

SKYFIRE AVENUE

天火大道

— 唐家三少 著 —



中国福布斯上榜作家

唐家三少

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Skyfire Avenue

(天火大道)

Chapter

001-903

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Story Description:

Skyfire Avenue is a street that is 2048 meters long. There are 168 stores here, and each of the store owners is an extremely powerful adept. The Avenue does not permit any vehicles or any robots to pass through it, much less mecha. Even the patrolling police must move about on foot. This is because this is a street for pedestrians, a lane for nobles, hidden away within this high technology world. Lan Jue, the greatest of the mercenaries, code-named 'Zeus', has secluded himself here in Skyfire Avenue after the death of his wife. The name of his shop is "Zeus' Jewelry Store", and here in Skyfire Avenue, he has been given the title, Jewel Master.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

Chapter 1: Zeus' Jewelry Store

A brilliant light was bursting forth from afar.

When it first started, it was nothing more than a simple dot. Slowly, it grew until it became a line. Once the ray of light had begun to fully burst forth, the brilliant light had become so dazzling to behold. It seemed to fill and nourish the entire world, and yet it seemed to destroy the entire world as well.

The universe. Infinite and boundless.

Behind the light, there would always be darkness.

Staring at that boundless light in his field of vision, he laughed.

“Farewell, Hera.”

An enormous shadow appeared behind him. He gracefully retreated, merging into it.

The shadow flashed, and in an instant, it travelled far away.

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Skyfire Star. Skyfire City. Skyfire Avenue.

This famous lane didn't permit any vehicles or any robots to cross it, much less mecha. Even the patrolling police must patrol on foot, the most ancient of methods. That's because this is a street for pedestrians, a lane for nobles, hidden away within this high technology world.

Fresh yet uniform stones covered this 2048 meter long lane. The buildings on each side of the lane were of completely different types, but every single building had its own unique aspects and history. There was ancient French gothic-style pointed buildings, the sprawling and majestic jade-carved buildings of ancient China, and were even Roman-style buildings.

This street, which seemingly had no high technology present, was set within the most central, most developed area within Skyfire City. Supposedly, here, every single square meter of earth was worth as much as

one of the newest, top-tier Michael's [Mai'ke'li] P12-class high atmosphere hovercar.

In the center of Skyfire Avenue, there was a rather unremarkable little store. The reason why it was described as 'little' was only because it was little by comparison to the enormous, noble structures surrounding it. The storefront was only seventeen meters wide, and it was designed in accordance with a combination of the luxurious, classical style with the simplistic neo-classical style. The mirror-like deep blue walls, the brilliant display windows, all showed off several dazzling, gleaming jewels. In the middle of the top of the store, four letters, glowing with a sapphire light, formed the name of the store.

Z, E, U, S.

The door was made from some sort of unknown deep blue metal. It didn't have any decorations, save for an imprint of a jagged lightning bolt.

Zeus, the King of the Gods in ancient Greece, the controller of the power of lightning.

Thus, this store was also named Zeus' Jewelry Store.

The insides of the store was a world of sapphire blue. Sapphire blue carpets, sapphire blue velvet covering the walls...even the bottoms of the jewelry display cabinets were sapphire.

Behind the front desk of Zeus' Jewelry Store were two young ladies. They wore identical, low-cut white gowns. They were very beautiful, but in different ways.

One was tall and slender, with eyebrows high like mountains, a face like a rose, her fine black hair trailing over her shoulders. Whether from up close or from afar, she looked like a clear, beautiful painting, and she had a rather classical feel to her.

The other was endearing and lovable, with neat, short, light blue hair. The low-cut dress revealed her spectacular 'mountain range', but the look in her deep blue eyes changed constantly. She appeared...a bit weird.

"Boss, I want to eat ice cream." The short-haired girl called out

coquettishly, her voice so sweet that it could kill a man from a sugar overdose.

A lazy voice rang out. “Are you going to eat mine, or am I going to eat yours?”

The voice came from behind the front desk. So there was actually a third person in the shop as well. He looked to be in his twenties, and was seated on a leather swivel chair. His hands clasped behind his head, he leaned there comfortably. He had short black hair, a black shirt, black pants, and a white vest with the diagram of an ancient Greek temple on it.

“Either works.” The short haired girl giggled.

“Ke’er, stop messing around.” The long-haired girl said somewhat resignedly.

The youngster sat up straight, his movements smooth and graceful. Although his hair was a mess and his face had some unshaved stubble on it, he didn’t give the impression of being disheveled at all.

His eyes were very bright, but he had a rather languid cast to his lips. Every single movement he made, however, was very graceful and pleasing to behold. At a glance, one could tell that he was someone who had received the finest lessons in noble etiquette for many years, and thus had gained these habits.

From within his breast pocket, he withdrew a silver pocket watch, which was covered with many small, yet exquisite gemstones which formed a beautiful diagram of a starry sky.

“It’s about time. I’m going to freshen up a bit, then I’ll go out to have a drink. Xiu Xiu, Ke’er, it’s about time for you two to head back as well.”

The long-haired girl, Xiu Xiu, laughed very gently as she looked at him. “Boss, you go do what you need to do. The store has us.”

The youngster smiled warmly. “Xiu Xiu is always so well-behaved.”

The short-haired girl instantly pursed her lips, and the youngster had to add, “Um, Ke’er is very well-behaved as well.”

“Dingdingding.” A sound like silver chimes rang out, and the door to the shop was pushed open. A woman walked in from outside.

Upon seeing this woman, the youngster’s eyes shone even brighter.

This was a very beautiful woman. Her makeup was a bit heavy, and it was hard to tell what her age was. She was 1.7 meters tall, had a slender body, and on her feet she wore a pair of extremely extravagant, custom-made silver and crystal heels from VanCleave & Arpels, which perfectly showed off her slender, straight calves. A white pleated skirt which extended below the knees. A white mini-dress. Long hair coiled on her head. She looked extremely tidy.

The color of her eyes was very special. They were a jade green color, the color of an emerald. If one looked closely, one might find that they could ensnare your very soul.

After walking into the store, her feet paused for a moment as she swept the display cabinets with her gaze.

Xiu Xiu went to welcome her, smiling as she spoke. “Welcome to Zeus. Can I help you with something?”

The woman didn’t look at her, her gaze instead falling on the youngster. “I want to buy a royal blue star sapphire necklace that is at least fifty carats in size or larger. Do you have it?”

The youngster walked over from behind the front desk. Smiling, he said, “Of course. Xiu Xiu, lead this lady to the VIP room.”

Xiu Xiu made a gesture of invitation towards the woman, while on the other side, Ke’er had already opened the door to the VIP room, covered in genuine fur that was deep blue in color.

The VIP room wasn’t large, only ten square meters or so in size. It also had blue carpets and blue walls, while at the same time, it had a row of six blue security cabinets lining against the walls.

Aside from these, the VIP room also had a table and three chairs. One chair was towards the inside, while the other two were outside.

This was the place where the real deals were made. The most top-class jewels would never be put out on display on the cabinets outside.

The youngster invited the woman to sit, and she sat down on one of the two chairs on the outside of the table.

Xiu Xiu poured a cup of warm water and gave it to the youngster, who then placed it directly in front of the woman. For the owner to personally deliver refreshments was naturally more meaningful than an employee. A small detail, but then, it was often the small details that determined success or failure.

Xiu Xiu quietly shut the door to the VIP room, not making a sound. The store had an unspoken rule. So long as the boss was present, he would personally handle all of the guests who were led to the VIP room.

The youngster walked to the woman's side, delivering the cup of water to her. "Please, have some water."

The woman accepted the cup of water, but then raised her head and looked at him. "Zeus!"

The youngster's face still had that graceful, indolent smile on it. "You mistake me for someone else. My name is Lan Jue, not Zeus. Or perhaps, you are calling out the name of my shop?"

The woman didn't seem to have heard him, as she stared at him with her scorching gaze. "Zeus, I want to ask you to do something for me."

The smile on Lan Jue's face vanished, and he took the cup of water back from the woman's hand.

The cup of water lit up, and the clear water within it suddenly transformed into blue, the blue of countless tiny little thunderbolts.

Lan Jue looked calmly at her. The woman's body shook slightly, as though she had been affected by some sort paralyzing force. She didn't move at all.

After fully draining the cup of electric water in one gulp, Lan Jue pushed open the door to the VIP room and walked out.

“She isn’t here to buy things. Please escort her out. I’m going to go get a drink.”

Chapter 2: The Old Gothic Winery

There weren't many pedestrians on Skyfire Avenue, because this was a place where one had to be qualified to be here. It wasn't just a matter of money. It was also a matter of taste.

Only after one passed through seventeen linked evaluations would one receive the Skyfire Badge. But of course, it would cost money as well. The reason was: 'Skyfire Avenue Public Maintenance Fund'.

Lan Jue walked out of Zeus, his face returning to its normal, faint smile. The events in the shop apparently hadn't impacted him at all.

He walked to the opposite side of Skyfire Avenue. There was an ancient, French-style gothic building there.

Tall, sharp towers, arched doorways, stained glass windows depicting stories from the Holy Bible, gothic arches, flying buttresses, slender columns...they produced a light yet lofty sensation, as though one was flying in the sky. The framework provided the entire structure with abundant support and strength, with the directly rising lines contributing to a grandiose and spacious appearance.

Compared to Lan Jue's Zeus Jewelry Store, this Gothic structure was like a leviathan. In the entire Skyfire Avenue, in fact, it was the most arresting sight.

Pushing open the door and going inside, Lan Jue rubbed some of the stubble on his face. He couldn't help but let out a hint of a bitter smile. He was about to be criticized again by that strict fellow.

"Jewel Master, you came." A tall, slender, beautiful young lady, with long golden hair, dressed in an ancient French full-length court dress, came to welcome him. She gave Lan Jue an absolutely proper French curtsy.

Lan Jue nodded at her slightly. "Eva [Yi'wa], hello. Is the Wine Master here yet?"

Eva smiled slightly, displaying those eight pearly white teeth. "He's here. The Gourmet and the Coffee Master are here as well."

“Oh?” A hint of surprised delight flashed past Lan Jue’s eyes. “The Gourmet is here as well? That’s wonderful.”

Eva smiled. “I’ll bring you there.”

A luxurious, long French palace table that could easily seat twenty for dinner. Several people were seated next to it. In the head seat, there was an old man who seemed to be in his fifties or sixties. He was dressed in an exquisite French suit, with a wig on his head. He sat there, upright yet graceful, his face very solemn.

On each side of him, there were two others seated as well. One was tall and thin, dressed in a white shirt and a black vest. His short hair was exquisitely done. He was around forty or so, and there was a gentle smile on his face.

The other person was around thirty five, of ordinary stature. He wore a white suit, and his long golden hair was perfectly brushed, falling from both sides of his temples to his shoulders, dazzling to behold. His eyebrows were quite thick, and his eyes were very large, but in his eyes there was an undisguised hint of laughter, making him look a bit ‘naughty’.

Three men were seated on the other side of the table. An old man, a middle-aged man, and a youngster.

Compared to the three people in the host’s seats, they seemed to be slightly uneasy.

“Hey, is it the evaluation time again today?” Led by the young lady, Eva, Lan Jue arrived at that long table. He pulled a chair next to the man in the white suit.

“Jewel Master, you didn’t shave or comb your hair.” The old man in the head seat said with a frown.

Lan Jue slapped his forehead. “I knew you’d say that. Fine, I’m at fault. Even though I just came because I wanted to show that I’m making changes, and wanted to draw a bit closer to you old fogeys.”

The Wine Master said coldly, “If you are at fault, then you need to accept

the punishment. You understand our rules.”

The man in the white suit next to Lan Jue lowered his head, and said in a very ‘cool’ manner, “Support.”

Lan Jue glanced at him sideways, then looked at the Wine Master. “What’s for dinner?”

The lips of the man in the white suit trembled. In the end, he couldn’t refrain from laughing.

The Wine Master laughed as well. “We can talk about what we’ll eat later. Since you are at fault, then you’ll handle the interviews for the next few people. You are more skilled in this regard than I am.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “No. That’ll cost me too much brain power.”

One of the seventeen evaluations in order to be admitted into Skyfire Avenue: Wine.

The Wine Master said, “If the results of your interview are satisfactory to me, tonight’s wine will be on me.”

“Done.” Lan Jue said.

The man in the white suit pursed his lips. “Can’t you be a bit more reserved?”

Lan Jue said calmly, “Then don’t drink.”

The youngster dressed in a black vest on the other side of the man in the white suit spoke for the first time. “Support.”

The man in the white suit said unhappily, “Gourmet, why are you always on his side?”

Gourmet said, “Because he has more taste than you.”

The Wine Master, in the head seat, nodded as well. “He does.”

Lan Jue cast his gaze towards the front. “The three of you, let’s begin. First one.” To him, the opportunity to sample fine wine was something he definitely didn’t want to delay if at all possible.

The face of the old man seated in the first position immediately grew

solemn. "Please ask."

Lan Jue said, "This is the Old Gothic Winery. Do you know where the wine from here comes from?"

The old man clearly had prepared early on. He immediately responded, "The Old Gothic Winery was one of the very first businesses opened on Skyfire Avenue when it was first developed. It engages in the sale of fine wine from various former nations of the previous era. These wines are preserved through spatial technology and can essentially be preserved in the state they were originally in year 2020. Actually, the most valuable thing about them is that once a bottle is drank, a bottle will be gone forever. Thus, the price is extremely high, but the ability to enjoy and sample these ancient wines is the mark of a true noble."

Lan Jue neither assented nor disputed. He continued, "What is your favorite type of red wine?"

The old man spoke with seemingly great fluency. "Chateau Lafite. An ancient French wine from 1855, from one of the five first class Chateaus in the Medoc, the Left Bank of the Bordeaux region."

Lan Jue asked, "If the seven of us were to share a bottle of Lafite today, and you were the host, what would you do? Please explain in detail."

The old man said, "I would carefully open it, then pour out a tiny bit, look at its color, smell its aroma, then taste it. After verifying that it hadn't gone bad yet, I would then divide it amongst everyone, so that we can all enjoy this bottle of fine wine."

"You can leave now." Lan Jue leaned back against the back of the chair and said calmly.

"I passed?" A look of surprised delight was on the old man's face.

Lan Jue shook his head. "No. You've been eliminated."

The old man said with surprise, "Why? I didn't say anything wrong?"

Lan Jue frowned as he spoke. "You've just prepared in advance. You don't actually like wine, nor do you know how to drink. If a bottle of

ancient Lafite wine were to be drunk in the manner you described, that would be an absolute waste.”

“Lafite, no matter what year it is from, is stored in a horizontal state. Before drinking it, the very first thing to do is to put it upright and keep it in the wine cellar for three days, allowing it to settle. When opening it, you do indeed have to first test the time, but it isn’t just to test for whether the wine has gone bad or not. The more important thing is to determine the status of the wine through tasting it, and determine how long it needs to be decanted for. One of the most important things for connoisseurs of wine is the question of how long the wine needs to be decanted. A normal bottle of Lafite would need to be poured into the decanter to be decanted for at least two hours. Otherwise, it wouldn’t taste much better than vinegar. It needs time to release its aroma. If you don’t even know that, you clearly don’t know how to drink wine. In fact, you’ve never even drank any fine wine. Thus, stop wasting my time.”

Unwilling to accept this, the old man said, “But the books all say...”

Lan Jue quirked his lips. “The people who wrote about Lafite in your books had never tasted it before. They just were writing based on what they had heard. To immediately uncork a bottle of Lafite and drink it is a form of disrespect to it. To drink it like that, you might as well dump it into a humidifier instead.”

Chapter 3: Previous Era, New Era

In year 2235 of the previous era, the first group of humans migrated to the solar system of the Skyfire Star. From that day forward, humanity entered the era of stellar migration. This was the beginning of a new era, and was thus referred to as the 'New Era'.

In but a hundred short years, humanity, including Skyfire star and humanity's mother star, in total administered a territory of twenty three star systems.

Skyfire Avenue. The Old Gothic Winery.

The old man had left with his head hanging down. The expressions on the faces of the middle-aged man and the young man became even more nervous.

Lan Jue turned his gaze towards the middle-aged man. "In the previous era, France's red wine was primarily divided into which two production districts?"

The middle-aged man replied, "Bordeaux and Burgundy, with Bordeaux being divided into the 'right' and 'left' banks."

Lan Jue said, "The 'Big Eight' chateaus of Bordeaux referred to which eight?"

The middle-aged man replied, "They refer to the five great 'first class' chateaus of 1855 in the previous era, located on the west Left Bank of the Medoc, and the three major wineries of the Right Bank of the Medoc. The five on the Left Bank are Château Latour, Château Lafite, Château Margaux, Château Haut Brion, and Château Mouton. The three on the Right Bank are Château Ausone, Château Cheval Blanc, and Château Petrus."

Lan Jue said, "Excellent. Just now, we discussed how generally speaking, around two hours would be needed to decant the wine of Château Lafite from the Left Bank. In that case, generally speaking, how long would the top-tier red wine of Burgundy need to be decanted for? For example, the

‘La Tache’ wine produced in the Domaine de la Romanée-Conti?”

“This...” The middle-aged man hesitated, then said probingly, “Decanting depends on the state of the wind as well as the storage conditions, so it’s hard to say.”

Lan Jue laughed. “You must think you are quite clever.”

The middle-aged man’s heart tightened.

“You can leave now.” Lan Jue said.

The middle-aged stood up with a bitter smile, then said, “What was my mistake?”

Lan Jue said, “Burgundy wine and Bordeaux wine are completely different. It only needs a little bit of decanting; generally speaking, no more than half an hour. What’s more, the finest Burgundy wine actually doesn’t need any decanting at all. The point of drinking it is to enjoy the taste it has once it encounters the air and begins to constantly transform. You might have drank Burgundy wine before, but you definitely have not drank much.”

The middle-aged man nodded seriously. “Thank you for the lesson.” He nodded towards Lan Jue and the other three, then left.

The youngster who had been seated next to the middle-aged man stood up as well, a bitter smile also on his face. “I think it’s best if I leave as well. I’ll come back after I come up with a way to drink a bit more wine.”

The Wine Master looked at Lan Jue. “Each time you administer the interview, you are able to resolve the situation in the shortest period of time. Although you do rather take it hard on them.”

Lan Jue smiled. “But it gets straight to the heart of things, right? You don’t want to be too unkind, because that’s your style. I’m the Jewel Master, not the Wine Master. Which is to say, I’m nothing more than an alcoholic who wants to drink some fine wine as fast as possible. Today, what do you plan to treat us to drink?”

The Wine Master said, “Go to the spatial wine cellar yourself and pick a

bottle casually. Limited to one bottle, though. If you take more than one, please pay for it.” While saying these words, he placed a piece of silvery-white metal on the table in front of him.

“Fine.” Lan Jue immediately stood up, and as he passed by the Wine Master, he picked up that silvery-white piece of metal and walked to the rear.

After passing through the thirty meter high walkway, he went down a flight of stairs, circling down another thirty or so meters until he arrived in front of a large, ancient, unadorned brown door.

Before entering, Lan Jue opened his palm. The piece of metal in his hand seemed to have sensed something, and flew into the air, agilely pressing itself against the door.

The door ‘rippled’ as though it was made of water. It didn’t emit any light, instead just bizarrely disappearing into nothingness, as though having evaporated.

Lan Jue smiled slightly, then slowly walked in.

When he stood without moving, everything around him seemed to be gently contorting and distorting. After walking straight for roughly half a minute, the sense of distortion finally disappeared, and everything returned to normal.

This was an extremely large underground wine cellar. The wine racks were made from the finest quality French white oak of the previous era, and they were laid out neatly, stretching so far into the distance that one couldn’t see an end to them. Nearby, countless enormous oak barrels were heaped atop each other, taking up an entire section of the wall.

Although this wasn’t his first time here, Lan Jue still couldn’t help but sigh in praise. He really had no idea how the Wine Master had originally procured so many fine wines of the previous era and brought them to Skyfire City. And then, the Wine Master had used such incredible spacetime manipulation techniques to store them all here. Just the white oak wine racks alone were each worth over ten thousand New Era Dollars. The normal salary of a family living in Skyfire Star would generally only

make a thousand New Era Dollars each month.

In this place, both space and time were frozen. If Lan Jue didn't have that piece of metal floating atop his head, which constantly cast a soft glow around him, he would have been a frozen part of this place as well.

Only by freezing both time and space was it possible to keep these fine wines of the previous era in perfect condition.

Lan Jue slowly walked deeper inside. While walking, he stared at the rows of antique wine bottles and labels.

"Every single bottle here is top class! Truly, one bottle drank is one bottle gone forever." While inspecting the bottles, he sighed in praised.

Suddenly, he seemed to sense something. Halting, he raised his head to stare in front of him.

There was a small lamp there, casting off a dim yellow glow. To an ordinary person, it was nothing more than a lamp. But Lan Jue was able to notice something tiny and minute regarding that lamp.

It was just a lamp, but halo of light it cast seemed to be a bit too large.

A faint layer of soft blue light began to shine in the area around Lan Jue's body, and he began to levitate off the ground. When his body came into contact with that yellow halo of light, space suddenly began to distort itself once again.

"Swoosh!"

He arrived in a different room. Compared to the outside room, this room was a bit smaller, roughly around five hundred square meters or so in size. The layout was identical to the outside.

The walls were lined with rows of standalone wine racks, filled with bottles of red wine.

When Lan Jue saw this, his eyes suddenly turned blue, a blue that was filled with electric light.

"What a fine fellow. This is the Wine Master's treasure room! What a pity that I can only take one bottle."

He, normally always so calm and graceful, couldn't help but speed up his footsteps as he moved towards a wine rack. He lifted up a bottle of red wine and looked at that pure white wine label. His eyes were filled with infatuation and adoration, as though he were staring at an absolute beauty who had moved his heart.

Turning, he walked towards the yellow halo of light, but after but a single step, he halted.

A slightly evil smile appeared at the corner of his lips. "For its sake, the Wine Master might actually be so stingy as to renege on his word. I can't give him that opportunity." With a flip of his hand, from some unknown place, he retrieved a corkscrew specially designed for removing red wine corks.

Chapter 4: Romanée-Conti

She looked like she was eighteen or nineteen. Her skin was as white as jade, and her neatly combed, long wine-red hair flowed down her head. She wore a white French Romantic-period palace-style flower dress, which perfectly showed off her figure.

Only, this young lady was panting just slightly. Her head was lowered. Her fair white face and her neck, as elegant as that of a swan, were all slightly red. Her long eyelashes were trembling slightly, and she had a look of embarrassment on her face.

“Forgive me. I came late.”

The Wine Master stared at this young lady with a severe look on his face. He said calmly, “You can leave. Tardiness is an unpardonable mistake.”

“Why not give her a chance?” Lan Jue’s voice rang out.

The Wine Master sat there, unmoved. “Tardiness represents discourtesy.”

Lan Jue said, “When we were young, we also cared about spending time on our appearance. Why not just give her a chance. Consider it as just giving me some face.”

The Coffee Master, dressed in a white suit, said, “He’s calling us old.” He had a faint smile on his face, as if to say, ‘I’m not the sort of person to cause trouble.’

The Wine Master furrowed his forehead.

The Gourmet spoke. “Jewel Master, for the sake of that bottle of wine in your hands, I’ll support you this time.”

The Wine Master unconsciously turned to glance towards Lan Jue, but when his gaze fell upon the bottle of wine in Lan Jue’s hand, he was no longer able to remain calm.

The normally always sedate, solemn Wine Master rose to his feet. Both

his lips as well as the finger he was now pointing at Lan Jue began to quiver at the same instant. "I told you to pick a bottle casually!" He all but ground out these words, gnashing his teeth.

Lan Jue said seriously, "But I've never been a casual person."

"Give it back to me!" Like an arrow, the Wine Master shot towards Lan Jue, immediately grabbed the bottle of wine in Lan Jue's hands.

Lan Jue didn't dodge. The bottle of wine arrived in the Wine Master's hands, but in Lan Jue's hands, there was an undamaged cork, a cork which emanated with the faint, fragrant scent of wine.

"You bastard! You actually opened it!" The Wine Master said with frantic fury.

"Cursing is an unpardonable mistake for a noble." Lan Jue waved the wine cork in his hands admonishingly at the Wine Master.

The young lady in the white dress raised her head as well, and saw the bottle of wine. Her sky-blue eyes seemed to flash with brilliant, gem-stone like light.

The Wine Master's breathing was rather ragged. After taking several mighty breaths, he snatched that silver piece of metal in Lan Jue's other hand. "Eva, warm water and slices of white bread. Spanish Iberico ham, cured 72 months, shaved into slices."

"Yes, m'lord."

"Wait a moment." The Gourmet called out to Eva, rising to his feet. With a smile that wasn't a smile on his lips, he looked at the Wine Master, still clutching that bottle of wine tightly. "So you have something as fine as Iberico ham that has been cured for 72 months. Only, you normally were too stingy to bring it out."

The Wine Master said viciously, "The old master had only brought over to here nineteen hams in the past. There are only fourteen left. I was planning to enjoy them myself. You are taking advantage of me."

The Gourmet smiled. "Don't be angry. Sampling fine wine and delicacies

requires one to be in a good mood. In addition, a single ham will last for many eating sessions. Eva, bring the entire ham over, and also a larger serving platter, as well as twenty candles. I'll handle it."

Eva looked at the Wine Master, who nodded at her. Perhaps because of words of the Gourmet, the anger on the Wine Master's face was slowly subsiding.

Lan Jue walked towards his seat and sat down, then glanced at the young lady, who was secretly drooling. "Do you recognize this bottle of wine?"

The young lady immediately nodded vigorously.

Lan Jue smiled. "Tell me about it."

The young lady didn't hesitate at all. "This is one of the finest types of wine, Romanée-Conti. It is the 'king' of the wine production area of Burgundy of France. It was the pride of Burgundy, and a wine master once said that Burgundy, just by relying on Romanée-Conti alone, was superior to all eight of the chateaus of Bordeaux. In the previous era, it was the most exalted red wine in the world."

Lan Jue said, "Tell me about its taste."

The young lady's eyes suddenly revealed a hint of intoxication. "This is a sort of flavor that can sink into your taste buds and your teeth. It is a flavor that feels as though it could burrow into every single cell of your body. The fragrance of it is a long lasting one, and it is both exquisite and heavy, both delicate and strong, both balanced and condensed. It has the smooth, graceful texture of velvet. It is virtually the distilled essence of the finest strengths of Pinot Noir grapes. It is an inimitable, fantasy-like wine. After entering the New Era, due to the environmental changes and damages in our home planet, no more true Romanée-Conti was ever produced again, after year 2025."

Hearing the young lady's words, Lan Jue, the Wine Master, and the Gourmet all revealed looks of surprise on their faces.

The Wine Master said. "You've drank it before?"

The young lady nodded gently, somewhat embarrassed. "I was once

lucky enough to sample a cup of Romanée-Conti of the 1981 vintage. Although that wasn't the finest year for Romanée-Conti, the flavor of that wine still lingers in my soul."

The Gourmet smiled. "This is a girl with fine taste. It seems the Jewel Master is right yet again."

Lan Jue looked at the Wine Master, who nodded and said, "For the sake of Romanée-Conti, I'll consider you to have passed the interview. Remember, in the future, no matter what you are doing, as a noble, you cannot be late, regardless of the reason."

The young lady made a deep curtsy. "Yes."

The Wine Master said, "You can go now. Eva will take you through the procedures."

"Thank you." The young lady curtsied yet again. Pausing for a moment, she finally summoned her courage and asked, "In the future, after I obtain the Skyfire emblem, can I come to your place to purchase Romanée-Conti?"

The Wine Master, his face cold, waved dismissively towards her. "Romanée-Conti is only for my friends to drink."

A hint of disappointment appeared on the young lady's face. She curtsied yet again, then turned and left.

Several servers came, bearing four Pinot Noir wine glasses, a platter of white slices of bread, four cups of warm water, a square white tray, and an enormous ham that was a meter long and thirty centimeters thick at the thickest part.

The Wine Master stared coldly at Lan Jue. "In the future, I will never let you help me interview again."

Lan Jue smiled. "Wine Master, you need to learn to be more charitable. Fine things need to be shared with friends."

The Wine Master snorted. He picked up the Romanée-Conti bottle with one hand, his thumb pressed against the neck of the wine bottle and his

other four fingers pressing against the other side.

Looking at the label on the bottle, he murmured to himself, “Romanée-Conti from year 2005 of the previous era...you punk, you are too vicious.”

Lan Jue stared at the wine glass in front of him. “I saw that you also had Romanée-Conti of year 1990.”

The Gourmet’s eyes bulged. “Then why didn’t you take it? Although 2005’s product was top-tier, 1990 was a legendary year for Romanée-Conti!”

Lan Jue said seriously, “A person can never go too far. I don’t want to be blacklisted by the Wine Master.”

A not-quite-smile on his face, the Gourmet arranged the twenty candles into place. “Don’t worry. Perhaps others might do that to you, but we definitely wouldn’t.”

The Wine Master said unhappily, “Are you getting revenge on me for some reason?”

Lan Jue and the Gourmet shared a look and a smile, and said in almost the exact same breath, “Drinking buddies are hard to find.”

Chapter 5: Heavenly Treasure

The scarlet red wine that had been poured into the cups were very tranquil, not a hint of a ripple to be seen. The fragrance of the wine wasn't too strong, as though all the flavor had been tightly locked into that sparkling, translucent, blood-red, ruby like wine.

The Wine Master's hand didn't tremble at all. He filled all four cups to an exceptionally equal level, up to two fingernails height in each cup. Just by looking at the cups, couldn't tell the difference between any of the cups at all.

Lan Jue stared at the wine, but the Gourmet was staring at the enormous ham in front of him. Both sets of eyes were mesmerized.

Twenty candles were set up in orderly fashion, just slightly smaller in total size than that square serving tray. The Gourmet swept his right hand towards the wicks of the candles, and at the same instant, all twenty candles lit up at the same time. The flames didn't burn very high, but they were very bright.

Holding the serving tray by the edges, the Gourmet held it at a straight level above the candle flames, allowing the heat of the candle flames to evenly heat up the tray.

The Coffee Master said, "Isn't that too much trouble? Why can't you just use your own fire?"

The Gourmet didn't even look at him as he spoke. "That's why we say you have no taste. If it weren't for the fact that you are extremely lucky, there's no way you would have the chance to drink this wine today, or eat a ham like this. My flames are positive energy flames, but of a dry and explosive type. Candle flames are positive energy flames that are gentle, soft, and evenly distributed. The latter is what I need right now."

The Coffee Master said somewhat argumentatively, "Why is there no way? I don't believe it! Wine Master, is he telling the truth?"

The Wine Master didn't say a word. He lifted up the long-stemmed

wineglass in front of him by its long, crystalline stem. Raising it high, he caught the light of the candles within it and stared at the scarlet red wine within.

The Coffee Master next turned to look at Lan Jue. “The Gourmet looks down on me! On what basis did he criticize me like that?”

Lan Jue’s gaze was focused on his wineglass as well. His movements were almost identical to the Wine Master’s. He lifted up his wineglass, staring at the ruby color within.

“He speaks the truth, and he has a very good reason. The reason the Wine Master didn’t say anything was because he didn’t want to hurt you. However, I can tell you the reason. We’ll just treat it as my revenge for you stirring up trouble earlier.”

“Fine. Tell me.” The Coffee Master said in a dissatisfied way.

Lan Jue laughed calmly. “If you want to learn something, you have to pay a price. Give me the wine in your glass, and I’ll tell you the reason. Otherwise, where’s the ‘revenge’ part?”

The Coffee Master said with some anger and embarrassment, “Fine. If your reasoning convinces me that I’m not worthy of drinking this Romanée-Conti, then I’ll give you my glass.”

Lan Jue put down his own wineglass, then turned to look towards the Wine Master. “You aren’t allowed to fight with me over it. He asked me the question. It’s your own fault for not saying anything earlier.”

The Wine Master let out a sigh. “For him to be willing to give up this glass of Romanée-Conti, in and of itself, is already a sufficient reason why he isn’t qualified to drink it.”

Lan Jue smiled as he spoke. “But this isn’t enough to convince him, because he could always make up the excuse that his desire for learning exceeds his desire for delicacies.”

Lan Jue raised the glass of water and took a sip before finally turning to look at the Coffee Master.

“Actually, the reasoning is very simple. It is because you are the Coffee Master. Although you know how to appreciate wine very much, and you also know how to appreciate gourmet food very much, in the end, you are a Coffee Master.”

The Coffee Master, somewhat bewildered, said, “How can this be considered a reason?”

Lan Jue said, “Of course this is a reason. Compared to red wine, you like coffee better. Might I ask, how many cups of coffee do you drink every day?”

The Coffee Master said, “Three cups.”

Lan Jue said, “Drinking coffee has already become the most important habit you have in your life. The better the coffee, the stronger and the longer lasting its flavor is. However, it will also dominate your taste buds. Before sampling a truly top-class red wine, in order to be able to enjoy all of its fragrance to the fullest, one has to avoid eating anything with strong flavor for at least three days in advance. Coffee, tea, chocolate...these are all definitely forbidden. Otherwise, your taste buds will have already been occupied. Although you can use white bread to try and absorb those flavors from your mouth, there will be at least a little bit that remains. It will impact the sublime feeling which this fine wine will transmit to your soul. This is a form of blasphemy towards the wine.”

Pausing a moment, Lan Jue smiled as he looked at the Coffee Master. “Then, in the past three days, have you drank coffee?”

The Coffee Master laughed bitterly. “Of course I have.”

“Thank you.” Lan Jue gracefully picked up the glass of wine in front of the Coffee Master, pouring all of the wine within into his own glass, then returned the empty glass to the Coffee Master.

The Wine Master let out a sigh. He gently swirled the glass in his hand, then delivered it to his nose for a sniff. Instantly, the solemn look in his eyes disappeared, and was replaced by an intoxicated, mesmerized look.

He took a rather large sip, keeping it in his mouth for a rather long

moment before swallowing it.

Lan Jue also took a drink. Lowering his head, with a gentle sip, the gentle sound of liquid entering his mouth could be heard. And then, he once more lifted his head up, swallowing the wine.

Only a long moment afterwards did the Wine Master's expression return to normal. "A pomegranate glow makes clear its quality; the fragrance of classic Romanée-Conti, the smell of roses and sweet peppers; gentle and harmonious, in the mouth, one can sense how the strength of the taste is rather reserved, but an extremely long aftertaste remains.

As he spoke, he turned his gaze towards Lan Jue. "You picked very well. This bottle of Romanée-Conti is right at the perfect time for drinking."

Lan Jue let out a soft breath. "It fuses both a spicy fragrance and a floral fragrance, is refined and joyous; in the mouth, it shows off its astonishing suppleness and harmoniousness. The taste of haw fruit mixed with cherries, plentiful and exquisite. This existence of this wine and its exquisiteness is a sort of pleasant surprise to us! It indeed lives up to its reputation as being acclaimed as a 'heavenly treasure', the king of wines! I think, in the next three days, my taste buds and even my teeth will still be filled with this wondrous flavor. I can't drink wine for the next three days."

The Coffee Master looked at the expressions on their faces. He couldn't help but say, "Is it as good as all that? Wine Master, give me a little bit more."

The Wine Master let out a sigh. "I originally had prepared that plate of white bread especially for you. I wanted to have you use it to absorb some of the flavors saturating your taste buds. After doing that, given how powerful the flavor of Romanée-Conti is, you should be able to just barely appreciate the flavor of it as well. However, you've already lost it to the Jewel Master. I had only intended to offer you a single glass to begin with. Thus, I'm very sorry, but today, you don't have a share."

The Gourmet removed the tray from above the candles and placed it on the table. He patted the Coffee Master on the shoulders and said, "This is what the revenge of the Jewel Master is like. This fellow really knows how

to hold a grudge.”

The Coffee Master turned his head to shoot a vicious glare at Lan Jue.

Lan Jue once again took a sip of that heavenly treasure, that wondrous wine. “The other day, Miss Camille [Ka’mei’er] went to my store. Although she didn’t buy anything, from her eyes, I could already tell what she liked.”

The Coffee Master’s face frozen. He let out a gloomy sigh. “You win.”

Lan Jue inclined his glass towards him. Slowly, the Coffee Master’s face returned to his previous calm. “But I won’t leave just like that. Although I didn’t have the chance to drink fine wine, I’m still going to eat some of this ham.”

The Gourmet had, at some point in time, taken a slender, long, yet narrow knife into his hands. With a gentle cut, a paper-thin slice of ham drifted down into the plate.

His hand suddenly transformed into a blur, and soon, several dozen slices of ham filled up the plate.

“Why did you have to roast it a bit first?” The Wine Master asked the Gourmet.

The Gourmet said, “This so-called ‘black pig’ should actually be called an Iberico boar. Generally speaking, in the previous era, they were raised in the mid-west forests of Spain. That place was one of the most classic, natural environments. It included wide pastures, oak trees, and the acorn trees which made up most of the foliage in Spain. The pigs which were raised in these wide pastures primarily ate the seeds of the oak trees and acorn trees. As for oak seeds, true oak seeds were an indispensable part of the feeding for true Iberico ham.”

“This is the manufacturing process; Slice open the pig, then chill the pig meat to six degrees Celsius; cure it; clean it; after the curing for one section is complete, use cold water to wash away the remaining salt of the ham, then place it in a storehouse for two months while salting it evenly; it will naturally dry. Afterwards, hang it in a natural cave for at least twenty four months without disturbing it, and it will be ready to eat. The

finest of Iberico ham actually needs to be quietly cured for at least forty eight months.”

“This ham that you brought out is an exquisite specimen even amongst Iberico hams. Only a 100% pure Iberico pig that was completely fed on oak seeds can possibly be cured in a mountain cave for as long as seventy two months. Even in the previous era, this is something that one cannot buy with money alone.”

“But this sort of ham has a problem. The problem is that its natural fat is too thick. Although the flavor is pure and beautiful, the fragrance will be somewhat masked by the fat. While chewing it over, although you’ll be able to taste it, in the end, it will still be flawed. I first heated up the tray, then chopped the ham into slices, so that the temperature of the tray will cause the fat to melt, allowing it to permeate into the meat and for the fragrance to completely come out. Look. The white fat has already turned translucent.”

Indeed, in the originally white-and-red ham, the white fatty parts were already translucent, looking like frozen crystals. A faint fragrance came out from the platter which thickened but did not dissipate.

Lan Jue reached over to take a slice, delivering it to his mouth. Instantly, his face changed. The flavor was strong and pure, and it lasted a long time in the mouth. After taking another sip of Romanée-Conti, he was utterly intoxicated.

The Wine Master also ate a slice, and his reaction was almost the same as Lan Jue’s. And then, he let out a bitter laugh. “It seems my previous manner of eating it was a waste.”

The Gourmet smiled as he ate the ham while drinking the wine. “I’m eating your food, drinking your wine, and being praised by you as well. How wonderful.”

Lan Jue sighed leisurely. “Heavenly treasure, a top-tier Iberico ham. Wine Master, in the future, I will often come.”

The Wine Master didn’t look at him, but his eyes had a bitter look in them. He knew that the Jewel Master wasn’t by nature an immodest

person, but when he decided to act immodestly...

The Coffee Master also had a bitter look on his face. The aroma of the Iberico ham far exceeded his imaginations, but unfortunately, he didn't have the 'heavenly treasure' to pair it with.

Chapter 6: Letter, Pearl, Hera!

Walking out of the Old Gothic Winery, Lan Jue's mouth was still filled with that abundant, meaty flavor, as well as the pure fragrance of that 'heavenly treasure'. The Coffee Master, having received a satisfactory answer from him, had left earlier.

Turning his head, he looked at the Gourmet who had left alongside him. Lan Jue couldn't help but want to laugh.

In the previous era, Iberico ham truly did have rather thick fat. But the method which the Gourmet had selected for them to eat had another effect; it reduced the amount of grease. After reducing the amount of grease, naturally it was a little bit tastier.

At this moment, Lan Jue's mind was still full of that look of hidden bitterness in the eyes of the Wine Master when he stored away the remaining ham.

"I'm off." The Gourmet waved at him, then merged into the night.

Lan Jue passed through Skyfire Avenue. He saw, to his somewhat astonishment, that the lights in his store were still lit. It was already very late at night.

Pushing the door open and entering, he saw Xiu Xiu, standing there with a smile.

"Xiu Xiu, why haven't you gone home to rest yet? It's very late." Lan Jue looked towards her questioningly.

Xiu Xiu smiled as she went to welcome him, handing an envelope over to him. "Boss, this is the letter which that young Miss Mao left behind. I was afraid of delaying some important matter, so I waited until you came back. Ke'er originally wanted to wait alongside me, but she was sleepy, so I had her go home first."

Lan Jue gave her a courtly hug. "You are always so thoughtful."

Xiu Xiu smiled. "Then I'll go home now?"

“Right. Good night. Be careful on the way home.” Lan Jue lightly kissed her on her cheek.

Xiu Xiu walked to the door, turned her head towards him, smiling beautifully. “The wine fragrance you are wearing today smells very good.”

Lan Jue laughed. “If I smelled this good every day, the Wine Master would try to kill me.”

Xiu Xiu shut the door after walking through it. Lan Jue stayed at the store at night. Not for the sake of standing guard or working at night, but because this was his home.

Holding that letter, Lan Jue strolled into the VIP room. He pressed a button on one of the side walls of the VIP room, and the wall slide away, revealing the room behind it.

Lan Jue’s residence wasn’t very large, only a hundred square meters or so, but it had all sorts of necessary equipment. Every day, Xiu Xiu and Ke’er would volunteer to help him keep it clean, so this place was always spotless.

The room still had the faint, natural fragrance left behind the two girls. Lan Jue didn’t like the smell of strong perfume, which Xiu Xiu and Ke’er both knew.

Sitting down on the sofa, Lan Jue pulled open the envelope. He actually didn’t want to read it at all, because he didn’t want to ruin the good mood the ‘heavenly treasure’ wine had given him, but...all people are affected by curiosity. He was no exception. In addition, he had the faint sense that this letter wasn’t a simple one.

Opening the envelope, he only saw four words, but these four words caused him to instantly forget about the flavor of the ‘heavenly treasure’.

Lan Jue’s eyes, slightly intoxicated after having drank wine, suddenly turned blue, and electricity crackled within them. The originally bright lights in the room began to flicker and turn dim, sometimes bright, sometimes dark, while emitting a nonstop crackling sound.

Hera! Is! Not! Dead!

Those were the four words on that piece of paper.

Hera was a name. In the previous era, on the home planet, she was the Queen of the Gods in Greek mythology.

Zeus was the King of the Gods. His wife, naturally, was the Queen of the Gods, Hera.

In the New Era, Hera Mao was Lan Jue's wife. The wife who had disappeared in what was, to him, an utterly calamitous event. The explosion which had ended the event had destroyed an entire star. No one believed that Hera could have survived.

It had happened three years ago. After it happened, he had arrived here and settled down here.

Dragons have their weak points. Zeus did as well.

Lan Jue sat there for a full quarter hour, not moving at all.

After the quarter hour passed, he flipped the letter over. On the back, he found a contact number.

With his left hand, he pressed down in mid-air. The electronic screen on facing the sofa immediately lit up, and a holographic 3D image appeared. The image was that of Skyfire Star. Lan Jue's left hand was now covered with a layer of light as well.

His elegant, agile finger transformed into a blur as he entered a lone line of numbers, and the holographic image in front of him rapidly moved.

Seconds later, the image of Skyfire Star disappeared. The woman who had come to the store before appeared in front of him, still dressed in white. But of course, this was just her digital hologram.

"Zeus, can we have a chat now?" The woman had a smile on her face as she spoke. She was very confident; perhaps even a bit coy.

Lan Jue's face was very calm, and the blue color had vanished from his eyes. "Do you know what the price of lying to me is?"

Although they were separated by a great distance and only speaking through a communications device, upon hearing those words, the

woman's face couldn't help but change. Strong heart palpitations caused her to suddenly feel as though her chest was under great pressure. Still, she quickly managed to calm down. "When Zeus is angered, the heavens and the world will know it. I know. My name is Pearl [Yue]."

Lan Jue said coldly, "Show me the evidence."

"Alright." Pearl agreed easily. Raising her two arms, she made pulling motions in mid-air, and an image appeared.

The image was that of a picture. It seemed to be a classroom in a school. The students were all dressed in school uniforms, and they were walking in line, preparing to go to class.

Suddenly, Lan Jue stood up. The blue light which had just disappeared from his eyes appeared yet again.

He saw a person. A person who, for him, had been engraved deep into his soul long ago.

The first thing he saw was her head of long, black hair. Her black hair was somewhat naturally wave, utterly black and glossy, rolling down to her waist. Her school uniform revealed her orchid-like, pure white arms, long and tender. Because the table obstructed the view, one couldn't see anything lower than mid-skirt.

The most shocking thing was, her eyes had pupils that were different from that of ordinary people's. They were sky blue, like the color of the sea, without a hint of impurity. Her long eyelashes blinked, and those sky-blue eyes became the most soul-stirring part of her exquisite features. Anyone who she looked at would feel that their soul was enchanted by her two beautiful eyes.

Black hair, blue eyes. It was her!

The picture disappeared, and Pearl's voice rang out once more.

"Zeus, can we talk about our partnership now? The school uniform which Hera is wearing, in the area of Skyfire Star alone, is used by the students of over two hundred schools. In addition, the star she is at isn't necessarily Skyfire. I can tell you a secret beforehand. Within the next ten

days, if you aren't able to find her, then, you will definitely regret it all your life."

Lan Jue, or, to be precise, "Zeus" Lan Jue, said, his eyes flashing coldly, "Terms!"

Chapter 7: Leng Lingxi

Pitch-black and boundless. Two phrases that shouldn't be put together. But if you were to use them to describe the universe, it would be appropriate.

But even in the pitch-black universe, on occasion, there would be some beautiful sights. For example, right now!

A ray of silver light streaked past the dark space, flying off into the distance.

This was a spaceship. A passenger spaceship that was quite frequently seen in the New Era, also known as an interstellar shuttle. It was usually around 534 meters long, 168 meters wide, and colored white. This was the color of the Northern Alliance, the most powerful of the three great powers which arose after humanity entered the New Era.

This interstellar shuttle was capable of simultaneously carrying both passengers as well as large amounts of cargo. It had a pre-determined route. It would jump through the safe wormholes which humanity had discovered during the past hundred years which led to each of the stars which humanity governed.

Not too far away, an enormous planet was visible. This was the capital planet of the Northern Alliance, the planet of Luo. This was an administrative planet which was even larger than the planet of Skyfire, and half of its surface was suitable for human life.

Drawing near its target, the interstellar shuttle's speed began to lessen as it prepared to make an atmospheric entry into the planet of Luo.

When entering the atmosphere, the speed couldn't be too fast, as otherwise, even an interstellar shuttle would break apart.

Just as the interstellar shuttle was slowly down to roughly three times the speed of sound, the empty space to its left suddenly distorted slightly, and a faint shadow suddenly, silently attached itself to it.

What was even more astonishing was that the interstellar shuttle didn't

react at all. Its sensitive radar seemed to have been completely unable to sense the presence and arrival of this shadow.

Suddenly, the interstellar shuttle shook powerfully. Its left side began to reveal traces of faint blue electric bolts, and the entire shuttle began to shudder violently.

“DIIIII! DIIIII! DIIIII!”

Within the interstellar shuttle, ear-piercing warning klaxons were going off!

Bosen [Bei'seng] was an interstellar shuttle pilot of thirty years, who had over a hundred thousand hours of piloting experience. This captain was an old pro. Hearing the warning klaxon from the ship, he picked up the communication tool in an unhurried, unpanicked manner.

“All employees, please take your seats and fasten your seat belts. We have encountered some static electricity in the atmosphere, and will temporarily postpone our passage through the atmosphere. Everything will be fine soon. At the same time, please temporarily refrain from engaging the procedures for waking our passengers from deep sleep.”

Captain Bosen's judgment was extremely accurate. Moments later, the interstellar shuttle's vibrations halted and everything returned to normal.

Most interstellar shuttles had roughly 70% of their renovated space reserved for holding cargo. Only the remaining space was used for holding employees, and of course the passenger cabin.

The passenger cabins were divided into three types. The first class cabin, the middle cabin, and the economy cabin, which was also known as the commoner class.

The three different cabins naturally had astronomically different prices, and each had their own services.

Each person in the commoner cabins only had a square meter of personal space, a simple seat, and were locked in place by metallic bonds, as though they were being chained up for punishment. When reaching light speed, the only support their heads had for when they were in deep

sleep was a helmet which definitely couldn't be described as comfortable.

The middle cabins was slightly better. At least, it allowed for a person to lie down while wearing the helmet. Thus, when waking up out of deep sleep, at least they wouldn't feel as miserable as those people in the commoner cabin, whose entire bodies would feel sore, as though they had been beaten.

As for the first class cabins, it could only be described using the phrase 'lavish'. Every single first class cabin had twelve square meters of space, including a proper, comfortable sleeping berth, a lavish seat that could be sat on or reclined on, and a shower as well as a changing room.

When sleeping within these sleeping berths during interstellar travel, not only would they receive the best rest, more importantly, these sleeping berths were equipped with nutritional liquids that could allow their bodies to be in a state which used up very little energy, to the point where the aging process was greatly slowed. After all, every single long-distance journey would take perhaps more than a month. Compared to those in the commoner cabins who over the course of the journey would perhaps lose at least a terrifying ten pounds of body weight, the first class cabins would actually help their passengers be in peak condition.

The price of a first class cabin was ten times that of a middle cabin, and a hundred times that of a commoner cabin!

Most standard interstellar shuttles only had around thirty or so first class cabins. After all, very few people would choose to pay such an astronomical price. The middle cabins were already enough to satisfy the needs of most ordinary people, who only wanted their bodies to not be damaged during the passage.

Leng Lingxi, undergoing the deep sleep awakening protocols, slowly escaped from his deep slumber.

"Uhhh....what a wonderful sleep." She murmured, then looked through her mask and found the green button which opened and closed her cabin. With a gentle push, the cover above her sleeping berth opened.

Leng Lingxi sat up from the middle of the viscous nutritional fluid,

revealing her slender, fine lines. She removed the mask on her face and took a deep breath of fresh air. Instantly, she revealed a relieved look on her face. However, she immediately began to brush off the liquid on her arm with a look of some disgust.

“Sleeping in a first class cabin is comfortable, but these nutritional liquids are really unpleasant. Can’t they improve it to something which is similar to clear water?”

There were partitions to every single first class cabin. Even if the first class cabins were all full, as long the partitions weren’t pushed open, nobody would be able to see anyone else.

Climbing out of her sleeping berth, she rinsed off the rest of the nutritional liquid in the shower, then put on a clean set of clothes. Leng Lingxi immediately felt much better.

She made several stretching motions and did a few yoga movements, then walked towards her seat while opening her partition.

The partition next to her slowly opened with a gentle, metallic sound, revealing the walkway for her cabin as well as the outside scene.

Hey, someone was even faster than me? Leng Lingxi looked with some surprise towards the left partition. That partition was also opened, and there was someone sitting on a seat.

This was a young man with short black hair, deep blue exercise clothes, and an extremely handsome face.

Someone seated in first class was wearing exercise clothes? This discovery caused Leng Lingxi to be unable to restrain her curiosity. This was the first time she had seen a guest like this in first class. Generally speaking, shouldn’t most people change into crisp suits or chic apparel, so that they would be ready to start working as soon as they disembarked the shuttle?

Leng Lingxi herself was an exception, because she herself was wearing a set of white exercise clothes. Thus, another exception easily attracted her interest.

“Hi, how are you. I think I didn’t see you when we boarded the ship?” Leng Lingxi’s temperament was completely different from her surname Leng, meaning cold. Not only was she not cold, she was very warm and generous.

A faint smile drifted onto the face of the young man. In a very gentlemanly manner, he inclined his head towards her. “Greetings, beautiful young miss.”

What proper etiquette, and not seeming affected or pretentious at all. “To be able to see such a handsome gentleman by my side as soon as I woke up truly is a happy event. My name is Leng Lingxi.”

The young man seemed to have been somewhat intrigued by the ambiguous meanings in her words. His lips curved upwards. Smiling, he said, “My pleasure. I am Zeus!”

Chapter 8: Womanly Secrets

“Zeus?” Leng Lingxi laughed, revealing a beautiful smile. She was beautiful, delicate, with wine red hair that was cut short and brown eyes accompanied by an exquisite body. Enough to garner the attentions of any man.

“What an interesting name, I think I’ve heard it before,” Leng Lingxi said though her smile.

“Oh?” The young man watched her with interest.

“Ever since the first time someone was called the name, many have since imitated. Only, though the name is Zeus, it certainly doesn’t mean you are he!”

“Haha,” the young man chuckled.

The expression in Leng Lingxi’s eyes abruptly grew sharp. “This space shuttle is fitted with thirty two first-class cabins, and they’ve managed to fill fifteen, including my own. I know clearly the identities of the other fourteen passengers. Can you tell me, where are you from? Choosing this time, recently awakened from deep sleep to sit beside me, it seems as though you have a reason. Don’t think because you’re attractive you can flirt with me. In this case, you have no opportunity to flee. And yet I merely must acknowledge, you’re quite amazing. On this trip we have more than twenty people, separated in to different cabins, and you come from Middle Class to sit beside me specifically. But unfortunately, you’ve encountered me. And if you think us women are easily bullied, you have another thing coming!”

“Ha ha!” The young man laughed again.

Leng Lingxi leaned casually in her chair. “You’re in such high spirits, but let’s see how long that lasts. Tell me who you are, your rank, then give yourself up without a fight and at least I won’t have you executed. I’ll have you remanded directly in to the custody of the Luo Interplanetary Police. If you don’t want to get hurt, you’ll obey!”

“HAHA!”

Leng Lingxi’s smile melted away. “Hey, ass! If you’d have avoided this in the first place, I’d have let you off. However, you deliberately called yourself Zeus. If I can’t beat you until you’re senseless, I can’t call myself Leng!”

The young man looked at her in astonishment. “Why?”

Leng Lingxi unfastened her seatbelt and, standing, shot him a cold glare. “Because you have the audacity to try and pass yourself off as my idol, calling yourself by his name!”

“Haha!” The young man again let loose a peel of laughter.

Leng Lingxi responded scornfully, “I’ve seen through your ruse, and still you laugh?”

A small smile spread across the young man’s face. “You want to know why I’m laughing?”

“Why?” Leng Lingxi retorted rashly.

The young man replied earnestly, “Under certain special circumstances, the sounds ‘Ha Ha’ mean something different; stupid!”

The stupefied expression on Leng Lingxi’s face gradually darkens to a thunderhead. “You want to die? Then I’ll help you!”

“HAH!”

It has been ages since Leng Lingxi had been this furious. She had to admit, the man before her had expertly stoked her rage!

An icy chill suddenly filled the air, and the border of Leng Lingxi’s eyes instantly became white. Her right hand groped toward the man, five fingers extended, and five streams of white air burst forth to surround him. A close examination of the white blasts would reveal their icy constitution. Instantly, the temperature of the First-Class cabins dropped more than ten degrees.

Frozen in ice! A crystal prison!

Power is the root of confidence, and Leng Lingxi was nothing if not confident. She questioned herself, but knew that even a large elephant she could freeze almost instantly. She detested this stupid fellow, and decided to teach him a lesson he'd remember for the rest of his life.

Looking on, Leng Lingxi saw that hateful smile soon to be frozen in ice, and at once ceased. Now there was no evasion, no defense – there was no way for him to run! Nor was it permitted to carry any weapons on to a space shuttle.

She was clearly pleased with herself, but in the midst of her gloating suddenly her beautiful brown eyes shot open, their depths full of disbelief. Because that man, the one who had called himself Zeus, suddenly broke in to pieces.

Indeed, shattered!

In the instant before the Ice Disciplines' power fell over him, the man's body unexpectedly fractured in to countless bolts of bluish-purple lightening that forked through the ice prison, and swept over Leng Lingxi's body.

How could this be? No!

As she grew conscious of her mistake, Leng Lingxi lost control of her body and began to shake violently before she gently collapsed. A slender, strong hand fell upon her shoulder, arcs of lightning racing along it's length.

The young man, recently smashed to fragments, stood behind her in perfect condition, allowing Leng Lingxi to rest gently in his arms.

Leng Lingxi's eyes popped open, feeling as though her brain had crashed like a computer system. I lost? I actually lost this quickly? Even so badly that I don't know how he did it.

No, it can't be!

An adept in the Ice Discipline, a Level 6 Genetic Talent. Escort for the Luo Heavenly Auction House of the Northern Alliance. Me, the most talented Chief-Ranked Mecha-Pilot in the Northern Alliance. And yet.. and

yet I lost like this?

At three, the Ice Discipline awakened within me, and I was evaluated as a Level 6 Genetic Talent, a genius among geniuses. I piloted my first mech by eight, and by twelve enrolled in the Institute of Mecha-Aeronautics despite their regulations. At fifteen, became the sixteenth youngest Rank Three Mecha-Pilot on Planet Luo, Rank Two at seventeen, and Rank One at eighteen. At nineteen, a Special Grade. Now I, twenty-one, Chief First-Class Mecha-Pilot.

How could I have lost?

In her heart Leng Lingxi screamed, but outwardly she could not say a word. From behind, a slight hint of top-grade Giorgio Armani Triple Crown eau de toilette filled her nostrils, not thick, containing West African incense and Somalian frankincense to leave quite an impression.

“You’re so young, so delicate.” The young man’s voice reverberated in her ears, and at the same moment his slender fingers find their way to the slipper of her track suit.

Gently he began to pull the zipper down, the chill air eliciting an involuntary shiver from Leng Lingxi.

Within the track suit, aside from an sapphire-bordered brassiere, was also...

“I have no intention to offend you, only... you’ve hidden something in your cleavage. I can only say I’m sorry.” The young man’s voice whispered in her ears, no different from that of a demon.

Those slender fingers pulled forth a silver necklace, inevitably brushing against her white unblemished skin which blushes in response, blossoming like a peony flower.

It was the first time in her twenty-one years a man other than those of her family had lain a finger on her, it was...

The silver chain bore a pale golden pendant of exquisite craftsmanship, and in it’s center a chestnut-shaped transparent gemstone.

Supporting her body, the young man placed Leng Lingxi back in her seat, and considerately fastened her seatbelt. His finger remained on the pendant, gently stroking the gemstone.

The atmosphere began to distort slightly, and a small wormhole no greater than a foot in diameter opened in the air before them. Inter-dimensional technology!

Leng Lingxi struggled desperately, yet her body still would not comply to the demands of her mind.

Extending his hand searchingly in to the hole, the young man produced a small box from it's depths.

The box was not large, composed of black ferrous metal, three coded locks on it's surface. The electronic locks were among the most precise, requiring input of three thirty two character passwords within one minute to open. One mistake, and you'd have to input them all again. Three mistakes, the destruction mechanism would activate.

The young man once again held the pendant between his fingers, the portal behind him closing, and with it the pale light emanating from the pendant ceased. He moved closer to Leng Lingxi's face, replacing the necklace upon her neck, going to far as to replaced the pendant upon her cleavage. He moved to zip up her track suit.

Ferociously did Leng Lingxi glare at him, anxious to destroy the man so near.

"Don't think you'll get my password," Leng Lingxi frigidly spat. Saying this, she realized suddenly her capacity for speech had returned.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "You understand nothing, of course I won't get it from you."

"How do you know?" Leng Lingxi nearly blurted out.

"Ha ha!"

"Bastard!" Leng Lingxi, in her twenty-one years, had never hated this word so much!

The young man was not angry, and looked upon her with eyes filled with pity and regret. “I’m sorry our encounter had to be this way. You’re a girl of quality, a girl of vision. Goodbye.”

Chapter 9: The Four Divine Monarchs

The room was exquisitely decorated, a hundred square meters, and yet uncomplicated and luxurious.

Decorations lined the walls, fine examples of old French décor, sporting hand-polished copper wall sconces plated in gold which bathed the lavish quarters in light. The large pendant lamp hanging from the ceiling was itself copper and plated gold, but with the addition of gold inlay, enamel and more. Above it's oval make burned over a hundred candles, their stems veined with pale gold coiled dragons, and each topped with a gentle flame.

In the middle of the chamber was a long table, capable of accommodating twenty people. The head and foot of the table were curved, becoming straight as they drew towards the ends and extending.

The table top sported a simple decorative pattern, bestowing a vivid and lively sensation. Under closer inspection, the pattern didn't appear burned into the wood, but rather raised. In fact it was composed of various splinters of bark, of many different colors, polished and joined flawlessly into the surface to create the beautiful and classical pattern.

The twenty chairs on either side of the table were made of a single piece of wood, the backs of each deliberately carved into arches to completely conform with the human figure. Even after sitting for lengthy periods, one would not feel exhausted or uncomfortable. The hollowed-out decorations of the chair were carved into the likeness of two standing eagles, their eyes and feathers detailed perfectly, and like the tabletop composed of polished bark fragments fused together.

The table came from the Francesco 'Black Dragon' line. In the previous era, the brand was Italian, and produced a myriad of furniture exclusively for European royalty.

At present, many of the chairs lining the table were occupied. At it's head sat an elderly gentleman in his sixties, with sleek and meticulously kept long silver hair. His black formal attire delineated him as nobility.

The atmosphere of the room was oppressive, no one spoke, with only the faint sound of breathing in the air. Upon the table sat seven cups of water, untouched.

Bang, bang! resonated from the door of the chamber.

“Enter,” the old man’s deep voice responded.

The door opened and a scholarly middle-aged man entered, clad in a white Armani suit, a rim of gold around his eyes. He moved quickly to the elderly gentleman’s side, and placed a piece of paper before him on the table.

“Did you find out?”

The scholar nodded his head slightly. “Yes, President Luo.”

“Tell them.” The old man waved his hand for him to proceed.

The middle-aged man stood beside the elderly gentleman, sweeping his eyes over those gathered at the table. Ultimately his gaze landed on a beautiful, pale face, with pity in his eyes.

“Greetings ladies and gentlemen. I am Guo Xin, Head of the Heavenly Auction House Intelligence Bureau. In regards to the theft of the Cipher Box, we’ve completed our preliminary investigation.”

Upon hearing this sentence, the previously inattentive Leng Lingxi suddenly bolted to her feet. Grinding her teeth she growled “Who? Who was it?”

Guo Xin looked sympathetically upon Leng Lingxi, her first important mission and she was robbed. He understood well this special young woman’s feelings.

“Please be patient, Miss Leng.”

Director Luo raised a hand towards Leng Lingxi, indicating she sit. The young woman took several deep breathes before returning to her seat.

Gui Xin continued. “From our analysis of the scene, the Number T-25 Space Shuttle ferrying Miss Leng Lingxi and her twenty-two person convoy suffered no damage, but for a temporary malfunction in it’s internal

controls. Thanks to meticulous attention to detail and a faint trail, we were able to issue a preliminary report.”

“The culprit likely approached the shuttle mid-flight via Mecha, drawing near under cover as the ship decelerated for atmospheric entry. Then, through some unknown means, he simulated an interplanetary magnetic current which permitted him to enter the shuttle’s hull without a trace. The Mecha itself was attached to the shuttle’s frame.”

“Our suspect then entered the ship, moving directly to First-Class. His sense of timing must have been exemplary, as he arrived just as the First-Class passengers were being revived from Deep Sleep. Employing electric current, he managed to incapacitate everyone with the exception of Miss Leng. He then proceeded to paralyze Miss Leng, and abscond with the Cipher Box.”

“In the process of the robbery he engaged in combat with Miss Leng Lingxi. None of the other passengers were hurt in the process. At present the only thing we aren’t sure of is how he managed to pass through the shuttle’s hull, enter the ship and leave without haste.”

Director Luo tapped the tabletop with a finger, interrupting Guo Xin’s report.

“You’re conclusion. I want to hear your deduction.”

Guo Xin paused, his previously impassive expression becoming more serious. “At present, our conclusion is that what the culprit told Miss Leng Lingxi was no falsehood – he truly is Zeus. Zeus, of the Divine Monarchs.”

The previous silence of the chamber became a cacophony, with shock clearly written on nearly everyone’s face.

“Impossible, it’s impossible! That bastard... how could that bastard possibly be Zeus?” Leng Lingxi sprung up once more, like a cat who’d had their tail stomped on. “How could Zeus have done such a despicable thing, robbing like a common Space Pirate! Inconceivable, my Zeus would never do such a thing!”

Her voice was nearly hysterical, drawing everyone’s eyes to her.

“Your Zeus?” Director Luo looked at her quizzically.

Leng Lingxi’s face grew red. “Zeus is my idol. How could he know...” It was then it seemed, before her very eyes, that detestable laughing face appeared.

Guo Xin interjected. “Zeus’ sphere of control is Electricity. If someone wanted to covertly enter a shuttle to commit a crime, and overpower you, I’m afraid it could only be accomplished by someone of his Level.”

The expression in Leng Lingxi’s eyes was lifeless. She suddenly remembered the young man’s words as he departed.

.....

“You’re a girl of quality, a girl of vision.”

.....

Sure... Surely it couldn’t be true? But... but he kept saying I was an idiot! The scoundrel!

“Silence!” Director Luo’s commanding voice brought stillness once more to the chamber. “With the loss of the Cipher Box, my Heavenly Auction House has suffered greatly. The envoy responsible, Leng Lingxi, is demoted to Rank Two. Cancel all protection missions, and suspend all escorts for three months. As to the identity of the culprit, I will proceed with verification. Dismissed!”

Director Luo was the first to leave, followed by Guo Xin. The others followed afterward.

Leng Lingxi sat, unmoving.

Her left index finger gently rapped the tabletop, and in her heart she thought, He is Zeus!

Her right index finger gently rapped the tabletop, and in her heart she thought, He is NOT Zeus!

Over, and over, and over.

Chapter 10: Red-Haired Chu Cheng

Planet Luo, Astro-Continental Hotel, Executive Suite, Balcony

Lan Jue quietly leaned against the balcony balustrade, peering into the distance. As a platinum member of the hotel, he could enjoy the executive treatment from any Astro-Continental while only paying a pittance.

Held between the thumb, middle and index finger of his right hand was a Former Era Cuban cigar from the El Laguito factory. A 6.5 inch, 56 ring gauge Cohiba cañonazo extra, also referred to as a 1966 Edición Limitada, a rare and precious limited edition. While red wine required different spaces and techniques to properly store, this cigar needed only a humidifier to last for a few hundred years, with a pronounced smell like nanmu. In reality it's date of production wasn't 1966, but was in fact 2012 of the Former Era. As to why it was called 1966, no one knew for certain. One flawless, limited edition 1966 was worth one-third a bottle of Romanée-Conti, King of Wines.

Lan Jue had never known poverty, but this sort of precious, rare commodity he rarely deigned to partake in. But today, the end of this 1966 Edición Limitada glowed intermittently with fire. A deep inhalation, the smoke never passing the throat, remaining in the mouth to roll from the tip of the tongue to the root, savoring, then gradually exhaling.

The intense flavor of coffee beans and the marvelous, burning taste in his mouth was mesmerizing. The entire cigar was covered in cream flavor, and the taste of leather, but once smoked for a time became full of the sweet taste of milk chocolate. It was irresistible. A moment of intense satisfaction filled his heart.

Though the high-grade cigar would mean abstaining from wine for at least a week, to immerse himself in the taste of the 1966 Lan Jue was as ever powerless to resist.

"So fragrant, so fragrant, only... 'tis better to enjoy together than partake alone, Third Brother*. Surely you don't plan to keep it all to yourself?" a languid voice wafted forth. Suddenly there was another beside Lan Jue,

bent over the balustrade and peering with him out over the distance.

The man appeared comparable in age to Lan Jue, with medium-length red hair that hung freely to his shoulders, and pink eyes that made him look like some evil spirit. The corners of his mouth were turned in a impish grin. He wasn't as handsome as Lan Jue, but his features weren't without their own charm. Black shirt, black jeans, black shoes; it was as if he intended to blend in with the night, only his red hair bobbing like a flame through the darkness.

"If you really want me to call you by this method also, keep calling me Third Brother." Lan Jue didn't look at his companion, his voice faint.

The grin upon the red haired man's face suddenly slipped away. "Why would I possibly want to be a few months older than you? Why would I want to be second? Fine, A-Jue**, I wont call you Third Brother!"

At last Lan Jue turned to face the red haired young man, who was of similar height to him. "A-Cheng, I apologize."

The red haired man shook his finger in admonishment. "You meant to let your feelings slip, just as you meant to stay on Planet Luo to wait for me. You aren't sorry. If you wanted to conceal your feelings no one would be able to guess them. I'm just curious... You've lived in seclusion for three years, what price inspired this legend of the mercenary world to come out of retirement?"

Lan Jue took another drag of his cigar, then gently exhaled the plume of smoke. He then said the four words on that piece of paper that inspired him to leave Planet Skyfire. "Hera is not dead."

The red-haired man's body shook visibly, and he unconsciously stood a little straighter. "Really?"

Lan Jue nodded his head. "This price that drew me out, is her whereabouts."

The red-haired man took in a breath, raising a hand to pat Lan Jue's shoulder. "Right. Your older brother will help."

Lan Jue looked up at him and smiled, warmth in his eyes. "How bad was

the loss?"

Casually the man responded, "My family only holds a thirty percent stake in the Heavenly Auction House." As he said this, the man snatched the 1966 from Lan Jue's grip, placing it in the corner of his mouth. "And this is mine. When you do wrong, there's always a price!"

Lan Jue's face twitched. "I only brought the one."

"Nonsense." The red-haired man reverently puffed the cigar.

Lan Jue lifted a hand to his forehead. "Chu Cheng, ya nothing short of a bandit!"

Chu Cheng's eyes grew large. "Ya JUST stole from my family, and you call me a bandit? Aren't ya a noble? What kind of noble says 'ya'?"

Lan Jue puffed out his chest. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Hera's there, do you need my help?" Chu Cheng said.

Lan Jue shook his head.

Chu Cheng let loose a peel of laughter. "Yeah, if you couldn't manage, neither could I."

"Joining me tonight?" Lan Jue shot him a glance.

"Alright." Chu Cheng took another drag from the 1966, nodding emphatically.

Lan Jue returned to the room, while Chu Cheng leaned against the balustrade once more, the smile on his face never wavering.

After a short while Lan Jue returned, bearing a bottle of brandy and two glasses. He stood beside Chu Cheng, placing the glasses on the ledge between them before pouring. At once a heady, fragrant aroma wafted forth.

Chu Cheng's eyes shone. "A-Jue, luckily you still remember your older brother's fond of spirits, brandy especially. This bottle of Hennessy XO isn't the highest caliber, but it'll still go down well."

Lan Jue offered a small smile. "Aren't you always on about the

disadvantages of being older? How are you going to drink this in one gulp. Do you think this is the Former Era? Finding an XO bottle of brandy is already very difficult. The X means 'exceptionally', and the O means 'old'. Exceptionally old brandy is already quite rare.

As he spoke, he poured approximately thirty milliliters in to each glass.

"Bring some ice cubes!" Chu Cheng said, lifting his glass.

Lan Jue shot his brother a disdainful glance. "We of the nobility always appreciate brandy a little warm."

"Brandy can be heated?" Chu Cheng said with astonishment.

Lan Jue indicated the glass before him, saying nothing.

Chu Cheng flicked his left wrist, and two small flames appeared beneath the brandy glasses. After a moment, Lan Jue extinguished the flames with a flourish.

Lifting the glass in his fingers, Lan Jue lightly sniffed the contents, the full-bodied mixture of grapes and alcohol filling his nostrils. Taking a sip, the aromatic grapes and warm current slipped past his throat. Indeed you couldn't enjoy wine after a fine cigar, but pairing it with brandy was beyond compare.

"Not bad at all!" Chu Cheng praised the brandy while taking a drink.

Chu Cheng continued. "A-Jue, you know... When I'd learned a person named Zeus had stolen from the Heavenly Auction House, my first reaction was joy. But seeing you here now, makes me even happier. My brother's back."

Lan Jue drained his glass in one gulp. "I'm sorry I worried everyone."

Chu Cheng looked shocked. "Oh I was fine. But Elder Brother... you haven't kept in touch with him at all? Surely you don't still blame him? You must know he realizes what you did."

Lan Jue trembled, and shook his head. "Drink."

"Right, drink! Tonight I'm here with you, let's get wasted!"

Early morning.

Chu Cheng had left, leaving only a slip of paper.

“I know you have the ability to open the Cipher Box, but why go through the trouble of doing it yourself? Find Hera, tell me the good news. Bring her back to drink with me.”

Under the sentence was a three-line password.

*

*Editor's Note 1: For those unfamiliar, oriental families take considerable stock in seniority, with the elder siblings often bearing the brunt of responsibility. Thus, Third Brother Jue is third of his familiar, and Second Brother Cheng must sadly deal with more of the headaches of familial strife.

**Editor's note 2: A-Jue is an affectionate term for a brother or companion, used as one might call their brother Stewart 'Stewey.' It's deceptively difficult to find a cutesie way to say A-Jue.

Chapter 11: The Cloudless Storm

Planet Skyfire, Skyfire City, Skyfire Avenue, Zeus' Jewelry Store

Lan Jue sat upon the sofa, quietly looking at the black metal box in front of him. Beside it sat the slip of paper containing the passwords Chu Cheng had given him.

Three years ago Lan Jue, in his arrogance, would never have thought to open the box. He'd have presented it to his employer without question.

Then again if this were three years ago, he also would have absolutely refused the assignment, since the owner and his brother had a relationship.

Now he had to see what the box contained. He had to know what he owed his brother for.

Placing a hand atop the box a beam of light emerged, it's rays creating the image of a keyboard hanging in the air. In the same instant, a sixty-second countdown began.

Lan Jue did not input the password during his first attempt. It was as though he was unaware the three-line code was needed within that minute.

Watching the red holographic keyboard, his eyes betrayed deep consideration.

A minute passed quickly, and it seemed almost immediately the final ten seconds were ticking down.

Ten...

Lan Jue stirred, his fingers stretching forth. They weren't thick, and his hands were smooth and fairer than most women, but also somewhat larger.

Ten fingers began to flutter, as though they were caressing the skin a lover. The naked eye was incapable of discerning where his fingertips pressed. The three-line code, completed in a single action, appeared upon

the Cipher Box's small screen.

Beep!

An electronic ringing arose, the holographic keyboard dispersed, and two sides of the metal box drew out. They opened quickly, retreating layer by layer as the interior rose to reveal the goods within.

On Skyfire Avenue, Lan Jue was known as the Jewel Master – he was no stranger to the exquisite and masterful. But when he spied the contents of the box, the corners of his mouth couldn't help but twitch ever so slightly. Muttering aloud, he said "A-Cheng, how will I ever be able to repay this favor?"

Within the box a pale gold piece of metal rested. It was twenty centimeters long, fifteen centimeters wide, and ten centimeters thick. Though the object was made of gold, it emitted a pale blue halo.

The average onlooker might think it pretty, but Lan Jue knew precisely what it was. No wonder it was protected by password and convoy. No wonder they hired a Chief-Ranked Mecha-Pilot and Sixth Level Adept. What they carried...

Refined Technetium!

Technetium is the byproduct of uranium fission from nuclear reactors. It is a metal that does not exist in nature, and can also be created by heating ammonium pertechnetate (Tc_2S_7) and ammonium sulfate in hydrogen gas at 500 to 600 degrees Celsius, then using electrolysis in a sulfuric acid solution to extract the metal. It melts at 2170°C , boils at 4877°C , and has a density of 11.5 g/cm^3 . Its characteristics are similar to ruthenium, found in the same chemical family. At high temperatures technetium oxidizes to form Technetium Heptoxide (Tc_2O_7). It has a half-life of 2.13×10^6 years. It can be used as a standard beta-emitter. A small amount (around $5 \times 10^{-6} \text{ mol}$) of technetium ammonium sulfate used in steel plating can greatly reduce corrosion. Technetium, along with the molybdenum alloys, are also superconductive materials. It can only be produced in small quantities, with prices exceeding 2,800 New Era Dollars per gram.

In addition, refined Technetium is created when the metal undergoes

intergalactic compression. One kilo of crude Technetium can produce between ten to twenty grams of it's refined state.

Refined Technetium can be integrated in to any alloy, infusing it with two unique characteristics; self-repair, and energy amplification.

Through the special properties emitted by Technetium, or perhaps some capacity of it's morphology, it is capable of producing and amplifying a superconductive state, increasing available energies by a factor of three to five. The purer the refined Technetium, the more excessive it's compression process, the greater it's resulting power and amplification. In addition, a single gram of refined Technetium can endow ten kilos of metal with the capability of self-repair. Once melted and cast, only very specific types of destructive force could render it powerless – but it would never lose it's shape. The lump of refined Technetium certainly didn't look heavy, but in reality weighed more than twenty kilos.

In short, applying this element to the body of a Mech, would render it capable of repairing itself while simultaneously increasing it's survivability and power exponentially.

Lan Jue couldn't guess at the worth of the refined element. On the black market, one gram would fetch ten thousand New Era Dollars. But there was no market for it. The Three Alliances of the New Era together only produced less than a hundred kilos a year. And so, that piece of metal before him was the equivalent of two fifth's a year's output.

In general, refined Technetium was rarely used on Mechs. Due to their massive bulk there wasn't ever sufficient quantities of refined Technetium to produce the desired effects. As a result it saw most of it's use in personal combat weaponry and equipment.

It was no surprise they wanted to sell it, a piece this large was a asking for trouble.

This piece of refined Technetium should certainly be given to A-Cheng. On all of Planet Luo, he's the only one qualified to use it.

He closed the box, and the precious metal once more disappeared in to it's interior. Lan Jue's eyes were awash in emotion, but his features quickly

returned to a flat stoicism.

Lang Jue motioned with his left hand, and a screen lit up adjacent to the sofa revealing a four dimensional menu. Thin and agile fingers moved with deft speed to enter a string of numbers. The image on the screen began to shift.

Pearl appeared upon the screen, smiling as she looked at Lan Jue.

“If Zeus does it, it will be extraordinarily done.” Pearl’s tone was pleasant, but looking at her through the screen Lan Jue saw only her frigid expression.

“Tell me where Hera is.”

“The item?” Pearl’s eyes fell upon the box placed before Lan Jue.

Lan Jue responded. “Tell me a place, and I’ll have it sent by Interstellar Courier. Once I’ve confirmed your information on Hera I’ll give you the password.”

“Fine,” she responded without hesitation.

“Where is Hera?” Lan Jue’s eyes shone, arcs of blue lightning coiling in their depths. His impatience was clear today, a state he hadn’t experienced for a long while. A state he couldn’t control.

Skyfire Avenue was rich in shops, but even at the height of it’s nightlife there wouldn’t be many people. Occasionally a patron would saunter by, clad in finery, but none would break the relative peace of the street much less quarrel or do something uncouth. If they did, they could lose their Skyfire Emblem at any moment.

Thrummm came the dull sound of thunder, and the avenue was suddenly illuminated by lightning. Not a cloud hung in the sky, yet lightning fell freely. The tumultuous roar of thunder filled the heavens.

It began with a single thunderbolt, but before long countless threads of lightning criss-crossed the sky, thunder surging. The sky was an undulating sea of electric blue, melting in to a forest of lightning which grew until the entirety of Skyfire City grew stark in the shadows of

lightning.

A cloudless thunderstorm. Lightning from an undarkened sky!

Chapter 12: The Clairvoyant

It was a building of the late baroque period, it's exterior displaying an array of elegant and distinctive arches, each one unique. The entire structure resembled a giant, open conch shell.

Following the line of the building's crest, a sign hung. A sun, with the words COFFEE scrawled beside it.

The sun represents the day, so it was only natural that this very special structure full with the scent of eighteenth century French art, was called... Daybucks Coffee.

The interior was furnished with delicate-looking and attractive furniture which employed a curious asymmetrical technique. The theme was one which involved conch shells, hillstones, whirlpools and S-shaped arches. Rolling grass and unfurling flowers, lingering and intersecting, creating an organic whole. The ceiling and cambered walls join seamlessly, the rounded edges bearing a mural.

In order to imitate a natural style, the building was also constructed using mismatching materials which resulted in a multitude of inconsistencies. The walls were painted in vivid shades of lime green, pink and rose red. The architraves are mostly painted gold. The interior paneling was made up of delicate wooden lattice, surrounded by lace with a light colored Oriental brocade at it's heart.

There sat the Coffee Master, clad in a white shirt and brown overalls with a cup clutched in his hand. Tenderly he took a sip.

Thrummm!

The sound of thunder rang out, and the coffee in the Master's cup trembled, nearly spilling free. A shocked expression on his face, he hurried to the window and looked towards the skies.

"A cloudless thunderstorm, with lightning from an undarkened sky. What overwhelming ability! Is this his power? I had no idea he commanded a force such as this. I fear to know what he encountered to

make him lose control in such a fashion.”

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This was a room without any unnecessary furnishings, of a size perhaps half that of what could be found in Zeus’ Jewelry Store. If it weren’t for the wooden door facing Skyfire Avenue, it was unlikely people would believe it was of a caliber to match the other shops along the street.

The shop wasn’t available for public use, instead intended for guests only. Within the room was a single long table of simple construction, square with four straight legs and a disconnected surface, and around it ten seats made of tree stumps.

Whether table or chairs, all shared the same texture, each carved out of a thousand year old preserved wood. If one were to look carefully at the grain, they would see either a multitude of strange faces, or a dense collection of spots akin to leopard skin. Thick, thin, ordered, messy, straight or crooked, all were present. Black lines were in the majority, but chocolate brown and red stripes were also visible. Scented Rosewood, from Previous Era Hai’nan.

The table top, however, was over five thousand years old. The Wine Master once said he would be willing to trade everything he owned – with the exception of what was in his Wine Vault – for that table, but the offer was refused.

Beside the table, by the window, the Gourmet stood looking up at the sky. The incessant bolts of light played across his craggy features. He chewed absently on a soda cracker, his eyes narrowing during a lull in the blasts.

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The Old Gothic Winery.

The Wine Master also stood by the window, Eva dutifully standing at his side. He looked out over the sky, then looked across Skyfire Avenue towards the shop marked with a lightning bolt. He gently shook his head.

“Master, i-is that...” Eva asked in a timid voice.

He lifted his hand, cutting her off. A dull silver light shone, and all sense of foreboding melted away. Eva, too, no longer felt anything strange, walking towards the window and thoughtfully looking towards Zeus' Jewelry Shop.

A streak of lightning raced across the sky over Skyfire Avenue, and the skyscrapers around Skyfire Avenue reflected a dull golden light.

ζ

A palatial building in the baroque style loomed, its exterior bathed in gold leaf. Schematically it was shaped like an olive, with an emphasis on its decorative domed ceiling. Its façade exhibited a separated pediment, the entablature curved, and the walls alternatively concave and convex. Its adornments were ample, lending to an intense shadowy effect. It was the largest building on Skyfire Avenue.

The building bore no sign, but anyone with a Skyfire Emblem knew it to be Skyfire Museum. Inside was housed many treasures, available to view for a fee to anyone with an Emblem. However, it was only open to visitors from sunrise to sunset.

Within, an old man quietly stood. He was tall with rugged features, his true age difficult to discern. His eyes were blue, deep, and clear as though capable of reflecting the universe itself.

He was clad in a magnificent robe of white silk. It was covered in silver embroidery, threaded with precious gems. On his head was worn a peaked cap, and his right hand bore a large ruby ring.

A silvery light crept over him, and suddenly another stood beside the old man; the Wine Master in noble regalia.

"You're nervous," the old man said with a smile, his eyes never straying from the window.

The Wine Master nodded his head slightly. "I'm afraid he'll change everything. Three years ago when he arrived, he almost immediately became one of us. He certainly displayed enough taste and ability. In these three years he's blended well, but his power... it's..."

Calmly the old man interceded. “Too strong, yes?”

The Wine Master silently nodded.

The old man turned to face the Wine Master, his sky blue eyes bright and sagely. “He is one of us. When we sanctioned his appointment to the Skyfire Council, he became an inseparable part of us. Regardless of what hardships he faces, we are his family.”

“Can you see his future,” the Wine Master asked.

The old man shook his head. “No. But I can sense the Thunderbolt’s integrity.”

The Wine Master continued, “With his disposition, so clearly infuriated, I’m afraid we might encounter some problems. Should we help him?”

The old man chuckled. “There’s no need. If he were originally someone who habitually brought trouble upon others, we would not have taken him in. Let nature take it’s course.”

Finally, a smile crept upon the Wine Master’s face. “Being a little bit of a troublemaker isn’t such a bad thing, I suppose. At least now he won’t come and drink all of my cherished possessions.”

The old man laughed. “Next time call on me. Although I can’t drink much, the taste reminds me of those olden days. Unfortunately I’m not sure whether I’ll be able to help you find where another bottle is kept.”

A light shone in the Wine Master’s eyes, but soon he asked with helpless tones, “Is it truly alright to use divination to find wine, Master Clairvoyant?”

With a small smile, the Clairvoyant looked at him. “How could it not?”

Chapter 13: The Beautiful Bride

Tianshan Mountain, situated fifty kilometers outside of Skyfire City, the highest peak of Western Skyfire.

The territory of Skyfire was situated by class and affluence. To the East lived the rich, with the noble class situated on the West. The poor lay to the South, and the ghettos to the North. As a result the inhabitants of the Western section were Skyfire City's – and in fact all of Planet Skyfire's – political elite.

Tianshan Mountain was said to be the 'highest' peak of the West, but in reality it rose no higher than eight hundred meters. The reason for its fame was the more than sixty ridgepole villas dotting its surface, the abodes of Skyfire's most illustrious elite. Here, the higher you lived, the higher your status.

From base to peak there was only one road, its other face a sheer cliff. Today appeared to be a special day, for the entire length of the twenty-meter wide street had been made pink.

The color was due to the fact that the entire stretch of road had been covered in butterfly orchid petals several inches thick. Stretching for hundreds of meters, the fragrance was intoxicating.

The trees lining the road had been decorated with... wedding dresses. Yes, wedding dresses, not white gauze. Each tree had been fitted with a custom-made dress, white as the driven snow, and wonderfully elegant with luxurious white pearls. They were meant to symbolize flawlessness.

The area three kilometers around the mountain had already been cordoned off. Clearly it wasn't wealth alone that could achieve this, but significant political clout.

Thousands of robo-cleaners had already swept the area the night before, so that not a single mote of dirt sullied the premises.

Some ten-odd Climate-Control aircraft flew overhead dispersing clouds, making the skies as transparent as a sapphire so that the rising sun could

shine it's brilliance upon the mountain top.

On the other side of the cordon line a scattered number of people had begun to gather. Half peered toward the mountain, the other half whispered amongst themselves.

"Has it started yet? This wedding has been hailed as the grandest cross-alliance wedding. It's as massive as expected! Look up there, Climate-Control ships dispersing clouds and all!

"Yeah! It's an important day, and I heard that later there will be a joint military parade, with mechs from both our militaries. They're going to hold the wedding here first, then have another in the Western Alliance."

"Ugh... lucky westerner. I heard the wedding is between the Chief of the Eastern Alliance's daughter and the Western Prime Minister's son. That's why it's such a grand wedding."

"How could this be at all regrettable? A political union through marriage, nothing more than posturing. No one's even seen what the Chief's daughter is like, they just don't know. I might even look better!"

"Hmph! The Chief's daughter might be a mystery, but the Western Prime Minister's son is always on the Interstellar Network channel. A young hero of his generation. For a political unification there can't be too big a disparity between the image of either party."

"Enough, don't bother looking for me tonight!"

"....."

Unbelievably, on the peak of the mountain nearing the misty skies, rose a palatial structure of layered architecture. It's style was a mixture of East and West, not at all lofty. It was white, in conjunction with the dominant hue of the day, and threads of splendid alabaster muslin were visible everywhere as though the building itself were clad in a wedding gown.

The building took up an area of seven hectares, it's interior facilities absolutely extravagant. An outdoor pool rippled with faint blue water, it's end tumbling in to a waterfall which flowed ceaselessly in to the palace's lower level. Within the giant pool swam one hundred and eight silver

arowana.

On the lawn adjacent to the pool, among an array of pure white flowers, milled guests who'd already arrived. A procession of high-end luxury verti-cars docked on the nearby helipad, and a queue of people in formal attire made their way inside the building. Among them were no lack of recognizable faces. Politicians, celebrities, business moguls...

Finely attired attendants shuffled between the guests bearing beverages, alcoholic drinks and delicacies.

In accordance with the traditions of the Eastern Alliance, the wedding must be held in the morning. As one of this century's greatest weddings, it would also be held in the morning without exception.

Within the palace, two stylists nervously worked in an extravagant room. Two maids stood beside to assist them.

In the middle of all of them sat a woman.

The female stylist busied herself with placing make-up on the woman's delicate features, while the man stood behind her. He held her jet-black shimmering hair in his hands, and thought deeply.

"Hehn..." The man held a Pink Finger's Orchid between his fingers, speaking effeminately. "Sweety, you're being impossible! If you wont let me put your hair in a bun, what am I supposed to do with it? With hair this long a bride absolutely needs a bun."

The young woman shook her head. "No, no bun. If you can't figure it out, then don't. Let it hang naturally."

"This..." the man began bitterly. "If you're gunna be like this I simply can't talk to you. How can you suddenly reject the bun? Today is your big day!"

The female stylist hummed. "What's so strange about it. Miss Qianlin was born so beautiful, the most gorgeous I've encountered. Not an ounce of styling and you'd still be stunning."

The man grumbled in agitation. "Hey! What are you talking about, a

good stylist can make the beautiful sublime. Fine, fine.. let me think of something. The dual coiling dragon technique will work.”

The young girl smiled, like a hundred blooming flowers. “Thanks!”

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Half an hour later.

The female stylist carefully placed the diamond-studded tiara atop the young woman’s hair, then clapping her hands together said, “There! Sweetie, you are absolutely the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. Stand up and take a look.”

The young woman stood slowly, her hair already woven up, the two sides coiled layer on layer to hang down her back. An array of colorful gemstones twinkled in their midst.

The most important aspect of the dual coiling dragon style was to make the hair beautiful while leaving it’s length unchanged.

The lily-white dress shone like the Milky Way, twinkling with resplendent light, each diamond on it custom fit by Van Cleef & Arpels. Each diamond was flawless, larger than a karat each. The dress bore one thousand and one of them. The largest was set in the center of the chest, and cut in to the shape of a heart. The fifty-karat diamond was surrounded by a circle of small pigeon’s blood rubies.

Standing, her body tall and lithe, her wedding dress fitting to her like a glove, there was no flaw or blemish. The arc of her voluptuous chest swept downward, her waistline slender, the ridge of her backside enticing. Moving further down, her dress narrowed until she looked like a mermaid, her tail moving delicately.

The dress had no crinoline, instead setting off her flawless figure, flowing down past her lower legs to spread out in a bloom of white muslin.

The diadem upon her head was made of platinum, inset with diamonds and sapphires. If it were just like this, it wouldn’t be sufficiently grand for the occasion, but looking closer it was revealed that each exceedingly hard

diamond and sapphire had been carved in to flowers using a special technique.

Peering upon herself in the mirror, Qianlin's beautiful blue eyes began to mist. Her brow furrowed, bearing an echo of worry in her expression.

Her delicate lips parted. "Am I beautiful?"

Chapter 14: New Bridegroom Richard

The gardens of the magnificent building were swarmed with people, especially around the outdoor swimming pool. The immaculately dressed patrons were sampling the fine wines and beverages, while likewise engaging each other in conversation.

In these sorts of situations no one would dare speak loudly. It was essential to maintain one's demeanor.

As the people milled, an enormous gemstone-blue verti-car appeared in the distance, cresting the mountain.

The airship was easily ten times the size of the average verti-cars docked nearby, comparable in size to a small airship. As it neared the peak of the mountain it began to descend. A reserved section of the parking area had been set aside.

"He's coming," people whispered.

As the vehicle drew nearer, the dual patterns on its sides became visible; two hearts conjoined, one red and one blue. The red heart represented the Eastern Alliance, while the blue naturally signified its Western Alliance counterpart. This wedding would have major significance for both.

A man in his forties, his posture tall and straight, pushed through the crowds with an entourage of ten-odd people.

He stood straight in a fine suit, with short hair and a steadfast expression on his handsome features. He was a staple on all of the Eastern Alliance's major television networks. Chief Minister Zhou Xue, the youngest Chief in the history of the Eastern Alliance, first among the Alliance's luminaries.

And today he was the penultimate host. The magnificent estate in which this wedding was held was, in fact, his official residence.

To be more accurate, this residence was the home of all Eastern Alliance chief ministers.

Minister Zhou Xue walked to the distant verti-car, pausing about thirty

meters shy. A small smile graced his features as he watched the vehicle's door slowly open.

Average verti-cars had only one door, but this luxurious and enormous vehicle had two. When the doors opened two bodyguards appeared from within, clad in black suits and sunglasses. They took up positions near the door, one left and one right, framing the entrance as a very tall man with grey hair emerged.

He was exceptionally tall, exceeding two meters, and though his hair was grey it was meticulously styled with pomade. He stepped from the car with a smile on his face, but he clearly bore himself with an air of importance.

A young man exited next. He wore a Steven Rich suit, goshawk pattern black crocodile leather shoes, and a black bow tie. His head was covered in fine blonde hair, styled to be aesthetically pleasing. He was a little thin, with two bright piercing blue eyes. He too was tall, very similar to the old man before him.

Seeing the two men, Minister Zhou Xue strode forward to greet them. The elderly gentleman similarly rushed to meet his host.

The two men met with open arms for a large embrace.

"Austin, we meet again. I see you're as statuesque as ever," Minister Zhou Xue said with a chuckle.

"Zhou, you haven't changed a bit. You cheated me the last time!" The elder gentleman grumbled.

The Chief laughed. "This is an auspicious day for our children! Let's not discuss business. We'll talk later. From today, we're one family, how could I cheat you? From now on how about I just call you Sylva, eh?"

Sylva Austin was head of the Austin family, and Prime Minister of the Western Alliance. The Austin family was the single most prominent family of the Western Alliance.

"Of course," Austin chortled. He turned his head to look at the young man behind him. "Richard, come and greet your father in law."

Chief Zhou smiled. "There's no need for formalities. You've had a long and tiresome journey. Come in and rest, everything's already set for the ceremony. We'll wait a little while before we start, yes?"

"Indeed. It's almost that time, you've gone through a lot of trouble yourself Zhou," Austin replied.

From within the sapphire verti-car an entourage of more than ten individuals exited, silent as mice, moving with practiced instinct to surround the man and his son.

Sylva Austin found it difficult to relax. As Chief Zhou lead him through the crowds, the myriad officials and lauded guests lined up to greet them. He met each with poise and grace, returning their acknowledgements with flawless etiquette.

Richard Austin smiled courteously through the process, but concealed in his eyes was anticipation.

Originally, when he'd first laid eyes on Minister Zhou Xue's daughter Zhou Qianlin, he mistook her for an angel. Though his father opposed, he was adamant in his affections for her. Zhou Qianlin herself never paid him any mind, until he spent a vast sum of money to conduct a romantic proposal. From then on she began to respond.

Both were descendents of prominent families, and it involved two powerful alliances. Sylva Austin and Minister Zhou Xue discussed the matter seven times, eventually coming to an agreement both sides could accept, and the grand wedding was set.

Of the three great alliances, the Northern Alliances was clearly the strongest, followed by the West. The Eastern Alliance was considered the least dominant, but the difference between it and the Western Alliance was negligible. Both needed a powerful ally.

Faced with the prospect of embracing his beautiful bride, Richard could hardly contain his excitement. From the moment he'd begun pursuing Zhou Qianlin, their hands had never even touched! In this moment, his brain was filled with images of beautiful black hair, striking blue eyes and an angelic figure. In his heart, this wedding had absolutely nothing to do

with the political implications.

Finally disentangling themselves from greeters and well-wishers, the Austins found their way in to the lounge. With little time before the start of the ceremony, Minister Zhou Xue left the two gentlemen to be with the bride's family. He still had a few small things to prepare.

"Richard, I hope you understand the price I paid to help you with this wedding," Sylva Austin said with a sigh.

Respectfully, Richard responded. "Father, thank you for your help."

Sylva shook his head. "There is no need for that sort of talk between father and son. If this woman is as Minister Zhou Xue has said, you mustn't only marry her, you must thoroughly subdue her. Make her a part of the Austin family. The Eastern Alliance has grown swiftly these last few years, and Zhou Xue is a formidable man. Hopefully this marriage will benefit us in other ways.

Richard uttered not a sound. He was the groom, and in his heart, there was only his bride.

Chapter 15: I am ZEUS!

Melodious tones reverberated through the area. A round flower-covered archway gave way to a gallery, upon the floor a red carpet stretching fifty meters until it reached the ministerial residence.

On either side of the flowery arch were row upon row of chairs blanketed in white. Every one was occupied, the multitudes of party-goers each with their cameras ready to commemorate this grand occasion.

The Austin family was Christian, while Minister Zhou's was atheist. As a result the wedding was designed to respect the Austin family belief. A priest already stood before the congregation, praying quietly with two others.

Richard Austin stood beside the priest, desperately trying to maintain an air of decorum. With the wedding about to commence, all he wanted was to see his new bride.

The Master of Ceremonies' pleasant voice rang out, "Let the wedding begin!"

An almost musical hiss filled the gallery as ranks of mechas rose into the air from either side of Tianshan Mountain. On the left, the machines had been coated in red, whilst the right was in blue. Twenty-four mechas in all flew overhead.

They spiraled into the heavens, then each broke off to draw ranks on either side. The execution was perfectly uniform, and it was clear each mecha was operated by masterful Mecha-pilots.

The two sets of mechas gathered into heart formations, drawing closer to one another until they merged in to one.

At the same moment, a brilliant flash of golden light shone forth, piercing the two hearts like a golden arrow. In that split instant the two hearts both seemed to shimmer golden light, completing a wondrous pattern in the skies above.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests; We are gathered here

today, before the eyes of God and men, to join Richard Austin and Zhou Qianlin in holy matrimony. Marriage is precious, a sacrament ordained by our Lord. In the Bible it is recorded that Jesus Christ attended a wedding at Cana in Galilee. It is also written: no matter the man, the holy bonds of marriage are of the highest importance. And so you must not act in haste or neglect, but instead with reverence, with piety, and with faith adhere to the will of our Lord. Then will your marriage be true.” The priest’s voice hung gently in the air.

“Next, we request the bride make her entrance,” the Master of Ceremonies called.

To one side of the assembly a choir let their voices be heard, a group of thirty six young women between the ages of eight and twelve singing *We Are One in the Bond of Love*.

Minister Zhou Xue emerged, having changed in to a snow-white suit. Beside him, her face half hidden beneath a veil, Zhou Qianlin held on to his arm. The veil prevented anyone from seeing her fetching blue eyes. Her magnificent dress shone with a hundred thousand starbursts in the natural light.

The bride is the focus of any wedding, and this one was no exception. Zhou Qianlin, twinkling with light, was an unparalleled bride.

The Minister’s face wore a slight smile. Gently he patted her hand as they walked in tandem, peering down the red carpet to the priest and Richard waiting at the opposite end.

If it were possible, Richard would have rushed down the isle to meet them, taking his wife from Minister Zhou Xue on the spot. Each diamond on Zhou Qianlin’s dress reflected her beauty, and he was absolutely dazzled by her.

But he couldn’t, of course. He could desecrate this lovely wedding with his impatience. He was a representative of the Western Alliance. And so he could only wait.

Minister Zhou Xue moved steadily, each step the same as the one before, the expression of his face amiable and reserved.

Thus, with the choir singing beautifully, Minister Zhou delivered his daughter down the aisle. Richard made as though to step forward, but he immediately felt the hard gaze of his father.

Old Sylva was helpless. He was an intelligent man, and recognized the light of obsession in his son's eyes. It appeared it wasn't so easy to force the Minister to lose his daughter and riches.

Minister Zhou led his daughter towards the altar, pausing two meters before Richard.

"Richard, from this day forward I entrust my daughter to you. I hope you will love her truly, look after her, and protect her."

"Absolutely, I promise you." Richard's response was somewhat hurried. He felt as though his heart was going to burst from his chest.

As he looked on in anticipation, Minister Zhou finally relinquished Zhou Qianlin's hand to him.

Quickly Richard advanced two steps, one hand behind his back and the other extended forward, employing the most traditional of Western noble etiquette.

Closer and closer the two hands drew. With baited breath the guests watched, each with their cameras and recorders poised to capture this wonderful moment.

Two hands joined!

Zhou Qianlin's frail frame trembled visibly. Minister Zhou looked on dumbfounded. Richard, his face red, was likewise stupefied.

Zhou Qianlin's diamond-studded, gossamer-clad hand did not embrace Richard's.

It was a slender hand, fair-skinned and forceful.

None were able to tell where he had come from, and to all it seemed as though he simply appeared before their eyes, half a step beside Richard.

Gently did the man stroke the dual coiling dragons of black hair, tenderly saying, "Let's go home."

“W-who are you? Let go of her!” Richard howled, raising his hand to grab the intruder’s shoulder.

The man did not move, allowing himself to be grabbed. Serpentine tendrils of blue electricity burst to life, and Richard suddenly felt as though a high-voltage current had torn through him. His entire body was encased in dazzling arcs of electricity which raced over and out of him.

One of the man’s hands reached out to embrace Zhou Qianlin’s waist, lifting her up.

Now, shaken from their stupor, people began to take closer note of the man.

Tall and thin, his head wash covered in golden hair which hung freely to his ankles. He was clad in brilliant golden robes, with a collar concealing his neck and conforming to the contours of his face. A mask concealed his features below the eyes. But most notable, were those two glittering, impish blue eyes.

His lifted his left hand, over his head and pressing towards the skies.

Thrummm!

The sunny skies rang with the abrupt sound of thunder, one after another, until the sky grew dark. Angry clouds converged from all directions, and lightning surged freely in their depths, as though the end times were nigh.

Minister Zhou had begun to react, the Chief Minister of the Eastern Alliance was surprised but not shaken. Retreating not a step, his deep voice bellowed, “Who are you!”

“I am ZEUS!”

Chapter 16: The Mecha Epoch

“Zeus?” Minister Zhou veritably quaked.

Without waiting for him to continue, the golden-clad man embrace Zhou Qianlin and began to rise. The wedding site was in chaos.

Who was this person? Who would dare to interrupt a wedding between the daughter of the Eastern Alliance Chief and the son of the Western Alliance’s Prime Minister, and further more steal the bride?

Prime Minister Sylva was already standing, his face somber. The body guards who’d arrived with the Western delegation finally burst in to action, two stooping to pick up Richard while the rest flung themselves at the man in gold.

Raagh, Oooagghh! Deafening blasts rang out. Two massive figures rose to cut off the man’s escape. Just then two guards of the Austin family, before the eyes of all, began to quickly expand. Their clothing tore, ripped and fell away, revealing the grotesque figures beneath!

The man on the left grew to a massive Gigantopithecus, an towering ape, over four meters tall. The right, too, grew to over five meters, his skin becoming splotched like tiger skin and bulging with enormous muscles. His face even shook and cracked, changing in to that of a tiger.

As the men grew to monstrous proportions the flowered archway burst apart, it’s severed petals dancing in the air. Their beautiful trek towards the floor was in stark contrast against the hideous faces of the guards.

Metamorphosis Disciplines! A specialty of the Western Alliance. Judging by the look of the two beasts, the guards were at least Fifth Level Talents.

“Protect the guests,” Zhou Xueguan bellowed. The residential guards had already rushed forth, guiding the wedding guests to safety.

“D-don’t hurt.. hurt Qianlin!” Richard was unharmed, but his tongue was numb from the shock. His hair had gone from sleek and shiny to dry and cracked. Luckily, the close-fitting protective gear he’d worn beneath his suit had protected him from the brunt of the electric charge.

Ooaaghh–! The Gigantopithecus howled, leaping ferociously towards the man in gold. The guests could not help but scatter and scream in fear at the hellish sight.

“Get lost,” the golden man growled.

Crack, crack, crack! A mighty bolt of lightning crashed down from the heavens, striking the Gigantopithecus. His hideous body burned and blackened, thrust away by the lightning strike.

Rushing forward to save Zhou Qianlin still caught in the grip of the golden man, the Ailuranthrope – or werecat, as they were colloquially called – staggered to a stop.

In that instant, a terrible rumble tore across the area. Scores of forked lightning bolts tumbled from above, striking everywhere. It looked very much like Armageddon. The blood-chilling bolts of lightning nearly blanketing the entire mountain top.

Tearing blasts of lightning, thunder, unidentified stabs of light... In this chaos, everyone was only concerned with protecting themselves.

The man in gold carried Zhou Qianlin in to the air, and before anyone could react he became a dazzling bolt of golden electricity. The light enveloped Zhou Qianlin, and then vanished in to the distance.

In the midst of that hellish rain of lightning, no one was capable of pursuit. Even the ten mechas hovering in the air were powerless, forced to retreat and land with shields up to avoid destruction.

The landing pad was the worst afflicted. No matter the model, no matter how luxurious, every verti-car sizzled and smoked in an inferno.

Within the mansion, every electrical appliance sparked and flickered. The beautiful surroundings, the fabled wedding, had in just a few short minutes become a hellscape.

The golden light encapsulating Zhou Qianlin soured thousands of meters in to the distance. It was then a flash of golden light appeared before her eyes.

The man in gold, who'd become lightning, stopped suddenly a few meters before the flash. He'd returned to his original form.

As before his arm was wrapped about Zhou Qianlin's thin waist, and in fact it was that violation that gave her the ability to withstand gravity.

Another figure appeared beside them, an impressive mecha entirely coated in gold. Suddenly she realized, this had been Cupid's Arrow – that golden light which pierced the two hearts created by the mechas at the mountain top.

When the other mechas were forced to land, this one had left to prevent the man in gold's withdrawal.

The mecha was eighteen meters tall, sleek and smooth. It was devoid of weaponry, perhaps because it was employed in the wedding.

Aside from standard mechas, each humanoid model was personalized, custom made from beginning to end. In short, each was made the exact specifications of its pilot.

The mecha hovering before them, with feminine figure and golden battle dress, was clearly made for a young woman.

“Put Qianlin down, or die!”

The icy voice of the pilot crackled from the mechas megaphone. The lower back of the mecha split open, and its hand reached back to draw forth a three-meter long rod. Both hands gripped the weapon and its dual ends shot forth an intense golden light, humming as it changed in to a battle spear.

“Make way!” It would appear this man in gold was quite gentlemanly towards women.

“Put Qianlin down, and I'll let you go. You should know, even your Discipline won't have any effect on this mecha.” The frigid female voice was unyielding.

As the New Era had approached, changes had occurred to the environment, and the magnetic fields of the planets. People, too, were

affected, a small number endowed with genetic abilities called Disciplines.

Adepts, or Talents – people with the ability for Disciplines – were far and away superior to the ordinary man. But this, this was the Mecha Epoch.

Adepts were ultimately human, whereas the standard mecha weighed over a hundred tons, ran on a fission reactor, were composed of a high-strength alloy and were fitted with the highest technology. It would be no exaggeration to state that, a mecha placed in the Former Era, could easily destroy an entire city on its own. And so in this era, to be a Mecha-Pilot was the dream of every young person.

The man in gold didn't care to repeat himself, and only looked toward the mecha and shook his head.

A thick blast of lightning tore forth to strike the golden mecha.

A cold grunt issued forth, the radiant spear in the machine's hands jabbing towards the sky, striking an impressive pose. The bolt reflected harmlessly to one side.

The cold voice shot back again. "You still don't understand. The stronger your Discipline, the more you will kneel in the face of this mecha!"

"Ha!" The gold-clad man shrugged his shoulders.

"Huh?" Suddenly the golden mecha became aware of another figure which had soundlessly appeared behind it. Two massive hands grasped its shoulders.

Crunch, crack. The two crisp sounds hung in the air.

The armor plating of the golden mecha's shoulders shattered beneath the grisly force, and the arms holding the battle spear falling to the side.

With that a powerful blast of energy shot forth, casting the mangled mecha in to the distance.

In the golden mecha's cockpit, two large emerald eyes stared unbelieving to the air. Where she had hovered, the golden man and Zhou Qianlin entering its open breastplate, floated a massive thing. She looked on with

red lips slightly parted, and eyes glassy.

Chapter 17: Let Me Be Your Antidote

The mecha towered twenty three meters, shimmering a brilliant sapphire blue. From shoulder to shoulder it stretched eight meters, with a tall and slender figure. It's shoulder plates were three affixed layers; the topmost was the largest with spikes which rose skyward, the middle layer was smooth and slightly smaller than the first, and the third layer retracted into the joint.

It's texture was markedly different from average mechas. It was as though it was carved from a single piece of true sapphire, a work of art. As the armor tapered towards it's edges the color became a metallic purple. As lightning flashed in the sky above, the light from the blasts reflected magnificently off of the armor. In the instant it's chest plate closed, it emitted a burst of intense violet light. It grew until it was as a ball of violet lightning rising in to the sky, vanishing in to the forest of arcing bolts above.

"That... that was..."

The golden mecha had already steadied itself where it had been left in the air. The blond-haired, green-eyed woman in the cockpit filled with a shock that was difficult to describe.

"Thor. That was Thor. I actually met Thor. Thor... Zeus? Was that Zeus? I actually... actually told Zeus that the stronger his discipline, the more he'd bow to my mecha? The Zeus who, by virtue of his Discipline alone, bested thirteen top-grade customized mechas!"

The stars shimmered in her eyes, as though she'd already forgotten all about the abduction.

She hovered stupefied for a long while, then again began to mutter to herself. "Why didn't he take me away?"

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Thor had risen with stunning speed, the upper atmosphere rolling past it like water off a duck's back. In minutes it was floating in the vast, quiet

expanse of space.

No radar in operation was capable of locating Thor. The special composition of it's armor was legendary in the world of Mecha-Pilots.

The cabin within Thor was somewhat larger than average, but was a little cramped accommodating two people.

Zeus withdrew the mask, revealing his long and handsome face. Only in this moment, he found it impossible to retain his traditional calm.

In this moment he wasn't Zeus. He was Lan Jue.

He hugged his arms tightly around the woman in his embrace, as though afraid she would vanish.

"Jin Yu, we're finally together again. Why... why didn't you come looking for me? You're my Hera!"

"I'm so hot." Locked in his tight embrace, abducted, this was the first thing Zhou Qianlin thought to say.

"Huh?" Lan Jue paused, lifting a hand to press against her forehead.

Zhou Qianlin's forehead was burning up, and her eyes had shut. Her brows were furrowed, and her body trembled slightly.

She had a fever?

Lan Jue's face grew somber, noticing the red flesh of her neck. She was sick, and those people wanted her to suffer through a marriage?

Lifting his head, Lan Jue muttered, "Thor, take us home."

"Affirmative, returning home." The gentle, dignified voice reverberated through the cockpit. Thor began to transform, to wings extending from it's back. Then, like a bolt of lightning, it shot in to the darkness of the universe.

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Zeus' Jewelry Store.

Ke'er was bored to tears, listlessly laying atop the bar.

Xiuxiu sat to the side, idly sipping the cup of warm water in her hands.

The jewelry shop rarely had visitors, a common reality on Skyfire Avenue. But even if there were only one or two customers, it was usually sufficient to keep the shop running.

“Hey Xiuxiu, where’d the boss go? Didn’t see him yesterday, still not here today.” Ke’er cantered her head towards Xiuxiu and whined.

Xiuxiu laughed. “The boss is a very important man. You think he’d just vanish? Don’t be such a nosy little thing!”

Ke’er giggled. “Me? Don’t tell me you aren’t curious what he’s doing. You came so early this morning, without waiting for me to come help. You even cleaned his house!”

Xiuxiu’s face grew red, as though she’d smeared it with rouge, adding even more charm to her classical beauty.

Just then, the earth shook beneath Zeus’ Jewelry Store.

The girls exchanged glances. “Speak of the devil,” Ke’er exclaimed. “The boss must be back, I’ll go check.”

As she said this, she skipped towards the VIP lounge.

As she pushed to open the door, however, she was surprised to find it wouldn’t budge.

“Xiuxiu, Ke’er, I’m a little tired. I’m going to rest for a while,” Lan Jue’s voice crackled through the speaker by the door.

“Eh?” Ke’er stood confused by the door, while Xiuxiu also drew near.

Ke’er turned to look at Xiuxiu. “The boss doesn’t sound quite right. Maybe he snuck a woman in, and is afraid we’d find out...”

Xiuxiu lifted her hand and rapped against Ke’er’s head in agitation. “What are you saying. In three years, have you even once...” She trailed off, a dismal look in her eyes. “I-If he really did bring a woman back, then I’m happy for him.”

Ke’er closed her mouth, and said nothing more.

Lan Jue carefully laid Zhou Qianlin atop his bed. Even in her state, she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

His brows furrowed in thought. Not half an hour since he discovered her illness and her temperature had already risen sharply. He'd used Thor's onboard diagnostics to run a scan, but discovered no sickness or poison. It was a drug, one that could trigger desire in the victim.

Why? Why today, as a bride, would she need this sort of drug? Judging by the progress of her reaction, it was meant to last until the wedding had concluded.

Those wretches! Was this wedding forced by the Austins? They DARE to force this drug on my Hera.

A thin hand softly rested atop his own, it's heat and soft touch drawing him from his rage.

Zhou Qianlin's body had grown red, and her body began to writhe.

It was a fierce, powerful drug.

Leaning down, he gently took her up in his arms. He felt the heat radiating from her, could smell the familiar scent of her body.

Softly he whispered in her ear. "My Hera. In this life, you are destined to be my bride, and mine alone. Let me be your antidote."

Chapter 18: A Place Called A Hospital

She lay against his wide, sturdy chest, the kind that made people feel safe.

Her lily-white, gem encrusted dress; her exquisite tiara; her dazzling tecnicolor veil. All had been cast beside the sofa.

He gently stroked her hair, which had already begun to unravel. Three years of suffering, poured out in a day. Despite her illness, he shut his eyes in relief.

He didn't see her brows furrow, or her bite her lip, but the shift in muscle was felt beneath his fingertips. "What is it, Jinyu. Why knit your brow?"

"Do you know who I am? Who's here to cure you?" Lan Jue's deep voice asked. "It doesn't matter who it was, they'll pay for what they did to you."

"Do you really know me?" Zhou Qianlin quavering voice asked.

"Huh?" Lan Jue turned her over in his arms, looking in to her eyes.

Zhou Qianlin lifted her head to regard him, looking at him in earnest. It felt as though his face had been branded in to her mind.

"Of course I know who you are. You're my wife. My Hera. My Jinyu. Zhou Jinyu."

She shook her head. "I-I'm not Zhou Jinyu. I'm Zhou Qianlin."

"Wha-" Lan Jue started, moving to sit by her side and looking at her closely. No, it was definitely Hera! Black hair, blue eyes... How could she not know who she was? Even her scent, exactly as it was before.

"Beloved... Is it, amnesia?" Lan Jue asked with uncertainty.

Zhou Qianlin drew the covers closer, saying quietly, "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything," Lan Jue replied.

Zhou Qianlin's eyes shone as she looked at him. "You said this Jinyu is

your wife... then... you've had relations before?"

"Of course! You really don't know?" Lan Jue was unconvinced.

Zhou Qianlin nodded her head, then moved the comforter to the side. She pulled them from Lan Jue's body.

Zhou Qianlin's fair features grew red, and she turned her face to avoid looking at him. Her hand slipped from beneath the sheets and pointed. "Well, then look at this."

A sense of trepidation filled Lan Jue's heart. When he dropped his head to look, he was nearly petrified.

There, he saw a fresh smear of red.

It was quiet, quiet as the grave.

After a moment Lan Jue spoke, his voice strange. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were..."

This time, it was Zhou Qianlin who was speechless.

Her body trembled, her lip quivered, her teeth clenched. It was as though she were afraid a curse would burst forth from her lips.

After some time her mood stabilized. She hissed coldly through gritted teeth:

"This was my first time!"

Lan Jue was dumbstruck. How could this be? He shook his head. No... this can't be true. His heart sunk to the pit of his stomach.

First time? What did she mean the first time? It meant... she wasn't Hera.

My Hera, my Jinyu. She still hasn't returned to me. Lan Jue felt as though he'd been run through with a sword. The pain in his heart stole his breath.

Watching Lan Jue's face drain of color, she too was dazed. The room sank in to a suffocating quiet.

Lan Jue's pained voice arose as he spoke to himself. "Three years. Three years. Why would God play such a cruel trick on me? Why give me hope?"

Don't you understand... the more you hope, the more crushing when it's gone. My Hera... still hasn't returned."

"So what you're saying is, what you just did to me wasn't intentional." Zhou Qianlin's cold voice interrupted.

"Huh?" Her words snapped Lan Jue awake. Seeing here, this woman an exact replica of his Hera, somehow eased the suffering in his heart.

Yes! She wasn't Hera, but she and her...

And, it had been her first time.

Further, the unification of the Eastern and Western Alliance leaders through this marriage.

Most important was that she knew who she was. Even if she didn't know, her family certainly would. In his arrogance he'd let slip his name, sharing with her father regardless of the situation that his name was Zeus.

What to do?

Lan Jue felt his heart thumping in his chest. In all his life, he'd never encountered such an awkward situation.

But it was done. Other than facing it, what else could he do?

"W-well, Zhou Qianlin, you'd been poisoned. Were suffering from it's effect. So, I was forced... against my will to..."

Zhou Qianlin glared at him, saying not a word.

Lan Jue was incapable of alleviating the situation. He knew of only one solution for the current problem.

The dead don't talk.

Kill her, and the problem would be gone!

And yet, could he do it?

Zhou Qianlin uttered, "I have an older sister... I think her name is Zhou Jinyu. She disappeared when I was young. Where did you meet her?"

Lan Jue stared at her. "An older sister?" She was Jinyu's younger sister,

but Jinyu had told him she was an orphan!

A younger sister separated for that long?

He didn't know what to think.

Even if he could do it, silencing her wouldn't actually solve everything.

Zhou Qianlin shot him another cold glance. "You just said I'd be poisoned. That's why you did that to me?"

"Yes, yes!" Lan Jue nodded emphatically.

Zhou Qianlin's expression changed, and she sat up abruptly. With eyes wide she glared at Lan Jue and yelled, "Have you never heard of places called HOSPITALS on this planet? What sort of poison could a modern hospital not cure? You could have sent me to the hospital. If I'm poisoned how does sleeping with me fix anything?"

"I..." Lan Jue stared at her dumbly, dropping his head after a moment. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he muttered, "I thought you were someone else."

Zhou Qianlin's expression was pained, possibly due to the pain in her body.

"Put your clothes on. I don't want to look at your hideous self. I'm afraid I'll get a sty." She shook her head violently for him to leave.

Lan Jue scrambled to his feet, quickly pulling on his clothes. As he did, his eyes fell upon the wedding dress crumpled atop the sofa. "It was probably your fiancé who poisoned you. To go so far as to poison your own new wife... this sort of scumbag, you're better off not marrying him."

Zhou Qianlin shot him a glare. "How do you know it was him? Before then, he had never even touched me. Scumbag? YOU'RE the scumbag! And even if he was, at least he didn't break the law. You? You destroyed my wedding, and defiled my body. You tell me, what are we going to do about that?"

Chapter 19: Same Clothes, New Person

Zhou Qianlin glared at Lan Jue. “You tell me, what are we going to do about that?”

Lan Jue took a deep breath. “What’s done is done. It was my fault. All of this was because I mistook you for someone else. I don’t know how I can make up for this either. You tell me what I can do, and I’ll do it.” The mistake had been made. He was a man, and had to face up to his wrongdoings, doing everything in his power to make it right.

Zhou Qianlin stared at him, her eyes a tangle of emotions. Lan Jue had changed, no longer dressed in the clothes he’d worn when we abducted her.

He wore a white shirt, and paneled deep blue pants. His neat clothes and his tousled hair gave a strange merger of order and chaos.

That dangerous glint in his eye from before was gone, and he’d assumed a more apologetic stance, like a child who’d done wrong.

Nibbling her lower lip, Zhou Qianlin got up from the bed.

“Find me some clean clothes.”

“Right away.” Lan Jue spun on his heel and left without hesitation. He’d only gone a few steps before pausing, then went directly to the closet furthest inside the apartment.

He paused before the closet as though uncertain, opening it after a moment’s consideration. He quickly grabbed a few articles of clothing from within and returned to Qianlin.

Qianlin regarded him coldly. “You seem awfully practiced at bringing women home.”

Arriving before her, he gently placed the clothing at her side. A spark of sadness shone in his eyes. “Your sister’s.”

Zhou Qianlin stared at him, catching that passing look. Though Lan Jue hid it well, his innermost anguish was too profound to hide completely.

Lifting the clothes by her side, she caught a whiff of a clear and refreshing scent. Each piece had been painstakingly folded. Lan Jue looked on, watching the clothes as though they were precious pieces of jewelry.

Even on Skyfire Avenue, even close friends, none knew that in the Jewelry Master's heart the closet of clothes was more precious than his entire stock.

"Hey!"

Lan Jue was shaken from his reverie. He lifted his head, looking directly in to Zhou Qianlin's hard stare.

"I'm sorry." He pressed his hand to his chest, an unconscious habit of his genteel mannerisms. He turned away and stepped aside.

A quiet rustling could be heard from behind him, but there was no excitement in Lan Jue's heart. In truth it was drowned in disappointment and sadness.

She is not Jinyu, even if she looks just like her. She's not my Hera. Where it not for the grief in his heart, and the fact she was her sister, Lan Jue never would have opened that closet. Of course, it was merely to make amends that he opened it.

Footsteps approached, and Lan Jue subconsciously turned his head.

She wore a long dress, white as snow, and a little thin. Tight-fitting but modest, with no extra fabric. Though the spotless dress was unadorned, the gem-encrusted gown she'd worn to the wedding made it look downright plain.

However, that raven black hair melded beautifully with the white dress. Those deep blue eyes were like the most fetching gems on the planet. Her beauty was almost otherworldly, perfect in every detail. Such beauty that it took your breath away.

"Jinyu..." his voice trembled.

She rose to her feet and moved towards him. In an instant she found herself wrapped in a firm, warm, shivering embrace.

The hug was like a thaw, and though she should have been angry she instead found herself almost automatically returning the embrace.

“Jinyu, my Hera, I miss you so much,” Lan jue, his eyes closed as though trying to keep a hold on the past. He seemed unaware his body had grown so feverish.

Zhou Qianlin tried to admonish him several times, her mouth opening though no words came out. But in the end, she couldn't bring herself to ruin what she saw in front of her.

What she saw was his intimacy, the fact that he still remembered her favorite color, an unblemished white. Contrary to the common woman she had no taste for fancy jewelry, in fact quite the opposite from Lan Jue. Moreover he kept saying she was the most precious gem he had. If a bottle of Romanee-Conti was considered some great treasure, then she could only be described as the most dazzling jewel in the crown of the gods.

Zhou Qianlin's face softened, the chill leaving her features. In the face of today's events any girl would have her rage clearly written on her features.

But that burning hug, as though magic, melted her cold exterior. Her rigid body eased, and thus so did her heart.

It is common for one man loves one woman, but it was unexpected to see this level of devotion.

The coldness receded from her expression.

One of his hands rested on her waist, the other gently stroking her messy hair. His tender ministrations helped settle it back in place.

This was care, a care derived from the depths of the heart. An adulation more precious than life.

“Hera, Hera...” he whispered. She never gave a response. That familiar body, with that familiar scent, but without her tender voice.

Lan Jue composed himself, suddenly standing straight and looking at the woman in his arms.

Zhou Qianlin looked like a frightened bunny, quickly extricating herself

from his arms. She hugged her arms to her chest, features growing red from embarrassment.

Lan Jue looked as though he were in a trance. His clothes were the same, he appeared no different, but the man was changed. The woman before him looked for all the world exactly like Hera. But she didn't have her eyes, eyes which could melt the coldest heart.

A silence fell over the room. Lan Jue uttered not a sound, Zhou Qianlin never opened her mouth. Their hearts each were flooded with conflicting emotion, but the emotions in each were as different as night and day.

Chapter 20: You Owe Me

“Where are we.” Zhou Qianlin was first to break the awkward stillness in the room.

“My home,” Lan Jue responded.

The corner of Zhou Qianlin’s mouth twitched. She’d been brought up from a very young age to be cultured and refined, but facing the guy in front of her, more than once she fought the impulse to curse him out.

Lan Jue started, aware of the mistake. “Oh. This is Skyfire Avenue.”

“Skyfire Avenue?” Zhou Qianlin certainly knew of Skyfire Avenue, in fact everyone in the Eastern Alliance knew of it.

It was a unique place, a sanctuary for nobility. It was independent from the outside world, the one area where machinery wasn’t permitted. An exotic oasis.

Even after many years, in the face of many former Eastern Alliance dynasties, none were able to altar the avenue’s rules.

“Take me home,” Zhou Qianlin said softly.

“Yeah.”

The sky was dark, night had arrived earlier than usual. The two walked along Skyfire Avenue side by side, but with a foot of space between them.

“What do you plan to do?” As they reached the end of the two-thousand forty-eight meter Avenue, he couldn’t help but ask.

Of course he knew that after what had happened today, how could she face the stress and troubles.

Had she been Hera, of course there wouldn’t have been any problem. He’d have had a good reason for his actions. But she wasn’t. So the mistake was his, and a very grave mistake it was.

Zhou Qianlin stopped, turning towards him with a grim look. “It isn’t your concern.”

Lan Jue shrugged his shoulders. "Now's not the time to pout."

Zhou Qianlin glared at him. "Oh, can you turn back time then?"

"Ugh... you don't need to worry about that." Lan Jue didn't possess that power. In fact, it was exceptionally rare to find someone with that Discipline. At best they were able to roll back time only a very little while, and even then only in a very small location.

Still less, some things simply can't be undone...

Zhou Qianlin's eyes grew cold. "I'll handle it, it isn't your concern." She began to hurriedly walk away.

"I'll send you back." Lan Jue moved to catch up. Before them, they'd reached the end of Skyfire Avenue's scope.

Zhou Qianlin turned her head to look at him. "Do you want to be a public enemy of the Eastern Alliance?"

Lan Jue stopped in his tracks. That's right! All of Skyfire City could be in turmoil because of her kidnapping.

"I'm not that fragile. I can handle myself. Go back," Zhou Qianlin said.

He stared at her dumbly. From the obstinance in her eyes, Lan Jue could see the Hera he knew, the Hera who was gentle as water and a moment later throwing a fit. It was something he also dreaded.

"This is my interstellar communication number." He produced a slip of paper and pressed it in to her hand. "If you need anything, let me know."

The ambiguity of his statement caused Zhou Qianlin's pretty face to redden. Lan Jue immediately recognized his error, but she didn't wait for him to explain, instead turning and walking away.

"Your wedding dress is still at my place," he called after her.

"I don't want it. You've polluted it."

"Well, when are you going to give me back that dress," he asked.

Zhou Qianlin stopped, spinning to fix him with a burning glare. "I'm NOT!" She turned away again.

The corners of Lan Jue's mouth twitched. This girl's temper is worse than her older sisters, and cold as ice. Damn it! What did I do?

Zhou Qianlin's voice wafted from the distance. "You owe me, and you better pay me back! When I know what I want from you, you'll hear from me."

As her words dissipated into silence, so too did she disappear into the dark.

He stood in silence for a long while afterward, staring into the darkness where she left, stunned.

Gradually his face grew hard, and a pale light flickered in his eyes. A thick anger rose within him, from his very bones.

Zeus, enraged!

That woman.. Pearl!

If not for her information, I never would have arranged such an ordeal. Worse, it brought trouble upon a loyal brother. That precious block of technetium, and this is what I get in return?

"You don't look like you're in the best mood," a deep voice uttered not far behind him.

Lan Jue turned to see the Wine Master at his back, clad in an impeccable and crisp business suit. Lan Jue walked towards him. "New suit?"

"Mm."

"Nice fabric."

"One hundred sixty thread count."

Lan Jue stared at the Wine Master. "I won't bring any trouble to Skyfire Avenue. If something happens, I'll assume all the responsibility."

The Wine Master spoke after a moment. "Have a drink?"

Lan Jue's eyes brightened. "What are we drinking?"

The Wine Master considered. "Your situation... red wine isn't appropriate. Whiskey, I think."

The edges of Lan Jue's mouth curled. "We nobles are certainly capable of self-control."

The Wine Master's lips revealed the ghost of a smile. "You had quite the murderous look in your eye a moment ago. It looked like you wanted to do something a noble shouldn't do."

"Compared with drinking, it isn't urgent," Lan Jue replied quietly. "A true noble must be responsible. At the same time, they have a responsibility to help those in need, bear their responsibilities. This benefits society, so how is it something an aristocrat shouldn't do? If someone had taken your 1990 Romanee-Conti, would you be laughing?"

The Wine Master's face stiffened, obviously recalling that unpleasant day.

Lan Jue grinned. "Whiskey then. Talisker, 1985 single malt, what do you think?"

"Henceforth you are persona non grata in the Gothic Winery. You'll not see me again." The Wine Master turned and began to walk off.

Smiling, Lan Jue hurried to catch up. "Take it easy, I'll pay."

"No!" he replied indignantly.

Lan Jue sighed. "I really am not in the best mood. If you want to hear my story I can tell you."

The Wine Master glanced at him. "I don't have 1985. I have a bottle of Talisker 18-year, though. You want it or not?"

"Off we go!" Lan Jue said categorically.

The Wine Master grinned. "Aristocrats have such high moral integrity."

Lan Jue shot him a puzzled glance. "I do! I'm not going just for a drink. The Iberian ham from before has already been cut, if someone doesn't eat it it'll go bad. Whiskey goes well with ham. Yeah, the Gourmet's method of heating it up really was something. In fact let's call him, his meal preparation is deserving of your praise."

The Wine Master sucked in a breath. "You are no noble, you're a damn

bandit!”

Chapter 21: Tang Mi

She moved silently through the gloom, pausing in the shadow of a building. A white figure quietly making her way.

In the distance she'd traveled from Skyfire Avenue, she'd already changed direction several times. Were someone looking for her trail, it would be almost impossible. Walking in the dark night, she'd managed to avoid all of the probes capable of recognizing her. Even the satellites far overhead had no means of detecting her.

Were it not for her wedding, she'd be wearing her communication device around her neck; enough for the satellites to get a lock. As it was she was doing everything she can to avoid detection. And all of it was for that guy.

Upon thinking about him Zhou Qianlin couldn't help but knit her brow. The pain in her body she could endure, but the chaos in her heart was another matter.

Though she walked in the darkness, in her mind the only shadows were his figure.

Everything that happened was only over a short time, but in her heart it felt like it was stretched over a century ago.

She paused, unconsciously looking back towards Skyfire Avenue. Through the emotional tumult in her eyes arose a shimmering tear.

When she stood before him she was strong, even cold. But in the end she was only a little girl!

With tears in her eyes she slowly walked through the shadow, passing under the glow of a streetlamp. From beneath the towering buildings and yawning eaves she was revealed.

Slowly, step by step she moved on, her mind blank, unable to think.

Suddenly, a whistling blast arose, a rapid surge of air swirling past her.

Zhou Qianlin almost stepped aside, her hands pressing down her dress to prevent the air from ruffling it.

A Ferarri verti-car hovered overhead. This sort of car was best suited for high-speed movement ten meters or less above the ground, though not as expensive as a high-altitude verti-car. But considering it's high energy efficiency, it was not expensive.

The window facing Zhou Qianlin descended, revealing a man young man with yellow Mohican-styled hair. He whistled while staring at her.

Zhou Qianlin's white dress hugged her eye-catching figure, especially her shapely backside which moved with her gait.

Her beauty certainly didn't just attract Zeus.

"Hey there pretty, all by yourself?" The young man ran a hand through his blond hair, pity revealed in his almond eyes.

Zhou Qianlin's look was biting, clearly the blast of air that'd startled her was intentional. This sort of obscene behavior towards women was downright detestable.

She disdained to even speak to him, holding that hard glare a moment longer before turning to leave.

"Saucy!" The young man's eyes lit up. Zhou Qianlin's dismissive glare made her look all the more virginal. And to come across such a pretty lady all on her own in the middle of the night, in his eyes lady luck had blessed him.

The Ferarri deftly moved forward to catch up with the retreating Zhou Qianlin.

The verti-car slowed, and the young man opened his mouth to speak further. As he did, he got the sense Zhou Qianlin had somehow grown brighter. It was then he noticed the column of golden light descending from the skies to envelope her.

Boooooommm!

Almost instantly after the light washed over Zhou Qianlin, a massive golden figure came crashing down, looking terribly mangled.

The Ferarri was abruptly smashed beneath it. The entire back half of the

car had disappeared, while the front had been irreparably warped by the impact. The force of the collision had caused the young man in the driver seat to faint. Luckily, he'd been wearing his seat-belt.

The shockwave tore across the street like a gale. Thankfully there weren't any others on the street. Zhou Qianlin was unaffected, protected by the column of light sent specifically from the golden figure.

The metallic mecha was eighteen meters tall, it's body smooth and streamlined, coated in gold. The sole imperfection were the crumpled armor plates on it's shoulders, traces of the damage the mecha had suffered.

"Qianlin," a tender voice arose, followed by the hatch of the mecha hissing open. A figure arose from within and leapt from the mecha. Unfazed by the eighteen meter height, the woman turned two circles in the air as she tumbled forward. As she did a layer of golden light encased her, and moment before she hit the floor she stabilized and landed firmly.

She was a tall and beautiful woman. Zhou Qianlin herself was considered tall, but this woman stood half a head over her.

Her legs were strikingly long, seventy percent the proportion of her legs and torso, but most gripping was the sense of power her imposing figure commanded.

She wore a black skin-tight flight suit, with a head of long golden hair and jade-green eyes that glittered like crystal.

The flight suit perfectly outlined her figure, and although her long legs seemed almost out of proportion her strong and beautiful posture gave her a tameless beauty.

The golden light quietly dispersed, and the golden haired woman closed the gap between herself and Zhou Qianlin in three long steps. She looked her up and down, asking with concern in her voice, "Qianlin, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Little Mi," replied while shaking her head.

"I've said it countless times," the woman grumbled, "Don't call me Little

Mi. Say my full name, Tang Mi!”

Zhou Qianlin smiled. “You got here fast.”

Tang Mi responded, “Like I had a choice. You know after your disappearance the entire wedding site went crazy. All of Skyfire City now sees danger lurking around every corner. They haven’t officially declared martial law, but they’ve already called for four whole Mecha Battalions to search the entire planet for any trace of you. I was so worried, no one at the wedding was able to protect you. I’m a terrible friend.”

Zhou Qianlin shook her head. “No one blames you.”

Tang Mi acknowledge that with a nod of her head, her big jade eyes excited. “Of course you can’t blame me. That was THOR! The single greatest Mecha-pilot in our Alliance, no way I could stand against him! Agh, why didn’t he grab me! If he had, I’d not have fought back, I’d have gone right along with him.”

Zhou Qianlin’s brows slowly began to rise. “What do you mean, ‘not fought back’?”

Chapter 22: His Story

“Mm, good stuff.” Lan Jue was a little drunk. He breathed in the scent of the alcohol, detecting hints of smoke and peat. His eyes looked dulled.

Before him was a table capable of seating eight and, though small, was quite magnificent with a classical style. It was composed of parqueted wood, inlaid with gold tooling and of very fine texture.

The Wine Master sat at the head of the table, Lan Jue to his left. To his right sat the Gourmet.

Today the Gourmet was clad in a fine black suit and white shirt, though differing from Lan Jue in that he also wore a u-shaped waistcoat. He was the very picture of the gentry.

The cuffs of his shirt had been rolled up. In his right hand he held a long knife, it's blade thirty centimeters long with a sandy beige handle. Were an expert present their eyes would bulge from shock – not from the beautiful moiré pattern on the blade, but due to the fact that the handle was made from mammoth tusk, exceptionally rare even in the Former Era.

The Gourmet's slender fingers moved deftly, cutting the Iberian ham in slices as thin as a cicada's wings and flicking it in to the ceramic whiteware clutched in his other hand. Beneath the plate a candle burned, causing the ham to adopt an almost crystalline texture.

The Wine Master first looked to the Gourmet, then to Lan Jue. “You've had nearly half a bottle of Talisker already, are you ready to share your story?”

Lan Jue swirled the whiskey glass in his hand, picked up a piece of ham and popped it in his mouth. A thick, yet not oily taste filled his mouth. He took another small sip of Talisker single-malt, the fine whiskey like fire down his throat, spreading through his every pore.

“The particular thing about Talisker is the strong taste of peat, a specific trait of an island. It is an untamed and legendary vintage spirit. For those who truly love the flavor, they can't help but partake.”

“You want to tell me a story about whiskey?” The Wine Master muttered.

The Gourmet finished heating another plate then sat, motioning with his knife as though he would bury it in the fine tabletop. The Wine Master shot him a glare, to which the Gourmet smirked and replaced the knife to its wooden sheath.

Reaching out, the Gourmet gripped the half bottle of Talisker in his hand, its golden contents shimmering with a faint halo in the light.

“Don’t give him any alcohol and he’ll tell you on his own,” he said, pouring himself half a glass. He placed the bottle to one side.

The Wine Master nodded approvingly.

Lan Jue looked disappointed, downing the contents of his glass in one gulp. “I’m a little tired, I think I’ll just go home and sleep, so...”

The Wine Master’s eye twitched. “Then go.”

“Will I be able to come back later?” Lan Jue said with a small smile.

“What do you think,” the Wine Master responded, looking at him obliquely.

Lan Jue leaned against the back of the chair, speaking calmly. “I’ve been here three years, right?”

“Three years, one month and three days,” the Wine Master responded studiously.

The corners of Lan Jue’s mouth curled bitterly. “I had a beautiful wife. She was gentle, kind, gorgeous... when you were with her it was like a spring breeze. From the moment I saw her I was lost, loved her instantly.”

“We were the envy of everyone. Everything was perfect, we enjoyed each other’s company, did everything together. It was so natural being together, so natural that we just felt happy with one another. She was my whole world. When she was with me, the entire universe seemed more colorful.”

“But they say good days are brief. Three years ago because of an accident, she left me forever. Even now, I don’t know if it really was an

accident or was somehow orchestrated. According to all evidence she vanished in a giant explosion. I couldn't find her, she left no trace. It was like she never existed in my life at all."

"She was gone so... my heart was empty."

"As a result I came here. I like the tranquility of Skyfire Avenue, like living here. In my early years when I'd visited here I liked it. I'd planned to bring her here with me, but she was gone so suddenly."

Lan Jue related the story calmly, his eyes reflecting his even temperament. It was like he was simply telling a tale, a story he wasn't involved in.

"Not long ago someone came to the shop, left me a note. It said my wife wasn't dead. It contained a video. I believed it. How could I not believe it. Even though I knew I was lying to myself, even though I knew it was impossible, I believed it."

"I helped them, and they told me my wife's location. And they told me she was going to marry someone else. You are men... I think you must understand what I was feeling."

"So I went after her. Took back my wife. I was so happy. She was like a paintbrush, bringing life and color back in to my life."

"But I'd deceived myself. She just looked like my wife. She wasn't... her."

Lan Jue stopped there, the trace of a smile on his face. But the emptiness in his eyes was unsettling.

The Wine Master looked at the Gourmet, beckoning towards him with a wave of the hand. A faint light, and suddenly the Talisker bottle was in his hand.

Removing the cork, the Wine Master quietly poured Lan Jue a glass, then lifted his own.

Lan Jue picked up his drink, threw his head back and downed it. The high-proof liquor burned through him. But the burning in his throat couldn't touch the pain he felt. He felt like he did those three years ago,

when he learned of the accident.

“I’m off.” Lan Jue placed his glass on the table, and left.

Neither the Wine Master nor Gourmet asked him to say. A man’s pain wasn’t so easily resolved through talking.

Lan Jue was worn out, dispirited. He’d even lost interest in seeking revenge against the people who’d given him the false news. No matter what he said, they had filled him with a great hope, only to deliver greater despair. But at least, for those few precious moments, he’d thought Hera had returned to him.

The Wine Master and Gourmet said nothing to one another, finishing the drinks in their glass. The Gourmet finished the last piece of ham.

“I’m leaving as well,” he said.

“Mm,” the Wine Master faintly responded.

As he stood the Gourmet’s brows rose. “Eh, he didn’t pay for the whiskey did he. I thought he said he would.”

The hand with which the Wine Master held his glass froze suddenly, as though by magic, paralyzed.

Chapter 23: The Mercenary King

"I'm fine." Zhou Qianlin had already forgotten how many times she'd said these two words. At her side fluttered her frightened mother. Chief Minister of the Eastern Alliance, Minister Zhou, paced back and forth in the spacious room with brows scrunched tight.

Her best friend, Tang Mi, stood not far off.

An hour before Tang Mi had delivered Zhou Qianlin back to the villa, where she gave a very simple account of her capture.

Captured. Passed out. Awoke in the street.

It was just that simple.

The Eastern Alliance hadn't hesitated to block any news of the wedding's upheaval from leaking, but it was already without question a massive scandal.

Everything had changed, the tone of the former political unification irreparably altered due to the sudden events. Sylva Austin was furious, and had already begun dressing down the Eastern Alliance security. A daughter-in-law stolen from her own wedding, this was a great stain the Austin family wasn't prepared to endure.

Regardless of whether his rage was real or born out of political necessity, Sylva Austin had left back to the Western Alliance with his unwilling son.

The Prime Minister's growling voice reverberated in the Zhou Xueguan's ears: "Minister, I am extremely disappointed in the security of your Alliance. This disgrace is not something we will suffer lightly, there will be consequences!"

After he'd said that, he'd stormed off and left.

At the time Minister Zhou had not gone in to an explanation. He'd had the entire planet shut down, searching for any trace of his daughter. To him, there was nothing more important than the safety of his daughter.

But now his daughter had been returned safely. And had changed

clothes.

A beautiful woman, captured and taken away, only pass out and return in different clothes. What did that mean? Even if nothing had happened, Zhou Qianlin's reputation had been tremendously affected. And clearly the Austins had broken off the wedding. And what's more, as Chief Minister he was expected to address questions about what had happened from his political peers.

"Darling I'm no stranger, tell your mother, tell me honestly are you alright?" Zhou Qianlin's mother, Bai Xiao, asked quietly.

"I'm fine, really." Zhou Qianlin stood. "Mother, father, I'm a little tired. Let me rest. I never thought something like this could happen. Father, I'm sorry I've caused so much trouble."

Minister Zhou stopped his pacing, and looked thoughtfully at his daughter. A pained sigh escaped his lips. "Who'd have possibly expected something like this would happen. Fortunately you've returned safe and sound. Qianlin, you don't need to worry. Go. Your father will take care of the rest." He was the backbone of the family, and no matter the difficulties it was his responsibility to shoulder what comes.

With everything said, he approached Zhou Qianlin and gave her a light hug.

Zhou Qianlin's eyes had grown red. "Father."

"Don't cry, sweetie. Go and rest. Little Mi, please accompany her. She must have been terrified," the Minister warmly requested.

"Don't worry uncle, I'm not going anywhere." Tang Mi quickly took up Zhou Qianlin's hand and led her away upstairs.

Watching her daughter leave, Bai Xiao moved to her husband. "Xueguan, this is very serious matter. The Western Alliance is already applying pressure. The Upper House is dissatisfied with you. Will you be able to find the man who kidnapped Qianlin?"

Zhou Xueguan shook his head. "Qianlin remembers nothing, no news we can use. He was also very powerful, left no trace. I've asked the

members of the Holy Eastern Church to take a look at the video. They said they thought it was the mercenary king from three years ago, Zeus.”

“Zeus?” Bai Xiao’s eye’s betrayed her shock. “You’re mean Zeus of the Four Divine Monarchs?”

He nodded. “In the last twenty years the Four Monarchs have been the most famed Adepts and Mecha-Pilots, mysterious and powerful. According to our data, each of the Monarchs are God level pilots, and at least Ninth level Talents. None are older than forty. Zeus pilots Thor, and holds sway over the Discipline of lightning. Thus his name, Zeus. Seven years ago he entered the scene as a mercenary, taking up an S-Ranked mission for his first job and completing it with no trouble. He was famous from then on. Because of that mission he’d been promoted to B-Rank in the mercenary company. Next he completed seven Triple S-Rank missions in succession, and assumed the reputation of Mercenary King. He’s never had a mission he didn’t complete.”

“But he’s very particular about the missions he accepts, only picking those he likes. I’ve looked in to the missions he has accepted for anything special, and nearly all of them involve vigilante justice. He performs the tasks fairly. But three years ago for unknown reasons Zeus vanished. He hadn’t been seen since, not taking any missions. If that truly is Zeus, we have no idea who hired him.”

Bai Xiao, her mouth agape, said, “I’ve heard of this mercenary king. If it really is him then I’m actually relieved. Zeus has never helped evil men. Our daughter really should be fine. Only, we don’t know why Zeus would kidnap our daughter. Do you think it was one of your political opponents who hired him, to break up the wedding and ruin your alliance with the West? But judging by his past missions Zeus just isn’t that sort of person, he rarely goes in for politics.”

“It’s hard to say,” Zhou Xueguan responded. “If he is from the Northern Alliance this would make sense. It would add up that he’d get involved if it was for his own alliance. Alright, get some rest, I’m going out for a spell. I have to go see the Chancellor of the Upper House. I’ll handle this, try to control the damage.”

Bai Xiao gently smoothed out her husbands clothing. “Hurry back.”

Chapter 24: He Doesn't Like Women?

It had been a week since the incident and Skyfire Planet had returned to a state of calm. Interstellar news had reported nothing further about the bride snatching. Everything was back to normal.

Lan Jue returned to his normal life, operating his jewelry store.

Recently business had been slow, with few customers to speak of. Luckily for the shop, it didn't need very many to stay afloat.

Ding ding ding. The bell above the door chimed as a man in a leisure suit found his way inside.

Xiuxiu smiled and gave a slight curtsy to the man in greeting, welcoming him inside. Ke'er had already dutifully prepared a cup of warm water which she held in both hands.

"What do you need? Speak – no discounts." Lan Jue lazily leaned against the back of his chair as he spoke to the newcomer.

The Gourmet took the glass offered by Ke'er and sat beside Lan Jue. He grumbled, "So stingy. You never paid for the whiskey you drank at the winey, either."

"Oh, really? I don't recall," Lan Jue responded his eyes large.

"Nobles never keep their word," the Gourmet responded disdainfully.

Lan Jue scowled. "What do you want."

The Gourmet responded by lifting his brows. "Do I need a reason to come see you?"

Lan Jue laughed. "With your cool demeanor? You wouldn't be here if you didn't have a reason. You sit in your little shop all day refusing to leave."

The Gourmet sighed. "Well, I guess you aren't too fond of me."

Lan Jue drummed his fingers, grinning at him. "No one likes a debt collector."

He huffed. "You don't owe me money. I just came to let you know I have

a whole bluefin tuna coming in in a few days. I wanted to see if anyone was interested in a bite.”

“A whole one?” Lan Jue’s voice raised an octave, his eyes lighting up.

Of course he knew finding a whole bluefin tuna was exceedingly rare. It certainly wasn’t a natural product of Skyfire, it must have come from someone’s fish farm.

The Gourmet stood. “Fine, I’m leaving. After they catch it it’ll be three days before it arrives, and another two after before it can be eaten. We’ll meet in five days. At the winery, it’s large and we’ll put the space to good use.”

“Good, good.”

The Gourmet made his way outside, lead by Xiuxiu. As he did he said over his shoulder, “It’s a big fish. Bring a friend.”

“Boss, bring me!” Ke’er looked peeved, laying atop the counter before Lan Jue with her lower stuck out.

“Ke’er,” Xiuxiu said in rebuke.

Ke’er stuck out her tongue, shuffling towards her. “We wont’ make the boss lose face, what’s wrong with going with him?”

Xiuxiu took her arm, speaking in quiet tones. “He hasn’t been in a good mood, lately.”

Beep beep beep! Lan Jue dropped his head to look at his interstellar communicator. An unfamiliar number flashed on it’s screen.

He answered.

“Thirty-Seven Huayin Street, Luo Yun teahouse.” A pleasing but indifferent voice came wafting through the communicator.

At first he listened apathetically, but his features could not help but shift once he realized who the voice belonged to. “I’ll be there soon.”

As he spoke he rose quickly and exited the shop.

Watching his back as he hurried away, Ke’er gave him a suspicious look.

“The boss doesn’t seem quite right.”

Xiuxiu, on the other hand, looked anxious. “He’s seemed like his normal self the last few days, but I can feel he’s been pretty depressed. Something must have happened.”

“With the boss’ abilities what sort of thing could make him so unhappy,” Ke’er wondered aloud. “You should ask him Xiuxiu. He likes you best.”

Xiuxiu’s face grew red. “Stop talking nonsense.”

Ke’er snickered, speaking quietly. “Don’t tell me you don’t like him. Every time you look at him I see it in your face. You got eyes for that goofy guy and no one else.”

Xiuxiu laughed bitterly. “You give him too little credit. If you can see it, so can he. He ignores it on purpose.”

Ke’er blinked in confusion. “Why? You’re so pretty and sweet!”

Xiuxiu shook her head. “I don’t know either, but.. do you remember? When the boss had first opened the store he was awfully depressed every day. Like he’d had his heart broken.”

“Hey, do you think he’s... you know?” Ke’er said cryptically, her voice softer still.

“What,” Xiuxiu responded, confused.

“You know, us two beautiful girls, strutting in front of him day in and day out, but no reaction. Only way to explain it, he doesn’t like women!”

“Ah?” Xiuxiu looked at her dumbly, the color draining from her face.

ζ

“Atchoo!” Lan Jue rubbed his nose and muttered to himself. “Who’s talking trash about me.”¹

ζ

Huayin Street was located in the Western section of Skyfire City, a significant distance from Skyfire Avenue in the city’s downtown district.

Lan Jue sat upon one of the public lev-buses, unaware of his scrunched

brows.

His tolerance exceeded that of the average person, and even then it took three years to free himself from the pain he'd experienced. It had been a week since his actions at the wedding, and his mood had gradually returned to normal. But that call, the voice on the other end of his communicator, brought back that night in his memory.

The sorry had already been pressed down, hidden away, but the trouble from that night was far from resolved.

But once he'd heard that voice, his heart beat grew rapid.

He couldn't help it. Not because she and he had been as close as a man and woman could, but because of what that voice resembled.

And so, almost unconsciously, he lept from the bus disregarding all of his normal grace and poise.

The Luo Yun teahouse wasn't large, but quite fine. It bore a classical Chinese style construction from the former era, located on a building with letters written over it.

He was met at the door by a woman in a cream qipao. She lead him inside to a tasteful private room.²

As he entered, he stopped in his tracks. The cream-clad woman behind him had already left and shut the door.

The room was small, only capable of seating two.

She wore the same dress as the night she left, long and white. Her long hair was brushed in to a pony tail, revealing the fair skin of her forehead. She didn't look up, instead staring quietly at the boccaro before her.

The enameled teapot wasn't large, the top set with a raised relief of plum blossoms. The surface was a deep red, and stood out.

The slightly golden, deep red tea water was poured out and the faint scent of it filled the silent room. The brief sound and smell only added to the quietude.

Lan Jue just stood, staring at the elegant women seated before him.

Though he could only see those long eye lashes, he felt his heart sink. Just like the first time he'd met her.

*

1. In China, it is said a sneeze is caused when someone is talking bad about you.

2. A qipao is a traditional Chinese woman's dress, often made of silk. In modern times it sees the vast majority of use in restaurants, worn by waitresses.

Chapter 25: Bodyguard?

It was as if time had stopped; white skirt, black hair, slender fingers, plum blossom teapot, the faint scent of tea. If you were to just see the contours, it was as perfect as a painting.

The tea was poured into two matching cups, red as the teapot. Just enough tea for one mouthful.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Zhou Qianlin lifted her head, looking at the frozen man before her.

White trousers, pale green shirt, short black hair, slender build. But his most arresting feature were those eyes, full of reminiscence.

“Oh.” Lan Jue was shaken from his haze and approached, sitting in the rattan chair set before her.

Zhou Qianlin motioned towards his drink, lifting her own cup. As the scent wafted towards her, she lifted it to her mouth and took a sip.

Lan Jue lifted the cup to his nose, then took a sip. “Jin jun mei, Lapsang Souchong black tea.” He’d always liked the nice things of this world, the ceremonial tea traditions from Former Era China with centuries-old history and culture. It was full of countless principles and traditions, so naturally he’d enjoy it. Contrary to most tea lovers who preferred green tea, he always enjoyed the black.

Green tea was for the scent, black was for warmth.

A small sip, and the aroma washed over him, like his body was transparent. For a moment his worries melted away.

“Good tea,” Lan Jue said praisingly.

Zhou Qianlin poured them both another cup. The small containers could only hold a very small amount. One sip, and more must be poured.

He took another drink, and placing the cup on the table before him, looked at the person adjacent.

Bright azure eyes, calm and impassive, quivering eyelashes.

“Let’s try this again. I am Lan Jue, proprietor of Zeus’ Jewelry Store on Skyfire Avenue.” He reached a hand towards Zhou Qianlin to shake.

Zhou Qianlin regarded him coolly, her eyes serene but distant.

Lan Jue awkwardly retracted his hand. In fact he’d barely managed to keep himself from asking how she was. Clearly that wouldn’t have been appropriate.

“I didn’t ask you here for a fresh start. We should talk about our situation.” Her voice was as pleasant as ever, but there was a distinct chill to it. Perhaps her cold nature was the reason she had chosen black tea, he thought to himself.

“Fine.” Lan Jue nodded.

Zhou Qianlin fumed. He acted like nothing had happened! Honestly...

“Unless I’m remembering incorrectly, you promised me a favor,” she said.

“Indeed. And you’ve thought of one?” Lan Jue stared at her. Zeus had made that promise, surely her request wouldn’t be an ordinary one.

Zhou Qianlin nodded. “I have.”

Lan Jue was anxious to resolve this. His face was calm, but it didn’t mean he’d forgotten. In fact he had never known this level of guilt.

“I’m a student,” Zhou Qianlin began, opening the lid of the teapot. She poured in more hot water and continued. “National Eastern University, National Scholar, Junior.”

National Scholar? Amid the beating of his heart he remembered the video they had sent, the first time he’d seen her. She had been moving between classes.

He’d heard of the National Eastern University, a top school in the nation. It was a mecha-piloting university. Everything they taught was related to mecha. However only the mecha branch was famous for combat, so the whole school wasn’t named a military university.

Considering the background of the Eastern Alliance, the NEU was the

single best institution of higher learning. A four year bachelor's degree and you could find any related job immediately after graduation. With this sort of education background you were guaranteed social progress, and a stepping stone to success in the military. Of the bachelors, the particularly talented were selected to continue their studies. They were the National Scholars.

National scholars, too, studied in a four year program, but they were the elite of the four alliances. They were assured an important position in their field, moreover it was very possible they would see further advancement in a very short time.

In the Eastern Alliance there were only a handful of institutions who trained National Scholars, thus every year less than a thousand such graduates were produced. As a result, National Scholars were highly prized. It was the same in the other two alliances as well.

"I didn't know you were a National Scholar." Lan Jue smiled.

"I haven't graduated yet," Zhou Qianlin replied, "You can't call me that."

Lan Jue said, "If I'm not mistaken, the NEU is a mecha-piloting university. As you're a graduate student, did you want me to train you in regards to mechs? This I can do, though it wont be easy."

It was the first thought that crossed his mind, though she may not know of his identity. However she had seen his capabilities the day he'd captured her, she looked like a smart girl.

But what she said next left him stunned.

"I don't need a mecha teacher," Zhou Qianlin replied dismissively. "You think I'd want a teacher who was rude and boorish to me?"

"Rude.. boorish?" Lan Jue felt the hair on the back of his neck rankle. No one had ever called him that before.

"We're nobility, how could I possibly be boorish?" Lan Jue's breath came uneven.

"Aren't you," Zhou Qianlin snapped back. "You don't even know what a

hospital is, and you aren't boorish? If you aren't, what else could I call you...?"

Lan Jue looked like he'd been slapped, his agitation beaten out of him. He frowned and leaned against the back of his chair. He said nothing else – there was never else for him to say – there was nothing he could do to erase his sin.

"What do you want," he asked. He just wanted to leave, quickly. The woman across from him made him feel impotent. He didn't feel like Zeus – he felt like minced meat on a cutting board.

"It'll be some time until I graduate. Two years. Because of what happened a week ago, the Western Alliance is likely to seek reprisal against the Eastern Alliance. Especially my family. I'm worried about my safety. You're rash and infuriating, but you'd do well as a bodyguard. Until I graduate, I'll need you to protect me at school."

"Bodyguard?" His voice raised an octave. He'd absolutely never expected her to ask for something like this. He'd thought Zhou Qianlin would disregard his offer, but now he felt like there were ten thousand alpacas stampeding through his head.

Chapter 26: Sat on by a Pig

“Nope.” Lan Jue refused without hesitation.

What is guarding? Day in and day out with the client, always by their side, constantly on your toes. The key factor was time, because poor timing could mean someone’s life.

Zeus, the untouchable master of the mercenary world, had served before as a body guard for two years. It was intolerable.

Why did he become a mercenary in the first place?

A Ninth Level Talent, God-Ranked Mecha-Pilot, infinite possibilities... why choose the life of a mercenary? It was simple, really – freedom.

Thus Lan Jue rarely returned home, he couldn’t stand the constraints.

Simply said this condition set by Zhou Qianlin went against his very nature, indeed he couldn’t comply.

He took up the enameled pot, pouring himself another small cup of tea. He replaced it and took another sip.

“Something else,” Lan Jue said in ill temper. When in her presence, even if he didn’t realize it, he hardly seemed like a noble.

“No need.” Zhou Qianlin stood. “A man who fails to keep his promise, what use could I have for him?”

As she spoke, she moved towards the door to leave.

“You!” Lan Jue jumped to his feet, grabbing her wrist. “What on earth do you want?!”

She glared cruelly at him. “What do I want? I told you what I want, but since you can’t agree then forget it.”

“Then what happened between us...” he began in hesitation.

Zhou Qianlin yanked her hand away and stood toe to toe with him, staring fiercely in to his eyes. Lan Jue unconsciously took a step back.

“It was like being sat on by a pig.” She spat the sentence at him, turned

on her heel and left.

Lan Jue felt like a victim of his own Lightning Discipline, standing there frozen for a long while.

“Stop!” After a few moments he finally reacted, running outside. He ran nearly headlong in to the waitress.

“Sir, you haven’t settled the bill.”

He paid hurriedly and hastened outside. He finally caught up with Zhou Qianlin at the door to the Luo Yun teahouse.

“Stop right there!” Lan Jue shouted at her.

Zhou Qianlin spun around, regarding him calmly. “You have something to say?”

“Y-you...!” lightning rippled in Lan Jue’s eyes, clearly on the verge of erupting.

She lifted her head, scorn evident in her beautiful sky-blue eyes. “What’s the matter? Ashamed?”

Lan Jue loosened his tightened fists, stepping back. “Ask for something else!”

Zhou Qianlin turned once again and began to walk off.

This time Lan Jue did not pursue, watching her slender form vanish around a nearby corner. He couldn’t stop his fists from clenching once more. He was finding it difficult to contain his emotions.

Around the corner Zhou Qianlin had stopped when out of sight, leaning against the wall. She covered her red face with her hands, gasping headily through her open mouth.

The pressure was immense, and she felt as though in that moment there still burned the heat of those two large hands pressing down on her shoulders.

And then a laugh burst unbidden from her lips. The whole scene was too much! Sat on by a pig!

Hah! He's got to be so pissed! What choice does the honorable and respected Zeus have?

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In the same instant Lan Jue was returning to Zeus' Jewelry Store.

Seeing his infuriated face, Xiuxiu and Ke'er gulped. The expression in his eyes was stranger still.

Lan Jue said not a word, going directly to his room. He needed to think.

"Who's he so upset with? He looks so... ugly," Ke'er said, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Xiuxiu shook her head. "It's the first time I've seen him this angry."

As he entered the room Lan Jue flopped down atop his bed, his head resounding with Zhou Qianlin's pleasant voice.

"Bodyguard!"

"Sat on by a pig!"

The two phrases echoed over and over in his mind. He knew that had someone else spoke to him like that he'd have incinerated them. But not Zhou Qianlin, she was his Jinyu's sister, and he still...

Only, this request was nearly impossible to accept. To be beside her every day as a bodyguard. How could anyone who values freedom live like that? And it was more than two years – the length of her schooling, at least two years and three months.

No, impossible! Regardless of the circumstances, impossible!

Yet to refuse was to go against his own moral code. In the heat of the moment they never discussed terms. Moreover he was the one that had taken her innocence. If he didn't make recompense it would be like a thorn in his heart forever, like a fish bone caught in the throat.

At the same time Zou Qianlin was also lying in her bed, covered by a light pink gauze curtain. Her room was constructed like an ocean of flowers. Lying atop the soft bed, her eyes were hazy, filled with several

emotions, her mind in a constant state of flux.

Will he accept? If he doesn't, what then?

Beep, beep, beep!

Zhou Qianlin nearly leapt from the bed, but sputtered when she saw the number on her communicator.

"Little Mi, what is it?"

"Tang Mi!" came the agitated shout from the communicator.

"Fine, fine. Tang Mi," Zhou Qianlin responded helplessly.

"I heard you'll be returning to classes next week. Are you sure everything's alright?"

Zhou Qianlin responded, "What do you mean alright?"

"Your mood," Tang Mi said. "After something like this you certainly can't forget it right away."

Zhou Qianlin snorted. "I forget about it ages ago. I'll return to class next week. Let me copy your notes."

Tang Mi chuckled. "You really want to forget then that's fine. I'm telling you though, you aren't allowed to have any sort of relationship with my idol. I'll be a mercenary myself, the beautiful woman chasing the every step of the Mercenary King, you won't be able to compete with me."

"Go then, meet a man and lose all your friends." She unceremoniously hung up the communicator.

Beep, beep, beep the communicator rang anew.

Zhou Qianlin impatiently answered. "I won't compete with you, alright? He's all yours!"

"Compete with what," a surprised voice answered from the communicator.

Zhou Qianlin sat up. "Is it you?"

The response was low, simple, like it required a great deal of courage to

utter.

“You’re request... I accept.”

Chapter 27: Be a Teacher?

“Your request... I accept.”

Upon hearing this sentence Zhou Qianlin’s eyes lit up, her lips curling in to a smile. “Don’t be reluctant. I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t think you could do it.”

From the other end of the communicator came a sound like grinding teeth.

“I’m not reluctant!”

“Excellent,” Zhou Qianlin said, not seeking to provoke him further.

Lan Jue choked down the impulse to smash the communicator in his hand. He took a deep breath, exhaled through his mouth and continued. “When do you need me, and what will I be doing?”

“I have excellent bodyguards at home,” she responded. “You just need to watch over me while at school during the semester. When school’s in recess, so are you.”

Hearing this Lan Jue let out a sigh of relief. Luckily it wouldn’t all the time, and he’d have some time to himself.

“What’s my cover while protecting you? Shall I enter in to school as well, be a classmate?” Lan Jue inquired.

The communicator was silent for a moment. “Uncle, have some dignity. At your age could you be my classmate?”

“U-uncle...” Lan Jue’s face contorted, and when he could endure it no longer replied indignantly, “I’m that old?!” He wasn’t even twenty seven. The average life expectancy in the Eastern Alliance was a hundred and twenty, he absolutely was still a young man. What’s more there were certainly post-graduate students who would graduate at his age!

Zhou Qianlin covered her mouth, muffling her laughter, a task she found difficult. “So old. Don’t be a student, it’d be too easy for your identity to be revealed.”

“I’M TWENTY SEVEN!”

“Way over the hill.”

Crunch, came the sound of a breaking communicator over the wire.

“Hahaha!” Zhou Qianlin rolled atop her bed laughing uncontrollably, reveling in the sweet sensation of revenge.

Beep beep beep! The communicator rang anew.

Zhou Qianlin hastened to regain her composure, her stomach hurting, and answered.

“Zhou Qianlin! I’m warning you, if you insult me like that again I’ll –“

“You’ll what?” she spat.

Lan Jue fell silent. Anyone else, and he’d have a slew of choice things to fire back, but from her he had nothing to say...

“A good man doesn’t fight with a woman. I owe you, and I’ll pay my debt. After these two years, we’ll have nothing more to do with each other. Speak, what’s my cover?” Lan Jue tried valiantly to keep his voice under control, for he knew that if he didn’t it would only make Zhou Qianlin more pleased. He would not give her the satisfaction!

“Enter as an instructor, you’re about the right age. How you do that is up to you. You can do that, can’t you? Mr. Zeus?”

She hung up without giving him a chance to respond.

“Instructor?” Him, a teacher? How could he be a teacher?

Although the NEU didn’t produce the most famous Mecha-Pilots, it was a proper piloting university and nothing scoff at. To enter as an instructor, Lan Jue felt, would pose no problem for him. He was a God-Ranked pilot, the highest rank attainable in the Three Alliances – more than sufficient for a teacher.

Stop! He couldn’t let this impetuous girl get everything she wanted. He had promised to comply, but how he did it was never outlined. A teacher, right? But not a mecha instructor!

Lan Jue had a stroke of genius, gradually crafting his idea. He couldn't stop his mouth from curling in to a mischievous grin, his sour mood swept away.

His right hand suddenly grew hot, and Lan Jue lifted it to look upon the golden bracelet on his wrist. It emitted a gentle golden light, and as the light expanded it revealed the image of an old man.

He was an elderly man, big and tall, his face a landscape of craggy features. His true age was difficult to decipher, but he was possessed of two very clear blue eyes, deep and shining as though they reflected the universe itself. He wore a magnificent white robe, embroidered in silver and encrusted with gemstones. A pointed cap rested upon his head, and a large shimmering ruby on the ring finger of his right hand.

"Honorable members of the Skyfire Avenue Council, please make your way to the Skyfire Museum in one hour. If you have a scheduling conflict, please alert us as soon as possible."

As the voice faded, so too did the image.

The urgency of the Skyfire Council meeting made Lan Jue uncomfortable.

There were a total of one hundred and sixty eight shops on Skyfire Avenue, each with their own management. But the Council itself had only eighteen members.

The Council met bi-monthly for regular meetings to manage the Avenue's internal affairs. It was only when something serious cropped up that they would hold an emergency meeting.

It was also the first time since Lan Jue arrived in the Avenue that such a meeting was convened.

Skyfire Avenue wasn't simply a noble's street. It was also a place of Adepts. When entering the Avenue to be a shopkeeper, you also had to possess at least a Seventh-Level Talent, passing a series of tests. Further the eighteen members of the Council were the strongest among the Adepts present. Though the organization was freeform, the members were

some of the most celebrated and illustrious Talents in the Three Alliances.

Were it not for the combined strength of these members Skyfire Avenue never would have survived as long as it had, with it's freedom intact.

Lan Jue rose quickly, donning a three-piece blue suit and slipping a ring on his little finger¹ before stepping out.

In the dim light of the room's lamp, the ring seemed to leave behind it a green afterimage that shimmered with a life of it's own.

The ring itself had a peculiar look, forged of a silvery metal. The top half was curious, one side wide and the other side narrow. It created a trapezoid, set with fragments of diamond and sapphire like leopard print. In it's center was set a triangular green gemstone. The ethereal light, full of vitality, originated from there.

Before he stepped out Lan Jue turned the ring inward, hiding the gemstone in his palm.

The ring itself had a name: Thor's Promise.

*

1.) In China, wearing a ring on your little finger represents independence.

Chapter 28: Skyfire Avenue Council

Skyfire Avenue. Council Hall

The floor space of the classically beautiful Council Hall was quite large, nearly three hundred square meters. The walls were covered in famous paintings, awash in dark red adornments, lending a simplistic but beautiful atmosphere.

A dozen people sat on either side of a long table. With the Clairvoyant at it's head, the total count stood at thirteen.

The Wine Master sat to the left of the Clairvoyant, and beside him was Lan Jue. The Gourmet took up the third position.

The Clairvoyant lifted his hand and gently rapped upon the tabletop. All eyes turned to him.

“All council members on Skyfire have gathered, the other five away on business in other planets.” There was an odd charm to the aging man's features. Every eye was upon him, and though they revealed no emotion a deep respect lay in each gaze.

Elder of Skyfire Avenue, Chairman of the Council, the Clairvoyant was for all intents and purposes the brain of Skyfire Avenue.

He continued. “I've called this emergency gathering in order to resolve an urgent matter. Today, a government official was sent to meet me...”

Hearing this Lan Jue's eye twitched. An official from the Eastern Alliance government? What did he want?

“Diplomatic emissaries have been dispatched from the Citadel of the Western Alliance's Pontiff, and have indicated they wish an exchange with us here at Skyfire Avenue. The government officer intimated that he wished us to agree to this exchange.”

Was this revenge from the Western Alliance? Lan Jue was surprised, but quickly banished the thought. The Austin family was certainly influential in the Western Alliance, but they certainly had no means to employ the might of the Pontiff. The Pontiff's Citadel was to the Western Alliance

what Skyfire Avenue was to the East, only more illustrious still as all held high stations of power. It was highly unlikely that a political fiasco like the failed wedding would inspire them to make a move.

For the Clairvoyant to attach so much importance to this correspondence, to display apprehension over the exchange, was unusual indeed.

With the onset of the New Era, Mecha sciences and development advanced quickly, soon becoming an integral component of the battlefield. The Three Alliance all spared no expense or effort in creating the latest mechas, or training the best pilots.

Though on the surface the Three Alliances lived in harmony, in practice the border planets between the three often saw conflict.

In addition to the advance of Mechas, on the battlefield each unit required exceptional pilots to dictate the flow of war. A pilot had to be athletic, with high genetic Talent, thus making training an exceptional warrior more likely. As a result Adepts also received a fair amount of attention.

Adepts were separated in to several groupings. Those who possessed awakened innate talents were called Intuitives. Adepts of the Eastern Alliance mostly fell in to that category. All of the Adepts who lived on Skyfire Avenue were Intuitives, and that was in fact a prerequisite for membership.

Those who acquired talents later, through special means designed to manipulate genetics, were called Derivatives. These constituted most of the Western Alliance, and the Alliance was second to none in the study of the medicines needed for genetic manipulation. There were two organizations representative of the Western Derivatives; the Pontiff's Citadel and the Dark Citadel. The two were, naturally, at odds. Though both names indicated locations, in truth it was just the name of their organizations.

Other than these two groups of talents there was a third, wherein machinery was joined with the body to create a high-tech conglomerate of

flesh and metal. Gene manipulation and robots joined to endow great power. These were called Converts.

The Northern Alliance was the most technologically developed, thus did they possess the most Converts, who themselves were gathered in to a group they called the Great Conclave.

Of the three groups Intuitives were the rarest, with the other two more or less the same in number.

Derivatives and Converts were quicker to produce, thus saw more use in military campaigns. However, they lacked the limitless potential of Intuitives.

The Clairvoyant began to speak once more. "Were it only a representative of the Citadel's Holy See it would be preferable to respond. However, it is very probable they will be accompanied by a delegation from the Dark Citadel. The situation between these two organizations is tenuous at best, I can't imagine why they would choose to travel together in this instance."

The Wine Master spoke up. "This so-called exchange, I fear it is an indispensable opportunity to learn about the other Adepts and their powers. We should consider our response as soon as possible."

"Representatives from the Citadels will arrive at Skyfire Avenue in one month," the Clairvoyant said. "At present we do not know the names of those who will attend. Be that as it may, we should prepare appropriately. The focus of this meeting is to confirm that we will be responsible for these delegates. As it seems now, we will require three members to participate in this exchange. Naturally they shall have to be shopkeepers, and willing to participate. You may volunteer at will."

The Wine Master, as vice-chairman of the Council, interjected. "Judging by the status of these groups, our standards must be equally high. Such being the case I volunteer to participate."

The Clairvoyant nodded. "Anyone else?"

"I will," Lan Jue stated, rising. Regardless of whether this meeting had to

do with the events of the week before, Skyfire Avenue had tacitly agreed to his actions. It was his responsibility to contribute here.

“Very well, Jewel Master,” the Clairvoyant responded with a smile.

“And I,” came another voice. The hoarse tones came from the young man seated to the Clairvoyant’s right.

He looked slightly older than Lan Jue, his hair neatly trimmed and teased up. He wore a leather jacket, and his stocky build and small eyes gave him a lethargic appearance.

“Oh, the diabolical Little Clippers deigns to act?” The taunt came from a woman several seats down from the young man.

His face stiffened in response. “My title is not Little Clippers!”

The woman snickered. “Doesn’t the Barber use little clippers? If you used shears like a gardener no one would have anything to say. Our delegation is all big bad men, that wont do. I’ll join. Four members will make them look even more important.”

The Clairvoyant agreed. “Very well, then the welcoming committee is settled. The Wine Master, the Jewel Master, the Barber, and the Beautician shall be our representatives.”

Chapter 29: Beautician and the Barber

The Clairvoyant stood. "The welcoming committee has been selected. The rest of you may go. Thank you all for coming."

The remaining council members stood and filed out. Once leaving the chamber they spoke quietly amongst themselves.

"Forgive me, Keeper. If I might bother you for a moment." Lan Jue stood, addressing the elderly man who had been seated to the right of the Clairvoyant.

He looked an age comparable to the Clairvoyant, and wore an ancient Tang Chinese style gown. He looked quite scholarly, but at the same time frail and sluggish – like he had one foot in the grave. Still he was the second vice-chairman of the Skyfire council, and in fact may have been slightly older than the Clairvoyant himself.

Lan Jue moved to the Keeper's side, gripping his elbow to help him stand.

"I must trouble you with something, would it be alright if I met you at the Library later?" Lan Jue helped the old man towards the door, speaking softly in his ear.

The Keeper gave a grandfatherly smile and nodded his head. "Of course, of course."

Lan Jue thanked him, then returned to his seat in the council chamber.

Only the Clairvoyant, the Wine Master, the Jewel Master, the Barber and the Beautician remained.

"I am sorry to trouble the four of you," the Clairvoyant began. "We must choose twenty shopkeepers to participate in the event. Wine Master, if you would."

The Wine Master nodded. "I will choose them."

"Then what about me? Just wait for the reception?" The Beautician looked stunning in a long pink dress. Her figure was breathtaking, the

late-twenties beauty smiling alluringly towards the Wine Master.

“The reception itself will be handled by the government of the Eastern Alliance,” the Wine Master stated. “We are only responsible for the exchange.”

The Beautician shot a glance towards Lan Jue, sitting across from her at the table. “Little Brother* Jewel Master hasn’t said a word since joining our little committee. Come on kiddo, participate!”

Kiddo...

Lan Jue’s cool features stiffened for but a moment, but he did not respond. He wasn’t entirely familiar with all the members of the Skyfire Council, but he did know the Barber.

The Beautician’s taunting moniker of the Diabolical Little Clippers wasn’t baseless. According to what Lan Jue knew, the Barber had been an accomplished assassin in the Northern Alliance before coming to Skyfire. The most wanted man in the North. Not even thirty, but she teased and taunted the Barber in public. And he didn’t retaliate. Despite her young, sweet appearance, she wasn’t someone Lan Jue had any inclination to tussle with.

When compared to the Northern Alliance’s Great Conclave, even Skyfire Avenue and the two Citadels together couldn’t match their numbers. However, they did possess the most universally acknowledged top-grade Talents.

A member had to be at least a Ninth-Level Talent to be considered for entry in to Skyfire Council. Because the Avenue was only loosely managed, members coveted their specific abilities as a secret, and even the most senior members did know the abilities of the others.

It was frightening to think of a ninth level Talent one knew nothing about.

In the last year the only person who’d been able to make him lose his temper, to fail to control his emotions was that blasted girl who’d asked him to be her bodyguard.

The Wine Master spoke gently. “Know your enemy as you know yourself, and in a hundred battles you will have a hundred victories. Three will stay in the event they will be needed as comrades in arms. As a result, I ask that each of us clearly reveal our abilities so we can be familiar with them.”

The Beautician fiddled with her constellation-encrusted fingernails. “No problem. I don’t believe we know much about Little Brother Jewel Master either. My ability; Illusion. How about you, kiddo? Hehe.”

Looking upon the Beautician’s cunning and sweet smile, Lan Jue’s heart rate increased in trepidation. Illusion! To the average person the word held no special significance. But to his ears it was like a peel of thunder.

He’d heard of this ability once in a story. Twenty years ago a small girl’s family had been murdered. As the evil men approached the girl to finish the job, her innate Talent had awakened. Illusion.

Just awakened, a Ninth-Level Talent, she was unable to control her own powers. But in the blink of an eye her assailants were caught in a dreamscape of heavenly bliss and hellish terror. The young girl’s fears bubbled up from her mind. In the end, the ones who’d killed her family all succumbed to the phantasmagoria. None survived.

Shattered by the experience, the young girl then wandered out in to the streets of the city. There she enveloped the entire place in her dreamscape, inflicting upon it horrendous damage.

Later she had been overpowered by the forces of the Eastern Alliance. She was tested, the extent of her illusion powers determined, and then taken away. It is said she was quietly executed.

When Lan Jue was younger he’d once read several secret reports on Adepts, and this story was the one that stuck most in his mind. He still remembered clearly. He also recalled that illusion was a rare Discipline. To his knowledge it was only seen that once. Was this coyly smiling Beautician...

“Hey, kiddo? You?” Her elbows were perched upon the armrests, her face in her hands. She smiled as she watched Lan Jue.

“Lightning,” he said simply.

The Barber shot him a glance. “My ability is speed.”

Speed?

Lan Jue did not look down upon him for his simple speed ability. Any Discipline could be terrifying at the highest levels. Speed was no different. The Barber was considered one of the best among Skyfire Avenue, thus his speed certainly wasn’t anything to scoff at.

The Wine Master nodded. “Good. We’ll finish here for today. We are all now more or less familiar. In accordance with our customs, remember that what is said in the council remains with the council, or the culprit will become an enemy of Skyfire Avenue.”

The Beautician, the Barber and the Jewel Master each nodded their head in agreement.

The Clairvoyant smiled. “I am possessed of a simple prediction. This situation is threatening but not dangerous. It should be interesting.”

Lan Jue walked slowly from the Museum, making his way towards the Keeper’s Library when suddenly he heard the Barber’s voice from behind him.

“Jewel Master.”

“Hm?” Lan Jue uttered, turning around.

The Barber fixed him with a pair of gleaming eyes. “Let’s spar!”

*

Note:

*Little Brother is a sort of emasculating term, used for familiarity, to marginalize, and sometimes both.

Chapter 30: Another Skyfire Avenue

“No thanks,” Lane Jue replied. He wasn’t in his best mood, and as a result wasn’t the least bit interested in the Barber’s challenge. He turned to face the library and made to leave.

Whoosh, a figure rushed passed him. The Barber appeared before Lan Jue blocking passage forward.

Lan Jue stepped aside, but the Barber matched him, denying progress. It didn’t matter where he turned, the Barber would surely be in front of him.

“I’m not in the mood,” Lan Jue said, stopping.

The Barber, in contrast, smiled. “But my mood is just fine.”

Lan Jue gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Well now that we’re done sharing our feelings, I guess we’ll get on with it.”

“How amusing, I’ll judge!” The Beautician’s giggles wafted towards them.

The three returned to the museum, each feeling for the emblem pinned to their chests. Each badge was silver, inlaid with eighteen colored gems. Together they made the image of a flame which glittered majestically in even the slightest light.

They made their way to the unimpressive elevator set beside the museum’s spiraling staircase. The Beautician lifted her hand and placed it on the marble to one side.

Instantly a light emanated from the top of the elevator, sweeping over their figures, glittering off of their badges. Afterward it issued a slight di di of approval.

Soon the doors opened, revealing the five square-meter interior.

The three entered, and though there were no buttons the doors shut behind them.

An electronic voice fills the elevator. “Welcome Councilman Jewel Master, Councilwoman Beautician, and Councilman Barber.”

A slight sensation of weightlessness overtook them, indicative of the

elevator's speedy descent. The sensation lasted a good minute before dissipating, then the doors opened soundlessly. Immediately a cacophonous ruckus met them from outside.

Before stepping out, the three almost in tandem removed the badges from their chest. The emblem represented their membership in the council. In a place like this it held an impact, It was a status symbol. None of them had any desire to draw undue attention to themselves.

Exiting the elevator they were met with another sort of street, wide and comparable in many ways to Skyfire Avenue above. Both sides of the street were lined with numerous buildings. Looking up, eyes were met with a blue sky and lazily flowing clouds. Closer inspection, however, would reveal that the sky and clouds contrasted with the free and natural world outside by having their own set rules – that it was in fact the backdrop of a massive dome.

In further contradiction to the Skyfire Avenue above, this place was bustling and lively. Scores of people wandered back and forth among the busy shops.

Indeed this was also considered Skyfire Avenue, another Skyfire Avenue, a world of Adepts. Any Third-Level Talent, be they Intuitive, Derivative or Convert was permitted to enter so long as they paid the fee.

Here, there were Cultivation Areas, high-grade Adept products, specialty Mecha items on auction, a fighting arena, a casino, shops, and a mission board. You name it, it was here. But this place had it's rules, and declined any criminal enterprises. It was, after all, run by the Skyfire Council.

Of course no one dared to violate the rules, for no one wished to upset the combined might of the best Adepts the Alliances had to offer.

Every shop topside had an elevator leading to the underground, but only shop owners possessed the badges necessary to use them. Outsiders needed to find other channels in order to enter. Even if you were a shop owner, you could only enter through your shop's personal elevator. Only the eighteen members of the Skyfire Council were permitted to use any elevator they saw fit.

Exiting the elevator, the Barber, Beautician and Lan Jue tacitly made their way towards the left. Unlike the avenue above, the buildings on either side of the street were even more elaborate, but still retained that old world charm. In it's infancy the two avenues had been the same. You could go so far as to say that the Skyfire Avenue situated above them came about through the one underground. It was the Adept's Utopia, and countless Talents arrived to gain power, earn money, and realize their every desire.

The trio proceeded unabated, until they were faced by a brawny bald-headed figure coming their way. The massive man was over two meters tall, and wore only a vest to show off his physique. His bulging arms were larger than the Beautician's waist. When he walked down the street it was like being confronted by a road roller. Strangest of all, however, was the metal casing that covered his head and half his face. The red glow from his metallic eye was particularly unsettling.

The rule of thumb was that pedestrians were expected to stick to the right whilst walking. The giant, however, walked contrary to the foot traffic with a palpably threatening demeanor and long strides. Every Talent present almost subconsciously moved out of his way.

In this place people didn't look for trouble. Skyfire Avenue didn't permit public conflict. If you wanted a fight, it had to be in the arena. However, it seemed like Big Baldie wasn't familiar with this particular rule. It was only a few short moments before he was standing before the trio.

Lan Jue, the Barber and the Beautician, of course, weren't in the habit of getting out of people's way. Seeing the three unwilling to part, his metal face twisted in to a sadistic leer. He moved towards the Barber, situated directly in front of him.

The Barber straightened and, turning his head towards the Beautician, muttered, "There's always that one who thinks the rules doesn't apply to them."

Crash! before he'd even finished his sentence, Big Baldie had smashed right in to him.

However, by the time the surrounding Adepts had stopped to look, Big Baldie's enormous bulk went flying dozens of meters and crashed in to the ground like a sack of garbage.

Lan Jue had watched as speed and power in equal measure collided, and in that moment it was like the Barber had become some ethereal glimmer, his shoulder smashing in to Baldie's stomach.

The Beautician covered her small mouth with a hand, her eyes wide and full of faux astonishment. "Why Little Clippers, you brute! That looked like it hurt!"

The Barber rolled his eyes. "You really shouldn't, Big Sister. My body count pales in comparison to yours."

Lan Jue looked on impassively, but hearing the Barber's words he could help but feel a shudder. For an assassin of his caliber to say something like that...

The Beautician's eyes fluttered towards Lan Jue just in time to catch his reaction. Giggling, she said, "Don't listen to his nonsense, Little Brother. A cowardly little woman like me, how could I possibly murder anyone!"

Chapter 31: Harlequin Silver

The hulking man struggled to get to his feet after the Barber had thrown him aside. He knew precisely how strong he was, but he wasn't stupid – if the Barber had been able to chuck him aside so easily, he knew better than to start anything else. He turned glumly, seeking to continue on.

“Halt,” The Barber called harshly.

Big Baldie turned back. “Whadda ya gunna do about it,” he said threateningly, but the fear was in his eyes.

The Barber regarded him listlessly. “I should be asking you that. Do you know where we are?”

An ominous glint lit Big Baldie's eyes. “Skyfire Avenue.”

“So you do know,” the Barber said, “And yet you deliberately break the rules.”

Big Baldie growled. “I broke no rule. Where's it written you can't walk down the opposite side of the street?”

The Barber's face adopted a shocked expression. “So you knew you were going against the crowd! That's good. In fact you're right, there isn't any rule expressly forbidding walking against the flow of traffic. But that was before. From now on this street indeed has that rule. Because I said so. I'll submit the provision when I return to the Skyfire Council. And likewise you will pay for your malicious disregard for the rules.”

Big Baldie's features blanched. “Yeah right, how you gunna prove it!” As he spat this, he turned and ran down away down the street.

The Barber sneered derisively. “These thugs of the Great Conclave are as stupid as they come. Let's go.”

As he spoke he started to move onward, seemingly losing interest in Baldie. Neither Lan Jue nor the Beautician bothered to follow the man's departure either.

Big Baldie, meanwhile, pushed his way wildly through the crowd. A few

moments later, he turned his head to ensure he wasn't being chased by that little guy with the evil eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Come with us," a voice directed. A middle-aged man stood near him, hands tucked in to the pockets of his grey suit trousers.

"W-who are you?" Big Baldie stammered. All around him half a dozen other grey-suited men had silently begun to draw closer.

"Skyfire Avenue Enforcement," the man replied impatiently.

"What proof do you have to take me away?" The muscles all over Big Baldie's body began to swell menacingly.

The middle-aged man heaved a sigh. "You're blind, then? Do you know who you bumped in to? You probably could have caused trouble for anyone other than the Barber and been fine, you know. You're lucky he was in a good mood, too, otherwise there'd be no need for us to come collect you."

As he spoke, his hand shone with light. Big Baldie tried to call out, but the only thing that emerged was a choking gasp before he collapsed to the floor.

"Take him away."

Lan Jue saw the geodesic dome rise before him, his face betrayed his interest. "It's my first time here. They call it the Reaper's Arena, right?"

The Barber looked at him with a grin. "That's right."

The Reaper Arena, the place where Adepts brought their enemies for duels. It was as fair as you could get. Both parties signed a waiver absolving the other of their death. Combatants fought to the finish, fate deciding who lived and who died. Revenge wasn't permitted. Sometimes the Skyfire Council would host fights between combatants with particularly deep-seated hatreds. On those days gamblers came out in droves. Business was surprisingly good.

Lan Jue chuckled. "Suddenly my mood has improved. I'll tell you what, Barber – we're both respectable men, nobility, and have never fought

before. What would you say to a wager?"

The Barber blinked in surprise. "You want to bet me?"

"Naturally!" Lan Jue grinned.

The Barber clapped his hands, their sound thrumming though the area. Smiling, he replied, "Excellent idea! How'd you know what I was thinking. Ahhh, I'm not worthy of being a Councilman – you understand me too well. Fine, to tell the truth I've had my eye on that Soulfire diamond in your shop, the fifty karat one. Unfortunately I'm embarrassingly short on funds. Seeing as we were never that close it would have been improper to ask you for it directly."

Realization dawned on Lan Jue's face. "You should have said something earlier. We're all Councilman, and the shop's discounts are at my discretion. But seeing you like this, I assume you hadn't intended to spend the money anyway."

The Barber nodded his head.

The Beautician stood nearby, smiling pleasantly. "Since you both have invited me to be the judge, I have to make sure the scales are even, and make this a fair contest. You want the Soulfire gem, Little Clippers, but you'll have to offer something of equal value in return."

"Of course," the Barber replied. "I'm a fair and equitable businessman. What do think of this, Jewel Master?"

The Barber's hand searched his jacket as he spoke, retracting a moment later with something in his grip.

A metal roughly the size of his palm emitted a ethereal glow, as though sunlight bloomed from within. It shone with the whole spectrum of color.

Lan Jue's eyes grew wide. "That's a fair bet," he said, without hesitation.

The metal held in the Barber's hand was called Harlequin Silver. Like Technetium it was superconductive, but rarer still. In addition to transmitting the vast majority of power used with it, mixing only a small amount in an alloy would produce a weapon that would greatly amplify

any Adept's power. A piece that size was worth far more than the Soulfire gem the Barber had requested.

There were several planets where technetium could be mined, but finding Harlequin Silver came down to luck. It was exceedingly difficult to gather, only traces could be found accompanying special metals. Very difficult to get indeed.

The Barber handed the Harlequin Silver to the Beautician. "Then it's decided."

As he spoke, he entered the Reaper's Arena.

The Reaper's Arena was in fact many arenas together. From outside the building itself didn't look so large, but the arenas inside were all built with specific characteristics. Whether one entered to fight or spar, a fee was always required. This provided a professional referee, registration, and record keeping. Only then could you fight.

Of course, for Lan Jue and his companions as members of the Skyfire Council, they had no need to pay. They also had free use of the best arena. Necessary for such a top-level fight.

The Barber registered them for a sparring session. Despite their status as Councilmen they were still required to register and enter in to the records. As for bets, however, that was up to them. If they wanted the arena to act as arbiter, they would have to put down a ten percent deposit against the value of the winnings.

"You want to make a deposit with the Arena, Jewel Master?" The Barber asked, shrugging his shoulders.

Lan Jue responded with a small smile. "Up to you."

Chapter 32: The Sparring Arena

The Beautician gathered two badges from the staff, handing them to the others. "Let's go on in. I can't wait."

Peering at Lan Jue, the Barber pressed the badge in his hand. Instantly a silvery light enveloped his body, and he stepped through a barrier of light with the number 23 above it.

Lan Jue, in turn, bowed towards the Beautician. After giving his regards he employed the badge and entered the arena.

With a flash of light, the scenery changed before his very eyes.

The arena was circular, with a diameter exceeding three hundred meters. The Barber had already made his way to the far ends of the arena. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, smiling.

As it was Lan Jue's first visit to the Reaper's Arena, he took it all in earnestly.

The circular arena's floor was fabricated with a special material. It was surrounded by walls that rose a hundred meters in to the air. It was like the entire arena was covered in a some sort of case.

A robotic voice filled the air.

"Welcome to the S-Rank Sparring Arena. There are no rules: surrendering, or activating your Arena Badge will terminate the match. Whoever terminates the match is declared the loser. The results will be entered in to record."

"Participants are; the Jewel Master; the Barber. This match will not exceed sixty minutes."

"Match, begin!"

The series of announcements repeated, going over the rules.

"From the look of you, it really is the first time you've been here Jewel Master," the Barber said, in no hurry to attack.

Lan Jue nodded in affirmation. "That's right, first time."

The Barber smiled. "I'll make sure to leave you with a good impression. No crying, though!"

Lan Jue returned the smile. "We are nobles; fair, modest, astute, intelligent. We certainly aren't puerile."

He stood about a hundred and fifty meters from Lan Jue. The smile fled from his face. "Are you calling me childish?"

"Heh."

The Barber glared at him, and lifting his right hand palm upward. Without any clear motion, the Barber caused the entire arena to warp, and a strange buzz issued forth.

Boom! A violent blast was heard. All that could be seen was an orb of crackling blue light that surrounded Lan Jue. The barrier undulated like it had been struck by some great force.

It flickered, undulating like choppy seas, and shimmered from the pressure.

"Quite the display, not bad at all," Lan Jue praised, honesty in his voice.

And it was. The attack had come from the Barber slapping his hand, the impact causing an explosion. A blast of a hundred and fifty meters, produced only by a palm – it must have been nearly the speed of sound.

"Not bad yourself, though it's the first time I've ever seen a blue turtle shell," the Barber taunted. In the next instant, he'd disappeared.

Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom... ! A succession of thunderous blasts erupted, and the lightshield surrounding Lan Jue shuddered like it had been fed through a wood chipper. Countless bursts of light appeared where the invisible attacks landed. The terrifying attacks left deep ravines in the arena floor.

Lan Jue's brows had drawn together, and he stood quietly never moving from his spot. It was like he didn't react at all, or he had no way to react. He only suffered the mad blows of the Barber, who'd disappeared in to thin air.

Whoosh! The Barber appeared anew, this time fifty meters in front of Lan Jue.

“Are you planning to sit there and defend until I run out of power? We’ll see just how strong your defense really is.” The Barber glared at Lan Jue.

Bzzt bzzt bzzt! A deep hum wormed from around the Barber’s body. The power coursing through him covered him in a dim cyan light.

Looking on, Lan Jue’s face took on a strange expression.

Cyan represented wind-element Disciplines. The Barber’s power was derived from wind.

The Barber’s body shimmered and flashed, suddenly dropping down from the skies. As he began to descend a dull blast filled the air.

He broke the sound barrier! Sound!

In the space of an instant the Barber’s fist appeared before Lan Jue’s face. His luminous shell began to cave, crack, then shatter with a loud crash in to countless motes of light.

But it was the Barber’s scowling face that froze in shock. A large, powerful hand was gripping his fist.

“How could you be this fast?” The Barber looked at Lan Jue, stupefied.

Lan Jue looked at him, shaking his head apologetically. “Your genetic Talent just barely reaches the Ninth level. Your ability has only reached sound. I’m guessing the best you can achieve is four times the speed of sound. Once you’ve reached the ninth rank, your strength doubles with each subsequent degree. You’re just a first degree Ninth-Rank Talent, and though your control is excellent it isn’t enough. I once knew a ninth degree Ninth-Rank Talent, also a wind-element Adept. Not only could move at the speed of sound. He could move at the speed of light. Your Talent is quite good, but you’ve used too many drugs, and they’ve limited your potential. Continue to work on your foundation, keep striving. After all, you’re still young.”

Though he certainly appeared younger than the Barber, in the midst of

his lecture he looked for all the world like a professor.

“Ninth degree Ninth-Rank? It’s impossible for the Wind Discipline to grow that high!” The cyan light surrounding the Barber bloomed suddenly, employing all his power to wrench his fist free from Lan Jue’s grasp.

“It brings you no shame to be uninformed, but I didn’t want to say anything. You’ve lost, and I appreciate your gift of the Harlequin Silver.” Lan Jue offered a small smile, and the power surrounding the Barber became a deep blue. In the next instant, his entire body sparked as bolts of lightning spat out from him.

Clap, clap, clap. The sound of applause prefaced the Beautician’s arrival, though no one knew how long she’d been in the arena. “Splendid, Little Brother! I hadn’t expected you’d be so strong! You certainly opened your Big Sister’s eyes. It’s just, you only said his own power wasn’t sufficient. How is it as a Lightning Disciple you are so fast?”

Lan Jue spotted the Barber struggling to catch his breath, freeing himself from the incapacitating lightning. He looked up at the grinning face of the Beautician. “Both of you now.”

Chapter 33: Never Told a Lie

“Both of you now,” Lan Jue said.

“Huh?” The Barber and Beautician looked at him, stunned.

Lan Jue asked flippantly, “Wasn’t that your plan from the start?”

The two exchanged a glance, surprise evident in their eyes.

The Beautician ran her hand through her hair and smiled. “And how’d you figure that out, Little Brother?”

Lan Jue shrugged. “It wasn’t difficult. I knew you two were a team once he started his attack. You’re always calling him the Diabolical Little Clippers, but his style of confrontation is always head on. Clearly you’d been trying to deceive me from the start. Moreover, were you two not a team why would you come in once the fight was finished? It may be my first time, but I know the rules don’t permit noncombatants to enter during a bout.”

The Beautician glared at the Barber. “I told you! You should have held back, don’t rush in guns blazing. You don’t listen. You’ve shown your hand.”

She turned back to Lan Jue, that devilishly cunning smile once more lighting up her features. “Little Brother, you really are something. I simply must know what degree ninth-rank you are.”

Lan Jue blinked his eyes. “I’m not sure what degree I am myself.”

The Beautician pursed her ruby lips, malcontent written across her face. “Little Brother, don’t be so dishonest.”

Lan Jue sighed. “I’ve never told a lie. In fact, Sister Beautician, I must tell you that my degree isn’t menial.”

She responded with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, and in that moment a pink light exuded from the center of her body. In the space of an instant, the arena had become a world of pink.

The air filled the shrieking howls, bloodcurdling cries, as a host of

wraiths clawed their way out from the ground with bony hands. The world of man had become hell, adrift in the river Acheron*

The Barber disappeared, and the hellish shrieking of the wraiths lapsed in to silence. He had become the deadly blade in the bowels of hades.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, simply lifted his hand and shouted. “That Silver’s mine!”

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Skyfire Museum.

“Ahh,” the Clairvoyant sighed, and gave a halfhearted smile.

The Wine Master grinned at him. “What’s all that noise about?”

The Clairvoyant replied. “Are we going about this the right way?”

“What’s wrong about it,” the Wine Master inquired. “If we didn’t do it this way, they would find a way. In this case to do is better than to restrict. It will take more than a day or two before they accept the Jewel Master. After all, when he’d first arrived in the Avenue we broke our fair share of rules. But these three years he’s kept a low profile, gained prestige in the council. These are good things.”

“This morning I saw the Barber, his face sour,” the Clairvoyant said. “Like he’d lost something valuable. The Jewel Master’s face, meanwhile, was aglow – like he had a hot date, a good sign.”

Smiling, the Wine Master rejoined, “Let them work it out among themselves. Though the Jewel Master’s heart isn’t entirely pure, but his actions are measured.”

“I wouldn’t call that measured. Economical so as to avoid shortage, maybe. Take care of your precious liquors.”

The Wine Master snorted. “The guy’s quite rich, but exceptionally stingy. I haven’t the slightest idea what he’s planning with all of that money. And when choosing alcohol he’s even more sinister than the Beautician. In these three years he’s opened up more of my treasures than I care to count.”

The Clairvoyant responded with a full-bellied chuckle. “The fault also lies with you, good drinking buddies are rare! Were you to give me fine liquor I wouldn’t know what to do with it. No, it seems you quite like the boy. Although he takes advantage of you, there will certainly come a day when he’ll pay you back double.”

“Oh?” The Wine Master raised a brow in curiosity. With the Clairvoyant, this sort of talk was never to be taken lightly.

ζ

Skyfire Underground.

It felt incredible to switch up his mood. Lan Jue toyed with the Harlequin Silver in his hand, throwing it up and catching it. As he left the arena all his worries, his anger over Zhou Qianlin, melted away. It was like taking a long drink of ice water after leaving the sauna.

Not long after he left, the Barber and Beautician followed.

The Beautician had become like a peasant woman, her reddish-brown hair tousled and tangled.

She looked like a lion after viciously defending it’s territory.

She ground her teeth as she watched Lan Jue leave.

The Barber looked even more wretched. He lurched with a hand over his stomach, and his face looked like he’d been constipated for more than a month. He looked like he wished he were dead.

“Shameful loss, that guy trounced us,” the Barber nearly bellowed, flustered and frustrated.

“It’s your fault,” the Beautician hissed, trying in vain to get her hair under control. “Who made you so useless! My Harlequin Silver!”

The rage painted across the Barber’s features gradually disappeared, replaced with a stern and dignified look. “The Jewel Master was far stronger than we had assumed. By my estimation he’s at least a fourth degree Ninth-Rank Talent. What do you think?”

The beautician nodded in agreement. “Seems about right. I’m a second

degree, and you're a first. Our powers complement each other. No one but a fourth degree or higher could crush us so quickly and easily."

The Barber's face twitched in anger. "We weren't crushed. We'll persevere one day."

"Oh absolutely... ONE DAY!" The Beautician spat sarcastically.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, had paused in his route to escape the Skyfire Underground and walk towards a shop.

In the center of Skyfire Avenue, there was a rather unremarkable little store. The reason why it was described as 'little' was only because it was little by comparison to the enormous, noble structures surrounding it. The storefront was only seventeen meters wide, and it was designed in accordance with a combination of the luxurious, classical style with the simplistic neo-classical style. The mirror-like deep blue walls, the brilliant display windows, all showed off several dazzling, gleaming jewels. In the middle of the top of the store, four letters, glowing with a sapphire light, formed the name of the store.

Z, E, U, S.

The door was made from some sort of unknown deep blue metal. It didn't have any decorations, save for an imprint of a jagged lightning bolt.

Indeed it was Zeus' Jewelry Shop, a mirror image of the one that sat above them on Skyfire Avenue.

He pushed open the door and entered.

Ding ding ding, the pleasant ringing of silver bells heralded his entrance, and a young girl greeted him. "Boss, you're here!"

The young woman wore a black skirt that fell to her knees, revealing thin fair-skinned legs. Her torso was hugged by a snow-white blouse, and her short green hair framed her shimmering viridescent eyes. A sweet smile spread across her face.

"Guoguo... how's business been lately?" Lan Jue called at her in greeting.

Goguo responded with a charming giggle. "Bad."

“Bad?” Lan Jue responded, slightly taken aback.

She snickered. “The boss hasn’t been around to see us! Of course things have been bad! Really though business is alright.”

“Not great, but at least there’s peace and quiet!” A disgruntled voice interjected. Another shop assistant appeared, fresh from entertaining a customer and clearly not in the best mood.

She wore the same clothing as Guoguo, but the two were as alike as apples and oysters. She rose a hundred and seventy centimeters on long thin legs. Her deep breaths caused her figure to strain against the confining blouse. Her fiery red hair was tied in a bun, and the black rimmed glasses perched on her nose lent her titillating aura an decidedly intellectual flavor. Her pink eyes glinted, like a pair of captivating gemstones.

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*Acheron was one of five rivers in the Greek myths of Hades, the River of Woe. Here, it may also refer to hell in it’s entirety.

Chapter 34: The Power Gem

“Mika, you didn’t miss me even a little?” Lan Jue smiled charmingly, leaning against the counter. His eyes swept over the fiery salesgirl.

Mika huffed. “A boss who neglects his duty for over half a month? What’s to miss?”

Lin Guoguo also spoke up, her own voice somewhat grouchy. “If you keep this up, boss, Mika and I’ll apply to work with Xiuxiu and Ke’er. We’re down here all day long, dead tired with no sunlight and you don’t even come to see us. It’s heartbreaking!”

Lan Jue rubbed his forehead and smiled. “Fine, fine, girls. My mistake, alright? I’ll change my ways, and definitely come more often to see you.”

Mika’s anger turned to delight, and she fixed him with a softer gaze. “That’ll do.”

“Ah, right. You showed up just in time boss. There a matter you need to tend to.” Lin Guoguo’s changed gears, all businesslike. Even like this, with her sweet flushed face, it could almost drive a man to bite her.

“Oh?” Lan Jue asked. “What is it?”

“Yesterday a guest came in with a gem to sell,” Lin Guoguo began. “Mika and I both had a look, but it was hard to tell. He wanted a lot for it, and we didn’t want to proceed without asking you.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Let me see it.”

Zeus’ Jewelry Store didn’t only sell jewelry, but also purchased some, though of course at a lower price than they would at the market place.

The shop above offered the flashy, the opulent, the magnificent. The Avenue underground, however, was different. Jewelry was also sold here, but they weren’t only for looks. In fact each was fitted with a power gem for practical use.

With the onset of the New Era humanity proceeded to excel at planetary development. Eventually they discovered a number of special gems which

possessed special qualities. Their specific abilities were as various as the stones themselves, but they all became known as Power Gems.

Regardless of whether they were affixed to mechas or forged in to weapons Adepts used directly, they advanced the abilities of whatever they touched. Particularly rare were the giant Power Gems, which often fetched exorbitant prices.

An example was the Soulfire Diamond he'd bet against the Barber's Harlequin Silver. The diamond's function was energy compression. In condensing energy by a factor of five the original volume was reduced by a fifth, but it's power was increased three-fold. The greater the size of the diamond, the greater it's one-time use. The gem held in Zeus' Jewelry Store was sufficiently large to compress the entire power of a ninth-level Talent in to a single blow. Although the Power Gem would fracture after use, it was certain that single blow would be the deciding factor in any battle.

In truth single-use gems like the Skyfire Diamond weren't exceptionally valuable. Of much higher worth were the re-usable gems. Generally speaking, power gems of equivalent effect compared to precious metals increased functionality by a factor of ten. In terms of price, the difference could be a hundredfold.

Therefore, the highest level mechas were often a combination of precious metals and power gems.

After a short time Lin Guoguo returned, bearing a silver metal box. The box was small, and unadorned, but Lan Jue knew at a glance it was composed of heavy lead. This sort of box was only used for intense, radioactive gemstones. And most of those gems were harmful to people. Of course it would also be capable of stimulating an Adept's genetic abilities, strengthening their Discipline. That sort of gem was invaluable.

"Boss, we've already analyzed the radiation. It's emissions are strange; they aren't harmful, but also don't seem to have any benefit. But, the intensity of the radiation itself is quite large. It has a high metal penetrability. The man seemed like he desperately needed the money. If

you wait a little while he'll probably return. He'd said that if we didn't take it he'd go sell it to someone else.

Lan Jue took up the box, opening it gingerly. A gentle blue light crackled around his hand, growing until it coated the box. Lin Guanguan and Mika had long ago grown accustomed to Lan Jue's power, and so were not surprised by the display.

A precious stone the size of a ping pong ball rested in the box. It was a light brown, and clearly unrefined. Still, it's crystalline façade displayed no impurities, and light flowed easily through it's center. But it's surface appeared somewhat opaque. All in all, it didn't look worthy of much attention.

The radiation it emitted was indeed strong, and his body tingled from the sensation.

"How much did the man want for it?" Lan Jue muttered.

The saleswomen had reverted to a more professional demeanor, retiring their playful smiles. "He wanted fifty thousand NED*," Li Guanguan replied.

"Give it to him," Lan Jue said eagerly.

Mika's eyes glinted in the pale glow of the stone. "Boss, you know what this stone does?"

Lan Jue, in turn, shook his head. "No idea. But judging from the strength analysis, his power gem is at least a-rank. This radiation is directly derived from it's power. It's power is quite pure, and it seems the compression abilities in it are hidden deeper in. The power itself doesn't come to the surface to dissipate, instead presenting as radiation with no distinguishable power fluctuation."

A-rank? Hearing this, the two women's eyes shone like luminous diamonds.

The value of a Power Gem, from high to low were S-, A-, B-, C-, E-, and F-rank.

The discrepancy between rankings was tenfold. Generally, It was

accepted that a gem's value and rank were directly proportionate to its volume.

Only a few s-ranked gems were uncovered a year in the Three Alliances, and nearly all were subsequent favorites at top-level auctions. It would be fair to say that a-rank gems were the best the average man could hope to encounter. The Skyfire Diamond, by comparison, wasn't even considered d-rank. The capabilities of a single A-ranked Power Gem could rival that of an elite mecha. In fact any 'elite' mecha that wasn't fitted with an A-rank power gem wasn't elite at all.

Mika and Lin Guanguan were both quite experienced in the industry, and new all S-or A-rank power gems on the market. Neither had seen this one before, but that didn't shake their confidence in their boss. If it was indeed an A-rank gem, then the thing was worth a hundred million dollars.

"I'll contact the seller," Mika stated promptly. She turned on her heel and left.

Lan Jue wasn't in a hurry to leave, confronted with the A-ranked power gem. He played with it in the palm of his hand. Fifty thousand NED meant little to him – the cost of a fine bottle of wine – but even if this gem was a fake, it still required some investigation. And in the event it was real, this was the deal of a lifetime. But above all, since this gem wasn't known on the market, it could mean he's found information on a new vein. And a place to build a mine. Of course the possibility was extraordinarily remote. Gems of power were almost never found together.

*

*New Era dollars. Future translations may refer to them as 'bucks' or NED unless otherwise specified.

Chapter 35: Mika's Fire

The owner of the brown gem was a tall man, who wore a green hoodie to conceal the majority of his face.

"The gem belongs to you?" Lan Jue queried.

The man nodded in affirmation.

Lan Jue's face spread in a slight smirk. "You're aware of Skyfire Avenue's rules," he said, not really asking.

Again the man nodded, but said nothing.

"Then we can proceed with the deal. Mika, give the man his money."

"Yes, sir," Mika replied. She produced a handful of yellow notes; the highest denomination of NED available, ten thousands dollars a note. She gave the man five.

The hooded man took his money, his face hidden in shadow. Wordlessly he turned, and made to leave.

"Wait a minute," Lan Jue called after him.

"Our business is concluded," the man replied. His voice was strange, clearly altered by a voice modulator. "According to the rules of Skyfire Avenue, we have no further association."

Lan Jue nodded in agreement. "Absolutely, but if I offered to pay you for information about the origin of that stone, we'd be entering in to another business arrangement."

The hooded man seemed to sigh, and shaking his head pushed open the lightning-emblazoned door of the jewelry shop. However, he did not pass through it. In the contrary, he retreated several steps, his body rigid.

From without three men entered through the door he'd opened.

The foremost man was clad in black leather, a hooded jacket over all and a black mask. All that was revealed was a pair of shining, intelligent eyes. The two men behind him were dressed similarly, though they wore no hoods.

“Where is it, Oliver?” The resonating voice of the leader asked the man in green. Though he asked, his eyes caressing the box set before Lan Jue revealed the question as rhetorical.

Without warning, the man in green side-stepped the leather-clad intruders and threw a single punch at the leader, trying to knock him out.

Bang! The black-hooded intruder raised his arm to block the attack, and in that moment a squall of wind tore through the store.

“Enough!” Mika’s clear voice rang through the shop, and she approached them indignation clearly written on her face. “Are you not aware of the rules here?!”

The two hooded men dropped their hands. The one in black growled, “Mind your own damn business. I know you can’t fight in Skyfire Avenue. But we aren’t on the Avenue, are we.”

Lan Jue, sitting a short distance from them, sighed faintly. “It would appear our safeguards against rule-breakers have been insufficient of late. Where are all you troublemakers coming from. Mika, if you would please show them the door. Have the enforcers deal with them.”

“Absolutely, sir!”

Her right leg shot out. In her tiny skirt, the gentlemen thought they might be granted a quick peek. However, before they could have the opportunity to appreciate the view, they found the world before them engulfed in red.

All of them, including the man in green, found themselves enveloped by the flame-red light to the point where they didn’t even have room to struggle before collapsing to the floor.

Mika waved her left hand, and in response the door to Zeus’ Jewelry Shop opened of its own accord. One by one, she literally kicked the four prostrate men from the store.

Mika strode towards the door, hands on her hips. She shouted out in to the street. “Are the enforcers all on lunch break? Come fetch this garbage!” She turned, disregarding the host of stares earned from the

Adepts wandering the street, and walked back inside slamming the door behind her.

“So fierce,” Lan Jue teased, covering his face with his hands in feigned discomfort.

Lin Guanguan giggled. “You’ve spoiled her, boss!”

Lan Jue chortled. “A little fierce is good! You have to protect yourself from bullies. I must say though, Mika, you should employ a different method next time. Kicking your legs in such a short skirt is so unbecoming of a lady.”

Mika responded with a flirtatious look. “Oh boss, they didn’t see anything... I just wanted to give you a show.”

“No thank you,” he said, standing. “I’m terrified you’ll burn me too. I’m heading out, but by the way I ran in to Chu Cheng a few days ago. You know he thinks about you all the time! Would you not give my poor older brother some consideration?”

Mika’s playful expression shifted, a bitterness crept in to her voice. “If you aren’t interested don’t throw me away to just anyone. If you force me to go with him, I might as well die right now.”

“All right! Pretend I didn’t say anything,” Lan Jue said, rubbing his forehead. He felt pity for his brother. But more, if his brother was just ‘anybody’, what did that make him? Ugh, this girl!

Lin Guanguan and Mika accompanied Lan Jue to the surface elevator. Mika spoke to her counterpart. “Look after the store, Guanguan. I’ll go to the enforcers and follow up.” For many things she was able to make the proper decisions and didn’t require Lan Jue’s direct instruction. Among Lan Jue’s four employees, she was certainly the most qualified in all aspects.

Lan Jue returned topside, the lead casing clutched in his hands. This power gem would require some careful research to verify.

The elevator went directly to Zeus’ surface shop, but didn’t stop, instead moving on until it reached the Library. He and the Keeper had made an

appointment.

Despite his good disposition from obtaining the gem and Harlequin Silver, his mood darkened when he remembered what he wanted to speak with the Keeper about. More than two years he thought, two years of my life!

The Library situated on Skyfire Avenue's upper level was very small, about the same area as Zeus' Jewelry Store. But compared to the Winery, or the Museum, it was miniscule.

What the unaware would never suspect, however, was that what lay beneath the surface was a building dedicated to the cultivation techniques of all the Avenue's Adepts. And it was massive.

The Keeper sat upon a recliner, rocking back and forth before the door of the Library. A rattan tea table was situated beside him, and on it sat a dark red teapot. In comparison to the pot Lan Jue'd used at the Luo Yun teahouse, this one had a thicker and smoother lacquer coating, making it clear it was used quite often.

"Come, take a seat. Now what reason would you have to come talk to an old man like me! A young fella like you, I doubt you'd come knocking for no reason." The old man smiled amicable towards Lan Jue as he spoke. No matter the guest, the Keeper always greeting everyone with a smile.

Lan Jue offered a small smile of his own. "Originally it had been only one thing. Now I'm afraid there's a second matter I need to ask about."

Chapter 36: You don't get capital punishment for annoying someone to death, right?

“Two things,” the Keeper rejoined. “Go on.”

He handed the box in his hands to the old man. “This is a power gem I’ve recently acquired. It emits a rather powerful radiation, and after some investigation I found that it’s internal power of compression is A-ranked. But this gem isn’t in any record. You are the wisest man on Skyfire Avenue. I was hoping you could offer some insight.”

The Keeper took the box in his hands and opened it without hesitation. A faint light pulsed from the box, shimmered, and then ceased completely.

The Keeper relieved the box of the gem and examined it closely. After a moment had passed, he frowned. “If you aren’t in a hurry I suggest you leave it here. I’ll examine it more closely. It’s nothing like I’ve seen before.”

“Sure,” Lan Jue responded without hesitation. After all, the Keeper didn’t simply sell books. He was also an accomplished scientist, and the stone had clearly piqued his interest.

“And the second matter,” the Keeper inquired, replacing the stone and setting the box absently upon the tea table.

Lan Jue began, “I remember you have a good relationship with the greatest schools of Three Alliances. Do you happen to be familiar with the National Eastern University?”

The Keeper shot him a glance. “What. Are you planning to get your doctorate? Don’t bother, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks – and they have nothing to teach you anyway! Hehehe.”

Lan Jue’s face scrunched in exasperation. This old guy, just a few Alpacas short of a herd.

“Well you’re not wrong, I’m old hat. I was hoping to enter the University

as an instructor.”

“An instructor?” The Keeper blinked in astonishment and the smirk slipping from his face. He stared at Lan Jue in amazement. “You want to be a teacher? Did I hear that right? You aren’t going there to corrupt the youth of our nation, are you?”

Lan Jue forced a wry smile. “Keeper, is that honestly what you think of my character?”

“Oh not at all,” The Keeper replied, “It’s just that not long ago I saw something about a man stealing another man’s wife. Terrible business.”

“Eh...” Lan Jue’s face grew rigid. He’d certainly blocked Skyfire’s Satellite Network at the time. Had the Keeper been there?

“I’ve some connections,” The Keeper continued nonchalantly. “Getting you a job as an instructor wouldn’t be a problem. It’s just an old man like me who’s spent his life enlightening the inquisitive, I hope the teacher I recommend doesn’t end up being a poor influence.”

Lan Jue once more smirked towards the old man. “In fact I’m really not a good teacher. I’m actually going there to act as a bodyguard, so some official post with no real responsibility would be best.”

“Then what were you looking for,” the Keeper asked.

Lan Jue, in response, leaned close to whisper in to the old man’s ear.

When Lan Jue had finished speaking, it was as though the Keeper’s craggy face had deepened. “You’re serious?”

Lan Jue rejoined with serious countenance. “It’s an area I’m skilled in, and I can promise you I won’t be a bad influence or shoddy instructor. Students who learned these skills certainly wouldn’t be at a disadvantage.”

The Keeper gave him a strange look. “Interesting,” he muttered. “Very interesting. Very well, then you go ahead and give it a shot. But be assured, if you hurt my relationship with the university, I won’t forgive you.”

“Be at ease. I know the implications.” Lan Jue dare not offend the man before him. He’d heard stories about the old man from the Wine Master.

He had apparently perfected science to the point of a Discipline, becoming an Adept of science. Rarely did he deign to act, but when he did it was world-shaking. A mad scientist capable of firing positron explosions from his hands while suspended in mid-air, probably not the best idea to make him mad. The Wine Master had once told Lan Jue that Skyfire Avenue had only known two synthetic Tenth-Level Adepts. The Keeper was one of them. He was also considered Skyfire Avenue's ultimate weapon. His power was considered synthetic because it was not derived from genetic Talent, but from intense learning and cultivation. His natural Talent didn't exceed Sixth-Level.

The second Tenth-Level was naturally the Clairvoyant. On the surface the two looked incapable of holding their own in a fight. Only the inner council members knew the truth; they weren't bad at fighting, just bad at skirmishes. When they fought they couldn't help but rip the heavens and drown the earth...

"Remember young man, when the time comes to show your powers don't hold back. Sometimes, the best way to avoid trouble is letting people know exactly what you're capable of."

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Three days later, a letter of appointment from the National Eastern University arrived at Zeus' Jewelry Shop.

"Boss, you're really going to be a teacher?" Ke'er's bright eyes watched Lan Jue closely.

Lan Jue nodded his head half-heartedly. "Uh-huh."

Ke'er sighed wistfully. "Then you'll definitely be the most handsome teacher there! It's just... why?"

Lan Jue smirked. "I've got nothing to do in my spare time."

"Blach!" Ke'er seemed to be choking on her own saliva. "I'll send you, okay! Oh and by the way, the gourmet wanted me to remind you that the Bluefin Tuna will be ready to eat in two days."

"Mmhm," Lan Jue said, his eyes lighting up. It was certainly good news.

“I’m going in to the back to rest for a while. I have to prepare to report for duty.”

“Do you need me to start packing some things?” Xiuxiu’s gentle voice inquired.

Lan Jue shook his head.

Returning to his room, Lan Jue extricated his interstellar communicator and input a number.

After a moment, a pleasant voice rang through the speaker. “What are you doing?”

Softly, Lan Jue answered. “At your request, I will be reporting to your school this afternoon. Do you need protection?”

The fair-sounding voice on the other end fell silent for a moment. “Keep in touch. This afternoon I’ll take you around the campus. After you’re more familiar with the place we’ll talk more.”

“Fine,” Lan Jue torpidly responded.

“Oh right, and what’s your name?” Zhou Qianlin asked.

Lan Jue truly didn’t understand why it was so easy to upset this girl. “Didn’t I tell you, that day?”

“Did you? I forgot. I tend not to bother with unimportant things or people.”

“My name’s Lan Jue,” he growled through the receiver.

Zhou Qianlin continued. “I was thinking, it would be better if we pretended we didn’t know each other in public. You can protect me from behind the scenes. How you do that is up to you, it shouldn’t be my job to tell you how.”

Lan Jue was confounded. “Why? What’s with the sudden change of heart?”

“Because,” she said, “If my classmates discovered I knew you, they’d be bound to question my taste.”

“ ... ”

“By the way, I wanted to ask you a legal question,” Zhou Qianlin said.
“You don’t get capital punishment for annoying someone to death, right?”

“Zhou Qianlin, do you happen to know what I’ll be teaching at your university,” Lan Jue said, the indignation eating away at him suddenly dissolving and replaced with a sly grin. Annoy me to death? Sh*t, you haven’t even seen what I can do.

Chapter 37: Etiquette Teacher

“Zhou Qianlin, do you happen to know what I’ll be teaching at your university?” Lan Jue’s question confused Zhou Qianlin. Wasn’t he going to be a mecha instructor?

Lan Jue unfolded the acceptance letter in his hand, and read from it’s contents. “We are happy to accept Mister Lan Jue as an associate professor of National Eastern University, hereby responsible for the ad-hoc curriculum of... Etiquette.” The communicator clicked off, his words still hanging in the air. Expected a mecha teacher, eh? How quaint.

Zhou Qianlin stared at the quiet communicator in her hand, her once proud demeanor now dumbfounded. “Etiquette? Since when did the University have this course? What is he even going to teach?”

Lan Jue saw the communicator strapped to his wrist hum, but all it accomplished was to make him laugh and shake his head. Since when did these mood swings become so common, he thought. Probably because she looks so much like Hera.

His memory conjured up that charming face, so like Hera’s, and he couldn’t help but feel a pang in his chest. And yet, at the same time he was looking forward to taking his post in the University.

He knew very well she wasn’t Hera, but in the deep recesses of his heart he still anticipated seeing her. At the very least, seeing her will remind him of his time with Hera.

Looking at the map, the University didn’t appear too far from Skyfire Avenue, but it would be quite a distance on foot.

Tomorrow I report to school. Think, when was the last time I enrolled in any classes? Ten years or more now. I was in my teens, and I was a pretty well-known problem child!

A smirk spread unbidden across his face. His memories were precious, recalling his wild and carefree youth like it was yesterday. And tomorrow he’d enter in to university again, but as a different person. The student had

become the teacher. But what sort of teacher would he be?

The depression that had accompanied Qianlin's request had dispersed, what with the happenings of the last few days. He was adjusting to the rigors of life, or perhaps, it was the beginning of a new chapter. It was the desire of every man to shed the veil of sadness.

He pressed a few digits in the to the communicator on his wrist, and soon a lethargic voice arose on the other end.

"Eyy, A-Jue, what's happening! Did you find Hera?"

A crooked smile split Lan Jue's face. "The greater the desire, the greater the disappointment."

The voice on the other end seemed to awaken. "It sounds like someone cheated you."

The muscles of Lan Jue's face jerked. "And it sounds like you're gloating."

"I'm not, really!" Chu Cheng's voice solemnly swore from the receiver.

Lan Jue smirked. "Fine. I'll deal with my own business. Give me an address, I have something for you."

"What's that," Chu Cheng asked curiously.

"Some Harlequin Silver. You know the kind of person I am."

"You know you don't have to repay me," Chu Cheng responded in agitation.

"Unacceptable," Lan Jue stated categorically. "If I take too long to repay a debt I won't be able to. Besides, I don't want to cause you any trouble. Although the silver isn't as significant as the refined technetium to you, you might be able to use it to trade for a batch."

Chu Cheng's voice rejoined. "A-Jue, you really need to get out. It's no good being shut in all the time."

Lan Jue acquiesced. "I know. I'm trying, I even found a job."

"A job? You coming out of retirement, back to being the Mercenary

King?” Chu Cheng’s excitement was apparent. “That’s excellent! We’ve got a few missions that need tending to, all S-Ranked. They’re yours if you want ‘em. Price is no object. I remember your rules, you only need to ask. Whatever gem you need you’ll get, I’ll have the whole family out looking.”

During his time as a mercenary, Lan Jue never accepted money. He preferred to be remunerated in the form of power gems. It was the take from those days that allowed him to corner the gem market in Skyfire Avenue.

Lan Jue chuckled. “I said I was looking for a job, not that I was going back to merc work. I’m going to be a teacher!”

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“Te.. teacher...” Chu Cheng’s mouth dropped open, and the cigarette that had lazily burned in his mouth tumbled to the floor instantly burning the shag carpet.

“Mmhm, a teacher. An Etiquette teacher, actually. Come on, give me an address.”

As if in a trance Chu Cheng muttered the address, and even when Lan Jue’s communicator went silent, he still didn’t know how to react.

Teacher? He’d said teacher, right? He wants to be... a teacher? Why did he sound so relaxed?

After a few moments of blind confusion Chu Cheng gradually came back to his senses. A wry smile spread across his face by degrees.

It appears A-Jue was finally letting go of what had happened the last few years, he thought. At least he’s getting out and letting go of his pain. It doesn’t matter what he’s out doing, so long as he’s doing something. And with his abilities, he’s sure to make an excellent teacher.

But what did he say he wanted to teach? I suddenly can’t remember...

“Chuuuu Cheeeeeng!” A wild voice suddenly rang out, full of bile.

“ You DARE smoke in my house again?! AGH! MY CARPET! You abhorrent little punk, do you have any idea how rare this carpet is?! Your

father just bought it at auction. Don't go running you awful degenerate, time for a whooping!"

"My fault mom. Pretend I don't exist!"

ζ

National Eastern University.

It was one of the top ten schools in the Eastern Alliance, situated right here on Skyfire, in the city itself. It was particularly known for its mecha program, and though it wasn't a military institution its piloting curriculum was known through the Alliances. Not only that, it was first among the Alliances in alloy research and application.

The school itself was enormous, constituting a tenth of the Western part of the city. At its back was the Western mountain, which itself had been incorporated in to the university. It provided the mecha students with a place to train.

Rays of early-morning light splayed across the campus, setting the morning dew to twinkling and bringing with it a vividly fresh scent. A figure slowly approached from the distance.

He was tall, clad in a three-piece azure blue suit. He wore a white shirt, pink neck tie, and a pink handkerchief folded in his breast pocket. And he came rolling in on a two-wheeled bicycle.

Chapter 38: The NEU

The bike leisurely meandered towards the school, Lan Jue sitting straight atop it so as not to wrinkle his finely pressed suit.

The fine black bike had been procured for him by the Wine Master. He had always been a fan of antiques. Apparently this bike the Wine Master had been riding was a relic from Former Era China. The brand name – Forever – could be made out on its crossbar. It was a good name, denoting its quality. The bike was veritably soundless as it rolled along.

A soothing, cool breeze caressed his face. Occasionally he would ring the bell, and the crisp ding ding ding would waft upon the wind. It was certainly a novel experience for Lan Jue.

Today, in order to appear more the professor, Lan Jue had chosen to wear a pair of black-rimmed spectacles. Naturally they were lens-less*, but they lent a certain air of culture and gentleness. His clean and kept face wore a genial, elegant smile. It was a scholarly look, contrary to what one might expect.

From far away he could make out the towering sign of the National Eastern University. The front gates of the campus were tall, and made of fine wrought metal. In fact, they were composed of an alloy, though it was difficult to determine which with the naked eye.

The National Eastern University. The letters were bold and brazen, written in a forceful hand that demanded attention. They caused Lan Jue to think back on that old geezer, reclining easily on his deck chair. He couldn't of been the one to write this, could he?

And yet Lan Jue knew clearly that though the man looked older than God, he'd probably go another hundred years before kicking the bucket. He was the world's greatest scientist! Was there anyone else who understood the workings of the human body better than he?

It wasn't long before Lan Jue and his antique Forever bike arrived before the campus' lofty gates.

He'd arrived just as the students were showing for morning lessons. The school's gates were thrown wide to accommodate the occasional maglev vehicle. As the levitating cars drew near they would slow, rapidly shifting from speeding bullets to full stop. Before the gates they would be scanned, and only then were they permitted entrance.

Aside from the maglevs, pricey high-altitude verti-cars were also seen from time to time. Like their inexpensive cousins, they also had to stop and get scanned before they could enter. In fact, the air above the university was entirely devoid of verti-cars or other traffic. At least, not on the campus. Such were the rules, and any who dared break them ran the risk of being shot out of the sky.

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A number of the maglevs arrived at the gate and went no further. Parking on campus cost a pretty penny, so most of students were sent to school by family. They would be dropped off at the gate and walk in from there.

Dumb-mutt Jin was such a student. His family's maglev arrived at the gates and descended until he could jump out. He slipped his backpack over his head and walked towards the gate.

The backpack was something that survived the inevitable march of progress. Personal inter-dimensional pockets existed, but only for those students whose families were particularly well off.

Dumb-mutt Jin's family was middle class at best. A maglev itself was an achievement.

He made his way through the gates, nodding his head to the rock and roll blasting through his headphones like he did any other day.

He wore a black school uniform that was fairly well kept, but the white shirt beneath was undone to the third button revealing his underwhelming pectorals. He wore a diamond earring in his left ear that lead the eye to his pink spiky hair. It made him look rather like a rooster. He certainly didn't look the part of a model student.

Mecha Pilot. Junior. Problem child. Those were the words to describe Dumb-mutt Jin. His name was actually Jin Tou, but his emphatically miserable behavior earned him the moniker Dumb-mutt. He was like a cur, they said, biting anyone he came across. And with his current academic record, graduating was starting to look like a crazy pipe dream.

As he made to traverse the gates Dumb-mutt Jin looked up in time to see something that stopped him in his tracks.

A man in a pressed suit rode towards the school on an ancient two-wheeled bicycle. He was a few meters away from the school when he threw his right leg over the back of the bike, balancing on his left foot perched atop the pedal. He swept by like that, standing to one side as the bicycle rolled on. His casual entrance, fine suit and gaunt stature was quite the attention-grabber.

Dumb-mutt Jin had fostered an interest in novelty items, and his eyes grew wide at the sight. He immediately pinched thumb and forefinger together, placing them in his mouth to produce a shrill whistle.

The man soon pulled up the university's gates and dismounted.

"Hey brother, not bad! Where'd you get the wheeler? Pretty sweet ride. All mechanical, right? Manpowered?" Dumb-mutt Jin appeared a fan of the past, and walked a circuit around the man.

The man offered a refined smile, and gave a reserved nod of his head. "It's called a bicycle. All manpowered."

"It's got character! Lemme get a ride on it." Dumb-mutt Jin moved closer still in zeal.

"I'm afraid not," the suit-clad man responded with a shake of his head.

"Pfft," Dumb-mutt spat disdainfully. "Well that's not fair, ya stingy bastard. Whatever." As he spoke, he turned and entered the campus. He wasn't a good student, true, but making trouble before the university gates was just plain stupid.

Lan Jue followed the chicken-head punk depart with his eyes, a laugh bubbling unbidden from his chest. Memories of his own time as a student came rushing back, and it appeared this university had it's own problem kids. The exaggerated hairstyle reminded him of a young A-Cheng, who'd experimented with something similar. But, sadly, that ended when his mother came storming into the school with a pair of scissors. Snip, snip!

"Beep! Attention unregistered vehicle, you are prohibited from going further." An emotionless digitized voice pulled Lan Jue from his reverie. Two men in uniform were already watching as he approached.

The two men were clearly campus security, and were clad in uniforms made to look like military fatigues. Both were quite tall, and quite burly.

"Unregistered vehicle, you are not permitted to enter the campus grounds. Please await processing, and produce your student identification for inspection."

Lan Jue certainly wasn't as old as Zhou Qianlin had tried to assert. Freshly shaved he looked quite young, no different than a post-graduate student.

Lan Jue smiled, and spoke to the uniformed guards politely. "Good morning, to the both of you. Please excuse me, but I haven't got a student ID. This is actually my first day reporting to the university. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the rules." As he spoke, he pulled out a dark blue envelope from the basket affixed to the back of the bicycle. He opened the document and produced the letter of appointment.

One of the guards took the red paper from Lan Jue's grip, while at the same time whipping free some instrument from his waist. He drew the apparatus over the document, scanning it. Only afterward did he open it to read.

"Etiquette teacher? What's an etiquette teacher?"

*

*I don't know about the other places in the world these days, but rimless glasses are a 'thing' in China. A fashion statement aimed at making you

look cute or scholarly. I mean, you forgot to put actual glass in your glasses, so I dunno how smart you are, but that's just me showing my age I guess...

Chapter 39: The Office

The letter of appointment was real and, despite the query as to his curriculum, he was permitted to enter the university unmolested, along with his bicycle.

As was expected, students and teachers operated under different rules, and teachers were given a designated area to park their vehicles free of charge. Lan Jue decided, by the way, to register the antique bicycle for entry.

In contrast with the strange alloy of the university's gate, the interior gave the distinct impression of communion with nature, all fresh and new.

Old trees grew together in to a towering canopy that shaded the campus grounds, guarding the roads and walkways. Each area was unique in its foliage, and it was clear even at a glance that they were all painstakingly kept. The fragrant smell of mowed grass, the heady fragrance of fresh flowers, both mingled together and filled the nostrils. Walking the meandering paths of the campus was like reconnecting with nature.

What a wonderful place! Lan Jue silently praised.

The buildings, layout and tenets of the school were all in line with its teaching ideology. And, of course, the preferences of the administration.

But more than that Lan Jue felt drawn the National Eastern Campus and its adherence to nature. If he had to describe it; tranquil. That would do it.

Earlier whilst being directed through the campus he'd easily found the teaching affairs office where he'd registered. He was given his office key, as well the key to his apartment. He was indeed treated like an honorable associate professor.

Stepping out the teaching affairs office, laden with his things, he freed a hand to push his glasses up on his nose.

"I guess I'm a teacher!"

The quality of the NEU was well appreciated, and the pursuit of knowledge was rigorous. The dean of the teaching affairs office had subtly

hinted that it didn't matter what connections got him in to the university, and he didn't know how he'd managed to get the administrators to agree to the so-called Etiquette Classes, but he wouldn't be paid for doing nothing. As a result, his first class was scheduled for this afternoon, and the school would broadcast the advertisement for this elective course. Further the Teaching Director himself would attend the class to determine for himself whether Lan Jue had what it took to teach. If he didn't, he'd have to face the administration, and have his class cut.

Simply put, his first test at the National Eastern University was just around the corner!

Recalling the stony visage of the dean, Lan Jue's face couldn't help but suffer a brief twitch. Why was it all deans of the world seemed exactly the same – or, at least, shared the same face, like they were cut from the same mold.

The thought turned over in his mind, although it was none of their business he certainly couldn't allow himself to be dismissed. Otherwise he'd never hear the end of it from Zhou Qianlin.

It had been ages since Lan Jue had felt this eager about something. He still had the morning, how would he prepare?

The NEU was vast, and separated in to numerous areas. The most significant of these was the R&D Department, a place only teachers and graduate students were permitted to enter. Three large, white, circular buildings sprawled across it.

The rest of the campus was standard, separated in to various area like the Mecha Combat department, and the Mecha Manufacturing and Service department.

The departments themselves were separated in to many smaller units. To put it simply, the Mecha Combat department had units dedicated to combat exercises and mecha application.

Mecha Manufacture and Maintenance, meanwhile, dealt largely with research and mecha building.

The NEU was laid out so that the further reaches of the campus were considered of higher status than the front. After all, it's how they displayed worth.

These two departments took up an area of roughly 150 hectares, and was separated in to the teaching building, research labs and so on.

Lan Jue had been assigned an office here, in the third teaching building with all the other elective courses.

What were known as elective courses here where all after school courses, mostly set up by students according to their interests and needs. Things like art, music and others. And now, etiquette.

The students themselves you could separate in to various ranks, and the difference between the status and future prospects of exceptional and average students was tremendous.

Teachers were no different. The income inequality and status of normal course instructors versus elective teachers was just as vast. This was especially true for post graduate and research instructors.

And so it was that all elective teachers were huddled here in the third teaching building. It was an open office, shared among some ten or more teachers. Their dormitory was nearby as well, in a small building behind the one their office occupied. It was without a doubt the shabbiest structure in the entire university.

Compared to teachers of normal subjects elective instructors weren't treated very well, but when examined against other normal professions outside of the campus they still were paid quite handsomely. After all, of all the universities in the Eastern Alliance the NEU enjoyed the most appropriated government funds. Teachers benefited from that.

In the end, though, it wasn't the salary that was an elective teacher's greatest source of income. It was bonuses. How much was earned depended on how many students attended the class. Joining an elective required payment, of course, and a portion of those profits were given to the teacher in question. The better their class, the more students they got, the more money they earned. It was a decent incentive method.

As for the dorm, Lan Jue didn't much care. He had no intention of living there. And so he went directly to the offices.

The door of the Number Three Teaching Building's offices was cast open. It had been a difficult place to find in the round campus, and his bicycle required a fair amount of effort to maneuver.

Knock, knock. Lan Jue rapped his fist against the office door. He smiled at the milling instructors as he made his way inside, nodding in greeting.

"Hello everyone," he began politely. "I'm the new etiquette teacher, Lan Jue."

Few occupied the office at the moment, and to Lan Jue's surprise the majority were women. The office was approximately three hundred meters with a few dozen desks. Nearly half lay empty. Of the occupied cubicles only eight teachers were present. Two were male, the rest women. Most appeared in their twenties, but for one older woman.

Every eye turned to Lan Jue. Regardless of gender each took in his tall, lithe frame and gentle demeanor. His gentle smile and elegant conduct immediately set people at ease.

Chapter 40: Mr. Lan

Lan Jue had made a good impression with his polite and gentlemanly introduction.

Closest to the door, a pleasant looking woman rose to greet him. She gave him a friendly smile. "Hello, I'm Jin Yu. You're the new Etiquette teacher?"

Jin Yan was small, but had an excellent figure. Paired with her delicate facial features she was definitely the best looking teacher in the office. She looked about the same age as Lan Jue.

"Hello, I'm the new Etiquette teacher. Is there somewhere I can place my things?" Lan Jue asked.

Seeing that graceful smile Jin Yan's face reddened visibly. She had known some very handsome guys, but she couldn't quite place it... The man before her had a certain special quality, noble but accessible, an elegant demeanor that made him seem almost perfect. Her heartbeat quickened, and so lost was she in her reverie that she forgot to answer.

"Mr Lan, you can pick anywhere so long as it isn't occupied," a middle-aged man stated politely.

Mr. Lan... Lan Jue ruminated over the title for a moment. He nodded towards Jin Yan and found a table near the corner. He organized the office materials given to him by the school atop the small desk, then sat before them in silence.

The other teachers in the office gave him curious glances, but none chose to speak. They were content to busy themselves with their own things.

"I'm sorry about just then, Mr. Lan, I was distracted," Jin Yan's pretty voice intruded. Her station wasn't far from Lan Jue's.

Lan Jue smiled, and shook his head. "It's fine, I found a place."

Jin Yan's curiosity grew stronger. "I'd heard yesterday from the teaching affairs office we were going to add a new Etiquette elective. We figured it

was nonsense, so we didn't expect you would arrive today. So tell me, what is your etiquette class about, Mr. Lan?"

Lan Jue smiled, and replied, "Nothing much. It's a course covering things related to your every day life, like proper decorum, lifestyle choices, perspectives of dealing with things, and perhaps some appreciation for the rarer things like an introduction to antiques."

"It teaches a bit of everything! Heh," came a sharp voice from nearby. At was another male teacher within the office. Compared with the genial middle-aged man who'd greeted Lan Jue, this man was somewhat younger and more handsome. However his face was pale and bloodless, and his hair had a waxy texture that even flies would disdain from approaching. He appeared distressingly foppish.

"Why are you even talking, Wang Hongyuan," Jin Yan replied grouchily.

"It's fine. In fact I do teach a little of everything." Lan Jue didn't seem to mind the slight, and indeed cast Wang Hongyuan a small smile.

Wang Hongyuan's mouth curled disdainfully but he said nothing more, suddenly occupied with something in his hands.

"Mr. Wang sounds a little grating when he talks," Jin Yan said apologetically, "but he's a good guy."

"Hm hm," Lan Jue chuckled politely.

Seeing that Lan Jue didn't have any further interest in talking, Jin Yan nodded politely and returned to her own desk.

Lan Jue opened his communicator, quickly typing in a message.

'I'm already at the school. Where are you?'

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The roomy classroom was excellently lit. Even during the day, the solar powered lights affixed to the ceiling glowed brightly.

The graduate school students were all especially gifted. There were no tricks or shortcuts to entry, if you passed the entrance exam then you were smart enough to be there. After graduation they were all Eastern Alliance

National Scholars – a title every young student dreamed of one day acquiring.

Zhou Qianlin was stooped over her desk, working diligently on an equation. She was a sophomore Scholar, but her workload was already greater than a Junior bachelor's student. Not only was she required to complete her own studies, but she also had to work through research projects with her tutor.

Bzzzzt. Her communicator vibrated gently. While in school your communicator was always set to silent, no matter who you were, so as not to interrupt the studies of others.

Reading the message a smile crept across Zhou Qianlin's pretty face. Both hands combed through her dark hair slung along her shoulders, and used a simple white handkerchief to sling her hair in to a ponytail.

It was a simple motion, but one that garnered the attention of all the boys in class. A few were audacious enough to stare at her outright, some merely stole a glance. Some veritably snarled, but of course those were the jealous girls.

Zhou Qianlin was already used to the attention, and ignored it while she tapped her response in to the communicator.

'Are you in the Electives division? When do you start teaching?'

Lan Jue: This afternoon, first class. Dean said if it's not good enough I'm fired. Think you can help give me a leg up?

Zhou Qianlin: The universe helps those who help themselves.

Lan Jue: ... you're so cruel!

Zhou Qianlin: Oh! How'd you know my nickname was Cruel!

Lan jue:

Zhou Qianlin couldn't contain herself, and snorted back a laugh after seeing Lan Jue speechless. Her laugh was like a hundred flowers blooming, and even the blazing solar lights of the classroom dimmed in comparison.

Elective course teachers office.

“Cruel,” Lan Jue sighed faintly. “It’s a pity you aren’t called Hera!”

Lan Jue’s chosen seat in the corner was next to a window, and leaning against the back of the chair he looked out to see the blue sky, white clouds and drifting leaves in the sunshine.

In this moment his mind was empty, a smile lighting his face as he enjoyed the scenery. It had been ages since he’d known this sense of stillness.

Most electives classes were held in the afternoon, so teachers spent their mornings in the office preparing class. The competition amongst elective teachers was far more intense than for normal professors. Their livelihood depended on having students not only enjoy the class, but applying it. As a result instructors diligently prepared their curriculum.

Other than Lan Jue lazily staring out the window, the only other instructor who appeared to be taking some leisure time was the one called Wang Hongyuan. Sitting quietly at his desk he appeared to be reading a magazine. His spectacularly waxed hair was polished enough to occasionally reflected the blue sky and white clouds from outside. He moved methodically, gracefully. But, as he turned the pages his fingers naturally held it delicately as though he were holding a flower...

Chapter 41: Before Class

The Electives Department had its own mess hall wherein the teachers and students ate in separate areas. The food was rather good – well, according to your average teacher at any rate.

Lan Jue carried his tray to a nearby corner and sat, having only picked a plate of steamed vegetables and a bowl of rice.

“You eat so little, Mr. Lan!” Jin Yan’s fair voice reached him as she placed her tray across from him and sat.

Lan Jue smiled. “I’m not very hungry.”

“But you’re so tall and strong,” she replied with a smile of her own. “Surely that isn’t enough nutrition there.”

Lan Jue only laughed.

So accustomed to fine cuisine, Lan Jue had lost his taste for the more conventional fare, but still he finished everything on his plate. Not a grain of rice went to waste. If the food wasn’t to your liking you could eat less, but you absolutely must not waste.

Lan Jue made no effort to press the conversation further, so Jin Yan ate in silence.

After he’d finished Lan Jue made no motion to leave, instead sitting quietly until Jin Yan had cleaned her plate. But he was sure not to stare – after all, staring at young women was not polite.

Even still, Jin Yan’s pretty face still grew slightly flushed. It had been somewhat abrupt, she felt, to sit beside him in the mess hall. But for reasons she didn’t quite understand Lan Jue’s every word and deed made her feel at ease, and not the slightest bit awkward.

“All done.” Finishing off her last bite she glanced at Lan Jue’s cleaned plate. She smiled in appreciation. “No wasting, that’s a good habit.”

His only response was to smile. He waited until Jin Yan had risen, and followed taking his own tray to the drop-off counter.

“So this afternoon is your first class, Mr. Lan. Would you mind if I sat in?” She’d known him for only a very short while, but Jin Yan’s interest in Lan Jue had grown considerably. This young gentleman with his noble demeanor and sharp clothing seemed almost perfect to her. It was the first time she had felt this way.

“Of course! It would be my pleasure,” he said with an amicable nod.

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Jin Tao ran a hand through his peach-colored hair, making them gather together in the center of his head all the more. A cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth, the smoke curling around him as he sauntered towards the alumni’s section. He hadn’t any friends lately, but it hardly bothered him. He entertained himself.

“The following is an announcement,” a melodious female voice called.

Jin Tao in turn paused, listening. It appeared to be a school-wide broadcast, so he was curious what it had to say.

“Announcing a new Elective Course: Etiquette and Lifestyle Training. The first class will commence at two o’clock this afternoon. Instructor Lan Jue leading. Any students with time and interest are invited to attend.”

The broadcast repeated three times, echoing throughout every nook and cranny of the campus.

Jin Tao’s lips curled in contempt. “The hell is that? Etiquette? Pfft.” As he spoke he stuck in middle finger up to the sky in defiance.

Just at that moment he spotted a couple figures in the distance making their way towards him. His eyes lit up... and he darted out of sight.

Two women in school uniform were walking his way. The first woman was wearing the formal dress of a university lady. White shirt, a black skirt stopping at the knee, white stockings and a black suit constituted her outfit. Her black hair hung loose, free to flow down her back, and her glimmering blue eyes seemed like they could look right through you in to your soul. Her beauty was breathtaking.

The second young lady stood at her side and was wearing a tight-fitting mecha-pilot flight suit. These flight suits were excellent at protecting the body, but it also served to perfectly outline the figure of this long-legged beauty. She had a hair full of blond hair and deep, penetrating green eyes that shone like quartz. The uncommon length of her legs might have been somewhat off-putting, but her posture and well-built figure exuded a tameless, alluring beauty.

The normally fearless Dumb-mutt Jin had a reason for hiding away. Upon seeing the black-haired vixen he had been immediately smitten. However, that blond Amazon filled him with an odd sense of fear.

She was a name among the Mecha department. The NEU had but a few Special Grade pilots, and this was one – Special Grade second rank. But rumor said, she was just a hair's breadth away from Special first rank. And what's more, a Sophomore National Scholar like the black haired beauty she accompanied.

Jin Tao had managed to earn a Third Rank in piloting with no small amount of effort, still the lowest rank to be found in the school. In front of this beautiful maverick he wouldn't dare act arrogant.

What's more, both were top of the charts for the most beautiful girls on campus. At the very top? Black Beauty. Some students might not even know who the Dean was but the Blue-Eyed Goddess Zhou Qianlin, not a soul was unfamiliar.

"So what do you think, Qianlin. Why do you want to check out this Etiquette class? Could it be you have some lifestyle defect? I really don't know what the university was thinking, suddenly opening this class," Tang Mi said querulously.

Zhou Qianlin walked beside her textbook clutched to her chest, and said in resignation, "I'm not forcing you to go with me. It's you who really wants to tag along."

Tang Mi snorted. "Hmph, you still really don't understand public sentiment do you! Who do you think are the people with nothing better to do than attend electives? Problem students. You rush over there and they

start to harass you, what then? I get the worst of it, that's what!"

"What are you talking about," Qianlin muttered quizzically.

Tang Mi giggled in response. "Don't you remember? You said if I were a man, you'd have married me. You're my woman!"

Zhou Qianlin stuck her tongue out at her friend. "Big breasts and no brains."

"Nonsense," Tang Mi blurted out, "Mine clearly aren't as big as yours!" Her voice had risen markedly. Hidden behind a nearby tree, the racy visions surging through Dumb-mutt Jin's head threatened to send him spiraling in to a coma.

"Fine. Long legs and no brains, how's that," Qianlin grumbled.

After the two beauties passed, Jin Tao remained hidden, dizzy from what he assumed must have been a sudden lack of blood. The two campus belles were going to join the Etiquette class eh? Awesome, a chance to see these gorgeous ladies up close and personal!

This was a secret he definitely wasn't going to share!

Off he went with that thought still ringing in his head, directly to his dorm room to change clothes. If he wanted to make a good impression on those girls he needed to look his best!

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At the same moment Lan Jue had already arrived in the first classroom he'd use as a teacher.

The classroom they'd assigned him wasn't large. It looked capable of holding only maybe fifty students. There was no fancy teaching equipment. Just a blackboard, a podium, and the chairs which would hold his charges.

Chapter 42: The First Class

Wu Junyi looked at the time flashing on his communicator's display screen, and couldn't stop his features from scrunching in to a frown. He looked at the young man standing on the teaching dais, calmly arranging his teaching materials.

His first impression of this Lan Jue had been pretty good; intelligent, modest, and refined. He was precisely as a teacher should be.

But in his capacity as the Teaching Director, and keeper of the rankings, he couldn't simply make decisions based on appearances alone.

This gentleman had been hand-picked and appointed by the university's Dean himself, and given the title of associate professor. It was, in a word, unprecedented. Elective teachers had a rather high turn-over, and as a result weren't very reliable. Generally they were just given a lecturer post. This guy became associate professor in a day, which needless to say was quite the pay bump. Wun Junyi had argued vociferously, and the Dean had agreed to hire this Mr. Lan provisionally as a normal teacher.

He didn't appreciate this guy's willingness to circumvent the normal order, sneaking in through the proverbial back door. But more than that, he simply didn't agree with the course subject.

Etiquette?

If it hadn't been expressly permitted by the Dean, Wu Junyi definitely would've considered whoever made the decision to add the class had been hit on the head. It was utterly useless.

Ten minutes till two, and not a single student had arrived. If, in the end, no students chose to attend it would still be recorded in the annals of university history. And would be remembered as a big joke.

But in truth, his respect for this teacher has grown despite his reservations. Even now, with not a student in attendance he did not appear the least bit flustered. He revealed no sign of anxiousness. This sort of temperament was hard to come by.

“Mr. Lan.” A voice arose from the door of the classroom. Directly following a young woman in a long white skirt entered. Jin Yan.

She had intentionally changed her clothes in the interim, wanting to appear more youthful and attractive.

“Ah, Miss Jin. You’ve come,” Lan Jue greeted with a smile and a nod of his head.

“I’ll sit in the back,” she stated. “Oh! Director Wu, you’ve come as well.” She smiled as she noticed his presence.

Wu Junyi had always been a man of stony countenance. At fifty five, conservatively dressed, and with cold and piercing eyes he certainly fit the look for a teaching director.

“Mm,” he responded with a nod of his head.

Jin Yan peered toward Lan Jue, witnessed his composure, but in her heart she harbored a secret anxiousness for his situation. The director was present but not a single student was to be seen. This definitely did not look good.

She moved to the back, and chose a seat not too distant from Director Wu.

Just that moment, a silhouette filled the doorway. They rushed in, yelling as they did so: “Is this the Etiquette classroom?”

“It is,” Lan Jue responded. But once he saw who it was that had rushed in to the room, a frown came unbidden to his face.

In the same instant Jin Tao also recognized who he was talking to, and stood with a stupid look on his face. “You’re that cheap-ass with the bicycle! You’re a teacher? Ya sure looked like a cool dude at first, but you sure were some kinda miser. Imma ride that thing later, and don’t be surprised if I’m not mister manners about it.” As he spoke he shook his fist towards Lan Jue.

“Jin Tao!” The growling hiss had come from somewhere in the back of the classroom.

“Who asked y-“ it was then he saw the two people he least wished to meet in the whole school.

“O-older Sister...” He trembled visibly upon noticing Jin Yan. And then, half a second later, the formidable figure of the Teaching Director drew his eye. He was a problem student, and he sure knew who the director was.

Suddenly he found himself at a loss for words. Meek as a mouse, he took a seat in the front row and sat in silence.

Lan Jue drew his eyes towards the director. The man had said not a word from beginning to end but that suffocating presence was stifling. Secretly Lan Jue had begun to fill with doubt.

His first inclination towards Jin Tao certainly wasn't a friendly one, but he hadn't known he was Jin Yan's younger brother. But beyond that what could he say – he was his very first student.

Maybe it was Jin Tao's peach-colored Mohican that brought him luck, but after he'd arrived students suddenly begun to enter in twos and threes. In each of them was the tell-tale shimmer of curiosity in their eyes.

But to Lan Jue's consternation, no less than half of the newly arrived students had oddly colored heads. It made his classroom look like a dye-works. A host of young men looking for cute girls and trouble. A Pervert Legion.

Luckily the Director's presence alone served to frighten these potential troublemakers in to silence. A few had tried to flee once they noticed him sitting there, but at a glance from the intimidating man they sat in obedient silence.

Much to Lan Jue's pleasure the Director appeared to be acting in the capacity of a monkey trainer. It saved him a fair deal of trouble.

Lan Jue extricated a pocket watch from his vest and peered at the time. He made his way towards the door, preparing to begin his very first class.

As the door began to close, a slender hand suddenly pressed against it.

“Wait a moment!”

A young blond haired woman squeezed through. The crestfallen Pervert Legion inside, a moment before visibly dejected, suddenly came to life. Their eyes widened and if he didn't know any better, Lan Jue could have sworn he saw the glint of saliva in the corner of the young men's mouths.

Another figure slipped in behind the blond, this one with black hair. The thunderous sound of the Pervert Legion's jaws collectively striking the floor was deafening.

But it wasn't just them, even Director Wu Junyi's face betrayed a hint of color.

Two pairs of eyes met. Zhou Qianlin regarded Lan Jue as though they had never met, offering only a nod. She pulled Tang Mi with her towards the back row. The Director's presence kept the Pervert Legion at bay, restricting them to muttered hellos and coy smiles. The two young woman found some empty seats and settled in.

The collective hate of the young men towards Director Wu was almost palpable! If it weren't for his presence, they'd all be scrambling to surround the two campus belles. Of course now, no one dared move a muscle.

Lan Jue followed Zhou Qianlin as she made her way to a seat. His eye lid twitched imperceptibly. She was just going to pretend she had no idea who he was. And she was the one so insistent on him coming here to be her bodyguard...

He shut the door, and slowly made his way back to the podium. His eyes swept over the students, most of which were here for the promise of being near the two beautiful girls. He cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome. Henceforth, I will be leading our class in Etiquette.”

“I imagine you're all curious. What is this class all about? After all, who doesn't know the basics of proper living? What I aim to teach you is character. Meaning. I'm going to turn each and every one of you, in to

aristocrats.”

Chapter 43: This is Aristocracy!

“I’m going to teach you all how to be aristocrats.” As the words hung in the air, nearly every face held a disdainful smirk. A few openly sneered. Tang Mi was one of those, but Zhou Qianlin merely revealed a knowing smile.

“Qianlin, you really want to listen to this? Teaching us how to be noble, it’s laughable,” Tang Mi whispered in to Qianlin’s ear, her tone full of contempt. “The teacher’s definitely more handsome than I expected, but he’s probably just eye candy. All looks and no brains.”

“Stop spouting nonsense,” Qianlin muttered, her face red. Visions of that night not long ago swam through her head.

Lan Jue turned to the blackboard and began to write. And though Tang Mi’s voice was low, he heard every word.

“All looks and no brains.” His chalk snapped.

He took a deep breath, then finished writing.

The words he’d written were scrawled in a bold and fine script. Director Wu looked at them in appreciation. In this high-tech day and age few took the time or effort to work on their penmanship.

What is aristocracy? These three words stared back at the congregated students from the blackboard.

“So, who can tell me. What is aristocracy?” Lan Jue set the chalk aside and turned to regard the forest of students splayed out below him.

A girl with massive hoop earrings dangling from her ears chimed in. “Isn’t it just about about living in a mansion, driving a high-alt verti-car, being surrounded by bodyguards, having a beautiful girl on your arm? Is that not what you guys think?”

“Nonsense, bodyguards don’t mean anything. You need at least a unit of mechas. That’s style,” Jin Tao interjected. “And one girl’s hardly enough. If you wanna be a noble your whole mecha unit should be piloted by smokin’ hot babes. So that means board-cheated, flat butt girls like you

are out.”

“You lookin’ to die eh, Dumb-Mutt?!” The girl slammed her fist against the table top and rose to her feet. Clearly she’d forgotten the director seated quietly in the back.

Jin Tao extended his pinky finger and motioned her over.* “Bring it.”

“Silence!” Wu Junyi’s deep voice boomed through the classroom. The ruckus threatening to engulf the auditorium was instantly suppressed. Director Wu hadn’t planned to intervene, but a flash of surprise had fluttered across Lan Jue’s face, a look as though he were questioning the integrity of the school. Embarrassment had forced him speak out.

The blond haired girl with the giant hoop earrings pointed at Jin Tao, the sinister look in her eye almost capable of ending him right there.

“You’re both wrong. What you’re talking about isn’t nobility. That is the nouveau riche. The new money,” Lan Jue replied in even tones.

“Pfft.” A few students in the front couldn’t stop themselves from expressing their opinion.

Lan Jue acted like he hadn’t heard, and continued. “Today, the first day of our new class, I’ll simply explain exactly what I mean by aristocracy.”

“In the minds of most, attending a noble school would afford you noble treatment. You would live a noble lifestyle. As a result many richer families send their children to the Western Alliance for nobility finishing school in the hopes they will be aristocracy when they graduate. But when they discover that even in the best schools students sleep on plank beds, eat simple fare, endure strict training drills – they find that their lives are more difficult than the students of public schools. They don’t understand that this Buddhist-like asceticism is the key to the noble spirit.”

“In fact this shouldn’t be the least bit surprising. Aristocracy is different from the nouveau riche. It’s does not conflict with spirit of civilians, and especially different from a lifestyle of leisure and self-aggrandizement. Instead it is about cultivating a pioneering character based on courage, honor, self-discipline and responsibility. “

There was no change in the students as Lan Jue spoke, but seated in the back Wu Junyi's eyes were fixed upon him. He gave a slight, almost unconscious nod of approval.

“The most famous nobility finishing schools in the Western Alliance implement strict, arduous military drills for the purpose of instilling cooperation and self-discipline in their students. True nobles are possessed of an iron will, and a mighty strength of spirit. It's a sense of character that must be instilled from a young age. Public schools in their alliance also employ these methods to foster many first-class citizens such as General Wellings, who defeated Admiral Hu Na and his Tiger Brigade of the Northern Alliance. He was the top student of a Western public school. His name is renowned in the three alliances, famous in military history. There is a story about that decisive battle with the Admiral: At the time he was at the front, observing enemy positions while taking heavy mecha artillery fire. His staff repeatedly urged him to withdraw but he refused. Seeing that he would not be swayed, they asked him for his last words in case he were to fall in battle. Without turning his head to regard them he said, ‘Tell them my final words were like me, unbowed.’”

Lan Jue recounted the story in ordinary tones, but as he finished the tale of General Wellings the classroom had lapsed in to an attentive silence.

The disdain upon Tang Mi's face had melted away, and Zhou Qianlin listened in rapt silence. Wu Junyi remained as stoic as before, and Jin Yan's eyes glittered.

“Wealth is about things, but nobility is about the soul. A noble spirit means first and foremost that the individual has self-control. Restraint. They sacrifice themselves in service to the people. Take for instance Prince William and Prince Harry, royals of the ancient Western Alliance. Both were sent to military officer school for training, and after graduation Prince Harry went directly to the front lines to do battle with the North. As an ordinary pilot. The royal house of the ancient Western Alliance knew, of course, of Harry's royal blood. They also knew the risks of fighting on the front lines. But sacrifice, the assumption of risk for the people, is what makes a man truly noble. During the Eastern Alliance's first war with the

West a photo saw wide circulation. The commander in chief of the Eastern forces, Field Marshal Qi Mu, went to the trenches to survey the situation. He stood before the door of a ramshackle house, staring in at a woman as poor as a church mouse and asked her ‘Pardon me madam, would it be alright if I entered?’ He was showing respect to the most vulnerable of society. Because a true noble knows that respect is not reserved for the rich.”

“1910, October 28th of the Former Era. An old man gave up all of his possessions to the poor in order to save his suffering spirit. He left his vast manor, dying as a vagabond in some train station. That man was Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, celebrated writer of Former Era Russia. Years later another famous Former Era writer called Stefan Zweig said of Tolstoy: ‘This inglorious, menial death in no way diminished his greatness. If he did not bear the suffering of the people, then Lev Tolstoy would not be considered a human treasure, as he is today.’”

His words hung in the air, and in the silence he swept his eyes over the gathered students. Suddenly, his voice grew fierce, and rang through the auditorium. “This... this is aristocracy.”

*

*I asked around concerning this particular motion, trying to see if there was some sort of particular significance for pinky come-hithers in Chinese society. I’ve determined that Jin Tao is just weird.

Chapter 44: Telling Tales

“This is aristocracy!” The three simple words hung over the classroom.

Unconsciously Jin Tao had sat a little straighter and a twinkle invaded his eyes, stirred by the exciting speech. It was a sentiment shared by almost all in attendance.

Wu Junyi’s hard expression had softened perceptibly, and beside him Jin Yan’s breath had quickened to match her flushed face.

Tang Mi’s jade green eyes shone. Beside her sat Zhou Qianlin, and though her expression was unchanged, her heart was beating with excitement.

“Before the eighteenth century of the Former Era, nobles were still an integral part of society. They were important. Even today the older families protect and pass on their titles of nobility, and grant them to subsequent generations. When the nobility became the common citizenry, the bourgeoisie didn’t rise up, didn’t rail against their culture. On the contrary they sent their sons and daughters to finishing schools in the hopes of becoming aristocrats themselves. They bought titles, figures and insignia’s, anything they could to inherit the mantle of ‘noble’. The reason why the noble institution has continued until today is because it has earned the approval of the people. Because the people believe that the noble spirit represents a certain honor... A certain dignity.”

“In the old days battles were all more or less the same; on the field they were enemies. Back home they were neighbors. Looking back on them now people see these fights like schoolyard scuffles.”

“Long ago in the former era a king died. Both his grandson, Henry, and his sister’s son Stephen thought they were entitled to the throne of England. Stephen had already been in the country when the king passed, so he was first to arrive. He rushed forth to claim the throne as his own. Henry, meanwhile, was on the mainland and upon hearing the news grew resentful. So he raised an army of mercenaries to confront Stephen. But Henry was young, inexperienced, and he deployed his troops without the

proper planning or strategy. His mercenary army arrived from afar to land on his native shores, and disembarked to find that he had spent all of his money. Their food, too, was gone. What was he to do? It was then he came up with something a normal citizen couldn't; he wrote to his adversary Stephen begging for aid. I have embarked on an expedition, he claimed, but have failed to bring the proper provisions. I ask you to send financial assistance so that I might disperse the mercenaries and send them home. Surprisingly, Stephen acquiesced and sent his second-cousin some funds. And in response Henry later began a second bid for the throne."

As he related the story Lan Jue had returned to his normal, soft-spoken persona. A small smile was on his face, and as he continued he had the attention of every ear in the hall.

"Someone offers you financial assistance, and you return the favor by trying to murder them. Most would call this ungrateful at the very least, but nobles believe that affording your enemies a measure of leniency is a matter of course. If competition is required, then there will be competition. And so a few years later Henry lead his armies against Stephen in a second go. At this point he had grown older, wise, and this resulted in Stephen's defeat. He had won his victory, but the result was quite interesting. The two signed a treaty wherein they agreed Stephen would remain upon the throne, but Henry would become his successor. Not long after Stephen succumbed to age and Henry became king. To the average man earning only a successor's title after winning such a difficult victory hardly seems worth it. But this is precisely the spirit of nobility. Henry use the code of aristocracy to repay Stephen for his earlier leniency."

Lan Jue paused as though lost in thought. Gradually the look in his eyes grew more serious. "In regards to the noble spirit there is yet another story that makes me shiver, an unforgettable tale. It was back when I was still a student, a story my own professor told me. Today I'll tell it to you."

"In the former era mankind had produced a massive cruise ship. They christened it the Titanic."

"The name Titanic had been borrowed from Greek mythology, referring

to the giants called Titans. The Titans wished to wage war against the god Zeus on behalf of the mysterious forces of nature. They were ultimately defeated, and banished to the depths of the Atlantic ocean, buried deeper than the eighteenth level of hell itself. Thus it was people said the name 'Titanic' was poorly chosen, ominous, and would invite catastrophe."

"And as predicted, the ship sank to the bottom of the sea in an accident."

At the mention of Zeus, Zhou Qianlin inadvertently raised her head. Her eyes found Lan Jue's looking directly back at her.

Lan Jue continued. "But the difference between this great ship and the titans of lore was that the only thing that sunk was it's steel.. it's bolts... it's people. It's spirit was never conquered. That is to say that the titanic sunk, taking with it the lives of one thousand five hundred passengers. But the invincible spirit of human civilization remained. Unsinkable."

Lan Jue's voice grew louder as he pressed on.

"As the boat sank eight musicians calmly stood upon the deck, playing their instruments. Those notes embodied the dignity and honor of the human spirit, refusing to bow it's head to the ruthless acts of nature. Just as the famous writer Hemmingway wrote in his book *The Old Man and the Sea*: A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated. The sharks following the old man could gnaw on the fish lashed to his boat until there was nothing but bone, but they couldn't gnaw the sailor's undaunted spirit. This was the burning fire of the inner spirit, the will of man, that not even the entire ocean could extinguish."

"Even many years later people still laud the actions of those musicians and sailors. How could they have so much courage when they faced drowning in the brine? How is it they could adhere to their duties when death lay in those tumultuous waters? How is it they could retain the noble sentiment to wait until all the women and children had filled the lifeboats before thinking of themselves? Statistics state that seventy-six percent of the sailors died in the accident, a ratio that outstripped the first, second and third class passenger deaths combined. The sailors even had evacuation preference over the passengers – but they gave their

opportunity to others. They took on that hopelessness for themselves. Nor was it one, or two sailors who did this. All nine hundred staff, including sailors, waiters, firemen and even the cook all chose to stay behind; so many people, willing to do what they did. As we think on it today, this sort of towering spirit of humanity is not unlike what they said about the sinking of that great ship. It is almost unbelievable.”

Chapter 45: Genuine Nobility

Lan Jue's voice grew more passionate, his voice commanding the classroom. Every eye was on him, silent and attentive.

“Later investigations found that sailors had jumped in to lifeboats two and six. However, when their commanding officer called them back they wordlessly returned to the deck to perform their duty.”

“A famous writer later explained it thusly; It was due to an ideal instilled in them at birth, the ideal that duty was to be considered above all else. In the hours before the sinking of the Titanic, this illusive ideal was proved by their strength of moral character.’”

“Indeed it was this spirit of responsibility that made George Henry Cavill turn around and return to the Number Four Boiler Room. He had made his way up, but returned to see if any of his fellow boiler men were still trapped; It was this spirit of responsibility that kept signalman George Thomas Rowe atop the deck sending messages in Morse code, even when all was beyond hope; It was this spirit of responsibility that made lifeboat paddler Samuel Earnest Hemming remain behind so that others could take his place, and waited until the last possible moment before releasing the boat in to the water; It was this spirit of responsibility wireless operators Jack Phillips and Harold Bride employed to remain working diligently in the radio room until the very last minute when Captain Smith came to relieve them of duty, imploring them to abandon ship – but still they remained, tapping away at that radio to send death tolls, dispatches and final wishes; It was this spirit of responsibility that filled Chief Engineer Joseph Bell and all under his charge when they toiled in the engine room, knowing they had given up any chance for escape; It was this spirit of responsibility channeled by band leader Wallace Henry Hartley and others of his band when they played their ragtime tunes, ending in their solemn rendition of Nearer My God to Thee until the rising waters drowned their music and their lives...”

“Calling this simply ‘bravery’ does not do it justice. There is a Western proverb that states: ‘Even heroes will be cowards in a hopeless situation.’

But the Titanic shows us that the myriad of common people can be heroes! This spirit of responsibility lifts humanity, makes us brave, makes us dignified, makes us beautiful.”

“That is nobility! In my eyes, each one of them is noble.”

“The survivors of the Titanic gathered to discuss who lives and who passed, and discovered that the number of female survivors far outnumbered males. They attributed it to the success of the rule “women and children first.” However, the company who had launched the Titanic stated that there were no maritime laws requiring men to sacrifice themselves. It was merely the strong taking care of the weak, and had no bearing on whether it was at sea or on dry land. This was a choice made of their own volition, not the requirements of some institutionalized law. It was an adherence to those ancient and eternal human values.”

“At that time multi-millionaire John Jacob Astor asked the officer in charge of the lifeboat if he could join his pregnant wife onboard the skiff. The crewman stopped him, telling him to allow women and children first. He did the gentlemanly thing and sat quietly on the deck, until the ship sunk, and its smokestack smashed in to the Atlantic ocean. Astor was the only multi-millionaire on the Titanic, and was in fact one of the richest men in the world at the time. He had enough money to build eleven Titanics.”

“The Titanic’s captain, Smith, had a good relationship with nearly all the rich and powerful aboard his vessel. Not a few were his good friends, including Astor. But even though Astor knew Smith well, he didn’t go to him for any unfair advantage, to pull strings and get him on a boat. He had as good a reason as you can ask for, as his wife was five months pregnant. And yet he didn’t, or perhaps the thought didn’t even cross his mind. It was not an era of favors and backrooms dealings, but instead a time of striving for gentlemanly conduct, of being a true man. He was genuine nobility!”

“Another man with riches only surpassed by Astor himself was traveling aboard the Titanic that day, named Isidor Straus. He was traveling with his wife, and the two had brought over a dozen servants and attendants

with them in the event the boat's help wasn't sufficient. You can get a sense of their wealth and lifestyle. After the ship had collided with that ice burg Madam Straus had managed to board the number eight lifeboat, but the moment before her foot left the deck she had changed her mind. She returned to her husband, and said, 'We have been living together for many years. Where you go, I go.' She gave her spot to a young woman, and threw her fur coat to the maidservants. 'I won't be needing it,' she said."

"Someone spoke up, saying 'I promise there is no one who would appose you climbing in to this boat'. Straus' response; 'Far be it for me to take another man's place.' Taking his wife Ida's arm, the two staggered away to sit upon a pair of deckchairs, an affectionate couple spending their final moments together in silence."

"Pipeline magnate Benjamin Guggenheim also knew his time was nigh. His response was to don his finest dining jacket. He said 'I wish to die with dignity, like a gentleman.' He handed his female companion a slip of paper upon which he'd written; Not a woman remains on this ship because I have helped them in to the lifeboats myself. I will not die like an animal, but I will instead die like a man. I am nobility!'"*

The stories ended, and Lan Jue's eyes had grown moist in their telling, but were full of an enthusiasm that had infected everyone in the room.

"I cannot know if you will be called noble in the future, but I stand here today as an instructor of the National Eastern University, and in this first class it is my duty to teach you – what is the noble spirit."

"It doesn't not mean riches, for not all wealthy are noble. Nor is it possible to purchase with riches! If one day you all can stand tall, raise your head and call yourself nobility, then I would be filled with pride!"

*

*According to my research all of these stories appear to be true. The author credits parts of this story to Danny Allen Butler's *Unsinkable: The Full Story of the RMS Titanic*.

Chapter 46: DreamNet

Lan Jue rolled down the street on his antique bicycle, leisurely meandering down the lanes with a small smile curling the corners of his mouth.

His right hand still felt the grip of the teaching director, who'd vigorously shaken his hand following the class. 'Thank you,' he'd said before leaving.

As for the students, they left the classroom with slack or terrified expressions. Lan Jue, meanwhile, felt a contentment in mind and body as the class concluded. Perhaps it was the transmission of positive energy that had him so upbeat.

He still remembered clearly his own days as a student, that stodgy professor who'd taught a class very similar to his own. Even now it was like that enlightening voice was speaking right by his ear. He'd experienced so much in these last few years, but his origins were still fresh in his memory.

Leaving the university, Lan Jue meandered towards Skyfire Avenue. Suddenly he stopped, and slapped his forehead as though he'd forgotten something. "Wrong! This is an Etiquette class, not a philosophy course! I have to teach them how to live a quality life. I went way off topic..."

Beep. Beep. Beep. The familiar ring of his communicator interrupted his thoughts.

"What," Lan Jue spat in to the communicator, distracted.

On the other end Zhou Qianlin looked at the number scrawling across the communicator on her wrist. She heard that familiar listless voice, and for a moment confusion crept in to her face.

Was this really that impassioned teacher from before? The one who had made those rowdy students sit in silence for more than ten minutes, who even after class filed out wordlessly?

"You taught well," she said. Although her tone was somewhat frigid Lan

Jue couldn't help but feel a smile of pride turn his lips.

"Only, weren't you supposed to be here to protect me?"

"Right!" It sounded like the thought had just come to him.

Zhou Qianlin's voice snarled through the communicator. "Then where are you?"

"..."

Lan Jue applied the brakes, slowly coming to a halt. "Heh.. ehm... I forgot. I'm heading back now."

I'm a bodyguard! Lan Jue quietly chastised himself.

"Where can I find you," he asked evenly, suppressing his agitation.

"I'm in the mecha combat department. Come find me here."

"Didn't you say being seen with me would hurt your image," Lan Jue asked. "Not scared of that anymore?"

"You can't stand a little ways off? Just don't talk to me. You're a teacher, you can go anywhere on campus and no one will pay attention. We're in the simulation area, classroom three." Zhou Qianlin hung up.

Lan Jue slapped his forehead once more. This HATEFUL woman! He fought off the sudden gloom that had surrounded him and turned the bike back towards school.

The mecha combat department wasn't the most important sector of the school, but it took up the most room. Proper mecha instruction needed a host of high-tech equipment and sufficient space to use them. The area was split in to various areas for theory, simulation, operation and more.

The Simulation Wing Zhou Qianlin had mentioned was the mecha combat department's most oft used training module.

Learning to operate a mecha was a rather lengthy process. Before even beginning a certain level of Talent was required, otherwise the body couldn't endure the effort or control the machine. Lately each of the three Alliances had ways of promoting the capabilities of normal people to

perform the job, but only the highest ranked Talents could hope to be top-level mecha pilots.

Mechas were expensive to manufacture, and required delicate advanced technologies to produce. If students were permitted to train with real mechas, it was not only dangerous but financially wasteful. As a result the Simulation Department was created for the need. In fact, the simulations were just as good as the real thing. They emulated mecha combat reactions and situations very well, and so were just as effective as reality. The results were fewer accidents and less upkeep.

Only, wasn't Zhou Qianlin a postgraduate mecha pilot? Why was she studying mecha operation?

But when he arrived at the simulation department's third classroom, he had nothing to say. Because Zhou Qianlin wasn't anywhere to be seen.

The classroom was massive, and looked like a giant metal warehouse. It's interior was filled with over a hundred spherical simulators, each three meters in diameter. It was easy enough for Lan Jue to find it, thankfully, though that was due to the instructor microchip they'd installed in to his communicator.

Several of the large spheres shuddered and shook within the warehouse, occupied by students in the midst of training.

Unfortunately all of the spheres were sealed! Zhou Qianlin had said she was here, but how to find her?

Lan Jue had no option but to ring her communicator again. 'I'm here. Which pod are you in?'

"Wait for me at the door," was her terse response.

I guess I really am her bodyguard! His eyes, bearing no small measure of anger, swept the warehouse. He spotted a pod, it's side open.

He clambered into the pod with practiced motions and took a seat. He couldn't suffer standing around in vain, and there was an open pod available. Leaving the lid ajar, he shut his eyes and leaned back in the makeshift cockpit.

ζ

Simulation Department Number Three Classroom, Corner, Pod 12

Zhou Qianlin sat quietly in the cockpit, but had not begun her scheduled training regimen. The conversation with Lan Jue concluded, she found her warm moist lips pressed tightly, and a tear filling her eye.

“Lan Jue... A-Jue... Zeus...”

ζ

“Zzzzzzg—“ the trembling of the pod caused Lan Jue to awaken with a start. To his surprise the door to the cockpit quickly began to close.

He knew he had the capability to leave the cockpit effortlessly and with time to spare, but just at that moment he saw two students approaching from outside. To leave quickly would mean revealing his Discipline.

And as he hesitated, the door to the simulator sealed shut.

“Ding. Scanning microchip.”

“Greetings, Instructor Lan Jue. Welcome to the National Eastern University Simulation Department. Will you be using an existing DreamNet account, or would you like to register a new account?”

Lan Jue was temporarily stunned. It had been a long time since he’d used a simulator. DreamNet was an interstellar company developed jointly by the three Alliances, made specifically as a large-scale network platform for simulated mecha training. It was used both for study and recreation.

Well, it’s better than doing nothing, he thought. Might as well mess around a little bit.

“New account.”

Five minutes later, a new face was wandering DreamNet. Meandering through the Eastern Alliance, along the avenues of the NEU, Nooblet appeared...

Chapter 47: Prometheus

Eastern Alliance, Planet An Lun

Rolling hills and stretching mountains surround a valley. Within the valley buzzes a world of metal; metal buildings, metal machinery, metal verti-cars. And massive metal mecha suits.

The valley's sky is torn by countless soaring peaks, the tallest among them lying to the west where its head was hidden by clouds.

Two people stood upon the summit of that great mountain.

Clouds and mist roiled like a floating sea, causing their figures to appear indistinct like spirits.

Chu Cheng stood with his hands in his pockets. The flickering light of a cigarette flickered through the mists, a fiery red like his hair.

"So I guess you didn't just call me here to shoot the breeze with you, boss." Chu Cheng's lazy drawl hung heavy in the surrounding clouds. He was always like this, no matter the situation, like he'd just woken up.

A man stood a few paces from him, dressed in black military fatigues. He was tall, stocky, with wide shoulders and a straight back. However it did not approach the level of excessive – he wasn't overly robust, but instead was like a javelin.

A golden star had been affixed to the epaulet of his uniform.

A general! This raven-haired man, certainly no older than thirty, was in fact a general.

As the era of science and technology progressed, it took a special level of talent and military ability to rise above the rabble.

By the estimation of most military organizations, a man at thirty was only beginning to work his way up the totem pole and nothing more. The average general in the Eastern Alliance was fifty-one. With the average life expectancy at one hundred and twenty, a thirty year-old general was unheard of.

“How is he,” the man asked, turning to face Chu Cheng.

His eyes were a viridescent green, and when paired with his black hair gave him a wicked appearance. However at present, their firm expression pushed the sinister light away. His face was stoic, weathered, as though it were chiseled by a knife. An almost imperceptible, oppressive power exuded from him like some indestructible blade.

“Not so good.” Chu Cheng lazily rubbed his nose, struggling for a response in the face of the man’s piercing presence.

The raven-haired man’s eyes softened somewhat. “Three years, and he still hasn’t come out?”

Chu Cheng’s voice was thin as he responded. “You know his temperament. If it were so easy to get him out why would we be worrying about him. Boss, if you have the time the best thing is to go see him yourself. You guys have your misunderstandings, but you’ve always been the most convincing. Not to mention you’re his older brother by blood.”*

The man’s eyes once more grew cold and hard. “He isn’t wrong to blame me. It was my miscalculation that lead to Hera’s fall.”

Chu Cheng’s brows creased. “Boss, we all know what happened. You don’t need to pile all the blame on your shoulders. Look, in three years he hasn’t returned home but you? Three years in this camp, drilling your soldiers like a machine.”

“I called you here,” the general growled, “not so you can tell me how to live my life. His decadence, your lack of progress – you both have your own messes to clean up.”

Chu Cheng gulped, and subconsciously retreated a step. “You’re mad at A-Jue boss, don’t take it out on me!”

“This isn’t me angry,” the man responded faintly. “My own abilities need honing, and luckily here you are. Show me how you’ve progressed these last few years.”

As he spoke his long legs took him forward, and in that instant his green eyes shone with a dazzling light. The clouds around him dispersed,

replaced with a towering column of blueish-green.

“Boss, you’re serious?” Chu Cheng quailed, his standard indolent expression melting away. A blazing flame burst from his back. It began as a pure red, but in the face of that opulent teal pillar before him it became orange, then crimson, ultimately settling on an undulating maroon. The heart of the fires burned black.

The raven-haired man said nothing further. He lifted his hand, and the column of light melted in to his arm, blooming like a lotus flower to create a blazing spear of light that engulfed Chu Cheng.

In the valley, the bustling personnel paused to look when the peak of the western mountain was consumed in light.

In the space of a moment the entire horizon was tinted teal, and within it flickered a persistent maroon. The two coronas of colored energies clashed, and their fluctuating exchanges caused the clouds over the valley to flee.

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Half an hour later...

“Boss, you’re downright inhuman!” Chu Cheng pressed a hand to his red, swollen face and sat on the ground with a sigh. His clothes were nearly in tatters.

Parts of the raven-haired man’s clothes were burned and blackened, though he remained as straight and dignified as before they’d fought.

“There was no will to fight. I derived no pleasure from beating you,” the man responded flatly.

Chu Cheng’s face grew dark. “You beat me then start talking down to me? How can anyone say you brothers are decent people? You’re bloodthirsty, and A-Jue’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing, wicked smart to boot. I’m outta here! And I’m damn sure not coming back. If you feel bad, go take it out on your little brother.”

“I’ll go find him,” the man responded.

Chu Chung stood to leave, but stopped in surprise at the revelation.
“You’re really going to find him...”

The raven-haired man only nodded his head.

“But I heard you’re on the cusp of a promotion,” Chu Cheng said. “Can you even leave right now?”

“What’s in a title.” The man’s cold eyes fixed on Chu Cheng.

Chu Cheng stuck out his thumb. “Good. You deserved to be called Prometheus.”

Faintly the man responded. “Out here, call me Lan Qing. I’m only Prometheus in the field.”

Prometheus, the god of wisdom!

“I’m off. I’m looking forward to hear about when you beat on A-Jue. If ya like let me know when, and I’ll go check out the festivities.”

Lan Qing waved, and turned back towards the valley.

With the clouds gone the valley looked crisp and clear. The world of metal reflected sunlight off of every surface, their sharp rays absorbing his figure.

Chu Cheng stood quietly as them an left, and with a smile on his face flicked a middle finger at his back. He began to hobble his way down the mountain, but stopped after a few steps. A beam of red light shot down from the heavens, with a monstrous black figure standing in it’s center. A sanguine light glowed from it.

Among his four brothers, Chu Cheng also had a nickname...

Hades, Lord of the Underworld.

*

*This seems a little clunky, but the distinction has to be made because the use of terms like ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ in China aren’t exclusively reserved for immediate family. These terms can also refer to cousins, good friends, etc.

Chapter 48: Whiteboard Nooblet

White waist coat, and big shorts. That's what Lan Jue had chosen to wear. At least, so it was in DreamNet where he'd earned another moniker: Whiteboard*.

Lan Jue was eight the first time he'd logged on to DreamNet, and he hadn't been this much of a newb since then. Pair that with calling himself Nooblet, he couldn't have appeared more virginal.

Looking down to view his ridiculous clothes Lan Jue couldn't help but laugh. "Definitely the fabled 'fresh meat.'"

The better schools were given the opportunity to apply for their own 'space' in DreamNet. That is where Lan Jue currently stood, the student's center of National Eastern University's DreamNet zone. There weren't any public shops or ornaments here, only training areas for mecha instruction.

What's would a new guy do, he thought. Lan Jue patted his forehead, as he certainly had no idea. After all it had been many years since he'd been new.

"Hey kid, stop!"

As Lan Jue was recalling his comical first few steps with the original Whiteboard the voice stopped him in his tracks.

Three large figures loomed before him, each clad in flight suits.

Ah, right, I should probably go buy a flight suit first. They should be free as this is a school. Then find myself a basic mecha. Yeah, that's what I should do.

He was brought back to the present by the three figures standing before him.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. You deaf?" One of the guys, a kid in his early twenties, kicked at Lan Jue and caused him to stagger.

"Ach," Lan Jue grunted in pain, and it had indeed hurt somewhat. The DreamNet here had been fixed with pain simulation to make combat

more authentic. In the civilian market pain meters could be adjusted between one and thirty percent, but in the school the meter was constantly fixed at fifty percent.

“Newbie, eh. Take out your new bonus,” the young man said threateningly. He approached and grabbed Lan Jue by his thin collar.

Ahh that’s right. Newbies get a bonus – should be fifty DreamBits for buying the essentials. DreamBits were actually a virtual currency, but actuality they could be exchanged for real currency at a whim. In fact it was accepted as a fourth universal currency in all the three Alliances.

“No,” Lan Jue responded in true miserly fashion.

The young man pushed him, causing him to tumble to the floor. “Listen kid, clearly you don’t understand the situation. So I guess I’ll have to beat some knowledge in to you. The pain meters here are set. And in DreamNet, no one knows who we are – a strict secret hidden in the DreamNet mainframe.”

Lan Jue pulled himself to his feet. He certainly didn’t intend to come here and beat on people, but nor was he inclined towards masochism. Unfortunately DreamNet didn’t have any Adepts or Disciplines. He was just a normal healthy Joe, possessing only the very base level one Talent needed to pilot the lowest level mechas. If he didn’t adapt to the circumstances, getting beat on what to be expected.

The other two guys moved to flank him, Lan Jue now surrounded. Obviously this wasn’t the first time they’d done this.

Lan Jue sighed, and fixed each of the three youths in turn with his eyes, pity heavy in their depths. He began to move his virtual avatar.

Suddenly, a pretty voice rang out from behind him. “You three again!”

Following the call a figure like lightning skittered closer.

Bang! Pow! Crack! Thwap! In what seemed like less than a second the three guys went flying in all directions like scattered leaves. They came tumbling down, screaming, a dozen or so meters away.

A heroic figure appeared then standing before Lan Jue.

Lan Jue stood stupefied as he looked at her. At her long blonde hair, sky-blue eyes, and exceptionally long legs. Wasn't this Zhou Qianlin's friend? The one who'd accompanied her to class?

Tang Mi hadn't changed a thing about her avatar in DreamNet.

The three boys stumbled to their feet, and without looking back raced away. Obviously, it also wasn't the first time they'd met Tang Mi.

Tang Mi seethed. "If I knew which class those degenerates belonged to, I'd beat them until they couldn't wipe their own backsides. Hey, whiteboard, you alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Lan Jue said sincerely.

Tang Mi pointed to a tall building before them. "Newbs head over there to sign up and get a mecha. Grab one then head to the combat area for training. If you run in to those punks again just call out. The Campus security will be there right away. And you don't need to worry about those guys, they scare all the new blood but they aren't dangerous.

"Ah." Lan Jue responded.

Tang Mi turned and left, her valiant figure pacing off in to the virtual sunset.

Quite the sense of justice in this girl, Lan Jue silently praised.

A sign hung over the high-rise building, 'The Classroom Building'. Five minutes later, Lan Jue exited, newly registered and with a brand new flight suit. He did regret, however, the 'Nooblet' scrawled across the back of it.

Next was choosing a mecha. Mecha development ensured the machines were humanoid in appearance, but there were different sorts of mechas for various specific purposes.

And so as a blank slate Lan Jue had his choice of two suits; long range, or close combat. He picked the close combat mecha without any hesitation.

"Would you like to select this model, and enter the training area?"

“Yes.”

A light filled his eyes and in an instant Nooblet was settled in the cockpit of his new mecha.

Saber-Mech, that was the name of the suit Lan Jue had chosen. Ten meters tall, weighing in at thirty tons, the light mecha was equipped with a shield and sword of titanium alloy.

His ten fingers flew across the cockpits control panels, and in respond Saber-Mech rose to it's feet. Steadily it began to lumber forward.

Modern mechas were controlled by a combination of physical manipulation and brain wave reading. Pilots with particularly high Talent were able to even fuse with their mechas, in a matter of speaking, amplifying their power. But that required top-level suits.

Operation by brain waves alone was unstable, and influenced by one's body. Operation by hand, meanwhile, didn't allow for quick enough reaction. Together, though, they allowed for complete, perfect control.

The training area had been separated in to three regions; for elementary, intermediate, and advanced pilots. Ten victories in the elementary region advanced you to intermediate. One hundred victories earned you a spot in the advanced area. Once a thousand victories were earned, even higher levels were made available. However it was usually only National Scholars who reached that level of success. In fact earning a thousand victories in DreamNet sim combat was a requirement for graduation as a National Scholar. Bachelors required only a hundred.

As a result every mecha combat student was required to enter here. Their courses required a basic mastery of control, and that meant a minimum of ten victories was needed to earn course credit.

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*'Whiteboard' here is like the equivalent of 'fresh slate', totally untested.

Chapter 49: Abuse

Like the real world DreamNet permitted you to use communicators. In that it was to find Zhou Qianlin that Lan Jue had entered the combat area, not for mecha training. But Qianlin had to be somewhere around here practicing, and although entering DreamNet had been an accident, finding her here was no different than doing so outside.

“Where are you? I’m in the DreamNet NEU sector,” Lan Jue said.

“You came in?” Somewhat surprised, Qianlin continued. “I’m in the intermediate area. Defense maneuvers today. Wait until I’m done training then sending me home, that’ll be all. Just remember, don’t let other people find out you know me. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

DreamNet’s Nooblet rubbed his nose. Am I that disgraceful? Still with this demand that we pretend not to know one another.

Intermediate area?

Heh.

Nooblet shook his head and entered the elementary area. Ten victories to enter the intermediate level. It would take no time at all.

DreamNet’s iteration the NEU had been simplified, so that as he entered the area he was instantly transported to a wide open space.

The sector was round, like a giant sports arena three hundred meters in diameter and rising fifty meters. It was the standard construction for a combat arena, and was the most commonly used.

There was a flash, and suddenly a black mecha had appeared before him – another Saber-Mech. But in contrast to Nooblets, this one had pieces of silver plate armor affixed to its head and legs.

In DreamNet students were able to upgrade their mechs with payments of DreamBits or winning point from victories. In theory this meant that the lowest levels mechs could be upgraded to top-ranked fighting machines, but that would require exorbitant amounts of time. In reality most of the better pilots simply exchanged their old mechs for higher-end

models and upgraded those. It ended up saving them a lot of time and effort.

Clearly the Saber-Mech in the opposing corner had seen some improvements. Judging by what could be seen, it looked like it had had its speed and defense upgraded.

“Nooblet? Haha, lucky me! It looks like I’m finally getting my tenth win.” The voice that echoed from the mecha was supremely arrogant. Without warning the thrusters burned at the mecha’s back and it advanced hurriedly.

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Jin Tao was really excited. He’d been moved by the stories he’d heard in Lan Jue’s Etiquette course, to the point that his customary laziness had melted away. He’d went immediately to the training area to work on his skills. Though a student of mechanized combat, he still hadn’t managed to pass the elementary stage. He’d only just managed to master the very basics.

Maybe it was the inspiration he’d gained from Lan Jue’s class, but today he felt as though his control of his mecha was better than ever. He’d just won a contest, bringing his total wins up to nine. He only needed one more, then he’d finally be considered Intermediate.

Like this, he wouldn’t have to worry about the finals this semester. If he got to intermediate, staying enrolled another year was a given.

The one before him very obviously had just enrolled in DreamNet. His Saber-Mech hadn’t been refitted at all. He’d never been so lucky! He remembered his own time as a newbie, and clearly recalled the blows his self-confidence took when he was beaten down by upperclassmen. He never even hit them.

Ahh newbie abuse, that’s definitely something he could enjoy.

In a flash Jin Tao’s Saber-Mech was standing before Nooblet’s, and his titanium alloy sword was cutting a murderous arc towards his enemy’s throat.

Nooblet, apparently frozen with fear, did not move. The glimmering blade came streaking right for his face.

Jin Tao was filled with self-satisfaction, and yet a sense of pity snuck up within him. If this newbie had worked even a little bit, it'd show off his own skill all the more!

In this moment of consideration, Nooblet suddenly moved. It was so simple... he squatted!

Jin Tao's sword skimmed right over Nooblet's head. And that right arm bearing his sword kept right on going, flying off in to the air. Everything went dark, and an emotionless digitized voice spoke in his ear.

"Defeat. Mecha damage has exceeded forty percent. Please repair your suit, and continue."

Defeat?! How is that possible? Jin Tao couldn't understand how that could happen, and quickly hit the fight replay button.

The fight had been brief, and it took Jin Tao only a moment to see what had happened. He sat in the simulated cockpit, incredulity veritably bursting from his eyes.

In the midst of his coup de grâce Nooblet had crouched, as he'd seen – but what he missed was the unfitted mecha's right foot pinning his own before Nooblet's sword masterfully severed his arm from it's joint.

His pinned foot prevented the suit from recoil and added to the power of the strike, which ultimately lead to his arm flying off in to the distance. Nooblet had then taken advantage of the strike to sweep behind him, weapon poised. The whiteboard's strike obliterated the power unit on the back of his head, and the fight ended.

The whole thing took less than three seconds. Nooblet's movement were not fast, nor fancy. They were just very, very accurate.

Jin Tao cursed under his head, and left to repair his mangled mecha.

Each mecha combat student was required to learn suit maintenance, in order to improve their own combat efficiency. Students were expected to

repair their own units after a fight, and though you could certainly pay to have them restored the price was outstanding.

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Just as Jin Tao was being made aware of his defeat, Lan Jue also heard a digital voice addressing him. “Victory. No damage to your suit was sustained. Perfect victory. Total wins: one. DreamBits earned: five.”

Elementary victories earned pilots anywhere from one to five Dreambits on average. Clearly Lan Jue’s display earned him full marks.

Heh. Lan Jue’s grin bordered on obscene. With a push of a button he continued to his next fight. Lights flashed and he was back in the same area, though this time a Gunner-Mecha stood as his opposition.

Gunner, eight meters tall, nine tons, equipped with the standard laser rifle.

Gunners had the advantage in flexibility and speed, while also have considerable reach. Saber-Mechs, on the other hand, were more capable defenders and had a higher base attack power. Each had it’s advantages.

The Gunner-Mecha seemed to know what it was doing, and quickly drew it’s laser gun to aim towards Lan Jue. Nooblet, in return, did something unexpected.

Moving quickly to the side his left arm shot out, the shield that had been held there tore through the air like a Frisbee. The vicious arc raced towards the mecha, the impact sure to sever both it’s legs.

Chapter 50: Nooblet vs. The Ace

The Gunner jumped, startled, and hurriedly moved to dodge the shield attack.

His control was significantly better than Jin Tao's, which allowed the shield to skim harmlessly past his legs. Still, the screen went black.

"Defeat. Mecha damage has exceeded thirty percent. Please repair your suit, and continue."

How'd that happen?! The Lancer's pilot reacted in much the same way Jin Tao had, and pounded the replay button.

Nooblet hadn't just thrown the shield, but in the next moment had thrown his sword as well. The attack had caused the Gunner to reel away, and he'd essentially impaled himself as the undefended cockpit was pierced by the titanium alloy blade.

"Which one of us is long distance anyway?!" The Gunner-Mecha's operator roared.

Hehehe! Lan Jue cackled wickedly and hit the button for his third fight. Rocking newbies really did make you feel good! And no one even knows who I am!

Another flash. Another fight. Another Saber-Mecha.

Much like Jin Tao the Saber-Mecha raced forward to attack Lan Jue's Nooblet. As he did, Lan Jue saw clearly the name floating above it's head: The Ace.

What ironic parallelism!

The Ace flew forward, titanium alloy sword in it's right hand, and again like Jin Tao attempting to strike at the neck.

Nooblet waited until the last moment, lifted his right foot, and tried to surreptitiously pin his opponent.

But it was Lan Jue's turn to be surprised, for either by coincidence or from true skill his enemy lifted his leg the instant before his foot found it's

mark. The action caused Nooblet to ram his abdomen right against the rising knee, while the sweeping sword overhead buried itself in his shoulder with a staggering blow.

The two were locked together, a hair's breadth apart, affording no room to maneuver.

Nooblet turned his wrist to point the tip of his blade upward and thrust at the Ace's exposed arm. In the same moment he slammed his shield against his adversary's side.

Ding ! peng!

The two sounds rang out almost concurrently. The Ace drew it's arm back and the crossguards of the two swords clashed. The second muffled sound was Nooblet's shield striking against the enemy's knee.

The strike came at an angle and caused the Ace's suit to tilt. When you and your rival's equipment were the same, victory came down to control.

The Ace made no effort to stabilize itself, instead spinning around and out of reach. It's steps were irregular and erratic , causing the body to twist.

But instead of toppling, it was clear the body was compensating intentionally with the steps.

Disordered Stepping? Lan Jue looked on in surprise. It was a pretty standard close combat move for intermediates, used to avoid both close combat attacks and ranged artillery.

This was a technique an unfitted cadet could pull off?

This guy was full of surprises, and it certainly piqued Lan Jue's interest. He changed up his own footwork, matching the disordered stepping of his opponent and swerving in to his path.

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Tang Mi's pretty face was a hard mask.

What the hell was this? It wasn't easy finding a way to re-register a new account, specific to prevent this sort of newb abuse. And who could have

known a landmine would find a landmine? This Saber-Mech's shield strike had expertly offset her rhythm. How long had it been since she's seen something like this?

And this guy still dares rush me, you really think I'm that much of a push-over?

Suddenly a vicious thought came to Tang Mi! The titanium sword in her hand lashed out, the blade twinkling, and like mercury wound towards her rival.

But in that exact moment Nooblet saw her hand rising and the tip of his sword rose to meet the flat of her blade. The Ace's streaking blade was knocked away. Tang Mi was mad enough to spit blood!

Nooblet's figure rushed quickly, and almost as though he'd flashed right through her.

Clink! The soft sound wafted towards her.

Tang Mi's reaction was could not be called slow. She sent her mecha spinning outward, slashing towards Nooblet.

However, to her continued amazement, when she turned Nooblet was nowhere to be found.

Clink, clank, chink, clang, chink! The sound of metal striking metal filled the cockpit from behind her.

Tang Mi was flabberghasted. She changed up her footwork with each step, but no matter what she did she couldn't catch a glimpse of Nooblet.

A drop of sweat raced down her forehead. Is he.. shadowing me?

Mirroring was an expert close-combat technique. The greatest sin of close combat was giving your enemy your back, and a master at mirroring could take advantage of that when their strength is inferior to stick close to their adversary without them even knowing.

But Tang Mi knew where her assailant was, why couldn't she shake him?

Suddenly, everything grew black and calm. A computerized voice filled the cockpit.

“Defeat. Mecha damage one hundred percent. Please repair your suit, and continue.”

What? ONE HUNDRED PERCENT damage?! Tang Mi sat in utter confusion. Simulated and real mecha combat were almost exactly the same. She knew what a hundred percent damage meant. That sort of thing only happened with massive, direct frontal explosion. How could a saber mech possible do something like that?

REPLAY!

She reached out and slammed the button.

It started from the beginning of the fight, with The Ace rushing towards Nooblet. He squatted, she kneed him.

The Ace broke in to disordered stepping.

Nooblet, disordered stepping...

And then that supernatural strike. That one strike, that offset the Ace and allowed Nooblet to get behind her.

After that it was cut after cut, and a clear line was open to finish the fight. But he'd just kept swinging that sword .

The titanium alloy sword glinted with a brilliant metallic luster. No strike was exceedingly powerful, but the speed was inhuman. Even in the replay Tang Mi had to slow down the speed to see clearly what had happened.

As she looked on in shocked admiration, she noticed that nearly all of Nooblet's strikes found a joint – but they did not sever them completely.

When his final cut struck home, her mecha stiffened, and collapse in to a heap of slag. A pile of scrap. Like a toppled tower of toy bricks.

Tang Mi knew this technique, or to be precise, had heard of this technique!

The Brunois assault! It was a technique rarely seen on the battlefield, since it was largely impractical.

Slaughtered! The Ace slaughtered by Nooblet!

Perfect victory!

Chapter 51: Fresh Meat

Bang! Tang Mi's fists viciously pounded the control board of the simulator, her face twisted in to a mask of rage.

She'd changed her account , chosen a saber-mecha, all to satisfy an urge. Lots of people did it, and they called them landmines; if you stepped on one, you're in for a bad time.

There have been those who have suggested action against this kind of behavior, adding a real-name system to DreamNet. This would ensure each Id number had only one account, but until now the DeamNet management authority hasn't approved. This was something that would affect all three Alliances. It wouldn't be an easy change.

Tang Mi definitely didn't expect to be the one stepping on a landmine. That Nooblet guy, who was he? He's a bastard is what he is, an outright bastard!

had never been in a situation like this. She thought about the replay, about how he'd chopped her up in to tiny cube-sized pieces, and she just wanted to disappear in to a hole somewhere.

Tang Mi

"Who! Who! Who!" Tang Mi screamed at the screen, alone in the virtual cockpit. She knew at the very least it was someone from the school, else they wouldn't have been able to enter the sim training yard. You could only get here by using one of the school's special simulators.

But the school was huge, how would she be able to find this Nooblet?

Tang Mi took a slow, deep breath to even her temper.

She could not suffer the presence of this enemy. He needed to be destroyed.

Her arm raised, and in the space of a moment her communicator was ringing a number.

"Little Mi, what's up?" A man's voice, simple and sincere, sputtered from

the communicator.

Tang Mi audibly ground her teeth as she spoke. “I don’t care where you are, or what you’re doing. Find a simulator and log in to DreamNet immediately. Find me in the university novice arena. There’s someone we need to humiliate.”

“Huh?” Surprise was evident in the man’s tone. “The novice arena? Tang Mi, you’re playing the landmine again, aren’t you. I told you before not to bother with that boring garbage. Why don’t you listen. And what? You run in to another landmine that gave you a spanking?” The man knew almost immediately what had happened from Tang Mi’s voice alone.

“Are you coming or not?!” she screeched.

“You wouldn’t be that way right?” The man’s voice sounded more surprised as the conversation continued. “Spend all your time by the river and you’re bound to get wet. Go cool down. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Tang Xiao, your little sister was just turned to scrap metal by someone using the Brunois Assault. If you don’t come in here right now and avenge me, you’ll wish you were dead. I’ll tell Qianlin all about how you wet the bed until you were ten, and you won’t have a ghost of a chance with her. You have an opportunity now that her engagement has broken off. I may not have much to offer to help get you two together, but at a word from me you’ll die alone! HAHAAHAHA!”

“... give me three minutes.” The voice had suddenly turned serious. The communicator went silent, and Tang Mi re-entered DreamNet.

Just you wait Nooblet. If I can’t beat you, then I’ll call someone who can! Tang Xiao’s a Master-Ranked mecha pilot and he’ll deal with you. You can bet your ass!

Bang!

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Lan Jue expertly stabbed his titanium blade through the brain box of his ninth opponent, bringing the match to an end.

That's number nine! One more and it's off to the intermediate arena.

If A-Cheng and them knew I was in here messing with newbies they'd have to pick their jaws up from the floor. Lan Jue's face twisted in a strange smile. Man being a landmine was fun! Hah! It's been a long time since I've seriously trained in a mecha. Next time I come in here I'll have to do it with a higher level account. This novice area hardly even counts as a warm-up. But it's good practice for skills and mind-hand coordination. Give me a month and I'll be back at peak ability.

In the last three years he'd undergone almost no effort towards cultivation or training. His Discipline may still raise of it's own accord, but he'd hardly practiced mecha operation. A lot of his skill was already deeply ingrained in his muscle memory, but he'd still grown somewhat rusty.

Tenth fight, begin.

A light flashed from somewhere, and he appeared once more in a fresh arena. Once more his opponent was a saber-mecha, unfitted and fresh. It was the same as all the others, only that one fight with the Brunois assault had stirred him at all.

Fresh Meat. The name flickered above the saber-mecha's head.

The guy must be shameless, Lan Jue thought. A smile touched his lips. Shamelessness was good. It meant they had a good mentality.

"You're that landmine, eh?" The voice that echoed across the field was honest, simple, and carried in it a sort of quiet magnetism.

This was the first time since beginning that someone had spoken to him with the intention of holding a conversation. Lan Jue did not reply.

"You want to be a landmine, you better be prepared for the consequences. You've been bullying my little sister, and that means I'm going to have to chop you in to little pieces!" Fresh Meat's Saber-Mecha strode forward, cross-stepped, then turned a full circle to stop with it's shield across it's chest and the titanium allow sword pointed towards the heavens.

“Not bad eh?” His adversary’s voice was had a fair measure of pride.

The guy really is shameless, Lan Jue thought.

“You didn’t answer so I assume you agree. Time for your betters to get started.” As he spoke, his mecha suddenly picked up speed, racing headlong towards Nooblet in a straight line.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes, his curiosity clear. The guy had superior control over his mecha. There was no wasted movement, no wasted speed. He certainly liked to talk nonsense, but he had some skill.

“Ah hey buddy, by the way something interesting happened today,” Fresh Meat said as the distance closed between him and Lan Jue.

Lan Jue rased a brow. Wasn’t he here for revenge? What did he hear that could have anything to do with me?

Fresh Meat continued. “We had a guy in class today who really needed to fart. Definitely a fart. Then she came upon an excellent idea; she’d fart, and clap her hands at the same time to hide the sound. She reeled back and clapped... and just as everyone turned their head to look at her, she let ‘er rip!”

“Pfft!” Lan Jue couldn’t help but snort a laugh. At that moment the magnificent glint of a blade filled his vision, blinding him to the figure racing towards him and any means of escape. Lost in that split-second glare, Fresh Meat’s leg shot out and viciously connected with Nooblet’s mechanical groin.

Chapter 52: Outrage and Oscillation

Lan Jue was caught off guard. He did not expect Fresh Meat to go through an entire tirade before his assault. He couldn't help but laugh at the story, and in that split second he'd let his guard down.

Fresh Meat's attacks were instantaneous and vicious. Even with his abilities, controlling this factory-level mecha under this sort of assault was proving difficult.

The tips of his toes raised, and suddenly he was shooting backwards. In the same moment the blade in his hands was cutting an arc, barely managing to deflect Fresh Meat's own weapon. His right leg raised to meet his enemy's kick and push it aside.

"Some good reaction time buddy!" Fresh Meat's voice sounded full of praise.

"I'll poke your eyes out," he shouted, and suddenly his mechanical legs were shooting out to entwine Nooblet's.

Nooblet was unstable, his hurried retreat causing him to stagger. He couldn't avoid being caught by his adversary's trip. The body of Fresh Meat's mecha then twisted with the agility of a monkey, in attempts to bring Nooblet to the ground.

Jiu-jitsu! Fresh Meat had learned to incorporate jiu-jitsu into his mecha fighting techniques.

"You know though I've come across some bad luck myself lately," Fresh Meat continued through the grapple. "I'd gone to the cafeteria for some grub yesterday and there in my food was a piece of pork covered in hair. I thought to myself, man this school's cafeteria really doesn't care for cleanliness. So then I carefully pulled the hairs out one by one, cleaned it off and popped it in my mouth. And goddamnit, wouldn't you know, it was a piece of ginger!"

Where someone present to see Lan Jue's face in the sim pod, they would have discovered the look of disgust on his face.

Nooblet's mecha had been pinned to the ground by Fresh Meat, their legs wrapped together. It appeared Fresh Meats pointless stories were giving him a definite advantage. Even with Lan Jue's many experiences on the battlefield, this was the first time he'd come across an opponent like... this.

Taking advantage of the situation, Fresh Meat extricated himself from the grapple and plopped his metallic girth directly on to Nooblet's back. He then proceeded to lock up Nooblet's sword arm with his hands.

"Heh! Whada ya think buddy, cool story right?" Fresh Meat sounded exceptionally proud of himself. Or maybe you're not convinced. Tell you what, if not you go ahead and hit me. Go on, hit me! Hehehe!"

"Don't think you've won just yet," Lan Jue growled.

"Eh?" Fresh Meat sounded surprised. "Won? Oh don't worry, I wont let you off so easy – I just don't want you to hurt your mecha! That way DreamNet can't interrupt us while we continue our little chat."

Suddenly Fresh Meat felt Nooblet's mecha shaking beneath him. It was of no great intensity, but quite sudden. More, surprising, however, wasn't the shaking itself – but the fact that it had unexpectedly loosened his grip!

"No... !" Fresh Meat yelled. Nooblet twisted and, in a way Fresh Meat couldn't even determine, suddenly he was the one entangled. For with a metal-crunching blow Nooblet threw him to the floor, and pinned him there.

"Oscillation! You're using oscillation!" Fresh Meat was too shocked to even attempt a counter.

Oscillation, he'd been attempting to train in that for ages!

Fresh Meat was indeed Tang Mi's older brother, Tang Xiao. He was well known, one of the best students in the mecha combat division. Already a Sovereign-Level First Class pilot, and one of the top ten in the entire combat department.

Once one was evaluated as a Sovereign-Level mecha pilot they were immediately conferred the title of Lieutenant by any state in the three

Alliances.

The graduation requirement for even National Scholar pilots was only Second Class. Sovereign-Level Second Class pilots were often called upon to command mecha squadrons of ten suits.

But even with all these ranking and expectations – Sovereign-Level, First Class, top ten – Tang Xiao still wasn't capable of executing the Oscillation technique.

The Brunois Assault was a show move, worth little in actual combat. But Oscillation, that was a close combat maneuver that was highly prized. It was fair to say it was that level of ability every pilot dreamt of.

In truth Oscillation was something even the lowest Third-Rank pilots trained, but even Sovereign-Ranked pilots... maybe even God-Ranked pilots couldn't master it. It took a certain level of talent not everyone possessed.

The technique known as Oscillation caused the entire mecha to begin vibrating at high-frequency. The result was traumatic injury to the opponent, or to extricate oneself from difficult grapples. Brain waves are important in mecha manipulation, but Oscillation – that required an unfathomable speed of hand!

Chapter 53: Lose Weight!

The lawn behind the Electives Teaching Building wasn't anything magnificent. It lay in the shadow of the building before it, so nutrition was a limited resource for the sparse grass.

It was afternoon, and the elective courses have already finished. As a result the lawn was particularly peaceful.

Lan Jue stood with his hands behind his back. He was straight-backed, in a three-piece suit devoid of any wrinkles. His antique bicycle was set not far to the side.

His features were calm, serene, as though he were a garden statue set amongst the shade.

Suddenly, an odd smile replaced his stoic façade.

"Ah! Professor, here you are! I've arrived!" Tang Xiao breathlessly trotted towards him, excitement clearly written on his face.

Slowly Lan Jue turned to find an overweight man huffing headily as he bore down on him. His flight suit stretched valiantly against his girth. Lan Jue quietly wondered whether he could actually fit in a mecha cockpit.

Tang Xiao was tallish at one hundred and eighty centimeters, with a waist of similar diameter. His fat jiggled as he jogged closer. With his short hair, small eyes, and pudgy features he was really rather adorable. As for his facial features... well, everyone looks more or less the same under a certain layer of fat.

"Introductions," Lan Jue said in frigid tones in lieu of greeting.

"Oh.. ok. Em, go ahead." Tang Xiao grew silent, respectfully waiting for Lan Jue to continue.

Lan Jue's face fell in embarrassment for this young man. "I want you to introduce yourself!"

"Ah!" Tang Xiao's pudgy face jiggled. He hurried to speak. "A misunderstanding, professor. J-just a misunderstanding! My name is Tang

Xiao, and I'm a third year national scholar in the mecha combat division. Sovereign-Rank second class. Reporting for duty!"

"Tang Xiao?" Lan Jue rolled the name around on his tongue, and walked a circuit around the young pilot. "How much do you weigh?"

"What... ? F-five hundred and fifteen pounds," Tang Xiao replied with pride.

"Talent level?"

"Sixth-Level. Professor, my Discipline is very honed, only... if you'd like to know what it is I must first ask you to show me some identification." Tang Xiao laughed nervously, his little pig eyes shining.

"Fine," Lan Jue replied. He produced the letter of appointment the Dean had sent him.

"Etiquette? Associate Professor?" He looked slack-jawed at the letter, then back up at Lan Jue. "Professor. You're... this is a joke right? What does an etiquette professor even teach..."

Lan Jue gave a small, private smile. "Common sense. Your Discipline?"

Tang Xiao spoke up. "Metalmorphosis. I make the surface of my body change in to an incomparably tough metal. Great, right!"

Lan Jue's face hardened. "At this weight, it isn't just your Discipline – the added weight increases the efficacy, doesn't it."

At this, Tang Xiao's face lit up. "Professor, you really are the kind of master capable of Oscillation! I see it now. That's exactly the reason for my weight. An eighth-level talent taught me this."

But the revelation only caused the corners of Lan Jue's mouth to slink in to a frown. "The guy who said so was messing with you. If you want to improve, increase your metalmorphosis, you'll need to increase your weight tenfold. But then, how will you even walk? Will you become a shield? Moreover, if your Discipline continues to evolve to eighth-level you'll be able to change to titanium – and how heavy is that? What the hell is the point of so much weight then?"

“You think,” Tang Xiao whispered, “You think I could become an eighth-level Talent?”

Lan Jue lifted a hand to pat his forehead. “There weren’t any Adepts in your family before you, were there.”

The youth earnestly nodded his head. “That’s right. My family is in politics.”

“That figures,” Lan Jue muttered. “But we’ll save that for another time. Let’s talk about the matter at hand first.”

“What matter?” Tang Xiao listened raptly as Lan Jue spoke, terribly excited at the prospect that his natural abilities could improve. It was the first time he’d heard it was possible.

Lan Jue gave him a flat look. “Aren’t you here to study Oscillation?”

“Absolutely!” Tang Xiao nearly leapt for joy.

Lan Jue began. “This is no problem, I’m sure we can get you where you want to be. A short period of special training and you’ll have the ability to Oscillate. However, you are definitely too overweight. So much so that it impacts your hand speed, coordination and kinesthetics. It stifles the development of your abilities. And so, the very first thing you need to do is lose weight. Until it no longer affects your Talent. Improve your coordination, then cultivate your Discipline.”

“Right, right, so tell me what I should do?” Hearing Lan Jue’s plan for success, Tang Xiao’s face was aglow with excitement.

“Your current weight has already far outstripped the line for morbid obesity, you’ve huge stores of fat. But fat is simply a form of energy for the body. You can’t just directly lose the weight – that will cause loose skin and marks, and thus the effect of your metalmorphosis. So, at the same time as we extract this excess energy from your body, we must also increase muscle mass and improve the condition of your skin, its elasticity and so forth. This will also increase your body’s sensitivity. After a while, when you’re in better shape and your body’s back to normal, then you can learn to Oscillate.”

Tang Xiao took note of Lan Jue's serious expression. "Professor," he pleaded, "but how?"

After a moment's hesitation, Lan Jue responded. "I actually do know a method that can speed the process up. But, it's painful. Would you be able to handle it?"

"No problem," Tang Xiao immediately responded, nodding emphatically. "A little pain is nothing! Real men can take it, bring it on." His mind was flooded with dreams of Talent cultivation, and a longing to learn the secrets of Oscillation.

Lan Jue looked impressed. "Not bad. Worthy of my disciple. We can achieve this by me patting your body. It will hurt, and you can tell me when you can bear no more. You must also control your Discipline and keep it from emerging, else all the effort will be wasted."

"Alright, so when do we start professor?"

Lan Jue's eyes flashed. "No time like the present. Are you ready to begin?"

"Ready!" Tang Xiao squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest. Resolution was etched clearly on his face.

Crack! A streak of brown leather whipped across his face.

"Gaah!" Tang Xiao screeched. But the sound was quickly lost with the thunderous sonance of a thousand blows.

Crack-crack-snap-crack-snap...

"Ah, Professor! AH! It hurts..!"

"Stay resolute! We're extracting all that extra energy!" Lan Jue shouted.

To make you humble, make you strong, I must beat weakness out of you!

Chapter 54: The General's Memoirs

"The teacher's first lesson; be grim, be fierce, be forged in blood, improve my motivation and endurance to pain.

Only then will my power grow."

Memoirs of the Metal Fox, Army General Tang Xiao

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Lan Jue threw a leg over his bicycle, preparing to return to the simulation warehouse when he ran in to another familiar face.

"Professor Lan! Lookin' good!" His teased pink mohican hair all a-quiver, Jin Tao's excited voice cut off Lan Jue's escape. He'd come looking for his sister, but upon hearing the screams chanced upon the scene on the lawn.

The brakes squealed as Lan Jue brought his bicycle to a stop and dismounted. "Hm?" He turned his eyes on to Jin Tao.

The young man failed to notice the odd light in Lan Jue's eyes. He pressed on excitedly. "I saw the whole thing, you beating on Fatty Tang. The guy's a bully, you don't know how many times he's bugged innocent people like me. I stole a lollipop from him once when I'd just enrolled in college. Man that was satisfying..."

Lan Jue fixed Jin Tao with a hard gaze. "What's this about beating someone? You think you understand? I was trying to teach Tang Xiao how to better cultivate his abilities."

Jin Tao looked confused. "Cultivate?"

"Mmh." Lan Jue nodded solemnly. "Your classmate Tang Xiao has a very special Discipline. With the proper stimulation of his abilities his powers could advance quite quickly. The process is painful, but if successful he could become far more powerful than he is now."

Suddenly Jin Tao's eyes shone as though they were stars. "Really? Can my Discipline evolve too? My own Talent is only First-Level. At first I wanted to learn your method of beating Fatty Tang, but if you could evolve

my own genetic abilities that would be great! You know today I almost got promoted to intermediate in the sim area. Who knew I'd come across that Nooblet guy, must have been a Sovereign-Rank pilot. I was seckilled* like a chump. If my Talent were stronger, I'd definitely be able to handle my mecha better, too. Hey man, help me out too."

"What's your Discipline," Lan Jue asked softly.

Jin Tao's lips curved in a smile. "Metamorphosis. I can turn in to a dog! Only... a very weak dog. You think my talent has room to grow?"

"Of course," Lan Jue responded flatly.

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"The teacher's first lesson; be grim, be fierce, be forged in blood, improve my motivation and endurance to pain. Only then will my power grow. Even were I Snoopy, he said, he could make me in to a Tibetan Mastiff."

Memoirs of the Frenzied Lion Mastiff, Army General Jin Tao

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"Where are you?" Zhou Qianlin had sent off Tang Mi, who'd had a peculiar look in her eye. She stood now in the door of the simulation department's third classroom. She spoke through her communicator to someone.

"Look to your left. The handsome guy in the blue suit, about fifty meters away," Lan Jue responded jokingly.

Zhou Qianlin turned her head to look, and spotted Lan Jue leaning idly against the wall. He waved at her.

The faintest hint of a smile threatened to break her serious expression. "I don't see any handsome guys, but I see an old man. Go, keep about three hundred meters between you and me.

"No problem." Contrary to what she expected, Lan Jue made no fuss.

In truth Lan Jue stood somewhat in awe. Zhou Qianlin wore her flight suit, and – as they are wont to do – it outlined her slender figure perfectly.

She didn't have the exaggerated legs of Tang Mi. The combination of her legs and body lay right in the golden ratio. Her long black hair was tied up to reveal her pale neck. The suit strained against her chest, round and supple. The pleasant curve tapered down to a slender waist, not an ounce of flab. Sky-blue eyes like translucent gemstones looked right back at him.

And it wasn't only him who noticed. Everyone who entered, everyone in the class, man or woman, had their eyes drawn to her like a magnet.

That was the kind of beauty Qianlin was in her flight suit.

Lan Jue wandered outside. His mind hummed with the memories of that time when Qianlin rested in his arms, Thor tearing through the heavens under his control.

Zhou Qianlin exited soon after, her alluring body now covered with a long coat. The hood was raised over her head, and she exited with her eyes towards the floor. The shadows concealed her face.

"Your family wont send a car for you?" Lan Jue looked towards her in curiosity.

She looked up. "It's no concern of yours. Just do your job."

"So do I send you home," he asked helplessly.

Qianlin shook her head. "Take me to Grace Hospital."

It was a name he wasn't familiar with. "You don't feel well?" Suddenly, though, it was as though a shock rocked through him. Wide eyed and slack jawed he looked at her. "You're not... you don't have a..."

Zhou Qianlin's face flew through a rage of confusion, shock, then went red with embarrassment. "You wish! Stop talking nonsense and hurry up." She shoved him towards his bike as she spoke.

Lan Jue was possessed of a very keen level of perception, and notice Zhou Qianlin's heart rate increase to at least double.

But seeing her reaction, it was unlikely it was as he thought. He secretly let out a sigh of relief.

Lan Jue pulled himself on his bicycle, and looked towards Zhou Qianlin.

“How are we going? Do you have a way to get there?”

Zhou Qianlin dropped her face, hiding it from Lan Jue. “Don’t you?” She pointed at the frame on the back of the bicycle.

Lan Jue blinked at her. “You, miss money bags, agreeing to sit on the back of a bicycle?”

She raised her head, casting him a withering glance. “I have never been a ‘moneybags’.” She sat herself on the protruding frame of the bicycle.

Lan Jue began to peddle, and Qianlin suddenly found herself groping for the seat below her.

The two figures peddled in to the distance, lit by the golden rays of the setting sun. They cast a long shadow.

They continued in perfect silence for ten minutes before Lan Jue slowed and pulled his bicycle to a stop at the side of the road.

“Why are you stopping?” Zhou Qianlin spoke up suddenly, as though she had been lost in her own memories.

Lan Jue looked back at her abashedly. “I don’t know the way.”

A grin tugged at the corners of Qianlin’s mouth. “Keep going straight, then turn right at the third junction. I’ll tell you what to do next when we get there.”

“Got it,” Lan Jue replied. He resumed peddling forward.

“Oh, by the way...” Lan Jue suddenly spoke up.

“Hm?”

“You’re so heavy.”

A pair of pale slender fingers deftly reached forth to lay upon his waist. They found a bit of flesh, gingerly held it betwixt them... and twisted a hundred and eighty degrees.

“AHH!”

The bike veered left and right, and suddenly that pale hand reached out in a panic to wrap about the injured waist...

*

*'Seckill' is a gaming term in which a player manages to defeat their rival in a manner of seconds.

Chapter 55: Little Elf Girl

“You’re telling me you’re my older brother...” Tang Mi looked at Tang Xiao’s swollen face pig-like face in surprise.

Tang Xiao winced. “Have a little compassion, why don’t you.”

“You want me to be compassionate?” Tang Mi spat. “I called you over to deal with that Nooblet, and instead you’re calling me on the communicator to come and save you. What are you doing letting someone beat you in your pig face anyway?”

Tang Xiao stuck out his chest and, choking back the pain in his body, spoke with pride. “You don’t understand. I’m cultivating my powers. You’ll understand later!”

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“You don’t understand!” Jin Tao said to a visibly panicked Jin Yan.

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“If you tell anyone about what we’re doing here, you can forget about cultivation. And don’t bother coming to find me,” Lan Jue warned.

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Lan Jue found it hard to imagine how this hospital had become so run-down. It was a shabby stone building of simple construction, with decorative iron bolted to the wood-framed windows. It had to be among the oldest architectural styles on Planet Skyfire.

A distinctly modern crucifix’s green neon glow flickered over the large door. The twinkling green glow radiated around the cross like a halo, sometimes there and sometimes not. Even from a good distance you could still make it out.

Lan Jue brought his bicycle to a stop. “You’re sure this is the place?”

Zhou Qianlin answered by dismounting from the backseat of the bike and wordlessly making her way in to the hospital.

He pulled his bike to the side and entered after her. After all, it was his

duty as her body guard.

The scent of disinfectant fluid swirled around him as he entered the hospital. This sort of low-cost cleaning method was rarely seen in the three alliances anymore.

All the facilities he passed look exceedingly worn-out, with the exception of the odd doctor or nurse's coverall.

Despite this, however, the hospital was host to many patients. Without exception each was clad in simple clothing, some as worn as the building they stood in.

It was a poor district hospital. Lan Jue knew this even before stepping foot inside, because Grace Hospital was located right in the middle of Skyfire's most famous ghetto.

What he couldn't understand is why Zhou Qianlin would want to come to a place like this. Looking at her lithe figure moving in front of him, It was clear she was familiar with the place.

Zhou Qianlin didn't pause, continuing on in to the heart of the hospital. She proceeded until passing through a simple wooden door.

They stepped in to a small, pleasant flower garden, no more than two hundred square meters. The vegetation within wasn't anything particularly special or rare, but they were vibrant and well tended. Vibrant green filled the eyes, and the fresh smell was invigorating. Twenty or so elderly patients sat or stood among the flora.

As Zhou Qianlin entered, every pair of yellowed, rheumy eyes drew towards her. Their faces lit up, their wrinkles deepening as each adopted a smile.

"Linlin!"* A wrinkled woman in grey clothing smiled at Zhou Qianlin and weakly waved her hand.

Zhou Qianlin hurried to the woman's side, a radiant smile blossoming upon her face.

"Granny Meng! Why are you sitting on this stone bench with no

cushion. You mustn't let your legs get cold." Zhou Qianlin knelt before the elderly woman and took her hand, a look of mild admonishment on her face.

Grenny Meng chuckled. "It's fine, it's fine. The weather today isn't bad. I'm not cold at all. Here, I got this special for you. Eat it quick while it's fresh." As she spoke her trembling hands fumbled for her pocket, extracting an apple from within. She passed it to Zhou Qianlin.

The skin of the apple was already distinctly shriveled, but the smile on Zhou Qianlin's face was wide and genuine. "Thank you Granny Meng. Oh, it smells lovely," she said as she took it in her hands.

She ignored the shriveled and dusty exterior of the apple and took a big bite.

The other elderly occupants of the garden had begun to gather around.

"Little Linlin, come here to granddad. Here, I brought you some bread."

"Don't bother with that bread. Here, Linlin, this is some tea my grandson brought me. I knew you were coming today so I brewed you a cup, still warm. Here have a sip, wet your whistle."

"Linlin, I brought you this..."

Almost every one of the twenty-something patients presented something to Zhou Qianlin. She took each item in turn, praising the giver and looking upon each item as though it were precious.

Lan Jue stood not far off, silently looking on. He keenly felt the warmth and friendliness of the older patients as Zhou Qianlin ate their gifts and gave them hugs in return.

Why? What relationship do they have to her? What is this place?

A quavering, aged voice interrupted his thoughts. "Did you come with Linlin young man?"

Lan Jue turned his head and spotted an old man clad in an old green army coat, clutching a walking cane in his hands. He looked back at Lan Jue in curiosity.

“Yes. Greetings,” Lan Jue politely responded. “Pardon me sir, but what is this place?”

The old man’s eyes softened visibly. “This is Grace Hospital Retirement Home, serving the slums here. Linlin comes here once a week to volunteer. She’s our little elf – we say that when she comes it’s like our own festival.”

Zhou Qianlin pulled her hair up with practiced hands and tied it with a simple piece of cloth. He didn’t notice when in her hands suddenly appeared a pair of nail clippers. One by one she knelt before them, and one by one careful clipped their nails. Concentration filled her eyes, and from beginning to end her face held a gentle smile. In between she’d speak a few sentences to her charges, which would invariably cause their faces to light up in smiles.

“Young man, come have a cup of water if you’d prefer not to talk.” The old man from before offered a mottled tea cup, filled with steaming clear water.

“Thank you very much.” Lan Jue hurriedly took the cup and brought it to his lips.

The old man began to chuckle, but the phlegm in his throat set him to coughing. “It’s my turn to get my nails clipped, eh!” He turned towards Zhou Qianlin with a youthful vigor.

This green-eyed girl, smiling as she works... she really is the garden’s little elf. A flawless, perfect little elf.

*

*In China, repeating the last part of a person’s name is a cutesy nickname denoting familiarity.

^Granny and granddad are used to denote a close relationship with an elder person – not necessarily blood relation.

Chapter 56: Kindness Should be Preserved

“Excuse me a moment everyone, I’m going to get some water and wash your feet. Please come in one by one.” Zhou Qianlin turned and motioned Lan Jue over. It was the first time she’d acknowledged him in the half hour they’d been there.

Lan Jue was still surprised with the scene, but managed to make his way towards her.

As he did, he felt all eyes on him.

“Ey, Linlin, is this your boyfriend hm?” Granny Meng’s eyes lit up mischievously with this new piece of potential gossip.

Zhou Qianlin’s face grew red, and she quickly shook her head. “Not at all, he’s a friend of mine.” She spoke then to Lan Jue. “Come and help me with the water.”

She gripped his sleeve and pulled him away through another door on the opposite side of the garden.

They found themselves in a long corridor beset on each side with scores of doors, a number above each one.

“What are you yanking me for,” Lan Jue inquired as he was pulled along.

“They all care a lot for me. If I didn’t pull you away you’d never have escaped,” she responded. “With you to help me today getting the water should go faster.”

As they spoke she pulled him in to a simple room. A wooden chair and a steel frame with hangers affixed to the ceiling were it’s only adornments.

“Usually they use this room to give the patients injections.” She offered the simple explanation as they moved towards the water heater in the back. A washbasin had been set beside it.

Zhou Qianlin took up the basin and began pouring the hot water in to it. “The cold water pipe is outside. Go bring some in so we can adjust the temperature.”

“Why are you cleaning these people’s feet anyway,” Lan Jue asked with genuine curiosity.

“They’re old and have trouble stooping down,” she responded without hesitation. “And washing their feet with warm water helps with circulation.”

The basin had filled during their exchange, and she carefully placed it onto the ground. She removed her backpack and put it to the side.

Standing over her, Lan Jue could clearly make out the contents of her backpack as she opened it to rifle through.

There was no make-up, accessories or playthings as you might expect; only books, and two bags – one big, and one small.

First she removed the small bag and replaced the nail-clippers she’d used earlier. Besides those, there was also a pair of scissors and hair clippers.

She then opened the larger bag. Lan Jue peered in, and couldn’t help but lift his brows and interject.

“What are all the orange peels for?”

Zhou Qianlin smiled, and her response was filled with no small measure of pride. “Don’t you know? Using orange peels in the water not only helps with circulation, but can also clear the cuticles, softened the skin of the feet, and guard them from cracking.”

“You’re a homeopath, too,” Lan Jue muttered in wonder.

The smile on Zhou Qianlin’s face widened. “Go get the water.”

“Right,” he said, and turned to do so.

The first batch consisted of four elderly patients. They entered orderly and took their seats. When Lan Jue returned, their eyes immediately fell upon him, curiosity plain on their faces.

“Hey son, who are you anyway?”

“You really aren’t Linlin’s boyfriend?”

“Hey kiddo, you’re a handsome fella but ya still aren’t a match for our Linlin. Keep at it eh!”

“You mess with our girl and you’ll have to answer to me!”

Lan Jue felt overwhelmed with the questions, but he keenly felt how much these people cared for Zhou Qianlin.

With Lan Jue’s help, four orange-peel infused basins of warm water were quickly produced. Each were placed before the patients before their shoes and socks were carefully removed and their feet placed inside.

Her motions were practiced, fluid from beginning to end. Each of the retirees beamed down at her as she worked, appreciation and enjoyment filling their pale yellowed eyes.

“Do you usually come by yourself,” Lan Jue asked as he helped her pour the water.

“Xiao Mi usually comes with me,” she said. “Today she had something to do, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked you to come. This is probably the first time you’ve done something like this, huh. You aren’t accustomed to it.”

Lan Jue nodded in confirmation.

“Well today we’ll be using up some of your time,” she continued. “They’ll be warming their feet for about twenty minutes each. Until they begin to sweat a little is best.”

“Why do you do this?”

Zhou Qianlin gave him a strange look. “No real reason! These people need looking after, so here I am. I’m happy when I’m with them. I lost my grandparents in the war, but here I have many grandparents to share my time with. They have so many experiences, I love hearing them talk about their lives. If my studies weren’t so busy I’d be here more often.”

“Oh.”

Soak, wash, wipe. And so it continued.

For two hours it proceeded, washing the feet of every tenant, but Zhou Qianlin did not waste the time. As they left she would also gather their

laundry, bringing it in to the washroom to rinse and dry.

It was night by the time they left Grace Hospital Retirement Home. Lan Jue stood at the door, holding Zhou Qianlin's bag as she placed her hands on her head and stretched. Her supple figure beneath the dim lamplight was a sight to behold.

Lan Jue shouldered her back and began to push his bicycle. "Tired?"

"No, I'm used to it. Are you? You got the hang of it pretty quickly, and they seemed to like you. I hadn't suspected the great nobility would be able to handle this sort of work, hehe." Zhou Qianlin's smile had flowered significantly. Except for the very beginning, Lan Jue had stood at her side and helped for the whole two hours, his fine three-piece suit becoming hopelessly wrinkled in the process.

He smiled. "Helping the elderly is showing respect. It something we all must do."

"Time to go home," Zhou Qianlin said.

Lan Jue patted the bike's back seat before straddling it himself. Zhou Qianlin sat upon it as though she'd done it a hundred times before, and immediately wrapped an arm around his waist.

As the bike began to creep forward Lan Jue spoke over his shoulder. "How long have you been coming here?"

"More than two years."

"Are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

Zhou Qianlin's response was guarded. "Why?"

"A friend of mine invited me to a meal, and I can bring someone along. Would you like to come?"

A flash of surprise passed though Zhou Qianlin's pretty eyes. But something else lay deeper still.

"Why would you invite me to go eat with you?"

Lan Jue smiled. "Kindness should be preserved."

Chapter 57: The Mundus Crystal

“Hey fella come here. We have the results of the stone’s inspection.”

“Excellent.”

Situated in the Skyfire Underground, the library stood as it always had. The Keeper sat upon his rattan deck chair with his fingers playing over the clay teapot in his hands. He looked at ease.

Lan Jue had come directly from his jewelry store after sending Zhou Qianlin to the base of her mountain-top home. It had been a full day, one that had filled him with a sense of contentment, and now that he’d heard from the Keeper he was beginning to think today was indeed his lucky day.

“What was the result?” Lan Jue stuffed his hands in his pockets and moved to the Keeper’s side.

The Keeper shut his eyes for a moment. “I’ll start simply by saying that if you found the vein this come from, you’d make an unimaginable fortune.”

“Oh?” Lan Jue’s eyes lit up. “What did you discover?” For the Keeper to even start with this sort of evaluation, he must have found something significant.

The Keeper continued. “I won’t go through the entire analytical process, you wouldn’t understand anyway.”

Lan Jue smiled as his elderly counterpart went on. “As for the results, we did discover that were this ore to be refined, it would create a particularly special crystal. The crystal’s capabilities would be immense, and beyond that it would be possessed of a truly astonishing peculiarity in energy transformation.”

“Simply put, energies injected in to the stone will have its impurities extracted, releasing only energy in its purest form. I call it Mundus Energy. If you were to incorporate it with some sort of procedural structure, you could create an astounding energy purification system. And the mundus energy it exudes could be used in any form of modern scientific pursuit.”

“What about conversion speed and power grade,” Lan Jue inquired.

“Conversion is exceptionally fast,” the old man responded. “You could charge a tenth-class mecha from empty to full in ten minutes. I went through my databanks, and no power gem like this has ever been recorded. It is quintuple the capabilities of the closest equivalent gem. It had to be recorded, so I called it the Mundus Crystal. Were we able to find a suitable means to develop this, it would catapult human science and technology in to a new era.”

Even Lan Jue’s trademark composure was shaken following the Keeper’s explanation. It took all he had not to gape like a moron.

“However,” The Keeper proceeded despite Lan Jue’s stupefaction, “make no mistake that this Mundus Energy isn’t without it’s dangers. Converting energy at it’s quickest rate gradually causes the gem to weaken. Through my experimentations I’ve determined that were this stone of yours refined in to a Mundus Crystal it would enervate a top-level mecha three times before being irreparably damaged, and rendered useless. As a result I thought it cannot be classified as an A-level stone – a C at best, though of course a very special C. The analysis shows it’s stored energies aren’t any different from a normal A-ranked stone. It has no capability of self-repair or other function – simply it’s one special quality.”

Lan Jue was not disappointed by the Keeper’s designation of C-rank. On the contrary the fire in his eyes only grew as the old scientist went on. He had no shortage of stones to compress energy, strengthen attack or harden defenses. But this stone, with it’s ability to restore energy so quickly, was something altogether different, something he needed.

“Another interesting aspect we uncovered, however, is the energy it produces is pure enough that even our Disciplines can absorb and assimilate it. This caused my original C assessment to be upgraded to a B. Regrettably the sheer enormity of it’s energy output means only seventh-degree Talents or higher would be capable of using it. Otherwise it would likely be A-ranked.”

“I’ve already submitted the results and the name to the Power Gem

research association. I hope you don't have any objections?" The Keeper looked at Lan Jue.

"None," Lan Jue replied. A history making power gem with a name they patented, certainly it would be beneficial to him. Once it became known to the populace everyone would want to mine it for themselves. They'd be bound by the rules of the patent, and would need his authorization. It was a policy adopted by all of the great alliances to incentivize exploration and public benefit. And with the Keeper's help, the whole process was sure to go off without a hitch.

"You'd better hurry and find the vein, then. When you do you'll be a rich man. I'll be fine with thirty percent of the final sales." The Keeper had sat up at this point, his eyes glimmering.

Eeeeeeeee-! At that moment the harsh resonance of an alarm blasted through Skyfire Underground.

"Hm?" Lan Jue and the Keeper shared startled expressions.

It was an alarm rarely heard, a red alert indicating a conflict the Skyfire Enforcement Team couldn't handle. It meant the Skyfiire Council itself had to intervene, requiring at least one member to make their presence felt.

It was the responsibility of a Council member to drop what they were doing immediately and tend to the problem.

"I'll check it out," Lan Jue growled. There was a flash of electricity, and suddenly the Keeper was standing alone.

ζ

A blazing halo of crimson fire stormed around Mika, but it was a fire devoid of heat. The Zeus' Jewelry Store of Skyfire Underground rose behind her.

Beside her stood a dozen officers of the Enforcement Team. Several more in uniform lay scattered on the ground.

Opposite them stood six figures. Five were clad in silver leather, their faces concealed with hoods. They appeared to be lead by a man in similar uniform, though his was gold.

“Hand over the ore. We’ll pay ten times your asking price. We have no interest in causing trouble in Skyfire Avenue, but if you continue to deny us I can’t promise we’ll remain so polite.” The rumbling voice of a silver-clad assailant wafted towards the others.

The ridicule on Mika’s face was clearly apparent. “The nerve! You dare to cause trouble on Skyfire, in our shop. If you want the stone you’ll have to deal with me.”

A chilling voice hissed from beneath the golden hood. “If that is the case, then this establishment holds nothing of interest to us.”

“This toad’s halitosis is making my eyes water.” Lan Jue’s lackadaisical voice matched his easy stance, having appeared without notice. He placed a hand upon Mika’s shoulder, and immediately her roiling fires extinguished.

“Boss.” A look of pleasant surprise dawned on Mika’s features. She grinned as she greeted him. “What are you doing here. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Lan Jue sighed. “How could I not! When a tiger sleeps too long others forget he has claws.”

Chapter 58: Phantom of Lightning

Lan Jue's appearance caused the gathered Enforcers to heave a quiet sigh of relief. Outsiders may not know have known of his status, but they certainly did. One of the eighteen Council members, newest of their ranks, but in a short time capable of rising to great heights. It was a poignant display of ability.

"Jewelry Master," the Enforcers respectfully greeted.

"You're the owner of this establishment?" The golden hooded man's voice sounded almost metallic, strange and tinny.

"That I am!" Lan Jue appeared at ease, a lopsided smile on his face. He turned then to the Enforcers. "Take the wounded for treatment. I'll handle things from here."

"Right away." From among the gathered Enforcers a few stepped forward to gather the injured. The remainder waited respectfully behind the Jewelry Master, awaiting his orders.

"Relinquish the stone from the other day, and we'll leave immediately." The golden man's voice was as cold as ice.

Lan Jue shook his head. "I'm afraid that's impossible. You've hurt my people. To leave now would be running away from the consequences. As for the stone, it's already turned to dust." As he spoke the final sentence he couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret in his chest.

He hadn't lied, for in fact the stone had been reduced to powder. Such was the result of the Keeper's experimentations, in finding the stone's limitations.

"What did you say?" The golden man took a menacing step forward. It was a small motion, but one that spoke volumes. A step that spoke murder. Though no face was visible, the man's homicidal intentions were palpable as he faced Lan Jue.

To enter Skyfire one had to possess awakened Talent. In the face of this man's dark aura, everyone present – be they Enforcer or onlooker –

allowed their Disciplines to exude forth.

Standing beside Lan Jue, Mika's brows raised at the scene. She made a motion as though to engage, but was cut off by her employer.

As ever, Lan Jue's face only betrayed that signature indifference. His right hand lifted, slowly and purposefully, to snap his fingers. At once an azure photosphere appeared floating in the air. But it did not rush towards the golden man, instead floating to about a meter before Lan Jue before bursting in to oblivion.

At the sight of the explosion a pale red flame hung in the air. Stranger than that, however, is the fact that the flame raced towards the golden man as though it had a life of it's own. At was as if an invisible cloud of gasoline had ignited in the air, and the flame was racing back to it's source in the golden man.

The murderous aura suffocating the area dispersed almost immediately, like the fires had burned it away. The golden man howled and retreated a step, his right hand raised and flailing to shield himself. A sanguine light cut through the link the fire had established.

"Phantom of lightning, who are you!" The golden man lifted his head, revealing the contours of his face. Unfortunately, it was further hidden by a golden mask, but a pair of light-blue eyes were visible. The pupils dilated, then began to stretch vertically, emitting a palpable field of fear.

Still Lan Jue held his lazy smile. "I see you are of the Moonfiend Empress. Each of you shall leave a finger, and five million in medical expenses. Then you may go."

"Now that you know our identity, you should understand the Way of the Moonfiend Pirates. Give us Oliver and the stone, or we'll hunt you until death even if you are phantom of lightning!"

As the name of the Moonfiend Pirates hung in the air, nearly all the onlookers took a collective step backwards. The crowd that had surrounded Zeus' Jewelry Store had suddenly grown thinner. No small number of lookers wordlessly dropped their heads and fled.

Flippantly, Lan Jue responded. "You came today of your own accord, am I right?"

The golden man was taken aback, but responded harsher than before. "I'll ask for the last time, give up the stone!"

A sigh fell from Lan Jue's lips. "Disasters from the heavens can be forgiven and avoided, but the sins of man must have consequences. Even were it the Moonfiend Empress herself standing before me, she'd lose more than a finger in payment. Do you believe even you, relying on your ninth-level Talent, can afford to cause trouble on Skyfire Avenue?"

At this he turned to a spot in the gathered masses and nodded. "Wine Master, if you would indulge me. These gentlemen are subordinates of someone I know. I intend to exact payment."

"Very well," responded a deep voice. Though it came from a great distance, it was as clearly heard as though it had come from right beside him.

Suddenly, the sky grew dark. Skyfire Underground's controlled climate never saw such shifts, but in this moment the entirety of the avenue was plunged in to darkness. On that dark canvas suddenly bloomed a great purple light, spreading like an enormous halo.

For an instant it was as though the whole of Skyfire Avenue warped violently, and just as quickly all was bright as more, back to as it was. All except for Lan Jue and the hooded assailants, who had vanished.

"Back to your duties," a harsh voice commanded. A silver-clad woman had appeared from nowhere, and stood before the Enforcers barking commands.

She was tall, slim, and symmetrical. Beautiful, with silver hair cut at her ears. Her eyes bore the same metallic shine, and a shimmering aura of energy surrounded her lithe frame.

"Yes, Captain." The gathered Enforcers snapped to attention before slinking sheepishly in to the crowd.

Adepts native to Skyfire knew to retreat with the appearance of the

silver-clad woman. To them seeing her was like facing a nightmare. Those who were not familiar still stood, mouth agape in wonder and fear at the strange singularity they had witnessed.

“You think you can react any slower?” Mika stared sardonically at the young woman.

The silver woman shot her a hard look. “I was topside.”

Mika’s lips curled. “Well you can head out. It looks like things have been handled.”

She shook her head in response. “I’ll wait for the Jewelry Master’s return. This needs an explanation.”

Mika raised a brow. “You expect an explanation from our boss?”

“I do,” came her response, without hesitation.

Mika’s eyes shown devilishly. It was as though a fire was alive in their depths. “And who are you?”

The silver woman lifted her hands to pull down the hood of her trench coat. Those shimmering silver eyes then grew transparent and dark, like dual whirlpools of tarnished silver swirling in their sockets. Fearlessly she stared back at Mika. “I am the Vice Captain of the Skyfire Avenue Enforcement Team. I have the authority to monitor all of the shops here.”

Mika snorted irreverently, and her body grew covered in ominous hyacinth flames. The overpowering scent of gunpowder arose suddenly between the two great beauties.

Chapter 59: The Moonfiend Empress

“Alright, alright sister. If miss An Liu wants to wait then she can wait.” The pretty voice came from behind, and Lin Guoguo’s slender figure approached to block Mika’s approach.

Her body was enveloped in a faint pink aura, making her appear strange and ethereal. Blanketed in this rose light and exuding her trademark sweetness she was like a faerie. Mika’s angry red flames seems to shrinking the face of Lin Guoguo’s presence.

“Enough!” Mika huffed, causing the flames around her to leap higher. “Let’s go then. If someone wants to sit and look after the mutt on our doorstep then let them.”

Lin Guoguo gave An Liu an apologetic look. “I’m very sorry miss An Liu. Mika really does have an awful temper. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

An Liu’s features remained hard and cold, but she nodded her head and moved to the side of Zeus’ Jewelry Store to wait.

Lin Guoguo then turned to follow Mika inside.

“Mika, why is it you get so mad every time you run in to miss An Liu? Didn’t the boss tell you to avoid using your power as much as possible?” Lin Guoguo stood at Mika’s side and spoke no higher than a whisper.

Mika grunted. “It’s nothing, just looking at that bitchy face makes me angry. You shouldn’t bother with her either, she’s no good.”

ζ

It was a white world. The sky, the ground – everything was washed white. It made everything flat and two dimensional, difficult to judge distance.

Confusion was clear in the eyes of the golden hooded man and his six silver-clad cohorts.

None had any clue where they were.

As moonfiend pirates, on their own planet they were the judges and executioners, masters of life and death. As a result they had grown overbearing, arrogant, proud.

This was particularly true for the golden man. He felt, as a ninth-level Adept, he was above the common rabble and their rules. There was very little in his world that could cause him fear. It was this fearlessness that sent him to Skyfire Avenue despite its reputation.

Lan Jue stood as he did before, hands stuffed in to the pocket of his jeans. Though now there was a clear dissatisfaction in his eyes.

He lifted his hand and punched a string of numbers in to the communicator strapped to his wrist. Soon after the connection stuttered to life.

Beep, beep

“Eh? What are you doing calling me? I thought you’d died ages ago.” The voice that wafted through the communicator was soft and quiet.

“Your subordinates wanted to tear my shop down,” Lan Jue responded. “I thought I should let you know.”

“Huh? You’ve opened a shop, where are you? This poor woman has been looking for you for three years with no luck, so imagine my surprise to hear you’re a shopkeeper. What do you sell?” The woman on the other end sounded as though she’d woken up, her previously lazy intonations becoming clear and sweet. Surprise was also clear in her voice.

Lan Jue spoke to his wrist. “I was no longer interested in my old life. I just wanted things to be nice and quiet, so I opened a place on Skyfire Avenue. As for the other matter, you should speak with your people.” He removed the communicator from his wrist and handed it to the golden man.

“Empress.” The man spoke in to the item with trepidation.

“Which one is this?” The sweet and gentle woman’s voice had changed

again, this time bearing a chill that cut to the bone.

“I’m Gao Yong.” A bitterness crept in to the golden man’s mouth.

“What happened,” The woman known as the Empress asked.

Gao Yong dare not slight his mistress, and so briefly recounted the circumstances.

“Alright, very good.” Despite the words, the Moonfiend Empress’ voice had grown markedly chillier.

“Empress, that stone is very important. We suspect it holds enormous energy, an energy that hasn’t been tapped in to.” The golden man hurriedly tried to offer his explanation.

“And this is your reason for leading men in to Skyfire Avenue?”

Gao Yong was silent, as if he knew what was to come.

“Give the communicator back to that guy,” the Empress snapped.

Gao Yong lifted his head to look at Lan Lue, who was standing calmly to the side as though nothing had happened. The golden man took a deep breath and, with a dark glint in his eye, took a step forward to stand before Lan Jue. He handed him the communicator.

“Would you like to handle this, or should I?” Lan Jue asked indifferently.

The Empress’ sweet voice once more rang from the communicator. “I really never would have imagined in these three years you’d have run off to Skyfire Avenue. It is, in fact, quite a nice place. Thank you, I’ll deal with it.”

The corner of Lan Jue’ mouth curled in to a smile. “I see you’ve finally grown a little conscientious.”

The Empress laughed. “I know you feel for me, you don’t want to weaken my organization.”

“Gao Yong,” she barked.

The golden man lifted his head and looked directly at the communicator in Lan Jue’s hand.

“In accordance with his wishes you all will cut off one finger and pay him what he asked. Then you’ll get your asses back here. You’ll forget this whole issue with the stone ever happened.”

Gao Yong stood in stunned silence. Although in his heart he knew it was coming, he almost couldn’t believe it coming from his Empress’ mouth. This was the Moonfiend Empress, destroyer of cities! Arbiter of life and death, with a heart of stone who would shatter any opponent who dared defy her like an uncaring bolt of thunder. Yet in the face of this man before him, she orders a senior general to injure himself. It was beyond belief.

“Gao Yong!” The Empress’ powerful voice burst out.

“I refuse!” he blurted out, his voice full of indignation. Yes, he refused, how could he possibly be convinced to do otherwise.

“Empress, I’ve done no wrong. I’ve done nothing but what’s best for the Moonfiend Pirates. How could you treat me like this? You don’t fear disappointing my brothers?” Gao Yong shouted angrily at the communicator in Lan Jue’s hand.

The Empress was silent.

Lan Jue sighed once more. “Some people are so stupid there isn’t any medicine in the universe that can save them. Empress, let me help you teach them a lesson.”

The Moonfiend Empress sighed as well. “What’s your status on the Avenue?”

“Councilman,” Lan Jue replied.

“Then I appreciate you taking the trouble,” she said. “Keep that one alive, but the others I leave up to you. If they continue to cause you trouble then deal with the lot.”

Lan Jue smiled. “So be it. I’ll speak with you later.” He hung up.

His eyes rose to fix upon Gao Yong. “You refuse to submit?”

Gao Yong glared daggers back at him. “Why should I submit?”

“Very well then. I’ll give you all a chance,” Lan Jue said. “Beat me, and you all can leave Skyfire Avenue unmolested.”

Chapter 60: Gravity Manipulation

Gao Yong's eyes veritably filled with evil intent. It exuded from his every pore, filling the air though it could not be physically seen.

The place they found themselves in, this world of white, was simple and bleak but did not effect the abilities of the Adepts that inhabited it.

Gao Yong wasn't stupid, he knew that trying to escape from this place with his henchmen would be futile. The legends of Skyfire Avenue were true, he knew, and likely greater than he even expected. As for the young man before him he'd learned from listening to his exchange with the Empress that he was a Skyfire Councilman, and a ninth-level Talent.

But so was he! What was the difference? How had he gained such favor from the Empress? Gao Yong had never heard such mild and sweet words from his mistress, she who was so noble, beautiful and powerful. This guy before him, what was it he had?

He was angry and indignant, yes, but beneath that swam a current of jealousy!

His right foot took a step forward, and a terrifying rumble exuded from Gao Yong's position. Around them, the color of the entire planet began to change.

Lan Jue very slightly lifted an eyebrow. "Gravity manipulation."

He felt as though his body had become lead. Gravity tore at him, trying to crush him to the ground.

Gravity manipulation, certainly a powerful Discipline. Cultivated to it's highest levels, it could effect even the smallest hair. One could make themselves light as a feather, and increase the effects of gravity a thousand-fold on their enemies. It was a powerful ability, even were you to fight single-handed against a mecha.

At Gao Yong's motion the six silver men behind him also began to move.

They crossed their legs and sat, a mighty fluctuation of energy pouring

forth from their bodies.

And as the undulating powers of the six mingled with Gao Yong's own energies, they began to blend in to one.

The golden man's skin began to blacken. It was stark against the white backdrop of the world around them, and made him look like he had been infused with ink.

At that, even Lan Jue couldn't help his feelings from being written clearly on his face.

"Gravity overlay... your power expanding so long as you're near your people," Lan Jue observed with surprise.

"That's right." Gao Yong's pride was clear in his voice. "Though none of them exceed a six-level Talent, they have been with me for years. Their similar abilities when supplementing mine empower my Discipline from a third degree ninth-level to a fifth degree or higher. To beat me in the midst of my brothers will require no less than three top-level Talents."

"No wonder you so blatantly entered Skyfire Avenue," Lan Jue stated.

Gao Yong continued in his cold metallic voice. "Regardless of your ninth level Talent, under my powers of gravity you'll find even moving to be difficult, much less to endure with gravity compressing you. You would be crushed and broken by my power of gravity before you even knew who did it to you."

Lan Jue heaved yet another sigh. "Yup, that is indeed the power you hold."

"Then let me see what powers you hold," Gao Yong stated cruelly, "Lest I reduce you to dust."

"I know you're thinking, deep in your heart, why your Great Empress would speak to a man such as me in such a polite fashion," Lan Jue said. "Am I right?"

Gao Yong paused, causing his manipulation of the gravity force around them to change. Not weaker, but stronger still.

The area around Lan Jue had began to warp perceptibly.

“Then I’ll tell you.” Lan Jue smirked, as though the crushing field of gravity around him had no effect. “It’s because she’s scared of me!”

His allegations were punctuated with a dazzling blue light, bursting forth from his body.

The pale white world was as paper, and the field of gravity stains of ink. Lan Jue was the brush, sweeping through the ink to add an azure hue.

A violent peel of thunder arose, and the light encompassing Lan Jue became a great globe of roiling lightning.

The black field of increase gravity fled broke against the sudden burst of power and fled from around the Jewelry Master. Then, in an instant, he appeared before Gao Yong as though he’d been there all along.

He broke out of my control? He was a master of battlefield control, an adept of domination. This sort of situation was precisely the kind he feared the most. It meant not only was this man more powerful, but that he also had the specific ability to obliterate his power of manipulation.

The world grew bright, and once more Lan Jue soundlessly vanished. He reappeared, but not beside Gao Yong. Instead he stood behind the golden man’s silvery compatriots.

Six twisting bolts of lightning reached out like snakes, striking at the six hooded figures. The six-level Talents groaned in unison, then fell to the floor.

Gao Yong felt his gravity manipulation weaken considerably with the loss of their amplification. In that moment he dared not turn to see what had happened.

In a flash the world was afire in blue light, then Lan Jue appeared once more. The Phantom of Lightning was hunched beside the fallen bodies of his henchmen.

“Gao Yong, had you chosen to accept from the onset I wouldn’t have had anything further to say to you. Due to my words your Empress has offered

some good advice. These last few years I've grown, and my heart isn't as it once was." As he spoke, Lan Jue slowly lifted up the right hand of one of the downed henchmen. Deftly, he severed a finger.

"You... !" Gao Yong felt his chest tighten. Gravity around him shifted, and in the space of a moment he was beside Lan Jue. He launched a fist at the phantom of lightning, surrounding it with the weight of seven times normal gravity. He knew if he could land even one punch, he'd tear the bastard asunder.

But his fist merely tore through the air. Lan Jue was already beside the second subordinate, exacting the due punishment.

Since attaining the ninth rank of his talent, Gao Yong had never felt so humiliated. He roared at his shame, at Lan Jue, and launched himself forward.

But Lan Jue only stood. His eyes fixed upon the golden man, and flashed an ethereal blue.

Two beams of light radiated from those unsettling blue eyes.

The white world became blue. A deep, royal blue from heaven to earth. It was no forest of lightning, but a sea. An ocean of all-consuming electricity.

Chapter 61: Professional Ethics

“Here.” Lan Jue handed a strip of golden cloth to An Liu.

The silver woman tenderly opened the cloth to discover seven fingers and a check inside.

“Did you pay as well?” An Liu looked pointedly at Lan Jue.

“I can, but you’d have to pay me back,” he responded, beaming a smile at her.

“Fine.” An Liu grunted, her eyes softening somewhat.

Lan Jue went on. “Show these gentlemen out of Skyfire Avenue. Make sure they aren’t allowed back in.”

She nodded once again, straightening her posture before offering a formal bow. “I will be submitting a report concerning this dereliction of duty, and will await punishment.”

Lan Jue lifted his hand, wanting to pat her shoulder. But his hand stopped in the air when he saw her eyes. “It’s fine, don’t be so grave. Off you go, you’re busy.” He dropped his hand, turned, and made his way in to the jewelry store.

Ting ting ting!

“Welcome back boss,” Lin Guoguo greeted pleasantly.

“Clever Guoguo. Where’s Mika?” he asked.

“Mm,” Lin Guoguo grunted. “She’s over there sulking.”

Lan Jue chuckled and made his way behind the counter to spy Mika. He gave her a smile. “If you keep getting angry during working hours I’m going to have to dock your pay!”

Mika lifted her head to glare at Lan Jue. “When have you ever given us a paycheck?”

“Eh...” Lan Jue rubbed his nose defensively. “I actually don’t know how much the store makes... but what’s mine is yours!”

Mika's eyes adopted a lascivious glint. "Is that true for people, too?"

"Certainly not!" Lan Jue straightened with feigned indignation. "I'm a man of high moral integrity!"

"Pfft!" The sound didn't just come from Mika.

Lan Jue rubbed his face. "Right, don't be mad. You know why I didn't let you get involved."

Mika frowned, her voice carrying distinct hints of a pout. "To bully me."

Lan Jue gave her a wry smirk. "Your power is simply too dangerous. If you lose control think of what it'd do to the Avenue. Don't you like it here?"

Mika shot to her feet. "What do you think. Here!" She threw a memory stick at Lan Jue.

"The location of the power stone deposit?"

"Mm." Mika nodded her head.

"You two shouldn't always be so secretive! I get jealous!" Lin Guoguo pressed closer, her pink lip jutting forth.

Mika giggled, throwing her arms around Lin Guoguo and pecking her on the mouth. Lin Guoguo's face grew red, her eyes widening in surprise. She gave Mika a chastising look.

"I didn't see anything. I'm leaving." Lan Jue covered his eyes with one hand, and pinched his nose with the other for fear his nose would start bleeding*. He turned quickly and left.

"Coward," Mika mumbled.

"Miikaaa!" Lin Guoguo's furious voice rang through the store, causing Mika to jump.

"Fine, fine! I won't make you reciprocate." She quickly dodged around the corner, out of Guoguo's reach.

"You stole my first kiss!"

"Nonsense. Didn't you take advantage of him while he slept, kissing him

after saving you that one time?”

“How did you know!”

“I was only pretending to sleep!” Mika said around a devilish smile.

“Mika! I’ll kill you!”

ζ

Early in the morning, after washing her face and teeth, Zhou Qianlin began her morning run.

Most were still in the grip of dreams at this time of day. She loved her morning runs; they swept away the sleep from her body, got her blood circulating, so she had spirit for the rest of the day.

However, compared with her usual demeanor, her mind was racing faster than her body.

He was an electives teacher, so he needn’t come for class every day. She’d forgotten to ask yesterday what his schedule was.

She hadn’t thought the guy would so readily help her look after her elderly friends.

At the memory she couldn’t help her pretty face from adopting a small smile.

“What are you thinking about, that’s making you smile like a little fox.” The voice suddenly arose from behind her, making her jump. She turned her head and spotted someone set not far off, arms crossed over his chest.

“You, what are you doing here?” The mountain was home to many of the most rich and notable. The security was supposed to be impeccable.

Lan Jue spoke up. “You know, if this mountain is so hard to get on to, how am I supposed to protect you?” He swept his eyes over her figure as he spoke.

She wore a plain white jumpsuit, and a similarly pale handkerchief

pulling her fine black hair in to a ponytail. She wore no make-up, allowing her natural beauty to shine forth.

Zhou Qianlin frowned. "You know this over-inflated ego of yours is terribly unattractive. You don't think I'll call security?"

Lan Jue looked shocked. "You wouldn't. I'm taking you out to dinner tonight, I deserve some slack."

"Hmph!" Zhou Qianlin was highly amused by his apparent trepidation. But she quickly recovered. "Go on. Why'd you come out here so early in the morning."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I'm a bodyguard aren't I? Of course I'm here to send you to school."

Zhou Qianlin responded, "I find it hard to believe you."

"It's true," he said. "I don't have any classes, so I won't be going to the campus. I have something else to take care of. But I figured I'd come early to send you there. I'll come back tonight to bring you out to dinner. We can take my bike like yesterday."

Zhou Qianlin stared at him openmouthed. "Well look at you, being responsible!"

Lan Jue stuck his chin out proudly. "It's called 'professional ethics'!"

"Well then wait for a little while. Let me change then we'll go."

"No hurry. I imagine you haven't eaten breakfast yet. Eat, then we'll leave. I'll wait for you here." Lan Jue smiled at her.

"Alright," she responded, then turned and ran back towards her home.

Bai Xiao watched her daughter bounce in to the room. It was strange, she thought. "What's got you in such a good mood, Linlin?"

"Am I happy?" Zhou Qianlin replied.

"It's been a while since I've seen that smile from my daughter, like a thousand lilies blooming," came her response.

Her face grew red, and she stuck her tongue out at her mother. "Oh

really?”

Bai Xiao nodded earnestly.

“Is breakfast ready, mom?” Zhou Qianlin quickly attempted to change the subject.

“Yup. You got back early this morning. Your father just got up.”

Zhou Qianlin giggled. “Alright, I’ll go eat first then!”

“Sure. Qianlin, do you want the car to send you today?”

Zhou Qianlin gave her mother a helpless look. “Mom, why do you ask the same questions every day. Our house and car all belong to the Eastern Alliance. They aren’t ours for personal use! I’ll send myself to school.” She spoke over her shoulder as she made her way to the dining room.

Watching her daughter’s retreating figure Bai Xiao couldn’t help but smile. “Little minx, you’re so pretty! Your mother doesn’t feel safe! Although... never mind. So long as you’re happy. Maybe the breaking of that marriage contract was a good thing.”

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*A common anime trope, seeing something sexy or exciting causes the viewing character to suffer explosive nose bleeds.

Chapter 62: Spirit Caller Power Gem

The early morning was a little cold, but fresh and clear.

Lan Jue pedaled his antique bicycle, leisurely meandering towards the university campus. Zhou Qianlin sat behind, smiling prettily. She would, on occasion, pull funny faces at his back.

“What are you going to do today?” she asked casually.

“It’s a secret.”

“Fine then.” Zhou Qianlin huffed. “By the way, how often are your classes?”

“Two days a week,” he replied.

“So few? That’s intentional, right? You make a terribly incompetent bodyguard.” She muttered in malcontent.

“I’ve done some looking around,” he said. “The campus looks relatively safe. Besides, I can’t usually leave Skyfire Avenue. If you need something I’m a call away.”

As he spoke he managed the bicycle with one hand and reached back with the other to hand Zhou Qianlin something.

Zhou Qianlin reflexively reached up and took it.

In her hand was a pendant of some white metal, inlaid with an occidental topaz. It was simple and delicate.

“What’s this,” she said crankily.

“It’s a power gem. Called a Spirit Caller. CRanked. Two gems are linked together, and when worn share their thoughts with the person on the other end. The link can’t be broken or interrupted. I’ve already linked it with another, and it should work anywhere on the planet. So long as we’re both on Planet Skyfire, all you need to do is infuse it with your will and you’ll link up with me.

“So this is a Spirit Caller power gem.” Zhou Qianlin turned the pendant around in her hand, staring at it appraisingly.

“You know about them?” He sounded surprised.

Zhou Qianlin nodded. “I’ve heard of them. Even though they’re ranked as a C, their rarity and function makes them no less valuable than your average B-ranked power gem.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Are you impressed?”

“Nope. Standard for a bodyguard.” Her tones were matter-of-fact, but she didn’t hesitate to slip it around her neck. The pendant was cold, she could feel it through her clothing. It drew a small shudder from her and he thought that the pendant had just been in Lan Jue’s hand caused her to blush.

“If that’s what you think then throw it away!” Lan Jue growled. He pressed hard against the pedals and the bike shot forward.

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Five hundred meters from the NEU.

Zhou Qianlin’s sleek hair swung as it was caught by the wind. She called towards Lan Jue. “I’m off!”

“Mmhm. I’ll be here to pick you up tonight.” Lan Jue was still in a poor mood.

She gave him a cunning grin. “Bodyguard, if you aren’t afraid I’ll make you lose face, I’ll just wear my school uniform to attend your dinner.” A fair, clear laugh tumbled from her lips as she turned and made her way towards the university.

Lan Jue stared at her back, slack-jawed. “Am I bodyguard or a baby-sitter? I must have been having a stroke yesterday, why else did I invite her to dinner. Now I’m responsible for how she dresses? Ugh! Let me go get you a bikini, see if you dare wear it!”

By the time he’d ridden his bicycle back to Skyfire Avenue, the day was in full swing. Beams of radiant sunlight beamed down upon the street. The

fine buildings were blanketing in the golden glow of the sun.

He went directly to Zeus' Jewelry Shop. As he entered and the melodious doorbell sounded, four pairs of pretty eyes turned towards him.

Today it wasn't just Ke'er and Xiuxiu who manned the store, but Lin Guoguo and Mika were in attendance as well.

Each of the four beauties had their difference, but at this moment they stood in one line, a team in fine black skirts. Lan Jue stared back at each of them in silence.

Mika, with her flowing red hair, pink eyes and black-framed glasses.

Lin Guoguo, adorable with her short green hair and pale green eyes.

The elegantly beautiful black hair and eyes of Xiuxiu.

Finally, the cute and vivacious Ke'er, her short blue hair matching her deep blue eyes.

Four gorgeous women, four styles of hair, four fine pairs of eyes. Each looked beautiful and refined in the work uniform, the sort of beauty that could make a man shudder.

Where each to turn around, they'd reveal the golden lightning bolts sewn in to their skirts.

"Hey boss!" All four, with hands folded before their skirted waists, bowed as he entered. The sudden inundation of bosom shot his blood-pressure in to the red.

"Eh..." Lan Jue took a frightened step back. "Whaaat's going on here?"

The four women rose in unison. Ke'er spoke first. "Nothing! This is how we're supposed to act, isn't it?" She giggled prettily.

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. "You all never show any respect, and suddenly this? There must be a reason, so go on spit it out."

Each young woman smiled devilishly at the accusation. Lin Guoguo covered her mouth, speaking in quiet tones. "Boss knows us well. Really it's nothing, just... if you're planning to go somewhere we'd like to come

along. It's be so long since we've traveled to any other planet."

"Knock it off," Lan Jue muttered helplessly. "You guys get three holidays a year. Where do you want to go that you can't get to?"

It was Mika's turn. "How is that the same? We go by ourselves, or the boss takes us out to play. Boss, I was the one that found the mineral vein for the power gems. If anyone should go along it should be me."

"I wanna go too!" Ke'er's pretty face was scrunched in discontent.

Lin Guoguo batted her big, pretty eyes at Lan Jue. "Boss, you should do what you like," her pretty voice whispered. "If you don't want to bring Guoguo, that's fine." Her eyes had grown watery as they trained on him.

Only Xiuxiu stood quietly, smiling at Lan Jue. But her eyes alone spoke volumes.

Lan Jue shook his head. "I knew it. Wolves in sheeps clothing, all of you."

Mika snickered, and bounded to Lan Jue's side. She pulled at his wrist. "Boss, you've been different lately. More energetic. We just want to help that grow! Come on, taking us along will only make you look better – we're all pretty girls!"

Lan Jue looked defeated. "Alright, alright. First we'll research the location of the mineral deposit. If we really go, then we'll all go. I guess it has been a long time since I've taken you all out."

"That's right, Zeus' Amazons left the mercenary world years ago. We're afraid people will have forgotten about us! Even to the point people even dare come in our shop to cause trouble. Hyaa!" Ke'er jabbed her tiny fists fiercely through the air.

Lan Jue motioned with a flourish. "Shut the doors. To the back room, let's see what's going on with this mundus ore vein."

"As you wish, boss!" The four women called in chorus, excitement filling their sweet voices.

Chapter 63: Shattered Starfields

“Boss, according to the information from the man called Oliver, I’ve narrowed the location of the Mundus vein to somewhere in this region.” Mika pushed her glasses further up on her nose, lending her a distinctly intellectual appearance.

A curtain of pale yellow light appeared before Lan Jue and the four women. The orb it created was alive with twinkling lights – a star map.

“It must be there. The Shattered Starfields.” Lan Jue narrowed his brow.

The Shattered Starfields. It was a place Zeus and his Four Amazons were intimately familiar with.

It was situated in the very center of humanity’s three Great Alliances. By size alone it was larger than any one of the Alliances. It effectively cut off each from the other, requiring a wormhole to circumnavigate.

The interior was riddled with asteroid belts, each of them unstable. They moved without rhyme or reason. What’s more, strange planets resided within. The Three they were called, nestled within the depths of the belts themselves.

But there was more than these three planets and their belts, of course. A multitude of smaller planets could also be found. They were also unsafe and unstable, damaged from repeatedly passing through the shifting asteroid belts.

It was this instability, and the very real danger of destruction that ensured no large-scale airship ever dared sail through.

It was also why the Shattered Starfields had become a pirate’s playground. Larger ships were unable to pass, but smaller ships could traverse without incident owing to their increased maneuverability and the experience of their pilots. The three large planets hidden amidst the asteroid curtains were all hearth and home to pirates.

Pirate clans both large and small dominated the area. The smallest counted barely a hundred strong, while the largest could be separated in to

several divisions. The largest were housed on the three main planets, but the smaller ones also were home to smaller pirate clans. The more stable the planet, obviously, the more powerful the clan it was home to.

The Moonfiend Pirates were the first among the buccaneers. Their Moonfiend Empress was also known among them as the greatest of the Pirate Kings. Her strength and reputation is what allowed for those like Gao Yong to give in to their arrogance, and attempt to assault Skyfire Avenue.

Lan Jue looked upon three planets Mika had narrowed their search too. His face grew darker still. "If we want to go to any of those, we'll have to visit the Three first to resupply. They also keep moving, so we'll need to find a specific bearing to get to them. We'll need accurate starmaps from the Three to proceed.

Mika nodded. "Of course. So to find the Mundus vein we'll need supplies and maps from the Three, then we can get started. In my estimation the collision from the asteroid belts, and the friction it causes, would lead to the creation of all sorts of material. We should find a sizable vein."

Xiuxiu's apprehensive voice chimed in. "Even assuming we find it, extracting it will be no small problem. After all the starfields are pirate territory."

Lan Jue's pensive expression shifted, and he smiled. "It will indeed, but we'll have some help there. The Keeper and I have entered in to arrangement, sharing the proceeds. He's sure to lend some aid."

"That old scientist?" Lin Guoguo sounded taken aback.

Lan Jue nodded. "We're all denizens of the Avenue, aren't we? It would be rude not to share."

Ke'er stuck out her lower lip in defiance. "We don't need Skyfire Avenue's protection anyway."

Lan Jue only smiled, but Xiuxiu gave her a reprimanding poke.

Lin Guoguo went on. "Boss, give the word. When are we heading out?"

Lan Jue shut off the projector and turned to face the four girls. “Are we really all going? We’re leaving no one to keep shop?”

The women each looked at one another, but it was Xiuxiu who eventually dropped her head and spoke. “I can stay, boss.”

Mika wrapped her arm around Xiuxiu’s shoulder. “Stop being such a goodie-goodie already. It makes it hard to tease you.”

Ke’er spoke up. “Don’t tease sister Xiuxiu!”

Lin Guoguo winked an eye. “We have to pass out of the alliance, three million kilometers from the planet before we can jump through a wormhole and passed the alliance defenders. Then we’ll have to jump again through the collapsing wormhole. Then we’ll be in range of the Shattered Starfield. We’ll need seven days to get there, then considering travel within the system and a return flight, we’re looking at twenty-five days to a month so long as we don’t run in to any problems. Closing the shop for a month isn’t so long.”

“That’s right!” Ke’er vigorously nodded her head.

“Fine,” Lan Jue said. “Start preparing. Since we’re all leaving, we’ll leave as early as we can. Tomorrow morning.”

The women each looked at each other, their pretty eyes filled with excitement. “Thank you boss,” the spoke in unison.

Mika: “I’ll make sure we stick to the plan.”

Lin Guoguo: “I’ll prepare the airship.”

Ke’er: “I’ll be responsible for supplies.”

Xiuxiu: “I’ve got the equipment and resource assignment.”

Seeing the girls so excited caused Lan Jue’s smile to grow brighter. “This is all on us. Our own mission. We’ll call it Operation Crystal Incursion.”

“Yeah,” the girls answered together. It was like they’d all changed, a fire roiling in the depths of their pretty eyes.

Yes! Zeus’ Amazons. Three years of waiting, three years of silence. The

sleeping giant was finally awakening. How could they not be excited? It was as though the universe had suddenly opened up before them.

They each had the urge to shout it towards the heavens. Zeus is back!

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It was afternoon, and already the sunlight wasn't as dazzling as it had been in the morning. The sun had begun its trek to the horizon, and below it studies had begun to end for the day in the National Eastern University. Zhou Qianlin and Tang Mi were making their way from the campus.

"Where are you heading to tonight anyway, Qianlin? Why aren't you leaving with me?" Tang Mi asked in curiosity.

"I'm going to the beautician with mother," Qianlin answered. "She's coming to pick me up. You can go ahead and head out first."

Tang Mi continued suspiciously. "Skin like yours and you're still going to a beautician? If that's the case what am I supposed to do? Anyway, I'll head out then. I don't know what my brother's been up to either. Yesterday he let someone beat him to a pulp, and today he didn't even bother to come to school. I'll go home and look for him."

"Alright, I'll see you later."

Zhou Qianlin began walking. Five hundred meters later she saw a familiar antique bicycle.

Chapter 64: Hera?

“Let’s go!” Zhou Qianlin had become a natural sitting on the back seat of the bicycle. Lan Jue pushed the bike forward off the tip of his toes.

Lan Jue was garbed in simple attire; blue jeans, white leisure shoes and a white shirt. Simple and stylish.

Sitting behind him, Zhou Qianlin asked, “How long have you been waiting?”

“Only a little bit,” he replied.

“When’s your second class?”

“Actually there won’t be a second class for a little while,” Lan Jue said. “I was actually just going to tell you, I’m afraid I’m going to have to play hookie for a little while.”

“Huh?” Zhou Qianlin shot a confused gaze at his back.

He continued. “There’s a matter I have to deal with. I was just at the teaching affairs office asking for leave.”

For a moment she was speechless, but eventually found her voice. “You have one class, then ask for leave? Aren’t you afraid the school will dismiss you?”

Lan Jue smiled bitterly at the road before him. “They wouldn’t go so far as to dismiss me. But the Dean Wu’s face certainly wasn’t pretty.”

Zhou Qianlin chuckled. “Director Wu’s face is usually like that. But if you’re just going to leave like that what about your bodyguard responsibilities?”

“This is also something I wanted to ask you about. What do you think? This is a very important matter, something I have to handle in person. I have to head out to another planet so it’ll be a while.”

A tremor of anxiety thrilled through Zhou Qianlin’s eyes. “How long?”

“If there aren’t any troubles, about a month,” he said.

Zhou Qianlin fell silent.

Lan Jue didn't speak either, and the atmosphere became somber.

"I'm sorry! I really am a person of my word, but I really do have something that I must deal with. We'll just add the time to my service. However long I'm gone, we'll add that much time. And I'll find someone else to look after you during this time. You definitely won't be in any danger."

Zhou Qianlin shook her head. "I don't need anyone else to look after me. We'll just postpone the time."

"Hey, since when did you become so pliable?" Lan Jue was quite surprised at the change.

She huffed at him. "I'm not in the mood to haggle with you. But I need your guarantee, whatever you're doing can't interfere with your teaching qualifications. Otherwise doing your job is going to become much harder."

"Not a problem," he said without hesitation.

With the atmosphere once more light-hearted they continued, but a touch of anxiety still lingered in Zhou Qianlin's beautiful jade-green eyes. On the occasions her eyes landed upon Lan Jue, their depths grew even more complicated.

It didn't matter how strong Lan Jue's genetic talent was, he couldn't see the changes in those beautiful eyes.

The trip to Skyfire Avenue from the school wasn't a short one. The sky had already grown dark by the time they arrived.

Lan Jue dismounted the bike just outside of the Avenue. Even though the bike was man-powered, it was still considered machinery and thus was banned from use in Skyfire Avenue. But it could be pushed in, since it was – after all – an antique.

As a councilman, he also had the authority to bring 'normal' people in without incident.

Passing along the brick-lined, elegant simplicity of the Avenue caused

Zhou Qianlin to swing her eyes every which way in curiosity.

“They’re beautiful.” She couldn’t help the tones of amazement in her voice.

Lan Jue’s face betrayed a small smile. “The pride of Skyfire Avenue.”

“It’s deserved. What are we eating tonight?”

“First we’ve got to change clothes,” Lan Jue said.

She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him, wide-eyed. “You really prepared clothes for me?”

“That’s how reliable I am!”

Zhou Qianlin snorted a sarcastic laugh. “You’re such a sweetheart.”

“If you’d give me back those clothes I lent you that night, it’d be even better,” Lan Jue probed.

Zhou Qianlin raised her pretty brows. “Those are my sisters, not yours! Can you wear them? If you can fit then I’ll give it back.”

Lan Jue’s mouth curled in to a frown. “Forget I said anything...”

The whole of Skyfire Avenue stretched two thousand and eighty meters. It wasn’t long before the sapphire door of Zeus’ Jewelry Shop appeared before them.

“Compared to the other places, your shop is hideous.” Zhou Qianlin sneered at the door.

“Just missing a little of that rustic charm,” he said helplessly.

Ding ding ding! The bells above the door heralded their entrance.

“Hello and welco-” came Ke’er’s fair voice in greeting, though the final word caught in her throat as her eyes fell upon them. They grew large in disbelief.

“What is it, Ke’er?” Xiuxiu stopped tidying to look up at the sound of Ke’er’s strange voice. In an instant she, too, was as stupefied as her co-worker. For a moment her pretty face looked like she had a stroke. She looked almost frightened.

“H-hera?” Ke’er and Xiuxiu called out, almost on top of one another. Their disbelief was so strong that they feared even speaking her name might make her disappear.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin stood shoulder to shoulder. His voice raised slightly as he spoke. “Finally it isn’t just me who thinks that. Let me introduce you, this is Zhou Qianlin. Hera’s little sister. They’re just very similar. Qianlin, these two are my work partners, Xiuxiu and Ke’er.”

Zhou Qianlin gave them both a shy smile. “Hello.”

The two women still hadn’t totally recovered. They exchanged glances, still unsure of what stood before them.

“You.. you really aren’t Hera?” Ke’er asked.

Zhou Qianlin gave a small laugh. “I’m Zhou Qianlin. A student at National Eastern University.”

Ke’er pat her chest. When she spoke a tinge of fear still lingered. “Oh that scared me! I was going to say, how could Hera survive standing on an exploding planet!”

“Ke’er!” Xiuxiu caught Lan Jue’s dark expression, hurrying to shut her up.

Ke’er instantly became aware of her mistake, wincing and sticking out her tongue in embarrassment. “Hi, miss Zhou, please come in.”

Lan Jue huffed a small sigh and helplessly shook his head. “Xiuxiu, please bring miss Zhou to the back. I’ve already prepared some clothes for her. Please have her change. I’ve invited her to eat at the Gourmet’s tonight.”

“Right away.” Xiuxiu dropped her head respectfully, motioning for Zhou Qianlin to follow.

Zhou Qianlin followed on her heels. Watching her leave, Ke’er then quickly jumped to Lan Jue’s side. She put on her gossip voice. “Boss! Miss Zhou really isn’t Hera? She’s really her sister?”

Lan Jue forced a smile. “What do you think? If she were Hera, I’d be

happier than anyone. Unfortunately that's not the case."

Ke'er leaned in, speaking cryptically. "You've been so different lately boss. You've been in a better mood. It's because of her, isn't it?"

"Eh?" Lan Jue's eye's narrowed at her.

Chapter 65: The Gourmet's Boutique

Elegant dinner jacket, knee-length white skirt, all the same hue, all masterfully made. Her pretty face was lined with silken black hair, and her blue eyes – the color of the sea – twinkled radiantly. She was like a painting, beautiful and moving.

“Not bad.” Lan Jue nodded his head approvingly.

Zhou Qianlin's face grew red. No young woman could resist pretty clothing. “Thank you.”

“You're young. It wouldn't do to accessories with jewelry that's too fancy. A simple necklace will suffice.” Lan Jue smiled softly.

She shook her head. “I'm not interested in any jewelry.”

“Jewelry is a woman's best companion. Wearing jewelry isn't about displaying wealth or luxury, but to set off your own natural beauty. Your clothes are cut with a v-neck. It's not deep, but it requires a necklace. It'll show off your complexion, and even further improve the disposition you exude.”

“I guess I'll wear one then.” Zhou Qianlin fumbled through her bag to produce a small pouch. She opened it and produced the Soul Speaker gem Lan Jue had given her earlier.

Lan Jue looked surprised. “I'd actually prepared you a nice sapphire necklace.”

“No need, I'll wear this,” she insisted.

“Alright then.”

“Help me put it on.”

“Lan Jue took up the necklace and positioned himself behind Zhou Qianlin. He slipped the necklace around her throat and fastened it.

It was simple, unadorned, with no fine metals or ornamenting gemstones. The soul speaker gem itself emitted a gentle yellow light, but it did not clash. It added the final touch, highlighting Zhou Qianlin's pure

and simple temperament.

“Let’s go.” Lan Jue offered his right arm, and Zhou Qianlin responded by slipping her hand around his elbow. They pushed the door open and stepped out.

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“I really had no idea Hera had a little sister,” Ke’er was saying. She turned her head when Xiuxiu offered no response.

Xiuxiu’s frail form, stooped over the counter, jerked suddenly.

“Xiuxiu, what’s wrong?” Ke’er hastened to her side.

“I’m fine,” she responded, though her voice was hoarse.

Realization came over Ke’er suddenly as she looked at her co-worker. “You’re worried about the boss and miss Zhou. She isn’t Hera! Don’t think too much.”

Xiuxiu gently shook her head, sitting a little straighter. She rubbed away a tear that had begun to creep down her face. But it didn’t hide her reddening eyes.

“But she looks exactly like her.”

Ke’er spoke softly to her. “But that doesn’t make her Hera. Think about it. Her voice, her mood, her mannerisms all are different. Not to mention younger. But I don’t know why the boss found her.”

Xiuxiu shook her head sheepishly. “I’m sorry Ke’er. I think too much.”

“Ke’er wrapped her arms around Xiuxiu and gave her a hug. She sighed as she continued. “Xiuxiu, I’ve actually been wanting to tell you... when the boss looks at us, every time you can see how much he cares!”

Xiuxiu lifted her head, and that normally tender light in her eyes was undercut by a current of determination.

If one were trying to find the most unimpressive structure on Skyfire Avenue, the old Chinese-style shop with its carved purple door would probably be it.

It couldn't accurately be described as a shop. Only a minority of Skyfire's residents understood that this particular building held the greatest delicacies on the planet. It was, after all, the Gourmet's personal boutique, not open to the public.

The store here on the Avenue and its sister in Skyfire Underground were as alike as apples to oysters. While this one was small and narrow, the Undergrounds was no less expansive than the Keeper's pharmacy – and that place served nearly all the Adepts who visited Skyfire. This place was simply used for the Gourmet to entertain friends.

Lan Jue pulled open the door and motioned for Zhou Qianlin to enter.

As Qianlin entered she was immediately met with a distinct fragrance. It wasn't pungent, but unique. It almost filled her up.

A long, simple wooden table stretched the length of the room, and at its sides sat five people. As she made her way inside, every pair of eyes turned to fall upon her.

Zhou Qianlin felt like a pauper beneath their gaze, but each rose politely to greet her. They all nodded and spoke kind, respectful greetings.

Lan Jue had entered at that point, and stood at her side. "When there's good food you all certainly don't waste any time! Introductions, this is my friend Zhou Qianlin."

"Hello everyone," she greeted with a small smile, nodding to those gathered.

Lan Jue pointed to the one furthest from them, dressed meticulously with the head of silver hair. "This is our Wine Master, who manages the Gothic Winery on the Avenue."

“Nice to meet you,” she said again politely.

“Welcome, beautiful lady.” The Wine Master stepped forward, and in accordance with noble custom bent to kiss her hand.

Lan Jue continued, indicating a tall and stocky man in his forties. He rose a good head taller than Lan Jue, and his white shirt was stretched taught over his stalwart frame. His face was craggy, his skin tanned bronze, covered with a finely sculpted beard.

“This is our Mechanist. We also call him the Blacksmith.”

“Hello,” she said gracefully.

The Blacksmith bubbled with laughter. “This is the first time the Jewelry Master has brought someone along, welcome!” He did not move forward, but instead gave her an amicable nod.

“This is our Coffee Master.”

“And our Tailor.” Lan Jue indicated the other woman present besides Zhou Qianlin.

The Tailor was herself a beautiful woman, of medium build with long brown hair. She was clad in a simple white blouse with the sleeves rolled to her arms and a tight black skirt.

Upon introductions her eyes grew bright. “Qianlin, you really are gorgeous. I simply have make you some clothes.”

Zhou Qianlin laughed prettily. “Thank you very much, miss Tailor.”

“Please sit,” Lan Jue said, pulling free a chair for her.

Zhou Qianlin hesitated. “But there’s one other you haven’t introduced.”

“That one doesn’t need an introduction,” Lan Jue said casually, “so as to save us all his blathering.”

“Jewelry Master! My best friend!” An agitated voice bubbled up from across the table, a pale man with indignant expression. His voice was muffled from the lollipop stuck between his lips.

He stood and made his way towards Zhou Qianlin, his expression

changing to adopt a wide smile. He began speaking fast enough to make Zhou Qianlin dizzy. “Hello there pretty lady, I am the universally popular and wisest among us. You can call me: the Accountant! Do you have a boyfriend? It can’t be this Jewelry Master right? Don’t be fooled by his finery, inside he’s all rubbish. A normal plebian. But me, I’m the young one with all the potential!”

Chapter 66: The Bluefin Tuna

“Slow it down, there’s no hurry,” Zhou Qianlin said good-naturedly.

“Shut up, or I’ll beat the crap out of you!” The Mechanist’s growling voice thrummed through the room as he shook his large fist under the Accountant’s nose.

“Only cowards resort to violence!” The accountant shot back.

“Call me a coward and you’ll regret it. All I know is, you keep running your mouth and I’ll crush you to paste, then scrape you out the door!” The Mechanist’s harsh voice threatened.

The Accountant’s face paled. “B-bowing to superior physical might is the wise decision. I’ll tolerate it, for now!”

Zhou Qianlin struggled to stifle her laughter at seeing this strange man. He was a bit of a clown.

The argument was punctuated with the rise of the back curtain. The Gourmet appeared bearing a large tray, upon which were perched eight delicate square-shaped plates. Each bore a large seaweed roll, though their contents were unclear.

“Here comes the delicious food! What is it? What is it?” The Accountant nearly jumped for joy.

“Shut up!”

The Gourmet placed the platter atop the table. “Our appetizer is a minced handroll. Help yourselves. Made from the left-over pieces while I was carving the Bluefin, wrapped in seaweed. There is no seasoning, just the delicious original flavors of meat itself combined with the faint additions of the wrap. One for everyone.” As he spoke he took up one for himself. One bite, two, and then it was finished. Afterwards his eyes fell upon Zhou Qianlin, and he smiled amicably.

“This is the Gourmet,” Lan Jue introduced.

“Hello, thank you for hosting this lovely dinner,” she said, turning

towards him.

The Gourmet chuckled. “No need to be so polite. Welcome, welcome, please eat.” He motioned for her to choose a wrap, then turned and left.

The Accountant was first to reach out for a wrap, but his hand was slapped away by the Mechanist.

“What now?! I can’t use food to plug up my mouth, isn’t that what you want?” The Accountant fumed.

The Mechanist pointed towards the Wine Master, who had stood and walked off to the side. He stopped by a box.

Lan Jue’s eyes grew bright, and rose to his feet as he followed the Wine Master with his gaze.

The silver metallic box opened, and from within a faint white wisp of air emanated forth.

“Sherry,” Lan Jue stated, a grin plastered on his face.

Zhou Qianlin gave Lan Jue a curious expression. “How do you know that’s sherry?”

“Temperature and grade,” he said. “Different types of alcohol each have specific suitable temperatures at which to drink them. For red wine, that’s fifteen degrees. The incubator wouldn’t have released steam like you saw at that temperature. White wine, on the other hand, is best at five degrees. Which of course would produce that sort of steam. Champaign is often enjoyed at a similar temperature, but it wouldn’t be suitable for this meal, clearly. And so, it must be sherry. It’s only white wine that can cause the natural flavors of seafood to blossom forth.”

The Wine Master first produced eight glasses from within the box, followed by a bottle of wine. It was significantly larger than an average bottle – roughly three liters. However, Lan Jue’s face dropped when he spotted the label. “A common blend.”

The Wine Master shot him a withering glance. “For Bluefin Tuna, cold and dry sherry is best. What would you prefer?”

Lan Jue smirked. "It's fine. And quite the bottle. It should be of adequate quality."

The Wine Master gave the bottle a gentle push, and it slid towards Lan Jue. He tossed him a bottle opener.

Lan Jue skillfully opened the bottle, and lifted it up. He placed his thumb in the punt and wrapped his fingers around the base before moving to the Wine Master's side and pouring him a few fingers.

The Wine Master picked up the glass and gave it a swirl before bringing it to his nose. He inhaled deeply, took a sip, and in the midst of appreciating it's aftertaste gave Lan Jue a small nod. "It's a relatively ordinary village wine, but of fine status. The advantages of a larger bottle."

"A large bottle can be that good?" The Accountant asked.

The Wine Master cast him a dismissive glance. "The wine is wasted on you."

The Accountant glowered dubiously, but dared not say anything before the Wine Master.

Lan Jue laughed in spite of himself. "In a larger bottle the total volume is much higher. When preserved it retains it's flavor for longer. If we assume the average bottle is about seven hundred and fifty milliliters, which could be stored for around thirty years, then a one point five liter should last over forty. This three liter can last even longer. In regards to taste, since it's all the same wine in higher volume, it can stand longer exposure to oxygen. The taste will change over time. And so, higher volume bottles of wine are held in higher esteem, and are of higher quality. This is particularly true of older wines."

As he spoke he'd arrived before the Tailor. He poured her approximately two fingers before moving to Zhou Qianlin, then the Wine Master, Mechanist, Coffee Master, Accountant and himself.

His method of pouring looked simple, but followed the rules of etiquette; women first, followed by seniority.

Zhou Qianline swirled the wine in her glass, and the faint scent of the

sherry wafted up to fill her nostrils. She took a small sip, and was immediately swept up in the sweet burn as it slipped passed her throat. She felt it tingle through her whole body. Her pretty eyes sparkled.

A pink meat filled the wraps, not something that appeared terrible attractive to eat. There was no distinct scent, either. Zhou Qianlin turned her head to look at Lan Jue. It was her first time trying something like this.

Lan Jue smiled at her. “Go on and try it. We only get this opportunity about once a year.”

The Accountant couldn't help but interject. “Jewelry Master, what's so nice about this particular fish? This is also my first time partaking.”

The Coffee Master rolled his eyes. “Letting you worm your way in was a mistake. But for the sake of our two beautiful guests I'll educate you.”

“Bluefin Tuna live in the deep ocean, and are considered mature when they reach fifty pounds. In truth, freshly pulled from the water they aren't at their best. Five days on ice is the sweet spot. It gives it time to release it's amino acids. After five days of acid discharge is when they reach the highest point of deliciousness – which is the point we're at right now. As for the richest part of the tuna, that would be the area around it's belly. Made in to a paste, as it is in the wraps, it isn't as ambrosial as the belly, but it certainly is still something special to eat.”

Chapter 67: Gluttonous Feast

The flavor! It was the first thing that filled Zhou Qianlin's mind as she popped the roll in to her mouth. She couldn't imagine how she'd never had something so delicious before. She took a quick sip of that sweet and spicy wine, which elevated the flavor to even greater heights.

For a long moment Zhou Qianlin tried to contain herself, but soon couldn't help but lean towards Lan Jue. "Amazing," she said in quiet tones.

"The best is yet to come," he whispered in her ear.

His breath in her ear caused her pretty face to redden ever so slightly. She moved away.

Not long after the wraps had been finished, the second course arrived. Everyone was provided a small copper pot with an alcohol burner in its base to heat the plate. Within the 'hot pot' simmered a simple kelp soup.

Next were provided several plates, upon which were long strips of fish. They were of a slightly darker hue than those used in the wraps.

"Mid-abdominal meat. Place the strips in the water. After it's boiled and the meat turns white, then it's ready to be eaten. But don't let it sit too long." The Gourmet sat to join his guests. Lan Jue poured him a glass of wine.

He then turned to Zhou Qianlin. "Also part of the fish belly, but not as rich. You can eat it raw or boiled. For balance we don't want the oily sensation from eating it raw, so we'll have it b oiled."

After providing each of the diners with a helping of sauce, the Gourmet took a sip of the sherry. He shot the Wine Master a quick glance.

The Wine mastered responded with cool indifference. "Don't give me that look. There are too many people." More people meant more wine would be consumed. And for each bottle enjoyed that was one less bottle in store. This was especially poignant for his rarer stock.

The soups began to boil, and the fish was placed inside. In only a few short moments pink became white and the fish was extricated from the

hot water to be eaten. It was smeared with a vinegar-based sauce, enhanced with secret ingredients before bites were taken. The outside was boiled white while the depths remained red, like frosted hawthorn cakes.

The meat didn't have the flavor of the upper abdominal slices from before, but when paired with the sauce it's taste was almost beyond compare.

Side dishes of pickled vegetables were then scattered across the table to be paired with the meal.

The hot pots were cleared away and slices of fish sashimi were prepared, from all parts of the fish. Light pink, light red, deep red – they were brought out in waves, in pieces large and small. It was presented with horse radish and wasabi, and everyone lapsed in to silence as they enjoyed the food.

The fifty-two pound fish was truly too much to finish despite there being eight of them. However, the Gourmet had already accounted for this, and planned to bring the remainders down to the Underground for when he entertained other distinguished guests.

“The final course. Fried fish head and neck.” The Gourmet returned with a massive platter, atop of which was the head and neck of the tuna roasted to a golden hue. He set it before the watchful eyes of the guests.

The face itself was ferocious, and compared to what had come before looked a sight less appetizing.

“It certainly doesn't look very good. Does it really taste alright?” The Accountant eyes the platter, unconvinced.

But no sooner had he asked than two of the other guests had already tucked in. Two pairs of old Chinese-style chopsticks had plucked clear the eyes, and returned only a moment later to begin plucking away at what meat remained.

“Wow, the face even.” The Accountant still eyed the fish head with uncertainty. On the other hand he knew the others to be accomplished foodies, especially the first two to partake – Jewelry Master Lan Jue and

the usually restrained Wine Master. With the evidence presented to him, the head had to be delicious.

The others were also quick to move, and it took only a short time for the head to be reduced to nearly nothing.

Zhou Qianlin watched Lan Jue as his fingers shot out like lightning to snap up the fish, and even though her taste buds were still full of the taste of the dish from earlier she trusted Lan Jue's judgement.

"Fish eyes, they clear vision and nourish the eyes. Make it like crystal. Have some." Lan Jue placed the eye he plucked free upon Zhou Qianlin's plate.

Her face scrunched in to a look of distaste, and she pushed the small morsel back unto his plate. "You go ahead."

Lan Jue gave her a flat look. "You aren't scared are you?" The eye was passed back like a ping-pong ball.

Zhou Qianlin's face grew red, but she said nothing.

"Alright, try this then." He exchanged the eye for a bit of face meat.

The Gourmet chuckled to the side. "Gluttons know what good food is. The average person wouldn't be interested in trying fish head or neck. It's usually greedy chefs who save that part for themselves. Bluefish Tuna, as a deep sea fish, doesn't have a lot of meat in its face. Instead it's composed of colloid, the tastiest part. Best of the best.

Sure enough, as the morsel slipped past her lips Zhou Qianlin was overcome with the mingling pungent flavors of the meat and the distinct texture of the colloid. The explosion of taste would forever be branded in to her memory.

The Accountant had begun to participate, but was unable to procure much for himself. His strength and dexterity were a far sight less capable than the others around the table. It was a failing of his genetics that, though he was not considered slow, his natural abilities were less in comparison. Compared with the fact that the Mechanist kept shoving him out of the way, this left the Accountant with only the crispy brown skin of

the fish left to enjoy. The skin was delicious in it's own right, but did not have any of the colloid the others were reveling in.

The wondrous feast came to it's conclusion, and though there was bitterness evident in the Accountant's eyes, no one paid him any mind.

"Thank you, Gourmet. I'm going to head out." The Tailor stood, nodded politely towards the Gourmet and turned to leave. She paused, however, to face Zhou Qianlin. "Qianlin, please remind Lan Jue to bring you by my shop sometime. You have an excellent figure, you need a set of fine garments to match. I'll be thinking on it, and when you come by we'll take your measurements."

"I'll send you off." The Coffee Master stood and joined the Tailor at her side. She shot him a disparaging glance but said nothing. She said her farewells and left.

Lan Jue also stood. "It's our time to leave as well." There was no need for him to offer thanks, his relationship with the Gourmet didn't require it.

"If you come across any particularly tasty morsels in your travels, you keep me in mind," their host said.

"Hm?" Lan Jue blinked, giving the Gourmet a suspicious glance. "How'd you know I was going on a trip?"

The Gourmet rounded on the Accountant. "With this one's big mouth hanging around, how could I not know?"

Lan Jue's features darkened as he looked at the Accountant, making the man shiver.

"You dared to spy on my business?"

"Eh... J-jewelry Master, listen. It wasn't on purpose. I just sort of chanced upon the information. I just know that you and those pretty workers of your are up to something unconventional, hehe, n-no idea what you want to do exactly!"

Chapter 68: The End?

To Zhou Qianlin, Lan Jue appeared passive and gentle. He did not react to the Accountant's malfeasance. However, as they turned to leave the Gourmet's small apartment a tendril of lightning snaked soundlessly along the ground under the Accountant's feet. Every hair on his body stood on end.

"This won't happen again. Otherwise, I'll throw you out of the Avenue myself." The Wine Master had also stood, staring daggers at the offender as he spoke. He left on Lan Jue's heels.

The Accountant opened his mouth, and a tendril of smoke slithered from between his lips. The muscles of his face twitched uncontrollably. "You have to believe me, I was just having some fun! I didn't mean anything by it."

The Mechanist reached out and grabbed the Accountant by the throat. "It's because I believe you that I want to beat you even worse."

The Gourmet interjected gently. "Were it not be a waste of my food, I'd beat you myself until you threw it all back up. You better think up some way to make it up to the Jewelry Master."

The sky had grown dark in the interim. The Avenue was lit only by the lights of the shops that lined its sides, and though not bright it added to the rustic charm of the Avenue's antique construction.

Lan Jue walked in silence, Zhou Qianlin a step behind.

"Are you angry?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "The guy's just that way, he didn't do it to hurt me specifically. It's not really worth getting angry with him over. I'm just thinking of other things."

"Oh?" Zhou Qianlin watched him carefully.

Lan Jue stopped and turned to face Zhou Qianlin. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

“What?” Her confusion only grew.

“You’re so like her that in my mind, at certain times I forget you aren’t. It’s wrong, Hera is the only one in my heart. You aren’t her replica, not her replacement. And so, I apologize. In the future I’ll be only your bodyguard. After these three years, when my contract ends, we’ll part ways and have no more contact.”

Lan Jue’s voice was distant, detached. As he spoke, even he himself felt he probably went too far.

But he had no choice. Ke’er’s words had woken him up. Had Zhou Qianlin not begun to replace Hera, at least in his mind, would he have agreed to three years as a bodyguard? Would he have become an instructor at a university? And he even brought her to the Avenue, to participate in this special meal. All of this together meant only one thing; she had begun to mean something to him.

The wondrous flavors of the meal still dominated his taste buds, but in spite of their valiant efforts he couldn’t shake these thoughts. Zhou Qianlin wasn’t his Hera. His Hera was gone. Logic told him he mustn’t continue, else one day Zhou Qianlin replace Hera as his most beloved.

It was best to deal with something like this in the beginning. The longer he let it be, the harder it would become to do the right thing.

So he had no recourse but to speak up.

Zhou Qianlin looked at him, speechless. There was no change in the expression of her pretty face. But her eyes couldn’t conceal everything, and the secrets were hidden there.

She gave him a long, piercing stare. Her deep green eyes were deep, as though capable of drinking his soul in to their depths. Under that heavy gaze, Lan Jue’s heart couldn’t help but skip a beat. He felt the pang in his chest, though it was not solely from her look.

“Qianlin, you’re a nice girl. I know what I said hurt you, but...”

“Fine.” She replied softly.

She followed that with a burst of pretty, tintinnabular laughter.

“Are...” Lan Jue looked at her, dumbfounded. “Are you alright?”

Zhou Qianlin shook her head. “You men. You think all women under the sky just love you. Surely you don’t think I felt something for you?”

“...”

Zhou Qianlin’s hard gaze kept him pinned. “If you think I like you, or you’re afraid I’ll like you sometime in the future, then you have nothing to worry about. You took my body, which means I’ll have to remember you for the rest of my life, but when I do it will be in regret. You said it, you’re just my bodyguard and nothing more. I’ve never thought of you as anything more. Don’t think of yourself as someone special, got it? This dinner was nice, now send me home.”

The words still hung in the air as she turned to leave, a small smile on her face.

Lan Jue stood in place, frozen for a good few seconds. Eventually he began to follow.

Her face was calm, revealing nothing. But deep in her eyes lived something strange, fluctuating. There was gratification, regret, pain, and something unexplainable that flowed within her.

The entire way back to her mountaintop home was spent in silence.

“Alright, here’s fine.” Zhou Qianlin stopped and smiled towards Lan Jue as she spoke.

“Right,” he said, nodding his head.

“You’re heading out tomorrow, be careful. Oh, by the way, so you don’t misunderstand let me make this clear. I do not care for you, I say this so that you make sure to come back ready to act effectively as my bodyguard.”

“I will.” He nodded again.

“Goodbye.” She waved a hand, and left without saying anything else.

Lan Jue watched her leave, unmoving. After a moment he snorted, and strode away.

He cast the experience away as though it were nothing. Still, for reasons he didn't understand, a dull ache still remained in his chest.

Zhou Qianlin went directly to her room and sat on the bed. Her face betrayed no emotion, but after a good while a bitterness crept in, and tears began to flow uncontrollably from the corner of her eyes. She made no sound, and the tears rolled down her smooth, white skin unhindered.

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Skyfire Avenue was as silent as ever. At night there never were very many stragglers on the street. The darkness had grown, but Lan Jue's mood had improved as he moved down the chilly street.

"Come to me," a deep voice intruded in his ear. He jumped slightly from the unexpected sound, then turned towards the Gothic Winery.

"You aren't calling me here to apologize on behalf the Accountant, are you?" Lan Jue sat beside the Wine Master, smirking.

The Wine Master's face betrayed a rare smile. "Your current mood isn't due to what he did. There's no reason to bother with him. The guy is a clown. No, it's because of the girl you brought tonight. Am I right?"

Lan Jue looked at his old friend. "It's done."

The Wine Master gave a wry chuckle. "If it's done you don't need to tell me so. You're an adult. I'm not your father."

Lan Jue's face grew hard. "Why'd you call me here."

The Wine Master smiled. "Blind taste check. Let's see if you're still as sharp as you used to be."

Chapter 69: The Legend of the Gods of Wine

A taste test, obviously, was determining the type and quality of an alcohol by taste alone, without the benefit of seeing it's bottle or label.

"Taste test? Great!" Lan Jue smiled. "Just don't give me anything too nasty. If it's too bad I won't be able to stomach it."

The Wine Master chuckled and extricated a bottle from the wine cabinet at their side. He placed it before Lan Jue. The bottle was without adornment, covered in a thin layer of dust. The only hint to it's contents was it's deep red color.

A bottle opener was produced and the bottle was opened. Two glasses were spread before him, within which the Wine Master poured a small amount from the bottle.

Lan Jue didn't immediately reach for the wine, instead taking a sip of plain water from a separate glass. He then took up the wine and passed it under his nose. He swirled the contents, breathing deeply.

In a flash Lan Jue's expression underwent a tremendous change. Shock, appreciation and disbelief flitted across his features.

"This... this is..."

He lifted the glass higher and peered at it through the light, checking it's opacity.

It wasn't the ruby shine of your average red wine. Instead it appeared almost turbid. But despite the unconventional appearance, Lan Jue's gaping expression managed, "Burgundy Domaine de la Romanee-Conti?"

The Wine Master was silent, simply sitting there with a smile.

It wasn't long ago Lan Jue had nearly given the Wine Master a stroke by drinking one of his 'celestial elixirs', a Romanee-Conti. A masterwork of red wine. The pride of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti. Abbreviated as DRC, it was a wine-producing area in Burgundy, ancient France. It was

home to the best ever made, from one of the most famous and storied manufacturers.

It was unique, and required only a sniff from Lan Jue to determine it's nature.

"Try it," the Wine Master said, motioning for him to take a sip. He took up his own for emphasis.

Lan Jue took a large sip, holding the liquid in his mouth. In the brief moment on his tongue the high-grade flavors of the wine burst free, rich and aromatic. The spectacular taste filled every corner of his mouth, and although it didn't have the heavenly flavor of the Romanee-Conti from earlier it remained an astounding experience for any wine connoisseur.

The lingering tastes stayed with Lan Jue for a long moment. Finally he found his voice. "Excellent vintage. Only the people of ancient Burgundy could make something with this sort of flavor. Flowery, fruity, plum... enduring and excellent. From the tip of the tongue to it's base and back again, the texture is wonderful no matter where it lands. The tannins are smooth – not silky like Romanee-Conti but not far off."

"So, in your estimation, what are we enjoying?" The Wine master inquired.

Lan Jue answered without hesitation. "DRC La Tache, or possibly Grands Echezeaux. As for the year, I'd say 2012 Former Era, about."

The Wine Master burst in to peels of laughter.

"Wrong!"

"Wrong?" Lan Jue blinked, stunned. "Was it the wine that's wrong or the year? There's no way it can be anything else! DRC wines are very rare and I've had very little, so I suppose there's the chance I'm wrong. Perhaps it's a Richebourg, or a St. Vivant? It's not a St. Vivant is it? St vivant isn't as good as this is..."

"Wrong, wrong, all wrong." The Wine Master sat smugly before him. He took another sip of his wine, appreciation plain on his face.

“Wine Master, it’s no fun if you play tricks on me.” Lan Jue was fairly certain of his abilities.

The Wine Master leaned closer. “How many ranks of Burgundy exist?”

“Four,” Lan Jue replied. “The Lowest is called AOC, Appellation d’Origine Controlee. Then there is communal, or village-level. Next are premier cru, and finally grand cru. These are the DRC level wines. Romanee-Conti is chief among the grand cru, king of wines.”

“What you just tasted, was village wine,” the older gentlemen said indifferently.

“What?” Lan Jue rose to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair. Such was the surprise he felt from the Wine Master’s revelation.

“Impossible, how can a simple communal wine possess the taste of a DRC? Like a Romanee-Conti? Wine Master, you know very well that wine is my most important hobby. You mustn’t tease me about these things.”

The Wine Master only laughed. “We had the same reaction, you and I, when I had it first. My first sip of this wine I was completely taken aback. More shocked even than you. It must be a trick, I thought. However, later when the truth was revealed to me, I knew I wasn’t wrong in my original estimation. Nor was there any trickery. Because, the village wine in your hand indeed should be that good. It is a communal wine, but if I tell you its name you will understand how it is like it is.”

“The average connoisseur knows Romanee-Conti as the king of wines, but ancient France had three ‘Gods of Wine.’ Did you know that?”

“You mean the three burgundy wine masters of the time, the ones honored as the Gods of Wine?”

The Wine Master nodded his head in affirmation. “The three gods of wine as recognized by the world were Aubert de Villain of DRC; former co-owner of the DRC Lalou Bize-Leroy; and independent vintner Henri Mayer.”

“Aubert de Villain is credited with the creation of DRC’s dominance, the most famous of which is the Romanee-Conti. His masterpiece. He was fully deserving of his status as one of the Three Masters, and further

displayed that with his excellent management capabilities.”

“Mrs. Lalou Bize-Leroy was originally co-owner of the DRC domain. However, eventually creative differences on how the vineyards should be managed brought her in to conflict with Aubert. She was eventually elbowed out of the board of directors and became an independent vintner, of the Domaine Leroy. She made it one of the most sought-after wines in the world, and thus also grew to be successful. So goes the story. She was also instrumental in creating new biological brewing methods with Aubert.”

“Finally we come to Henri Mayer, whose name is mentioned least among the Three Masters. However, in the world of wines he is held highest of all. Should his name be mentioned within any auction, you can be assured the item will be it’s biggest draw. If it is said that the Romanee-Conti is the King of Wines, then Henri’s three top wines are the King of Kings. Stranger still, his crowning achievement was not a grand cru, instead being a premier cru. The Clos de la Roche. A name difficult to pronounce, and impossible to match.”

Lan Jue took another look at the unlabeled wine set before him. “You can’t mean this is a wine created by one of the Three Masters,” he nearly whispered.

The Wine Master stood, chuckling. “That’s exactly what I mean. This is a village wine, but the man who made it was the best of the very best. One of only several hundred bottles made per year when the master, Henri Mayer, enjoyed success as the God of Wine.”

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*This information is mostly true, with some bias. You can learn about the ‘three gods of wine’ by looking their names up in Wikipedia. If you’d like to learn more about Burgundy classifications, famous vineyards and naming practices, you can check out this excellent resource here: <http://www.bbr.com/wine-knowledge/burg-classifications>. It’s a good start on the basics of wine appreciation.

Chapter 70: Possibilities

Shock! At the last words of the Wine Master Lan Jue felt the surprise vibrate to his very core. He stared slack-jawed.

For an avid lover of wine to have this opportunity – to taste a wine actually created by one of the Three Gods of Wine – it didn't matter what the 'rank' of it was, it filled him with something almost unspeakable. He was happier even than that day he'd had the Romanee-Conti.

In the former era, bottles of Romanee-Conti were produced in the thousands per year. Products of the Master Henri Mayer, however, only numbered in the hundreds regardless of classification! It was an experience that could not be measured with any amount of money.

"Thank you," Lan Jue stated, simply and earnestly.

The Wine Master smiled contentedly. "Come, drink."

"I don't really want to."

"It's already opened," the Wine Master insisted. "It'll spoil otherwise. It has to be finished as soon as possible."

"Actually, I meant I'd rather take it home and enjoy it carefully," Lan Jue said. "What do you think?"

"... .."

The bottle had done its job. Before discovering it was the product of Henri Mayer, he knew only that it was a village wine from 1997. Its low classification didn't detract, however, from those wondrous tastes that had nearly caused him to forget his troubles.

"So go on then, what do you want me to do?" Lan Jue finished the last drop from his glass and, setting it down, stared pointedly at the Wine Master.

"You're that sure I want something from you?"

Lan Jue's eyes narrowed, similar to his expression the first time he'd sipped the exquisite wine. "It can't be easy to part with a wine from one of

the great masters. If you were really that generous I'd be truly happy."

The Wine Master laughed. "You always talk about how stingy I am. But how could a miser suddenly be so generous? So in fact you guess correctly, there is a request I'd like to make of you. The Clairvoyant has discovered that someone from a nearby planet is attempted to acquire another bottle from one of the Three Masters. I'd like to go see for myself, and present them with a gift. In the three alliances there are only a select few who possess such exemplary wines. I hope that through these discoveries we can uncover the secrets of these masters, and bring their gifts back to modern man."

Lan Jue's eyes widened and grew bright. "Truly?"

The Wine Master nodded. "Wine isn't just my hobby, it's my only hobby. This isn't something I'd joke about."

"Two questions," Lan Jue began. "First, you've had wine like this the whole time and you've never shared before?! And second, you actually take advantage of the Clairvoyant's powers to find wine?"

The Wine Master gave him a hard stare. "What are you trying to say?"

Lan Jue broke in to a peel of laughter, shooting his old friend a big thumbs-up. "Good on you!"

The two men exchanged a look, before starting to howl in laughter.

"So you agree?" The Wine Master asked again, recovering from his guffaws.

Lan Jue shrugged. "With your powers, you still need my help?"

"The Clairvoyant's divinations were somehow cut short near the end of his vision," the Wine Master said. "You should understand what this means. 'A wise man doesn't stand beneath a collapsing wall'¹, and more than that how could you enjoy the fruits if you don't do the labor?"

Lan Jue sighed. "Fine, what can I say. This Henri Mayer has fed my wine addiction, this will be my reciprocation. But, it'll have to wait. I have to head to the Shattered Starfields. I'll be gone about a month, when I get

back we'll discuss where to go from there."

"Not a problem." The Wine Master smiled. "I'm in no hurry. I still have some in stock."

"I'm off!" Lan Jue rose, waving his head.

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A shadow swept passed, and a dozen seconds later rolling thunder followed. It was a McKelly p12 high altitude verti-car. Only a car like that could reach such break-neck speeds.

"Mika, slow down! I'm getting car-sick..." Lin Guoguo's face was pained, and she had a white-knuckle grip on the car's grip handle.

Lan Jue sat in the back middle seat of the car as it roared along. Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo sat on either side of him. In front, Mika sat behind the wheel, peering through red hair and black-rimmed glasses while Ke'er cheered her on in the passenger's seat.

Mika's driving style was anything but conservative as she was squeezing every drop of horsepower from the car. She'd broken the sound barrier long ago.

"Fine, fine. Weak. The boss didn't say anything..." Mika grumbled.

"I just lost my lunch," Lan Jue said lazily, leaning against the seatback.

Xiuxiu giggled. Ke'er turned back to look at Lan Jue at stuck out her tongue.

Mika huffed. "We'll be there shortly. Hold on." The car suddenly took a handsome drift to the side before suddenly losing altitude. Instruments inside helped regulate the weightlessness of gravity, but that didn't stop their stomach from jumping in to their throat.

Lin Guoguo screamed, followed shortly by Xiuxiu.

Ten seconds later the car was pulling steadily up to the public airship

hangar of Planet Skyfire.

Beep, beep, beep! A harsh alarm filled the interior. Several uniformed guards suddenly gathered round. An electronic voice joined them: "Speed violation, classification; severe. Please exit the vehicle immediately, and submit to an inspection."

The McKelly p12 high-altitude verti-car's doors folded open like a pair of butterfly wings. The four gorgeous women stepped out in tandem: Fiery Mika, Blue-haired Ke'er, Xiuxiu the raven-haired beauty and green-bobbed Guoguo.

The four all wore their jet-black, close fitting flight suits. The contours of their slender figures were outlined perfectly, every curve and valley. Though they were wearing helmets you could almost hear the guardsmen take a collective gulp as their heads figuratively exploded.

"Is there a problem, handsome gentlemen?" Mika swept her flirtatious gaze from one officer to the other.

"M-miss, you broke the speed limit," one officer stuttered.

"Oh, I'm sooo sorry! Can you be a dear and watch the car for us? We have some... business." Mika waved a delicate hand at them, turned, and strode off. The three women at her heels followed her lead.

Lan Jue stood in their midst, a distinct swagger to his gait.

A few moments later, watching them leave, one of the officers came to his senses.

"We're wearing helmets. How would she know if we were handsome?"

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=> A wise man doesn't stand beneath a collapsing wall.

The phrase here means a wise man has the ability to recognize and protect himself from potentially dangerous situations. Also, when finding oneself in a dangerous situation, having the ability to extricate oneself quickly. ↩

Chapter 71: Zeus-1

The public-use section of Planet Skyfire's Airship compound was separated in to several sectors. They included the normal docking area, long-distance vessels, and the VIP hangars.

Only the VIP hangar had individualized docks and warehouses, but it was reflected in the price – one they had to pay monthly. Further, one had to hire their own security.

Lan Jue and his beauties had parked the p12 beside the VIP hangar, one of the reason why the guards hadn't dared trouble them too much about the speeding.

The standard color of the airship had been painted over in a brilliant sapphire blue, all but for the alloy door which retained it's original silver finish. Above the door was something almost like a sculpture; a deep blue bolt of lightning jutting out to point the way. It was registered to Zeus' Jewelry Shop specifically, for use in transporting particularly rare goods.

Lan Jue sauntered in to the hangar in his khaki windbreaker, followed by his ladies in single file. He walked lazy by, stopping to lean against one of the metallic walls and stuff his hands in the pocket of his windbreaker. He pulled a cigar from some hidden breast pocket and stuffed it in his mouth, leaving it unlit.

Several deep-blue robots of various kinds bustled around the hangar, engaged in various activities. No human workers were seen. Everything appeared to be done by machine.

What occurred in these hangars was private, and he wished to keep it so. As a result no human employee possessed the qualifications he required. The interior of the hangar, thus, was a world of silver and blue with the occasional flash of a spark. The effort and result of a mechanized workforce.

Three ships were anchored within, all of similar size. The exteriors all looked exactly the same – all a luminous sapphire blue – with no outward emblem, marking or number.

The ships were seventy meters in length, and fifty meters port to starboard. The wings, slim and streamlined, swept back against the hull. Five engines sat dormant; two affixed to each wing, and one enormous one on the tail. It was, simply, a work of art.

Xiuxiu made her way to one of the silver platforms and pressed a button. In response a screen and keyboard jutted forth. Long slender finger like flower stems flew over the keys. The sound of her steadily beating fingers fluttered through the hanger, and streams of data flew across the monitor screen like a waterfall.

“Zeus-1 Power Systems online. Weapons systems online. Hull integrity: 100%. Flight status approved, and ready for boarding. Boss, ready when you are.”

Lan Jue looked over the powerful, sleek frame of the ship, making no effort to hide the pride in his eyes. He nodded his head, and softly his voice issued forth. “Let’s do it!”

Xiuxiu’s fingers tapped at the keyboard, and the closest handful of robots lurched in to motion. They retreated from the area as a boarding ramp slowly extended. The robot workers stood diligently to one side in ranks, as the interior of the ship awoke.

Zeus-1 became bathed in light. It’s brilliant sapphire sheen was illuminated from head to tail. It looked for all the world like a great bird shaking itself from slumber.

The others didn’t wait for Lan Jue, who still leaned against the wall with the cigar in his mouth. Mika, Ke’er and Guoguo each made their way to the ship. Xiuxiu finished with the computer and joined Lan Jue as he made his way towards the ramp.

The engines of Zeus-1 began to rev up, thrumming as air passed through the intake. The gusts from the jets sent air swirling through the hangar. Lan Jue’s windbreaker flapped in response.

Xiuxiu could see the side of her employer’s face from where she stood. There was a melancholy in his eyes, and his hair was in a mess. However, he’d taken care not to appear too sloppy. The collar of his windbreaker

was pulled up to conceal his neck, but it looked more like it was there to conceal something deeper.

Xiuxiu pursed her lips, but said nothing. She strode to Lan Jue's side and boarded with him.

The bridge stretched three hundred meters, and the world without was visible through the light-blue window set at the front. The four beauties each took up positions while Lan Jue sat in the roomy captain's chair behind them. Cigar still firmly set between his lips, Lan Jue dropped his head to stare at the armrests. Regret remained in the depths of those eyes.

It had been a long while since he'd flown in Zeus-1. Ordinarily it was just the girls, and even then they were usually busy at the store.

He felt strangely separate from the place now. He turned to view the seat at his side, empty.

"Hera..." It was a name he said often, but one that never failed to bring a flash of sadness fluttering through his eyes.

But in the next instant it wasn't Hera that flashes through his mind, but someone who looked just like her. That impish, dimpled grin hung in his memory.

"Energy fluctuations normal, hangar bay open," Lin Guoguo said through her headset.

"Runway clear, we've got the go ahead from the tower," Ke'er followed.

"Power, defense, mechanical and weapons systems checks all green. Good to go," Xiuxiu reported.

Mika nodded. "Zeus-1 ready and waiting. Light her up!"

A rumble arose from the engines as they spooled up, and the cabin's lights brightened while the hull shook from motion.

Lan Jue plucked the cigar from his mouth and placed it in his coat pocket. "Take us out. Destination, the Shattered Starfields."

Zeus-1 slowly pulled from the hangar like a sapphire spectre. It turned left onto the runway.

A pale blue light issued from the four roaring engines on the ship's wings. A moment later, the intense fires expanded forth and Zeus-1 issued a deep roar. They shot forward, the engines leaving swirls of steam and fire behind them.

Three hundred meters later Zeus-1 rose from the ground like a great, blue, majestic bird. The main engine on the tail came to life, and a moment later they'd torn through the sound barrier. They vanished in to the sky.

Somewhere on the other side of the strip an attendant gaped at the condensation trail where the ship had been. "Wow, that was fast! Whose ship was that?"

"I think it belongs to the jewelry shop."

"Good money in jewels."

"Yeah, lucky bastard!"

"They really were going too fast though. Did you catch the model?"

"Nope, fuzzy. It really had some speed on it."

Chapter 72: The Voyage

“Zeus-1 has broken atmosphere, we’re space-bound. Accelerating!” Mika’s voice echoed through the bridge.

“Maintain speed,” Lan Jue ordered.

“We’ll be arriving at the wormhole in seven minutes, and will proceed to jump to the alliance border.”

In the vastness of the universe Zeus-1 was but a spec. But it was it’s speed, not it’s size that protected it from military radar. It was simply too fast for them to get a lock.

If any of them knew the materials used to make the ship, or the sheer amount of energy gems that powered it, they’d be speechless.

The entirety of Zeus-1 was comprised like a gem. The blue coat on it’s exterior wasn’t to dazzle the eyes, but was actually created from a power gem called an indigo keystone. It was mixed with other items to give it texture. It served both to insulate the ship and aid in power distribution.

The primary reason most airships had their speed capped was from heat restrictions. Air friction from going that fast caused the hull to heat up to extreme temperatures, getting worse the faster you went. Zeus-1, with it’s coat of indigo keystone, didn’t have this problem. It was, in fact, capable of faster-than-light travel.

The result of it’s excellent power transference was the ability to use the natural radiation and x-rays of the universe to charge itself. When designing the ship, the concept was so long as you could see space, the thing would fly.

The coat had required a hundred kilos of indigo keystone to produce, which itself was a c-ranked gem. A hundred kilos would buy five ships the size of his own.

And it was only the most ordinary aspect of Zeus-1’s construction.

“We’ve reached the wormhole. Shields active. Commencing interstellar jump.” As Mika spoke, a series of photoshields enveloped each of the

passengers.

Zeus-1 shook, and in the space of an instant the area around them began to warp grotesquely. An envelope of white light expanded from the ship to surround it.

Energy shields have always been an important staple of modern ship assembly, prized for their ability not only to protect in combat scenarios, but more importantly for protection against hazardous flying conditions.

Now, under the protection of the shields, Zeus-1's flight became steady once again. Outside, the shield was alive with bolts of multicolored light.

In what felt like a few seconds, and yet like a century, the ship shuddered and once more the skies outside became the comforting blackness of the universe.

"We've exited the wormhole. Nearing the boundary of the Eastern Alliance." Mika's voice crackled through the headsets.

Lin Guoguo's voice was next. "Intelligence reports state that the Twelfth Galactic Battalion of the Eastern Alliance is currently patrolling the Shattered Starfield border. Reliance on East Lake Bastion for zone control. We'll approach under cover of an asteroid on it's left flank. Then, when we approach the wormhole we'll burn towards it."

"Calculate delta-v," Lan Jue ordered.

Silence, then Ke'er piped in. "Near-SOL1."

"Ensure safety parameters, then go SOL."

"Yes, boss. Three days 'till jump point," she replied.

Lan Jue couldn't help but smile. "Alright ladies, go take a rest. Put her on auto-pilot. We jump in three days."

The photoshields lifted one by one, and Lan Jue unfastened his safety harness to stand.

The serious expressions upon the women's faces melted away and they stood, with the exception of Ke'er who was setting the auto-pilot.

Lin Guoguo giggled. "It's nice with the boss here, we get to experience SOL travel!"

Mika smiled, draping herself around her companion's shoulders. She muttered something in her ear, which instantly turned Guoguo's face red. "Bah! Stop talking nonsense!"

Mika gave a deep, throaty laugh.

Lan Jue's hearing was excellent, and despite Mika's low tones he'd heard it all. When these girls got worked up, their topics could be worse than any man...

"I'm off for a nap," Lan Jue stated, stretching.

ζ

CRACK!

A red lash struck forth like a viper, landing on Gao Yong's body. The skin where the whip landed split, and a deep red rivulet of blood seeped forth.

Gao Yong grit his teeth, not daring to make a sound.

A woman in a long black dress was situated before him, her long hair pulled in to a bun on the top of her head. She looked to be in her twenties, with skin like snow and strange carnation-tinted eyes. They shone like crystal, with pupils red as the blood they looked upon. A beautiful, cunning demon woman.

She was tall, slender, standing at one hundred and eighty centimeters. Her black high-heels made her taller even than the towering Gao Yong.

"Do you know how stupid you are," the woman hissed.

"You're majesty, I just..."

CRACK!

Another welt grew red and angry across his skin.

The Moonfiend Empress continued in her cold, malevolent voice. “Worse than how stupid you are, is the fact that you don’t REALIZE your own stupidity. If he weren’t a friend of mine, you’d NEVER have left Skyfire Avenue.”

Gao Yong was as intractable as ever, the welts had done nothing to rid him of that.

“That guy’s strong, but no stronger than you your majesty. He’s just managed to restrain me, otherwise, I’d have...”

The Empress snorted disdainfully. “You think you’re a match for him, hm? I’ll tell you honestly, if he wanted to crush me he could. With little effort.”

“Huh?” Now he truly was astonished. “You’re Majesty, you.. you’re serious?”

She glared chillingly at him as she spoke. “In the whole of our universe, of the organizations with the power to destroy our entire pirate clan, Skyfire Avenue is ranked above them all. There are no less than three who live there with the ability to utterly destroy me. You have no concept of their capabilities. You wouldn’t, since they so rarely decide to act. But the one you met? He’s different – he doesn’t care. If he were to become angry, the whole of the Starfields would shake.”

“Who is he?”

The Empress stared at him with hard, cold eyes. “Three years ago, do you remember why the greatest pirate clan was destroyed?”

Gao Yong’s eyes grew wide with realization. He thought back to the power he’d felt, and a chill struck to his very core.

“You mean, he was...”

*

SOL – speed of light.

Chapter 73: SOL Jump

The East Lake Bastion didn't look entirely unlike a Big Mac, floating silently through the expansive blackness of the universe. Military vessels frequently came and went from its docking port.

Space bastions had become a staple of the modern military, going so far as to be a fair indication of an organization's strength.

The Northern Alliance possessed the most, numbering twelve, with the Western and Eastern bastions numbering only five each. Both the Eastern and Western alliances perpetually sought to increase their number, in order to compete with the North.

The East Lake outpost vessel was the weakest of the Alliance, and was primarily responsible for policing the wormhole to the Shattered Starfields. It facilitated long-term patrol of the area through offering reinforcements and soldier quarters. However, it only quartered two battalions, and thus wasn't the most powerful bastion the East possessed. Its primary function was to stem the tide of piracy from the Shattered Starfields.

The constitution of the starfield was complicated, to the point where larger vessels couldn't safely navigate through it. With the added threat of pirates familiar with the territory, few dared venture through the wormhole in the first place. The three alliances had once attempted to eliminate the pirate threat in a joint effort, but had only managed to strike at their outlying forces. Their main force wasn't even touched. But the existence of piracy in the Shattered Starfields also had a political component, making the pirates useful in their own way.

"Three minutes until SOL jump point. Prepping for jump." Lin Guoguo's enticing voice echoed through the bridge.

The universe outside of the ship's hull had already begun to change from dark to light. In addition to the indigo keystone's protective coating, survey scramblers installed in Zeus-1 also protected it from radar, making it entirely invisible to anything but the naked eye.

“Current velocity is twenty times SOS1, preparing for light speed,” Ke’er said.

Xiuxiu was next. “Main engine spooled. Shields jump ready.”

“Weapon systems ready,” Mika added.

“One hundred and sixty seconds to jump point. Sub-light a hundred seconds following.”

Lan Jue sat at his chair, looking over the bridge. His hands gripped two metal spheres which had risen from the seat’s armrests. The lethargic expression that usually covered his face was gone, replaced with a look of concentration.

It was a tense moment, hence his concentration. In this age of space exploration, it was entirely impossible for any single person to stand against the armed forces. The main barrage of one of these bastions was capable of obliterating a planet.

Of course it was not their aim to be disintegrated. Even the smallest mistake could spell disaster. All of the military warships possessed SOL capabilities, so if they were discovered it became a race to the wormhole.

Zeus-1’s bulk already made sub-light travel a veritable miracle. SOL required more than just the ship’s own capabilities.

“Commencing jump in; ten, nine, eight, seven...”

“...six, five, four...”

“... three, two, one. Jump!”

The pale light surrounding Zeus-1 suddenly became unbearable to behold, a blazing cocoon. All five engines blazed at full power, making the ship look like a giant, flaming bird. The burst of light grew brighter still as Zeus-1 reached full velocity.

The sudden burst of speed caused the entirety of the ship to shake violently. The outer shields had gone from pale red to a deep crimson as they protected the ship from being torn apart.

“Energy levels normal, acceleration normal.”

Zeus-1 arced a graceful line across the back of the East Lake Military Bastion.

But reaching full power, the ship was no longer hidden from the outpost's scanners. An alarm sounded, harshly shrieking through space.

"Warning: unidentified aircraft. You have entered East Lake Bastion airspace. Stop immediately, or we will be forced to fire upon you." The electronic warning was clear, but Lan Jue and the four women proceeded as though they hadn't heard.

Three patrolling ships from nearby had already reacted to the threat. They'd positioned themselves to cut off Zeus-1's trajectory.

"Thirty seconds until sub-light. Distance calculated, judged safe," Ke'er assured.

"Eastern Alliance White Tiger-class battle cruiser readying main weapons." Xiuxiu was checking her instruments.

The words caused the atmosphere of the bridge to grow tense.

"Ten seconds until weapon fires, and twenty-three seconds until the first White Tiger intercepts our vessel. We can maneuver, but we can't evade their weapon's lock."

Lan Jue's face was as solemn as before, but there remained a distinct sense of calm.

"First Whit Tiger has fired a salvo," Ke'er said, her voice having risen in apprehension.

From the port window a small white beam of light could be spied.

Any unknown vessel that refused a check was treated like a pirate by the patrolling military. It accounted for the speed of the battle cruiser's response.

"Impact in twenty seconds!"

"Fifteen seconds to impact!"

"Ten seconds!"

“Firing auxiliary boosters!” Lan Jue’s voice rang through the bridge. In the same instant his eyes changed to an ominous azure blue. And in the next moment, his entire body followed suit.

His body vanished in a sea of lightning, the thunderous blast only contained by the protective shield that had been dropped to defend the passengers from outside harm. It served to contain the frightening fluctuations of power.

The top of Zeus-1 suddenly revealed an odd electric glow. From within the center of the main engine, a smaller jet protruded – fitted with a diamond-cut violet power gem. Suddenly, a dazzling blue streamer erupted from it’s depths, swallowing the main engine’s burn into itself.

Zeus-1 shook violently, and in that instant it was as though everything simply stopped. The main engine’s flames became a luminous crystal blue, followed then by the other four.

The reddened shields surrounding the ship grew darker until they were an unsettling shade of maroon. The illusion of stillness dissolved, and the ship launched forward. They were instantly moving at sub-light speeds, but it wouldn’t be long before they pushed it even farther.

A beam of white light roared behind them, tearing through nothing but the vast nothing of the universe. The White Tiger battle cruisers looked on as Zeus-1 became an incorporeal blue light, and vanished. They had no option but to turn back to their outpost, stunned and defeated.

“Woo, go boss!” Ke’er, Guoguo and Mika cheered almost on top of each other. Even the significantly more modest Xiuxiu sat there with a grin on her face.

Ke’er sighed. “It’s great having the boss around. No need for weapons, makes things easier on them. Ten seconds to the wormhole.”

“Battle cruisers have abandoned pursuit,” Lin Guoguo added.

The tearing bolts of power racing across Lan Jue’s body slowly began to recede, and in response the ship began to slow back to sub-light. A grin curled the corners of his mouth.

“Jump complete.”

*

SQL = Speed of sound

Chapter 74: The Shattered Starfields

Once entering the wormhole, the concept of speed ceased to exist. Once more they were in a space of varying lights and warped visuals like they had been during the light jump. Zeus-1's five engines had returned to quietly emitting their fiery red glow.

Lan Jue sat slumped against the back of the captain's chair, fighting to keep his exhaustion from being obvious in his half-lidded eyes.

It was a rarity among adepts to use one's powers to manipulate a ship's jump capabilities due to its risks and requirements. Even Lan Jue couldn't rely solely on his own discipline to achieve what he did.

Aside from Lan Jue's considerable power, the power gem fitted in Zeus-1 is what had ultimately granted it the explosive velocity that got them to light speed. His discipline had been channeled through a Core Power Gem fitted to the engines, which had served to greatly amplify output. It was a rare, special a-ranked gem – one whose value was equivalent to a five-hundred meter military cruiser.

Clearly, nearly every aspect of the ship's system's had been improved beyond its original construction.

A shudder passed through the ship as it exited the wormhole. Once again, the black expanse of space spread out before them.

"Maintain sub-light. We'll be arriving at the Shattered Starfields in three days," Ke'er reported.

Xiuxiu was next. "Energy recovery normal. Beginning energy conservation speed control."

"Expanding radar scope, effective range increased to spot incoming threats," Mika reported.

No action was wasted, and no task botched. The four women worked impeccably, with the tacit understanding that this ship – which would usually require around fifteen people to effectively operate – had to be managed with just them.

At this point forward, Zeus-1 had successfully left the scope of the Eastern Alliance's control. They found themselves now in the expansive outer limits of the Shattered Starfields. What this meant for them, was that they could encounter a pirate force at any moment.

Lan Jue closed his eyes. The area around him flickered occasionally with pale threads of electricity. Sitting there looking majestic and at rest, a pale blue light glowed indistinctly in the center of his chest.

Two days later.

Zeus-1 soared easily through space at stable speed, it's wings wide. Ahead, there appeared an indistinct undulation of light and darkness.

The Shattered Starfields were vast, and their interior possessed some seventy-plus stars scattered throughout. They filled the starfields with light, heat and energy in spades.

The numerous planets unfortunate enough to populate the area were constantly subjected to meteor strikes. Some were so battered that they broke apart, eventually becoming scores of asteroids themselves. It was only the smaller planets that survived, hidden away within the center sectors of the starfields. Paired with the high amounts of radiation emitted from it's numerous stars meant the Shattered Starfields was one of the most inhospitable places in the universe. It was no wonder that time and again the three Alliances have abandoned it to piracy.

So it was that this had become a pirate's utopia. The inhospitable environments have proven to be their greatest defense. And the three planets dominating the interior, those were the havens of all manner of scum and degenerate. Criminals from each of the alliances often found themselves stuck here.

"Entering Shattered Starfields peripheral galaxy," Ke'er reported.

"Excellent." Mika's eyes flashed dangerously. Her excitement was clear even in the way she flipped her hair.

Lin Guoguo shot her a glance. "You're always so violent, Mika. How do you expect to get married?"

Mika huffed dismissively. “And why should every woman get married? Isn’t it just as an accessory to some man? I don’t want to marry – there’s nothing appealing about a man. Oh, ‘cept the boss.”

Lan Jue had just come up from the cabin as she spoke the last sentence. He gave her a stern look. “Mika, do you need a spanking? You dare say I’m not a man?”

Mika chortled. “You said it, not me. I’m complimenting you!”

Lan Jue frowned, muttering as he walked to the window at the fore of the control room.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. I wonder if it’s still as chaotic as it’s always been.”

Xiuxiu spoke towards Lan Jue. “We’re heading towards SS-31, right? Should we also do some looking around for the shop?”

It was true that the Shattered Starfields were a dangerous and unstable place, but it was also a fine market for many special power gems that were mined in the region. Only, the safety concerns made any business consortium hesitant to set up shop.

Lan Jue nodded. “We’ll deal with the business at hand, first. If everything goes well we’ll make the trip and see what we can find. The bigger the take, the bigger the split.”

Beep.

The sound came from within the ship, soft and not unappealing. But the sound instantly caused Lan Jue and his four companions’ faces to grow serious.

Zeus-1 was their baby, manufactured to the last detail by them. As such they were intimately familiar with each aspect of the ship. That sound was the sound of the sleeping cabin’s door opening. But all five of the ship’s intended passengers were gathered on the bridge. So, that door had no business opening.

Lan Jue’s eyes grew cold and hard as he turned to investigate.

Mika had already reacted, crouching like a leopardess ready to strike. The fire grew visible behind her eyes.

“What a great sleep! It’s been a long time since I’ve had such a deep sleep. It’s nice not having to worry about the date or time.” The voice echoed through the halls, quick and appreciative in tone.

At the sound of the voice Lan Jue’s expression changed from hard to confused. And then downright murderous.

Mika had curled herself in to a pounce position, then shot forth. A few moments later a shrill yell filled the air. “Ah! N-not so hard! It’s a misunderstanding, just a misunderstanding!”

Mika came storming back in, dragging someone behind her. Their clothes had clearly suffered burns.

“Jewelry Master, you have to save me!” The yells continued, but they’d grown weak and faint.

“Accountant,” Lan Jue growled, glaring at the stow-away. “I’m going to need an explanation, otherwise I’m flushing you out the air lock. I wonder how long you’d last.”

“No, no don’t!” The Accountant cowered pitifully, half-asleep and entirely frightened.

The women all looked shocked, Mika among them. How someone could inadvertently stumble aboard Zeus-1 and fall into Deep Sleep while totally evading their security checks and processes was simply baffling. It wasn’t just inconceivable, it was deeply shameful.

Like Lan Jue each of them had been around the proverbial block, but his was certainly a first.

“J-jewelry Master... don’t be angry. The Keeper asked me to come. I-I’m his spokesman. You wanted his cooperation, right? The Keeper’d ask me to tell you before, but I’d forgotten. Ah! Miss, don’t hit me, let me finish! Listen, ok, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so curious, but I found you hangar. A-and I know my curiosity should have ended there but I started fiddling with the controls. A-and my curiosity got away from me, and I

know I shouldn't have but I got on the ship. But, the ship, it's planner – genius! Really just amazing construction. All of these power gems, it's just luxurious! Jewelry Master, you've really got some bank account!"

Lan Jue's face changed by degrees, eventually dropping his hard stare for a small grin his two new disciples from the NEU were intimately familiar with.

"Mika, you can't maim him. Otherwise..."

A wicked smile slowly spread across Mika's face.

*

1. The three primary planets of the Shattered Starfields – the three that are within the belts and pirate havens – will be called SS-1/2/3 in subsequent translations. ↩

Chapter 75: Pirates?

By the time the Accountant was once again brought before Lan Jue, his face was so swollen as to be almost unrecognizable. Mika threw him atop one of the chairs before taking up her own, stony-faced.

“Right, now we can have a conversation. What did the Keeper send you here to do,” Lan Jue asked, settling himself beside the battered Accountant.

The Accountant responded, his words muffled and muddled from the beating. “Jewelry Master... treating me this way... it’s inhuman!”

“Mika.” Lan Jue looked towards the fiery woman.

“No! No wait, I’m sorry, I was wrong.” The Accountant stared wide-eyed at Lan Jue, terror clear in their depths.

Lan Jue turned his eyes back to the cowed man.

“The Keeper gave me some equipment, to help locate and mine gem deposits.”

Lan Jue looked skeptical. “What’s your relationship with the Keeper?”

“Ehm... I can’t say.”

“Mika!”

“Alright... alright... I-I’m his only grandson.”

Lan Jue blinked, taken aback. He knew for a fact that the only way the Accountant could have entered Skyfire Avenue as a resident was to undergo a series of stringent evaluations. There were no shortcuts.

“You’re the Keeper’s grandson.” His face said he didn’t believe it.

The Accountant’s anger flared. “What’s wrong with me being his grandson?! You think it’s a blessing being part of his family? Ever since I was small the old man has been brainwashing me with floods of useless data. Trying to fill me with his knowledge and ideas. From when I was three to twenty-three, I only had four hours of sleep a night. Then, to Skyfire Avenue for the evaluations. You want to know why I talk so much?

Because I wasn't able to share my thoughts at all for twenty years! You don't know how much I loved the outside world, but I couldn't leave the geriatrics side. I'm twenty four, and still a virgin. How pathetic is that!"

Lan Jue spoke now in considerably droll tones. "And that's why you snuck on my ship?"

"Eh..." the Accountant stuttered. "Jewelry Master, I know you aren't one to stoop to pettiness. Let's not fuss about it. I've always been a little hyperactive, since I was small. Sometimes I can't help myself. I see something interesting and I want to study and look and examine..."

Lan Jue waved his hand, cutting him off. He didn't have the time to listen to the Accountant talk all day.

"Seeing as you're part of the Keeper's family, I won't bother with you any more this time. But in return you have to go through the ship's systems and patch up their loopholes, so that next time no one – not even you – can sneak on board. Then we'll be square."

"No problem. O-only, how can you prove I won't be able to get back in?" The Accountant's eyes shone with curiosity.

Lan Jue laughed. "Let me tell you a secret. See these four ladies? One of them is psychic. If I want to know anything at all about you, it's as easy as asking a question. Take a guess... which one do you think it is?"

"Psychic?" The Accountant's heart rate shot up. As the Keeper's son he absolutely knew about the Psychic Discipline. And how horrifying it could be.

Regardless of the type of psychic ability, congenitally derived Psychic Discipline begins at no less than the seventh-level of Talent, with plenty of potential for growth. The Accountant hadn't imagined Lan Jue commanded such a companion.

His eyes fluttered back and forth from Mika, Lin Guoguo, Ke'er and Xiuxiu. He'd already been acquainted with Mika's fiery temperament. And with her degree of power, she was a downright Dragon Lady. It couldn't be her, then, and thus must be one of the other three. But which one?

His own Talent was fairly useful in a fight, so combat didn't frighten him too badly. But a psychic, those types were capable of controlling your mind in the blink of an eye. No amount of intelligence could protect you.

"Mika, from now on you're in charge of the Accountant. Get him a computer, and make him prove his worth."

Mika turned her face to shoot the Accountant a charming smile. "As you command, boss."

The Accountant's face grew sour at the prospect of being stuck with his tortures, and the pain in his body occasionally still caused him to twitch. Mika had left quite the impression on him.

"Boss, radar's picked up a gunboat-class ship bearing down on us. Wait, no... three of them. Two on the original's flanks."

"Pirates? A-are they pirates? Is there going to be a fight?" The Accountant asked excitedly.

"Shut up!" Mika spat at him.

Ships in the tree alliances were broken in a class system. From high to low, they were; Bastions, Sovereign-Class Base Ships, Capital Warships, Expedition Battleships, common battleships, and gunboats. After those were carriers and mechas.

Generally speaking gunboats weren't fitted for long-range expeditions, they needed to resupply at depot vessels. Any fleet required a range of ships to function effectively.

Zeus-1 was also, technically, a gunship, but compared to it's unfitted cousins they were like night and day. It had no specialized mecha compartment, and could only house a crew of about ten. Regular gunboats, on the other hand, usually flew with a small mecha combat group. It was the best load-out for stellar assault missions.

"Signal the boats, affirm their identities." Lan Jue said softly. He made no move to return to the captains chair.

"Approaching gunships have refused signal," Ke'er reported.

“Purpose unclear. Their speed has increased and their gun ports are opened,” Lin Guoguo followed.

“We’re getting demands to surrender,” Ke’er said.

Lan Jue chuckled. “Surrender? Ladies, which one of you would like the honors?”

“Oh! Me!” Other than Xiuxiu, the other three ladies all scrambled to speak at once.

The Accountant just watched the scene, speechless.

The three girls, each with a sharp look in their eyes, stared at one another for a moment before raising high their right hands. Together, they called out: “Odd One Out!”¹

The three women each shot their hands out, Mika and Ke’er palms down, and Lin Guoguo with her hand facing up.

“Hah! I win,” Guoguo called out excitedly. She immediately typed something out on the keyboard before her. A silver helmet descended from the roof of the cabin to settle on her head.

“The enemy’s main battery is charged and ready. Estimated time to fire, ten seconds.” Ke’er was watching her control panel as the information streamed past.

“Ten seconds is enough,” Lin Guoguo affirmed. She’d quickly become all business. From the three meter tall conical bow of the ship, a firing tower slowly issued forth. A golden power gem was affixed to the tower’s apex.

*

1. This is actually called ‘Black/White Match’ in Chinese, and is played by shooting your hand out either palm up or palm down. The odd one out is the winner. ↩

Chapter 76: The Psychic Tide

“Eight seconds!”

“Turning off the shields!” Xiuxiu shouted at her monitor.

The Accountant whimpered in terror. “W-why are we dropping the shields?! Even if it’s just a gunboat, it’s main cannon is enough to obliterate us!”

“Shut up!” Mika lifted a hand and slapped the sniveling man in the back of his head. It caused the Accountant to lurch forward and smack his head on the monitor situated in front of him.

“Six seconds!”

“Five... four... three... two... one. Enemy main cannon fired!”

In the distance, the three enemy ships shuddered as giant beams of light suddenly burst forth from their weapons.

The Accountant lifted his head from the screen just in time to witness the deadly fireworks.

As he watched, the blast from the two ships to either side actually fired inward, while the middle ship’s attack plowed in to the enemy on it’s left flank.

A blazing corona of light and fire filled the distance between ships. Each had their shields active, so this didn’t destroy them, but the display was enough to have the Accountant sitting there, mouth agape in wonderment.

“Mind control... my god! You’ve fitted this thing with a psionic amplifier. Jewelry Master, you’re a lunatic!”

Lan Jue had spoken true, one of his amazons was indeed a psionicist; Lin Guoguo, the Psychic Tide!

In this moment Lin Guoguo’s eyes had become entirely gold, with her psychic discipline channeling through the silver helmet. Anyone unlucky enough to be captured in her gaze would feel their consciousness slipping

away in to their depths. Not only was her power tremendous and terrifying, but she exerted an incredible amount of control.

She'd employed the amplifier to directly control the enemy ships, a type of combat that – it went without saying – was highly unusual. Of course controlling the small ships was one thing, where it a battleship with many aspects and sections the difficulty of taking control would double.

Simultaneous control of three gunboats with the power of an amplifier. The Accountant's quick calculations determined she must at least possess a level eight psionic Talent. It was horrifying. After all, psionic powers have always been hailed as wondrous abilities. An eight level psychic could match favorably against nearly any other first-degree, ninth level Talent.

The shields of the three ships sputtered and failed. Once more the guns fired, and once more the sky was filled with blossoming halos of light and fire. The explosive force issued a roaring shockwave, which diffused harmlessly in to the universe.

“Combat is finished. Enemy destroyed. Searching for depots or battleships,” Ke'er said.

Beside her Lin Guoguo had already removed the helmet, and the gold tint to her eyes slowly receded. She turned her head to give Lan Jue a prideful grin.

Lan Jue gave her a thumbs up. “Beautifully done. Your powers are increasing.”

Guoguo's grin became a triumphant smirk. It was clear the scenario didn't take too much out of her.

The Accountant slowly lifted his hand to shut his open mouth. He swept his eyes back towards Lan Jue. “Jewelry Master... are all the council members as strong as you are?”

Lan Jue peered down on him. “You haven't seen power,” he responded softly.

The Accountant's mouth twitched as though he wished to say more, but

he felt the malicious gaze of Mika and immediately thought better of it. Instead, he kept his thoughts to himself:

Such poise, so cool! Oh when will I be able to command four beautiful women such as these. It would be like heaven on earth!

“I’ve located a depot ship attempting to escape. Should we take it’s stores?” A pot-bellied depot-ship appeared on the main screen. It was clear the dusty thing was scrambling to flee.

“There’s nothing of use in that trashy thing. Mika.”

“Understood, boss.” A smile lit her face as her fingers tapped away at the keyboard before her. A series of gun barrels slowly rose from the wings of Zeus-1. They quickly shot forward to catch up with the fleeing ship.

Glimmering beams of blue light shot through space, arcing through the darkness before hitting their mark. The depot’s shields could not compare with those of the combat ships. In addition, though Zeus-1 had fired it’s auxiliary cannons, even those were like death’s sickle. They swept through shield and hell effortlessly.

Boom!

By the time Zeus-1 passed by, a few thousand meters away, the ship had been reduced to twisted slag.

Three gunboats and a depot ship, your common pirate unit. Destroyed in less than ten minutes.

The Accountant rubbed his cheeks, trying to free himself from his perpetually surprised expression. He tried to concentrate of the screen in front of him. His understanding of the ship he’d snuck in to was woefully lacking. It had the fighting power of a battleship, the speed of a capital ship, and the maneuverability of a common airship. There was simply too much to learn.

“Engage stealth, adopt pirate markings. Full speed to the Shattered Starfields. Port, thirty-five degrees,” Lan Jue commanded.

Zeus-1’s coating quietly adopted a grayish hue. Near the stern there

slowly emerged the image of a blood moon. The ship's engines grew bright, and Zeus-1 began to tilt.

One hour later.

A battleship and its six gunboat entourage surveyed the wreckage floating in space before them. A hefty, bald man fumed with rage on the battleship's bridge.

A floating asteroid, an indistinct planet, rays of light flowing through its cracks. It was a fair visual representation of the starfields.

Here, no matter what classification of capital ship you possessed you couldn't navigate safely. Only battleships or lesser crafts could manage the treks. Even then, only explicit knowledge of the area and an experienced captain could make it safely. And all of this in the face of a pirate unit attack...

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The pirates of the Shattered Starfields relied on outside plunder, merchants straying from the borders of the Three Alliances. Otherwise, the area was relatively quiet.

You of course couldn't exclude the occasional treasure hunter or adventurer scouring the starfields for prizes, trying to prove themselves.

The Accountant sat within Zeus-1, glued to the screen like a man possessed as he scoured the specs of the ship, thinking, the streams of data reflected in his eyes.

Chapter 77: Planet of the Moonfiend

Lan Jue's brows narrowed, and the expression on his face grew dark.

Once they'd adopted the colors, emblem and countersigns of the local pirates they'd encountered no further troubles. Zeus-1 deftly maneuvered between the racing asteroids as they hurtled through the dangerous region.

However, after three days, the small planet that was their objective still hadn't revealed itself.

Here, everything but the stars and a few select planets moved in irregular orbits. Asteroids, planets, moons – everything changed. As a result, whether you were pirate or pioneer, you always needed the latest star maps to find your destination. And to find them, you needed to visit one of the steadily orbiting giants – except that they were pirate havens.

“We need to make our way to Moonfiend. It looks like we'll need to get ourselves an updated star map,” Lan Jue commanded.

“Yes, boss.”

Planet Moonfied, largest of the static planets residing in the Shattered Starfields. It's name had changed more times than anyone could remember. Perpetually in flux, the planet changed ownership whenever there was a power adjustment in the region. Whatever pirate clan emerged as the largest, took the planet for their own and invariable gave it their own name. The planet itself remained as it always had, regardless of name – quietly orbiting around Beelzebub, the Starfield's largest star situated at it's heart.

A day on Moonfiend was thirty six hours; a year, four hundred and twenty eight days. Significantly different than Planet Skyfire, to be sure. But the climate was suitable, and it had three times the surface area of Skyfire.

The Shattered Starfields had three stable-orbit planets hidden within the shifting bands of asteroids. Moonfiend, while the largest, was only one.

The other two were known as Nefarius and Diablus. Their names never changed.

Looking down upon Moonfiend from the vacuum of space, it was difficult to imagine it was home to a ruthless pirate clan. Fifty percent of it's surface was a clear, crystal blue. The remainder was verdant green landscapes.

Zeus-1 slowly made it's way to the massive docking port and came to a stop. After a few moments, Lan Jue exited, cigar chomped between his teeth and hands stuffed in the pockets of his windbreaker. Mika, Lin Guoguo and Ke'er were at his heels.

The Accountant had chosen to remain behind, immersed as he was with his work on the ship's systems. Xiuxiu stayed as commanding officer in Lan Jue's absence.

"So where we going, boss," Mika asked.

The three women had already changed clothes, and no longer sported the revealing flight suits. Mika had chosen a white blouse, black coat and a black short skirt. Paired with her black-rimmed glasses, high heels and fiery red hair she looked like an intimidating business woman. Or a sexy secretary.

Ke'er had slipped in to a pair of white suit pants, peach high heels and a white jacket. She looked erudite with her pantsuit and bob-cut blue hair.

Lin Guoguo was dressed similarly to her sister amazon, changing out the pants for a long skirt. As they trailed behind Lan Jue away from the hangar they were the focus of many a wandering eye. Although it was a pirate haven, none dared to approach the women despite their beauty. After all, women were pirates, too.

The Moonfiend pirate clan had been in control of the planet for ten years. They were now well established as the rulers of the area. The result was actually a planet enjoying prosperity and safety. Of course, there were always the seedier parts of town, but those were generally easy to recognize and avoid. The Moonfiends had put a great deal of effort in to establishing a sense of order and propriety. This was in part due to their

secret trade deals with the three alliances, which afforded them both the strength to fight off contenders and the funds to keep their populace content.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Little Yue,” Lan Jue said, “We’ll visit her first and see if we can’t procure a star map.”

Mika swept her eyes over to Lan Jue, but said nothing. Lin Guoguo took a step closer and giggled. “Boss, so arrogant! Waltzing directly up to the Moonfiend Empress!”

Ke’er nodded her head and huffed in serious tones. “Don’t worry boss, we’ll protect you.”

“He grinned. “What, you think she could take me in a fight?”

Ke’er gave him a sideways glance. “I was talking about your chastity.”

Lan Jue tripped on his own feet and almost topped to the ground. The three women behind him erupted in laughter.

“These girls...! I oughta fire them... fire them, I say!” Lan Jue’s face was red, either from anger or shame. It was hard to determine the root cause.

Mika squared her shoulders, her voice clear and righteous. “Boss, we’re only doing what’s best for you. The fact that the Empress has coveted you for some time isn’t lost on us.”

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. “Get a car.”

Mika huffed in response. “So ashamed he’s gone all pissy. Fine, getting a car.”

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The Moonfiend Palace. Where the Moonfiend Pirates handled their affairs, and home to the Moonfiend Empress.

The Palace area was like a small city. It was shaped like a crescent moon. The sole city on the entire planet, and as hard as it was to believe that was

the simple fact. It was, in all actuality, the fifth largest city by acreage, even compared to the cities in the alliances.

Overhead, scores of verti-cars shuttled back and forth among the skyscrapers.

Lin Guoguo whistled appreciably. "Crescent City's sure changed. Just a few years and it's like any modern metropolis. The Empress really is something."

Mika scowled. "I don't see how. Too much power and expansion, and the three alliances won't have any choice but to come cracking down on them. What this is, is suicide."

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes at her words. "Little Yue's always been a prideful one, never wanting to back down. I think you're right, I should say something to her."

It would be troublesome for the three alliances to come after the pirates, true. However, only the foolish and prideful forget the sheer number of Adepts the Alliances commanded. If it came down to it, if the three alliances decided the pirates had to go, it wouldn't take much for them to make it a reality.

An hour's time in a verti-car got them within sight of the Palace. It was like an ancient city, with white parapets and a spindly white tower in its center. It was there the Empress called home.

As the verti-car reached the border of the Crescent City, it was compelled to come to a stop. It made its way to ground and delivered its passengers. Here, only mag-lev cars were permitted. Veri-cars, mechas and others like them were banned from use.

"Present your com's code for scanning." A man in a cyan hood blocked further passage.

Lan Jue produced a silver card in response. As the guard held his scanner up to the piece of metal a light issued forth and ran over its length. Moments later, a sharp beep, beep, beep rang from it.

"Coms code expired!" The Cyan-hooded man lifted his head, and the

look in his eyes grew hard. The light and angle finally conspired to reveal his face, a hodge-podge thing half composed of metal. His right eye, itself some mechanical construction, glowed a menacing red.

In the blink of an eye a dozen more hooded men appeared. They brandished their weapons at the small group.

“Expired?” Lan Jue looked at the card in his hand as though he were confused. After all, Zeus-1’s coms code had been fine – but, this was a card for the Crescent City.

Eventually his face betrayed a bitter smile, and he could only shake his head. “I guess it’s been too long since I’ve been out.”

“Hands above your head, and get on the ground! Any resistance will be met with lethal force!” The humming laser rifles were leveled at Lan Jue and his cohorts.

Mika, Lin Guoguo and Ke’er moved like a trio of lionesses, pulling Lan Jue in their midst to face the guns themselves.

Chapter 78: The Moonfiend Palace

“Drop your weapons, put your hands on your head, and get on the ground!”

The sound of weapons clattering to the floor followed, before every one of the cyan-hooded men netted their fingers atop their head and dropped to their knees. Denizens of the city who chanced by all invariably stared dumbstruck, unable to comprehend what was happening.

“Just can’t help yourself, can you Guoguo,” Lan Jue muttered helplessly.

“And who said they could point guns at my boss!” Lin Guoguo gave him a resentful look.

Ke’er snickered. “Guoguo did well! She was only just faster than us.”

He peered dejected towards the city interior. “Originally I’d hoped we could avoid this much noise.”

The ear-piercing notes of an alarm sounded, and from the apex of the palace gates gun muzzles rose up. From the outer sectors of the city several verti-cars were already making their way towards them.

Ke’er’s elegant brows shot up, but before she could make a move she felt Lan Jue’s hand on her shoulder. In the next moment an electric cloud arose, surrounding the three women and himself. By the time it dissipated, the area they once occupied was empty.

It was only a matter of seconds before the pirate patrol cars arrived at the scene. By the time they did, the kneeling guards had begun to come back to their senses, but to a man had no idea what had happened. It didn’t matter, as there was no trace of Lan Jue or his amazons to prove they were ever there.

Somewhere else, twisted tendrils of multicolored light swept overhead. Ke’er spoke to the small group that had appeared there. “Boss, your electro-portation is better than it’s ever been! Haven’t you been cripplingly depressed for three years?”

Lin Guoguo gave her a reprimanding poke, while Mika struggled

valiantly to hide a wry chuckle. “That’s our Ke’er, as frank and honest as you can get.”

Lan Jue gently slapped Mika on the back of her head. “Yeah, because you never talk too much.”

Mika stuck her tongue out at him. “Picking favorites!”

As the afterglow of the electro-portation faded they found themselves before the gate of the old city.

“And who are you?” The clearly confused voice of a silver-hooded guard wafted towards them. him and his partner glared at the four figures that suddenly appeared before them in a cloud of sparks and color.

Lan Jue lifted his head, and a burst of blue light filled the area. The silver hooded men collapsed. “Little Yue, if you would.” As he spoke, the sound was taken up by a strange blue light, which floated off in to the distance.

Lightning was, obviously, light. Through proper implementation and reception it was a better mode of sound transmission than a megaphone.

A great cry like the call of a bird rose from the palace interior, and in the moments following a golden figure appeared before them.

“Who are you?”

She was a golden-robed girl, no older than eighteen or nineteen. She struck a strangely imposing figure, with her arms stretched out at her sides. But it wasn’t her stance that was surprising – instead it was the pair of wings extending from her back. They splayed out behind her, surrounded by a soothing white light. An ancient-looking bronze sword was clutched in her right hand. Despite her appearance, she exuded no sense of impending force or violence.

Lan Jue looked at the young woman, engrossed. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. You’ve probably joined the clan in just these last few years. What’s your Discipline?”

“Enough!” The girl’s voice was hard, and cold. The bronze sword clutched in her hand sprung in to motion. In the same instant the white

light around her wings grew brighter, and began congealing around them. As the blade moved it, too, glowed with an incandescent white light. A distinct sense of holy righteousness swept over them. Great fluctuations of power burst out towards Lan Jue and his companions.

“Angelism. Acquired, not congenital? Something you’ve inherited from the Pontiff’s Castle, I imagine.” Lan Jue watched the young woman carefully.

She paused, taken aback, but the hesitation was quickly overtaken by a murderous look in her eyes. She rose to the tips of her toes, and in the space of an instant flashed towards Lan Jue. Her blade stretched out like a piercing white light, ready to separate his head from his body.

“Halt, Luo Shang!” The queenly command rang forth, but was unfortunately a second too late. That violent light had already reached Lan Jue.

“Stop!” Lin Guoguo’s voice arose, cold as ice. Her viridian green eyes had become as gold as the girl’s robes.

The young woman’s body shook visibly. She stopped in mid air, while in the same moment a fiery blaze erupted from beside Lan Jue. The wall of flame was like a shield, stopping the girl from advancing further.

White and red light collided. Nothing could penetrate the ensuing flash. The girl in gold had already retreated, and hovered in the air with wings splayed wide.

A figure descend from above, clad in a flowing black dress. She was lithe, and her long black hair flowed freely behind her like a living shadow, falling to her calves. Her skin was white as cream. In fact, it was only her pale red eyes that bore any color. As she floated to the ground, she became the focus of everyone’s attention.

Scores of silver-hooded men began to pour from the palace gates as the red-eyed woman made her entrance. Among them, two men in gold arrived to stand beside the young woman. One, upon seeing Lan Jue, flinched visibly. Terror fluttered through his eyes.

“Empress.” The girl turned towards the woman and called to her respectfully.

“Luo Shang, I’ll handle this.” Her voice was hard, her expression worse, and she exuded a palpable sensation of majesty. With her presence alone, the area around them seemed stifled in her aura.

“As you command.” She fell back to stand behind her queen. She took up position beside her two golden-robed compatriots.

The woman in black began to slowly, tantalizingly make her way towards Lan Jue. Each step increased the oppressive sense of her aura, filling the air until it was hard to breathe.

She stopped five meters before him.

In the next instant her icy expression melted away like frost before the spring sun. What emerged beneath the chill was an attractive smile. She gave him a light rebuke. “What are you doing here, bullying people?”

Lan Jue gave an apologetic laugh. “It’s been a long time, Little Yue. I didn’t want it to be like this. Unfortunately, the coms code you gave me for the Crescent City has expired.”

The empress began to walk towards Lan Jue once again, continuing to grumble coquettishly. “It has been a long time, and not so much as a word.” As she spoke her hand rose, and rested on Lan Jue’s arm. Were the elite members of the pirate clan in attendance not already looking on in stunned silence, they would be now. Their noble and majestic Empress, reduced to a flirtatious child?

“Not so close.” Mika thrust herself between them, face to face with the empress.

“Mika... still so hateful,” the woman cooed, her brows wrinkling.

Mika pushed her black-rimmed glasses higher on her nose, and lightly shook her head. The motion caused her red hair – previously pulled to a bun atop her head – to tumble down past her shoulders. As the hair came down, it began to change, becoming a garnet red from the root down.

A palpable, horrific power arose and swept forth like a tide. The silver-hooded regimens could not stop themselves from retreating a step in apprehension. It was a monstrous aura that was no less throttling than the Empress' own.

Such was the power of one of Zeus' Amazons: Mika, the Stygian Succubus!

Chapter 79: The Daughter of Satan

Long, flowing locks of maroon hair were complimented by a pair of sinister blood-red eyes. Flames arose, as dark as the fires of hell – and among this, that terrible suffocating aura! The entirety of the area grew bleak and dim.

This was Mika – the Stygian Succubus.

“The Dark Tower. This is Satan’s stink?” The young woman who’d moments before retreated at her mistress’ behest drew closer once again. The wings splayed behind her reacted to the scene, glowing with a dim white light. It pulsed and shook when confronted with Mika’s devilish aura.

The Moonfiend Empress looked on with narrowed brows, and a golden light shimmered behind her eyes. Her own presence – previously majestic and overbearing – changed. She grew bright, and exuded a sense of unfiltered holiness.

“Mika... are you sure you want to square off against me?”

The Succubus snorted derisively. “If you dare approach my boss again, I’ll tear your palace to the ground.”

“Alright, Mika... relax.” Lan Jue lifted his red hand and placed it soothingly atop Mika’s shoulder. The dancing, ethereal flames that surrounded her began to snake up his arm like a cancer.

Mika gasped, startled. The murderous light in her eyes and the flaming color of her hair gradually dissolved back to normal. The sense that had crawled over the area – that demonic oppression – also dissipated in to nothing.

The Empress bore a clearly displeased expression, and glared daggers at Lan Jue. “You fool. You come all this way, suffer all the pitfalls and bring three jealous little girls with you. It bores me. Enter, if you must.” As she spoke, she lazily turned that curvaceous form back towards the palace. She began to walk in, swaying tantalizingly as she did. It was enough to

drive any man to do irrational things.

The lapping flames surrounding Lan Jue's hand grew small and vanished. He patted Mika's shoulder once more comfortingly.

Mika dropped her head a few degrees. "I'm sorry, boss," she said sheepishly. "I saw the Pontiff's lackey and... I couldn't help myself."

Lan Jue adopted a serious tone. "Over the last several years you've done wonders keeping that darkness at bay. Don't let all that effort go to waste."

"Yes boss," she said dutifully. There was no further trace of that unrestrained evil from moments before.

Lin Guoguo and Ke'er were at her side, then. Each took up one of her hands in comfort.

Lin Guoguo leaned in. "Sister, there wasn't any need for that," she whispered to her. "You have me and Ke'er here. Together we can protect the boss just fine."

Ke'er nodded her head in agreement. "That's right! Sis, don't give in to your impulses. I remember what you were like before, violent and unpredictable."

Lan Jue shot them a bitter smile. "Last I checked I still have hands and legs, ladies. I'm perfectly capable of handling myself. Let's go." He rubbed his nose and made for the palace entrance.

Luo Sang looked on as the four left, walking towards the palace. She watched carefully as Mika followed her boss. Her sharp, clear eyes never left the Succubus' form, even after she disappeared through the gates.

"Such potent evil," she muttered to herself. "How could it be? Even in the core of the Dark Tower there were only a few who could possess such pure vileness. Could she be close to that wicked Satan? Who on earth is she? And how is it she came to be that man's servant?"

"Luo Shang." The voice arose from beside her, and shook her from her reverie.

“Hm?” She raised her head, looking towards the golden-robed man at her side.

“There are some things that don’t bear looking in to,” he warned. “There is no benefit for you – only risk. All I can tell you, is even as dangerous as that woman is – her master is worse.”

Luo Shang looked to where they had vanished in to the palace. Who was he?

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The palace had no elevator or means of transport. The only way up was the ancient stony stairway, which the four ascended with the Empress in the lead. Eventually, they arrived at the pinnacle of the castle.

Here, there was no entourage of silver-hooded men. There were no guards or servants. Only the Empress and her guests.

The highest point wasn’t large, and after pushing open the wooden door there was revealed an area of only about two hundred square meters.

The floor was covered in a pure white shag carpet. Situated around the floor was antique furniture. On the walls, the eyes of countless portraits followed them as they entered.

Mika shuddered under their gaze, and the slightest hint of red light flickered behind her eyelids.

“Mika,” Lan Jue warned.

Mika gritted her teeth, and pushed her black-rimmed glasses higher on her nose. Her eyes cleared.

Lan Jue looked towards the Empress. “It’s been so long since you left the Pontiff’s employ, little Yue. Why do you still hang this gaudy things?”

Their host spoke softly in response. “Once mustn’t forget where they came from. They may have lost faith in me, but my belief in the Lord

hasn't changed. If it hadn't been for that belief, after so many years I'm sure I'd have fallen to corruption."

Lan Jue's brows wrinkled. "And what of that girl, Luo Shang? Unless I'm mistaken she's an acquired Talent, newer generation. And her Angelism is an Archangel, no less. How'd she get here? Aren't you afraid the Pontiff's Castle will come looking for trouble? I wouldn't be surprised if they already know you're here."

The Empress' tone took on a dark note of violence and disdain. "If they dared leave their lofty towers, there'd be little chance of returning to them. As a matter of fact, even if you hadn't told me about their true selves – awakened me to their real intentions – I'd likely still have broken free of their control. But that is what it is. I watched Luo Shang grow up, and convinced her to join me. That's the gist of it. The Pontiff's Castle has no idea. You should know that my control over this place is absolute. You're the first person to have seen her and lived to talk about it."

"Hmph." Mika snorted angrily.

The Empress shot her a look. "And what are you grunting about? I left the Pontiff's Castle at this man's request – didn't you do the same from the Dark Tower? You and I certainly aren't alike – you are Satan's daughter, heir to the Dark Tower. And still you turned your back on him and left. If the Dark Tower were to ever find him, I can only imagine the trouble. You don't understand how enraged the tower was the day you left. But I am curious how you all managed to hide all traces of yourselves for so long. And controlling that evil nature of yours so well."

"None of your business," Mika spat.

Four eyes met, challenging, and again that dangerous fire welled up behind Mika's eyes.

Helplessly, Lan Jue interjected. "Alright, you two don't need to go toe-to-toe every time you meet, ok? You may have very differing beliefs but neither of you are what you used to be."

The Empress rolled her eyes at Lan Jue, but even that action bore a distinctly flirtatious undertone.

“So what is it you want me from this time? There’s obviously something or you wouldn’t have bothered. You coward.”

Lan Jue continued as though he hadn’t heard the insult. “I need the most recent star maps of the Shattered Starfields. Name your price.”

Chapter 80: Class of the Seven Stars

“You’re here for that power gem, yes? It seems as though you’ve finally discovered what it does. So you tell me, what price do you think I should ask for?” The Empress smiled wolfishly at Lan Jue, a telling light in her eyes.

“Aren’t we the greedy one,” Lan Jue muttered.

The Empress simply laughed, swaying back towards her guests. “Aww, who says I’m greedy? You just want a star map? It’s yours.”

As she spoke she lifted her right hand. Empty, a light shone in her palm – dimly at first, but growing until it encompassed the appendage. When it receded she bore a silver disk, which she handed to Lan Jue.

Lan Jue made no shows of courtesy, taking up the disk and handing it to Ke’er, who stood at his side.

“Thanks. I owe you a favor. We’ll be on our way.” Saying his piece, he turned and began to make his way from the white chamber. He had no intention to linger any longer than he had to.

“Stop right there!” The Empress’ charming voice interrupted.

Lan Jue paused, and turned to see that her face had grown agitated.

“Unconscionable. Business is concluded and you simply run off!” She sounded resentful.

“Hey,” Ke’er began, her face sour, “watch what you say. Our boss is a decent person, no one’s taking advantage here.”

The Empress’ expression darkened. “Don’t give me that, little girl. Somehow I imagine you all wish he wasn’t so decent. Zeus’ Amazons... would any of you claim not to harbor an interest? You know he only pretends not to notice.”

It was Lan Jue’s face that darkened this time. “Ke’er, give her the maps back. We’re leaving.”

Ke’er stood stunned. Lin Guoguo and Mika were similarly stupefied,

their faces adopting strange expressions. They knew their boss well. This time, he really was angry.

The Empress herself was taken aback, but she made no move to take the disk in Ke'er's hand. Her eyes reddened at the edges, and as she spoke a lump grew in her throat. "So you protect them, then. Tell it true, Zeus – if I submitted, would you take me under your control as well? Would I become your fifth servant!"

Lan Jue's brows raised, and he sighed as softness returned to his eyes. "Little Yue, you know that's impossible. With a character like yours how could you not? Even then, my protection can only extend so far."

The Moonfiend Empress hung her head. "I know. Your three years of seclusion wasn't just because of Hera. It was to benefit the three girls with you as well. Did you know that, Mika? I really do envy you all – to have a man like him as your guardian. Sometimes the hard and harsh Lord of his castle, and sometimes the kind-hearted angel. Go then, I'm done speaking with you."

Mika, Guoguo and Ke'er each turned their eyes to Lan Jue.

Lan Jue smiled indifferently, like nothing had happened. "We're off." The words still hung in the air as he turned to leave.

It was at this moment a figure appeared, hurriedly rising from the floors below. It was the golden-hooded man from before, who'd warned off Luo Shang – revealed now as Gao Yong.

"Your Majesty. They've sent another."

The Empress had regained her noble façade in the space of an instant, and was once again the majestic leader of the Moonfiend pirates. "Show them to the reception room. I'll be there shortly."

Gao Yong took a quick look at Lan Jue and his followers before continuing. "Your Majesty, this purpose this time is... I'm afraid we can't put them off any longer."

The Empress sniffed dismissively. "They'll wait until hell freezes over if I want them to. But fine, I'll see to them."

Ke'er fiddled with the disk in her hand and muttered, mostly to herself. "I knew this thing wouldn't be so easy to get."

Lan Jue chuckled. "It's for the best, actually. Now I won't need to worry about it later."

Turning back he spied the look on the Empress' Face. "So, what's the problem, Little Yue?"

But she had grown obstinate, and waved him away with her hand. "It doesn't concern you. Go on."

Lan Jue turned then to Gao Yong. "Maybe you'll be more forthcoming."

Gao Yong looked to his mistress, then back to Lan Jue with uncertainty dancing in his eyes. He responded quietly. "Mister Lan, it's the Purgatory pirate clan. We don't know how they've gained power so quickly... they want to redistribute the territories. They plan to use the ancient pirate way _"

"A duel." Lan Jue said.

Gao Yong only nodded.

"What manner of dual," he followed.

Gao Yong answered. "Three bouts of adepts. Four for mechas. Seven contests all together, first to four wins. Here we call this 'Clash of the Seven Stars'.

"I'm surprised," Lan Jue said. "With the Moonfiend's strength I'd assume you wouldn't have such problems."

Gao Yong's smile was a bitter one. "Originally our power was absolute, but recently Purgatory has sent for several particularly powerful individuals to bolster their ranks. We suspect they were poached from the Three Alliances, brought over with six battleships. Before the clan was already not too far off in power to us, but now the gap has closed considerably."

Lan Jue looked back towards the Empress. "Little Yue, this is something I can help you with. Call it your price, debts settled. Not just for the star

map – understand?”

She looked quietly at Lan Jue for a long moment. The emotions in her eyes were numerous and complicated, but controlled. Eventually she spoke. “Up to you.”

Ke’er frowned at the proceedings. “Boss let’s just go. It’s like you’re begging to help her. What are we still doing here?”

Lan Jue did not answer, speaking instead to Gao Yong. “When does the Clash begin?”

“If it were up to them, in three days,” Gao Yong replied. “If Mister Lan agrees to help, we’ll respond accordingly.”

Lan Jue nodded. “So be it. In three days we’ll return to Moonfiend. In the interim we have our own business to attend to. Wait for our return, then we’ll fight in the name of the Moonfiend Pirates.”

Gao Yong’s face was elated. “Many thanks, Mister Lan!” Since learning of Lan Jue’s identity, Gao Yong had grown ever more grateful for Lan Jue’s decorum and restraint that day on the Avenue.

He made his way from the castle, a small smile ever present as a shadow on his handsome face. His three amazons followed behind.

“Boss!” Mika called.

Lan Jue paid her no mind, despite the fact they walked shoulder to shoulder. He arm pressed against her for just a moment.

She said nothing further, and walked along with him in silence. Quietly, she tapped a few buttons in to the communicator on her wrist.

As the four left, Lan Jue said not a word. The verti-car they’d hired waited patiently not far off, ready to depart.

“A moment, Zeus.” The exclamatory voice broke the silence of their trek.

Lan Jue stopped in his tracks, and his features changed, dropping that small smile. Quietly he addressed the voice. “Are you going to force me to kill someone?”

“It looks like my estimates were correct. If I let you leave today, I’m afraid you won’t be coming back. The Empress remains as affectionate for you as ever, and though I don’t know what she insinuated, it looks like you understood.”

A large figure was slowly making their way towards them from afar. Reality almost appeared to swirl and bend around them. The various peddlers and pedestrians on the street all quietly vanished. It was clearly felt by Lan Jue’s three protectors that it was as though they’d entered another reality entirely.

Chapter 81: The Pontiff's Castle

The imposing figure drew ever closer, and with each step their features became clearer. At least two meters tall, and clad in plate armor reminiscent of the ancient Middle Ages. In their left hand, a shield. A sword in their right.

With each step their imposing aura became stronger. It was as though they were the center of the universe, the master of this reality.

Lan Jue's face was calm as he greeted him. "It's been a long time, Raphael."

"Indeed. A long time, Zeus. We've been looking for you for... ages." Raphael's incessant march towards Lan Jue never ceased. Strangely, despite his heavy plate armor, he made not a sound as he trekked towards the small group.

Mika had already undergone a change; her eyes narrow, the red in their depths growing darker with each passing moment. "The Archangel of Healing... Raphael, of the Pontiff's Castle."

Lan Jue turned then to face Mika, and placed his hands gently upon her shoulders. "Mika, promise me. Unless there is absolutely no other choice, do not use your abilities. Understand?"

She looked in to his eyes in silence, and moisture began to collect at the corner of her eyes. "Boss..."

He gently ran a hand through her hair. "You call me boss, it's my job to protect you. Trust me."

Mika took a deep breath, and straightened her shoulders. "Right!" The red that had crept through her eyes had dissolved.

"Zeus. Really, there's no reason it has to be like this. If you want to leave there are none among us who will stop you. All we want is the Stygian Succubus. It was never our intention to feud with you. Give her to us, and you may leave. The Pontiff's Castle will even owe you a favor."

Lan Jue laughed, almost as though the exchange brought him joy.

“Raphael, you keep calling me Zeus. So you know the kind of person I am.”

“But you’re no real supreme being.” This sentence came from another voice, clear and melodious. Another towering figure appeared, this one not in armors but an impeccably clean white robe. Long golden hair flowed to his back, with sapphire blue eyes set in a handsome face. He looked regal, elegant, like an artist.

Lan Jue gave them a lopsided smile. “We’re all old friends. I figured with Raphael around you’d show up. Gabriel, you haven’t changed a bit.”

Gabriel gave him a small smile in return. “Oh? And how would you describe me?”

“Cheap,” Lan Jue said without hesitation.

Gabriel’s features grew rigid, but he quickly recovered. “Ah Zeus, all you have is words? I am curious, though, how you knew it was a trap. In return I’ll tell you how we set it up.”

Lan Jue spoke, appearing almost bored. “Your trap was flawless, actually. But, you shouldn’t have sent that little angel my way. I know what kind of person Little Yue is, as well as I know her relationship with your lot. But I also know her heart – and she wouldn’t let any one of your number near her. Unless I’m mistaken, you likely offered something she dare not refuse in return for setting this up. This Clash of the Seven Stars was your doing, a snare you knew I’d have to walk in to.”

Gabriel sighed. “You really are a special breed. In this instant you really do seem like the real Zeus. Even now you still seek to protect your Little Yue. You’ve got the one right, but there was also Gao Yong. But those aren’t even the most important. What made it in the end was Yue seeing the look in your eyes. We’d originally thought you’d been fooled, but she noticed how you spoke to Gao Yong; relaxed, at ease. So we decided we’d settle this today.”

“Of course, you can still choose to leave. All you have to do is agree to leave the Succubus to us. You can take the others and go,” Raphael added sincerely.

Lan Jue leisurely pulled his cigar from his breast pocket, producing with it a cigar cutter from his windbreaker. He clipped the end, and spoke over his shoulder to Mika. "Let me get a light."

Mika smirked. She pressed thumb and forefinger together, and with a snap a flame appeared hovering before Lan Jue's face.

Lan Jue leaned forward and drew upon the cigar, sucking the flames in to it. The pungent aromas of the fine cigar began to fill the area.

"Who else, hm? Come on out. In this Holy Light it's hard to pinpoint your exact locations. Just the two of you isn't enough for what you want, I think."

He looked around with an expression of boredom, his mood almost dismissive. But there was a clear arrogance in his mannerisms.

"So you wish to be our enemy, Zeus?" A magnetic, rumbling voice filled the air. The voice changed something in Lan Jue. His arrogance slipped, and a quiet dignity crept in to his eyes.

A fiery red figure gradually appeared between Gabriel and Raphael. He walked towards them at an average, leisurely pace, but his presence flooded the area with radiant light with each step closer.

Mika's face blanched. "Michael – the Angel of War!"

Lan Jue gave a throaty laugh, and took a long drag of his cigar. The plume of smoke slowly extricated itself from his lips. "You all think so highly of me! Three of the Pontiff's Seven Archangels. Anyone else?"

Michael was covered in a set of fiery red armor. Brilliant and divine his features, however, were as hard as carved stone. A great cloak of crimson flowed at his back, and he wore no helmet which permitted his golden hair to shimmer brilliantly in the holy light.

"Uriel. He's at your airship. You must know the Blade-Maiden is no match for him," Michael said matter-of-factly.

"So just you four then," Lan Jue asked.

Michael continued. "The Succubus is an important matter to us. She will

inherit the Dark Tower.”

Lan Jue looked towards Gabriel. “You found me after what I did on Skyfire I imagine. Then you discovered I was on the Avenue. Then, after the conflict with Gao Yong and the pirates, you figured I’d come to the Shattered Starfields. And so here you plan to end things. Am I right?”

Chapter 82: Ascension

Gabriel fixed Lan Jue with his eyes. “Zeus, I’ll stress again – we don’t want to be enemies.”

Lan Jue laughed softly in response. “But I already am, aren’t I. I really don’t have a choice, and neither do you. The only thing left to say can be said through power. If you want to take Mika, you’ve got one road – and that’s over my dead body.”

Michael’s response was calm. “If that’s the case, there’s nothing more to say. Gabriel, you handle these. Zeus is mine.”

Brilliant pillars of light erupted from the three angels. Their pure white wings splayed out to magnificent lengths. Each bore six wondrous wings. Each were Six-Winged Seraphim!

An Angelism resulting in a six-winged seraph meant they were at least a ninth-level Talent, seventh ranked. And Michael, the Angel of War, lead the Seven Archangels as a ninth-level ninth-ranked master. He’d attained the peak of cultivation.

Gabriel, the Messenger of Death was ninth-level, eighth-ranked. Raphael, the Angel of Healing, ninth-level seventh-ranked.

Great beams of golden-red light shot manically from Michael’s back. “Zeus, the widely renowned. I’ve long awaited this battle.”

Lan jue lazily puffed on his cigar. “You’ve thought about this, Michael? You know me, you know I don’t let a slight go unpunished. Let this be the end, for if I leave here alive, the Pontiff’s Castle will never know another day of peace.”

Michael’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Still you threaten me.”

Lan Jue’s response was cool, collected. “I’m telling you what will happen. If I die here, you’ll create some scene to confuse any who come to investigate. But if I don’t, if I walk out of here, you know what the consequences will be. If you didn’t, you’d have come for me long ago on Skyfire Avenue.”

Michael huffed. “Since when did Zeus resort to talking to solve his problems?”

Lan Jue laughed, though it was an expression that never reached his eyes. “You know? I actually want to stamp my cigar out on that irritating face of yours. Unfortunately it’s a method that doesn’t fit with my noble decorum. But it sure would make me happy.”

“Guoguo, Ke’er. Protect Mika. Leave these three to me!” As he spoke, he took a single stride forward to meet his assailants.

In the space of that single step, the lackadaisical and indifferent Lan Jue underwent a dramatic change.

A golden mask appeared from nowhere, covering his features. In the same instant there appeared a brilliant golden cape. His hair grew long, like spun gold. Once more he appeared as he did that day on the mountain top, ‘rescuing’ Zhou Qianlin from her marriage.

This man wasn’t Lan Jue. In this moment, he truly was – Zeus!

But the angels didn’t look on in stillness. In those few moments they, too, were in motion.

A dazzling flash of golden red like the rising sun burst in to bloom before Zeus’ face. The explosion released an incomparable blast of light and heat.

The holy fire reflected off of Zeus’ golden mask. His right hand short forth, and a terrible blast of blue light erupted towards his adversaries. It charged forth like a spear, piercing to the depths of that golden orb of light and fire.

Terrible bursts of energy issued from the point of contact. The electric energies cast forth by Zeus seemed to devour the orb. With the air still crackling from the power of the impact, he took another step forward. Surrounded by the remnants of their opening salvo, his approach seemed even more menacing.

The Messenger of Death deftly avoided the blast, floating effortlessly in the air as though he were taking a leisurely stroll. Suddenly, a holy light

expanded from his body, pure and brilliant, and raced towards the three women. The chorus of angels rang from its depths.

Mika hadn't moved from her original spot. Her red hair hung loose, framing her pretty face. With head slightly bent, she stood still and silent – as though the events of the world around her didn't exist.

Lin Guoguo strode forward until she stood between Gabriel and Mika. Her right hand was pressed against her forehead, and a sharp golden light flashed from her eyes. Behind her appeared a golden faceless figure, surrounded by a blazing ring of light. In the blink of an eye the halo burst in to innumerable golden bolts, which launched themselves violently towards the assaulting angel.

The aura around Gabriel shifted perceptibly, created a black void between them. Guoguo's arrows of light fired harmlessly within and vanished.

It wasn't a second later that reality ruptured between them, and from the depths of the tear a great azure hand swiped at Gabriel's halo of light. The attack landed to the side, succeeding in tearing it asunder.

"I said leave the three to me," Zeus' roaring voice thundered forth.

Boooom! Earsplitting peels of thunder rang through the heavens. Threading bolts of blue lightning became encased in golden light, and furiously detonated from between Zeus and the Angel of War.

The fiery red figure of Michael staggered out.

Another step forward, and Zeus reached his hand in to a void in space. When he retracted it, a great spear of golden lightning writhes in his grip. He jabbed the weapon towards the red angel.

The air shimmered and parted like water before the tip of Zeus' spear. Michael grunted and, exposed from the assault, staggered back a few steps.

Zeus wasted no time. The opening allowed him to turn his golden spear of lightning to Gabriel.

Suddenly, dual beams of holy light descended from on high, encasing Michael and Gabriel. The light served as a shield, divine intervention, which also caused the energies pouring from their bodies to become enhanced.

“Let the skies open!” Zeus’ penetrating roars resounded around them.

At his call a terrible boom of thunder followed, and the air above them became riddled with scores of golden fissures.

The white shield of light before Gabriel split like paper in the face of Zeus’ golden spear. The crackling bolt veritably screamed as it made for his face.

Gabriel’s eyes grew wide, and his face paled in terror. Instinctively he drew his six wings before him like a barrier, and his body became consumed in blessed white light.

A shrill cry filled the air as the blinding light receded. Gabriel’s body fell from the shell of brilliance, collapsing to the floor. Two of his six wings had been horribly mangled. Golden rivers of blood sputtered from the angel’s mouth.

“Ascension... ?” The Angel of Healing, Raphael, was struck dumb as he watched the scene.

Slowly, Zeus turned to look at Raphael. Slowly, his right hand lifted to point to the roiling, shattered skies.

“The heavens shall splinter!”

The world grew bright as day. With Zeus at its center, scores of searing golden lightning erupted from the skies to obliterate everything they fell upon. In the face of this abominable tempest, even the three great angels of the Pontiff’s Castle had to devote all of their power to self preservation.

The heavens indeed fractured, in from the blue skies and white clouds there radiated forth a great beam of light.

“Hmph!” The grunt was cold and angry. Michael, Angel of War, stood unmoved, his six wings keeping him aloft.

Each beat of his great wings radiated powerful, holy light. The shimmering glow spread across his pure white wings until they, too, shone gold with power.

As the last feather of his wings absorbed the golden glow, they split apart. Twelve glorious wings beat furiously at Michael's back. But more than that, behind the mighty warrior a shimmering ethereal figure with twelve wings of its own hovered.

The true angel had emerged. Adventus.

Chapter 83: The Variable

Twelve powerful wings beat against the air, and Michael vanished from view. The respite was short lived, though, for he appeared moments later high above them. Thus extricated from Zeus' line of attack, he made a charge for the three women.

Raphael rushed to Gabriel's side, and laid his hands upon him. Gentle white light emanated from the contact and began to heal the fallen angel's broken body. Raphael's brow knit as he worked. "Zeus... it's a fitting name. Resolute, unwavering. To use his Ascension from the onset. His level of cultivation is comparable to our own, despite the fact we've lived for more than a hundred years. But it isn't true mastery. He draws too much from himself, and I doubt he'll be able to hold it for long."

Gabriel's face was pale and pained. He coughed speckles of golden blood. "It's a... powerful Ascension. And his judgment is impeccable. He didn't hesitate to draw so much energy to command the battlefield. The Thunder Discipline is worthy of being called the most explosive of powers. He even forced ... Michael to employ Adventus. He is... also an arrogant one. In his Adventus form, Michael can also break the barrier into tenth level. Enough even to rival his Majesty the Pontiff's un-enhanced abilities. And Zeus, drained as he is, will have no chance to run."

The golden light surrounding Zeus flickered, and began to fade by degrees. Golden hair, golden mask, golden robes... each of them melted away like rippling water until they vanished. Lan Jue hadn't employed any gems or enhancements – this was his own innate power. However, he could only maintain this ultimate form for ten seconds before it ran its course.

His face was pale, and blood had begun to collect at the corner of his lips. But his eyes retained that calm attentiveness.

"Boss! Let me," Ke'er shouted resolutely. Undulating waves of light shimmered in her eyes.

Lan Jue turned to look at her, and something in his expression stopped

any further debate.

Mika remained still, silent, with head bowed. Lin Guoguo stood dutifully by her side, fists raised and eyes flashing gold.

“Xiuxiu, do you copy.. Xiuxiu!” Lan Jue growled in to his communicator. Only static responded.

The signal had been blocked.

ζ

“Wa-hah! Tell me how awesome I am! The Jewelry Master asked, and I have delivered! I’m nothing short of a genius. Now, there’s absolutely nothing that can crack your protections. The only way someone’s breaking in is if they can survive a blast from Zeus-1’s main cannons.” The Accountant practically wriggled in his seat with self-pride.

Xiuxiu sat a small distance away, but acted as though she hadn’t heard. Her hands supported her pink cheeks as she stared towards the city through the porthole, preoccupied with her own thoughts.

“Man, I am something else!” The Accountant continued to toot his own proverbial horn.

Thrumm! Suddenly, a shudder ran through Zeus-1

Xiuxiu was drawn from her silent contemplation to stare quickly at the screen before her.

“Eh? What’s with this interference signal. It’s so strong... it’s like our communications array has just broken off!” The Accountant scratched his head, muttering indistinctly to himself.

Xiuxiu spoke up. “Something not right. The boss must have run in to some trouble.”

The young woman’s classical, even temperament grew sharp in the space of an instant. Though it would take exceptional perception,

someone looking close enough would discover the pupils of her big eyes had elongated like dual razors.

A shadow covered her screen, and a figure appeared.

He was a graceful man, elegant, but the smile upon his face held a dangerous quality. He was tall, stood straight, and from his back extended six magnificent white wings which slowly undulated to keep him aloft.

“Salutations,” he spoke through the screen. “Unless I’m mistaken, the only one of Zeus’ amazons remaining on the ship is the Asura Blade-Maiden. I, am called Uriel. I’m unsure whether you’ve heard of me, but I’d ask you not do anything... rash. You are currently surrounded by four battleships, and four more stand by in orbit. What I need you to do, is simply remain calm and quiet, until matters are settled. I am loathe to act violently towards a woman, as any gentleman worth his salt can attest. And so, Blade-Maiden, remain just as you are and things will remain copacetic.”

A hard glint shone in Xiuxiu’s eyes, but her face remained calm and betrayed nothing.

“The Cherubim Uriel, of the Pontiff’s Castle? What are you doing all the way out here? What’s happened? What in the world did the Jewelry Master do now?! Why would the Castle send people to come after him?” The Accountant sputtered question after question, staring worriedly at Xiuxiu.

Xiuxiu lowly turned her head to look at him. “We’re likely trapped. The whole thing probably was – even from the day we got that gem from the hooded man on the Avenue. The others are certainly in danger – but between Mika and the boss’ power, they can hold their own for the time being. Luckily he doesn’t know you’re on board. After all, neither did we. Uriel’s made his calculations based on all the information he has. You, are the variable.”

“I’m going to get out and draw the Cherubim away. Its your job to find a way to get this ship out of here and provide support for Lan Jue and the others. Understand?”

The Accountant stuttered. “B-b-but what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Xiuxiu responded casually. “Help the boss, and he’ll come for me.”

“But –“

Xiuxiu interrupted before he could finish his thought. “No time for ‘buts’. If you want to live you need to get out of here, and do as I say. You’re already as familiar with this ship as any of us. You’re going to have to do this. Just remember, I can’t hold him off for long.”

With her final command issued, Xiuxiu turned and left without hesitation.

He watched her back as she left and said nothing. Contrary to his nature the Accountant sat silent, deep in thought.

Uriel hung in the air by virtue of his six beating wings, a hundred meters before the bow of Zeus-1. That diabolical smile never left his lips.

However, he didn’t remain alone outside for long. As he looked on, the ship’s hatch opened to reveal a figure silhouetted by the ship’s interior light.

Black flight suit, black hair, and black eyes met his gaze. Xiuxiu exited the ship atop a small personal aircraft that made it’s way towards Uriel.

The Angel laughed. “I’d certainly heard Zeus commanded four beautiful maidservants. Today I find truth to the rumors. The Asura Blade-Maiden, I presume.”

Xiuxiu’s response was curt. “Did you lackies of the castle figure you can assault my boss without consequences?”

Uriel’s dark grin grew wider. The taint of sinister schemes lived in that smile. “With all of you dead, there wont be any consequences. No one will know what happened to you. After all, this is the Shattered Starfields.”

Chapter 84: The Asura Blade-Maiden

“Fine,” Xiuxiu responded coolly. “I hadn’t thought the boss’ actions would bring you lot. It’s good, really – it make things more interesting.”

Uriel tilted his head, and looked at her with a hint of curiosity in his dark eyes. “And you aren’t the least bit afraid?”

Xiuxiu shot him an impish grin. “Why should I be afraid? Do you honestly think you and your people can defeat my boss?”

Uriel’s laugh was deep, and sinister. “It appears you aren’t interested in standing idly by. But I’d advise you against taking any reckless actions. As far as I can recall, the Amazons were Talents ranging from eight-level, to ninth-level first-rank. Simply put, that isn’t enough to stop us.”

Xiuxiu looked at him earnestly. “Data, words on a paper. How can you really know unless you find out for yourself? Am I right?”

Her dark eyes shone like lacquer. A flash – but not black, white like a terrible heat. It was quickly followed by a sudden and violent burst of power, and a curtain of light erupting from behind her.

It coalesced in to a shimmering white sword, and a thunderous sound like tearing filled the air as it solidified. Uriel felt himself stiffen in response, and from his wings there emitted a gentle golden glow which shielded him from the worst of the ensuing blast.

“Impressive – worthy of being called Zeus’ right-hand. Quite the powerful aura! I’m going to assume your Discipline lies in the domain of piercing. It’s a rare thing to find someone who’s cultivate this sort of power to the eighth level.” As casual as when he first appeared, Uriel lazily motioned with a finger. Tendrils of golden light, thin as spider silk, slowly slithered from his body. They had no rhyme or reason, nor did they stretch towards Xiuxiu. Instead they blossomed like groping fingers, like threads of fishing net.

The undulating blade on Xiuxiu’s back slowly manifested itself, growing until it stretched a meter and a half in length. Decorative designs etched

themselves upon the blade, and a crimson fuller stretched down to the impossibly sharp tip.

[TN : The indented part in the center of the blade that – contrary to their secondary name ‘blood gutters’ – is actually to make the sword lighter, not promote the flow of blood.]

The light emanating from Xiuxiu’s eyes shone brighter, yet her form began to grow hazy and indistinct. She faded until, surprisingly, the blade swallowed her in to itself.

The great blade shuddered, and swelled a hundred-fold. Now an enormous, blazing sword of light, it carved a deadly path towards the net of golden tendrils.

[TN : hundred-fold = A five hundred foot sword is ludicrous, but that’s the translation, so that’s what ya got]

The grating sounds of impact arose as blade met spindles. A great tear appeared in the net, and with a sharpness that threatened to tear reality at the seams, it continued it’s dangerous arc directly towards Uriel.

“Ninth-level, then?” Uriel looked at the dancing blade in mild surprise. According to his research, the Blade-Maiden should have been the weakest of Zeus’ Amazons – no higher than eighth-rank. Simply following at Zeus’ side had apparently caused her to increase in strength and ability.

As he watched, he realized also that it wasn’t just the data that had been wrong. In these last few years, the Blade-Maiden had crossed an Adepts most important threshold, advancing from eighth, to ninth level. Moreover, it almost seemed as though she were holding back.

Lost in his thoughts and under assault from the living blade, he hardly noticed when Zeus-1 shuddered in to motion. Without any indication of the engines spooling, the ship immediately began to rotate. It was quick, small, only fifteen degrees or so – but it was enough to catch Uriel off guard.

Autopilot?

Not far away, the deafening roar of engines arose. As the air whipped

violently around them, the sensation of compression from the engines sputtering to life was nearly crushing. Uriel's threats had not been empty, for now four great battleships were rumbling to life. Slowly each began to rise in to the air. High overhead, only partly visible through the clouds were revealed several more enormous figures. A classic dragnet.

The great blade paused for but a moment in midair, but only long enough for it's edge to adopt a golden glow. It struck anew at the embattled angel.

In the face of the great blade, even Uriel had no choice but to retreat. A radiating white light arose to shield him.

Sword never met shield, but the guard pulsed with power regardless. Uriel had grown angry, and with a growl his great wings unfurled, launching him above the Blade-Maiden. His figured dipped, aiming a vicious punch towards the living weapon.

Boom! Zeus-1 moved anew, this time it's five massive engines firing all at once. In a space of time that should have been impossible, the engines roared to full power, and the thin white light of it's shields buzzed over the ship's length.

But the ship didn't lift off as expected. The roaring engines this close to ground screamed like banshees as the ship lurched backward.

Zeus-1 had maneuvered back, slamming directly in to a building situated behind it as weapon blasts from the battleships overhead rained down. The resulting impact razed the obstacle and left the ship with a clear path of escape. By virtue of it's speed and shields it was able to complete the motion. Almost instantly the ship launched up a thousand meters, then rose abruptly towards the skies.

Crack! Countless streams of white light shot forth from Uriel's extended fist, followed by a dizzying hum.

Xiuxiu had appeared again in the air between them, the great blade situated at her side. Streaks of blood covered her nose and mouth, but her battered face still looks delighted. Finally realization dawned on Uriel's face.

“There was another on board.” Uriel’s face was dark with rage. In his time as Cherubim, never had he been so deceived. He found it difficult to keep his emotions hidden.

Xiuxiu only laughed. “You think I’d tell you?”

Uriel opened his fist and reached out to grab Xiuxiu. Once more numerous threads extended in to a web, enveloping the Blade-Maiden in their depths.

Xiuxiu grunted, reaching up to pull a necklace from around her throat.

It was a thin thing, unadorned and not visibly special in any way. The pendant, however, drew the eye. It was a small golden sword, that shimmered with it’s own internal light.

She held the pendant gently between her fingers and, her eyes growing soft, she called forth: “Asura!”

A piercing golden light flared from the small sword. As it receded, an inky void appeared before Xiuxiu, and from it’s depths arose an colossal figure.

White, with two seven meter blades affixed to it’s back. A massive mecha, which when it arrived blinded the eyes with scores of dazzling prismatic rays. Uriel’s net shattered harmlessly under the strain.

From the mecha’s chest a light shot forth to embrace Xiuxiu. As the light dissolved, so did the Blade-Maiden. What remained was the mecha. It’s eyes shone as it came to life.

Asura stretched thirteen meters – not tall by ordinary mecha standards. However a nearly indescribable, palpable sense of dread accompanied it’s arrival. Scores of tiny black fissures appeared in the air around it, growing larger and more numerous as the mecha’s power flooded the surroundings.

Chapter 85: Asura

The arrival of Asura sent Uriel reeling. Sometime during his staggering retreat, he'd produced a golden cross with a yellow gem which he clutched in his hands.

A golden light shimmered to life around him, crackling with power. It served to ward against the sudden and vicious slice from Asura's dual blades.

The highest level Talents certainly possessed the ability to contend with mechas on their own – but that was against your average pilot. If the enemy was of a power comparable to one's own, that was another matter entirely.

And of course, an adept was at their strongest when they were in their mecha. The white mecha he faced now, Asura, was piloted by the one he knew as the Blade-Maiden. Xiuxiu, one of Zeus' amazons. A strong adept, in her own mecha.

The suit was large, and constructed to look like your perfect human physique. It bore no superfluous parts, no needless weaponry – only that pair of monstrous swords. As he looked on appreciably, said weapons were already gripped in the mecha's hands. With a burst of speed it rushed forward, directly towards that golden shield – the only thing protecting Uriel from its deadly blades. They lashed out in savage chops. Where they slashed the air, great arcs of white energy in the shape of a crucifix charged forth.

The shell cracked, great gashes appearing where the attack had landed. Beams of golden light spilled out, and as the shell shattered away a second giant figure was revealed.

Yellow, streamlined, with six great extended wings. The latter clearly indicated what it was – an Angelic mecha of the Pontiff's Castle – a Seraph, with Uriel at its helm.

[TN : The translation states that the Cherubim Uriel's title is synonymous with the title of its mecha – Seraphim. I believe this is an

author mistake as the two are separate classes of angels. Cherubim are the second class of angels, whilst Seraphim attend directly to God in catholic canonical works. If that's the case than Uriel, an archangel (the highest order of the seraphim), is misnamed. Still, as that's the way it's written that's the way I'll translate it – just be aware that Cherubim is Uriel's title, not status.]

The Cherubim mecha stretched eighteen meters high, with shimmering spar minerals affixed to the center of it's chest. The heart of the crystal pulsated as though a tempest roiled in it's depths. A great shield was poised before it, blocking Asura's blades from finding their mark.

[TN : Again, he's used the names Seraphim and Cherubim interchangeably.]

Crack! Sparks of energy paired with a shock wave as the two indomitable powers collided, swirling around them like a storm.

Asura pivoted effortlessly around the raised defense, as lithe and mobile as any human. It moved like a white shadow, spinning about and tearing the air with it's blades. The weapons rained blow after blow upon the Cherubim, interweaving until it seemed like it was a dozen swords he faced now.

Within the Cherubim's cockpit, Uriel's face had curdled. His fingers danced over the control panels like raindrops. Golden light still burned in his eyes. The mecha's shield seemed to move slowly, but was always just where it needed to be to block the ceaseless assault from Asura.

Each impact set the world ablaze in hard light, and deafened the ear with harsh cracks.

ζ

Zeus-1's sudden take-off had set the battleships in to disarray. They were ten times heavier than the sapphire gunboat. Though they bore superior weaponry, they simply didn't have the maneuvering capabilities of their

prey.

Theoretically eight battleships would be more than enough for an effective dragnet against a single gunboat. But there are always exceptions.

Zeus-1 had risen, twisted and launched quicker than they were able to react. In the end it launched directly skyward like a rocket.

The battleships already in flight hadn't wasted any time in utilizing their tracking systems to get a lock on the fleeing ship. However, as they scrambled to take action, their quarry did something a ship of its class simply shouldn't have been able to do; it tumbled through three complete horizontal rolls, shut off its engines, and began to plummet towards the earth in free-fall.

The result was the same across all ships – the lock was lost.

As the ship floundered, screaming towards the earth for impact, the engine on its left wing sputtered to life. Zeus-1 was wrenched forward, twisting back around.

The undulating maneuvers gave the gunboat enough stability to spool up its primary engine and fire in to the distance. By then the great blasts fired from the battleship's cannons were already way off their intended mark and crashed to ground ineffectually.

"What the hell kind of ship is that!" One of the battleship's captains, a man in his forties, looked on slack-jawed and wide-eyed as Zeus-1 slowly vanished in to the distance.

"WOO! Now that was satisfying!" The Accountant was practically devoured by his seat, strapped tight by the safety harness. That didn't stop his fingers from pounding away at the keyboard in front of him, though. Odd flashes of data slithered across his eyes, eyes that had a strangely manic expression. The tail engine continued to accelerate, and Zeus-1 shot ahead like a bolt of lightning.

Xiuxiu watched Zeus-1's retreat, her red lips pressed tightly together. In the next instant she was back on the offensive, lashing out at Uriel through Asura, at one with the mecha's electronic brain to have it dance around the field of battle like quicksilver.

Rage was etched clearly on Uriel's face. Against Xiuxiu alone his power was enough to overwhelm her. But now, with Asura, the danger to him had grown considerably. He clearly recognized several avenues to gain the upper hand in their battle, but he had to know Asura would use any means necessary to fight back. She had the will, and he wasn't keen on destroying his own mecha to achieve this victory.

He'd let Zeus-1 escape! Though they'd blocked nearly all of Moonfiend's electronic signals, Zeus-1 appeared to be on track to breaking atmosphere. With the speed and control he'd just seen, he wasn't sure the safeguards they had in place would be enough. It wouldn't be long before word got back to Skyfire, and then the Castle would certainly be at risk of retaliation from the Avenue. They'd learned already Zeus was on their inner council – ignorance would not be an effective excuse.

It can't happen like this. I need to get to that ship and disable it. Uriel was resolute – he'd get to his airship, and chase that gunboat down.

Cherubim descended until one foot made contact with the ground. It crouched, and with its six great wings splayed out like knife-blades, it launched itself at Asura.

Xiuxiu's mecha slid to the side and parried, the steel in its left hand rebounded off of the enemy's wings. The lithe figure darted backwards. As the weight of the deflection spun it around, Asura pointed its blade forward and launched ahead. Mecha and weapon blurred in to one, a whirling cone aimed at the Cherubim's heart.

Behind the controls of a mecha, Xiuxiu was no less capable than the angel she faced.

But before the final blow could land, Uriel's Cherubim straightened. Its six great wings expanded farther still – until they exploded out from its

back. What was six solid wings now became a hail of golden arrows, heading straight for Asura.

Chapter 86: The Duel

Lan Jue floated in silence, suspended in the air. Wordlessly he stared at the glimmering figure similarly suspended before him – Michael, the Twelve-Winged Angel of War.

“Hand over the devil and you can still leave.” Michael addressed his opponent calmly. Red-gold flames smoldered from his eyes, and he hovered over them like a demi-god above the masses.

Lan Jue’s expression was flat and uncaring. “From where I stand, it looks like only one of us will be breathing by the end of the day. As that’s the case, let’s settle this like gentlemen – with a gentlemanly challenge.”

Michael’s heart rate quickened. He knew he had the upper hand, and knew the man he faced was several degrees inferior in Talent. However in spite of those facts he also felt something inexplicable, something undefined that inspired fear to grow within him.

“You’re sure you want this, Zeus?” Michael asked in his growling voice.

Lan Jue only nodded in response.

Michael’s ears pricked up, as though he’d heard something. A subtle change came over his expression. “Very well. I accept your challenge. But this doesn’t have to result in death. It is my wish that concession end combat; if you succeed, you may leave unhindered, but if you lose the demon stays with us and you may go.”

Lin Guoguo and Ke’er both looked on in wonderment. Michael’s conditions were uncharacteristically generous.

Lan Jue smiled knowingly. “So it looks like Uriel wasn’t able to keep Xiuxiu contained, am I right? Hypocrite.”

Michael’s flaming eyes glared down at them. “Make your choice, Zeus.”

I don’t agree,” came the replied. “I am the master of my destiny. It is I who will be your challenger, Michael.” Through the chaos her head had remained bent, her powers contained, but now Mika lifted her piercing gaze to the angel.

“Mika!” Lan Jue hissed.

“Boss, I’m sorry. I can’t let you keep bearing responsibility for me. You’ve already sacrificed, suffered too much. There’s no way I can pay you back. Originally I’d planned to follow you forever, but I bring nothing but trouble. You don’t belong to me, I can’t continue to be so selfish. If something were to happen to you because of me... I’d suffer the pain from that for the rest of my life.” Glistening teardrops, reflecting the shimmering red light from her eyes trickled down her cheeks.

Lan Jue gently shook his head. “I couldn’t protect her on that day, and I lost the most important person in my life. If I fail to protect you today, and live to dwell on it, it would be a fate worse than death. You say you’d suffer pain, would you wish that on me?”

“No, no, no! That isn’t what I mean, boss!” Mika vigorously shook her head, scattering her glittering tears in all directions. The world before her eyes grew indistinct from the water welling up within them.

Lan Jue moved to her side, and took her up in an embrace.

“It’s alright Mika. Be calm.” He gently stroked her fiery red hair, and before she realized what was happening his finger brushed against the collar around her neck.

Lan Jue turned, handing Mika’s incapacitated form to Lin Guoguo.

The Psychic Tide said nothing. She moved forward to take her friend from him. Ke’er reached out to grip Lan Jue’s arm.

“Remember boss, your life isn’t just important to you. What happens affects all of us. If something really does happen, it isn’t just Mika whose life will be ruined. Zeus’ Amazons and Zeus, live together or die together.”

A pang ran through Lan Jue’s heart, and with warmth in his eyes he ruffled her head of blue hair. He turned once more, fixing his gaze on Michael.

“Come on then, Michael. It’s time to decide the victory. If I win, I won’t kill you. But if you do, you better make sure the job is finished.”

Lan Jue raised his right hand to the heavens, and they in turn grew dark and ominous. Countless tendrils of lightning snaked by overhead in a cloudless sky.

Michael's eyes hardened in resolution. He, too, raised his right hand, and a pillar of flame leapt to life in his palm. A great sword of light and fire appeared from the pyre's depths.

It was then two more figures made their presence known; Gabriel, the Messenger of Death, and the Angel of Healing Raphael.

Gabriel was still pale, weak, but the wings upon his back had been repaired.

The Archangels of the Pontiff's Castle shared a special connection, one which allowed them to know intrinsically what the others encountered. Despite just re-entering the fray, they knew precisely what was about to occur. They stopped a short distance away, silent and watchful.

With a flourish of Lan Jue's hand, it began. Great, searing columns of lightning crashed down from on high towards Michael's position.

Not a moment later radiant flames burst from around Michael's body. The holy fires expanded like a sun, and the lightning it came in to contact with harmlessly dissipated in to nothing. Not a single bolt managed to find its mark.

Michael's growling voice boomed through the thunder. "You should know this has no effect on me, Zeus. These powers I command – powers of a ninth-level ninth-ranked master of cultivation – I can maintain for half an hour at the least. You have already spent your energies, and cannot call your Ascension. You simply have no chance."

"A load of nonsense," Lan Jue spat back at him. He vanished, only to appear suddenly directly before the angel. His hand lashed out, and gripped within was a whip of crackling lightning. Thunder roared as the whip snaked towards his adversary.

Michael's divine sword – a simple weapon of no ornamentation – lashed out to meet it.

Lan Jue immediately felt something indescribable. The blade seemed to be drawing him in; not just his powers, but it was as though his very soul was fighting not to be drawn in to the sword's depths.

A booming chorus of holy sermon filled his ears. Darkness clouded his vision.

Deaf and blind, his flailing whip could not find its mark. However, with the slightest motion of his left hand the whip fractured in to a score of sizzling lightning bolts and raced back towards him.

A deafening screech tore through the air. Michael struggled to maintain position as a vacuum threatened to suck him in. Lan Jue had in that moment vanished from sight. The Adventus Michael lost his hold.

Great peels of thunder roared before the angel, as behind him there appeared an azure figure. An enormous hand raced towards him, reaching with tearing fingers for his twelve golden wings.

Chapter 87: The Second Discipline

Boom!

Blinding flashes of electric light preceded Michael's inelegant tumble forward as the disembodied hand found its mark. But as the strike landed a plume of golden fire issued forth from the splayed wings to fall over Lan Jue.

As the fierce flames consumed him, a flash overtook Lan Jue's body and he vanished. He reappeared in the air a short distance away, covered in golden flame. Little by little they died away as lightning crackled around him.

Michael had already recovered by the time Lan Jue reappeared, and the snaking bolts of lightning that had been coiling around him were burned away by the holy fires. Shock and confusion were behind those flaming eyes.

"That speed..."

No ordinary Discipline had produced that speed, or else he wouldn't have lost the Adventus hold. It was as though Lan Jue simply tore apart space to appear elsewhere, folded reality. Whatever it was, it didn't fall under the domain of Thunder Discipline.

Lan Jue glared icicles at Michael, as his arms raised slowly on either side of his body. Slowly the violet bolts of lightning around him vanished, but with each passing second his body grew more and more luminous. He shined with a glaring, white-hot splendor.

In all of the Three Alliances there existed ten Great Paragons, absolute masters of their Talent. They were possessed of a power so great, so terrible, that they were known to be capable of facing down warships by themselves. Both Lan Jue's Ascension and Michael's Adventus temporarily pushed them to the boundaries of a Paragon. Others of the Archangels weren't capable of reaching such a level.

But Michael, at the cusp of Paragon himself, was stunned as he watched

Lan Jue. He had underestimated him, this man who he knew not to be greater than a seventh-rank. It was a mistake that lost him his edge. And he wasn't even employing his supreme form!

Michael beat his twelve marvelous wings, launching him forward. His holy blade stretched forth towards Lan Jue as the air around the angel shimmered with ghostly shadows. As he drew closer, the shadows became great whirling tornadoes of holy light that filled the skies, threatening to devour Lan Jue.

A mocking sneer turned the Jewelry Master's lips. The white light encapsulating him pulsed, expanding tremendously as the tornadoes of holy energy fell upon him. He melted in to a pillar of light, shooting up in to the air. Despite the number and ferocity of Michael's blasts of energy, none could compete with Lan Jue's speed and he escaped unscathed.

The skies above were washed in white light. A single peal of thunder washed over them as a streak of lightning plunged from above.

CRACK! Michael's body flashed white, and lightning coiled around him like a hungry serpent thrusting him backward.

He toppled back with another figure, awash in rose-gold light. Lan Jue. None but Michael had been able to see where the attack had come from.

The Angel's wings began to fade from sight. The dancing fires surrounding Lan Jue slowly started to extinguish. Both figures plummeted towards the ground in free fall.

They didn't manage to gain some semblance of control until they were a hundred meters from the rapidly approaching ground. Lan Jue stabilized, stopping the descent and casting free the golden fires that had surrounded him. Michael, too, recovered. Embraced by an orb of holy light, the electric tendrils that had sent him falling crackled in to nothingness.

Lan Jue looked silently at his enemy, his features cold and calm. Michael looked back, dark and imposing.

"The speed of light. So, it's not just thunder you command, but also electricity. It's no wonder, then, that you were capable of achieving your

supreme form. That you were such an illustrious figure in the mercenary world. In truth your power is no less than mine. Thunder and lightning. They complement each other – and that’s how you’ve reached ninth-level, ninth-rank.”

[TN : So here, my head exploded. All throughout the former chapters Lan Jue has been using lightning. His moniker – Zeus – was the god of lightning. Thunder is simply the sound that accompanies it. Here, however, the author reveals to us that his Discipline was in fact thunder, which makes no sense, while his second discipline is in fact lightning/electricity. Sooo... yeah, dunno what to do with that there.]

Lan Jue listened as Michael ruminated on the situation, and offered words of his own in a calm, quiet voice. “I was interested in finding out just how long you could hold the Adventus. Your form’s specialty isn’t speed, but overcoming fortifications and disadvantages.”

Michael’s face was hard and mean. “So this was all part of your plan. Right down to using your Ascension. All to get me to employ Adventus. I imagine it didn’t even drain you all that much, if you drew on both your Disciplines. All you had to do was endure... wait until my Adventus was spent. Then you’d have your victory, am I right?”

A smile finally crept on to Lan Jue’s face. “Life’s easier when you don’t have to explain everything.”

“Worthy of the name Zeus,” Michael stated. His face had once more adopted a calm mask. “As smart as you are powerful. Good... very good. A man can only use the supreme form once in a period. Now it looks like you have the upper hand. But our fight isn’t over.”

As he spoke the undulating rays of red and gold diminished until they were no more. His majestic wings were once again that pure, unblemished white of origin.

Lan Jue’s eyes flashed and, without hesitation, he vanished once again in a column of light.

Michael raised his right hand. Thereupon there rested a golden bracelet, bearing a golden angel charm.

The sky thundered, and lightning flashed. But this time no bolts of electricity assaulted Michael. His shield of light remained intact. The world behind the hovering angel grew dark as a black hole quietly rent reality asunder and opened. From within emerged a colossal figure, glimmering golden red. The white light that had warded him from harm shone bright, glowing from the center of the massive figure's chest.

Lan Jue appeared once again, looking down upon Michael with a biting glare. "The Angel of War – a fine mecha. Very fine." He responded by lifting his left hand, looking towards the ring on his little finger.

Chapter 88: Thor Joins the Fray

The ring was forged of a silvery material. It's top half was relatively wider than it's base, giving it an almost trapezoidal configuration. The surface was inlaid in a leopard print pattern of crushed diamond and sapphire. The very center was inset with a vibrant triangular green gemstone.

As Lan Jue looked upon it, the gem shone with a quiet power. It wasn't unlike the glowing force living in his eyes. He flourished with his left hand, calling forth a blue bolt of lightning which lit the sky.

The air between them split. The fissure grew as two great hands reached out from within and tore it further. The mammoth figure that emerged moved majestically to Lan Jue's side.

"Thor!" A booming voice ripped through the area with the mecha's arrival.

It wasn't solely by virtue of Zeus' Discipline that he was able to dominate the mercenary world. It was likely more due to his status as a God-Ranked pilot.

By Michael's estimation, even his Adventus would be no match for the combined might and speed of Zeus' powers. Thus had he chosen to drop the transformation and conserve energy, instead calling forth his Angel of War. In this way he could minimize Lan Jue's speed advantage. However, this didn't mean that Lan Jue would be an easy foe to defeat.

The angel of War was covered from head to foot in a golden red alloy. It's expansive wings were embossed with threads of crimson. The six appendages rose and fell as the twenty-one meter monstrosity hovered in the air. In all, it looked like a an ancient, angelic knight dressed for combat.

Zeus, on the other hand, looked as though it was carved from a single massive piece of sapphire. It's entire length and breadth shimmered like a jewel. It rose twenty-three meters, stretched eight meters across, and stood tall and slender like a bolt of blue lightning. It's shoulders were adorned

with tri-layered armor; the top-most layer was large and tapered upward in to a point, the middle layer was smooth and slid beneath, and the final layer was mostly hidden beneath, pressed against the mechanical arm.

Thor's peculiar construction and polished, gem-like appearance made it appear more a work of art than an instrument of war. The navy-blue coloring refracted the light around it. Where the armor drew to spikes or corners, certain angles almost made it look purple. As bolts of lightning raced overhead, they flashed off of the mecha's armor and added to its ominous appearance. As its chest plate closed, and Lan Jue took up position in the cockpit, a dazzling azure corona of light issued forth from it.

Ke'er and Lin Guoguo looked on with a burning fanaticism in their eyes. "Thor... Thor," they chanted, louder with each call.

Thor, the great beast of thunder, under Zeus' command.

Two magnificent mechas, two tremendous Adepts, stood suspended in the air in a stand-off. The Angel of War reached slowly behind its back, producing a blazing sword of light gripped tightly in its mechanized hand.

When employing a top-level mecha in combat, there was really only one avenue available to achieve victory in a situation as this. Because these machines were practically immune to laser weapons and even cannon fire, close-range combat was almost required. A top-level mecha was defensive, fast, and legendary in their close-quarters capabilities. As a result almost all of them were just that – close range fighters. In the end, though it came down to the skill of the particular pilot.

Zeus responded to the Angel of War's actions with its own. Two giant hands stretched out, their palms glowing. Soon they were filled with a thirty-meter long, double-edged lance. The weapon was shaped like a bolt of lightning, and glowed with a gentle blue light.

The Angel's wings spread in a smooth movement, and with a single thrust sent the mecha rocketing forward. In no time it came upon Thor. The sword of light tore through the air, leaving behind it a radiating trail of golden-red light. Its sinister arc looked set to behead the sapphire

colossus.

A mecha's construction naturally included a bevy of power gems. These gems, paired with the abilities of the pilot that controlled it resulted in the aggregate power of a single mecha. The quality of the gems also played a significant role. The result was that a suit's combat prowess and the Discipline cultivation of the one who commanded it were inexorably connected.

Thor swayed to the side, out of the blade's path. In the same motion it's spear lashed out. Contrary to expectations, however, the spear didn't seek to block the golden sword's path. Instead it swept around and knocked it aside at the flat of the blade.

Ting! Sparks flew at the weapons collided, the piercing ring a result of their clash.

Gabriel, Raphael, Ke'er and Lin Guoguo scrambled back out of harm's way. Two mechas of this caliber were known to destroy everything in a large area during the course of their battles – more than your average Adept, to be sure.

The Angel of War struggled visibly from the counter. The slight motion had set it off balance. Thor took advantage of the opening. Electric power raced over it's form, as it dropped it's shoulder and rushed in for a body-slam.

The Angel of War didn't even attempt the dodge. To do so would have increased it's unfavorable position. Instead it swept out it's arm, aiming the spike jutting from it's elbow directly with Thor's shoulder. A dangerous red light extended forward from it.

A millisecond before collision Thor shifted ever so slightly. It was just enough to avoid the spike and it's curious red light. The collision that followed was tooth-rattling.

Crash!

The Angel of War was launched back from the impact. Thor hung in the air like it had rammed an iron wall. The Angel had also managed to land a

strike. The sword's thrash had set the sky afire, and a shock wave of energy raced from between them. Thor's shoulder plate had crumpled. A spike from the Angel of War's couter was missing. The giant machine buzzed with electric energies as arcing bolts snaked over it.

[TN : Angel of War's couter = The piece of armor that covers a knight's elbow]

"Oscillation!" The Messenger of Death hissed under his breath.

"Michael's in dire straights. He'd oscillated in that last second to avoid Michael's defensive strike. Zeus really has that level of control..."

Thor's robotic eyes shone. It's massive arm lifted and with a mechanic creak threw the spear towards the Angel of War. It cut through the air, becoming a sizzling bolt of lightning. Thor was right behind it, catching up with the weapon just before thrusting it towards it's enemy's chest.

The golden mecha abruptly lifted it's hand, in attempts to deflect the spear with it's sword. The two weapons tore through the air at each other – the spear of lightning pointed directly at the Angel's cockpit, and the sword of light racing to deflect.

No man – not even one as powerful as Michael – could survive a direct blow from a mecha's weapon. Especially not Thor's.

The Angel of War's arm hung in the air, it's blazing sword still. Just a moment too slow, a fraction of a second. Thor's spear found it's mark. The terrible screech of shredding metal combined with eruptions of light as the attack tore through the Angel's chest.

But, unexpectedly, a powerful aura of light surrounded the impaled machine. The light heralded an immense magnetic attraction, which shot out to cover Thor. It was locked in place. Zeus had no means of retreat.

Chapter 89: Vacuums and Positron Cannons

The moment of impact, Michael understood completely that there was a clear discrepancy between he and Zeus in mecha control.

Michael had vastly more experience with mechas than Lan Jue. He had spend his life around them, changed by them. Now, he was over a hundred years old. When he'd reached the age of sixty he'd begun vigorously cultivating his powers, searching for ways to prolong his life. In short, he was well past his 'prime' physically. Mecha manipulation not only required skill and intelligence, reflexes were also important. In this, he was clearly inferior to Lan Jue.

But he was the Angel of War for a reason, celebrated for his combat abilities, and first of the Castle's Seraph.

He'd had a revelation during their relatively short exchange. Thor was simply too fast – though he had the benefit of experience, the longer the battle raged the more difficult it would be for him to emerge victorious. His golden Angel was difficult to injure, but it was only prolonging the inevitable. The more he fell behind Thor, the more dangerous his predicament became. He had to do something drastic.

Michael's sluggish defense was deliberate. Thor's spear had indeed run the Angel through, but instead of pinning Michael to the back of the cockpit it had merely struck his shoulder. The electric energies coursing through it had paralyzed him, but it didn't prevent Michael from employing his own Discipline.

Michael sat bleeding in the mangled Angel's cockpit, his body alive with orange flame that filled the cockpit. The maroon power gems situated in the mecha's head, knees, elbows and stomach drank it up – the source of the powerful vacuum.

The gems were called Abyssal Flame gems. When injected with power, they produced a flame, but contrary to normal fire they created a potent

vacuum in their area of effect. The increase in fuel and oxygen made the fires burn at a frightening temperature. Your average alloy couldn't stand the heat for long.

These gems were the exclusive property of the Pontiff's Castle. They went to enormous lengths to protect and procure them, even going so far as to sacrifice capital ships. They were considered A-ranked gems.

Even the most cutting edge of mechas couldn't support installation of an S-ranked gem. They were simply too powerful to be safe – the machinery couldn't support them. A-ranked gems were overall a better call. When linked with others they even approached the power of a single S-gem.

The burning flames that encircled Michael were known as the Fires of Sacrifice. They empowered his holy fires to even greater heights. No one had ever escaped the powers of the Abyssal Fire gems, and with his sacrifice they became that much stronger.

The drawback to employing such powerful abilities was considerable. Each moment drained his fundamental vitality, worse even than the drain from his Adventus. The golden Angel of War was also affected, as the gems wreaked havoc on the mecha itself. It would cost a fortune to repair the machine – if he got the chance.

But Michael was resolute, assured in his decision. A decision born of fear – fear of what Zeus could do in the future.

A man with two disciplines, congenital and powerful. If he were allowed to cultivate his powers, to master them, he would be the most powerful Adept in history. This was something the Pontiff's Castle... in fact, the entire Western Alliance couldn't allow.

For this reason he'd lit the fires of sacrifice. His heart had already hardened; to his own death, and the death of his enemy.

Crrrrunch. The two gigantic mechas pressed violently against each other. Thor trembled visibly, but this time the Oscillation did nothing for him. In fact, under the intense pressure, the mecha had become plainly more sluggish.

Undulating bolts of electricity raced along the length of Thor's armor creating a shield. It served to temporarily withstand the heat of the abyssal flames. But with the added power of the sacrificial fires from Michael, the heat proved too much. As the mecha's shields began to fail, Lan Jue sat fuming in the dark cockpit.

“Michaaaeeeell!”

ζ

The white columns of light served as an effective cage to reign in Asura. No space existed for even the slightest motion. Despite this, the Cherubim Uriel sat in glowering at the scene from his cockpit.

A giant gash marred the mechas surface from shoulder to abdomen. It was deep enough to reveal the cabin he sat in now.

He'd misjudged Asura's capabilities, so much so that it almost cost him his mecha and his life. The large cut that nearly split him in two punctuated the fact. Even though he'd come out victorious, his victory had cost him more than it cost Xiuxiu.

Asura was an inferior machine to his Cherubim, but her sheer attacking force meant that his victory had come at a great price. It would take a minimum of three months to repair, and even then the Cherubim would never be the same.

“Have you found Zeus' ship? Did it attempt to break atmosphere?” Uriel spoke in to his communicator.

“Master Cherubim, no ships have attempted to leave Moonfiend's atmosphere. The ship was fitted with a superior cloaking device. We've found no sign of it.”

Uriel growled at the voice crackling through his communicator. “Keep up surveillance. Moonfiend and all it's satellites. If anything tries to break through, you shoot it down.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Hm!” A deep grunt tickled at Uriel’s ear. He shot his eyes around, but neither he nor his mecha were able to determine the origin of the strange, hoary voice.

It became considerably more disconcerting when the lights went out. All the space between he and Asura went dark, and the columns of light seemed to slither away like they were being swallowed up.

His fingers jabbed at the controls of his mecha, running an external diagnostic. The results caused his eyes to grow wide.

“A vacuum singularity?” Somehow, in the space between he and Asura, a powerful vacuum had spontaneously arisen. It wasn’t unlike the void of space, but did not continue to expand.

“Positron cannon!” The aged voice returned, stronger than before.

His reaction was swift, and without hesitation. A hissing noise filled the air, and Uriel immediately dropped his control over Asura and bolted wildly in to the distance like a meteor.

A beam of blinding light lanced through the spot he’d just vacated. In its wake all manner of reconnaissance and radar equipment shut off.

“Singularity... positron cannon... that was the Arcane Magnate! It was really him!” Uriel flew in retreat as fast as his Angel could manage. His face was pale from fear.

The Arcane Magnate – one of the Great Paragons! And more, in the top three of their order in terms of simple destructive power.

How did the Arcane Magnate come to be here? Uriel couldn’t shake the confusion muddling his brain. A battleship’s shields couldn’t survive a blast from a positron charge, much less a mecha. It was a weapon employed by capital ships. Capital ships, and the Magnate – a man who could discharge positron charges with his body alone. A man who could fold space to attack from anywhere.

The same was true for the singularity.

But there were no energy fluctuations – just light? His heart skipped a beat, and his features once more turned dark.

“No... I’ve been tricked.”

Chapter 90: Electro-Squall, Thor's Starfall

The abyssal flames burned, consuming Thor's shields for every moment they licked at its surface. The overwhelming heat of the fires had begun to turn the mecha's sapphire blue exterior to a pale red.

Michael's face was grim. Those self-same fires were devouring him in the same way he hoped they were destroying Zeus. He could already hear the frame of his Angel of War groaning, growing weak as the alloys softened. But where he was slowly being melted to slag, the situation was rapidly worsening for Thor.

The red of its surface had darkened to an angry maroon as its shields began to fail. However, despite the heat Thor had yet to display any signs of melting. Whatever alloy it was composed of was valiantly resisting destruction. The cockpit of the great mecha was similarly protected by virtue of a thin, pale shield.

The area around them had become indistinct. The air rippled like waves of water, making anyone outside the area of effect unable to clearly distinguish what was happening within. They could only feel the fires as they burned.

Lin Guoguo looked at Ke'er, who in turn looked back. They did not exchange any words, but they didn't need to. Their concern was clear as day on their faces.

Guoguo gritted her teeth, the gold in her eyes shimmering dangerously. Mika began to stir to consciousness in her arms.

Mika shook the confusion from her muddled head. Once clarity returned she shot to her feet. The quick motion startled Lin Guoguo, and as she pulled at Mika she almost fell from the air. At the eighth level, an Adept could rely on their Discipline for flight. One's speed and control was reliant on their particular set of abilities.

"Mika..." Lin Guoguo whispered towards her.

"What do we do?" Ke'er looked at the two questioningly.

Mika had a hard look in her eyes. “We wait, and watch. The boss’ discipline may not be a match for Michael, but we know how strong Thor is. If it’s too much for him we’ll engage the knights ourselves. Even if it means our death.”

Ke’er nodded resolutely. She leaned close, whispering softly in to Mika’s ear.

Mika’s body trembled at the words. “No! You...”

Ke’er shot her an impish smile. “You said it yourself – you’d give everything to save the boss, to pay him back for what he’s done. If you’re willing to go to such lengths, how can we not also? Not to mention in this situation, my discipline would be the right move. Right now, I’d be more effective than you would.”

Contrary to expectations Mika wasn’t angry with Ke’er’s estimation. Instead, she opened her arms wide and embraced her sister in a tight hug. “You’re a wonderful person. I’ll try not to fight so much with you in the future.”

Lin Guo gently bit her lower lip. “The boss will win, he has to! Because he’s ours!”

The words weren’t a few seconds past her lips when the two mecha burst in to an eruption of white light. As the light-warping waves of heat dissipated, and the fires burned out, no trace of them remained.

“That’s...” The Messenger of Death and the Angel of healing stared at the empty space. The light was similar to one they’d seen before, emanating from Lan Jue. Only this time it encapsulated Thor, and Zeus along with it.

In the ensuing silence seven twinkling lights appeared. They shone like diamonds, flaring with white light. They descended in the shape of the Big Dipper. Seven glimmering stars falling from the heavens.

“The Big Dipper... ? That’s... !” Gabriel and Raphael nearly mirrored each others’ scowls. The constellation was not one native to the Scattered Starfields. Whatever these lights were, they weren’t what they pretended

to be.

“Thor’s Starfall! It’s the boss!” Lin Guoguo called out.

Boom, boom, boom. Boom boom, boom boom! Seven thunderous blasts, one on top of the other. It almost sounded like one continued blast, but in the distance seven distinct mushroom clouds roiled towards the atmosphere. It’s distinct shape was maintained through the display.

The lights began to move again, interweaving as they raced across the sky. The blasts continued as though the entire world were tearing at the seams.

“Electro-squall, Thor’s Starfall!” Mika, Ke’er and Lin Guoguo shouted towards the lights. Pride and surprise lit their eyes.

Incandescent light, no less dazzling than the sun, lit half of Moonfiend in it’s glow.

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The Moonfiend Empress stood at her balcony, squinting in to the distance as the blinding lights arose. Tears stung her eyes, fuzzy from the stabbing light. She covered her mouth as the scene unfolded, attempting to quell her sobs.

ζ

Blinding rays of light shot past, filtering through the porthole. Xiuxiu shot up from her seat, belting a triumphant yell.

The Accountant watched also, slack-jawed. “By the... it’s like grandpa’s positron cannon! Ah Jewelry Master – so full of secrets.”

ζ

The awesome display continued for half a minute before slowly beginning to fade. High above a white outline of lightning refused to vanish, but eventually it too began to die away revealing the two massive figures within it.

“Michael!” Gabriel and Raphael raced towards the hovering figures. But before they could get far, their advance was cut off.

Mika stood before them, her eyes blazing a deep crimson. Behind her hovered an indistinct figure exuding a suffocating ferocity.

Lin Guoguo hovered peacefully with hands pressed before her chest. Her eyes were shut, and her body was encased in a golden aura. She almost looked like a statue cast in gold.

Ke'er soared before the other two, arms outstretched. Fierce winds whirled around her. With her short cut blue hair flitting in every direction she had a distinctly pixie-like demeanor. A blue light arose from the center of her chest. It strengthened and expanded until it overcame even Mika's murderous aura.

The pulsating waves of energy radiating from the three women threatened to swallow the two angels by virtue of their fury alone.

Even thirty minutes before this moment, neither Gabriel nor Raphael would have been these women could content with them, even together. But now, seeing the pure destructive capabilities of Thor, they didn't dare make any further assumptions. Who knew what kind of disciples the madman Zeus would dare to create.

And now, with this blue-haired girl's aura blotting out the world around them, their fear and uncertainty grew. Stronger even than the vicious aura of the Stygian Succubus – they genuinely feared for their lives.

Chapter 91: All Accounted, All is well

Though they were struggling to believe what they were seeing, neither Gabriel nor Raphael were interested in wagering their life to find the truth.

“Have you forgotten the Code of Chivalry?” Ke’er asked Gabriel with a sneer.

The Messenger of Death’s face reddened. “It was you three who were planning to interrupt the duel. We heard everything you were saying.”

“And what of it,” Lin Guoguo responded. “We aren’t knights. We’re ladies.”

The sentence caused both the Angels to almost gag.

Mika watched them both with devilish red eyes. “If you have a death wish, then try to get past us.”

Bang! The strange sound drew all five pair of eyes towards the source.

The two mechas, pressed tightly together, finally separated with a snap. One melted in to a beam of blue light and raced towards them. The second, tumbled inelegantly towards the ground.

“Go!” Gabriel and Raphael retreated, heading to ground. They knew it was Thor who sped towards them.

Thor hung mangled but triumphant in the sky. It’s former dazzling glory had paled as the damage to it’s surface was clear. The entire top half was largely unrecognizable. It’s internal components whirred and ground, revealed through deep gashes in Thor’s armor. Irregular jolts of electricity added a dramatic undercurrent to how poorly it looked.

However, the battle damage only increased it’s imposing presence. Now more than ever it looked the grizzled veteran. A gash of white lightning shimmered against it’s chest, with another on it’s back. It’s two mechanical eyes were as bright as when it appeared.

In the distance, the sound of the Angel of War impacting the ground

wafted towards them. The angelic mecha looked much worse for wear, having suffered at least twice the damage than it's opponent; half of it's wings were missing, and it's two arms were irreparably broken. It was lacking even stumps. The only thing that had saved the mecha from absolute obliteration was the faint golden light that still issued faintly from around it. It had managed to stabilize just enough before making landfall so as to avoid disintegration.

"Zeus... thank you." Michael's growling voice rang through the air. Judging just by tone alone, it was impossible to tell if the Archangel had severed any further injury.

"None are needed," Lan Jue responded indifferently. "But be warned, this matter will be settled sooner or later with my visit to the Pontiff's Castle."

Michael was silent for a moment, but eventually called to his comrades. "Gabriel, convey my orders; all ships involved in the blockade are to stand down. This time, I've lost – and I keep my word."

"As you command." Gabriel nodded his head respectfully.

A twinkling caught their attention as a blue light arrived from the horizon. A dazzling azure ship arrived at battlefield, making directly for Lan Jue and his three charges. Raphael and Gabriel watched it approach with both shame and anger. Uriel, too, had been bested.

The four distant figures melted in to one. A moment later, the single dot of light also faded in to darkness.

Tsss! The hissing sound of depressurization arose as the Angel of War's chest plate gradually spread open. The damaged cockpit was revealed.

Michael sat strapped to the chair, a shade of his former glory. His grim, resolute façade was gone, replaced with a blackened mask. A charred husk of an angel.

"Michael!" Gabriel hastened to his side, struggling to extricate him from the mecha. Raphael moved to his side. A pale white light emanated from his hands, their healing glow extending to cover Michael's broken body.

Under the Angel of Healing's power Michael found the strength to pull

himself from the wreckage. The movement caused the slag that was his mecha to shift, grinding painfully as it crumbled to the floor.

Michael's face had been burned away, now a black mask of charred skin and gristle. If he was even capable of expression, it was impossible to see what it would be. But one could guess that it wouldn't be a smile.

"Michael, are you alright?" Gabriel supported his commander by the arm. He keenly felt the sizzling heat that radiated from him. His own hands felt numb just by touching him.

[TN : Seriously? No wonder you guys lost, with those powers of perception.]

Michael shook his head. "We were wrong. Our assumptions were false. Zeus is far more powerful than he's let on. Or he's become much stronger in the three years since his disappearance. Still, he didn't leave our battle without a scratch. He's likely just as hurt as I am. The fact he got away... the future for us looks dark indeed."

Gabriel's eyes shone with anger and violent intent. "Then we-"

Michael's smile was dour, bitter. He shook his head again, cutting Gabriel off. "Nothing we can do. Do you think he'll give us another chance like this? His codename wasn't just given for his power. He's got the scheming heart of the ancient god as well. I know for a fact he didn't know our plans when he came before the Moonfiend Empress. And yet the moment he knew it was us, he'd made his plans - to employ his Ascension, confuse and divide us to produce his opening. The Ascension was the strongest he let slip, during his time in the public eye three years ago, so using it at the onset would make us drop our guard - lull us in to a false sense of superiority. And make me match him with the Adventus."

"It was unexpected he'd possess a second Discipline. A speed that outstripped even Adventus. By the time I knew what was happening I'd already expended too much power. He knew I would fall back on the Angel of War. Counted on it. I don't have the reaction time and control of a younger man. The gravity nova would prevent him from out-maneuvering me... but Thor's strength was superior. My guess, Thor's core

gem is S-ranked. That's the only way he could have commanded power like that. Hell, he could obliterate a battleship and not blink an eye."

Raphael interjected. "Let's get to the Castle first, and deliver our report to His Majesty. Zeus is tied to the Avenue. This will likely put us under pressure from Skyfire. Our hunt for the Succubus will have to be secondary."

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"Boss!" Lin Guoguo exclaimed, supporting Lan Jue. His face was as pale and thin as tinsel.

Lan Jue lifted his head. He looked at Guoguo, then the three others. A strained smile spread across his face. "All accounted... all is well."

Chapter 92: The Man in Black

The Accountant stood to one side, looking with envy upon the nearly comatose Lan jue. The King of Mercenaries lay battered, but in the embrace of four beautiful women.

Ke'er supported his head, resting it upon her thighs. Mika and Xiuxiu knelt at either side, gripping his arms and shoulders. Lin Guoguo rested her hands upon his legs.

Four lovely girls, with tears in their eyes for the man between them.

"Damnit!" Ke'er spat through her tears.

"You said it," Lin Guoguo replied, her teeth gritted in anger.

Xiuxiu was speechless. Mika's lips were turned in a scowl. Her eyes shown with an ominous light.

Suddenly the four turned as one. Their collective fear, anger and vengeance focused upon a single point.

"What are you waiting for, fly the damn plane!"

ζ

Planet Skyfire. Skyfire Avenue. Skyfire Museum.

"I hadn't expected the Castle's involvement," the Clairvoyant said. He stood staring out of a window, speaking softly to the glass.

The Wine Master stood a short distance away. "Why didn't you let us go with him? It doesn't matter who the enemy is, there's a price to pay for assaulting one of ours."

The Clairvoyant responded with a thin-lipped smile, reflected in the mirror. "The young man needed to grow up. There's a price to pay for that, too. Otherwise how is he supposed to lead Skyfire... to stand up in the face of Three Alliances?"

The Wine Master stood a little straighter. “You’re sure?”

The man’s smile slipped, and a bitter expression overtook his face. “Do you remember who you’re talking to?”

The Wine Master shot a look at the Clairvoyant’s back.

“Old coot, as inscrutable as your visions. The Pontiff’s Castle eh... hmph!” The quavering, aged voice arose from the opposite side of the Wine Master. An old man, stooped and wrinkled, struggled valiantly to rise from a nearby stool. He extricated himself from the stool and made his way from the room.

The Wine Master looked at the Clairvoyant, and though he didn’t turn his head to watch the old man leave, he spied the reflection of the museum door’s crystals flashing as the door opened.

“Shall I bring him back?” he asked the Clairvoyant.

The augur grinned. “Let him go. We’re always that familiar. Small things like that don’t offend. At any rate the old man needs his exercise. Don’t worry, though. That whole ‘one foot in the grave’ look he cultivates is his greatest means of defense.”

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National Eastern University.

“Today we’ll be continuing our discussion on interplanetary technology, mecha coordination and how the two are joined. As I’m sure everyone is aware, the advancement of interstellar technology has permitted us to develop mechas with the ability to absorb and – when needed – release the stabilization properties of special power gems. This allows them to employ space flight. As for mechas pilots, with enough practice they almost become one with their machines. This makes not only travel, but combat much more fluid. So, can someone tell me any other relationships between interstellar technology and mechas?”

The professor continued to blather on behind his podium. The students arrayed before him listen with rapt attention.

All but Zhou Qianlin, who was looking distractedly out of the window. Her pretty blue eyes where filled with visions of the crystal blue sky and towering trees.

“Qianlin!” She felt a light jab at her side, which woke her from her daydreaming. She looked inquisitively to her side.

Tang Mi looked at her suspiciously. “What’s going on with you? We spent course credits to get in to this class. I can’t even calculate how long I had to save up for this. Meanwhile you’re watching the flower’s grow.”

Zhou Qianlin shot her a petty glance. “I’m a good student – I’ve got plenty of credits.”

“Tsk. I don’t get you. It’s like you’re some lovelorn airhead.” Tang Mi huffed in disappointment, then returned her attention to the class.

Professor Roger’s eyes swept the classroom, landing eventually on them. Zhou Qianlin immediately became the very picture of attentiveness, smiling politely as the instructor proceeded.

The Professor appeared himself well impressed with the young woman, nodding and returning her smile.

Professor Rogers was the foremost mind in the field of astronomical technology and it’s utilization in mecha piloting. He possessed a special talent for the subject, on top of being a seventh-ranked Adept in the discipline of cosmo-manipulation. He was only a visiting professor for the NEU, and only gave lectures once a month. His classes were always full of national scholars whenever he came to teach.

As class ended, Zhou Qianlin and Tang Mi gathered their things and left. The two were like magnets, drawing eyes wherever they went. They were all too scared of Tang Mi’s temper to do anything, but that didn’t stop them from staring.

“Hey Qianlin, I heard we’re going to have a transfer student moving in to our class.” Tang Mi said off-handedly.

“Oh.” Her response was tepid.

“Hey, are you listening?!” Tang Mi gave her friend an agitated look.

Qianlin sniffed good-naturedly. “So what? What does this transfer student have to do with me? Do you like the guy or something?”

“Oh this new kid’s got nothing to do with me,” she said mysteriously. “But I’m guessing he’s got an interest in a certain someone. He’s from the Western Alliance, you know. Pretty far from here, don’t you think? I heard they pulled all sorts of strings to get him in to our program. To sweeten the deal they sent two visiting professors along with him.”

Understanding began to dawn on Zhou Qianlin’s face. “You mean...”

Tang Mi shrugged. “Naturally it would be your former fiancé, wouldn’t it.”

Zhou Qianlin froze in place. She stared, dumbstruck, at her friend. “How is that possible? It was a giant scandal. How could they just let that slide?”

“Politics isn’t my forte,” Tang Mi responded flippantly. “As far as I understand it Sylva Austin only has the one son. And you know his character. A stalker’s love never dies. As I see it Prime Minister Austin doesn’t want to lose his only son – the family’s sole successor. So, some things just need to be compromised.”

Zhou Qianlin chewed her lip nervously. “When is he coming?”

Tang Mi gave her a questioning look. “What is going on with you? What’s wrong with Richard anyway? Young, rich, talented with a mecha... maybe even better than me. He’s even supposed to be a decent Adept. And with the Austin family at his back, no less. How can you sit here and stick your nose up at him? Why even agree to marry him in the first place, then? Avoiding the guy like he’s some poisonous snake... I really, really don’t get you.”

“You don’t understand!” Zhou Qianlin quailed.

“In the end it doesn’t matter if I do or don’t. Clearly this guy bothers you.”

Skyfire Avenue

A tall, slender figure gradually made his presence known at the end of the Avenue. He was a man clothed entirely in black; black suit, black shirt, black hair. He walked the street in even strides, slow and unhurried. His gait was elegant but... almost robotic.

In no time, he stood before the entrance to the Avenue proper.

“My apologies. Ahead is Skyfire Avenue. Please produce your badge if you wish to enter.” The single Avenue guard politely lifted a hand to entreat the suited man to stop.

The black-clad man paused. “I’m looking for someone,” his deep voice responded. “I have no badge. What shall we do about that?”

The guard’s response was practiced, as though it were a speech he’d given dozens of times. “To acquire a badge for entrance in to the Avenue, you must submit an application, and undergo a series of examinations. The process takes about a hundred days. I’m afraid without a badge, I can’t let you pass.”

“No other way?”

“Nope,” the guard replied.

“Very well,” the man said. “I’ll call him out, then.”

“That’s fine, and in fact if his clearance is high enough he can bring you in with him.”

The black-clothed man nodded. “Hm.”

He lifted his head, quietly calling out towards the empty street.

“Lan Jue!”

The expression was a quiet one. As the guard looked on, he felt, just for a moment, as though things had gone dark. It was only temporary, though,

and soon things were back to normal. However, those two words suddenly began to echo countless times through the length of Skyfire Avenue.

It started as a whisper – audible only with some effort – but as the echoes rolled over one another, repeating again and again, soon the sound became a shout. The deep, stately utterance soon filled every corner.

The various shop-owners piqued their ears at the sound, lifting their heads from their business. For most, the voice caused clear changes to their easy expressions.

“You...!” The guard reacted to the unconventional use of Discipline – if at this point he still hadn’t, he wouldn’t be worthy of the post. Without any further hesitation, he launched himself at the black-clad man. The surrounding area quickly grew populated as other figures arrived.

The man didn’t move, still as a statue. The guards who had gathered ran at him, their bodies glimmering with the power of their disciplines. Still he did not react – at least, not physically. Instead tumultuous gusts of hurricane-force wind extended from him, casting the guards away to distant corners like so many rag-dolls.

They screamed violently through the air, crashing to the ground – and yet, strangely, none suffered even the slightest injury. The winds were gone as quickly as they’d come.

Alone again in the darkness, the man in black stood. Calm, patient, he waited. Still as a shadow.

The guards had gathered themselves together, staring at the man with soured expressions. But none dared attempt another assault. They simply surrounded him, and waited. They all knew well the disparity in power between themselves and this strange man. To continue fighting would only mean their likely demise. They didn’t even possess the capabilities of Skyfire Underground’s policing squads. Thankfully the man did nothing, and so they waited to see what would transpire.

After a short while, a figure did appear from the depths of the Avenue. The silver silhouette marched slowly towards them, like a star slowly moving through the inky night. The black-clad man watched them come.

His face was calm, but his eyes... they were cold as ice.

Chapter 93: Lan Qing

With a flash of silver, the figure appeared amidst the gathered Skyfire guards.

“What’s this?” A frigid, clear voice broke the silence. As the words rolled along the wind, the temperature around the small group dropped distinctly.

The guards finally reacted, snapping to attention as the figure passed. “Captain!”

Silver hair cut to her ears framed silver eyes, complimented by a silver uniform. It was like she was made of metal – metal, or a block of ice.

“It was you who called?” She turned her frigid eyes to the man in black.

“Indeed it was. I’m looking for someone.” The man’s response was cool, collected. He seemed almost disconnected, relating news as though from a note card.

An Liu continued her questioning. “That’s how you call people?”

“I was told I can’t enter without a badge,” he responded. “When I stated I would call for him, the guard claimed that was fine. So I called.”

“Is that right,” she said, turning to look at the indicated guard.

“Yes, captain,” the guard hastily replied.

An Liu’s brows wrinkled as she considered the situation. “Very well. As that is the case no rules were broken. You’re free to leave. However the use of your Discipline has disrupted the peace of our Avenue. This isn’t something we can permit. Should this occur again, my response will be decidedly less polite.”

“I’m only here to speak with someone,” the man in black affirmed.

“And who is that?”

“Lan Jue.”

“There is no ‘Lan Jue’ here,” An Liu offered flippantly. “And if there was

we still wouldn't know. We don't ask such information of our Adepts here. As you aren't of the Avenue, you must acquiesce to a badge examination. Register, pay the fees, follow the rules."

"Is there a way to enter without this badge," he asked once again, still calm and polite.

An Liu nodded. "One other way."

"How is that?"

An Liu turned once more to face him. "As you disturbed me, causing me to come deal with this matter personally, your method will be more difficult than average. Survive an attack from me, and I'll consider you cleared for entry."

"Very well," he answered.

An Liu raised a hand, and lightly reached for the man. The guards, as though fearing for their safety, quickly moved to clear the area.

The man stood still, silent. He hadn't moved, and the stony expression on his face hadn't altered a hair. His dark eyes watched as her hand drew nearer.

Just as it seemed her hand would touch his face, the air suddenly suffered a dip in warmth. From the young woman's palm, a blast of arctic wind shot forth and enveloped the mysterious gentleman.

Finally, he moved. Swift as a cool breeze, he retreated from the cone of cold. Her glacial grope was quick, but he was quicker. But while his movement was brief and simple, the location he'd so recently vacated had changed. In his wake there appeared a vacuous void. The freezing winds were harmlessly devoured in to it.

An Liu watched him withdraw, saw the void appear. The power of her cold discipline was drawn away in to the darkness, and then was gone. So strong was the resulting pull that it caused her to stagger forward.

"Hm?" Surprise crept in to An Liu's silver eyes. She reached out again, and this time a beam of icy-blue light shot out towards the man in black.

He made no move to dodge. The beam raced towards him, but as it came within three inches of his person it suddenly fractured and split away. Bolts of blue light reflected in every direction, as though repelled by some invisible force. The black-clad man remained, unmolested. He stood now in a field of icy crystals, ten meters in diameter.

“I thought you said one attack,” the man said flatly.

The woman paused, looking him up and down. “So I did. I suppose you’ve passed. We still have some registration formalities, but you’re cleared for entrance in to Skyfire Underground.”

“Thank you.” He offered her a nod, a simple gesture of regard. His features and movements bore no excess effort. Only just enough as was needed.

An Liu watched him carefully. She knew her powers, could control their force. Though she had held back, that second blast would have caused a seventh-level adept to struggle. Of course, it would only really freeze them temporarily.

But he shrugged it off like it was nothing. If it was so easy for him to deflect, then his power must be something considerable...

An Liu felt she could handle the man if needed, but decided it still would require some looking in to. If he turned out to be a ninth-level talent, she would need to report his presence to the Council.

The man finished his registration procedures quickly, and was led by a guard to the Underground’s elevator. An Liu looked over his information as he did so.

“Lan Qing. Discipline; wind.”

The Avenue’s registration process was brief and cursory. They did this for the Adept’s secrecy and protection. However, there was something about the name An Liu recognized. She just couldn’t put her finger on it...

She needed to discover more. She turned to join the man in black, relinquishing the data to the guards.

The man in black, Lan Qing, strode from the elevator and paused to spy his surroundings. He watched in silence at the bustling, boisterous scene before him.

“Worthy of the name. Skyfire Avenue... it’s larger than expected.” There was praise in his eyes now, jostling for space amid his icy glare.

He walked slowly through the Avenue, his eyes sweeping along the storefronts. He took each one in carefully, as though searching for something.

“So who is this person you’re looking for? By the name I’m guessing someone from your family?” The frigid tones tickled his ear from behind.

“My younger brother,” he responded, though he did not bother to turn his head.

“I’ve checked the records,” An Liu stated. “There has never been anyone of that name who visited here.”

Lan Qing paused, then, and turned to look at her. “Thank you,” he said, but there was no trace of a thankful expression. Still, it put An Liu at ease.

“But he isn’t a visitor. He is one of your own number.”

An Liu blinked. “A shop owner? Then I certainly wouldn’t be able to find him by name. It would be a waste of time to try. Here our shop owners are known by titles. Are you familiar with your brother’s?”

Lan Qing paused in thought. “I believe I might. Ah, yes... I think he goes by, the Jewelry Master.” The name tumbled through the back of his mind, likely mentioned by Chu Cheng the last time they’d met.

“The Jewelry Master?” This caused An Liu to stop her lazy gait as well, and look towards the older man.

“Is there a problem?” Lan Qing fixed An Liu with his dark eyes.

But it was her eyes that bore more interesting facts, for aside from their inherent icy depths, curiosity bubbled behind them.

The Jewelry Master? This is the Jewelry Master's older brother? No wonder he's so strong... but the Jewelry Master is lightning. His is wind?

"Nothing. We do actually have a Jewelry Master here. But I'm afraid you might have made the trip for nothing," she said.

"Why's that?" Lan Qing raised a brow at her.

"Because he isn't here." She shrugged a shoulder before continuing. "He left not long ago. I think there was something he needed to get done."

"He left..." Lan Qing took the news with some level of surprise. Could it be his brother had finally gotten over his hardships?

"That's right." She nodded in conformation. An Liu couldn't be sure everything the man before her had told her was true, but it was his appearance and power that convinced her to stick around a while longer.

"Would you mind directing me to his shop, so I can have a look for myself?" Lan Qing said after a moment.

"Not a problem," she said without hesitation. This was no strange request. They walked in silence as An Liu lead them to the Underground's iteration of Zeus' Jewelry Store.

The Avenue was only two-thousand and forty-eight meters in length. It was an attribute shared between both the underground and Skyfire Avenue proper. Thus it didn't take long before that telling blue façade and flickering lightning-bolt sign came in to view before them.

Sure enough, the store was closed. A sign had been hung on the door, confirming suspension of business.

"He took those four women, workers, with him. Maybe they went to restock." An Liu suddenly caught herself, surprised at her words. She'd only just met this man, and yet she was telling him all she knew. It certainly was out of character. Was it simply because he claimed to be the Jewelry Master's brother?

“Thank you again.” Lan Qing stood before the door of the jewelry shop and stared in to it. He remained there, silent, as though in thought.

After a few moments he turned his attention back to An Liu. “When he returns, will he be coming back here? As far as I’m aware there is also a store on the upper Avenue.”

An Liu looked back at him. “I’m afraid I can’t answer that.” She was determined to answer no further questions from this man. She already feared she revealed too much.

“Oh.” Lan Qing paused once again. “Am I unable to visit the other shop?”

An Liu nodded her head in affirmation. “The avenue above is reserved primarily for citizens. Citizens of means. There are a number of evaluations required before you can enter.”

“About how many, do you suspect? What sorts of evaluations?”

“Etiquette, style, wine and food appreciation...” An Liu rattled off the simplified list by rote.

Lan Qing listened earnestly. “Would I be able to undergo these evaluations now?”

An Liu was taken aback. “Take the evaluations? Those aren’t just about the strength of your Discipline.”

“If Lan Jue could pass them, so can I. We grew up together, after all.”

“I’d have to ask,” An Liu stated. “Is there a way you can prove your relationship with the Jewelry Master?”

Lan Qing said nothing, only reached for something in his coat pocket. He handed it to his inquisitor.

An Liu took the offered proof. It was a metal star, with five points. The surface had been polished to a mirror shine. It was surrounded with a pale blue radiant light. At a glance, it was clear this was composed of something special.

An Liu turned it over, and what lie behind suddenly caught her eye.

“You’re...” She looked back up at Lan Qing, her eyes wide. Disbelief caught her tongue.

Chapter 94: The Eastern Alliance Super Soldier

Finally she understood. She knew why the name had sounded so familiar to her. Finally she understood why she'd been so curious about the man in black.

On the back of the five-pointed metal star was a column of words. It was carved, and painted with a special coating that made it glow with a metallic light.

“Lan Qing, Commander-in-Chief, An Lun Planetary Military Command..” It was a simple string of words, but it nonetheless took An Liu by surprise.

She knew about An Lun. With the name of the place and this man together, she knew precisely who the gentleman before her was.

An Lun was a planet located on the border regions of the East's celestial territories. It was the closest planet to the Northern Alliance, and one practically bursting with all many of power gems. It was a place of strategic importance for resources, and a military staging area. It was an endless expanse of mining and military personnel.

It was the land of legends – legends largely involving Lan Qing.

His background was a mystery. He first appeared on record as a simple infantry man, stepping foot on An Lun as a common mecha pilot.

One of the greatest legends was about that simple soldier, who carved a name for himself with nothing but the standard issue mecha the army had supplied him with.

Under the pretext of cleaning out pirate infestations, the Northern Alliance had sent a crack team of mecha pilots to An Lun. The clandestine operation was tasked with sabotage of the mining and military operations. It was Lan Qing's third day in the armed forces.

The primary objective of the infiltrators was a simple one; destroy the

largest power gem mine on the planet.

The Northern Alliance engaged with pirates in An Lun planetary air space, attacking unprovoked to provide cover for their mecha unit. The conflict drew the brunt of An Lun's defenses to orbit for support.

Five hundred expert mecha pilots, sporting the latest in stealth technology. This was the squad that invaded while their support drew attention away to the skies above. It took them no time at all to reach their target. The mine, meanwhile, only had a hundred average infantry garrisoned in defense. Lan Qing was one of those.

In the opening wave of attacks the Eastern defenders had lost more than half of their number to the invaders. It was a crushing defeat that routed the garrison. It looked like the mine was lost.

Despite their victory, the Northerners discovered several of their number inexplicably missing. The Eastern soldiers, scrambling to retreat, discovered one of their number standing firm.

What Lan Qing then said to his comrades has been forever etched on the cultural memory of the East: "Make for safety. I'll cover your retreat." These simple seven words are what catapulted the simple soldier to heroism.

Against five hundred of the best the North had to offer. It was a suicide mission. More than that, their objective was sabotage. This was no deciding battle.

Indeed everyone suspected Lan Qing was sacrificing himself so his squad-mates could escape. What they didn't expect was that Lan Qing would perform a miracle.

First, his masterful control of his mecha allowed him to set the surprise attack in disarray. He then utilized the native defensive systems of the mining facility to keep them at bay.

Losses continued to increase for the invaders. Eventually they broke through the defensive line of the mine's systems, but their number had been reduced to three hundred. More than a hundred of those lost were at

Lan Qing's hand.

The Northerners were indignant and enraged, but still were on the cusp of completing their mission. However, Lan Qing's audacity had not been spent. He still had a plan.

The mine they had chosen to attack was currently being used for storage. The gems housed therein were integral components for mechas of the time. They gave them their motive capabilities.

As his enemies gathered for their third assault, Lan Qing arranged a number of the gems together. He waited patiently for the company to swarm in to the mines. Then he detonated the stones.

The resulting explosion was enough to obliterate half the mine, and a hundred mechas.

At this point the Northerners had suffered grievous losses. However, with the mine in shambles they considered their objective complete. What they couldn't have known was that Lan Qing had detonated the front part of the mine – an area that had long since been mined dry. The richest veins still lied within, safe from the blast radius.

The infiltrators prepared to depart, but Lan Qing still wasn't satisfied. As they made their retreat, Lan Qing was like a specter at their heels. Like the angel of death he picked them off one by one as they fled, with nothing but his standard-issue mecha.

He came and went with no more substance than a shadow. He struck with the force of a hurricane. Even to this day no one understood how he could know the terrain so well after only three days. But it was simple – he used every tool at his disposal, every ounce of knowledge and skill.

As the enemy's numbers dropped to near fifty, their morale collapsed. They couldn't stand in the face of this unbelievable assault. All they wanted was to escape. All their energy went to running.

Lan Qing was too exhausted to proceed. He'd single-handedly turned the tide of what should have been a massacre. There, battered and tired, he received a communication: the remaining enemy forces had been wiped

out. The reserves at the mine had regrouped, returning to fight by their comrade's side. Even two Master-Ranked pilots who'd come as reinforcements met their end.

Lan Qing had made a name for himself. In these short moments he'd become a hero of the East. His legend only increased when he refused his medals, choosing to have them honor his squadron mates instead.

Even those self-same squad mates thought he was nuts. The kind of psychopath willing to face five hundred enemy soldiers. Still, a triumphant psychopath. A hero.

As the conflict between the North and East continued, Lan Qing repeatedly proved his military talent. It didn't take long for the East's officer to realize he wasn't just a genius on the battlefield, but also far surpassed any of his peers in areas of strategy and leadership. They were skills that led him to victory in every skirmish he participated in.

He was eighteen years old at the time.

In the ten years following he remained on An Lun, at the forefront of the East's conflicts. His intelligence and strength resulted in victory, for all two hundred plus battles he fought. Never once was he or his company defeated. His medals, accolades and commendations lead him to become the youngest Rear Admiral in the history of the Eastern Alliance. He was also given command of the entire military force of An Lun, and in that time the North hadn't managed a single foothold or earned any beneficial victory. It was a post usually reserved for only the highest ranking military personnel.

He had yet to achieve the top posts of the military, but there wasn't a soul alive in the East that wasn't willing to bow to him as the Supersoldier of An Lun. The Northerners knew him as the Specter of Death. It was widely accepted that the East was the weakest of the Three Alliances, however Lan Qing insured they were able to maintain control of this most coveted territory.

Of course fame brought it's challenges. In the criminal underworld he remained on the list of top ten targets for assassination, a list that

changed extensively but for his name. That's how important he was to the East.

This was the person who stood before An Liu. A hero, supersoldier, and commander of the Eastern Alliance's most battle-hardened company.

Skyfire Avenue was detached from politics and the outside world, but that didn't stop An Liu's normally frigid exterior to melt before this storied Guardian of the East.

She took a deep breath and calmed her nerves. "I have to verify your identity," An Liu stated, choosing intentionally not to use any honorific.

"Very well." Lan Qing's responses had become familiarly concise.

An Liu's mind was a chaotic mess. Was this legend really the Jewelry Master's brother? And here to find him. She decided his presence had to be kept a secret – others couldn't know he was here on the Avenue.

"Wait here for a moment," she ordered. "I'll be back shortly." After speaking she disappeared down the street.

Lan Qing walked slowly towards Zeu's Jewelry Shop once again. He rested a hand upon the raised lightning bolt emblazoned on the door. He stood like that for the space of a few moments, then let his hand drop.

An Liu's return was as quick as promised. This time, she'd brought someone with her.

"You shouldn't be here," the imperious tone of the man began.

Lan Qing stiffened at the voice, and turned to meet it.

The Wine Master stood at An Liu's side, a hard light of disapproval in his eyes.

"You are...?" Lan Qing inquired.

"I am the Vice-Chairman on the Skyfire Avenue Leadership Council. You may call me the Wine Master."

"Then salutations, Wine Master. I'm here to speak with Lan Jue."

"You claim he is your younger brother?" The Wine Master's tone was

suspicious, but inquisitive.

“Mm,” Lan Qing verified with a nod.

The Wine Master’s eyes narrowed. “Come with me,” he said, immediately making his way to the nearby elevator.

The procession moved to extricate themselves from the underground; the Wine Master in front, Lan Qing behind, and An Liu bringing up the rear.

An Liu watched the back of Lan Qing as they moved. She wasn’t sure whether it was panic or confusion that set her heart to fluttering, but whatever it was it was something she hadn’t felt in years. But there it was, as sudden and unsettling as a bolt of lightning.

The military commander was tall, straight, almost regal in posture as he moved. Nothing in his movements seemed forced or false. It was a posture that said he could face anything. She was convinced this man was indeed the Lan Qing she’d heard of.

A memory tickled at the back of her mind, the fact that his military achievements were paired with an accomplished Talent. In the world of Adepts he’d been named Prometheus. The God of Wisdom. One of four others titled after gods of Greek mythos, who together were named the Divine Monarchs. Adepts who were pushing the boundaries of becoming Paragons.

As they exited the elevator, it was as though the Wine Master and An Liu had forgotten – or simply disregarded – their rules. Lan Qing walked the Avenue above unmolested as they trekked to the Gothic Winery.

“Sit.” The Wine Master unceremoniously indicated a chair situated on one side of a simplistic table.

“A Francisco. Black Dragon, unless I’m mistaken.” Lan Qing glanced over the chairs and table.

The Wine Master smirked. “I’m pleased to discover you know more than how to fight, Prometheus.”

Chapter 95: The Astral Phantom

“Where’s Lan Jue?” Lan Qing sat opposite the Wine Master, saying nothing more about his Prometheus remark.

The Wine went on with his line of thought in a gentle voice. “Of the Four Divine Monarchs, you’re the most well known. Supersoldier of the Eastern Alliance. The ‘God of Wisdom’. But with all that supposed wisdom, you still come here. Unless I’m mistaken, your name is number six on the Black List after you destroyed that Northern battalion masquerading as pirates.”

Lan Qing smirked. “The guy above me is called ‘the Astral Phantom’.”

The Wine Master mirrored his smile, but his tone was serious. “You shouldn’t have come. You’re brothers, you could call him to you.”

“He wouldn’t come,” Lan Qing said, shaking his head. “Otherwise he would have long ago.”

“Would you like something to drink,” the Wine Master inquired, suddenly changing gears.

Once more, Lan Qing shook his head. “I used to be quite the lush. But I haven’t had a drop since I was twenty. Alcohol impairs judgment.”

The Wine Master chuckled in spite of himself. “As well as your strength, hm?”

A hard glint shone through the admiral’s eyes. “You must never give your enemies an opportunity for attack.”

“The Jewelry Master is on the way back.” Once again, the Wine Master suddenly switched topics. “He should be here in roughly an hour. I assume he’ll go directly to his shop on the Avenue surface.

His guest nodded. “Thank you. I’ll wait.”

“Feel free to wait here. His shop is just across the way.”

“Hm.” Lan Qing closed his eyes. Like that – still, silent, blind – he remained.

An Liu remained standing to the side. As Lan Qing shut his eyes, his famously frigid exterior warmed by considerable degrees. The hardness of his expression eased as well, all but the area around his eyes which retained that steely resolution. His lashes were so long! Sitting like this, she could certainly see the similarities between him and the Jewelry Master. Even sitting 'at ease' his back was straight and his posture perfect – certainly worthy of a military designation.

“Ms. An, I’m sure you have other things to do than look after us,” the Wine Master said, mild-mannered and fatherly.

“Yes, sir,” came her respectful response. She turned and made her way to the door. As she moved past Lan Qing, his hand suddenly shot out and gripped her by the wrist.

An Liu’s reaction was swift, unconscious, and powerful. Instantly a suffocating aura of cold arose from around her. However, just as quickly she felt as though she had been covered by a blanket, an invisible force that stopped her powers from manifesting on the surface. She whirled around and stumbled to his side.

A thick dark spike, black as pitch, appeared directed at Lan Qing’s chest. But it did not pierce him.

The light around Lan Qing shifted, warped, and in the next instant he and An Liu vanished. The Wine Master quickly followed.

A stuffed, muted voice arose. It sounded like it was coming through the walls, from another room. The hoarse tones accosted them from all directions. “Ah, Cosmagus. It looks like I still arrived too late!”

As the voice faded in to the air, three shadows coagulated in to reality.

Lan Qing sat where he’d always been. He looked unchanged, unfazed. An Liu also had come to her senses, but appeared now on the opposite side of where she’d vanished.

The Wine Master’s face was hard and angry. “The Astral Phantom!”

An Liu understood then that Lan Qing had grabbed her to save her life. The warmth of his hand still lingered on her skin, but the expression that

spread across her face was dark and cold.

“I’ll deal with him,” she said, stepping forward.

“No need.” Lan Qing lifted his arm to block her progress. She collided with his arm, and the brief impact caused her to lose her balance. As she tumbled the general grabbed her against his chest.

The contact was brief, but it nonetheless caused Lan Qing some awkwardness and surprise. As he grabbed her, An Liu’s firm, taught backside landed on his thighs. For the first time since their meeting outside the Avenue, he saw her as the attractive woman she was.

An Liu’s pretty face had grown red. “What are you doing?!”

Lan Qing shook himself from his temporary stupor. “Don’t bother going after him, there’s no point. He’s one of the Ten Paragons – the lowest of them, but his mastery is speed. There isn’t anyone in the Three Alliances that can match him. He can even fold space, create wormholes. Presumably he made his way here the instant he heard news of my arrival. He likely didn’t count on the Cosmagus being here.”

The Wine Master’s response was level, but cold. “This is something he and I will settle. His arrogance has been allowed to go unchecked for too long.”

Another rare instance of a small spread across Lan Qing’s face. “I’m assuming he panicked, once he realized you were present. After all, if there is anyone in the universe with the ability to control him and his speed, the three Paragons of Skyfire Avenue are them.”

The various Paragons had attached themselves in one way or another to different forces of the Three Alliances. Specifically, the Avenue had three Paragons in attendance. In the Western Alliance, the Pontiff’s Castle and the Dark Tower had one each. The Coterie from the North had two of their own. Three more existed, though their alliances lay elsewhere. This Phantom, the last counted among the Paragons, belonged to the largest and most notorious coven of assassins in all the known territories.

The Wine Master gave Lan Qing a curious look. “You survive an

encounter with the Phantom, and you aren't even a little shaken?"

Lan Qing's response was lukewarm. "And what purpose do nerves serve? Were this An Lun he wouldn't have dared moved against me. I can't contest the man is exceptionally powerful, but in the face of modern science and technology even the powerful can only achieve so much. Even as a Paragon, even at the peak of his power, his destructive ability isn't unlike a capital ship. But what if he faces a bigger ship? Stronger? All he can do is flee. My metaphor isn't the most fitting, but in the world we live in there isn't anything – Adepts included – modern technology can't overcome."

"It appears my concern for you is unnecessary," the Wine Master said thoughtfully.

Lan Qing did not respond. Instead, he shut his eyes and sat in silence.

An Liu's breathing had, in the interim, become distinctly quicker. She stood, and silently watched Lan Qing for a few more moments before making her way outside.

As she exited the Gothic Winery a cold wind greeted her. Her eyes became sharp as she faced the zephyr. However, despite the chill a flush crept up along her cheeks.

He held me!

ζ

The high-alt verti-car hummed silently through the air until it reached the area of Skyfire Avenue. It's door slowly opened, and the glint of lamp lights glowed prettily against the blue streamlined surface.

Four slim and graceful figures exited in tandem. Behind them, a mote slower, Lan Jue's khaki windbreaker flapped as he stepped out. His face was still somewhat pale.

"It's good to be home," he said around a strained grin.

His assertions earned no response. Mika looked miserable. Ke'er and Lin Guoguo didn't look much better. Xiuxiu looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Alright, homeward bound!" Lan Jue good-naturedly patted Mika on the back. He took the lead as they headed for the Avenue.

The four women gave each other a silent look before hurrying to catch up with their boss. Behind them the doors of the verti-car closed, and from outside it looked like there were no doors at all.

"Jewelry Master." A small group Skyfire Guards snapped to attention as Lan Jue drew near. He gave them a polite nod in response.

A cold wind blew. The Jewelry Master pulled his collar tighter against the chill. His eyes swept along the Avenue, taking in the beautiful shops situated along its length. Unbidden, they became misty as he stared.

Three years. In that time, Skyfire Avenue had indeed become his home. Even when he'd escaped here in his grief, inconsolable, he felt as though he belonged. Perhaps it was fate.

Walking against the blowing winds, he made his way home. But his trek was interrupted as a sensation overcame him. He lifted his head, and looked down the dark street.

Skyfire Avenue was never very bright at night. The stores here rarely employed gaudy neon signs. It relied on natural light and the like for illumination. In the encroaching darkness he could make out a black-clad figure standing on the street before him. Still, Lan Jue knew instinctively the man was there before he even lifted his head.

Lan Jue's eyes narrowed at the sight. Slowly he came to a stop in the middle of the poorly lit Avenue. His body shook, as though he were in danger of collapsing.

"Boss!" Xiuxiu lurched forward a step to offer him support, but Lan Jue waved her off.

Ahead, the black-clad figure had turned to face them. Their eyes met, and though they were separated by a hundred meters the glint in their

depths were clear.

A shadow fluttered past, and the man in black was gone.

“No!” Mika called out. But no sooner had she opened her mouth than Lan Jue lifted his hands. His body was cast away like he’d been struck by a freight train.

Xiuxiu was closest, and had raced forward to protect Lan Jue from the blast. Mika, Lin Guoguo and Ke’er were quick on her heels. However the force was too strong, too fast, and the four women found themselves knocked back ten meters and thrown to the floor.

Lan Jue groaned, a trickle of blood snaking from his lips. He had been pale and frail, but now he looked like he was made of paper.

Lan Qing appeared where his younger brother had stood. He looked down Lan Jue, and the blood that was pooling beneath his cheek. Something burned in his eyes.

“Bastard!” Mika fumed like a volcano, moments from eruption. She scrambled to her feet and leapt in to the air. The Avenue became bathed in light as the crimson fires exploded around her. She launched herself at Lan Qing, becoming a screaming bolt of fire. An enormous trail of flame hung in the air where she passed.

Lin Guoguo’s brilliant eyes flashed like diamonds, and a surge of mental energy exploded outward. Ke’er, too, leapt in to the air like her flaming sister. But where Mika’s fires were red and angry, a blue light erupted from her. In the midst of the blue halo her body began to change, twisting until it became a massive artillery canon.

Only Xiuxiu remained still. She stared at Lan Qing, frozen in shock.

The three amazons were terrifying blazes of energy, but Lan Qing acted like he hadn’t seen them. His eyes remained fixed on Lan Jue.

His brother’s trademark, lackadaisical smile was gone. A scowl had replaced it; stubborn, cold, and angry.

Chapter 96: Brothers

Thunk! A massive, cyan hand effortlessly swatted the fiery lance from the sky. Mika went careening through the air.

The dazzling cyan light reflected off of Lan Qing's dark eyes. He turned and fixed his gaze on the distant Lin Guoguo. She huffed in response, and the golden glow in her eyes began to fade.

Ke'er was preparing for her own attack when a hand covered in snaking bolts of electricity fell upon her. "That's enough. Everyone stand down." Lan Jue's harsh voice stopped the women in their tracks.

Xiuxiu remained by Lan Jue, supporting him as he stood. Lan Qing, step by step, made his way towards his brother.

The howitzer-sized canon situated before Lan Jue had shifted again to the form of Ke'er. "Boss!" she called.

With her shift Lan Jue's hand rested now on Ke'er's shoulder. He moved around in front of her.

Mika and Lin Guoguo wasted no time getting to their patron's side. Zeus' Amazons formed ranks behind him.

Lan Qing's advance stopped three meters before his brother, and he slipped his hands in to his trouser pockets. He struck an impressive figure in his black suit, facing the small group in front of him with indifference.

Mika, Guoguo and Ke'er watched him carefully. Now so close under scrutiny, they felt he looked familiar and turned to peer at Lan Jue. Surprise overtook them as they immediately spotted the resemblance between this black-suited man and their boss. About the only thing markedly different between the two men was their temperament.

The man they faced was like a rock; hard, cold, unforgiving. Lan Jue was elegant and placid.

"What do you want."

"Are you hurt?"

The two men spoke at the same time, then became silent. They were of about the same height, and shared many similarities in appearance. The brothers stood staring at one another in the growing darkness.

There they were in the middle of the Avenue, but surprisingly no guards or enforcement personnel were present despite their brief scuffle. In fact, it seemed like there was nothing, no one around them. Just Lan Qing, Lan Jue, and the Amazons.

“Young Master.”[1] Xiuxiu spoke up, her voice timid.

[tn : 1. A title generally reserved for stuffy British aristocracy, here it means the eldest son of a rich family. It’s the closest phrase I could think of to express what she’s trying to say.]

“Young master?” Mika, until recently ready to spit fire, and the three others all looked at her in curiosity.

Of all the Amazons, Xiuxiu had been with Lan Jue the longest. While the other three were close with their boss, they weren’t as familiar. Not longer after they joined him, he chose to live here in seclusion. Now, hearing Xiuxiu’s address and seeing the similarities between the man and their employer, the others understood. But if that was true, why would he attack first without a word?

Lan Qing’s dark eyes narrowed. “Who was it.”

Lan Jue’s face was equally as cold as his brother’s. “None of your concern. My business, I’ll deal with it.”

Lan Qing took a step forward, though whether to say or do something wasn’t immediately clear. What was clear, was the almost instant and unspeakably violent sensation that filled the air around him as he did. All four Amazons shifted uncomfortably as the murderous aura enveloped them like a nightmare. Even Mika, titled the Stygian Succubus, turned ghastly pale in the face of it.

Lan Qing’s ordinarily dispassionate façade had changed, curdled and grown hard as a lust for blood shone behind his eyes. The fear that welled up inside the girls was hard to imagine.

Lan Jue appeared unmoved. The chill in his voice remained. “I said, it’s none of your business.”

After a moment, Lan Qing’s suffocating aura and his dark expression melted away. For Xiuxiu and the girls, the sudden shift felt like they were standing on the cusp of an abyss. Any misstep and they could get lost in it.

Xiuxiu had still managed to retain her composure, but her three sisters were on much less of an even keel. How strong was this guy! Just his presence was almost enough to reduce them to sniveling balls of fear.

Mika had been affected worst. There was a difference between her own powers – a power, a terror derived from darkness – and his. What she felt from him was pure, unadulterated bloodlust. It was something only one who’d killed many, many people could know. And yet there was something else there, unexplainable. There was a sort of stateliness, or nobility. The two forces seemed opposed, and yet there they were – integrity, nobility. Barbarity.

“Fine! Keep it to yourself. I’ll just go back, and let him know.” Lan Qing’s voice was soft, even. His features had again returned to their solemn default.

The cool regard he’d given his brother changed with the assertion. An anxiety crept in to his voice. “No you wont!”

Lan Qing’s features softened as he regarded his younger brother.

“It was because of me!” Mika stepped up to her boss’ side as she spoke. “He was protecting me. That’s how he got hurt. The men were from the Pontiff’s Castle, and if you’re really the boss’ brother those are the men you should seek out for revenge. Not here, making him worse. Can’t you see how bad his condition is?”

“The Castle,” Lan Qing growled. “Which one of the Archangels was it.”

Lan Jue just looked at him. Mika, her prickly manner making an appearance, snarled at him. “Archangels? This is my boss, why not guess the Pontiff himself?”

“Were it the Pontiff,” Lan Qing answered quietly, “and he’d brought you

four – you’d all be dead. If it were he himself, he’d have managed to flee. But I know him... understand him. That weakness, weak will.”

“Who are you calling weak?!” Ke’er’s anger flared.

Her challenge was ignored. Instead Lan Jue’s brother stepped forward and reach a hand out as though to grab him.

Ke’er pushed herself between them, to block Lan Qing’s advance. However, she was pushed away by a sudden fierce wind exuded from the black-clad general. In response, four beams of cyan light flashed through the air, cutting orbits around Lan Jue’s position.

An ear-splitting squeal filled the air, as four ragged gashes appeared from nowhere. The four women looked on helplessly. Lan Qing’s hand had reached its target, taking hold of his brother’s left wrist.

“It’s fine,” Zeus assured his Amazons.

A moment later, Lan Qing relinquished his hold. “Let’s go,” he said quietly.

“Mm,” came Lan Jue’s reply. He then turned towards the Jewelry Shop and began the walk home.

Meanwhile the four women watched, struck still in confusion. “If you would, the four of you please stay in the Underground tonight. I’ve got some things to talk about with him,” he said, pausing just long enough to speak over his shoulder at them.

“... boss!” Mika stuttered towards him in hesitation.

Xiuxiu, however, had begun to pull at her. “Let’s go,” she said, making for the public elevator nearby. They all fell silent in tacit consent.

Lan Jue continued to make for the Jewelry store, as did the women; one above, and one below.

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“Xiuxiu, what in the hell is going on? Who is that guy?” They had arrived at the elevator by then, and Mika could contain her confusion no longer. Lin Guoguo and Ke’er looked similarly perturbed by these events, but said

nothing.

“That,” Xiuxiu said, “was the Young Master, Sir’s older brother by birth – Sir, of course, being the boss. By the time you three had come, he’d made me stop calling him that.”

Lin Guoguo’s expression was afire with curiosity and surprise at the gossip. “He’s fierce.. frightening! That power that tore the air... so powerful! I almost ran right in to it. The boss certainly knows some unsettling people. But if they’re brothers, why would he show up and immediately start beating on his sibling? What kind of family is that?”

Xiuxiu’s vexation was clear as she shook her head. “I can’t say. I’m not at liberty to talk about anything relating to the boss’ family. Just this... you’ve heard of the Four Divine Monarchs? Three others, with names like our Zeus.”

Ke’er shrugged. “We knew he was the Monarch Zeus since we met him. You’re not saying his brother is one too, are you? There was Prometheus, Hades, Zeus and Poseidon – named after the most powerful gods from Greek mythology. So... which one was he?”

“The most famous one,” Xiuxiu responded.

Lin Guoguo couldn’t help herself. “First of the Monarchs... the supersoldier of An Lun... the god of wisdom. Prometheus!”

Xiuxiu nodded.

“Ahhh!” Lin Guoguo veritably squealed. Her three companions jumped in surprise.

“WHAT are you doing?!” Mika glared at her.

Lin Guoguo was almost shaking. “Prometheus used to be my idol! When I started following the boss I’d asked him if he’d take me to meet Prometheus. At the time he didn’t say anything. And now, to find out he’s the boss’ brother is just the best! Ah, man! I wanna go back up and see him again.”

In contrast to Guoguo’s excitement, Ke’er’s face had grown sour. “The

supersoldier of An Lun. What's so great about him?"

Guoguo stopped, stunned, and shot her sister a look. "What's your problem?" Mika is the one who responded, fixing Guoguo with a meaningful stare. It didn't take long for her to realize what it meant, and immediately shut her mouth.

Ke'er, however, had already calmed down. Her face softened as she spoke, and took her companion's hand in her own. "I'm sorry. I was just... thinking about before. I didn't mean to, and I shouldn't have. Ever since I chose to follow the boss I gave all that up. Here, this, this is my family now."

Lin Guoguo almost tripped over herself to reply. "It was my fault. I forgot you were from the Northern Alliance. I'm so sorry, Ke'er."

Mika grinned at the pair. "Alright, let's go. We can continue all this jaw-wagging on our own turf. It's hard to know who's listening out here." She pushed the call button for the elevator for emphasis.

Lin Guoguo snickered suddenly. "You guys think the Accountant got back? My guess is he won't be back for a little while. Wasn't our fault the verti-car could only hold five. And public transport is the worst. Just thinking about the look on his face when we left him back there makes me laugh, hah!"

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Zeus' Jewelry Store.

Ting ting. The doors situated above the door rung prettily as they entered. The lights were off, and the interior was blanketed in darkness.

Lan Jue made no move to turn on the lights to the exterior. He continued on until reaching the inner rooms, only then illuminating their surroundings.

Lan Qing followed silently behind. The two brothers stood, quiet, bathed in gentle light.

Lan Jue settled himself on the nearby sofa. Little by little, his hard

expression eased. Lan Qing remained standing, facing his brother with arms crossed over his chest.

“What do you want from me,” Lan Jue began, his tone markedly inhospitable.

“Nothing,” his brother replied.

Silence.

“So tell me, what’s with that girl. For the Castle to send out it’s Archangels after her, they must have known she was with you.”

Lan Jue’s response was swift and angry. “Why do you have to stick your nose in my business? You should get the hell away from me.”

“Because I’m your brother!”

Chapter 97: Lan Qing, Lan Jue

“Because I’m your brother!” The words struck Lan Jue like a slap to the face.

It was the first time he’d heard anything like that come out of his brother’s mouth. A look of incredulity overcame his features, but vanished as quickly as it had come.

“Mika was of the Dark Tower. Satan’s daughter, and his successor. Satan’s blood, his power, lies within her. The strongest of his brood. If that taint isn’t controlled, the consequences could be catastrophic. She’s trapped between two powers; the Pontiff’s castle, which seeks to exterminate her, and the Dark Tower which seeks to exploit her – to lose herself in the madness and bloodlust as a reincarnation of Satan. But Mika... she’s got a good heart. It was on the cusp of the Awakening when Satan’s power was consuming her that she came to her senses. She ran.”

“Later we crossed paths. I took her in, taught her to suppress the darkness, and brought her here. So long as she didn’t use them, Satan’s power would never awaken. It’d be locked inside her forever. Not long ago I let my presence slip. Something... caused me to forgo caution. The Castle found me, manipulated me to bringing them to the Shattered Starfields. There, we faced the Angel of War, the Messenger of Death, the Angel of Healing and the Cherubim. Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel had set a trap for us. Luckily it was the Moonfiend Empress who warned me to their presence. I was able to prepare, otherwise I’m afraid we really would have died out there. That, is what happened.”

The recounting was short, succinct. Lan Qing listened, lapsing in to silent consideration once all was said. A few moments passed before he lifted his head, and regarded his brother. “And you still wish to help her?”

“Why would anything change now,” he responded.

Lan Qing nodded. “Very well. You’ve made your decision, time to follow through. For this, there’s no need to get the Avenue involved. You don’t need to go chasing after the Castle’s people, either. As I see it, the Avenue

already knows. As is their custom they'll cover things up, handle what they need to. From now on, you shouldn't leave Planet Skyfire. Under the Avenue's protection neither the Pontiff nor Satan would dare come knocking. Your own abilities should also be sufficient on your home turf for self-preservation. As for the girl, make sure she doesn't go anywhere, either."

Lan Jue's eyes narrowed, and anger shone in the depths of his eyes. But whatever his thoughts, they weren't given voice. Silence hung over them for a time.

After a while Lan Qing spoke again. "Your wounds are serious. You shouldn't draw on your Discipline for a while, or you could make things worse. You'll need at least three months to recover."

Still, his younger brother was silent. A flash of hesitation came across Lan Qing's features. "Do you want me to stay?"

This took Lan Jue by surprise. He lifted his head and asked, "Do you have time?"

Lan Qing nodded.

But Lan Jue's sardonic smile returned. "Since when does our illustrious supersoldier of An Lun have time... go, I can manage by myself."

Lan Qing's response was brief, and tepid. "Then rest up." He turned and left without another word.

Ting ting! Once again the sound of the door chimes ringing hung in the air. Alone with the silence, a pained look came across Lan Jue.

"Brother..."

ζ

Lan Qing shut the door behind him, but didn't move towards the Avenue's exit. Instead he leaned against the wall of the shop and looked towards the twinkling heavens.

Beep-beep! The communicator on his wrist interrupted the silence. He answered.

“Admiral, when can we expect your return?” The man’s voice on the other end sounded urgent.

“Family matters. For the time being I won’t be returning,” he answered.

“But Admiral, as I’m sure you know, the delegation will be arriving in half a month. Will you be ready to receive them by then?” The caller sounded even more agitated by the news.

“I’m afraid not. Tell them I took leave for personal business.” His expression was blank and stony as he spoke to the man on the communicator.

“But, sir, this could impact your promotion. Admiral...”

He unceremoniously cut the connection. He’d already put the message out of mind, instead letting his thoughts dwell on that day, that message, three years ago.

“Brother, something doesn’t seem right. Hera might be in trouble. You’re closest, go help her.”

“Is your mission really that important? Hera’s your family! I’m begging you to go save her!”

“Brother...”

“I’m sorry, A-Jue!” The words were bitter in his mouth.

“What are you doing here?” The voice came from not far off. A flash of silver, and suddenly there was another beside him.

Lan Qing shot her a glance. “You’ve been lurking for a while already. Don’t pretend this is some chance encounter. What do you want.”

An Liu stuttered, flustered. “Y-“

“Do you have a cigarette?” The admiral turned his head to ask her.

“Eh?” An Liu blinked at him. “I thought you didn’t take anything that could impact your judgment.”

“Right now,” he said, “I’m not the admiral.”

“Wait a moment.” With that, An Liu disappeared in to the darkness. When she returned, she bore a packet of cigarettes and a lighter.

He opened the packet and slapped the base. A single stick poked free from the opening. He plucked it out and, running it under his nose, took a whiff. Something like regret shone in his eyes. “Do you remember? I was eighteen, you were fifteen... we were curious, so we stole away with a cigarette and sat smoking in the thicket. So strong. We couldn’t stop coughing. It was so bad that he heard us and found out what we were doing. Beat us both.”

“Wh-...” An Liu looked up at him in confusion. Clearly she couldn’t understand.

Lan Qing didn’t elaborate. Instead, he lit the cigarette and took a long, slow drag. Almost instantly he started to cough, the smoke bursting forth in plumes. “Ach! Kha!” The sudden coughing fit was so violent it brought tears to his eyes. Still, he was smiling through it all.

An Liu felt her heart skip a beat. That electric jolt that ran through her, was a feeling she could never get enough of.

“Are you alright?”

Lan Qing, coughing, took another drag on the cigarette in lieu of a response.

Ting ting! The familiar sound of the Jewelry Store’s bells made an appearance once more. Lan Jue pushed the door open and exited, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his windbreaker. Wordlessly he settled beside his brother, snatching the pack of cigarettes from his hand. Like his brother before him, he slapped the bag, pulled a stick, and lit it.

An Liu watched them both, silent and unsure what to do. Her first thought, Are these two sick in the head? Her second, though, was that her presence here wasn’t for the best.

Silently, she faded in to the surrounding darkness.

The cigarette was quickly spent. Lan Qing's face was red cough coughing. Lan Jue's wasn't much better.

"Wouldn't it be nice to just go back," Lan Jue said, his voice heavy with remorse.

"Go back?" Lan Qing cracked a bitter smile. "Lamentation is the crutch of the foolish. Right?"

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. "Always the realist."

"No, not realist. Pragmatist, maybe. No point in dwelling on the things we can't change," he countered quietly.

Lan Jue frowned. He pushed himself straight, stuffing his hands in his pockets once more. "Whatever you say." He walked back towards the door to the shop.

Ting ting! He stopped in the entrance and turned his eyes towards his older brother. "I've never blamed you. Never. I just blame myself. Tomorrow you go ahead and head back. I've already told A-Li, he said he'd come. Plus I've got Xiuxiu and the other girls. Nothing will happen."

"Hm?" Lan Qing hadn't moved, and turned his head to look at Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master's hard expression melted away. "I always wanted an admiral as a brother. It's something I take pride in. And it looks like I'm on the edge of a breakthrough. You better hope I don't catch up to you, or I'll beat you just as badly as you used to beat me."

Lan Jue disappeared from site as the door shut behind him.

Lan Qing remained where he was. He remained still for what felt like an age, before extricating another cigarette from the pack, and putting it between his lips.

Another smoke was pulled free, but this one was thrown to the darkness, towards An Liu.

"Don't skulk around. Join me in a cigarette."

An Liu plucked it from the air and made her way back towards the admiral. Wordlessly she took the lighter from him, and lit the stick. "You

know, you can really lay low a person's self-confidence."

Lan Qing smirked and shook his head. "It's fine. We've been like that ever since we were small."

An Liu gave him a cool look. "I was talking about me!"

ζ

Early Morning.

Lan Jue's outfit today consisted of a coffee-colored shirt under a white business suit. A white neck tie hung around his neck. He looked, as usual, meticulously put together.

Breakfast had been prepared for him by Xiuxiu, and it was wonderful.

"Boss, did the Young Master leave," Xiuxiu asked nonchalantly.

He nodded. "Early this morning."

The news elicited a sigh of relief. "You and he..."

Lan Jue shot her a quick look. It was enough to kill the sentence before it left her mouth. "I'm going to the university today," he interrupted. "I'm afraid if I stay away much longer they'll fire me."

Xiuxiu looked at him nervously. "You want to leave the Avenue? But your condition..."

He cut her off again with a shake of his head. "I'm not so fragile. Still Planet Skyfire, still Skyfire City," he assured her with a smile.

Xiuxiu screwed up her courage. "Well then how about I go with you."

Her boss laughed in spite of himself. "So you really do think I've got one foot in the grave, eh?" He lifted a finger and wagged it at her. A thin bolt of electricity writhed at the end. "Take it easy, nothing's going to happen. I haven't forgotten I still have to look after you crazy girls. Besides it's been a long time since the store's been open. You need to be here to help manage things. I'm off."

Lan Jue pushed his way out of the jewelry store. It wasn't his first excursion since returning, but nonetheless he still looked up and down the

street before proceeding.

By the storefront a small pile of cigarette butts had accrued, and he felt as though the smell of smoke still hung in the air. It somehow brought a smile to his face.

“This time I came out the victor. Probably the first time in my life.”

His high spirits persisted as he left the avenue, got on his bicycle and made for the NEU. The rattling chain of his bicycle gave sonance to the beautiful scene of clear sunlight, fresh air, and warmth as the young man made his way to work.

Chapter 98: Returning to Work

Jin Tao bobbed his head, setting his pink hair swinging manically as he made his way to school.

Man, Professor Lan hasn't been around for a while. When are we gunna get another class? I mean, how much longer is he gunna be gone?

Jin Tao glowered at the ground in front of his feet, suddenly in a sour mood.

The day after Lan Jue's 'lesson', Jin Tao had been beaten so bad he was practically begging for death. He had to take several days off school. But he swallowed the pain, and refused not only to visit the hospital but also the probing questions of his family.

However, it had seemed worth it. To his surprise, once the pain had cleared and his wounds had healed, he did indeed notice a change in his Discipline. Before his abilities only allowed him to change in to a pug. Now the base of his abilities got him to the level of a wild dog. It was absolutely a big change!

With the discovery that he was improving, Jin Tao's body had stopped aching so desperately. On the contrary, he was eagerly looking forward to more instruction from his new instructor. But to his dismay, when looking for Professor Lan he heard from his sister that the master had taken leave. One class and suddenly he's absent for so long? Certainly a capricious guy! He'd visited the yard behind the electives building every day since, but Professor Lan was never there.

Still, Jin Tao's performance in school had leapt forward at least as much as his discipline had. Maybe it was the inspiration he got from that first Etiquette class, or maybe it was the better control he had over mechas since his Discipline's cultivation. Whatever the means, a quiet self-confidence had grown within Jin Tao. It may have been small now, but it was an improvement that everyone could see.

Ding ding! The sound of rattling bells sounded nearby, jolting Jin Tao from his gloomy trudge.

"This blind moth-... hey, Professor Lan!" He'd scuttled to the side and swung around, ready to curse out the source of the bells when he noticed who it was. Lan Jue stood behind him, one leg planted on the floor and the other on the pedal of his antique bicycle, staring his pupil up and down.

"Hey," he replied.

"Ah awesome you're back." Jin Tao's rush to greet his master was so sudden and so intense Lan Jue had to lift his arms to protect himself from the onslaught. He kept his student at bay by the shoulder, and just in time otherwise he's afraid Jin Tao would have trampled down on top of him.

"What are you doing," Lan Jue said, glowering dubiously at him.

"I-it's me, Dumb-mutt. You don't recognize me?" Jin Tao almost shook with excitement.

"Sure I do," Lan Jue said. "You're the little pig-faced one I beat right?"

Jin Tao vigorously shook his head like a tambourine, his pink hair flopping about comically. "Nah nah. Pig-head was Fatty Tang. I'm the mutt."

Lan Jue frowned at him. "Why so anxious to be the mutt?"

Jin Tao chortled. "What's wrong with it? Dogs are loyal, bright, strong, good runners, have an excellent sense of smell and are man's best friend. It's my discipline... how can I dislike myself?"

His tirade had taken Lan Jue by surprise. He didn't expect such a response. "And what are you doing blocking my way?"

"Waiting for you to beat me again! You probably don't know, but when you beat me the last time my Discipline advanced by leaps and bounds. Go on and beat me, I can't wait to get better!"

Lan Jue caught him in a sharp glare. "If you want the whole school to find out about it keep up the yelling."

Suddenly Jin Tao became keenly aware of his surroundings. He'd forgotten where he was, about their agreement in his excitement. Now, several students on their way to classes had stopped to give the two

strange looks. He winced, his face growing stern as he shuffled closer to his teacher and dropped his voice to a whisper.

“Sorry, my fault. Don’t worry about it Professor, our secret. Between master and apprentice. No one will find out about it. So how about it, when ya gunna beat me next?”

Lan Jue shook his head and smirked. “Still looking for a beating. Noon, I still need to go to the office and report in. Go and tell Tang Xiao as well. After lunch – wait, no, don’t eat. Waste of calories. Just come to the yard behind the electives building at noon.”

“Got it!” Jin Tao was practically bursting with joy. He whooped excitedly as he raced off. Lan Jue watched helplessly as the youth raced madly towards the school.

Frankly speaking he had no interest in taking on an apprentice. His main purpose that day was to provide a catalyst for that pitiful wretch Tang Xiao to better himself. He wasn’t interested in wandering around, randomly smacking around students. He’d also stimulated the guy’s discipline with his own thunderbolt 1 powers so he wouldn’t feel he’d suffered the beating in vain.

As for Jin Tao, he couldn’t tell whether he should have considered himself lucky or unlucky. A chance meeting. And so Lan Jue did what was asked of him, of course boosting Jin Tao’s abilities as well. He hadn’t expected he’d run in to him again today. The guy had sampled the sweet taste of improvement, had learned he can improve. And now Lan Jue knew he wouldn’t get any peace. But it really did look like the kid had gotten better.

So did he really inadvertently acquire two new disciples? It would appear so, but these two guys? One so pathetic he associates with a wild dog, and the other morbidly obese. Whatever, he’ll deal with it as it comes. This time, he thought, he’ll beat them harder. They won’t come knocking tomorrow.

National Eastern University. Teaching Affairs Office.

Wu Junyi stared at the suited young man in front of him. After a long

moment, his sour countenance broke to reveal a smile.

“Professor Lan. You’re finally back with us.”

Lan Jue’s response was offered with sheepish expression. “Director Wu. Please accept my apologies, asking for leave just after starting classes. It was an emergency, but it’s been dealt with. I’m ready to get back to classes at your convenience.”

“Immediately, naturally,” Director Wu replied. “Of course you won’t be receiving a salary for last month – since you weren’t here. As you’re aware electives teachers don’t have a base pay.”

“Ah, good.” Lan Jue was just pleased he hadn’t been fired.

Wu Junyi went on. “After listening to your class it got people really thinking! Professor Lan, under your guidance I think our students could enjoy a distinct advantage. You even got my heart going there. How about this – we set you up with your own, school sponsored ethics course. You can teach these kids how to act like proper members of society. It’d be a much better situation than your Etiquette classes, and if things go well you’ll be a full professor within three years.

“Huh?” Lan Jue hadn’t expected such a response, and repeatedly shook his head. “No, no it’s fine Director. Really, you’ve already done so much and I’m certainly not qualified for the position. Really I’m only suited for this small area I’m teaching. I believe it’s best if I just continue with the Etiquette course.”

Director Wu gave him a regretful look. “Very well, we’ll keep it as is, for now. You earned a good reputation with the students after that first class. Quite a number hope they have the opportunity to enroll in your course. If you’re prepared, you can have your next class tomorrow. I’ll have an announcement made to let the students know. From then on, two classes a week. If things go well, and the benefit to the students is good, we’ll consider making your Etiquette class a standard course.”

“Excellent. Thank you very much, Director Wu.” His response was earnest and hasty, though in his heart he was secretly hoping it wouldn’t come to that. Two classes a week was already more than he wanted.

With the situation explained, Wu Junyi bade Lan Jue return to work. As head of teaching affairs he had a full plate, after all. Though he greatly appreciated the skill and effort of this young man, mecha studies and research had to come first for the NEU.

As he exited the offices, Lan Jue lifted his arm and peered hesitantly at his communicator. After a few moments of consideration he tapped out a brief message.

I'm back

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Beep! Zhou Qianlin was attentively listening to a lecturer when she felt the communicator on her wrist buzz, and issue the quiet sound. Almost by unconscious habit her eyes immediately went to the screen, and she spied those two words.

A tremble went through her slender body, and a flash of pleasant surprise flitted across her face. However, it was quickly replaced with a bitter expression. She pushed the thoughts away, and turned her attention back to class. At least that was her intention, however only a few seconds had passed before her eyes wandered again to her communicator. Her red lips pursed ever so slightly, then evolved in to a nasty, impish grin.

Her fingers raced over the buttons, tapping out her own response.

ζ

Beep!

I'm in trouble. Trouble you brought! Come get me from the scholar classroom immediately! Class is done in twenty minutes.

Huh? Lan Jue stared at the message. Trouble? Trouble he brought?

He felt the icy grip of fear squeeze his heart. Could it be the Pontiff's Castle, looking for revenge?

The anxiety grew until it almost threatened to overcome him. But then, it was gone. No... no it couldn't be the Castle, he thought. They only knew he was on Skyfire, part of the Avenue – not what he was doing here. Plus if

it were, she wouldn't be so relaxed about it. It had to be something else.

I have to keep my head! But... if it's not that, why should I bother?

He shook himself free of the conflicting emotions, and made his way towards the classroom. He tapped out a message on the way.

ζ

Suddenly you're not afraid the other students will know about us?

Zhou Qianlin glared daggers at the message. She responded: It's a big problem, you need you take care of it right away, the quicker, the better. If it means the other students find out I know you, that's a risk I'm willing to take. Just tell them you're my cousin.

ζ

"Cousin..." Lan Jue was speechless. How could he ever pass as her cousin? And this is Hera's sister...

Fine, cousin it is.

Chapter 99: The Savage Goddess

The classroom for National Scholars was located in the post-grad building. It was the most strict and rigorous area on campus, home to the most talented – and fortunate – students the NEU had to offer. Be it safety, learning environment or any other measure of respectability, the post-grad section of campus had the best of the best. And, average students were barred from entering.

In this, Lan Jue's status as an instructor served him well. He proceeded unmolested to the classroom Zhou Qianlin had indicated. He pushed his way in to the post-grad building and took the stairs to the third floor. He followed the signs and quickly arrived at his intended destination. He stopped when he came across the sign.

Second Year National Scholars, Classroom Four.

Yup, this is the place. He stopped before the door and took a look at the time. Still ten minutes before class was slated to end.

It was then he discovered he wasn't alone, standing there in the corridor. He was a handsome man, with blond hair and blue eyes, and a whip-thin figure. A strikingly large diamond stud twinkled on his left ear. The youth, seeing Lan Jue stop not far off, also swept his eyes over the newcomer.

He gave the kid a smile – and then froze. He knew, just then, that he'd seen this young man before. Could it be? That day, at the wedding... luminaries abound... was this the young man who was there to marry Zhou Qianlin? The man whose bride he stole?

It was, and if it wasn't for his intervention that day, this would be Zhou Qianlin's husband.

He was locked in place, thoughts running chaotically through his brain. His heart thumped raggedly in his chest. But despite what happened, what followed, he felt no pang of regret 1.

"You a teacher?" Richard asked.

Lan Jue simply nodded. He followed Richards eyes to his own clothing

and understood why he might have asked.

“Good morning, professor,” the young man greeted politely.

“Good morning,” Lan Jue returned. He nodded, forcing that languid smile back on his face. He was no fool, and quickly deduced that the ‘trouble’ Qianlin had described was standing right in front of him. But it was strange... he was from the Western Alliance, and the wedding that day was as much for them as it was for political insurance. When it fell through, it was undoubtedly a great shame on both their illustrious families. In the face of a situation like this, what was he doing here? In school? In uniform? It was, in a word, weird.

Richard continued his polite inquiries. “Are you here looking for someone?”

“I am,” he said, nodding once again. “My cousin.”

He shot Lan Jue a bright smile. “Oh great! Your cousin goes to school here. I’m waiting for someone as well. My wife.”

“Wife?” For reason unknown, hearing those two words coming from the young man’s mouth made Lan Jue want to punch him in the face.

“Yup! The most beautiful girl in school. She should be finishing school soon. Look for the gorgeous one – that’s her.” Richard was almost bloated with pride.

“Oh.”

Richard’s tutors were good and, seeing Lan Jue had no interest in speaking further he himself lapsed in to silence. He returned to his languid pose against the nearby wall and watched the door of the room, as though capable of seeing what was going on behind it.

It wasn’t long before classes ended. As the bell rang and students filed from their rooms, the once quiet hallway burst in to pandemonium. The door to the classroom opened and a teacher exited – no, a model.

The instructor wore a pair of pressed black pants, a short black blazer and a white shirt. Her black hair was pulled in to a tall bun on the top of

her head, and black-framed glasses hung on her pert nose. But despite her severe choice of clothing, Lan Jue wasn't off-put – but rather, intrigued.

The woman couldn't have been older than twenty five – not much different than Lan Jue himself. Her big eyes were fetching, but it was her figure that caught one's attention. She bore a graceful charm, the confidence and experience of an adult. Each curve of her figure seemed to go on forever, a playground for the eyes.

Richard, however, upon seeing her, unconsciously slid a little behind Lan Jue to hide.

"You again." Her eyes, sharp like razors, landed instantly upon Richard. "I've told you already, stop harassing my students. I guess my warnings don't mean any more to you than the air it takes to speak them. I honestly don't care who you are, this is the National Eastern University. Three times already you've done this, and you know what they say about three strikes. We're going to the teaching affairs office."

She swept past Lan Jue like he didn't exist, and grabbed Richard by the shoulder. "P-Professor Tan, now just wait a moment," he said. "I'm not harassing Qianlin. I'm just here to meet her after class. I'm her husband!" He sputtered as Professor Tan tugged him along, and he likewise lifted a hand to resist.

But despite his protests Professor Tan appeared determined. Her tugs were fierce, and Richard's poor attempts to extricate himself bore no results. She was like a force of nature, pulling him effortlessly through the hall. Richard's struggles faltered when he suddenly lost control and feeling in half of his body, rendered nearly paralyzed by a shuddering gust of power from Professor Tan's hand.

"Ah, Ah!"

She was fierce! As Lan Jue looked on he was immediately reminded of Mika. The two were remarkably alike in some ways.

"And you are you?" Her piercing glare had turned to him, then. "At least this one's wearing his uniform, which you have failed to do. You're coming to the office, too."

She hadn't even finished before her right hand reached out like a claw for him.

"Ah?" Lan Jue opened his mouth, but she wasn't interested in an answer. Her fingers stretched closer. Lan Jue had recognized right away when she reached for Richard that hers was an uncommon Discipline. But it was just that, uncommon. Nothing he had to worry about.

Almost without thought, Lan Jue raised a hand. Were this any other situation, the motion would have been sufficient to stop Professor Tan's advance. But he'd forgotten that he wasn't Zeus here – and regardless, an injured Zeus.

A blast of energy exuded from the Professor's hand. Lan Jue, meanwhile, felt his upraised palm tremble. He tried to urge his Discipline to action, but a dull pain filled his chest and nothing happened. It was just enough time for Professor Tan to grip him with a pinching grip to his trapezius. The numbness that filled his body was almost instantaneous. Even his face froze up.

How novel! It was the first thought that entered his mind. Here he was, King of the Mercenaries, Ninth-Level Adept, with the power of Thunder and Lightning at his disposal, even capable of defeating the best the Pontiff's Castle had to offer... snatched up by an angry teacher.

He couldn't even remember the last time he felt like this! Professor Tan humphed in agitation and stomped off down the hall, dragging Richard and Lan Jue behind her.

Richard's wide, innocent eyes shot towards Lan Jue. Zeus, meanwhile, was suffering from crippling unbidden facial convulsions. He wished desperately to employ his Discipline to escape the embarrassing situation, but this woman's own capabilities were nothing to scoff at. Her claw-like fingers dug painfully in to his shoulder, and with his own body weakened from injury he found it difficult to fend off even the slightest assault.

Is this to be my piteous end, dragged to death like a dog? Disgraceful, utterly shameful. And my suit!...

Now, the only thing going through Lan Jue's mind was the desperate

desire that as few people as possible saw what was happening to him. But reality would be cruel and deny his pleas. Nearly every eye in the hall was on them. Teachers stood by their open doors, and every student was pressed along the walls. It was a nightmare, only real and happening before his twitching eyes.

“Professor.”

“Hello Professor Tan.”

“Good morning Professor.”

She stomped past each overly polite student. With each greeting Lan Jue keenly felt their eyes following him. Gone, all gone! His illustrious name. All he could do was shut his eyes and wish for death. Professor Tan, meanwhile, nodded to each of her greeters and kept on.

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Zhou Qianlin never liked the crowds when classes ended. As a result she was often the last to leave the classroom. He must be here, she thought. Richard too. I wonder if he saw him...

Richard had enrolled and arrived at school only a few days prior. Since then, he'd come calling after every class, for all the world acting like they were a wedded couple. Of course by any measure, ceremonial or legal, the two of them had no relationship. But Zhou Qianlin had been patient with him. She felt guilty – but the reason...

She pushed past the door and stood in the hall, looking left and right.

“Eh? Where is everyone?”

The trepidation in her heart from seeing the young men again subsided, replaced by confusion.

“The Savage Goddess put on another display, lost art of torture and public humiliation. The two guys didn't even see her coming, poor bastards. Looks like she was in a bad mood today.”

The words of the passing student reached her ears. Savage Goddess? That's what they call Professor Tan. Nice enough lady, but that temper...

It was likely Richard was the victim. He'd already tried several times to meet her here, and the last time was explicitly warned against it. But the second? It couldn't... was the second Lan Jue?

The concept flabbergasted her. How could that be, with Lan Jue as strong as he was? Professor Tan was something else, but surely no match for him.

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Teaching Affairs Office.

"Director Wu, these two gentlemen have been harassing my students. I demand they get an official warning and reprimand from the school." Tan Lingyun practically howled her demands.

"Eh? Professor Lan? What in the world are you doing here? Didn't you just get back, and now you're harassing students? Ugh, Professor Tan let go of him immediately." Wu Junyi stared slack-jawed at the teacher who'd just moments before he was praising.

Lan jue's eyes were still shut tightly from shame and grief.

Gone! Finished! My reputation!

Chapter 100: Apprentice?

“He’s a teacher?” Tan Lingyun, like the Director, looked at Lan Jue in astonishment.

The Director rounded on his female colleague in anger. “Lingyun! Again with this temper of yours! Clearly you acted without thinking and dragged the poor instructor all the way down here. Let – go – at – once! And what would happen if you hurt Professor Lan with that crushing grip of yours?”

“I, eh.... I didn’t know.” Tan Lingyun released her death grip and Lan Jue crumpled to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Without his discipline to protect him, the pain was excruciating.

“Oh, I do apologize.” She immediately stooped down and helped the great mercenary king to his feet.

Upset could not begin to describe the look on Lan Jue’s face.

“Why didn’t you just say you were a teacher?” Tan Lingyun’s eyes widen, her tone accusing.

“And what opportunity did you give me to do so!” Lan Jue shot back in indignation.

Tan Lingyun’s shock only deepened. She took a good long look at this Professor Lan. His meticulously teased black hair, thin body, handsome face, fine white suit and bowtie. Only, the suit had been coated now with dirt, and hopelessly wrinkled.

She covered her disgrace with anger, narrowing her eyes and glaring at him. “What kind of man are you, anyway? You’re an instructor of the National Eastern University, and you don’t employ a Discipline to defend yourself?”

Lan Jue almost gagged, but in the end his response was muted and dejected. “Fine... you win.”

She snorted scornfully, then turned away. “Director Wu, I’ll leave this to you. Take care of this young pilot, because if I find him skulking around my classroom again I won’t be held responsible for my actions.”

Richard's scowl was deep and bewildered. "I was just there to meet my wife! What's wrong with that?!"

Tan Lingyun squared her shoulders and glared down her nose at him, full of a domineering arrogance. "First, this is not your house. This is a university. The only relationship we tolerate between students in these walls, is as schoolmates. If you want to go meet your wife, meet her at home. Second, Qianlin has never acknowledged you as her husband. This marriage you have concocted is all wishful thinking, with no legal documents or proof to back it up. Therefore, if I ever see your face again I will be formally submitting a request to have you expelled from school." 1

"You!" Finally, Richard's temper spun out of his control. The faint aura of his discipline began to exude from around him.

"ENOUGH!" Wu Junyi's thunderous voice rang through the office, cold and commanding. Richard suddenly felt a devastating pressure bearing down on him. The sudden fear that filled him helped to control his temper.

"Professor Tan, you may go. I'll deal with this."

"Goodbye, Director Wu." Tan Lingyun gave him a curt nod, turned, and left. As she stomped out she muttered, just loud enough to hear.

"No kind of man at all."

Both Lan Jue and Richard stiffened visibly at the insult. They looked briefly at each other, unsure to whom she was referring.

Director Wu watched 'the Savage Goddess' leave, helpless. "Professor Lan, this was a misunderstanding. I apologize on behalf of Lingyun. And as for you..." Wu Junyi's eyes shot quick and fierce to Richard. "I'll deal with you momentarily. Stand to the side."

Lan Jue made his way from the teaching affair's office and back towards the teaching building he was so cruelly thrown from. As he did, a cold gust followed. He shivered and hunched in his suit, burdened and bleak. But more than the chilling breeze, there was that ineffable feeling lingering in his heart. Such was life! In the end, at least it was interesting. A laugh

come unbidden from his lips, then. Could I be some sort of masochist?

“So I’ll assume everything’s fine, with you smirking to yourself like that.” The sultry voice arose from nearby. He turned his head, and sure enough there she was. Zhou Qianlin stood behind him, only a short distance away. The look on her face was more inquisitive than accusatory.

“Yup, everything’s fine! Why wouldn’t it be?” Lan Jue stuck out his chest in prime manly fashion.

Zhou Qianlin advanced towards him, a knowing smirk on her face. She ran a hand through her long, silken hair. “Your clothes are soiled.”

“Oh, this...” His squirmed.

“Let’s go,” she said, dropping the issue and any further questions.

The two walked side by side, and as predicted there was no shortage of curious glances directed their way. The title of School Beauty wasn’t lightly given, after all.

“Did you recognize him?” Zhou Qianlin’s voice was low as they meandered through the university.

“Mm. Your fiancé,” he replied.

Zhou Qianlin lifted her eyes to stare at him. She found a face as still and calm as the surface of a pond. “That’s right, and he’s here for me. What do you think I should do about it?”

Lan Jue blinked. “That’s up to you, how should I know?”

Her face stiffened, but a huff of laughter soon followed. “That’s right! It is up to me. Even though I’m a ‘soiled woman’ I think he’ll still want me. No problem then, you can go!”

Her pace quickened and she pulled out in front. Lan Jue came to a stop, making no effort to follow. He watched as she slowly vanished in to the distance. His features never changed, no expression revealed, except perhaps that shade of gloom returning. He turned the opposite direction, and began to walk.

Electives Building.

“Are you serious? Listen kid, if you’re messing with me you know what’ll happen.” Tang Xiao crackled his knuckles, glaring fiercely at Dumb-Mutt Jin situated before him.

There was a real fear in Jin Tao’s eyes as he tittered nervously. “Look, buddy, how am I messing with you here? You shouldn’t keep treating me like before. I mean, now we’re the same – we’re both apprentices under the same master!”

The fat on Tang Xiao’s face jiggled perceptibly. “Fellow apprentices? I really have no idea what Professor Lan was thinking. A guy as insignificant as you, working with him? I mean he can oscillate!”

“Oscillate?” Jin Tao’s eyes popped and he almost salivated at the prospects.

Tang Xiao laughed patronizingly. “That’s right, oscillation! Otherwise how could I be sure of his abilities as a master instructor? Only... he surely is a tough one. I still feel the beating he gave me.”

“Did your Discipline...” Jin Tao whispered cryptically.

His compatriot’s eyes hardened. “It’s a secret. How am I going to share that with some mangy dog.”

“Tang Xiao,” Jin Tao growled. “I’ve tolerate your insults for a long time. If you keep talking down to me, I’ll –“

Tang Xiao replied by puffing out his expansive chest. “What are you gunna do? That sentence is the best way to describe you. Not to mention you look like a mangy dog. For other people, a tall forehead means intelligence 2, but you prove the saying false. What’re ya gunna do, man, bite me?”

Jin Tao snorted derisively. “And you’re better? You’re growing in the wrong damn direction. When you were born whatever monstrous thing created you had to apologize for the error!”

“You are REALLY looking for an ass-kicking!” Tang Xiao’s hand shot out, looking to grab his opponent by the neck.

“Professor!” Jin Tao’s call froze Tang Xiao but only for a moment. He snagged Dumb-Mutt by the collar and grinned hideously in his face.

“Don’t give me that garbage. A three year-old wouldn’t fall for that nonsense. It’s not time yet, and the professor isn’t here. I could stand here and curse his mother and nothing would happen.”

“Is that so?” A dispassionate voice wafted over in reply.

Tang Xiao went stiff as a board, his jiggling fat swallowing that malicious grin. Slowly his expansive girth turned, and he addressed them from behind him with perfect propriety. “Oh, professor. You’re here. I-I was just messing around.”

Lan Jue’s hands were stuffed in his trouser pockets. He looked at him, then to Jin Tao, and nodded. “Hm, not bad. Both of your disciplines have improved. But it’s not enough. I’ve been on a business trip, and just got back. Are you two serious about learning with me?”

Before Tang Xiao could even open his mouth, Jin Tao practically leapt forward, falling to his knees before Lan Jue. Flop.

“Master, I am absolutely serious. I beg you to accept me as your student!” His assurances came as he bowed low to Lan Jue’s feet, so deep as to bang his head on the floor.

The suddenness and intensity of Jin Tao’s actions stunned both Tang Xiao and Lan Jue speechless. Students bowing low to instructors like this, what year was it?

Tang Xiao’s jaw set, and he bowed as low as he could manage. “Sir, I’m also determined.”

Lan Jue pulled Jin Tao up from the ground, and shook his head. “Good. That being the case, from now on I will also genuinely consider you both my disciples. However, if at any point in the future you do not acquiesce to my commands, any relationship we have as student and master is immediately dissolved.”

Jin Tao was overjoyed. He practically shouted at his new master. “Professor, whatever it is, just tell us what to do.” Despite his incessantly

arrogant demeanor, it was clear the boy was no idiot. He and Tang Xiao were different, to be sure. The latter was talented, an ace student. But this one? It was fair to say that here, he was nothing. If it wasn't for his sister's position as a teacher here, he'd never have passed muster to join the school.

It was Jin Tao's customary state to be uncaring, aloof, even dismissive. However, in his heart he did strive for dignity. This was increased when he listened to Lan Jue's speech that day in class. On that day, he became even more determined. He wanted to be a prince among men, to be a true noble. In his eyes that meant he first had to grow strong. With strength, the most basic requirements for greatness would be met. That is why without hesitation, without question, he threw himself to the floor before his master. He needed to prove his sincerity.

"Go on... beat him!" Lan Jue jabbed a finger at Tang Xiao, he stared helplessly at his teacher. "You may fight back, but neither of you may use your discipline."

"Heh!" A devilish light shone in Jin Tao's eyes, and as he slowly advanced on his pudgy opponent his grin became predatory.

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"Jin Tao is nothing but a damn rabid mongrel. Insane, and nobody wants anything to do with him. No, not that. He's a rabid mongrel who blindly follows a master. I'm convinced he's only pretending to be a madman most of the time! He shouldn't be called the Frenzied Lion Mastiff, no. They should call him the Scheming Idiot!"

Memoirs of the Metal Fox, Army General Tang Xiao

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"That fat-ass Tang Xiao isn't worth being called a human. A brain full of filth and obscenities. Anyone who becomes his enemy doesn't dare give him a chance to open his fool mouth, otherwise even if you come out the victor you've still given him what he wants. The best method is simply to beat him. Beat him to within an inch of his life. Until he can't even open his mouth. If I was tasked with giving him a nickname, it would be this:

the Fathead Porkbucket. That suits him best!”

Memoirs of the Frenzies Lion Mastiff, Army General Jin Tao

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1. With an attitude like this she better be one hell of a teacher! ↵
2. So they say in China. Luckily bald people use this to their advantage! ↵

Chapter 101: Bodyguard, Where Are You?

Tang Xiao stumbled to the floor with a swollen face and bloody nose. It was difficult to see his expression through the results of his beating.

Jin Tao, conversely, sat not far away. His expression was clear – the satisfaction of a man who'd finally taken a dump after days of constipation. In a way, finally beating on Tang Xiao was just that, release. He hadn't escaped the fight without a few bruises of his own, but they were few compared to Tang Xiao's.

"Hurts?" Lan Jue stood at Tang Xiao's side, looking down on him. The young man looked at his instructor, grunted, and said nothing further.

"Up!" Lan Jue hissed at him.

It was almost by reflex that Tang Xiao shot up. "What the hell is this about!" His words were muffled from the beating.

"Got a problem?" Lan Jue peered at him. "You probably thought he was so much weaker than you. Only reason you lost was because you couldn't use your Discipline, right?"

Tang Xiao didn't answer, but the look in his eyes did it for him: You're damn right!

Lan Jue continued. "As an Adept, as a pilot, your physical abilities are your foundation. Your will to fight is the key to success. You're fat, but you're also supple – flexible. You've got that up on Jin Tao. So why did you lose? Because you didn't have his dogged determination. What that means is, if your powers were equal, he'd beat you every time. This was just a little contest. You lose, you suffer a little pain. But if this was war... you'd be dead."

"So today the lesson I leave you two with is this: Treat every drill like a battle. Treat every opponent like an archenemy!"

The stubborn dissent in Tang Xiao's eyes slowly melted away. It was replaced with a solemn consideration. He was, after all, a smart and talented student. There was no doubt he'd come to understand. He was

twenty-three years old, and already he possessed considerable ability. However despite his innate skills, he'd certainly heard similar things from his other instructors. Perhaps it had never really resonated with him before, or maybe they had never impressed the fact that success would really require physical sacrifice.

"You lost the war of wills. Now do you understand?" Lan Jue concluded.

Tang Xiao lifted his head, and nodded solemnly.

Lan Jue then turned his scowling face to Jin Tao. "Understanding doesn't mean we're finished. I never told you to stop."

This time, Tang Xiao was the one with a malicious, hungry grin on his face.

"Wait a minute, this isn't right!" Jin Tao howled as the massive girth descended towards him, like a hungry tiger pouncing it's prey.

By the time Lan Jue was leisurely waltzing from the NEU campus, both the future Metal Fox and Frenzied Lion Mastiff lay sprawled on the dirt. This time Professor Lan hadn't lifted a hand, but they were in a sorrier state than the before. It only ended when they had no more strength to fight.

Ah. Teaching really is pretty nice. At the very least, relaxing.

Thinking back on the actions of the two gentlemen, guys not really much younger than himself, brought a smile to his face. Fifteen years ago he first experienced something like they did today. It froze the smile on his face, when the memories came. Fifteen years ago... a pain that went to the bone! Every time it was like that.

Serves you right, sitting there counting cigarette butts in the street! Hmph!

Classes weren't until tomorrow, and there wasn't anything he needed doing. It was time to go home. Still there were things to consider. Not only for himself, but for his young ladies as well. If they only worked together their development would skyrocket. Maybe things would be different this time. He wasn't sure how it would feel treating them like students.

His thoughts were interrupted as a familiar figure crossed his vision, exiting the university's main gate. He recognized him as his fellow sufferer from earlier in the day. Richard stood a short distance from the entrance smoking a cigarette. He looked glum, and ashamed.

"Oh hey, its you," he greeted amicably as he spotted Lan Jue.

"Don't come over here," Lan Jue snarled. "I don't know you." If it wasn't for this guy he wouldn't have been so publicly humiliated, abused by that hateful woman.

Richard was sheepish and apologetic. "Look, I'm sorry Professor! But you really shouldn't be blaming me, that woman really is just a bully. It's a damn tragedy she's my lady's class leader!"

Lan Jue had struggled to bring his anger under control, and was nearly back to his indifferent norm. But hearing him refer to Qianlin as his lady brought it all back bubbling to the surface.

"So what are you doing, casing the place?"

"Nah I'm not loitering or anything. Classes are almost out for the day, and Qianlin will have to come out this way. A gentleman sends his wife home, right?"

"Oh," Lan Jue replied, "alright then, as you were." He shrugged dismissively before pushing his bicycle out of the campus and down the street.

Suddenly he felt a heat welling up in his chest. He paused, and then a sound rang through the back of his mind: Bodyguard, where are you?

Bodyguard!

His response was almost subconscious, channeling his psychic energies through the soul-caller gem resting against his chest: Gate of the University.

I'll be there soon. Send me home! Repel anyone who tries to get near me. That's your responsibility. Even in his head Qianlin's voice was cool and dismissive.

Fine. His exodus from the school stopped. It was true – he still had a responsibility to act as her protector for the next couple of years. Nor was her request excessive, and so he had no grounds to refuse.

Not long after their exchange, Qianlin appeared by the gate. She walked by herself, clad in form-fitting clothing with her long black hair flowing down her back. Her face was neutral, but regardless was possessed of a quiet beauty. Her flashing blue eyes glimmered behind the cascading waves of black hair – certainly attention-grabbing.

“Qialin!” Upon seeing her, Richard sprang in to action. He barreled towards her at a run. “I’m sure you’re tired, huh, Qianlin. Here, my verti-car is parked just over there. I’ll send you home. Oh, but I was invited to dinner by my aunt.”

Qianlin shot him a withering glance. “Great! You go ahead. I have someone here to send me home.”

“Eh?” At first, hearing her enthusiasm his heart nearly leapt from his chest. However, when she finished her sentence a bitter taste filled his mouth. His formerly friendly demeanor suddenly grew prickly as he shot his eyes around. “Whose sending you?”

“That’d be me,” Lan Jue interjected lazily.

Richard looked at him, confused. “You?”

“That’s right.”

“So,” the young man started, “this morning, before the classroom. You were there waiting for Qianlin as well?”

Lan Jue nodded in confirmation.

“You her cousin?” He asked.

Again, he nodded.

Zhou Qianlin had already moved to Lan Jue’s side. She deftly pulled herself up onto the back seat of the bicycle. “Let’s get going.”

“Yup.” Lan Jue watched Richard’s slack features as he pushed off the floor, one foot on the pedal. Sadly Zhou Qianlin’s presence on the back of

his bicycle cramped his standard riding style. He had to squat over the seat.

“Cousins...? The hell was he driving, anyway?” He stood watching them meander away for a good few minutes, but still couldn’t quite wrap his head around what had just happened.

Richard didn’t feel threatened by the handsome instructor. Their relationship as cousins – and the fact he was just as easily disposed of as he by Tan Lingyun earlier – made him less problematic. Sure there were plenty of handsome guys who were interested in Zhou Qianlin, but how many could boast his personal status? He had a deeply connected family, a blessed and comfortable life, and an outstanding education. All of this conspired to instill him with a healthy sense of self-confidence from a young age.

Still, in the wake of his recent interaction with Zhou Qianlin he felt something odd. His interest in her, his courtship, wasn’t a new endeavor. In fact he’d fallen in love with her the very moment he first saw her. After their disastrous wedding, his father – enraged from the shame and disgraceful treatment – finally conceded after Richard had used every means at his disposal to convince him to let the young man come back to Planet Skyfire. Through all of this he felt he knew his fiancée very well, and yet for reasons unknown he sensed her overall mood had changed markedly from before.

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Lan Jue pedaled the bicycle, and Zhou Qianlin sat perched on the back. Both were silent. And though their rolling journey through the landscape of Skyfire was picturesque, there existed a strange barrier between them that made the trip uncomfortable.

For a while it continued in this way, until Lan Jue spoke up. “So, where we going?”

“Grace Hospital,” she replied.

“Got it.” Lan Jue began the journey towards the hospital. He’d only been there once, but the profound effect it had left on him meant he knew precisely how to get there. They continued in relative silence before arriving at the doors.

Zhou Qianlin deftly dismounted from the bicycle’s back ‘seat’. However, she didn’t move towards the door. Instead she lifted her hands, and rubbed her face for a few moments.

“I’m not going in.”

“Don’t go in!”

The two spoke on top of one another. They exchanged a look. It was Lan Jue’s awkward tones that broke the ensuing silence. “I have a friend coming to Skyfire City. I promised I’d go see him.”

“Your responsibilities aren’t finished,” Qianlin responded coolly. “I’d have to increase your contract duration a few days. Go then, no need to come back. I’ll find my own way home.” With that she turned and pushed her way in to the hospital. As she did, her back turned to her bodyguard, a smile spread across her pretty face. No matter her grievances, or how sour her mood, a smile always covered her features when she entered here. She was here to bring joy to her elderly charges, to make their lives better.

Watching her leave, Lan Jue’s face also twisted unnaturally. “Hera, she’s your sister,” he muttered to himself. “If I didn’t already have you, I don’t know if I’d be able to help myself from falling in love with this one. Helpful, attractive... but my troubles are many, and I wouldn’t want to involve her. But don’t worry. I’ll help you watch after her.”

Chapter 102: The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit

If you find yourself in some trouble, just call. The message was relayed to Zhou Qianlin via their soul caller gems. Lan Jue said nothing further, and pedaled away in to the distance.

Zhou Qianlin, meanwhile, felt the heat of the gem as she walked deeper in to the old people's home. The rims of her eyes grew slightly red. She unconsciously pressed her hands to her chest, reminding herself that this was a means of communication only the two of them could hear. She shook her head and puckered her lips, squelching the train of thought running through her mind. That plastered smile reappeared, and she continued on her way.

"Hey! Qianlin's here. Just off school, right? You really shouldn't come so often. It has to affect your studies."

"That's right! Qianlin, come on over here and have a sip of water. We really are all fine here, you shouldn't kill yourself coming all the time. We may be old but we can still take fine care of ourselves!"

"Ah ladies. I come so often because I miss you! Are you saying you don't look forward to my visits?"

"Of course we do! You don't know how much."

"Good then. And what about our new friend, Bess? Is she still shut up in her room? Let me go look in on her."

"Ah that stubborn old biddy! I don't know if she's got some sort of problem, always appearing and disappearing mysteriously. And always with that lascivious air. You see her and you know you're in for bad times!" A particularly prickly old woman muttered unkindly towards Qianlin.

Another at her side chortled. "Alright, Flores. We all know you're jealous because Bess is prettier – stealing your title of 'prettiest granny in the old folk's home.'"

“Hmph, is that so,” Flores huffed scornfully.

“Mrs. Flores, I brought your favorite for you today. Smoked plums! But you must remember to only eat one a day.” Zhou Qianlin artfully steered them away from the topic, laughing prettily.

“Oh, thank you so much! You really are the dearest girl.”

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“Ugh, this thing really is slow, huh.” Lan Jue muttered helplessly to no one as he pedaled the antique bicycle.

He glanced at the time displayed on his communicator. With some effort he should still be fine, he thought. His destination was the public air hangars, where anyone wishing to cross the planet had to dock. The guy he was meeting there certainly wasn’t using public transportation, but he’d be there nonetheless.

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“General, how long before you plan to return to An Lun?”

“Seventy-two hours,” Lan Qing flatly replied. “Roughly two jumps still ahead.”

“Very well, general.”

“Before I return prepare all the information we have on the Pontiff’s Castle of the Western Alliance. Have it ready for me by the time I get back. Be as detailed as possible, especially concerning their highest-grade members.”

“The Pontiff’s Castle?” The voice that came across the communicator seemed taken aback by the request.

“Do I have to repeat myself?” Lan Qing glowered dangerously at the space in front of him.

“We’ll have it ready for your arrival.”

“Good.”

He broke the call, just in time to let a couple light coughs escape his chest. “When they say smoking’s harmful to your health, they aren’t kidding. But I haven’t been as relaxed as I was last night in longer than I can remember. A-Jue... the Castle!”

Prometheus, the God of Wisdom stared out in to space, murder in his dark eyes.

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Western Alliance. Capital Planet.

It was a gorgeous world, similar to the Earth they originated from. Discovered a hundred and eight years ago and settled by the Western Alliance. It had taken immense resources and manpower, but once they verified the rich resources the planet had to offer, they wasted no time in establishing their capital here.

Capital Planet was more locally known as Eurmania. Seas comprised eighty percent of it’s surface. Only twenty percent was habitable. Strangely, though, in contrast to the Earth it mimicked, the water here was all fresh. The fauna were also markedly different, but despite these discrepancies the place was still a perfect place for human habitation. Other than it’s lack of salt, that is. But that was an issue easily fixed through interstellar shipping.

Several notable cities graced the surface of Eurmania. The most impressive of these was located on the planet’s eastern hemisphere, Spiritus Sanctus. It’s opposite, though no less awe-inspiring, lay in the west; Gomorrah.

Part of it’s mythos was that when the planet was discovered, God and Satan carved it to their liking and founded the two cities. Of course only a very few people actually believed in the stories, but the truth of it was it brought the ancient culture of humanity to bear here on their Capital

Planet.

Human interstellar travel and planetary terraforming were still relatively young. Still, it was an advancement that has seen incredible progress in a short period. Eurmania is proof of that fact. It was comparable to the East's own Planet Skyfire, though perhaps even more integral to the West.

Spiritus Sanctus was home to a particularly unique location, where sunlight shined thirty-six hours a day. On this planet, when a day lasted forty-eight hours, the result was only twelve hours of darkness in the area. In the center, often bathed in golden sunlight, was the crown jewel of the Holy City; The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit.

It was a gorgeous building done in the renaissance style of Old Earth. It was a classical structure with a Romanesque dome and Grecian Corinthian pillars. The building was constructed to look like a giant crucifix when viewed from above in accordance with holy tradition. It was the largest cathedral in all the Three Alliances. The interior was nothing short of resplendent; both bright and dim in places, mysterious, and composed of beautiful marble. The walls sported countless murals, painstakingly created by chips of colored marble. The project had been strikingly vast.

The archway which lead to the dome was situated on the right hand side of the structure. Although there was an elevator to help lift travelers part of the way, the route to the rooftop gardens near the dome still required three hundred and thirty steps to access. It was common knowledge that watching the sunset over the Sanctus Plaza from the Cathedral rooftops was the most beautiful sight in the city.

The central dome was the brainchild of a master architect. The interior of the dual-structure was always brilliantly lit. Beneath it rested the Pontiff's Altar, over which hung a bronze baldachin designed by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini himself. The twisting column drew every eye that fell upon it. Further below, in the church proper, sat St. Peter's tomb with a giant marble sculpture of Pope Pius VI done by Antonio Canova kneeling before it. The windows were stained glass, and featured prominently was a massive piece depicting a dove surrounded by an aureole. The inscription

below it read Bernini's Dove of the Holy Spirit. The entrance to the Secret Archives was to the left, within which was housed the holy relics that displayed the wealth and power of the Pontiff's Castle.

A plaza stretched in front of the cathedral, capable of accommodating over three hundred and fifty thousand city residents. It was three hundred and forty meters long, two hundred forty meters wide and encircled long two long half-moon covered walkways. Each bore a massive two hundred and eighty-four meter tall columns that kept it's towering ceilings aloft. Said ceiling was adorned with one hundred and forty-two statues, holy men and women of the Castle who watched you as you passed beneath them. Every one was exceptionally life-like.

The Cathedral had taken a total of forty years to construct. The pious believed worshiping here was the greatest of pilgrimages, the highest honor they could achieve in their lifetimes.

Today it was host to an uninvited guest. He wasn't a tall man, and in fact stooped unflatteringly. A white coat encircled him, as though he were an old doctor fresh from the local hospital. A pair of glasses sat perched on his nose, with lenses thicker than the bottom of a wine bottle. Slowly he proceeded through the Cathedral – a few steps, then stopping, then on again.

Raising his head, the old man quietly admired the murals and frescoes lining the walls. "They really are incredible! Such a pity..."

He continued further in.

"Forgive me sir, but proceed no farther. Within is the assembly chamber for the Curia. I'm afraid tourists aren't permitted to enter." The old man had arrived before a set of large doors. Two guards barred further passage.

"Oh? I can't go in?" The elderly traveler give them a despondent look.

"Do forgive me," the cassock-clad sentinel repeated, as polite as before. Despite his words, however, he was intractable in his resolve.

"Oh... here then." The man had thus stopped his trek there, turning his face to look at the majestic pontiff's altar behind.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to vacate the premises,” the priestly guard continued. A suspicion had grown within him, and he stepped forward to help hasten the man from the area.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the man engaged calmly. “Call that stodgy Pontiff out here. I’ll wait, but you only have ten minutes. Otherwise I’ll turn this grand cathedral of yours in to a quarry.”

The priest was stupefied. He looked at the old man like he was a lunatic, unable to believe he’d heard such talk from someone with one foot in the grave. The gall, sitting here attempting to threaten the Pontiff’s Castle!

The Castle was, after all, the balance of power in the West. It was large, and famously popular among believers. Even the Dark Castle wouldn’t be so brazen as to waltz in and make demands. They were locked, socially opposed and unable to overcome the other.

“Are you crazy, huh? Get out of here, I said!” The priest reached out to shove the man’s frail shoulder. But before he could, strange wisps of light emanated from the old man’s body. As the lights washed over the guard, he froze solid as rock like the statues he protected.

“Get out here, Pontiff!” The old man’s voice was no louder than a pleasant conversational volume. The sound was frail, hoarse, almost lethargic. A minute later that same lethargic voice was ringing like thunder through every corner of the Cathedral.

Every ear perked up at the sound. Every worshiper, priest, cleric and meditating patron couldn’t help but sit in stunned silence. At this moment, the whole of the Pontiff’s Castle held it’s breath.

Chapter 103: The Arcane Magnate

“Ten minutes, or this place is rubble. I suggest you encourage your disciples to make for the exits.” The old man stood unmoved before the doors. As earlier, his hard voice reverberated throughout the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit.

A few minutes of silence ensued. It was broken when the interior of the grand cathedral devolved in to chaos.

Swarms of angry worshipers, clerics, priests and Inquisitors descended upon the man’s location, looking for the source of the disturbance.

He made no efforts to hide himself, and was not difficult to spot standing conspicuously before the doors. The hunters raced towards him at break-neck speed. However, as each figure drew within ten meters of the man they suffered the same fate as the first priest; frozen solid like granite, locked in the corona of light that surrounded him.

“Visitors please clear the area. The Cathedral is now closing.” The sound was clear, dignified and unhurried. The scores of worshipers flinging themselves at the old man slowed to a trickle, and stopped. All became silent once more within the Cathedral.

In the sudden stillness two figures appeared, flanking the man from two opposite directions. As they slowly walked closer, the doors behind the visitor opened to reveal a third. Three people, from three different directions. Their pace was slow, and exactly mirrored one another’s.

The elderly gentlemen calmly turned to face the figure from behind the doors. His face bore no expression.

“Magnate, I pray you’re doing well.” The man who addressed him was strikingly handsome, with long blonde hair falling loosely down his shoulders. From the back one might think he was a girl. Pretty as a picture, almost like he himself was painted but retained a sense of masculinity. He was clad in a pure white, spotlessly clean cassock, but it was the eyes that stood out. Gold, and as they shone a saintly aura surrounding the newcomer.

“Metatron. Still not good enough. Where’s the Pontiff?” The old man addressed him dismissively.

The golden-haired youth smiled amicably. “He’s praying. He’ll be with you momentarily, if you would care to wait.” He spoke with the old man as though addressing an old friend visiting from afar, ignoring his crass manner.

“I said ten minutes. Now it’s seven.” He clasped his hands behind his back, returning his gaze to the murals set within the vaulted dome ceiling of the Cathedral. His expression was one of appreciation, not violence.

Aside from Metatron, the other two approaching figures also arrived at the old man’s location, revealing themselves as two young women. The girl on the left was clad in a long white dress, beautiful like an elf. Her skin was fair and soft, almost like milk. Even her long hair was a pure snow white.

The second woman had short blue hair – at least, from this angle. Strangely she seemed like an illusion or hologram, changing color as the time and angles changed. Her features were normal enough, but for that strange discoloration that made her hard to pinpoint with the eyes.

Metatron continued. “Arcane Magnet, sir, we know why you’ve come. This entire situation really is regrettable.”

The old man snorted a sarcastic laugh. “Your regrets can’t change what happened. Am I right? Let’s see if your regrets can stop me today, shall we? I’ve lived long enough anyway, I’m starting to grow impatient for what comes next. And who can ask for a better coffin than this beautiful cathedral? I’ll have more things buried with me than the kings of old.”

Metatron’s amicable smile began to slip. “Magnate, please be cautious. We don’t tolerate blasphemy of the Father or his home here.”

This earned a scornful snort. “The only god I know is Mathematics. Your god, is bullshit.”

“The audacity!” The girl on his left gasped in a tender, finicky voice. Her mane of white hair began to float around her head, and silvery moonlight

emanated from her. The light beckoned six silvery wings which stretched from her back and splayed wide. A suffocating aura of sanctity filled the air.

“And now this, half-assed ‘moon angel’ daring to puff up like a peacock before me.” The old man waved his hand at the young woman as though he were shooing away a fly. The motion elicited strange lights from reality before him. It was a peculiar illumination, that fanned out before him. The instant it touched the moon angel’s aura, the silvery light melted away like ice before an inferno. The speed with which it enveloped her was staggering.

It was like the air was sucked away, stealing it from her lips and pulling it from her lungs. The silvery girl’s eyes grew wide in fear.

“Please, be lenient Master Magnate.” Metatron had stepped before the old man, cutting his line of sight to the beleaguered young girl. His hands were raised as if to ward the frail man off, matched at his back by the unfurling of his great golden wings. They were so large, so full that determining just how many Metatron possessed was a difficult endeavor.

His own aura wasn’t flashy, nothing so glorious or brilliant, but was possessed of an incomparable pureness that culminated in the golden halo surrounding his head. It was his turn now, and as his hands raised a light was liberated from their depths, so grand that it was like a sun had been born within the confines of the Cathedral.

“Hmph!” The old man nearly spat. Suddenly his form became ethereal, like a vision, and vanished. However his sudden disappearance did not mean they were safe, for instead the strange light that was slowly suffocating the moon angel suddenly exploded outward. In the blink of an eye it had surrounded the entirety of the palatial church – and all within found themselves fighting for each burning breath.

“Magnate, you mustn’t!” Metatron shouted through gasps, but the terrifying vacuum surrounding them swallowed the sound before it could manifest. Instead he could only project his thoughts outward. As he did so an orb of golden light fought to expand out, with the angel at the center.

This was no ordinary denizen of the Pontiff's Castle. This was the one known as the First Among Seraphs, second only to the Pontiff himself. More powerful even than the seven Archangels, and once regarded as the closest to the Paragons themselves. But despite these titles, in the face of this singular old man he was clearly outmatched. This greatest of heavenly angels was not fighting – he was hoping not to upset the elderly visitor further.

“Three. More. Minutes!” The hoary voice arose from every which direction, making it impossible to pinpoint the Magistrate's precise location. As his voice faded, it was replaced with the sudden, thunderous chorus of angelic singing. It rang throughout the entirety of the Cathedral, and as it did the whole of the interior brightened as though light were pouring from the walls. Crashing waves of milk-white, holy light was coming from the doors behind Metatron in a torrent.

Visions of angels fluttered in the sea of white. The overpowering, sacred aura filled the onlookers with a sense of nirvana. Even the vacuum created by the Magnate diminished in the face of such an aura. The air around them returned to normal, and that suffocating sensation faded in to memory.

“Old coot, as crazy as ever.” Another voice joined the exchange, this one aged and plain. The source was revealed to be an old man, who walked towards them from the large doors. He was clad in luxurious robes, and a pointed hat sat upon his snow white hair. Metatron retreated a step, nodding respectfully towards him. The two women at his side bowed low at the waist.

“Took you long enough. Any longer and you'd have to rebuild this little nest you've cobbled together for yourself.” A shadowy figure appeared before the pontiff's altar. After a few moments it reconstituted in to the now familiar shape of the hoary old man.

The Pontiff regarded him from his location by the doors. “Keeper, this isn't necessary.”

Indeed it was he. This old man who'd single-handedly repelled the forces

of the Pontiff's Castle, the one they called the Arcane Magnate was the same old codger who spent his days on his deck chair in Skyfire Avenue sipping tea.

He scowled at the Pontiff's remarks. "You should be quite clear on the rules we've established on Skyfire Avenue. The Jewelry Master is one of ours, a member of the Council – a fact you knew full well. And yet, you set your trap and tried to have him killed. How do you plan to explain this?"

The old priest watched him with an inquisitive gaze. "I haven't seen you this energetic in ages, you geezer. Aren't you afraid of the strain, that it may kill you? You dare to come here alone, even though you must know that in this Holy City my abilities are nigh limitless. I can see what will be, can make it my will."

This produced a chortle from the Keeper. "I couldn't care less. Of the Paragons I am considered eighth, and you sixth – you're already more powerful than I am. But there is something I have over you, and that is pure destructive power. Other than the two greatest among us, none can compare to the obliteration I can bring. How do you think your precious city would look after a blast from my positron assault?"

The Pontiff glowered at his guest, sighing as he spoke. "Very well. Indeed, in this aspect we are in the wrong. If it wasn't for his relationship with the Stygian Succubus did you think I'd agree to provoking your Avenue? With that explanation, what will do you? Not to mention your own man is not without fault. The Angel of War is utterly destroyed, and Michael himself gravely injured. He'll need at least a year before he is fully recovered. By comparison, you've suffered no great losses."

"None of this has anything to do with me," the old man replied rudely. "I'm here for business the Jewelry Master and I had entered in to, a deal you ruined. Recoup the losses incurred by your meddling, and I'll turn right around and leave."

This took the Pontiff by surprise, as his helpless response underlined. "I figured there'd be a reason behind all of this. Fine, you'll have it. Consider the matter settled."

As he spoke, he turned towards Metatron and nodded pointedly. The Angel's brows knitted and he opened his mouth as though to speak, but the expression in the Pontiff's eyes cut him off.

The Keeper still did not appear convinced. "Since when did the old Scepter start being so agreeable?"

A coldness crept across the Pontiff's expression. "Undermining this meeting so you can show off your cleverness isn't the best move here. Take what you've come for and leave, and don't test my resolve in making you if I must. Even if it costs me this place, my life, don't think I want sacrifice it all if it means protecting the Castle from the likes of you. Even if it means siding with the Dark Tower. Even your precious Avenue couldn't stand against that."

"You're welcome to try," the Magnate hissed through his laughter.

The Pontiff had begun to lost his temper. This infuriating old coot didn't know when to back down. With an angry growl he turned, disappearing through the large double doors. Any further interaction here, and he feared his orders would become violent.

Chapter 104: Lili

Both the moon and dream angels looked towards the first of their order, Metatron. He watched the exchange between the Pontiff and the Magnate helplessly. For him, strength was not something to fear – but insanity was. If there was one among the Paragons he would not wish to face in battle, it was the man before him now.

The Arcane Magnate might have been ranked low among his peers, his sheer destructive power was in the top three. Worse still, if the old man had his way no trace would remain of his enemies. If he were to really lose his mind, it was unlikely anyone existed who could stop him.

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Skyfire Avenue, Public Airship Hangars.

Lan Jue trotted in to the welcoming lobby somewhat out of breath. It hadn't yet reached rush hour, so there were only a few people present.

He was pleased to find he'd arrived just on time. He'd pedaled valiantly without stopping to make sure of the fact. That bicycle was great for environmental protection, but that lack of speed...

He stumbled to a nearby vending machine set against a wall and stuffed a few coins in to the slot. A water bottle rattled to the bottom, which he took and emptied to nearly half in just a few gulps. He sighed contentedly as the water refreshed him.

In order to recover from the wounds he'd suffered, he had to keep his Discipline tightly bottled up inside. Be it thunder or lightning, their destructive power was too high and his body couldn't yet handle the strain. As a result his journey here by bicycle was completely dependent on his own physical strength – something which, also, was affected by his injuries. The wounds he suffered were indeed significant.

As he stood there, water in hand, his mind spontaneously thought back to earlier in the day. Lamentations filled him as he recalled the scene of him being helplessly dragged through the halls. Even the amusing visions

of his disciples beating the piss out of each other couldn't sweep that shadow from his mind. He could only pray that the none of the students who planned to visit his class tomorrow had seen the embarrassing display.

His self-pity was interrupted when the communicator on his wrist began to buzz. A-Jue, you here? The words scrolled across the screen.

Lan Jue immediately made his way towards the station exit to wait for his visitor. It wasn't long before he spotted him.

The man who ambled from the exit was a strange sight to behold. He was almost wrapped in layers of thick black tweed. A bulky scarf was wrapped around his neck. His head was covered in a grey skullcap, and half his face disappeared behind a pair of massive sunglasses. From a distance it was difficult to tell if he were man or mummy.

Lan Jue smirked as he waved high to catch the pile of clothes' attention. The man, presumably peering in all directions, though it was hard to tell, eventually locked on Lan Jue's position. He trotted towards him, pushing a luggage barrow before him. As he did, however, he still looked clandestinely in all directions as though on the lookout. Or in hiding.

Lan Jue took a step forward to greet him. "Well well, Lili. Quite the appearance. I'm guessing 'normal' was not in your wardrobe?"

The mummy man covered his mouth with a hand. "Shh! Keep it down. Let's get out of here, then we'll talk."

It wasn't until they'd left the station the mummy stood up straighter, and heaved a sigh of relief. The two were of a similar height, though the strange man was a sight thinner.

"Alright, we should be fine here. So, A-Jue, where's the car?" The man's voice was soft, clear. It had a strange attraction to it – a voice one would find hard to forget.

"Em..." Lan Jue scratched the back of his head. "I came in sort of a rush, Lili, so transportation's a little crude..."

"What are we wasting time for? I don't need any nonsense luxury car. I

don't care what we're driving – and stop calling me Lili! People'll start thinking I'm a woman.¹”

Lan Jue draped an arm around his companion's shoulder and pulled him in to a hug. “Fine. A-Li, that good? I'll go get our ride.”

Mummy-man was caught in the bear hug, and found it difficult to extricate himself from it. The display of affection dislodged his massive sunglasses and caused them to slip down his face. The brief glance at his eyes showed their surprise while looking at Lan Jue.

Said eyes were striking to say the least; clear, shimmering azure blue orbs which the word ‘deep’ would fail to describe. On a woman they would be almost too pretty, much less on a man. The long, curling eyelashes only made it worse. Fair skin, straight thin nose, smooth forehead... even with the scarf, glasses and hat it was hard to hide his pretty face! Indeed his charming features couldn't be described as handsome – only beautiful would cover it. Stunningly beautiful ².

Lan Jue slapped his forehead. “Your dad sure knew what he was doing when he named you, huh A-Li. It's a shame you're a guy – as a woman you'd be quite the heartbreaker. You'd probably have been my Hera!”

“Get the hell out of here and get your damn car! ³” A-Li hurriedly replaced his sunglasses, trying to peer in every direction at once. Convinced no one had seen him, he sighed in relief. That relief quickly dissipated when he saw Lan Jue return with his bicycle.

“Wh-... where the hell did you find this antique?”

“Oh this,” Lan Jue said awkwardly. “Ah, A-Li, y'see... like I said I came in sort of a rush, so...”

Li cut him off, pushing past him to stand before the bicycle. He lifted his glasses to stare at the ancient thing in careful detail. “Oh man... beautiful! What a nice surprise, A-Jue. Such a thoughtful gift!”

“Hey, stop embarrassing yourself. Who said I was giving this to you?” Lan Jue said in agitation. “Get a taxi, I'm riding this back.”

“No way! I have to experience this marvel of ancient design! You're

taking me.” A-Li left no room for disagreement, as he hurriedly scrambled on to the back of the bicycle.

Lan Jue scowled at him. “Women usually sit on the back!”

“Then I’m a woman!” A-Li said softly, batting his eyelashes enchantingly at Lan Jue. Needless to say his flirtatious glances were enticing. But that was the problem.

“Uerg... A-Li, you keep this up, and we’re never hanging out again.”

“Got it,” he said. “So let’s get moving.” A-Li remained locked in place atop the bike.

“What about the luggage?”

“I’ll carry them,” he replied. “It’s got wheels, right? It’ll be fine.”

One Minute later.

The antique bicycle rapidly rattled along the roadway, pulling behind it two rumbling suitcases dragged by a mummy.

“Woo, this is awesome! What a joy ride! Hey A-Jue, pick up the pace!” A-Li wriggled elated on the back seat.

Lan Jue growled over his shoulder. “Did I call you out here for a sightseeing tour? Aren’t you here to look after me? You know I’m hurt, and still you’re here making me work!”

Li sounded genuinely surprised. “You’re really hurt?”

Lan Jue didn’t answer, the depression in his eyes hidden from A-Li’s view. Although the damage Michael inflected was serious, it was the scheming that cut deepest. A-Li, meanwhile, lifted his free hand and pressed it against Lan Jue’s back. An indistinct sapphire glow shone forth.

A moment later he retracted his hand. His previously excited mood had turned sour.

“It really is this bad? Six of your meridians have been badly injured. Your fu-organs have also suffered some wounds. Something your own Discipline can’t heal on your own, even with three or four months of down

time. Who did this to you?”

“The Pontiff’s Castle,” Lan Jue replied. “Because of Mika.”

Li fell silent, as though in contemplation. After a moment he reached a hand in to his coat pocket and extricated a small, delicate silver communicator.

The face of the communicator housed a large blue gemstone which exuded a gentle sapphire light. A-Li pressed his finger down upon it, and after a second a fair-sounding feminine voice arose.

“Your command.”

“Cancel any current commodities slated for deliver to the Holy City, and sever any further ties. Issue a trade embargo against Spiritus Sanctus. No matter the cost.”

“Confirmed.”

He broke connection and returned the communicator to his coat pocket. Only then did A-Li’s mood normalize somewhat.

“There’s no need for that, A-Li,” Lan Jue said. “It must be an enormous loss for your family.”

“Nonsense, ride your bicycle.” A-Li’s tone was sharp. “Why didn’t you say something earlier? The morons at the Pontiff’s Castle must be tired of living if they dare to strike out at us. Something like this you can’t just decide and forget, yeah?”

“Warning! Warning! Stop your vehicle immediately and submit to inspection! Repeat: Stop your vehicle and submit to inspection!” Suddenly a piercing electronic voice shrilled from behind them. It took both A-Li and Lan Jue by surprise. They turned their heads to find the source of the startling noise.

A black-coated high-alt verti-car was descending from above. Brilliant blue letters adorned it’s side; Police. It spun in to a controlled drift and came to a stop a few meters in front of them. Lan Jue hastily squeezed the brakes, bringing the bicycle to a stop.

The door to the verti-car hissed as it swung open. A helmeted officer slipped from within, a woman judging by her figure.

“Hello,” the officer greeted professionally. “Please produce your IDs for inspection.” She spoke with official tones towards Lan Jue.

Lan Jue handed her his communicator, and muttered almost under his breath. “Did we break some law?”

The officer looked over his ID number. “Are you aware of how dangerous it is to haul cargo with an antique like this?”

Lan Jue blinked with realization. “Oh. I’m very sorry, this is definitely our fault. What should we do?”

The officer looked at the bicycle, then at the bundled man cringing on the back seat. “I’ll need your ID as well. We’ll need to confiscate your vehicle. You can come to the station to sort this all out.”

“No way!” A-Li scrambled from the back of the bicycle. “Pretty miss, don’t be so heartless. We didn’t do it on purpose. It was my first time riding this bicycle, and I didn’t know the rules. There’s no reason to confiscate it. Or how about this, help us with our luggage and send us to our destination and we can sort this all out there.”

The woman’s voice came cold and curt. “Sir, I’m wearing a helmet. How do you know what I look like. I repeat, give me your ID.”

“So be it.” A-Li dropped his head helplessly. He slowly began unwrapping himself; hat, glasses, and scarf.

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1. I know I did. It’s worth noting that the ‘Li’ character they use here for his name is the one used in 美丽 – the word ‘beautiful’ almost expressly used for women. You’ll see why in a second. ↩
2. This is just so fitting. ↩ => <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVVpZM8sFSg>
3. The translation is considerably more vulgar, but we’re a family site.

Chapter 105: The Superstar

“I wanted your ID, I didn’t ask to see your fa-“ The female officer stopped suddenly when she realized who was before her. She stood as though frozen, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Li had risen his head. Locks of pale blue hair ruffled majestically in the breeze as eyes as brilliant as the starry heavens fixed the woman with their enchanting gaze. A small, coy smile played across his fair-skinned face. Perfection, that is what people called it.

When he fixed her with that smile, it was as if everything around them faded in to the background. There was only him, as perfect as a statue, staring in to her soul. Lan Jue’s strength lay in his heroism and nobility, but in raw looks his companion had him solidly beat. A-Li didn’t have the same courageousness, but he made up for it in enticing warmth and empathy.

“Why miss... this is my ID.” A-Li pointed a thin finger at his face, his charming smile spreading wider with a wink.

“Y-you... you.. you... !” The officer’s voice grew higher by degrees with each stuttered word. Lan Jue looked on helplessly from a small distance away. He shook his head at the scene, realizing now that calling this guy over probably would end up being more trouble than it was worth.

“AAAAAAAHHHHHH!” The sudden, violent shriek that nearly shattered the woman’s helmet nearly scared the two gentlemen from their skin.

“Poseidon! Y-you’re Poseidon! Aaahhh!!” She shivered uncontrollably as the screams shot through the air. She fumbled manically with her helmet, eventually managing to free her charming face. She wouldn’t be considered terribly pretty, but she was possessed of a certain strength that made her attractive. Although now her eyes was practically heart-shaped, and her courage was hard to picture while she was hopping up and down like a school girl.

“Hush!” A-Li pressed his finger to his lip. “Be quiet! Otherwise you wont

be able to enjoy our little meeting just you and me. Do you still need my identification?”

“No, no need, it’s fine. Your face is the best kind of identification. You’re even more gorgeous than on television! Your eyes are just so amazing, and how are your lashes so long! Almost two centimeters. Oh gosh! I’m actually here with you, face to face! I’m so lucky, so so lucky!”

Li turned temporarily from his adoring fan to extricate a small box from his luggage. Like magic, a pen appeared in his hands, with which he signed the box and handed it to the woman.

“This here is my latest acousto-optic three dimensional album special. Here, this will be our fine, how’s that?” He patted the woman’s hands as he took a step back.

“This... this is for me?” Her quivering hands pressed the box to her chest. A-Li had already begun to replaced his hat, scarf and glasses. In response to her query, he stepped forward and patted her shoulder – but making sure to keep a respectful distance. After a brief moment he motioned towards Lan Jue.

The forgotten Jewelry Master swung his leg over the bike and mounted once again while A-Li got one behind him. Poseidon waved majestically at his fan as they pedaled in to the distance.

“Get going. I think it’ll be fifteen minutes or so before she recovers, but after that every cop in Skyfire’s going to be searching for me.” A-Li muttered quietly as he bounced along behind Lan Jue. It sounded like it was something he’d experienced often.

“And what’s there to be proud of anyway,” Lan Jue muttered.

“Usually the people who say such things are just jealous,” A-Li said through a smirk. “Anyhow ninety percent of the people in the three Alliances are like you, hyper masculine. The other ten percent like real men.” A-Li leisurely sat swinging his legs beside the churning bicycle wheels.

“Careful you don’t get disfigured,” Lan Jue hissed maliciously.

The voice that came up from behind him was not the A-Jue he knew. Instead it was soft, plaintive and crystal-clear. A woman's voice. "And if one day this one should lose their good looks, would you still love me?"

"Holy flaming crap on a pogostick 1 Shut your mouth and stop with that voice changing nonsense or I swear on my life I'll boot you right back into orbit!" He just narrowly missed sending them both careening in to a ditch.

A-Li's voice had returned to normal. "Have some dignity. You're injured. If you tried to throw anything it'd probably just be yourself in to an early grave."

"What kind of brother are you?"

A-Li's voice changed again, that unsettling feminine quality returning. "We should both go have operations, then we can be sisters!"

"What the... no wonder your dad called you Hua Li 2. Go do your operation then. So tell me then A-Li, if you're a woman what's the first thing you want to do now that you're here."

"Make the boys feel goood," he said timidly.

Lan Jue was silent for a long time. After what felt like ages he seemed to come out of the haze. With a profound look in his eyes, he resolutely said, "A kind brother!"

It was after dark by the time they arrived at Skyfire Avenue. Lan Jue used his status as a Councilman to fix Hua Li up with a temporary badge. The evening lights hung over the street as the sun slowly began to dip behind the mountains. The magic hour gave the Avenue a classic sort of mystery and beauty.

"Wow, it certainly is nice here. I like this antique feel. I can see why you lived so easily here for three years. A-Jue, your taste has only improved with age."

Lan Jue responded lazily. "If my taste was ever anything but impeccable, it was because I was spending time with you philistines."

"I'm hungry, what's for dinner?" Hua Li muttered as he cast his eyes

around the quickly dimming Avenue.

“What do you want?”

“Anything’s good!” Hua Li said. “I’ve eaten most of what this world has to offer already, so it’s all the same to me.”

Lan Jue shot him a glance. “Sure, because that’s not bragging at all.”

Hua Li’s eyes lit up mischievously. “Like this then. You bring me something delicious I’ve never eaten before, I’ll owe you a favor. Anything you want.”

“Become a transsexual?”

Hua Li plucked his sunglasses from his face, and fixed Lan Jue with that unsettling plaintive stare. As tears welled up in his clear eyes, his voice again took on that moving, feminine quality.

“So long as you’re willing to part with the male me.”

“Sod off! 3” Lan Jue shoot a foot towards Hua Li, who hopped nimbly out of the way with a self-satisfied grin on his face. “Stop using this play-acting garbage on me. If you make me worse I’ll have you feel what it’s like to be burnt to cinders by lightning.”

Lan Jue half-heartedly spat the threat while dialing a number in to his communicator.

“What’s up.” A deep voice answered.

“Got something delicious cooking? Something rare, for two.”

“Come.” The connection dropped.

Lan Jue had become accustomed to that baritone, laconic voice. “Your luck’s pretty good. Looks like there is indeed something good for you tonight. I guess we’ll see what in a minute.”

Hua Li nodded. “Not knowing is best. Now I got something to look forward to.”

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Before the small, simple door of a cabin.

As they pushed through the narrow entryway a faint, refreshing aroma greeted them. It smelled something like osmanthus, but not quite. It was a smell that almost seemed to fill you up.

“Scented rosewood?” Excitement lit up Hua Li’s face as he rushed forward. He pressed his nose to the expansive table and took several long, deep breaths. He straightened and stared at the table in surprise.

“Absolutely beautiful. Look at the heartwood grain, twisted like specter faces. Man! It’s almost like tigerskin, and so large. So many beautiful figures in it – no, not beautiful. This is magnificent! Just so amazing, how is a piece this large even here?”

“Please keep it down,” the deep voice entreated.

Hua Li lifted his head towards the voice. The man who stood before him now wore a pair of brown trousers and a black shirt, covered by a brown waistcoat. The Gourmet entered from the kitchen beyond.

The two looked at each other, though it was the Gourmet who was more distinctly taken aback – likely because of his guest’s striking appearance.

“Hello, I’m Hua Li.” He stood straight, and nodded politely to his host.

“Are you... a man, or a woman?” The Gourmet looked at him in utter turmoil.

“Haaah hahahaha!”

Lan Jue’s peals of laughter rang through the small room like a thunderstorm.

Hua Li responded by glaring daggers at him. Then, lifting his head, he pointed dramatically at his adam’s apple.

The Gourmet nodded. “Ah, good. Otherwise we’d have some real chaos on our hands.”

Lan Jue’s grin nearly split his face. “Not much different from now. You’re about the only person who doesn’t pay attention to things outside the planet, otherwise you’d know who he is.”

“Has nothing to do with me,” the cook replied. “You’re a fan of

rosewood, then?”

Hua Li's face underwent a quick and drastic change, from upset at the earlier exchange to excited once again. “Hainan Scented Pear tree, one of the most precious of trees from the home planet. Many household objects were made from their bark, and then were subsequently passed down within the family as priceless heirlooms. A memory of ancient China. It's official name is *Dalbergia odorifera*. They aren't difficult to grow, but their growth rate is exceptionally slow. Only fragrant rosewoods which have been left to grow for hundreds of years are suitable for use in furniture. This table of yours is about one and a half meters wide and four meters long. The tree it was made from had to have been at least five thousand years old! Even in the ancient times this would be considered an absolutely priceless treasure, much more so now.”

“Take a seat. It's no wonder the Jewelry Master brought you here. You've clearly got taste.”

Hua Li sat before the table as instructed, though his features bore a slight uneasiness. “I know there's no way you'd be selling something as precious as this. But how about this, if there was ever anything in the future you couldn't handle... something you needed a large favor for, suitably difficult... you can come right to me. If I'm able to help you, then I hope you could allow me to come often and admire your table. And if at any point you are interested in parting with it, I will give you everything I possess.”

“The last person who tried to discuss a price with me,” the gourmet said softly, “went flying right out of the Avenue. Luckily I haven't quite reached that point with you yet.”

Lan Jue, still standing to the side, spoke towards the man in a conspiratory voice. “There is one thing he said that's undoubtedly true, Gourmet. If indeed there comes a day you start looking to sell this table, he would be your best choice. There simply isn't anyone with his level of obsession for rosewood. As for his own treasures, very few in the Three Alliances can match him there, either. Eight, ten s-ranked gems... not an issue.”

1. Actual Translation. No, not really. ↩
2. The word for gorgeous, or magnificent. VERY feminine. ↩
3. Again, more colorful in the original translation. ↩

Chapter 106: Ma La Tang

“Eight or ten s-ranked gems. Are they made of chocolate?” The Gourmet addressed them flatly.

Hua Li’s response was earnest regardless. “If that’s what you want, I can find a way to get it.”

It was then the Gourmet knew he was serious. He looked from the newcomer, then to Lan Jue. For Hua Li to make such a claim, the Jewelry Master must not have been talking nonsense. The very effeminate gentleman before him must indeed be very wealthy.

“Let’s eat,” he said.

Preparation began when he produced a small stove, with a metal alloy plate beneath to ensure it didn’t hurt the table. A covered pot was then placed on top. The fires underneath were lit.

Next, several plates of fresh dishes were brought out before them. Seafood, vegetables and more were arrayed fancily around the stove. None of them bore any special preparation, but for bamboo shoots which impale the thinly sliced pieces. So far, it certainly didn’t appear to be what you’d call a meal.

“This is... hot pot?” Hua Li’s interrogative voice wafted forth, disappointment in his eyes.

“No!” The Gourmet vehemently shook his head. “This is Ma La Tang.” 1

“Ma La Tang?” The depression faded from his face. “You know how to make it? I’ve had it once before, and I still remember how good it tasted! That fresh, spicy taste is enough to have you eating way past what’s appropriate. But I hear it’s almost impossible to have authentic Ma La Tang these days. Most of the required spices have been lost to us, so the result is a relatively bland copy.”

“Bland?” The Gourmet tasted the word and found it unsavory. “You tell me then, how is one supposed to make Ma La Tang?”

Hua Li did not hesitate in the face of the Gourmet’s challenge. “Ma La

Tang was a provincial treat from Former Era China. The base itself is the most demanding aspect. You need garlic, ginger, hot peppers, bean paste, black pepper, white pepper and more. As for the specific proportions of each, I'm not sure. Once your base is completed, however, you boil it in a large pot. You then prepare several dishes as you've done here, and you can then place them in the boiling base. Once it's cooked to your liking, pluck it from the pot, smear some sesame paste on it, spice, and you've got yourself a delicious treat."

The Gourmand, after hearing the loquacious explanation, shook his head. "Were I to give you a base in the way you described, we wouldn't be having a hot spicy meal. It'd be a boiled spicy meal."

"Eh?"

"Let me ask you," the gourmet continued. "What's the difference between hot, and boiled."

Hua Li fell silent, apparently unclear on the question. Lan Jue also looked on in uncertainty. As they did the sound of roiling water reached their ears. The lid of the pot rumbled as steam spat from its sides, releasing a savory aroma. The thick mist was heavy with spice and freshness blended together. Just the scent alone raised their body heat, and opened their pores.

The Gourmet stood, and lifted the lid from the pot.

Immediately what was before a faint aroma became a torrent as the steam filled the room. As the smoke cleared, the shifting red soup within the pot appeared before Lan Jue and Hua Li's eyes. They could just spy the spices rolling around in the boiling broth. As the thick aroma invaded their nostrils, they grew more impatient to try it.

The Gourmet reached down and shut off the stove.

Lan Jue and Hua Li exchanged a glance. They hadn't yet eaten, they thought. Why turn off the fire?

Under their wondering gaze the Gourmet began to place the morsels of food scattered around in to the steaming pot. He didn't insert too many,

maybe fifteen sticks jutted from the lip of the cauldron.

“The most important distinction between boiling and heated is this. Boiling intends to maintain it’s state – to keep boiling. One takes advantage of the heat to thoroughly cook the food placed within. Generally speaking, this method of cooking requires one to pair it with delicious sauces. Because of the high heat, you can’t let the food sit within for sufficient amounts of time necessary to absorb the flavors. Rather like the boiled mutton they’d often eat in Former Era China. However there later arose several chefs who chose to employ a different method of cooking food. They deigned to heat the food slowly, and as a result the flavors of the broth were able to infuse the food.”

“So what is ‘heat’ here? Heat is actually this; once the soup has been brought to a boil, it’s easier to fill food with it’s flavors as it cools. Thus, the heat allows for a better overall meal as the spices of the broth and the food’s natural flavors combine. And so I shut off the fire because what we want is hot and spicy. Not boiled. True Ma La Tang does not require any sauce for dipping. What you described a moment ago was in fact spicy hotpot. The sad fact is that due to it’s troublesome nature to properly prepare, even Former Era China saw fewer and fewer people partaking. As a result, the broth and preparation you see here is my special secret.”

Hua Li and Lan Jue each nodded in sudden enlightenment from the Gourmet’s lesson. Hua Li was the first to speak up.

“Today was indeed a good day for me to arrive. I’m a lucky guy. It’s no wonder they call you the Gourmet. A well deserved title, and I admire your knowledge. As for meat, could we employ the same method you described to cook it as well?”

The Gourmet nodded in affirmation. “That is so. When creating stews I am constantly turning the fires off and on. This way they retain even more flavor – and as a result are much tastier than other people’s dishes. Always adding flavoring and sauces simply results in one losing the beauty of expertly prepared food.”

“Well I’ve been schooled,” Lan Jue earnestly piped up.

“Beer’s the best drink to pair with Ma La Tang. It isn’t good for the body, but it’s certainly satisfying. Chilled stout, or light beers made from glacier water are best. I’ve prepared both for us today, so you may pick what you like.” He pointed towards the nearby freezer for emphasis.

Hua Li almost didn’t wait for the Gourmet to finish. He clearly didn’t have Lan Jue’s restraint.

The Stout came in a five liter keg. The glacier beer, conversely, was offered in a porcelain jug. Neither of them were something one would see often. Of course for the three of them it wasn’t anything extraordinary.

Lan Jue chose the stout 2 while Hua Li chose the light. The gourmet also decided the darker beer was more suited to his tastes.

“Alright, that should be fine. The first round I placed in the pot cooks quickly. The second set will take a little longer. We’ll need to heat the pot twice.”

Stick after stick of vegetables, tofu, beans and more were plucked from the steaming pot. They glistened with beads of fresh, red soup. The spicy aromas surrounded them.

“The special properties of Ma La Tang; numbing, spicy, and hot to eat,” the gourmet said, almost to himself.

At this point it was background noise, as the two younger gentlemen had already begun pulling the food from the bamboo shoots with chopsticks and stuffing it in to their mouths.

“Amazing!” The first bite of Ma La Tang brought with it that full-bodied aroma that had been tantalizing them thus far. It filled them up, bringing with it that special sort of happiness that comes from a delicious meal. That sensation bloomed in the eyes of the Gourmet’s guests.

It wasn’t long, however, before the ‘spicy’ descriptor earned it’s presence. It was like a fire burned viciously in their mouths, paired with just a hint of numbness on their lips and tongue. The three each hurried to take a gulp of their beers. The thick malty tastes mixed with the fresh spices and eased the burn. In the interim the Gourmet had lit the fires

once more.

The second wave was a sight to behold. Large chunks of abalone, a full lobster, fresh oysters and all manner of sea food were placed in the pot.

“The various types of foods each require different cooking times. If you’re interested you can remember the order we place them in.” The Gourmet looked from Hua Li to Lan Jue and, seeing the satisfaction in their faces, a smile crept on his lips.

A cook who understood his guests was happiest. To them, cooking was an art form. If the tasters appreciated what they tried, this meant his status as an artist would also appreciate.

“Gourmet, such a disregard for the gifts of heaven! Ma La Tang with so much delicious food, and on top of that an entire lobster!” Lan Jue was almost speechless as he took another sip of his beer. He watched the two spindly feelers sticking from the edge of the pot.

“So stop eating,” the Gourmet rejoined with a smirk. “The most delicious things in this Ma La Tang are the abalone and the lobster. I call it Spiced Numbing Lobster. This is the first time I’ve had you try this, fearing you wouldn’t like the taste. Don’t tease me.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “So why bring it out today?”

The Gourmet shrugged. “Just your lucky day. I’ve actually been lazy the last few days, and haven’t cooked anything. I’ve been eating nothing but soda crackers to keep my stomach acids at bay. I couldn’t stand it anymore. It had nothing to do with you coming.”

Lan Jue chortled. “I guess it indeed was my lucky day.” He turned to look at Hua Li. “Do you know how he manages to stay thin and still cook like this? It’s the thing I admire most about him.”

“Cuz he’s lazy?” Hua Li replied.

Lan Jue shook his head. “No. Because of his fastidiousness. If it’s not the most delicious thing you’ve ever eaten, it won’t get past his lips. He’d rather eat soda chips to stave off starvation. That’s how he does it.”

Hua Li blinked, and stuck up his thumb towards the gourmet. “That’s some high moral principle!”

Soon the abalone and lobster were ready to eat. That flavor... simply ambrosial. Lan Jue finally understood that the Gourmet had not overstated his assertions of the lobster’s taste. This meal was positively dripping with pleasure.

*

1. Alright, so this is rather lazy, but there really is no way to describe 麻辣烫 in English that makes it sound appetizing or special in any way. ‘Numb Spicy Soup’ doesn’t get the saliva flowing. ↩
2. Man after my own heart. Ok. Pointless peanut-gallery commentary ends here, I promise. ↩

Chapter 107: He Returns

That aromatic spice filled the small room. Hua Li and Lan Jue felt covered in it.

“Oooee... that hit the spot. It’s been ages since I’ve eaten this much. If my agent found out I’m eating like this she’d kill me.” Hua Li pressed his hands to his head and stared at the ceiling in contentment. His eyes were half-lidded, his long lashes fluttering. In the fuzzy, indistinct lamplight he looked even more beautiful.

“You owe me a favor,” Lan Jue reminded.

“Hm,” Hua Li said. “Let’s head back to your place. Ah, by the way, how am I supposed to help you here anyway? You planning to go somewhere?”

They started towards the Jewelry Store.

Lan Jue shook his head. “Not planning to head anywhere.”

“No? So why’d you call me here? What place could be safer than the Avenue anyway? There wouldn’t be any danger if you just stayed here.”

Lan Jue gave him a bitter smile. “But I do need to teach classes, and I have my bodyguard duties. Xiuxiu and the other girls could do it, but it’d cause them no end of trouble. I also have no way to protect them if it comes to it. So you’re right, it’s safer in the Avenue. For them.”

“Classes? Bodyguard?” Hua Li’s eyes shot open. He looked lost.

“A-Jue, what’s going on? You still need to go classes? And still acting as a bodyguard for someone? If you’re still so interested in guarding, why not guard me! But whatever you need, just let me know.”

Lan Jue waved his hand, strolling slowly ahead. “Nah, listen...” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “It’s sort of a long story, actually. I owe somebody for something I did, and my payment is to ask as a bodyguard. What’s more, I decided to head out. People shouldn’t always live in the past. I guess too, that if Hera was alive she wouldn’t want to see me living like this. I want to start a new life. I’ll never forget Hera – she’ll always live in the most important part of my heart. But I have my own life. Maybe the

future me will never fall in love with someone else... but life goes on. If I keep avoiding life, I'm not worthy of the title Zeus."

Hua Li stopped in his tracks. There was shock in his eyes, but joy as well as he stared at Lan Jue. "Go on. I'm a good listener."

So Lan Jue did. "I'm a teacher at National Eastern University. Teaching Etiquette. You should find a way to enroll as a student. Go with me to and from school, secretly, and help me recover. With you here it should only take about a month before I'm more or less back to normal. And there's something else. In a few days representatives from the Dark Tower and the Pontiff's Castle will be coming here. I was supposed to help handle the situation, but I can't now. I'll need you to replace me."

"The Pontiff's Castle? They still have the balls to come here?" Hua Li's pretty eyes held violence in their depths.

Lan Jue went on. "What don't they have the balls to do. I heard the Keeper went over there as well, though I don't know what happened."

"The Keeper...?" Hua Li trailed off in thought, but it didn't take long for him to come to the proper realization. "The Arcane Magnate? The one the other Paragons call the Crazy Magnate?"

Lan Jue nodded his head.

This brought a smile to Hua Li's face. "Interesting. He deigns to rear his psychotic head for you. The Castle's really gotten themselves in trouble now."

Lan Jue chuckled. "It is what it is. How could they know when they set their trap I was collaborating with the Keeper?"

"None of this should be hard to deal with," Hua Li assured. "I'll help you work all this out. I'm also curious what you're like as a teacher!"

"Dashing, of course," Lan Jue said, standing a little taller. He struck a dramatic pose.

Hua Li sneered in feigned disgust. "Standing next to me you still have the nerve to call yourself handsome? Pitiful."

Lan Jue snorted. “What you are can’t be called handsome. You’re a beautiful flower!”

“@%\$^@!”

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The rising sun always brought with it hope. It’s faint golden rays washed over the NEU campus as though it awakened the scholarly spirit. Students living on campus were already roused from sleep by the morning bell, and after washing up were in the midst of their various morning routines.

Jin Yan had arrived early, and walked through the campus grounds. Her forehead was creased in worry.

Yesterday Jin Tao had returned home, once again beaten bloody. When she asked what had happened, he still steadfastly refused to tell her. He’d even refused to eat. Luckily their parents were away on a trip and weren’t home to see it.

If things continued like this what good could come of it! A bad student, but a good fighter – worrisome! Ugh, what can I do about this kid to make me stop worrying?

Suddenly, she couldn’t help but think back to that transitory figure, the man who’d arrived for just one class and then vanished. Still, he’d left quite the impression on her in that short time.

That one class had really got her thinking.

“What is nobility!” Jin Yan couldn’t help but run that sentence over and over through her head. Were it not for his explanation, she’s not sure she would have known what true nobility was. She even still remembered the change that had overcome her younger brother that day, after class – loudly proclaiming he would be a noble.

Unfortunately Professor Lan had only come for the one class, and his person had not been seen since. Reputedly he’d asked for leave, but how could he after his first class had gone so well? Not to mention he was so handsome...

“Professor Jin!” Someone called from a short distance off. She turned her head towards the sound, and spied meticulously teased hair bobbing her way. Wang Hongyuan, the dance instructor.

“Professor Wang, you’re also here early!” Jin Yan called out courteously.

Wang Hongyuan responded with a smile. “I’ve got to keep training or I become rusty. Oh, did you hear? Professor Lan returned yesterday.”

“Lan... you mean Lan Jue, that Professor?” She blinked, surprised at the news.

A mischievous light shone in the dance instructors eyes. “That’s right. I heard he came yesterday to report in, then...”

“Then what?” Jin Yan asked impatiently.

Wang Hongyuan continued. “He went to the post-graduated classes, I don’t know what for, and did something that had him dragged to the teaching affairs office by Professor Tan Lingyun. A whole host of students saw the exchange, culminating with her pulling Lan Jue along behind her like a dog. At first he looked like someone with significant personal ability, but I guess there’s nothing special about him after all.”

Jin Yan overcame her surprise to give her companion a cold look. “Professor Wang, we’re all instructors here. It doesn’t matter that he teaches etiquette and not combat. You really shouldn’t be talking behind someone’s back like this.”

She moved on without waiting for a response. There was no anger in her expression – on the contrary, there was joy. He was back!

As for this business with Professor Tan dragging him to the Director, could it have been some sort of misunderstanding? There were only a few in the school capable of beating on that tomboyish woman anyway.

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“What? Planet Skyfire? When did this information surface?” The sound rang through a magnificent, palatial room. The questions had come from a thin, beautiful woman in white. She looked around twenty five or twenty

six, with sharp eyes and an imposing bearing. Her long hair was tied in a bun atop her head. She seemed entirely confident and capable.

“Yes, Miss Mo. We just received this from the intelligence department. They got it from a local police woman.”

“Bastard!” Mo Xiao spat the word venomously. “What the hell is Hua Li doing all the way out there? Doesn’t he know his damn album Poseidon, Sounds of Nature is dropping? He even had the gall to order all sales to the Pontiff’s Castle stopped! Was he raised by pigs? What did he say when he left?”

“He sent a communication from a secure line, saying he wanted to go on holiday, but he didn’t say where. He often grumbled earlier about how difficult work was, so we didn’t pay any attention to it. He could have known he’d disappear an hour later, without taking anything.”

Mo Xiao stood with her hands on her hips, her well-endowed bosom rising and falling with her angry breaths.

“Start preparing. The launch event for the album will be held on Skyfire. We’ll start getting everything ready from there. And call an airship, I’m leaving immediately.”

“And as for his blockade against the Pontiff’s...”

She stopped the assistant with a stare sharp as icicles. “What is this your first day? If he wants something do we ever ignore it? Do what he asked! Even if he wanted to sell you all off there better not be a one who dares do the contrary!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Mo Xiao’s ferocious voice arose again as she spoke to herself. “If he’s off squandering his money, I swear I’ll murder him!”

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As ever, Lan Jue was pedaling his way towards the NEU campus for work. Only this time, he had an extra passenger on the back of his bicycle.

A mask covered the bottom portion of Hua Li’s face, and he’d changed

his hair to black. Close inspection would show it was a wig. His eyes had also changed, also black. They were covered by a pair of dark sunglasses. All to make him somewhat less recognizable.

“Your school is pretty obnoxious. It was hard as hell to get a visiting student’s ID, and I still can’t get in to the post-grad department. And by the way, are you sure it’s alright you wear that to teach a class, A-Jue?”

Today Lan Jue had chosen a dark blue three-piece suit, black tie, white kerchief and handmade Ferragamo leather shoes. He looked like he was dressed for a party.

Lan Jue’s reply was indifferent. “Have you forgotten what I teach? Your older brother teaches etiquette. If one’s own tastes are less than superb, how can one teach young minds? Plus, today I plan to teach them the rules and simplicities of formal wear.”

Chapter 108: Professor Lan's is Back!

"Professor, you're here!"

Lan Jue stopped at the gate of the NEU, stuck once more where Jin Tao had blocked his path.

Curiously, today Jin Tao was also sporting a pollution mask, though his was a sight more dramatic than Hua Li's. The young man's came almost all the way up to his eyes, hiding nearly the entirety of his face. His pink Mohawk remained, however, as impressive as ever.

"What are you doing here?" Lan Jue raised an inquisitive brow at Jin Tao.

"Waiting for you!" He responded.

"For me? What is it?"

Jin Tao explained. "What are you playing on teaching me today? Look, Fatty Tang's a lot more powerful than me, so I need something special right? Otherwise how am I supposed to catch up to him?"

Lan Jue turned to watch Hua Li hop from the back of his bicycle. A sinister grin split his face. Hua Li, seeing the smirk, immediately understood what Lan Jue wanted. He knew his friend well, and whenever that look shone in his eyes it meant something bad was coming. Fortunately this time it wasn't directed at him.

"Fine. But I still need to train you both together. This afternoon, same place. I have classes though, so make sure you come to listen, and bring Fatty Tang with you. Now that you call me your teacher, you must be sure to act in a noble and dignified manner. You'll need to become experts in etiquette as well."

"Yes, absolutely, thank you Professor!" Maybe it was the opportunity, or from excitement, but Jin Tao bowed low to his teacher before racing in to the university.

"That is your disciple?" Hua Li's tone was decidedly disapproving.

Lan Jue shot him a glance. "What, is there a problem?"

Hua Li's lips curled in a scowl. "He doesn't look like much. The energy he emits is minimal, he must have hardly any Discipline. No higher than third rank. Why would you train this sorta guy?"

The smile that turned Lan Jue's lips this time was a sight less devilish. "In this world there's this thing we call luck, understand?" With a cheesy flourish he pushed the bike towards the school entrance.

Hua Li did not move. As he watched his friend's back, a smile of his own crept across his face. "Luck? How could I not understand?"

"A-Jue, send me a message later and let me know where you're having class. I'm gunna have a look around." Hua Li called at his friend's back.

Lan Jue's response was displeased. "How about a little professional responsibility, eh, bodyguard?"

"Pfft." Hua Li was not convinced. He turned and wandered away.

A smile crept on to Lan Jue's face. After all, who couldn't appreciate the guy's wistfulness?

The electives building hadn't experienced any significant changes since his last visit. As before, as Lan Jue entered in his fine suit and leather shoes, every eye turned to him.

Jin Yan lifted her head at the sound and spotted him entering. She rose from her desk. "Oh, Professor Lan, you've returned."

"Hello again, Professor Yan," he politely replied.

"I really enjoyed your last class, it left a deep impression. I was wondering when I'd have another opportunity to listen in," she said.

Lan Jue replied with a smile. "This afternoon."

"For most people, having only one class then taking such a long leave, they worry about how this reflects their responsibilities towards their students." Wang Hongyuan's biting tone was muttered from a nearby desk.

"It was a temporary emergency," Lan Jue assured. "I had to leave for a short time. It won't happen again. In fact I'll be having two classes a week

from here on out.”

This brought a smile to Jin Yan’s face. “Then would you mind if I sat in on your class again this afternoon, Professor Lan?”

“Of course not,” he said. “It would be my pleasure.” He gave her a polite smile, and made for his desk by the window. Though he knew what he intended to teach, he still needed to organize and figure out how to present it.

As he was preparing, the school broadcasting system crackled to life: “Students and faculty, this afternoon the elective course for Etiquette will begin once again. Later the classes will be scheduled weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays at two in the afternoon. Interested parties are encouraged to attend.”

“An announcement so early? It looks like Director Wu was also impressed with your class,” Jin Yan said through a smile.

Lan Jue smiled handsomely in lieu of a reply. Jin Yan, sensing he had no further desire to speak, returned to her own desk.

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Second Year National Scholars Classroom Four.

Zhou Qianlin lifted her head, hearing the announcement bounce around the room. A flash of something danced behind her eyes. So he’s back to class... at last he returns to abide by his promises, she thought. A distinct expression of relief passed across her face, however in the next instant it changed to something more complicated. She supported her chin with her hands, elbows on the desk, and allowed her eyes to wander as she pondered.

Beep! Beep! Her communicator pulled her from her reverie.

“What is it, Xiao Mi?” she said as she answered the call.

“Did you hear the announcement? That etiquette class is back. Last time

the professor was quite good, so do you want to go again this afternoon?" Tang Mi sounded excited, her questions coming quick.

"I'm not going. I have a research project," Zhou Qianlin replied.

"Eh? Didn't you say last time you'd be returning for the class? Why the sudden change of heart?"

"I'm studying, we'll talk about it later." Zhou Qianlin cut the connection without giving Tang Mi the opportunity to respond. Her pretty blue eyes flashed as a thought pulsed through her mind. But it passed, and her attentions returned to her textbook.

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"Hey Professor, are you gunna be teaching us this afternoon?" Tang Xiao looked at the masked Jin Tao standing before him.

He didn't look any better than his opponent. Their scuffle yesterday hadn't involved any discipline, so their injuries were only superficial. But that fact didn't convince the pain in the bodies to let up. Still, despite their discomfort they were at school, because Professor Lan had returned. Tang Xiao, similarly masked to hide his beaten face, looked carefully at Jin Tao with an ominous light in his squished eyes.

"You don't have to go," Jin Tao said haughtily. Ever since beating on Tang Xiao yesterday, his confidence had been full to bursting.

"You wish!" Tang Xiao flipped dumb-mutt his middle finger. "I'll see YOU this afternoon. I hope the Professor has us repeat yesterday's class."

"Yesterday? You mean when I beat you so hard you couldn't wipe your own ass?"

Half a day passed quickly.

Wu Junyi, Director of Teaching Affairs, was wandering the campus after lunch. This was a habit of his he developed as he got older. Eat, and do a little exercise to get the digestion moving. Simply resting wasn't good. At

his age, he'd come to appreciate taking care of himself.

His thought turned to this afternoon, and the return of Professor Lan's Etiquette class. He didn't know what today's topic would be.

What is nobility... it hadn't only filled Jin Yan and the other students with motivation, it had resonated with him as well. If nothing troubled him in the afternoon, he too would sit in. Often elective teachers would work hard in the first class for listeners, and taper off as time went on, regardless of the subject.

If it hadn't been for that scene yesterday, with Lan Jue being viciously dragged in to the office by the 'Savage Goddess' Tan Lingyun, perhaps these seeds of doubt wouldn't be sprouted in Director Wu's mind. In truth, in many teachers' estimation the quality of an instructor was directly correlated with their power. At least approximately.

Afterwards Director Wu had spoken with Tan Lingyun specifically about what had happened. She'd explained that he hadn't attempted at all to defend himself from her. She'd called him nothing short of a pathetic weakling. Thus did doubt take root in the Director's heart about his newest instructor. He remembered clearly the first time he met the man – he was modest, and kept his abilities well hidden, but he seemed anything but weak.

His feet languidly carried him towards the electives building as he mind tumbled over the experience.

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The ambrosial flavors of last night's Ma La Tang still danced like spirits on Lan Jue's tongue. This morning, Lan Jue's breakfast had been comparatively bland. As for lunch, the only flavor the school cooks was familiar with was bland. He was a picky eater, and though not as bad as the Gourmet he was still fastidious. Still, even if it wasn't the most delicious food he'd eat some, just not very much.

A bowl of rice, a plate of vegetables, a thin porridge. This was Lan Jue's lunch, just enough to satiate.

By this point he'd already spent the morning on his class, and everything was prepared. As he was leaving the offices, with some time to spare, he shot a message to Hua Li then made his way towards his special 'teaching area' where he trained Tang Xiao and Jin Tao.

There, by himself, he stood amidst the yard with arms outstretched. He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring as the air rushed in to his lungs. It was lucky no one was there, for if they were they would be astonished at just how long this inhalation lasted. A series of faint cracks arose from within his body.

A moment later, a slight smile lit up his features and slowly he began to exhale. It lasted several minutes.

Li's mastery of water is profound. After last night's round of treatment, my self-healing abilities have improved considerably. Water membranes protect my organs, help nourish. It looks like I won't even need a month to recover. Once I get better I really must work on getting stronger. Otherwise, Hua Li might overtake me.

Last night, after their meal, Hua Li and Lan Jue had returned to the shop. Hua Li had then begun to help him with his recovery. His manipulation of water, and water's own healing powers helped tremendously. Already, the coagulated blood that had pooled inside him had been pushed out. Water had been manipulated to act as protective screens for his organs, and the result was he'd already much improved over his previously severely weakened state. He could even employ his discipline, if only just barely.

Ding, dong! The afternoon bell echoed through the campus. It was the first bell, alerting students and teachers that classes are almost ready to begin, and to proceed to their classrooms.

Lan Jue made his way to his appointed room. As he entered, he couldn't help but stop, and look over the class in surprise. The students who had come to watch his class had doubled since the last one, and although the room had not been filled a good two thirds of the seats were occupied. He

quickly picked Director Wu and Jin Yan from the crowd. Of course, Jin Tao and Tang Xiao were also in attendance. They sat in the front row, strange in their face masks. The worst was Jin Tao, whose mask was so large they looked like underwear flung over his face.

Chapter 109: The Secrets of Style

As Lan Jue entered the classroom, all eyes turned to him in constrained excitement.

He strode past them in his perfectly tailored sapphire suit, snow white shirt, black tie and white kerchief. With his impish smile and meticulously kept hair, he could certainly draw attention.

“Good afternoon,” he began. He positioned himself behind the podium, and gave his audience a nod.

“Good afternoon, Professor!” the students replied in unison.

His eyes quickly swept the room, but he found no sign of Zhou Qianlin. Her friend Tang Mi, however, was in attendance, sitting near the back. In total it looked like men accounted for seventy percent of participants.

From the back, Director Wu gave him a nod of acknowledgement, and Jin Yan beamed a pretty smile his way.

“I’d like to begin by expressing my apologies to you all. Unfortunately, a pressing matter arose after my last class that left me with no choice but to temporarily ask for leave. I’ve only just arrived back on Skyfire the day before yesterday.” As he spoke, Lan Jue retreated a step from the podium and bowed respectfully to his students. It was practiced, bearing no flourish or unnecessary flair. The students fell silent.

Most of the students who’d come did so to sate their curiosity. Like last time, many of them were considered the ‘problem students.’ Information passed among the students gave them the impression none of this was to be taken too seriously. Lan Jue wasn’t sure how this class would turn out, but his bow at least assured he showed them the proper respect.

Of course, no matter the quality and status of a university, no instructor enjoyed dealing with problem students. For the NEU, many of the students found entry only by virtue of very stringent entrance criteria. But despite this, the pressure of studies sometimes brought out the worst in them. Likewise most teachers don’t ‘waste’ their time with students who are

troublemakers, preferring to focus their efforts on the majority. Anyone other than the best students couldn't keep up, and would be removed. In the end there were always those who had no means of graduating. Jin Tao was a good example.

Under these unfortunate social constructs a problem student rarely even saw a teacher's smiling face, much less got a quality education. Although these youths often faced the world with scorn, they were still young men and women! They still had fantasies of being a teacher's pride, receiving the love and attention of an instructor as a talented pupil.

For this reason Lan Jue's bow resonated with them. Despite what was to come, in this moment their impression of Professor Lan increased significantly.

Lan Jue straightened and, smiling, went on. "I won't delay you any further. In our last lecture we discussed what it meant, precisely, to be 'nobility.' For those students who missed our first class and are interested, you can find a video of my first lesson in the College Forum. From today, we'll be taking a closer look at the subject of etiquette, examining topics both modern and historical."

"Basic necessities; as the name suggests, the things required by all men and women. First among them in clothing, and so it is fair to say that what we wear is indeed important. So, today we will discuss just that – what we're wearing."

Lan Jue once more distanced himself from the podium and walked towards the front row. "What do you all think of my outfit today? And don't worry, speak your mind. You here, young lady."

"Oh, quite handsome Professor," the young woman he indicated replied. "It's a good match for you." She spoke with her head cradled in her hands, eyes shining as she beamed up at him.

"Pfft, looks like a flamer too me." A young gentleman at her side couldn't help but interject.

With a smile still on his face, Lan Jue turned to the young man. "Go on?"

“Some kinda crossdressing idiot!” He scowled disdainfully. Judging by the arrogance in this one, he was a particularly troubling student.

Lan Jue only laughed. “Not quite. How about I show you something more along the lines of what you described.” As he spoke, his fingers rose to undo the single button keeping his jacket in place. As he pulled it open, he revealed the inner lining.

“Waa...” nearly the entire class exclaimed as they peered at him. Students in the back clamored to stand for a better view.

The inner lining of his suit was an eye-popping hot pink. In contrast with the sapphire blue of his suit it certainly was distinctly effeminate.

Jin Tao, seated directly in the front row, blinked his eyes dramatically. “Man Professor, my color-blind dog eyes were blinded by that nonsense!”

Lan Jue closed the jacket and fastened the button anew, hiding the inner lining. He returned his attention to the young gentlemen who’d spoken earlier. “So, what do you think now?”

“A man’s coquettishness shouldn’t be revealed on the surface. It’s considered impetuous. However, if a man hopes to attract a woman he must have some measure of it. The saying goes ‘girls like bad boys’ – without any flirty air, one is simply apathetic. So if a young man would like to have the attention of a young woman, he mustn’t be overwhelmingly seductive, but keep it close to the vest as it were.[1] The proverbial ‘surprise package.’” His devilish grin and the naughty topic elicited a round of laughter from the class.

[TL Note : [1] = See what I did there?]

He waited for the laughter to cease before continuing. “Today I’ll be discussing clothing, specifically formal wear. Why this specifically? In fact the reason is simple; for the young men in attendance, attracting the attention of the fairer sex through your choice of clothing will bring self-confidence. For the lades, learning more about the clothing choice of a man can help you be more discriminating in your decision-making, making judgments on their character based by their aesthetics.”

“Any successful individual will tell you ‘The Devil is in the Details.’ So that’s where we’re starting, with the details. If you would help me...” Lan Jue indicated a young woman nearby, Tang Mi who was situated directly in front of him, but in the back.

She blinked in surprise, pointing to herself. “Me?”

Lan Jue nodded. “Mmhm. If you wouldn’t mind coming to the front of the class...”

Tang Xiao was also surprised at hearing his sister’s voice and turned to watch her rise. A strange look overcame his face.

Lan Jue hadn’t originally intended to select Tang Mi, but as he spied the figure furtively trying to hide in the back his finger reached out. He couldn’t simply change his mind before the entire class, so Tang Mi it was. He removed his jacket and handed it to her as she arrived.

“If you’d indulge me for a moment.”

Tang Mi took up the jacket. Once more the striking interior was revealed to the students and, although it wasn’t their first time seeing it, wolf-whistles rang through the classroom.

Hua Li, who’d just snuck in, arrived just in time to see that beautiful – if rather effeminate – color revealed. He couldn’t help but lift his hand and give Lan Jue a giant thumbs up. Of course only he and Lan Jue knew his sarcastic intent.

Lan Jue went on. “Firstly, fine formal wear must be handmade. Generally speaking, even though many of the more expensive brands use glued lining for their suits, and although it’s usually hidden from view, it’s nonetheless a glaring blemish in the quality of design. The best lining are done by hand, needle and thread.”

He turned his attention back to Tang Mi, who was holding his jacket between her fingers before the eyes of the students.

“If you’d please walk around the class so they can examine in detail?”

Tang Mi was a prideful one. But for reasons unknown even to herself,

she couldn't refuse in the face of this professor's charming smile. She did as instructed.

“This isn't just true for the lining, either. Every buttonhole should be similarly handcrafted. These are the best quality suits. If we're talking about even the very best tailored suits, they are still only a fraction of the cost of those name brands. What this means is you should absolutely not fall in to the trap of being infatuated with a name [2]. Just because it's famous doesn't mean it's the best.”

[TL Note : [2] = Irony]

“The second point of interest is when buttoning. One must never fasten up to the top. Whether it's a vest, cuffs, or jacket the rule remains true. Well, that's not entirely accurate – you should probably always ensure your zipper is all the way up.”

Again a round of laughter rumbled through the crowd.

“Then it's on to how precisely to wear a suit. Now I'm sure some of you are thinking, ‘it's a suit, don't you just put it on? What kind of ‘technique’ is needed?’ As I'm sure you'll find, it isn't that simple. Firstly a suit is classified as either a two-piece, or three-piece. If one is missing a vest, what are their missing? Etiquette.”

“In practice a vest is rarely required. They're usually employed in very formal occasions. However I must implore you to keep in mind that you must always wear a tie and handkerchief when pairing your suit with a vest.” He indicated his own tie and the kerchief stuffed in his left coat pocket for emphasis.

“All together, it makes a perfect suit. However without a vest neither of the other two are required. You can even unfastened a few buttons, giving yourself a more relaxed look.”

By the time Lan Jue had finished his exposition, Tang Mi had finished displaying the jacket for her classmates. Her own attentions were focused on the item in her grip. Like her classmates, this was the first time she was hearing any of this and it captured her attention.

“All finished, Professor,” she said, returning to his side.

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly. “I’m sorry, but I must trouble you to hold on to it for a moment longer. Miss, what was your name?”

“Tang Mi,” she replied.

He stepped forward then, suddenly so close they could hear each other’s breathing.

Chapter 110: Secrets of the Collar Stays

Lan Jue's sudden appearance in front of Tang Mi took her off guard. She unconsciously lifted her hand to ward him off, but her professor deftly sidestepped and pushed her hand away until she was warding nothing but air.

"Don't misunderstand Miss Mi," he said. "I'd simply like you to examine my collar. Tell me if you notice anything."

Tang Mi was still off-balance, but eventually recovered. Her pretty face adopted a red tint, and her heart sped up.

What man would dare approach her like this! Even Tang Xiao kept his distance. Where he a student, he'd find her foot firmly planted between his legs in the blink of an eye. Of course there was nothing she could do here; he was no student, the Director watched from behind him, and he wasn't breaking any rules.

As they stood toe-to-toe, Lan Jue half a head taller than she, Tang Mi could smell the Professor's debonair cologne. With his suit, vest, kerchief and tie this only perfected his refined mystique.

"It looks fine... though the tie is a little crooked." She took only a cursory glance at his collar before speaking.

"Take a more careful look. See if you can't spot it."

Tang Mi muttered a dark curse at herself and, suppressing her displeasure, looked again. This time she saw it.

"Hm, the collar's ends are at an outward angle, just enough to accommodate the thickness of the tie knot. On either side the collar naturally droops down, giving it symmetry."

Lan Jue retreated a few steps, clapping his hands. "Very good, a fine observation. So why, then, is my collar like this?"

"Custom made," a young man in the class offered.

Lan Jue shook his head. "There are different methods of tying a tie. Each

one results in different width and thickness for the tie knot. Likewise each one requires a different collar. So does this mean I have custom shirts for every sort of knot I wish to tie? Far too wasteful. In fact my necktie this afternoon is not crooked – it's the color of the shirt. It isn't completely fitting with a very formal tie. As a result I tied this Simple Knot. It looks more... vibrant. And as for the secrets of the collar, I'll enlighten you..."

As he spoke he fiddled with one side of his collar, extricating something.

"I'm fairly certain everyone here's worn a shirt. But I'm absolutely sure you've never turned over the collar. Take a look." He opened his fist to reveal a one centimeter wide, five centimeter long strip of metal, rounded on one end and sharp on the other.

"This is called a collar stay. As the name implies, it helps the collar stay in the shape intended. Generally speaking even higher class name brands employ plastic collar stays. The problem with those is that they only keep the collar straight and smooth – they don't allow for adjustment of the angle. The ones I have here are pure silver [1]. I can make adjustments according to my needs, for whatever necktie I choose. This is how the collar works – not tailored."

[TL Note : [1] = Because that's not wasteful at all.]

The students looked on in rapt attention. Evidently none had heard this secret before. Director Wu fiddled with his collar, partially hidden in the back row.

Lan Jue replaced the collar stay. "If you don't tell anyone, no one will know your collar stay is composed of a precious metal. No one, except for those with good taste. They'll take one look at your collar and know precisely how it is you've managed that angle. I once knew a local official who used twenty-two karat gold stays, not for anyone else's satisfaction but his own. He knew they were twenty-two karat gold. Pure gold, obviously, would have been too soft for a stay. Unsuitable unless you add another metal. These weren't for status, for how could they be if no one saw them? This was his 'surprise package,' his hidden coquettishness. Think about it – what if one day your girlfriend has your shirt... for some

reason... and discovers a golden collar stay? She'd look at you differently, wouldn't she? I dare say she'd be more smitten."

More laughter, this time less forced. Be it male or female student each looked upon him with bright eyes and bright expression.

"Most people think ornamentation and accessories are a woman's fancy. What use have men for accessories? Isn't that 'girly'? Well I'm here to tell you that this sort of thinking is entirely wrong. In truth a man's necessary accessories aren't much fewer than a woman's.. only, they are less visually available. Collar stays, cufflinks, wrist watches, breastpins, even a delicate bracelet... things easily missed, but when briefly revealed increase your charm and charisma tenfold."

He paused here and took his jacket back from Tang Mi. He gave her a brief smile, and motioned for her to return to her seat. She looked back at him for a moment before making for the back row.

He slipped his jacket back on. "Now I know what you're thinking. 'Professor Lan,' you wish to say, 'Unless you're very familiar with a woman, your girlfriend for example, won't your secret remain hidden?' In fact, that's not the case. Take a look." He turned then and showed his back to the gathered youngsters.

"This particular coat is a double vent. So, say I'm walking down the street and a breeze catches my clothes. The back flaps ever so slightly, and there the lining is revealed. Oops! My secret is known."

Another ripple of laughter. Jin Yan and Wu Junyi also couldn't help but lend their voice to the mirthful chorus. Every eye watched Lan Jue, waiting for his next move.

Hua Li sat in a distant corner, watching the lecture from a distance. At some point the mask he'd used to hide his face had been removed, and as he watched his high-spirited friend a knowing smile spread across his pretty features.

Never had Lan Jue expected one day he'd be a teacher, much less Hua Li. But here he stood, standing before a classroom of rapt pupils.

“Now, folding pocket kerchiefs and wearing ties. There are quite a few ways to tie a tie. We have the common, popular knots like the four-in-hand, Windsor...”

He demonstrated each knot as he said them, pulling strips of cloth from behind the podium and passing them around the room. Director Wu took the lull in the lecture as a chance to speak to Jin Yan, beside him.

“Professor Jin, what do you think of this young man’s class?”

“It’s only the second time I’ve attended,” she began without hesitation, “but I can’t not acknowledge my interest. I hadn’t expected one would have to pay such particular attention to a suit. It’s also the first time I’ve heard of collar stays. I feel like this knowledge, for etiquette and common sense, is of great benefits to the students. What do you think, Director?”

He only gave a small, secretive smile. “At the very least, it’s not a disadvantage.”

Jin Yan continued. “I might as well be one of his students. I’m already looking forward to what he’ll teach next.”

“It’s not just you. Even at my age I’m learning a great deal from his lectures. I’ll probably have to go home and adjust my own suits after this. Show them off to the old lady.”

Time flies when you’re having fun, so the saying goes, and for the students of Professor Lan’s class the saying held true. In what felt like no time at all, the class was coming to an end.

As the bell rang, none of the students were in a rush to leave. After all the Professor still had one style of tie he’d yet to show off. Time didn’t seem a factor, and even Director Wu didn’t remind Lan Jue that he was delaying the students from their other classes. Ten minutes later, all was said and done.

“I really do apologize. First for my classes and then for my time management. Thursday afternoon we have our next class. Frankly speaking today’s class was mostly for the benefit of our male students, but the next one will be aimed at our young ladies. In the interest of advanced

notice we'll be discussing jewelry. There are a wide array of jewelry accessories and one class won't be able to cover them all, but I'll bring a few pieces to show off. And that's where we'll end today. Class dismissed, thank you."

Lan Jue finished with another formal bow.

"Professor Lan, can you tell me if I did this right?" One of his students rushed at the podium to get his attention. Others followed until it was as though Lan Jue was penned in by a swarm.

Hua Li slipped his mask back on his face, but not before muttering jealously under his breath. "I should be the one getting the star treatment. This guy..."

It took a good ten minutes for Lan Jue to extricate himself from the horde. His suit had been horribly wrinkled in the process, and someone's dirty fingers had stained the sleeves. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He'd have to send it to the dry-cleaners when he returned.

"Professor... professor, over here!" Lan Jue spied Tang Xiao's puffy head peaking from around the corner of the hallway. He waved his master over.

Lan Jue nodded and made his way over.

Jin Tao and Tang Xiao were both waiting out of sight of the others. As Lan Jue came up, Jin Tao couldn't help but immediately start blabbering. "Professor, what suit do you think would make me look most handsome?"

Lan Jue gently shoved the punk's head. "Handsome means an absence of grotesque shape. First you have to shave that hideous thing on your head."

"Got it!" He turned then to the chortling Tang Xiao, repeatedly slapping the kid's belly. "And what are you laughing about tubby? If we're talking about grotesque you got some adjustments to make yourself! Five minutes at a hairdressing and I'm golden, but this thing you're smuggling here? Hah!"

"Not in the face! Are you looking for another beating?!"

"I advise you both to save your strength," Lan Jue interjected ominously.

Suddenly there was another at Lan Jue's side.

Jin Tao looked at the newly arrived Hua Li. "Oh hi. Are you also one of the Professor's pupils?"

Hua Li chuckled. "No, I'm... a friend."

Chapter 111: Gobi Entertainment

“We had a teacher who commanded thunderbolts. Why have another who called the rain?”

-Memoires of the Metal Fox, Army General Tang Xiao

“More cruel than beating someone half to death, is curing them afterward and beating them again. A fist for hello and a fist for goodbye, over and over again.”

-Memoirs of the Frenzied Lion Mastiff, Army General Jin Tao

Lan Jue and Hua Li idly strode along the wide avenue cutting through the campus' yard. The smile on Lan Jue's face was a sinister one, and the expression in Hua Li's eyes was one of joy and contentment.

“It was indeed a good time for me to come. I don't even know how long it's been since I've felt like this. Remember when I used to bully the kids back in school?”

“Pretty cruel,” Lan Jue said. “How can you beat them so badly, heal them up then beat them again like that?”

Hua Li straightened and spoke as though delivering a line. “Nonsense, clearly it was you who wished it so. A teacher like you, beating his students? At any rate I was trying to give them more time to practice their combat skills, and fixed them right up before leaving. Nothing more than a little mental stimulation. A little rest and they're right as rain!”

Lan Jue humphed. “We're taking a shortcut. At their age and ability, if we don't how are they ever going to improve? Now that they call me teacher, they are my responsibility!”

“Tsk. Stop with your crap. Who believes your malarkey anyway.”

“Qianlin! Qianlin!” Tang Mi excitedly bounded to her friend’s side.

“What’s all this about?” Qianlin gave her friend a curious look. Tang Mi’s face was flushed, making her appear vibrant and cute. Her large eyes were wide and excited, even a little watery.

“Qianlin! Today I went to attend that etiquette class we talked about. Really very interesting! You have to come with me next time.” Tang Mi artfully cooed at her friend in attempts at manipulation.

Zhou Qianlin slightly dropped her eyes. “Not interested.”

“Oh but that Professor Lan is so handsome!” Tang Mi continued unfazed. “Oh right, I heard he had a run in with that.. what was it, goddess of violence? She dragged him to the teaching affairs office. Is that true?”

“Yup,” she responded, short and concise.

Tang Mi sighed. “He’s just so good in other areas, only a little weak. But it’s fine, behind every strong woman there’s a weak man.”

Zhou Qianlin looked at her like she was an alien. “What is this? Are you smitten?”

Tang Mi scowled at the accusation. “Never. Don’t you know me by now? I’m just talking, besides in my heart there’s already a Prince Charming.”

“And who’s that,” Qianlin inquired.

“Zeus! The Great and Powerful Zeus, of course!” Tang Mi’s eyes twinkled dreamily.

Zhou Qianlin snorted her criticisms. “Hmph. What sort of friend is this? He was the one that kidnapped me!”

“But that has nothing to do with you,” she replied. “If he wanted to kidnap me that’d be the best!”

“Friendship’s over!”

“Wait wait ok, I’m wrong, don’t go. I’ll treat you to some delicious food. How about some sweetened calabash?”

“Fine!”

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The Soulcaller gem grew warm.

Do you need me to send you home this evening?

No. Tang Mi will accompany me. If you aren't interested in her, you shouldn't lead her on.

When did I lead her on?

Silence

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Now that class had concluded there was nothing to do. With Zhou Qianlin refusing his company, he simply took Hua Li back to Skyfire Avenue on the back of his bicycle.

"You're heavy! Next time I'm going by myself. You've had your biking experience," Lan Jue muttered sourly.

"Don't you have any humanity? I'm here to protect you." Hua Li didn't seem to be bothered.

"Then you definitely shouldn't have me wasting all my strength!"

"Pfft... what's next anyway? Is that guy from yesterday gunna make us some more awesome food?"

"You wish. The Gourmet's culinary talents are only surpassed by his laziness. Keep bothering me and you'll soon find yourself blacklisted. We'll hang out at the shop. Ah right, I also told the ladies we'd be drilling them on combat skills, what do you think," Lan Jue asked his buddy.

"Like the two young gentlemen from this afternoon," he asked.

Lan Jue shook his head. "Press them a little. Shouldn't take long, then

we'll head over to the Wine Master's. Ask about the Castle and Tower matter."

As they made their plans, they were already coming upon Skyfire Avenue. They went directly back to Zeus' Jewelry Shop.

Ding ding!

"Boss, you're back." Xiuxiu looked towards Lan Jue, and immediately met him with a sweet smile. Only then did she notice the man who'd entered with him.

Hua Li removed his mask and shot her a winning smile. "Xiuxiu. It's been a long time."

"You are...?" Xiuxiu knit her brows and narrowed her eyes as she examined him.

He answered by lifting a hand and removing his wig.

"Poseidon!" Xiuxiu almost jumped in surprise, and stumbled back a few steps.

Hua Li matched her retreat with an advance, spreading open his arms as though to give her a hug. "I bet after so long you must miss me, huh?"

Lan Jue grabbed his friend's arm and yanked him back. "Stop messing around. Coming in here messing things up. We aren't that familiar."

"All man but no humanity. Always the same!"

Xiuxiu had by this time recovered, and bowed towards him in greeting. "It's nice to see you, Poseidon," she said with a smile.

Lan Jue turned to her then. "Xiuxiu, go let Mika and Guoguo know we'll be heading down in a little while to spar. Ke'er, if you would please go invite the Wine Master to join us at the arena."

"Yes, boss." Ke'er – stepping forward from behind the counter – and Xiuxiu replied in Tandem.

Lan Jue left then to his apartments to change clothes, Hua Li in tow.

"Hey sis, who was that handsome guy with the boss?" Ke'er watched

them leave in curiosity.

Xiuxiu looked at her co-worker in surprise. “You don’t recognize him?”

Ke’er shrugged. “Should I?”

“That’s no normal guy,” Xiuxiu replied. “His name is Hua Li – his nickname is Poseidon.”

“Poseidon... it does sound a little familiar.”

“You’re something else. The Four Divine Monarchs? You still don’t know?”

Realization suddenly dawned on her. “He’s that Poseidon?”

Xiuxiu nodded. “The Four Divine Monarchs are as follows; The God of Wisdom, Prometheus. King of Hell, Hades. Lord of Thunder, Zeus. And King of the Seas, Poseidon. Our boss is Zeus, obviously. Just now, that was Poseidon. With the boss injured he’s probably here to help look after him. Prometheus, who came the other day, is the boss’ brother, but these two have a much different relationship. Back before, when they were fighting shoulder to shoulder, he apparently took a serious injury for the boss to keep him safe.”

“I see. I had no idea that was Poseidon! He really is so good looking! But I still think our boss is better. More manly!” Ke’er nodded resolutely.

Xiuxiu covered her mouth and stifled a giggle. “Is this supposed to be a compliment? You don’t call him handsome, just ‘manly.’ I doubt the boss would applaud the choice.”

“I-I’m off to speak with the Wine Master,” Ke’er stuttered, leaving in a hurry.

As Ke’er left, Xiuxiu’s smile faltered and slipped away. A strange look filled her eyes. “Poseidon,” she murmured.

Lan Jue set about changing clothes while Hua Li settled on the sofa. He intermittently popped some dried fruit in his mouth as he watched T.V.

“We interrupt your program for an urgent news bulletin. Gobi Entertainment would like to announce the new Poseidon special release! Poseidon: Sounds of Nature, to be released first in the Eastern Alliance’s own Planet Skyfire! This product of Gobi Entertainment, two years in the making, was personally supervised by Poseidon every step of the way – and who’d have thought they’d choose Skyfire for their debut! The only thing left to answer is; are you ready?!”

“Damnit!” Hua Li nearly leapt from the sofa, like someone lit a fire under him. Filled with indignation, he began to shout at the television screen. “I run all the way out here to Skyfire and they STILL stalk my every move! It must have been that female officer from the other day. Mo Xiao, you’re ruthless!”

Lan Jue grinned, gloating at his friend’s misfortune. “You deserve it. Such are the trials of the rich and famous!”

Hua Li howled piteously to the ceiling. “Why is being handsome such a sin!”

By this point Lan Jue had changed his clothes. “With narcissism as pervasive as yours I wonder if you’ll ever have need to marry. You should be afraid you’ll be the only one to love you.”

Hua Li fixed his friend with a penetrating stare. “No. I also have your love.”

“Garbage!” Lan Jue shot a foot out at Hua Li, but his saucy friend deftly slithered out of the way. He stood just out of reach in a victorious pose.

“Let’s go,” Lan Jue muttered darkly.

They took the elevator directly to Skyfire Underground’s version of the Jewelry Shop. Mika and Lin Guoguo were already waiting as per Xiuxiu’s instructions.

“Oh, you’re Poseidon? You really are handsome!” Lin Guoguo batted her eyes at him, infatuation clear in her eyes.

Hua Li shot a proud gaze to Lan Jue. It's message was clear; you see? All women like what I got.

However in the next moment that beamish smile froze – no, it would be more accurate to say it was squeezed.

Literally, as Lin Guoguo pinched his face between her fingers. “Poseidon, what plastic surgeon did you use? Even flawless complexion! I’ve been wanting to ask you forever. I heard a journalist interviewed a whole slew of cosmetic surgery operations. So far eighteen have admitted to working on you. So which one was it, really?”

Hua Li’s figure vanished in a flash, free from Lin Guoguo’s evil clutches. He hissed at her, teeth grinding. “I’m all natural! Everything else you hear is slander!”

Lin Guoguo only blinked. “But... that’s what everyone says.”

Chapter 112: Pointers

Hua Li snapped his head around to glare at Lan Jue. “A-Jue, did you teach them this?!”

Lan Jue coughed uncomfortably. “Stop framing good people! Only you are responsible for your reputation. Come on, let’s get to the sparring arena. Ke’er should already be there with the Wine Master.”

He turned and began to make his way. As he did, hidden from view, a goofy grin nearly split his face. He couldn’t keep it hidden any longer.

Face-lift! HAH!

When they arrived they spied the Wine Master waiting. He stood quietly before the gates of the Reaper’s Arena, meticulously put together and almost regal. Above ground he managed the Gothic Winery, but here the Reaper’s Arena was under his purview. Ke’er stood behind him, as she felt uncomfortable at his side or in front.

“Wine Master,” Lan Jue greeted when he was not far off.

“Nm.” The elderly man nodded to the Jewelry Master. “What are you planning to do in my arena?”

“I’d like to rent a ring, one with no surveillance. I have some pointers I’d like to share with these young ladies. Oh, and let me introduce my friend, Hua Li.”

The Wine Master ran his eyes across Hua Li, who likewise was sizing up the old man. However after a moment’s observation it was Hua Li who was struck with surprise, and a slight fear crept through him. Employing his energy awareness had revealed absolutely nothing before him – a void, like there was no man there at all.

“It’s nice to meet you, Wine Master,” he offered with a smile.

The Wine Master stared quietly at him for a moment before reacting. “Hello. You’re Poseidon, are you? From Gobi Entertainment.”

“I am.” Hua Li’s smile broadened. There was no way for him to truly

conceal his identity. After all the Supersoldier of An Lun wasn't the most well-known of the Divine Monarchs – it was in fact him, Poseidon. A name that was known throughout all the Alliances, as an artist. The most famous artist in the universe. His fame transcended borders, and through the help and advertisement of Gobi Entertainment he could not be claimed by any one faction – he belonged to his fans alone.

The Wine Master nodded once more. “Your father and I used to be close, once. I was surprised to hear he retired.”

Hua Li's smile turned bitter. “Then you likely know the Gobi habit – striving to retire as early as possible. There's nothing grand about being a high-profile figure.”

The Wine Master spoke no further on it, turning instead to Lan Jue. “I'll give you an arena for use. No monitors or surveillance. It'll cost you, though.”

“No discounts?”

The Wine Master turned and walked in to the Arena as though he hadn't heard.

The others followed a few steps behind, but Lan Jue shuffled a few quick steps to catch up with his old friend.

“Wine Master, there's actually something I'd like to discuss with you. It's about the visit from the representatives of the Pontiff's Castle and Dark Tower. They should be arriving soon, if I'm not mistaken. Unfortunately I'm not at my full strength currently, and I'm afraid I'd be little use directly participating in the exchange. Perhaps Hua Li could take my place, if you approve.”

The Wine Master's brows wrinkled as he spoke. “Unacceptable. He isn't a part of the Avenue, and as such can't represent us. But you don't need to worry, we've actually heard from the Pontiff's Castle. For... reasons unknown, they wish to postpone the exchange for another month. Will you have recovered in that time?” He turned his head to look at his younger council counterpart, something curious in his eyes.

“Postponed?” His face revealed a sardonic grin. “That’s enough. I hope they have the nerve to show up.”

By then they’d arrived before a towering metal wall. The Wine Master lazily lifted a hand, waving it at the barrier before them. A moment later, the solid metal wall began to ripple like a curtain of water.

“Alright. This arena has been fully shielded, nor is there any surveillance. Head on in – here’s the key.” The Wine Master handed Lan Jue a metal orb inlaid with a sapphire power gem. “One c-ranked power gem per month.”

Lan Jue scowled. “Why not just rob me?”

The Wine Master’s response was chilly. “How much do you suspect a bottle of Romanee-Conti costs? Hurry and recover from your injuries. Don’t forget your promise to me.” He turned away then. He nodded once to Hua Li, and suddenly vanished from view – a void as empty as Hua Li had witnessed.

“Ooee,” Hua Li uttered in surprise. “That one’s scary strong. I’m guessing he’s the Cosmagus?”

Lan Jue nodded in affirmation. “A ceremonious but adorable old man. Come on, in we go. The cost of this is three times higher than normal – so inhuman. Someday I’ll spend a week in his cellar, see the look on his face then.”

Hua Li chortled. “You won’t see any face. He’ll just immediately shred you to ribbons. It’s rumored his true power is in folding space. I wonder how many interspatial fissures you can endure.”

They passed through the rippling barrier and as promised, everything was concealed. Darkness enveloped them, but a moment later the world beyond the curtain was revealed. Suddenly, they found themselves standing in a massive, open area.

“Well!” Lan Jue’s voice matched the surprise in his eyes.

The arena was circular, rising over two hundred meters to a ceiling. It was roughly five hundred meters in diameter. They felt insignificant in it’s

vast expanse. It may have cost Lan Jue three times the going rate, but compared to normal rented spaces it was monstrously large.

“Extravagant,” Hua Li hummed. A place like this was enough to practice even mecha combat. He, too, knew that a c-ranked gem a month wasn’t cheap, but they would be hard pressed to find a better sparring arena. Mecha piloting, Discipline training... anything they liked, without fear of collateral damage. Lately the authorities had become far more strict in this area, and finding a private space to train for any period of time was exceedingly difficult.

If you really wanted to improve in combat, the best way to do it was to give it your all, and hold nothing back. Thus this sort of space was indeed expensive.

Lan Jue stepped forward a few paces, then turned to face the four women.

“Our last foray in to the Shattered Starfields I think left us all with a very strong impression. I will always do my best to keep you safe – but I am not the strongest person out there. Each of you possess great talent, and with training can grow to become incredible powerhouses. These last three years, I’ve been far too lazy, far too indifferent, and it’s held you four back. Starting today, we’re all going to snap out of this funk, and work on getting stronger.”

“Xiuxiu,” Lan Jue said, looking at her.

“Boss.” She stepped forward.

“Your talent has reached the peak of eighth rank,” he addressed her. “Ninth rank is within sight. Your Discipline, Sharpness, is enough to overpower most in combat. Even so this last time Uriel managed to damage your Asura. It is my hope you break through to ninth rank within the year – then we’ll see a substantial increase in your abilities.”

“For all four of you, cooperation is the key to successful cultivation. If you work together, covering each other’s weaknesses, even a Paragon couldn’t stand against you.”

“Ke’er,” Lan Jue turned his head to the blue-haired young girl.

She almost leapt forward. “Boss.” Her rush forward caused her full chest to jiggle [1].

[TL Note : [1] = Swear to God, that’s the translation. (Jiggle Bell)]

“Your Discipline’s focus is raw physical attack and explosive power. Different from Xiuxiu’s. She excels in close combat, and you from a distance. I know because of your history, you’ve avoided further cultivation, but...”

“Boss!” Ke’er suddenly interrupted his thought. The corners of her eyes had grown slightly red. “Boss, not to worry. There will be no further problems in my cultivation. I’ll work hard to improve. I am also nearly ninth rank, and will break through. I want to protect you.”

“Eh...” For a moment, Lan Jue lost his momentum, but quickly recovered. “Excellent! Our Ke’er knows what needs to be done. Keep it up!”

“Right!” She emphatically nodded her head.

“Guoguo.”

Lin Guoguo stepped forward, a smile on her pretty face.

“Mind control... your potential is huge. But you lack perseverance. In the face of enemies you grow timid and overcautious. This locks your mental powers, preventing them from reaching out to the fullest. Your abilities and the willpower of others are closely tied. It’s in this way you must strive to improve. For you, your specialization is in control. In conjunction with Ke’er and Xiuxiu, you are a terror. You’re already ninth ranked, but first degree. We’ve got to get you to the second.”

“Yes, boss!” She stuck out her tongue. Timidity was always her weakness.

Finally his eyes fell to Mika, and a hesitation was revealed in their depths.

Mika’s eyes, however, grew hard. She took the initiative, and stepped forward. “Boss. What do I need to do?”

Chapter 113: Poseidon, the Sparring Partner

Lan Jue muttered inaudibly to himself, then a resolution came over him as though a decision had been made. His voice came low. "These last few days I've been thinking on your problem. Mika, frankly speaking your capacity is the greatest among you four. However, it is also the most dangerous – the most likely to bring catastrophe. The blood in your veins, that of the Prince of Devils, can spiral out of control quicker than you know. If that were to happen, you'd lose yourself. Little by little, it would eat you up until you no longer existed as Mika. Your kindheartedness would vanish, and all that would be left is death. None of us wish to see this happen, so as always I must beg your restraint."

"However, this isn't the long term plan. In these last few years your control over the dark blood has been excellent. However this has been due to the fact you haven't had to get in to a fight. Now, your identity and whereabouts are revealed – although you're safe in the Avenue, I can't suggest you remain here forever. So, in my view, letting it out is better than keeping it in. Escape isn't an option. The Dark Blood is full of evil, yes, but there's a pattern of manifestation. It can be controlled. For this month, continue of the path of cultivation we've already laid out. When I've recovered, then we'll attempt to keep that dark blood under control. Eventually your mastery will be complete... and then you'll be a Paragon."

"Alright." Mika watched her protector with somber eyes.

Lan Jue took a moment to look at the four beautiful young women in turn. Smiling, he went on. "The women of Zeus' Jewelry Store [1] are without compare. No matter what, and no matter when, I'm honored to know you. Next, I would like to introduce your sparring partner for the next month – Mr. Hua Li. Lili, would you come on stage, please."

[TL Note : [1] = Dibs on playboy cover story]

"Eh? Sparring partner?" Hua Li jabbed a finger at his own nose.

Lan Jue nodded sagely. “Don’t you think it’s wonderful to have these four beautiful women to train with? Let me introduce you to them.”

“This, is Hua Li. I imagine you all have heard of his nickname, Poseidon. He’s my good friend, as close as a brother. We were two of what were called the Four Young Divine Monarchs. He is the successor of the Gobi Collective, Diva of Gobi Entertainment. The most famous entertainer of our time. Heart-throb of a good ninety percent of the girls in the universe. Ninth ranked, sixth-degree Talent in the Discipline of water control. His family, the Gobi Collective, is the most mysterious in all the three Alliances, and their influence is seen everywhere. Here, is the lord of that illustrious family.”

“A-Jue, with such an introduction you’re embarrassing me! It’s nice to meet you, lovely young ladies.” Hua Li bowed in a fluid and gentlemanly fashion to the gathered Amazons.

Lan Jue interjected. “You? Shy? I thought that was an emotion you were born without. Xiuxiu you’ve met, but let’s go through proper introductions. This is Xiuxiu, whose discipline is sharpness. Her handle; the Asura Blade-Maiden.”

“Next is Ke’er, with a Discipline of metalmorphosis, energy explosiveness. She is an Acquired Talent. Her nickname is the Baleful Tempest.”

An Acquired Talent? And two disciplines? Hua Li was clearly surprised at the revelation. And yet it struck something in him, something familiar like he’d heard of these two disciplines being used together before.

“Lin Guoguo, Discipline psychokinesis. Called the Psychic Tide.”

“And last but not least, Mika. Her Discipline is Hellfire. They call her the Stygian Succubus.”

Hua Li took them all in; Zeus’ Amazons! The Asura Blade-Maiden Xiuxiu; the Baleful Tempest Ke’er; the Psychic Tide, Lin Guoguo; and the Stygian Succubus, Mika. Just as Zeus described. One look and he could see the potent energies exuding from them.

Lan Juue grinned at the lot. "Next, the time is yours. Ladies, today's lesson is simple – beat the crap out of him. Begin!"

"A-Jue! Don't you have a heart?!" Hua LI shouted agitatedly at the grinning Lan Jue.

"You can only defend and evade. No striking back!"

The ladies' reactions were quick as lightning. As soon as the call to begin rang out, they were in motion. First was the Psychic Tide, Lin Guoguo.

Her eyes flashed a dazzling gold, and suddenly a formless power smashed in to Hua Li's body.

"Eh?" Surprised thrilled through those clear eyes, but he quickly recovered. His eyes changed in color, shifting from the color of calm shores to tumultuous deep seas. Two golden points shimmered in their depths. Suddenly they began to twist and rotate like a whirlpool, and the golden spurs were swallowed within.

The change was quick, but still Hua Li stood rooted in place. The three other women wasted no time and spread out. Xiuxiu moved laterally, and Ke'er sprang in to the air. There floating in the air, a strange blue light began to expand from Ke'er's chest. It was a blue unlike Hua Li's, and burst forth with no trace of gentleness. Instead it seemed almost metallic.

Her body imploded above, dissolving and expanding out as a photosphere. Following the transformation a series of metallic gun barrels pushed forth from the light. Each issued a dazzling salvo of blue energy beams that raced towards Hua Li. Such was the power of Ke'er, the Baleful Tempest.

Mika vanished, appearing again chasing Xiuxiu at full speed. Roiling hellfires had already covered her body. Her red hair flowed free from constraints, and fluttered behind her like a hood of fire. Even the black-rimmed glasses she always wore couldn't diminish her intimidating appearance. On the contrary, she was like a wildfire.

She drew closer to Xiuxiu, but suddenly the Blade-Maiden disappeared, seen again instantly at Hua Li's side. Her two hands raised, and jabbed

viciously at Poseidon's waist. As they rapidly drew closer they were no normal hands – they glowed silver, and adopted a strange texture. They screeched as they tore through the air.

Lin Guoguo grunted, and her eyes dimmed, but it was only temporary. Xiuxiu's hands found their mark. Her hands like razors tore through Hua Li's figure... and the latter began to ripple like a mirage.

Under stress from Xiuxiu's attack it's ripples increased. Hua Li's image undulated within a halo of gentle blue light. Though the Blade-Maiden's attack had landed she felt nothing but air. That is, until the image began to congeal. Something thick and confining gripped her hands and started to snake it's way up her body.

Xiuxiu felt the temperature rise, and suddenly two fiery orbs raced past her on either side. They collided violently with the melting image of Poseidon. Fire and water, polar opposites. As the diametrically opposed elements collided an ear-piercing sound filled the arena. Xiuxiu just managed to get out of the way.

Ke'er energy blasts also landed in the same moment, and Hua Li's form shuddered drastically under the assault. From somewhere Hua Li's cries arose. "A-Jue! This is cruel! If they keep this up I can't hold them off!"

Lan Jue chuckled. "Fine, but be careful not to hurt them."

"Oh fine, fine. Me, a lover of all women kind, how could I bring them any harm! You worry too much!" It was then the gentle halo that surrounded him began to brighten. It grew and expanded until it was full with an overwhelming energy. When it burst, spears of dazzling light shot in all directions.

After her first assault Lin Guoguo had shut her eyes. Their golden light was gone, but in it's place her entire body had begun to emit a golden light. Suddenly and without warning a golden figure separated itself from Guoguo's aura and launched itself in to the distance.

"Ahh!" Hua Li's surprised cried erupted, and in the next instant he appeared before them. The shimmering golden projection was racing directly at him.

But that golden Lin Guoguo was as soft as a shadow, and she penetrated that blue shadow like she herself was little more than a dream.

Ke'er, already a glimmering ball of gun barrels underwent another change in the same instant. The bristling barrels melted and bonded in to one, reforming in the shape of a 300 millimeter canon. Closer inspection would reveal that the mouth of the barrel bore thousands of streaking blue threads that raced along it's length. The body of the surreal artillery weapon glowed with a pale blue light. It hadn't released it's payload yet, but even so Hua Li felt the threat bearing down on him.

With Hua Li revealed by Lin Guoguo's psychic doppelganger, Mika and Xiuxiu were instantly on the move. Xiuxiu was first, and leapt in to the air. A blinding white light surrounded her enticing frame before suddenly, she vanished. In her place, within that halo of glimmering light appeared a longsword.

The meter and a half long blade was simple in design, though strangely a series of waves like wood grain were imprinted on the weapon's surface. They looked like countless snarling faces. The hilt of the weapon was nearly a meter long itself. A distinct chill emanated from the sharp edges of the slender blade, and with the blade's arrival miniscule tears appeared in the space around it. It was like even the air couldn't bear the weapon's sharpness.

Mika lifted a hand, and took hold of the surreal blade that was Xiuxiu. Almost lazily, she swept the sword towards the distant Hua Li. The simple motion called from within the sword a burst of white energy that rushed out like a sonic boom.

But it wasn't the first time Hua LI had encountered the Asura Blade.

In the early years of his time with Lan Jue, he'd met Xiuxiu. At that point Xiuxiu had still called Lan Jue Sir, having been raised at his side – his maidservant, and his secret weapon. Anyone who knew Zeus also understood that when he held the Asura Blade in his hand, he was at his most dangerous. A god and a god-blade, this was a true warlord.

Were Xiuxiu at his side that day against Michael, things would have

turned out very differently. Now, it wasn't Zeus who held the blade, but that didn't diminish it's sharpness.

Hua Li had become entangled by Li Guoguo's doppelganger. Already he felt himself held fast, and even if he could dodge it was too late. Instead he simply raised his right hand, waving it in a circle before him. He executed a strange gesture, and gently pushed out with his palm. A swirling, cobalt blue vortex appeared at his side.

Chapter 114: The Power of Poseidon

The sizzling arc of light spat from the Asura Blade cut in to Hua Li's vortex. What was moments before a deep blue ripple became pure white – but the whirlpool remained. The deadly attack was swallowed in to it.

“Brine Mires,” Lan Jue reminded them cryptically from a distance.

The words echoed through the arena. Hua Li stood unmoved but not unchanged. That coy smile common to his handsome face was gone. His body spun around, and his hands shot out in a flurry. Like before, each strike of his palm birthed a spinning cobalt blue vortex.

As they blasted outward the Asura Blade strike was deflected. Lin Guoguo's golden doppelganger, too, was pushed violently away. The powerful force was clearly a conglomeration of the ocean's powers and Hua Li's own mental force. He was no psychic like Guoguo was, but once a power was cultivated to the ninth rank, one's control was nearly absolute.

The Brine Mire eddies surrounded Hua Li like moving armor. Slowly they gathered inward, melding in to one, until they swallowed Poseidon and left a massive tidal vortex in his stead.

Mika viciously swiped the Asura Blade, sending wave after wave of deadly surges against the vortex. But no matter how sharp they were, none could penetrate the water's defense. Each were swallowed in to the roiling depths.

It was no wonder he was called Poseidon! His power was indeed strong.

“My turn!” Ke'er's voice called out, and as it did a great beam of dazzling blue light exploded from the giant energy canon she had become. It's destructive volley fired directly in to the heart of the whirlpool.

In response a powerful, almost regal sensation issued from the ocean depths. Soon after, it was joined by a massive, cobalt blue figure. It was seen only faintly at first, a dark blue figure in rough seas. Humanoid, but larger than Hua Li – holding itself with a majestic posture.

“Destroy!” The rumbling voice roared through the entire arena. The

indistinct image extended a finger towards the energy shell Ke'er had launched it's way. A slender, slithering blue light shot out. It collided precisely in the center of the attack.

The beam of power stopped as it was struck. The area around it suddenly grew bright as the sun, waves of energy blasting out in all directions. As it faded, amidst the ripples of heat and energy, a hollow space remained where the two opposing powers had met. The beam was gone.

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Planet Skyfire. The Azure Sea.

Boom-!

A great, deafening blast filled the air. In the seconds following a terrific column of water fired in to the sky, towering hundreds of meters. The corpses of myriad sea creatures tumbled out from the spout in all directions. A staggering pulse of energy swept over the ocean's surface. It continued for a good ten seconds before finally dissipating.

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The Four Amazons froze, stunned that such a powerful force was simply commanded to cease. The massive vortex began to expand, growing larger still.

Frightful waves of energy blasted out like ominous tides, crashing over them. Mika, with the transformed Asura Blade in hand, were cast away. The whirlpool continued to expand at an alarming rate.

"Be careful. Guoguo's his target," Lan Jue interjected.

Lin Guoguo jumped with a start, the gold in her eyes flickering. The golden doppelganger had returned to her side. As her eyes flashed she lifted her right hand and pointed. The golden light around her flared, coming under assault from Poseidon's crushing wave. Neither budged.

“Good.” Hua Li’s clear voice spoke out in praise as his figure appeared. But as the four women looked on in confusion, his body melted away like water. He disappeared in to the tidal waves.

Lin Guoguo expelled a psychic pulse, searching for her enemy’s presence. But how could she find him, as water in an ocean?

Her head shot up as though she’d found her target. She looked up just as a blue figure was crashing down on her – a bubble, which quickly swallowed her up.

A flash of blue light, and Lin Guoguo was gone. When she reappeared she was several hundred meters away, in the belly of the spinning bubble. Her mental powers were rendered useless.

“Alright, that’s enough.” Lan Jue called for them to cease. As he did, the waters settled, vanishing. Poseidon’s regal figure was revealed as they did.

Mika lay down the Asura Blade, and Ke’er reverted to her adorable and unthreatening appearance. The bubble around Lin Guoguo burst. The soaked amazon trotted over to meet them.

Lan Jue looked over his warrior maidens. “You’ve already lost. If A’li had wanted to, at least two of you would already be gravely injured – or worse.”

“In respect to individual power you each are at a disadvantage. However, together you shouldn’t have lost this quickly. Guoguo, you’re problem is exactly as I just outlined; persistence. Your psychic powers didn’t reach the level they could have. Through the whole fight, you were far too gentle. Had you pushed yourself, your ninth ranked powers would have caused him real trouble.”

“Yes, boss.” Lin Guoguo’s face grew red, and she inadvertently stuck out her tongue in shame.

Lan Jue turned then to Mika. “your powers weren’t employed at all. Even controlling the power of your blood, you’re still a ninth ranked Talent. Fire and water are mortal enemies, both in competition with one another. Your manipulation of the fire element wasn’t nearly sufficient. Are you avoiding disrupting his water attacks because of your cultivation training?”

“Xiuxiu. You were correct in assuming the Asura Blade during the fight. But, you picked the wrong time. You have to pick the most beneficial moment to use it – and certainly not when no opportunity presents itself. Doesn’t this reveal your hand too early to the enemy?”

“Last, Ke’er. Ke’er, your energy manipulation shouldn’t be as you used it. Whether strength, density or timing, none were enough. We saw none of your energy tempest.”

“But for all of you, your greatest failing was cooperation. Think, as you continue to improve how will you employ your powers symbiotically for mutual benefit. In this way, your final result would be better than if you did so alone. In the future I’ll ask A-Li to train with you all every day. Use what you learn from him in the ring to improve.”

“Yes, boss,” the four women responded in unison.

Hua Li and Lan Jue left the secret arena, leaving the women behind to continue their training. Once alone, Lan Jue turned on his friend. “You don’t have any shame?”

Hua Li lifted his head and blinked. “What are you talking about?”

Lan Jue grunted. “I’m not in the mood. Using the power taught to you by your ancestors, against a few girls. Poseidon’s Mark! Aren’t you just the greatest ever.”

Hua Li’s face reddened. “Four against one and you’re still telling me to hold back? You do it next time!”

“If it weren’t for the fact I couldn’t use my discipline I wouldn’t need you! I’m already much stronger than you are. Do you think differently?”

Hua LI sniffed. “Three years ago, no. But some people have been moping around for the last three years, so now who knows. Who’s to say I wouldn’t kick your ass in to the dirt?”

“You wanna give it a shot?” Lan Jue fixed him with an angry glare.

“Let’s go then! If you think you can in the state you’re in.”

“They got DreamNet, don’t they?”

“That’s right!” Hua Li’s face broke in to a sinister smile. “DreamNet would work. There’s nothing to fear there, and no restrictions. Let’s go, it’s been a long time. Loser’s gotta bark like a dog.”

“Grow up,” Lan Jue spat, shooting him a sideways glance.

Hua Li chuckled. “Well there’s gotta be some fun in it.”

“Fine. Snort like a pig then. Best two out of three. If I lose, I gotta snort like a pig in front of the ladies. But if you do, you gotta call Mo Xing and snort at her over the phone.”

“Well shit, that cruel?” Just the mention of her name caused Hua Li to shiver.

Lan Jue chortled darkly. “What do you say?”

Hua Li hesitation, but eventually replied. “It’s a bet! Where’s the machine.”

“The Underground’s Jewelry Store should have everything we need.”

“Let’s go!” Hua Li threw an arm over Lan Jue’s shoulder as they walked. Cocky grins spread across both of their faces, and for a while it was like it was before; young, brash times.

Zeus Jewelry Store had a metal door situated in the back. Opened, it revealed an expansive warehouse within – larger even than the warehouse that housed Zeus’ three airships.

As they entered Hua Li swept his eyes around the expansive chamber until they settled on a flickering electric spark in the center. A small team of robots were at work with various tools, repairing something several dozens of times larger than themselves.

“Looks like Thor took quite a beating as well.” Hua Li paused to look over the enormous mecha.

Lan Jue nodded. “Michael wasn’t an easy one to put down. His mecha control isn’t as good as ours was in our prime, but his Angel of War is still top of the line after all. That attack of his, like a tactic that kills one thousand of the enemy and eight hundred of his own. I wasn’t careful and

got tangled up. He almost turned me in to toast. I was lucky to get away. If it wasn't for him underestimating me, going one on one in the mechas, I'm not sure I'd have come out of it. Come on, the simulator's over there."

Beep beep beep! Just then, his communicator rang out. He lifted his hand to look, and couldn't help but smile. He swung his arm towards Hua Li to give him a look, then answered.

"So when?" A lazy voice immediately arose from his wrist.

"When what?" Lan Jue said, smirking.

"When are we going to the Holy City! Call The big guy and A-Li, the four of us haven't gone out together in a long time, right?" Even through the communicator Lan Jue felt the excitement in that voice.

"He told you, huh?"

Chu Cheng answered. "Yup. So pick a date. I'm stoked. Say the word and I'll let A-Li know."

"Pfft, not an ounce of sincerity," Hua Li shouted at Lan Jue's wrist.

Chapter 115: Dreamburgh

“Ey?” upon hearing Hua Li’s voice, Chu Cheng couldn’t help but sound surprised. “Well you got there quick.”

Hua Li’s voice took on that distinctly feminine quality as he effected a sweet reply. “Of course! My affection for A-Jue is unquestioned!”

“Ugh, by the... cut it out, will ya? Your integrity’s already rolling around in the dirt,” Chu Cheng replied, his voice pained.

“Cut the garbage,” Hua Li said, his voice back to normal. “If you got nothing better to do get your ass down here. We’re not heading to the Castle just yet, A-Jue’s gotten himself messed up pretty bad. Not to mention in about a month the Pontiff’s people will be making their way here to Skyfire.”

“Got it. I’ll be there before then. A-Jue, get a bottle of brandy ready.” Chu Cheng’s voice was veritably bursting with dramatic aplomb.

“Chengcheng, come quicklyyy!” That pretty voice cooed at Lan Jue’s wrist.

“Ugh, erg... I-I’ve got stuff to do. Gotta go.” The connection broke.

Lan Jue patted his forehead. “This guy... guess a dog can’t help eating shit 1. Guess a punk’ll do as they do.”

[TL : [1] = I just had to leave this as is in the translation, too funny. The meaning is clear, but for clarification it’s akin to the western phrase ‘a tiger can’t change it’s stripes’ – you can’t help who you are. But I know I’m going to be using this one from now on.]

Hua Li’s voice was full of indignation. “And the nerve, saying I have no integrity! Like he’s got room to talk. I’mma beat his ass!”

“Well he’ll be here soon,” Lan Jue said, patting his friend on the shoulder comfortingly.

Hua Li shot him a glance. “Good. First I’ll deal with you, then I’ll show him what’s up. Show him what his insides look like.”

An uncanny smile flitted across Lan Jue's face as he nodded. "Alright!"

There were only five simulators here, but each were top of the line models. After all, the Jewelry Store was among the best earners on the Avenue. In reality Lan Jue himself didn't even know his current net worth, not after giving up management of the store. He left that up to his ladies.

The two young men picked their respective simulators and climbed inside.

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"Qianlin, want me to send you home? Are you feeling better?" Richard spoke politely to her as he walked by the young woman's side. They walked slowly from the campus grounds.

"I'm fine," Qianlin tepidly replied.

Richard looked at her, surprised. "But when I went to your house last night for dinner, you said you were too ill to come down and join us?"

Zhou Qianlin stopped, turned, and fixed Richard with her pretty blue eyes. "Richard, do you really not understand or are you pretending? I don't want to see you. We. Are. Over. Although it's better to say we never began."

Richard looked like he'd been struck with a hammer. "But you're my fiancé," he said bitterly.

Zhou Qianlin hesitated, but after a moment she had made her decision. Determination filled her as she stepped forward to Richard's side.

Richard's face lit up. Until he heard her speak.

"That day... the man who took me from the wedding he... he had his way with me."

If Richard had been hit with a hammer before, this time it was a bomb. His whole body shook, but he felt locked in place.

"I'm sorry. I want nothing to do with you anymore." Zhou Qianlin backed away a few steps, before turning and walking away.

Tang Mi had been beside her the entire time. Though her voice had been quiet, she'd still heard clearly every word she said.

"Qianlin... that can't be true, is it? You and Zeus really..."

She didn't utter a sound, only sped up her gait. Tang Mi got the point, and fell quiet as she raced to catch up.

After several long moments, watching the two girls leave, Richard's hands curled in to white-knuckled fists. That day was still clear in his mind, like it had just happened. It was the most shameful day of his life, brought about by that golden-masked man. His lofty voice still rang in his ears. "I am ZEUS!"

Tang Mi didn't speak again until they were at the school's main gates. "Qianlin, what you just told Richard. Was that just to get him to stop, or was it real?"

Qianlin dropped her head, and when she spoke her voice was quiet. "Little Mi, you know I feel very sorry for Richard actually. Before when I accepted his advances, I thought he was a playboy. Later when we actually met I found him to be a good man. Unfortunately he and I would never work out. It's better a sharp pain for a short time, than a dull pain for ever."

Tang Mi blinked her big eyes. "But that's not my concern! What I want to know is if you and Zeus REALLY did it, what's he like?! Is he as good a lover as he is a mercenary? Introduce me to him. I know we're sisters, but we'll keep the competition fair."

Zhou Qianlin spun around so quickly her hair fanned out. Her blue eyes were deadly.

"Eh... well, I... I'll go on ahead." Tang Mi turned tail and fled.

"Stop right there!"

DreamNet. Dreamburgh.

The skies above were a rainbow of colors. Everything was like a fairyland, like a dream. The towering buildings glowed with a faint titanium white, spotlessly clear and without blemish. It was a world of peace and quiet, comfortable. Gentle gusts of wind brought clouds lazily floating in the rainbow sea overhead. A sweet fragrance danced in the eddies, but more than that was a cooling moisture that cleansed the mind and body.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. Every visit it’s like I’m stuck somewhere between reality and a dream.”

It was a tall, slender man who’d spoken. Gold robes, golden hair, golden mask. A single word floated above him, nearly translucent: Zeus.

“Yeah! It has been ages. It was more than three years ago you last visited the Sanctuary. If you waited much longer I’m afraid they’d kick you out.”

Zeus’ companion was like him, tall and thin. His robes were a deep blue, and was embroidered like ripples in water. His long blue hair splayed out behind him as though they had a life of their own. His mask was silver. The name above: Poseidon.

Dreamburgh was a special area of DreamNet. Nearly all of DreamNet had a corresponding area in the real world, and were normally as lively. Only a very small handful of people were qualified to enter this large, isolated part of the web.

Here, the peak services of DreamNet were available. Most of which were compatible with the real world outside. Here, they were auctions for s-ranked gems, masterful blueprints for top level mechas, things almost unimaginable outside. But here they could be found.

Indeed it was a very selective place, for only a very special few. The gods themselves.

God-ranked mecha pilots stood at the peak of the piloting world. This status carried over to DreamNet. To every pilot it was considered a great honor to enter here. The ability to be a part meant any further simulated

battle for them was meaningless. Most important was the exchange between pilots of the same caliber.

Every pilot here was known only by their callsign. No one could know the identity behind the mask. This, too, was anything but insignificant. This, was the territory of the gods. Here is where one honed themselves, becoming qualified to stand at the top of the power pyramid.

There was a time when the Four Divine Monarchs were kings among kings here, known far and wide. At one point they'd had a one hundred day winning streak in five-man battles – just the four of them. Even today, the record had not been bested.

Of course there were some discrepancies. Real-world god-ranked pilots and those of DreamNet weren't always the same. Here, members were pilots alone – no disciplines were employed. The world's pilots were a combination of power gems, Talent and personal ability.

Still to this day it was the wish of all younger pilots to one day enter Dreamburg. To them, this was Valhalla.

It really had been ages since Lan Jue's last visit. So long, in fact, that were he an average citizen he'd no longer be permitted here. But Zeus was not average citizen. There wasn't a soul here that didn't know his reputation. Here in the sanctuary three separate ranking lists bore his name, and he was in the top sections of each.

The Sanctuary was a place for pilots of the highest grade to meet and compare notes. There was a list of all the participants. The contents of the list were widely known through DreamNet, passed by word of mouth.

To say there was one list though was inaccurate. There were in fact several; one for men, for women, arrangement by fighting capability, win ratios, and on and on. But among them there was one list that was the most telling – and likewise was the one most people adhered to. That was the Comprehensive Power Analysis. It was the final word when it came to the abilities of the sanctuary's pilots. Especially speed of hand.

As was well known proper manipulation of a mecha suit was a combination of mental commands and physical kinetic motion. The

higher your acknowledged rank, the more masterful your control. And so one's speed of hand was an important factor to know.

For most, when they spied the lists, they had the same reaction; inhuman!

There was also the God-Team rankings. A common mecha unit consisted of five members, but this was a difficult thing for pilots of their caliber. In fact the total number of effective teams was very small. Only a few hundred in the entirety of DreamNet. Being part of such a team meant you were among the best of the best.

Zeus' name was on all of these.

God-Team rankings: The Four Monarchs. This is where they became known, and where they earned their nickname.

Hand speed rankings; Zeus was fourth. It was determined by the number of executed commands in a short period. Next to his name was written 87.

What this meant was that he could execute eighty seven commands in a second. It was a number he had to maintain for a full minute before it could be counted.

Chapter 116: The Audacity!

Eighty-seven a second!

Staggering couldn't begin to describe it. What the average mecha pilot could barely manage in a minute, these god pilots did in a fraction of the time.

The final list was the aggregate power ranking, of which Zeus came in ninth. Of the other three Monarchs only one out-performed him there, his brother Prometheus. He was third. Strangely, however, in terms of hand speed the 'god of wisdom' clocked in at sixty – more than fiftieth in the rankings.

Prometheus was also present on the lists, but the only one he broke the top ten on was the god-team. For the others he was no slouch, but didn't quit reach the same level. Thirty-eighth in hand speed, and fifty first in overall power. In Dreamburg Prometheus was ranked high, but not overly so.

The only person to rank in the top ten of three lists was Lan Jue himself. Although it didn't accurately portray real statistics here, in Dreamburg, among the best pilots in DreamNet – there was none better.

"Doesn't look like there's been a lot of changes in the sanctuary since we've come last," Lan Jue said, looking over the lists. His name remained precisely where it had been three years ago.

Hua Li replied, "Only a few people are allowed in here, you think a significant upset would be that easy? Today, though, I'm here to beat you – aggregate power rankings are sure to see some changes. Three years with minimal practice from you, how much hand speed do you think you've lost?"

"Hah!"

"Let's go then!"

ζ

Dreamburg, Battle Prep.

“Honored Zeus, Poseidon, would you like your spar to be available publicly?” A pleasant, female voice wafted towards them.

“Private,” Lan Jue responded.

“Private, confirmed. After one minute, please enter the arena.”

A moment later the same voice echoed throughout the entirety of Dreamburg. “51st Ranked pilot Poseidon, has issued a challenge to Ninth Ranked pilot Zeus to a contest. One minute to commencement.”

A white light flashed before them. The God of Lightning, Zeus, and the Master of the Oceans Poseidon appeared on an expansive platform.

The platform itself was magnificent; round, suspended in mid air, and surrounded by that shifting technicolored sky. It was called the Altar, the combat ring for god-ranked pilots. Each time the pilots here chose to spar, this is where they did it. Battles could be public or private, and spectators to public matches had to pay great sums of money to enjoy them. Private matches, on the other hand, were somewhat of a misnomer. Spectators could come, but their fee was a hundred times greater. A truly astronomical figure.

Spectating a normal match cost DreamBits, but in the real world the cost would amount to a b-ranked power gem. And you could only watch one bout. The proceeds were all given to the combatants – DreamNet took nothing.

Hua Li shouted to his opponent. “Hey A-Jue, do you think it’d be crazy if someone paid to watch our little competition?”

“This isn’t going to be a competition,” Lan Jue shot back. It’s gunna be a massacre.”

Hua Li laughed it off. “Yeah?”

“It’s been three years since we’ve last met, and you’re bullshit hasn’t let up,” Lan Jue said.

“Well it looks like there aren’t any crazies coming out to watch today. Let’s do it.”

Both Zeus and Poseidon lifted their right hands. Two beams of light fired down from the heavens and enveloped them. The columns expanded, dissolved, and in their place stood two massive mechas.

On one side of the platform towered Thor, exactly as he would appear in the world outside. Opposite Zeus' mecha stood another, aqua blue and considerably more slender than the lightning god's. It's height was similar to Thor's, streamlined and towering. A teardrop-shaped gemstone glimmered in it's forehead, and in fact every important part and junction of the armor bore a similar gem. Looking on, it was like it's body was moving ever so slightly, undulating like deep-sea waves. A sapphire blue trident was clutched in it's hands.

This was Triton, Hua Li's mecha armor.

In this instant a flash appeared in the distance. A metal chair suddenly appeared just outside the platform, and in it a tall figure. A woman, judging by the figure, draped in a flame-red robe. Similarly fiery hair hung down her back, and her features were hidden behind a red mask. Her impressive stature glowed like an ember, but instead of appearing like a lick of flame she instead gave the impression of fresh blood.

"Woah, is that Piao Hong? Sure enough, there's our big wig Piao Piao! Same one from years ago who wanted to provide for you – looks like you're still on her mind." Hua Li's surprised voice issued from Triton. Any sound from the platform wasn't heard from outside.

"Shut it!" Lan Jue sounded especially sour.

Thor burst in to motion. Crackling bolts of lightning raced over it's figure as it launched itself toward Triton in an all out gambit. It looked like a raging ball of thunderbolts, twisting dangerously at it's foe.

Triton took a step back. It was careful and calculated – after all, the two men knew each other well. He did not dodge, but juked diagonally to the side to avoid impact. In the same moment Triton lifted it's massive trident, a hazy blue light enveloping it's prongs.

The misty lights flashed, and a vortex appeared before the weapon. It's pull yanked Thor to the side. Even the mecha was capable of Brine Mires.

The vortex pressure pulled violently at Thor, whose speed and ferocity caused it to stumble off balance for a moment before Zeus retook control. Triton's timing and power were spot on. For an instant it looked like Thor would tumble head first in to the vortex, but it abruptly stopped at a distance of about a meter.

The pull remained, but Thor was in no further danger of being torn apart by the whirlpool. Countless threads of crackling lightning bolts appeared, interweaving to create a massive electrical net. It exploded outward, batting away his opponent's weapon. Moreover, Thor's giant figure became fuzzy, and a mysterious buzz filled the air.

The net fractured, its once thick electric frame separating until it was almost like a photomask. It surrounded Thor like a blanket. This was an impressive combination of Thor's lightning net and oscillation – a combination that required a master hand. The punishing speed of oscillation, and a second function besides. To your average pilot this was, in a word, insane.

He looked almost like a mirage, and in the space it took for his net to complete, he abused the opportunity. Giant bolts of electricity fired off in all directions. But Triton had not been taken aback. Its own figure had become hazy, and as the bolts washed over it, it vanished. The flowing figure reappeared several meters away. It soared through the air, crackling with residual electricity.

“Stop knowing me so well,” Hua Li gloomily engaged.

Lan Jue answered with action. Thor fired itself upward towards Triton, shinning like a shooting star.

Before the rush could find its target, Triton changed. It split in to three identical images, each brandishing their tridents threateningly. With the motion a light swept over Thor, swallowing it within. The azure blue mecha was unfazed. Lifting its right hand, a golden light flashed and a lightning-shaped spear appeared in the raised appendage.

It did not strike or jab. Instead Thor gave the spear a shake, and countless dots of lights shuddered free like dust motes in a beam of

sunlight. They shimmered and shook, become a hundred thousand tiny spears of light. It was they who rushed out, finding every hole and weakness in the tridents' radiating power.

This clearly reflected the differences between the two great mechas. As the spears strikes rushed against the trident's power the weapon rippled like waves. It diffused and muted the spear's effectiveness. Meanwhile the spears attacks were indomitable, powerful, and precise. It was brute force against redirection.

The earlier strikes had put Triton at a disadvantage. He'd lost the offensive, and struggled back a few steps under Thor's onslaught. However, it was not a broken retreat, he still retained control.

At the levels in which these two competed, victory wasn't decided in a matter of seconds. Neither were employing their best skills or strategies – instead searching the best opportunities to use them.

“A-Li!” As the fight raged, Lan Jue's voice shouted over the din.

“Ah?” Hua Li's response was surprised, taken aback by the sudden cry. To shout in such a way in the midst of an intense stand off, surely there was something the matter.

However, Lan Jue's voice was calm. “A few days ago, while I was teaching class, there was this female student who desperately needed to fart...” [1]

[TL : [1] = Oh no he didn't.]

“She couldn't hold it, so she came up with an excellent idea. She would loudly clap her hands, and at that precise moment let loose thus concealing the sound. She went about her plan, loudly clapping her hands in the quiet classroom. And just as everyone was turning their heads to look at her, she ripped a fantastic one.”

“Ahh hahaha!”

Bang! A bolt of lightning shot out and collided with Triton's shoulder. The mecha fell in to an uncontrolled dive, and smashed to the floor. Thor wasted no time. Golden light washed over him, and as his friend was

tumbling he became roaring bolt of lightning. Immediately upon hitting the floor, Thor slammed in to him with the force of starship.

Brruuughhhmmm! The whole area shook as thunderous roars tore through the sky. The entire platform was awash in golden light. A mushroom cloud rolled and raised above it, the fiery lights dancing in it's depths.

Hua Li's screams echoed through the Altar, mixing with the thunder.

"Combat has finished. Winner: Zeus."

The cloud was swept away, and the golden light dimmed. Thor stood triumphant in the center of the ring.

Outside of the ring, the red-robed woman had already stood from her chair. She looked on with doubt in her eyes. Thor had indeed had the upper hand, but Triton's disposition hadn't been significant. Poseidon's mecha had simply sat there, frozen in the air as the attack landed, with no attempts at defense.

Thor hadn't let the opportunity go to waste, and combat was done right then and there. From where she sat it almost looked like Triton let him win – where they trying to exploit the list standings? But that simply couldn't be! God-ranked pilots wouldn't do such a thing!

"THE AUDACITY! A-Jue, that was some a-class bullshit!" Hua Li's enraged voice tore through Dreamburg.

Chapter 117: Fantascia Genetica Decoction

Lan Jue's voice was serious. "If this were real combat, would you talk this way to your enemy? You'd actually have no chance, because you'd be dead."

"Wh-..." Hua Li trailed off.

Within Thor, Lan Jue was fighting valiantly with himself to stop his laughter from bubbling out. It was a difficult task!

It appeared Tang Xiao's tricks were useful after all. Even he was almost beaten the first time he'd encountered that nasty deception.

"Unacceptable! Again!" Hua Li was audibly grinding his teeth.

Lan Jue's voice was lofty and dismissive. "The discrepancy in power is too great. Train harder, and challenge me again when you're ready!" Thor disappeared in a flash of light, without giving Hua Li a chance to answer.

It wasn't long before Zeus and Poseidon were once more walking the streets of Dreamburg.

"A-Jue! Since when did you become such a little punk!" Poseidon rushed at Zeus, grabbing him by the neck!

"Execute systems protection," Zeus answered quietly.

Boom! An arc of lightning crashed down from the heavens. It threw Poseidon away a dozen meters, burning him black.

Zeus wagged a finger at his companion's smoldering body. "Bad touch."

"Zeus!" In this moment a digitized female voice called his name.

He turned to find the source of the sound, spying the red-clad woman who'd watched their battle. "Piao Hong. Thanks for the gem."

Piao Hong's voice was curt. "Unfortunately I didn't see what I came for. I'll likely apply to DreamNet for reimbursement."

"As you like. That's right, I actually was looking for you."

"For me?" Her voice was surprised.

Zeus nodded in response. “I wanted to know if you were interested in a business proposal. I wanted to buy some fantascia genetica decoction.”

She blinked. “It’s still useful to you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zeus said. “I have my uses for it. Name a price.”

Piao Hong was quiet for a moment. Eventually she spoke up. “You should know, this sort of thing is priceless. For those that need it, no price is too high. It’s also secret, and I can’t verify your identity. I can’t sell it.”

Zeus smirked behind the mask. “In this place, there’s no such thing as priceless.”

This brought a smile to Piao Hong’s face. “You sure live up to your name. You speak true – here there’s nothing truly beyond the scope of purchase. In fact I’m also here because there’s something I wish to discuss with the two of you. If you agree, the decoction is yours as advanced payment.”

“Oh?” Poseidon had heard the exchange. “What’s so important you’re willing to give up the decoction in advance?”

Piao Hong smiled secretively. Her red clothes seemed to wax and wane like a pulse. “A God-Team battle!”

Surprise and suspicion both flickered through the two Monarch’s eyes.

“The Four Divine Monarchs have occupied the top of the Altar’s rankings for too long. In three years there is sure to have been some changes. We present a challenge against your team.” Piao Hong’s metallic voice grew sharper.

Zeus’ response was tepid. “According to the rules, you must first be in the top ten. Only then can you issue a challenge. Through DreamNet’s audits, we have three months to prepare. We’d have to accept, or risk losing our ranking. What are you playing at?”

Piao Hong’s aura become appreciably gentler. “Clever. What we want, is simple: Make it public! A spectacle for everyone in the three alliances to come and witness. Let’s give them all a show, so they know a true god

battle is. Boil the blood of all the young pilots with dreams of being where we are. Stir up the whole universe!" Her voice rose to a moving crescendo, fiery and emotional. Even Zeus and Poseidon were swept up in it.

"Public? This is nonsense right?" Poseidon said. "You have to know all top pilots have their own tricks and secrets. Having a competition like that, open to the public, would reveal all their secrets to everyone. Modern recording equipment can catch every tiny detail. It'd be giving our entire playbook to our enemies, to look over at their convenience. It would be the first public god-team bout in the history of DreamNet, much less open to all three alliances. Fantascia Genetica is important, but compared to what you're asking it's nothing."

"That's just so," Piao Hong replied softly, "and that's why we're discussing. This is not our attempt at pleasing the peanut gallery. It's something... reserved for a rainy day."

"Go on then," Zeus said. "But you should know that only a very good carrot's going to get us to agree to your stick."

"You should know DreamNet's origins, I assume?" Piao Hong suddenly switched topics.

She went on. "DreamNet is the largest multinational cooperation in all of the alliances. An independent platform created by the three great nations. In order to assure it's impartiality, it's central committee broke away from the alliances they came from and became it's own, special unit. It's more advanced than all three alliance armies put together. It's technological support is more powerful than the ten greatest families of the alliances put together."

"And have you heard of the Justice's Proclamation?" She paused to regard them.

Zeus and Poseidon shot a glance at one another.

"Of course," Zeus said. "The Proclamation was aimed at the central committee. They were too powerful, and required restrictions. During it's establishment, the three alliances and the cooperation itself came together for an agreement, creating the Proclamation and it's rules to help

determine it's effect on the people. For instance, one rule states that if a virtual personality develops emotions, it must be destroyed. And so on with the rest of the Proclamation, making it fool-proof."

Piao Hong nodded. "I ask you this, because I want to know if you agree. That all of the central committee's proclamations are just and equal, and in the best interest of human development." As she spoke, she lifted a hand. A golden light trickled towards Zeus.

Zeus deftly plucked the golden light from the air. The light itself was no corporeal thing, and as it came in to Zeus' grip a column of golden light shot down upon them from on high. A stately, ear-splitting voice howled at them from all directions.

"I protect the balance of DreamNet." As the words raced around them, it was as though the entirety of Dreamburg trembled. Before Zeus and Poseidon's wide eyes, a majestic figure appeared. They were middle-aged, alive with golden light. A pair of golden eyes looked at them, but it was as though they saw everything, all at once. It was as though they could pierce your very soul.

"A DreamNet Guardian?" Zeus and Poseidon spoke as one.

The trembling earth, the golden light... in an instant it was all gone.

Zeus stared wide-eyes at Piao Hong. "I had no idea you were a Guardian."

The DreamNet Guardians were a special group, who existed specifically to deal with the expansive reality's internal affairs. They existed here only, and from the day they accept the mantle of Guardian, their job is to protect DreamNet – and the myriad people who used it – from threat. Like DreamNet, they were also free from alliance restrictions.

Their identities were a closely guarded secret – no one knew who the guardians truly were. The masked protectors only ever showed up when something serious was happening in the virtual world.

Piao Hong nodded. "Indeed. Though I was born in the Western Alliance, I am now a Guardian of this place. Remember that what I have shared

with you now, is an absolute secret. If this is a responsibility you two fail to keep, you will become an enemy to DreamNet, and all the guardians in it.

“Promise!” Zeus and Poseidon spoke with one voice. They knew quite clearly what the Guardians were, what they did. In the whole history of mankind they had averted civil strife at least thrice, and four times warded off catastrophe. They were deserving of everyone’s respect.

When Piao Hong spoke again, her voice was low. “Eight months ago, the Northern Alliance had sent out an exploration party. They were mapping a distant galaxy when they got caught in an assault. Only a tenth of the expeditionary force returned. With them, they broke top-secret news; approximately seventy-eight light years from Planet Luo they’d found three new planets. Planets that housed endogenous life. The life forms they found were exceedingly monstrous, and frighteningly strong.”

“Stranger than that, though, were the planets. They were fixed in space, stationary. They had no orbit, no trajectory. But what they could do, is affix themselves to other planets... destroying them, and taking their energy. When the Northern party came across them, the planets were in the final stages of plundering a small planet. They watched the planet disintegrate with their own eyes. The aftermath of the planet’s death hit them like a supernova.”

“Afterwards they came under attack, suffering strange biological attacks. They suffered great losses. Luckily they were scouting ships, fast, otherwise there likely wouldn’t have been any survivors.”

“When the scouts returned and delivered their report, it was determined the power of one of these planets was equivalent to a space bastion in sheer power – and that is merely a preliminary estimate. Also their combat styles are entirely different from our own. Seventy-eight light years... not such a great distance away. We humans have settled dozens of worlds, rich with energy. Perhaps we’ll get lucky, perhaps these alien planets won’t choose to come our way. But even if they don’t, we must prepare. And what’s more...”

Chapter 118: Consent

Piao Hong stopped here, pausing for just a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was graver still. “According to our own calculations at DreamNet, there is a sixty-four point seven eight percent chance they will come our way. If that ends up being the case... humanity could be at war.”

“Judging by their distance it may be years before we face the risk, but we should prepare ahead of time. Because of this, we at DreamNet hope to improve the quality of our civil defense. We’ll start with inflaming the passions of the younger generation. What better way to do that, then to stage a god-team match, in full view of the human population. It would be an unprecedented event, one for the ages. The Four Monarchs, top of the lists, would be the main event. It was good you came today – another three days, and I’d have had to approach you through different channels. I hope, in light of these circumstances, you’ll consider the future of the human race. I hope you will participate, for everyone’s sake.”

“Of course the DreamNet corporation will compensate you for this. All you need to do for now, is participate in this competition. In addition to the decoction you requested, you’ll also receive one s-ranked power gem each. And, thirty percent of the proceeds from telecasting. This doesn’t include advertising or screening costs – a pure thirty percent. With this sort of money, you can make yourselves each a brand new, top-level mecha.”

Piao Hong went silent. Zeus and Poseidon stood in quiet contemplation.

Three alien planets... the words weighed heavy on their consciousness. The universe was indeed vast and boundless, and who knew how many intelligent species and habitable planets existed out there? After humanity had begun its interstellar programs in a serious way, it encountered many habitable worlds and strange species. Some were even threatening, but they were decidedly few.

However never before had they encountered something with the ability to rival their own destructive power. These three planetary bodies

somehow had the sheer obliterating force of a space bastion. It was a threat unlike humanity had ever faced. A menace that threatened their very existence.

“We can’t shirk our responsibility!” Zeus’ head rose as he made his thoughts known.

Poseidon, said nothing.

“I’ll relay this information to our other two companions, and give you an answer as soon as possible,” Zeus concluded.

“Very well. But please be quick.” Piao Hong nodded towards Zeus, and the roiling red aura around her undulated. With nothing more to say, she vanished.

Zeus turned to Poseidon, who in turn looked back at him. They knew what each other thought, and a tacit understanding was reached. A light flashed and they, too, were gone.

Lan Jue and Hua Li pulled themselves from the simulators and faced each other.

“What do you think?” Uncertainty lived in Hua Li’s moving eyes.

“There was no doubt that was a Guardian,” Lan Jue muttered. “The information should be reliable.”

Hua Li’s brows wrinkled, adding a dash of melancholy to his handsome features. “Your response was too quick. This whole thing... too sudden. Fine, so what did you want the Fantascia Genetic for anyway?”

“Tang Xiao’s own abilities are pretty solid,” Lan Jue began. “He’s begun to unlock his potential. But Jin Tao’s genetic talent is minimal, and without some sort of catalyst I’m afraid he’ll never advance past third rank. The only method left to him is man-made.”

Hua Li lifted a brow at his friend. “You mean business with these two apprentices of yours, huh?”

A devilish grin spread across Lan Jue’s face. “Didja like my joke?”

“%!*\$!” Hua Li brazenly displayed his middle finger under Lan Jue’s nose,

his face dark.

Lan Jue's voice interjected, flippant and disinterested. "Keep it up. I'll take a picture and send it to all your fans in DreamNet. Let them see what their hero is really like."

"A-Jue," Hua Li muttered. "I haven't seen you for a long time. You've become a real pain in the ass!"

"The first time I met Tang Xiao was in DreamNet. That little piece of comedy was something he told me. I only just managed to win that fight. I won through oscillation, and it was then he begged to learn from me, wanted to see me. I beat him viciously to vent my anger."

"A-Jue, I suddenly thought of something..."

"Eh?" Lan Jue looked at Hua Li inquisitively.

The superstar chuckled in supremely sinister fashion. "There are some out there who can't use their disciplines for... various reasons. I, too, seek to let go of a little agitation. What should I do, do you think?"

Lan Jue's self-satisfied grin faltered. "J-Just wait for me to finish talking. We really shouldn't just go around beating people, it isn't good for our abilities. I used lightning to give the kid a little shock, but hadn't expected he'd actually have considerable talent. Natural evolution, even."

"Evolution?" Hua Li suddenly appeared to be paying more attention. "That's certainly rare! So you're saying it's possible for him to develop to ninth rank?"

Lan Jue nodded. "The kid's endurance is almost supernatural. He certainly doesn't look like much, but he's got the heart of a victor. He's also very clever. He definitely knew why I beat him that day, but he was still willing to call me his teacher. In his eyes I saw that familiar look, that pursuit of power. The second time I saw him, when he accepted me as his master, I saw sincerity there, too. I had nothing to do, free time at my disposal. I saw his talent, and decided to teach him. But where he ends up, is up to him."

"As for Jin Tao, he... moved me. That crazy kid. Completely disregards

the fact that his genetic talent is practically nonexistent. But his desire, his heart exceeds his abilities two hundred percent. His desires have been pent up for so long, he wants change even more than Tang Xiao. I need to keep an eye on his temperament.”

“Are you done?” Hua Li’s arms were crossed over his chest. He grinned unsettlingly at Lan Jue.

“Yup. Alright, let’s go, I need a drink. What do you feel like?” Lan Jue calmly turned and began to walk away.

“All I want, is to LET OFF SOME STEAM!”

“A-a-Li, don’t be like this!”

“I’ll beat you till you shit your pants!”

“AAHH....!”

Half an hour later.

“Do you want to tell him, or should I?” Hua Li sat upon the floor of Zeus’ Jewelry Shop, sipping on a soda water.

Lan Jue was perched on a chair, tenderly massaging his face. There weren’t any marks there, but from his pained expression one can only guess at the inhumane treatment he’d just suffered.

“I will! Imma tell my brother you were beating on me, hmph!” Lan Jue spat the threat.

“Hua Li leveled his eyes at his pouty friend. “Have a little integrity guy. Don’t go running to your family like a child.”

Lan Jue was indignant. “And beating on the infirm shows integrity? I’m hurt, and here you are taking advantage.”

Hua Li fluttered his eyes, those long lashes brushing against one another. Those moving sky-blue eyes, full of mirth, shone at his friend. “Am I not helping you to recover?”

“Can you help with the pain in my heart?!”

This took Poseidon by surprise, and his playful demeanor became quiet. “Go on then,” he said. “Call him.”

Lan Jue snorted once more for good measure, then tapped a number in to his communicator.

“Hm?” Lan Qing’s voice rose from his wrist. “You called?”

Lan Jue revealed what he’d learned moment earlier from the DreamNet Guardian.

Lan Qing was silent, listening intently as Lan Jue related the tale. Eventually he spoke. “I know the Dreamburg guards. If you can be sure of their identity, then what they told you should be the real deal. And, top secret. I’ll let the higher-ups know, and see if I can get cleared. As for the contest, I’m in.”

“Alright,” Lan Jue said.

“How are you feeling?”

“No problems. A-Li’s helping me get better. Shouldn’t be long before I’m back to normal.”

“Good. If there’s nothing else, we’ve got things to do.”

“Mn.”

Hua Li watched the exchange, silent until Lan Jue dropped the connection. His brows wrinkled slightly. “If I didn’t already know you two, I’d never guess you were brothers. Things still no good with him?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “I can’t say I don’t blame him at all... for him, in his heart, duty will always come before family. But this time, when he came to see me... the hate was gone.”

Hua Li sighed. “He actually cares quite a lot for you. After all, you’re the only family he has.”

“Yeah, well...” Lan Jue waved his hand, as though trying to sweep away the depressing topic.

Hua Li went on. “Rest for a while, then we’ll continue with the healing.

“Alright.”

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“Granny Bess, I’ve cleaned your clothes for you. They’ve been dried, and I put them away in your cabinet. I have to head home, but you look after yourself. Drink some more warm water. [1]” Zhou Qianlin rolled down her sleeves, smiling politely at the old woman perched on the side of the bed.

[TL : [1] = ‘Drink warm water’ is a Chinese trope and cultural phenomenon where literally every single ailment in history can be fixed with rest and warm water. Cold? Warm water. Hemorrhoids? Warm water. Car wreck? Warm water. Still not better? You obviously need more warm water.]

She looked particularly advanced in years, with a head of long snow white hair past her shoulders. Her pink coveralls were matched with a pink scrunchie that tied her hair back. Inside was a pink shirt. Her pants were black.

She was exceptionally skinny, and the outline of her bones were clearly visible. But her two green eyes were clear and bright, without any hint of confusion. She stared quietly out the window, her thoughts a mystery.

“I’ll just be heading out now, Granny Bess.” Zhou Qianlin pulled over a small blanket, draping it over the elderly woman’s knees. She then quietly stood and left.

As the door closed, the elderly woman finally turned to look at where Zhou Qianlin had just stood. She remained quiet, but her clear eyes were alive with emotion. She lifted her right hand, and skinny fingers slowly splayed wide. The nails on each finger glittered like crystal, and from their tips silken threads of red light slithered forth. Gently they gathered together, intertwined, until they constituted a familiar figure; that of Zhou Qianlin, remarkably life-like.

“Go!” the woman commanded. An instant later the glimmering red outline vanished without a trace.

The woman returned her clear eyes to the world outside her window. Suddenly those green eyes became glazed, distant, as though revisiting an old memory.

Chapter 119: Sorry, Richard

The Soul-Caller Gem warmed.

“Come get me at home.”

“It’s so early. I’m still sleeping.”

“A bodyguard must fulfill their duties! Nobles must abide by their promises!”

“...”

“A-Jue, what are you doing so early?” Hua Li pulled himself to a sitting position on the couch, watching Lan Jue wash his face with drowsy eyes.

“You don’t have class today either. Where are you running off to? You wouldn’t need to get up this early to train your disciples either.” Hua Li’s questions were fussy at the early hour.

Lan Jue’s response was muttered, almost to himself. “A bodyguard must fulfill their duties! Ugh, nonsense.”

“I despise you,” Hua Li sighed dejectedly. He grudgingly pushed himself from the sofa.

Ten minutes later.

The antique bicycle rattled speedily along the road. Hua Li’s morose expression stared at the passing ground as he sat behind Lan Jue. “A-Jue I’m starving. It’s not good to skip breakfast. Gives you energy for the day.”

“Shut up, I’m hungry too. And I’m the one pedaling. Already a crappy day!” Lan Jue glared ruefully as they trundled along.

“So why are we up so early anyway?”

Lan Jue was silent, answering a few moments later in a miserable voice. “I’m telling you, you better not laugh.”

“I’d never!” Hua Li’s assurances came without hesitation.

“Not long ago a woman came in to my shop...” As they made for Zhou Qianlin’s house, Lan Jue recounted the tale of Pearl, stealing the Chief

Minister's daughter, and the things that followed.

Hua Li listened aptly to the tale, but upon hearing the tale, he shook almost hard enough to tip the bicycle. His eyes nearly popped from his head.

"Hairy hippos in a jelly tub! You sure you got that right?! How the hell did you mix that up, after being with Hera for so long you'd figure you'd know what she looks like! What kind of moron are you?" Hua Li stayed true to his promise, and didn't laugh. He was mad!

"Hey, whose side are you on, I'm already miserable about this. Shouldn't you be here comforting me? Still just accusations and interrogations? Hera's dead... for three years do you know how I've been able to keep on? Living like a drunk man, like in a dream, or nightmare. Wallowing in regret and loss. She was gone so suddenly, and then to hear just as suddenly that she wasn't dead, do you think I'd be in my right mind? That I could keep a level head? Even you who've known me for so long, after three years you start to forget what one looks like. Zhou Qianlin and Hera are very, very similar. Exactly the same. I was nervous, excited, scared, she'd been drugged. I didn't know at the time, but when I found out it was already too late."

Hua Li was near enough the only person Lan Jue could be this honest and open with. He held nothing back.

"That's all well and good, but that's not what I mean," Hua Li said. "Using this opportunity you find yourself in to have her act as Hera's stand in, is. Sure she looks like her, but is it fair to her, or you, to act this way? To make her fill that whole in your heart?"

Lan Jue's smile was bitter. "If only it were that easy. You must know, in my heart Hera is absolutely irreplaceable. And what happened... was my fault. She wouldn't have..."

"Alright, no use dwelling on it," Hua Li interrupted. "I'm actually curious what this Hera impersonator is actually like. Knowing you I won't be sorry acting as her bodyguard for a while as well."

Lan Jue let out a sigh. "Maybe it really is as you say. Sometimes I do

forget she isn't Hera, it's happened more than once. Suddenly it's like she's here by my side again. I know she's just a substitute but, deep in my heart, I long for it to be real – for her to be Hera. But I figured this out quickly. I've been keeping my distance.”

“Are you scared you two will develop feelings for one another?”

“Maybe,” Lan Jue said. He found himself growing irrationally agitated at the thought.

Hua Li patted his back comfortingly, and said nothing further. In emotional situations like this, trying to persuade the heart otherwise was a pointless endeavor. The only cure was time enough to figure things out in your own head.

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The foot of Tian Mountain

An excessively fancy verti-car was parked at the base of the towering mountain. Richard, clad in a fine white suit, stood not far off. An arrangement of roses were clutched in his hands.

Suddenly, his eyes grew bright, and his left hand left the flowers to check his moist, greased-back hair. He shuffled forward a few steps, and gently called out: “Qianlin.”

Zhou Qianlin stopped, her expressionless face turned to Richard. “What are you still doing here? I’ve already made our situation quite clear. We could never work, nor would your family allow a soiled woman in to their midst.”

Richard regarded her in silence, sorrow clear in his eyes. “Qianlin,” he finally began, “I have to admit what you said hurt me deeply. When you said what you did, it was like I was drunk. I couldn’t think, but the pain... but I slowly sobered up. I thought about you, about the pressure you had to suffer, the wrongs you endured. What happened wasn’t your fault. The blame lays entirely with that despicable Zeus. It was he who ruined our union, ruined everything. No, you’ve done nothing wrong, and in my eyes

you're still that perfect, pure Zhou Qianlin. Qianlin, my love, my feelings haven't changed from the first day I met you. My love is just as strong. It doesn't matter what's happened. All of that is in the past. In our future, as a man, I will do whatever is in my power to protect you from whatever comes. No one will ever separate us. If you agree, I will persuade my family to throw you the most incredible wedding the universe has known. I'll bring the whole might of my family to bear, to protect you. You'll never again suffer the slightest harm."

Zhou Qianlin looked in to Richard's eyes, at the sincerity brightly living within them. The rims of her own began to redden.

Suddenly, she almost collapsed as she bent low before him. "Richard, I'm so sorry. I can't bear to see you like this. I made the wrong choice. I should never have accepted your proposal. If I hadn't you'd never have suffered all of this trouble. You're so kind-hearted, suffered so much, all because of me. But I'm so, so sorry Richard. I simply can't accept. I beg you to forget me."

She scrambled to her feet and ran from Richard, down the mountain. The young man stood frozen in surprise. He was at a loss, so much that he was struggling to understand what she'd said.

"Here!" Suddenly a voice arose from behind him.

Richard turned his head in time to spy an antique bicycle squealing as it came to a stop. Two gentlemen dismounted, among them the man who'd suffered the same fate as he at the hands of that awful Professor Tan, 'the Savage Goddess.'

The two moon looked at once another, Lan Jue's eyes falling to the roses clutched in Richard's hands. They then swept to the tearful Zhou Qianlin.

Hua Li looked wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the girl who looked so much like the lost Hera. His large sunglasses slid askew on his straight nose.

She really was a mirror image. It was no wonder A-Jue couldn't distinguish the two at first. She was nothing short of Hera's clone! Unlike Hera, she released no significant waves of energy from a discipline – but

otherwise they were alike in every way. Of course, Hera also possessed the ability to hide her powers from view as well. He couldn't fault Lan Jue; were it he who'd seen her first, he'd have mistaken her for Hera as well.

Zhou Qianlin ran directly to Lan Jue, pulling herself on to the back perch of the bicycle. Her voice, thick with sobs, called to him. "Get me out of here."

"Right." Lan Jue nodded, shot a glance at Richard, then began pedaling the bicycle down the mountain.

Richard slowly walked to where Zhou Qianlin had made her escape, in a daze. He stopped just at Hua Li's side.

"So that day, when he said he was there for his cousin... that really was Qianlin he was talking about?"

"Well shit! What am I supposed to do? A-Jue you unabashed sexist!" Hua Li, suddenly aware of his lot, shouted indignantly at the rapidly disappearing figured of Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin.

"Hey, have you ever been dumped before?" Richard turned his pitiful face towards Hua Li.

Hua Li shoved his sunglasses higher on his nose. "You're alone in that, brother."

Richard responded with a sigh. "I was going to give you a lift, but... well, the miserable only seek the company of the like-minded."

Hua Li's mood instantly changed. "I have been dumped, actually! A-Jue you rat-bastard... Come on brother, let's get out of here." He muttered curses as he made his way towards the verti-car. On the way here he'd spotted no means of public transportation.

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Lan Jue silently pedaled the bicycle, Qianlin bumping along behind. She, too, remained silent. The atmosphere was suffocating. The gentle breeze

set her long silken hair to fluttering, brushing against her sad face.

“I’m sorry. I brought all this trouble on you. I swear I’ll keep to my word, and be a competent bodyguard.” At last, Lan Jue broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Richard is a good man. I shouldn’t have hurt him,” Zhou Qianlin muttered, her words barely audible.

“It was I who hurt you both.”

Zhou Qianlin looked at his back. “You’re making up for it. Stick to your promise, and everything will be fine.”

“Alright. I’ll come get you every day, and bring you to school. While you’re studying, I’ll be there at the ready.” As the words left his mouth, he felt a sense of relaxation flood through him, as though a weight was lifting.

As the words reached Qianlin, even though the two were hardly close, it felt to her as though a gap had widened between them.

They rode in silence for the rest of the trip to the campus. As before, Lan Jue dropped her off at that corner not far from the front gates. Lan Jue watched her go, letting her gain some distance before pushing his bicycle towards the school.

“Lan Jue!” A figure rushed at him from the side, grabbing him by the throat.

“Ach! Hua Li, when did you learn how to magically teleport?!”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!”

“Quiet! Teachers are looking, I’ll call the teaching affairs office for help! I’ll tear off your disguise! Let go, I can’t breathe!”

Chapter 120: Teacher Benefits?

“Hey Professor Lan, did you hear? In two days the school’s going to separate us in to units and send us on a trip. It’s supposed to be a team-building exercise.” Jin Yan spoke excitedly to Lan Jue as he entered and sat at his desk.

“A trip?” In truth the word was rarely directly at Lan Jue, ever since he was small. Every outing he participated in had purpose, not for fun. He looked back at her blankly.

Jin Yan continued enthusiastically. “Yeah! Every year the school will send us out on a field trip. It’s different every time, with the cost and how long. This is the first one this year. I heard we’ll be leaving Skyfire for it’s closest cousin planet, Taihua. It’s the holiday paradise for all of the Eastern Alliance! It’s supposed to have the most beautiful beaches and lakes. They chose this planet specifically for it’s gorgeous scenery. The legislative assembly of the Eastern Alliance set rules to make sure it doesn’t get overdeveloped, so that it stays a vacation paradise. There’s supposed to be thousands of acres of amazing old-growth forests that are untouched, just chalk-full of beautiful colors and scents and sounds. We electives teachers have relatively fewer classes, so for something as nice as this, it’s certainly a first. We can finally go check it out for ourselves.”

In the face of Jin Yan’s overwhelming excitement, Lan Jue could only smile. Unfortunately, in his condition, it wasn’t conducive to his healing to leave.

“Professor Jin, is it possible to skip the trip?”

She blinked, taken aback. “Of course not. It’s a benefit given by the school, but team-building is a part of it. Only teachers with prior notice and special circumstances are exempt. What is it, you don’t want to go?”

“Oh, no. It’s just I’m so busy lately...”

Jin Yan gave him a playful ‘hmpf’. “Two classes a week and you say you’re busy? What’s this class on jewelry you’re teaching tomorrow anyway? I want to come listen again.”

Lan Jue smiled mysteriously. "It's a secret. You'll find out tomorrow."

As ever, the nearby Wang Hongyuan shot a glance at Lan Jue. His mouth turned in a scornful sneer.

Lan Jue excused himself from the office. Once outside he tapped a number in to his communicator.

"Jin Tao, half an hour after lunch. Tell Tang Xiao and meet me at our teaching spot."

"Got it, Teach," Jin Tao joyfully responded.

Lan Jue was continuously surprised at this guy. This kid really was insane! The last few times he'd been beaten bloody, and yet he was just as excited as the first time.

Jin Tao certainly was excited, and the reason was simple. He was seeing improvement.

Hua Li had beaten and healed them more times than he could remember that afternoon, so bad he didn't know what was hurt more by the end – his body or his mind. But this morning when he awoke, he clearly felt as though he'd made a good leap forward. Not just his discipline, but his physical strength and reaction time as well. These new aspects of his training had him completely forget the agony he'd lived through.

As usual, Lan Jue's meal was a simple one: rice, and vegetables. It was hard to make the plain plainer. Whenever he was forced to eat things less than his expectations, he always chose the simplest fair. After all, adepts at his level were able to assimilate energy from the world around them to act as nourishment. Eating was just the most primitive and original source of energy intake.

After lunch he took a brief walk around the NEU campus. Everywhere he went he spied students, heading this way and that. He didn't know why, but in this crowded and noisy environment he felt at peace. Comfortable. He found himself growing more and more accustomed to this school as time went on, even came to enjoy it. He almost felt like a teacher, and all was well.

He made his way to the two young gentlemen he called his disciples. Upon finding them, he saw two distinctly different expressions on their faces. Jin Tao was excited, and wasted no time in running forward to greet his teacher. Tang Xiao, on the other hand, was more complicated. There was a thirst for growth in his eyes, but there was also fear.

“So teach, what’re we doing today?” Jin Tao dramatically rolled up his sleeves. He looked almost eager to get beat on.

“Let’s talk first,” Lan Jue said. He patted Jin Tao’s shoulder, and they both walked towards Tang Xiao.

The overweight young man felt a trepidation rise up within him. Though he didn’t know from whence it came, he knew that this was the proverbial ‘calm before the storm.’ The Professor had something up his sleeve.

“Talk? Will talking improve my abilities?” Jin Tao spoke almost without thinking.

Lan Jue slapped his young pupil upside the head, frowning. “What are you in a rush for? ‘Good tools are essential things’ – you need proper preparation before you jump in.”

Jin Tao rubbed the back of his head. But instead of chastisement the look in his eyes was strange. This beating, he felt, was deserved.

“Jin Tao, Tang Xiao, I’ll ask you one more time. Do you truly, unequivocally desire to study under me? I’ll tell you candidly, up till now I haven’t really treated you as my disciples. You’ve only studied with me for a short time, but when we truly get started your methods of cultivation will be ten... a hundred times more difficult, more painful. So much that you’ll wish you were dead. I can’t guarantee results with this process – in the end, it comes down to your own effort, and tolerance.” Lan Jue spoke earnestly, fixing them each in turn with a steady gaze.

“Professor, I am not afraid. Pain means nothing, only strength. I’m ready to do whatever it takes.” Jin Tao scrambled to answer, without a hint of hesitation. “Don’t think I’m impulsive. I’ve thought very much about this. My dad told me once...

‘In this life you only have a set number of chances. If you grab them when they appear, you’ll succeed. If you don’t, you’ll be doomed to a life of mediocrity.’

I don’t want to die as someone ordinary. I want to be strong. I see how the talented look down on me, and I can’t help but want to beat them. I hate that look, that says because my Talent isn’t as strong as theirs that I’m somehow less. I hate that dismissive scorn.” Jin Tao’s voice was heavy with emotion, full of sincerity.

Lan Jue remained calm in the face of his stirring tirade. “And when you become strong? What then?”

The question took Jin Tao by surprise. He dropped his head and began to think. “When I’m strong…”

Lan Jue didn’t wait for an answer, turning his eyes to Tang Xiao. “And you? Do you still agree to be my student?”

“Professor,” he blurted, “may I first ask what level your Discipline is?”

“Ninth,” he answered simply.

Slap! Tang Xiao’s meaty fist slapped against the palm of his other hand. “I’m ready. Dumb-mutt said it, there are only so many opportunities in life. Everything takes work. Teacher, I’m ready to learn under you.”

Lan Jue responded with an easy smile. “Then answer the same question. When you’re strong, what will you do then?”

Tang Xiao’s response came right away. “Join the army! It’s been my dream since I was small, to be a soldier. Not to boast about being a protector of our land and people, but because I want to surround myself with the strong and capable. You say strong, but I don’t know how strong. Even then it doesn’t matter, no matter how strong I am I’ll always strive to get better. I don’t know if I’ll ever surpass you, but there’s no better place to get better than the army. My idol has shown me that, the An Lun Supersoldier!”

“A Soldier?” Jin Tao’s eyes lit up. “Nice! When I was small my dad always said I’d never have a future. I’ll be a soldier too! I also want to protect our

people and alliance. I'll go with you when you join. We'll see which one of us takes out more Northerners. Whadda ya think?"

"Heh, you've got it all wrong. You're too impetuous!" Tang Xiao's voice was flat, not menacing or teasing.

Lan jue's smile grew wider. "Not necessarily. Soldiers must be possessed of an indomitable will. For now it looks like the both of you have made improvements, but I warn you – when we begin, if either of you fail to keep up with our training schedule, you're done. If in the future either of you use what I teach you to do evil, to abuse the weak, I will personally destroy whatever power you have."

"Yes, sir!" Both shouted to their teacher in one voice.

"Professor," Jin Tao shouted immediately after, "so what are we going to learn today? As far as I see it, the first time you beat me I saw the biggest improvement, so what do you think? Go for it again?"

"You're circumstances are special," Lan Jue said to the eager young man. "For you, we'll need extreme measures. Because of your weak innate talent, they'll be needed if you ever hope to be strong. These will be difficult, and it means you'll have to suffer far worse than Tang Xiao."

Jin Tao was silent, but eventually spoke up. "So that means that under these extreme measures, I may one day overtake Fatty Tang?"

Lan Jue nodded in affirmation.

Jin Tao shot his rival a cantankerous stare. "Then what are we waiting for? I'm ready any time."

"If you agree," Lan Jue said, "then call your sister here. I'll need to speak with her. This can be dangerous, so she'll need to know. Maybe not life threatening, but it could very quickly all lead to failure..." he stopped there.

Tang Xiao still felt that fear within him as he watched his teacher. His attention shifted between him and his fellow disciple. Jin Tao wasted no time, agreed, and raced off to find his sister.

"Professor." Tang Xiao was clearly perturbed.

Lan Jue didn't answer immediately, instead making his way towards a nearby stone bench and taking a seat. He patted the spot beside him. Tang Xiao answered his teacher's call and settled beside him. His large backside occupied easily half of the entire bench.

"Tang Xiao, your Talent's natural ability to grow is very good. As you've grown older, your discipline has improved along with you. According to my own observations, perhaps becoming this large really has had some sort of effect. Your ability may very well have undergone a natural evolution. That is to say, with the proper stimulation and work, you could very well become a ninth-level Adept."

"Huh?" The previously uneasy Tang Xiao now stared wide-eyed at Lan Jue.

Lan Jue grinned at him. "Didn't expect that, did you."

Tang Xiao could only nod.

"However what I just said is also true. You're already over twenty. If you want to reach your full potential at your age, you're certainly going to undergo some significant hardships. But if you persist, you'll find that it'll all be worth it."

"Teacher," Tang Xiao timidly offered, "will there be any risk to my life?"

Chapter 121: Jin Yan's Trust

Lan Jue chuckled. "So afraid of death! In this aspect, you're much better suited than Jin Tao – thanks to your natural talent. You'll suffer, to be sure, but don't worry. Your path is considerably less dangerous. His Talent is simply too weak to match up to yours, unless we take steps to change that."

Tang Xiao's mouth hung agape. "Professor, surely you aren't saying that with these measures Jin Tao could reach ninth rank?"

Lan Jue fixed his pupil with a stare. "Interesting response."

"Man..." Tang Xiao almost looked dizzy from what he'd learned. "This guy's making out like a bandit. If you had a method to get someone to ninth rank almost anyone would be willing to give it a shot, no matter the dangers. To reach the very pinnacle of human ability! Dumb-Mutt sure as hell is a lucky one."

Lan Jue's response came in quiet, earnest tones. "What I require from you is simple; don't let him surpass you. If you do, it'll prove to me you don't have what it takes to be my pupil. Do you understand? Alright, that's all for you today. We'll begin tomorrow, and your training will officially commence. We'll find somewhere else to meet as well, away from the school. This place is no longer suitable."

"Yes, Professor." Tang Xiao rose, letting his respectful answer serve as goodbye.

But as he turned to leave, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Professor," he began, his voice low, "If one day I'm strong enough, do you think I'll be able to beat that man from yesterday?"

The question took Lan Jue by surprise, but it quickly became a smile. "If one day you're strong enough to do so, you'll have earned my pride and respect."

Tang Xiao's knuckles whitened as he tightened his fist. "It'll happen."

He quickly made his way from the small yard.

“Oi, this fatty. He actually wants to beat on me.” An indignant voice arose from nearby.

“What’s wrong with having such lofty ambitions? If there does one day come a time when you can’t best my pupils, you’ll probably have to give up the title of Poseidon.” Lan Jue hadn’t expected the intrusion, and grinned broadly.

“He’s dreaming,” Hua Li muttered in agitation. “But it looks like you’re really gearing up to train these guys properly!”

Lan Jue nodded. “If what Piao Hong said was true, then we ninth ranked Talents have a responsibility to all of humanity.”

“Should we wait here a while before we respond to them?”

Resolution shone in Lan Jue’s eyes, and nodded in agreement. “What are personal gains and losses when the fate of our galaxy lies in the balance? Moreover, in the last three years I’ve done nothing to improve myself. Thor will also need some polishing. When this competition they’ve concocted is over, I’ll really need to make myself stronger. I can’t keep losing out to him.”

“Good! Then we’ll train together. Without you trying to run ahead I won’t have the motivation to improve myself.” Hua Li stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels, the picture of leisurely cool. Of course, this was somewhat offset by his giant facemask and ridiculous sunglasses.

It was then Jin Tao returned with the clearly confused Jin Yan. Upon seeing that it was indeed Lan Jue upon the bench, she visibly relaxed some.

“Professor Lan,” she greeted, smiling.

Lan Jue rose and returned her greeting. “Hello Professor Yan. I apologize for being bold in asking Jin Tao to call you here. It is something important we have to discuss. I felt it only prudent that I consult with you and his family, as close relatives, before any further action was taken.”

“Professor Lan, don’t frighten me,” Jin Yan stated. “What could be so important? Dumb-Mutt! What terrible thing did you do this time?” It

appeared Jin Tao pulled her here directly without explanation – probably because he wasn't sure himself of what his teacher was planning. He wouldn't be able to explain it to her clearly even if he knew.

Lan Jue hastily waved his hands. "He didn't do anything wrong. Professor Jin. Take it easy, and listen carefully to what I have to say. I've decided to take Jin Tao on as my personal disciple."

Jin Yan looked at him in surprise, but it quickly changed to joy. "This is excellent news! This kid's always needed a good guide. You probably didn't notice, Professor, but that first time in your class I noticed how engrossed Jin Tao was in your lecture. I knew from that instant you'd be the only one to get through to him. Frankly speaking neither me or my parents have ever really had any success with him, we just hoped he'd grow to be a useful member of society. If you've agreed to teach him then that's amazing."

This time it was Lan Jue who was struck silent. He looked at Jin Tao. 'Dumb-Mutt' resolutely held his gaze.

No wonder he rushed headlong towards any opportunity. Even his family, the people who cared for him, expected nothing to come of his life. As a man, an adult, so much was hidden away, buried within him as a result of his treatment. Behind his flippant nature, there was deep insecurity – and an iron stubbornness.

"I plan to train his Discipline, Professor Jin. But during the training process he's likely to encounter some risks. I cannot guarantee his safety. Of course, I'll do everything in my power to protect him, and reduce the risk of harm. This is why I needed to speak with you. If you all agree to have him study with me, he'll probably have to leave school for a time as we work on his foundation. From there he'll rise quickly. It'll take about three months. We'll say he needs sick leave. This, too, will require you and your family's agreement." Lan Jue spoke clearly and slowly to ensure Jin Yan understood the gravity.

"Sick leave? Three months?" Questions were clearly written on Jin Yan's face. After a moment, she resolutely nodded her head. "You're right! Jin

Tao absolutely needs work, from the bottom up. You'll need to start from the beginning. Professor Lan, I'm very sorry for all the trouble you're going through to help my brother. This is no problem, I'll have him set for sick leave as soon as possible. If it weren't for our family connections he'd never even have made it in to the school, much less have graduated. Professor, thank you so much."

Jin Yan bowed earnestly before Lan Jue. "I'll take him now." She grabbed Jin Tao and pulled him away without another word. Lan Jue watched them go, flabbergasted.

"She agreed awful quick," Lan Jue muttered to himself.

Hua Li's faint voice intruded on his soliloquy. "Sounds like she chose not to hear about that whole 'dangerous' thing. The kid hasn't taken anything serious in his life, a big disappointment to his family. It's also pretty clear this lady fancies you. Unconditional trust from the onset."

"Stop spreading rumors," Lan Jue hissed.

"Pfft," came Hua Li's dismissive response. "When it comes to reading people, you got nothing on me. And I guess I have to admit, if I weren't here you'd be an attractive option."

Lan Jue twisted to look back. "A-Li, you hide behind my lack of strength, without fear of repercussion for your obstinance."

This caused Hua Li to chuckle. "And when you recovered whadda ya gunna do? Think you can take me on in a fair fight?"

Lan Jue shook his fist in his direction. "When I'm better we'll give it a shot and see. Ah, right, and in two days the school is organizing a teachers trip to Taihua. I don't think I can get out of it. I doubt you, as a late-arriving student, will be able to take leave either."

Hua Li's brows knitted in concern. "You'll leave Skyfire? You sure you can't get out of it?"

"What," Lan Jue said, "You afraid they'll hunt me down or something?"

"Your discipline has only partially recovered," Hua Li said. "If you really

do run in to something, you'll be in significant danger."

Lan Jue lifted his left hand, revealing the glowing Thor's Promise. "Don't worry, Thor's with me. His damage isn't so serious any longer. More or less finished with the repairs. And Taihua's close, there's no need for worry. And besides, if he can't handle the fight, what's stopping me from running? The whole thing should only be a couple days. And there's another reason you can't come with me. Tomorrow I plan to give Jin Tao the Fantascia Genetica decoction. You've got to help me keep an eye on him, to make sure nothing happens."

Hua Li lapsed in to quiet thought for a moment. "Fine. I suppose it's unlikely you'll run in to trouble on Taihua. Just be careful. I'll have someone erase any trace of you leaving Skyfire. Go early, come back soon."

Lan Jue nodded. "I know my limits."

"So if you got nothing going in the afternoon, how about we head back? We can get to Dreamburg ahead of schedule, that'd be good."

Suddenly, Zhou Qianlin's figure emerged through his memories. He nodded. "That's fine. Let's head home. If something happens I'll come back."

Hua Li and Lan Jue made their way back to Skyfire Avenue, proceeding immediately to the warehouse and the simulators stored within.

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"Your reply?" Piao Hong was a little surprised to see Zeus standing before her. It had only been a day, and already the Four Divine Monarchs had an answer for her. The prize pool was massive, to be sure, but for any god-team to participate in an open competition before the three alliances – and thus revealing the scope of their abilities – was taboo to say the least.

"We agree, but not for DreamNet, and not for the reward," Zeus replied. "It's because of what you said yesterday. We hope what you said is true... otherwise what will befall the Guardians will be terrible. In addition, as partial payment for our agreement I hope you can assist me with

something. It shouldn't be anything DreamNet can't handle."

"Speak." Piao Hong didn't even ask, immediately ready to offer assistance.

Zeus lifted a hand, and a beam of light floated towards Piao Hong. A data-stream. More specifically, a video.

"Help me find the whereabouts of this woman. She deceived me once, and took something she shouldn't have."

Chapter 122: Lan Jue's Doubt

“Alright. I’ll send new as soon as possible. I must confirm once again – you two represent the Monarchs as a whole, and confirm that you agree to participate in the open competition?”

“Yes, we will participate.” Zeus and Poseidon each made their affirmations.

“Thank you.” Piao Hong, Guardian of DreamNet, a god-ranked pilot herself, actually bowed low to the two Monarchs. “Now that you’ve agreed, we’ll begin advertising. Our plan is already in place. We’ll begin by introducing you, and at the same time this competition. It will resound to every corner of the Three Alliances.”

“Good.” Now that the two young men had agreed, there was no further room for hesitation.

“The decoction you desire will arrive at your DreamNet delivery location tomorrow morning. You’ll find it enclosed within. In thanks for your support of DreamNet, and your defense of humanity, we’ve sent a second vial as well.”

“Excellent.” Lan Jue was blunt, but thankful. It was an overly generous gift to give two of them. A single draught of Fantascia Genetica was comparable in value to an s-ranked power gem. Even despite being a product of the relatively rich Western Alliance, only a dozen were made a year. It wasn’t something that could be mass produced.

ζ

Dusk was approaching.

Lan Jue was clad in a pure white track suit. He waited at their normal corner, just outside of the NEU with one foot on the pedal of his antique bicycle. Eventually he spied Zhou Qianlin approach in her school uniform. Richard was not in tow. Apparently he’d abandoned his efforts.

Zhou Qianlin arrived and settled on the bike. "Let's go."

"Yup." He waited for her to get settled before pushing off. They glided down the road.

"Zhou Qianlin."

"Hm?" She raised her brows at his back.

"In two days," he began, "the school has organized an outing for the teachers. I'll have to go with them, away from Skyfire for a while. I'll have someone else pick you up in the interim. They'll also be able to protect you. Is that alright? We'll add the time to contract when I return, just keep track of what I owe."

"It's fine." She shook her head. "You go ahead. This is normal circumstance for the university, so I won't add it to your time. And there's no need to find someone else to look after me, I'll just have Tang Mi close by for a few days."

"Oh." Lan Jue didn't press the matter.

The bicycle continued to roll along, casting a long shadow. "Are you headed to the old-people's home today?"

"Yup."

"I'll go with you," he said.

"With me?" She sounded surprised.

He nodded. "It's a good place to clear your head. Doing good deeds isn't solely for the benefit of others, it's good for oneself as well. Seeing that smile from helping people is a reward all its own."

"Alright." For the first time in what felt like ages, a smile crept upon Zhou Qianlin's pretty face.

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“Ey? This guy with Qianlin again. He’s a good fella. Hey there son, what’s your name?”

“It’s nice to meet you miss. My name is Lan Jue.”

“Ah, ah... Lan Jue. Nice name.”

Their time in the old people’s home passed quickly. By the time they’d finished, however, it had already grown dark outside.

“Wait for just a minute. I’m going to go in and check on Granny Bess again for a moment.” Zhou Qianlin nodded to Lan Jue, rolling down her sleeves.

“No worries, I’ll go with you.”

“Alright, but no talking,” she replied. “Granny Bess likes things quiet.”

“Alright.”

The two walked up the stairs side by side. Once they reached the landing, Zhou Qianlin led the way down the hall to the final room. The walkway was already dim.

Lan Jue stuffed his hands in his pockets, the very picture of casual. He walked a few steps behind Qianlin. Long, dark hair. Tall, slender body. She was beautiful, and yet at any moment one could sense the goodness in her. She was indeed a fine young woman. But he’d hurt her, and in that moment guilt flooded through him. Lan Jue quietly reiterated his promise to protect her, no matter what.

Zhou Qianlin walked along the hallway. She heard his steady gait behind her. To her it was like she had a lofty mountain at her back in support. A blanketing sensation of comfort and security surrounded her. In that moment she wouldn’t have minded if that hallway went on forever.

But, unfortunately, it did indeed come to an end. Two short, quiet raps on the door elicited a raspy response from within. “Come in.”

Zhou Qianlin carefully opened the door, Lan Jue at her heels. The room was a sight darker than the hallway. A closet, a bed, and a desk where all the comforts that could be found within. A single lamp upon the desk was

the sole source of light.

An old woman was settled on a stool beside the desk. White hair as pure as snow fell down her back. It looked carefully groomed. In comparison to most of the elderly, who abandon meticulous self-grooming in their golden years, this woman still appeared dedicated to the art. She was thin, and was clad in a deep pink suit of fine material. Her clear eyes stared out of the nearby window, watching nothing, and yet appearing as though they could see all.

She didn't turn to look their way, remaining precisely as she was.

Zhou Qianlin tenderly approached, doing her best to make not a sound. She deftly made her way to the woman's side and took up the empty cup on the desk. She returned to the door and quietly spoke to Lan Jue. "I'm going to head out and get her a glass of hot water. Don't alarm her. I'll be back in a moment. Granny Bess needs to have her clothes replaced every day, and I've already cleaned tomorrow's outfit. Wait here while I go get those as well and put them away."

"Got it," he quietly replied.

Zhou Qianlin left Lan Jue in the dim room. He stood silent, pleasantly awaiting her return and watching the meticulously kept older woman. As he waited he felt something strange. He didn't know why, but he sensed an odd aura around the woman. There weren't any clear pulses of Discipline coming from her, but an almost pervasive sense of 'cleanliness' surrounded her. It was a purity, from the inside out.

From where he stood Lan Jue could only see the woman's side, and her eyes. As he looked at her clear eyes, he once again felt strangely moved. It was a mysterious sensation, one he hadn't felt in a while. The first time he had, it was when he'd first arrived in Skyfire Avenue and came face to face with the Keeper. His aura, though, hadn't been pure. It was... profound. The sense he got from this woman was different, but he knew intrinsically that this woman was different.

Grace Hospital really had such a special woman under their care?

It was just then the woman slowly turned her eyes to Lan Jue. He kept

the gaze, nodding his greetings.

She said nothing, but her eyes brightened as they met his. She pressed a finger to her lips, imploring silence. Lan Jue understood, and nodded again.

She relaxed, and turned again to stare outside. Her frail figure began to move then, as she lifted her hands. She gently began to stroke her long, white hair.

Zhou Qianlin had wasted no time, and returned quickly with the woman's glass of water and fresh clothes. She placed the folded garments in her closet.

"Granny Bess, your clothes have been cleaned and placed in the closet. Get to bed early, ok? Remember to eat dinner. The others have been telling me you haven't been eating. That's really not good for you. You need your nutrients to keep healthy, yeah? You're already so thin. If you need anything just tell me."

Zhou Qianlin assumed she was lost in memories of bygone days, as she often was. But as she finished, the old woman suddenly turned her face to stare at Lan Jue. Her aquiline nose twitched ever so slightly.

"Bring me a glass of red wine. You smell of burgundy."

Lan Jue was taken aback by the accusation. It'd be days since he'd had any wine. How could this old woman possibly smell the burgundy he'd enjoyed so long ago? Indeed very strange! Burgundy was possibly the most important location for former era wine making, the Romanee-Conti he'd had so long ago at the Wine Master's chief among its exports.

"Alright." Lan Jue answered easily. He couldn't sense her power, but he was even more convinced now that she was considerably more than she appeared.

After the exchange the two young people left the hospital. It wasn't long before they were once more quietly rolling along the street on Lan Jue's bicycle.

"You can't be bringing Granny Bess any wine, you know. She's an old

woman, how can she be drinking alcohol?" Zhou Qianlin spoke to his back from her seat on the bicycle.

Lan Jue shook his head. "No... this Granny Bess is no ordinary woman, I think. You don't feel anything's off about her?"

Zhou Qianlin gave him a strange look. "She likes quiet and cleanliness. She doesn't talk much with the others, but she always takes care of herself. Every time I come she's looking out the window. I don't know what she's thinking about, but I do feel rather peaceful whenever I'm around her. No matter what's troubling me, it's better when I see her. Granny Bess hasn't been at the hospital long, so that's all I know really."

"That's already quite a lot," Lan Jue said. "Whether or not she's your average elderly sort, she doesn't seem to care much for the world around her. I'll bring some wine for her next time. This discipline and fear of disorder of hers, something must really have their hooks in her."

Lan Jue went directly to Zhou Qianlin's home on the mountain and dropped her off. He then proceeded back to the Avenue.

Tomorrow he'd be teaching another course, and in preparation he chose something from his shop as a display. He then retired to his apartments.

After dinner Lan Jue left to his room, and sat cross-legged on the bed. Hua Li sat behind him. The air rippled around the entire room as though they were under water. A pale blue light washed over everything. Everything was saturated with the sense of gentle power. The source of the blue light was Hua Li himself, and as the light issued from him, it soaked Lan Jue through to his bones.

Chapter 123: Have Someone Special

On the surface, Lan Jue didn't look any different from any other man. His powers of thunder and lightning were well hidden, constrained. They remained inside, as Hua Li's mastery of water penetrated Lan Jue to help him heal.

An hour later, Hua Li allowed his powers to dissipate. He let out a long breath, the sound strange, like the sound of crashing waves. The sound was not loud, but it washed through the room to the point where if one closed their eyes, they'd swear they were at the seaside.

"Not bad, you're recovering quickly. At this speed, by the time you go off to that teacher's retreat, you'll be about thirty or forty percent back to normal. You should be able to handle anything that comes your way." Hua Li shuffled off the bed.

Lan Jue followed suit, a small smile on his face. "These last three years I've undergone almost no training or cultivation. Luckily, at our levels Talent rises somewhat on it's own. Sitting idle for three years may not have been such a bad thing. Before, my improvement was so quick it didn't allow my foundation to settle as strong as it should have. This downtime might have solved that problem. Had I kept it up, my level would certainly be higher than it is now, but with an unstable foundation it'd sure to have an adverse affect."

"Pfft, stop giving yourself excuses. You've allowed my own discipline to catch up with yours. There's no good reason for that. You gotta hurry up and get back at it. Whatever the circumstances of next month's competition, we absolutely mustn't lose."

Lan Jue chuckled. "Of course we wont! By the way, how long until A-Cheng's supposed to get here? Have you heard from him?"

"Another few days," Hua Li said. "He's coming from Planet Luo, and it's not close. Not to mention the hostilities between the Northern and Eastern Alliances makes inter-alliance travel troublesome."

Lan Jue nodded. "So about when I come back from this teaching thing,

he'll be here. Your lady friend?"

Hua Li's handsome face grew stern. "Lady friend my ass. Stop talking nonsense. Ours is a simple platonic relationship. Just a friendship!"

Lan Jue smirked at his friend's discomfort. "Alright, take it easy. You think I don't know what's going on with you? How long has Mo Xiao been following you around? At least a dozen years. In all that time there hasn't been spotted one other woman at your side. A beauty like that at your elbow and you say there's nothing going on. Who'd believe it. Not to mention the way she looks at you is the same way Hera used to look at me in the beginning. You think I'm making this up?"

Hua Li suddenly grew impetuous and whiny. "Alright, alright! Stop flapping your gums about it. You gotta promise me, A-Jue, not to go on like that in front of her. Not on your life! She's sensitive. I'm her best friend. She's like a sister, but really there's nothing else going on."

Lan Jue raised his brows in surprise. "Nothing, really? Mo Xing's been following you around ever since you were young. Always your agent. Now, CEO of Gobi Entertainment. Frankly speaking you're more a figurehead. All Gobi business is run through other people, helping you to get things done. She likes you that much, all that work, and this doesn't get your heart pumping at all?"

Hua Li's eyes slowly lifted as Lan Jue spoke, as though he'd struck a cord. Silence followed Lan Jue's question, but after a moment he spoke up. "A-Jue, later we aren't to speak about this, especially about Mo Xing. In my heart there's always been someone special, but it's not Mo Xing. I know what I owe her. But those emotions, that I can't give. Like you with Hera. Even though she's no longer here, your love hasn't faltered."

It was clear to Lan Jue that Hua Li's mood was serious, and sad. He dropped the topic. "Alright, we won't talk about it. Right, A-Li, tomorrow I'll be bringing Jin Tao back to the Avenue with me. We'll need to do some preparation, then it'll be time for him to take the Fantascia Genetica. I'll need you to help look after him while I'm gone."

Hua Li had recovered quickly from the funk their previous conversation

had put him in. “Don’t worry about it. The first stages of the decoction require strong nourishment and support from the body. In this I’m stronger than you are. It’s the later, more critical stages where your power will be necessary. If the two of us are here and he still fails to protect himself from the decoction, it means he didn’t have the willpower. Now, though, I’m tired. I’m off to bed.”

With that declaration, he marched outside and flopped directly onto the sofa.

As he watched Hua Li leave in the wake of their exchange, he felt a little bewildered. A-Li had a love interest? It was the first he’d heard of it. With his appearance, and the world he lived in, what sort of woman must she be to have moved him so deeply? Who could be better than Mo Xiao?

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Early Morning.

Lan Jue arrived again at the mountain, waiting to meet Zhou Qianlin and bring her to school. Again, he spied Richard’s thin figure not far away. After throwing his fit yesterday, Hua Li hadn’t accompanied him this time.

Richard hadn’t arrived by verti-car today, and had chosen to wear a track suit in lieu of his formal attire from yesterday. In fact, he’d actually arrived in much the same fashion as Lan Jue – by bike. The old thing even looked similar to the professor’s own. Such an antique, and in just a short time he’d managed to find one for himself!

“Hey cousin!” Richard waved affably in his direction.

Lan Jue pulled up beside him, pointing at the bicycle. “What’s this?”

Richard chortled. “Now that I know my lady likes bicycles, I’ve brought one with me to meet up with her. Eh, cousin... this is a family matter – you know, between husband and wife. I’d appreciate it if you don’t get involved.”

Lan Jue simply couldn’t believe what he was wearing. This guy’s dedication was inhuman! Shaking his head, he pushed his bicycle to the side, out of the way.

Richard watched him move aside, his brow scrunched.

A short time later Zhou Qianlin come walking down from the mountain top in her school uniform. There she saw Richard, in his track suit and pushing his bicycle, and was struck speechless. Still, she hardly missed her stride. She made her way without pause to Lan Jue's side and hopped up on to her familiar spot.

Lan Jue looked at Richard, shrugged, and pedaled away.

Richard would not be denied, and in good spirits he leapt on to his bike and gave chase. He caught up in short order. "Qianlin, you're probably thinking my bike isn't as new as you're cousin's, right? I've already sent people out to see if they can find one in better condition. When they do how about you take a spin on mine, what do you think? That way we don't always have to trouble your cousin! Or maybe you can sell me yours, cuz. Name a price and you'll have it."

Zhou Qianlin's sculpted brows grew taught. "Richard, I've already told you a dozen times. We're just not going to happen. Stop coming here. Alright? When you're like this you make me feel worse. I just can't be with you."

Richard looked shocked. "Qianlin, don't say such things in front of your cousin. If you want to talk, let's go home and talk about it."

Qianlin only shook her head, and refused to speak further.

Richard pedaled harder, pushing his bike forward until he was beside Lan Jue. He smiled as he spoke to him. "Hey, so how much you think for me to buy that bike from you?"

"Sorry, not for sale," Lan Jue responded.

Richard opened his mouth to speak further, but Lan Jue cut him off. "Look out." His left hand shot out to grab Richard's arm and yanked the younger man towards himself. Richard was slow to react, but quick enough to keep his feet. Luckily his center of gravity had adjusted enough to shuffle him to the side. His bike was not so lucky, and dashed against the large tree in his path. The bike rebounded and tumbled to the floor,

it's front tire ruined.

Clearly the young man had failed to pay attention to the road, obsessed as he was with Qianlin and her 'cousin'. Lan Jue could only shake his head as he pedaled on. Richard stood beside his mangled bike, looking dejected.

"That one is stubborn. He sure is trying to do right by you, though." Lan Jue chuckled ruefully to himself.

Zhou Qianlin, however, replied in frosty tones. "If you're thinking of telling me to get together with him, you better keep your mouth shut. You are the last person with any right to speak about it."

Lan Jue smirked bitterly. Indeed, he was the one who ruined their chance at a family. What right did he have to say anything at all?

"I apologize."

Zhou Qianlin chose silence, and only nodded in response. Her eyes had grown noticeably more red at the edges.

Suddenly, much to Lan Jue's surprise, she wrapped her arms around his waste and buried her face in his back. The sudden motion almost caused him to lose control of the bike, and a jolt of shock ran through him. Before he could speak, he felt her thin figure trembling behind him. He didn't have the heart to break her grip.

He continued, quiet, unsure of what to say.

A few kilometers short of the campus, Zhou Qianlin finally separated her hands. She settled back on the back of the bike like nothing had happened. By the time they reached their normal corner, it was as though nothing had happened. Her face revealed no expression and, as she pulled her backpack unto her shoulders, she made for the university gate without speaking a word to her bodyguard.

For a moment Lan Jue watched her go. He gently patted his forehead, then began pushing his bike towards the school as well.

As he approached, the air whipped around him as a fire-red surface car raced passed, quick as the wind. It was quick, but nimble. Despite the

numerous pedestrians dotting the street, the car was able to wave between them without causing any danger.

Vroosh! The car came to an abrupt stop before the gate as effortlessly as it had arrived. The doors spread open, and charming figure stepped out.

She had long, fiery red hair and legs that went on for ages – Tang Mi. Immediately following, a second car raced up and stopped. This one was white, and from within stepped forth a young woman with long purple hair.

She was just as pretty as the young woman she arrived with. Small features, pale skin, and purple hair. Full of vitality, and full of allure.

It could be said Zhou Qianlin was as beautiful as a spotless snow lotus. If that were true, Tang Mi was the fiery appeal of a rose, and this new girl was the impish violet.

Chapter 124: Shui Zhongdie

“Hah! Little Butterfly, you lose again!” Tang Mi called teasingly towards the young woman from beside her car.

The violet-haired girl sniffed dismissively. “Only because I don’t have a death wish. You know what they say; those with great courage usually have something very wrong with their head.” She shook her own, causing her shimmering hair to flow like water as she walked towards the school entrance. Her car started and slowly made it’s way in to the distance on autopilot.

Tang Mi chuckled anew. She bounded to her friend’s side, opening her mouth to speak further, but then saw Lan Jue making for the campus entrance. Her eyes brightened, and she waved emphatically. “Professor Lan!”

Lan Jue stopped, and nodded politely to her.

She left ‘Little Butterfly’s’ side to quickly make her way to the etiquette instructor. “Hey Professor. You’ve got class today, right? I’ll definitely be there this afternoon to listen. What sort of things are we going to be learning about jewelry? Power gems?”

Lan Jue smiled at her enthusiasm. “Of course not. We’ll only be discussing jewelry used to accessorize. I’m pretty sure the school has another class specifically dedicated to power gems. I’m just an electives teacher, how could I teach such things?”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Tang Mi stated categorically. “As far as I’ve seen you’re practically an encyclopedia.”

Butterfly saw her friend stop suddenly, and race off to speak with the young man. Her curiosity was understandably piqued. There were no two closer friends in the school, and Butterfly knew all about Tang Mi – and her famous temper. Yet here she was speaking to the man. Who was he? A teacher? Lan-something? How did she not know of him?

As she considered the scene, she swept her eyes over the professor.

As ever, Lan Jue had arrived for class in a suit. However, in contrast to his last arrival, this suit was considerably more sedate. It was a grey two-piece, with a simple shirt inside. The material of the suit was fine, and was covered in a checkered pattern composed of light-blue thread.

Butterfly eventually arrived at Tang Mi's side. "Hey, aren't you going to introduce me to your boyfriend?"

Tang Mi only shot her an exasperated look. "Professor Lan, this is my classmate. We study in the same group. Her name is Shui Zhongdie. I call her Butterfly."

Lan Jue gave Shui Zhongdie a gentlemanly nod. "Hello," he greeted, "I'm Professor Lan. I'm an electives teacher here. You have a very interesting name."

Curiosity was clear in the young girl's eyes. "An electives teacher? What do you teach?"

"Mostly how to live a more cultured life. The class is Etiquette 101."

"Etiquette? Well, that sounds interesting." Shui Zhongdie shot him a pretty smile.

Many of the students coming and going from the campus entrance stopped to watch as two of the school's famed beauties stood speaking with him. For many of the young men, their envious eyes glared daggers at the handsome teacher.

"You two should go ahead and get to class. If you're interested come listen in on my lecture this afternoon." It was evident Lan Jue didn't want to spend too much time out in the open speaking to the two young women. In truth, he was still preoccupied with memories of his ride here, that trembling figure clutching him tightly from the back of his bicycle.

"You should come along with me to the class," Tang Mi said to her friend.

Shui Zhongdie emphatically nodded her head. "Sure! I'll go with you this afternoon and give it a listen."

Lan Jue bade the two girls farewell and left for the campus. Shui Zhongdie stood by Tang Mi's side and watched him go. "You're acting weird, is this professor really that good?"

Tang Mi's reply was almost a whisper. "Actually he's really interesting. He's really a man of high quality. Only..."

"Only what," Shui Zhongdie urged.

"Only he's not that strong in combat." Tang Mi quietly elaborated. "A few days ago that savage goddess dragged him off to the offices for some reason, without a fight. If only he were stronger, then he'd be absolutely perfect."

The purple-haired girl giggled. "Tang Mi, are we developing a little crush? Not an easy thing for a guy to catch your attention. I guess he's handsome. By the way, after a few days Gobi Entertainment's going to have a press conference for Poseidon's new album. There's supposed to be a concert after. Are you going?"

"Of course! I already have someone out buying tickets for me. Ten VIP tickets no less. And you can be my entourage."

"Woo! Long live Tang Mi! I love you!"

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By the time Lan Jue arrived at the office, Jin Yan and Jin Tao were already waiting for him.

"Professor Lan," Jin Yan offered in her customary greeting. Jin Tao stood beside her, a zealous light in his eyes. To Lan Jue's surprise, the young man's trademark mohican was gone. Now at that was left was a buzz-cut head of black hair. Infinitely better put together than before.

"In a little while I'll be leaving Jin Tao in your care." Her words were soft, deliberate. A sense of worry pervaded where yesterday there was none. Her response yesterday had been one of impulse, excited at the prospect of

an opportunity for her brother. But later, once she'd calmed and thought about Lan Jue's warnings, how could she not be a little anxious?

Lan Jue offered her a comforting smile. "You don't need to worry, Professor Jin. No matter the result, I'll take good care of him. I'll make sure he stays out of danger."

Jin Yan let out a small sigh of relief. "Alright then. Where are you planning to take him for his studies? Will we be able to come and see him?"

"Sis, I'm an adult. There's no need for you to come look in on me." Jin Tao stood at his sister's side, sounding impatient.

Lan Jue shot him a glance, and instantly the young man fell in to a complacent silence.

"Everything has its conquerer," Jin Yan said, looking at her younger brother, "And it looks like you are Jin Tao's, Professor Lan."

Lan Jue offered her a smile. "At first, for a short time it's best if you don't come to visit him. He'll need to direct all his effort and attention to training. After a month should be fine to come by. By then I'm confident you'll see a significant change in Jin Tao. He'll be studying with me in Skyfire Avenue – he won't be leaving the planet."

"Alright. Thank you very much." Once more she offered her heartfelt thanks to the man who was to train her brother. But here, she stopped suddenly as though she'd just thought of something. She looked at him with confusion. "Professor, did you... did you say Skyfire Avenue?"

Lan Jue only smiled. It was clear to him the young woman was still apprehensive about the arrangement. Revealing where her younger brother would be was likely to have a positive effect.

The pretty woman chewed her red lip, looking at Lan Jue with a strange mixture of feelings on her face. "You live on the Avenue?"

He didn't reply. He didn't need to.

Jin Yan took a breath. When she spoke again, her voice was resolute.

“Well Professor, he’s all yours.”

Lan Jue turned to his young pupil. “Come attend my class this afternoon. Afterwards you’ll be leaving with me. Have you already put together everything you want to bring with you?”

“Everything’s ready.” Jin Tao remained as stoic and determined as moments before. He, after all, had no notion of Skyfire Avenue or what awaited him there.

“By the way,” Jin Yan said, smiling towards Lan Jue, “we got the information from the head off yesterday. We’ll be leaving in a couple days for our cooperation training on Taihua. I’ve already helped you sign your name.”

In fact he’d already forgotten about it. Since stirring from his languid stupor there had been much on his proverbial plate. He’d already taken a month off after his first class, so skipping out on this was out of the question. But, at least Professor Yan was helpful.

“Thank you very much for that,” he replied. “We’ll be leaving from the school on that day right?”

Jin Yan nodded. “That’s right! We should have somewhere around forty teachers leaving together, including all of the electives teachers. Even the mecha instructors. We’re leaving early in the morning, eight o’clock at the big gates.”

“Got it.”

The afternoon came quickly. He made for his class, and as he pushed open the door to enter his heart skipped a beat. His class held even more students than the last time, the majority of them young women.

Jin Tao and Tang Xiao were also in attendance, seated squarely in the front row. However it was the three pretty faces at their side that surprised him. Beside Tang Xiao was the first, his vivacious sister Tang Mi. Beside her, Zhou Qianlin. The next seat down was home to the purple-haired girl he’d met earlier that day, Shui Zhongdie.

A host of earnest glances floated behind them as the young male

students shuffled to get closer seats. Though it may have been a blow to his estimation of his class, clearly the amount of students present and the arrival of these three girls were inexorably tied.

Hua Li was spotted, once again in the corner he'd chosen from the last time. He'd elected to remove his hat, but the face mask remained in place to keep his identity secret.

Director Wu was not among the listeners, but Jin Yan was as promised. Beside her, in place of the director, was the dance teacher Wang Hongyuan. His beady eyes watched Lan Jue with interest.

With all the people gathered, the place was certainly bustling. Lan Jue swept his eyes over the gathering.

"Hey Professor!" Tang Mi waved at him, and Lan Jue smiled pleasantly back at her.

In the next instant, his and Qianlin's eyes met. It was only for a moment, not too long for fear the other students would notice. Afterwards Lan Jue felt the spirit-caller gem grow warm.

I didn't have any classes in the afternoon. Tang Mi dragged me here.

Lan Jue smirked, just enough for her to notice. Her cheeks reddened. The brief pang of embarrassment she felt could be seen in her eyes.

Compared to Zhou Qianlin next to her, Shui Zhongdie's expression was dauntless. Her eyes were the same color as her long hair, a royal purple that was gorgeous to behold. Of course Lan Jue knew well that no normal person was born with eyes like those. It must have had to do with her discipline.

The three great beauties of the school sat dead center, and it was as though a great ray of light was shining down upon them. Many of the students who'd come this time were attending for the first time, so the class was appreciably more chaotic than normal. This was compounded by the lack of Director Wu's intimidating presence. It was certainly a test of Lan Jue's competency. And there in the back, with his shining eyes, Wang Hongyun watched and hoped he would fail.

Chapter 125: Diamonds

Lan Jue did not stop to greet the gathered students. He made his way towards the podium, and placed the tray he'd brought with him atop it. Next, he fumbled through his coat until he pulled out a small cloth pouch, removing its contents. He placed this upon the tray.

He spun around to face the board, and scrawled something across its surface: Who wants to win a prize?

At first only the students in the front noticed, but word quickly spread. Attention turned to Lan Jue, and the volume decreased.

He continued to write: It's too noisy to hold the raffle.

Quiet washed over the room. Wang Hongyun was curious at the promise of a raffle. It was certainly a novel approach. It was quiet now, he thought, but these were college students – stickers and candy weren't going to cut it. If the prize wasn't good enough in their estimation, he was going to have a classroom of angry students on his hands.

The dance instructor had only been teaching a few years, but he knew more or less the mind of the elective student. He'd struggled with classroom control at the outset himself.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Lan Jue began. He stepped from behind the podium, and bowed to the gathered student body.

Jin Tao was the first to stand – a show of respect for his professor. Tang Xiao was half a second behind. But it wasn't until after the three beauties followed their example that the other students joined in. Soon nearly the whole class was on its feet.

"Hello, Professor Lan." Jin Tao shouted the greeting towards the podium
[1] The other students echoed his call.

[tl: [1] = In China, it's customary – mostly in primary/middle/high school – to stand and say hello to the teacher in this fashion at the start of class. It's really only done in universities for teachers that are highly respected.]

Lan Jue motioned for them all to sit. "Please return to your seats."

The students did as instructed. Jin Yan lightly kicked the man at her side. “Why didn’t you stand, Professor Wang? We’re here listening to the class, so we’re no different than students. More than that, we’re his colleagues. If we don’t show support for Professor Lan, how can we set a good example for the students?”

Wang Hongyun smirked, shrugging his shoulders. “I wasn’t feeling it.”

Jin Yan scowled, but said nothing further.

Lan Jue returned to the podium and pointed to the board. “That’s right, a prize. No tricks. So take a guess, what do you think it will be? I’m pretty confident you won’t be disappointed. Does anyone remember what I said we’d be discussing today?”

“Jewelry!” A female student belted the answer from somewhere in the crowd below.

Lan Jue gave her a thumbs up. “That’s right. Today we’re discussing jewelry. In regards to jewel knowledge, there’s a lot of complicated information to go over. Jewelry comes in all shapes and sizes, numerous types and categories. I won’t be able to cover them all in one class, so today we’ll just be covering one kind. If this is a topic you all find interesting, I’ll continue with the other kinds at a later date.”

Lan Jue lifted the tray from the podium as he began the lesson. The velvet covering was a deep mazarine, identical to the one used to display products in Zeus’ Jewelry Shop. A gemstone shimmered alluringly within it. The gem itself was crystal clear, and pure white. Twinkling against the velvet, it was like a star set against the midnight sky.

“Who can tell me what this is?”

“A diamond.” Shui Zhondie at Qianlin’s shoulder was the first to answer, her pleasant voice wafting up towards him. It was almost musical, and though lacking the softness of Zhou Qianlin’s, was far more melodious.

“That’s right.” Lan Jue nodded at her. “This is one of the gems we often come across when considering jewelry. Diamonds. This is our topic for today. Further, this particular piece is the prize for our raffle.”

“Ooohh...” The students’ appreciative coos filled the lecture hall. Using a diamond as the prize? It was something entirely new for the university.

The sneering, self-confident contempt on Wang Hongyun’s face froze. From where he was sitting that was a one-karat gem. He couldn’t speak as to its value, but he knew that at least it wasn’t cheap. Meanwhile, Lan Jue pointed at the second sentence he’d written on the blackboard.

The silence came quicker this time, and the students settled down to continue. It wasn’t long before he had everyone’s rapt attention.

“There’s that old adage; a diamond is forever. I imagine you’ve all heard it before. It’s actually a slogan, but it also serves to elucidate the gem’s character. Namely, a diamond’s strength and resistance.”

“I’m no chemist, no physicist. I won’t go in to how a gem is made, or its component parts. I will tell you that a diamond is hard. If we don’t consider power gems, then diamonds are the strongest precious stones there are. If we were to assign a value of ‘ten’ to how hard it is, then the other gems we know such as rubies and sapphires would be a nine. Jadeite would be seven. Specifically those types of jade – as they were collectively referred to in the ancient era – which were at a hardness of seven or more were Jadeite. Under seven were called nephrite.”

“It’s our first class on the subject, and as such I don’t want to inundate you with information. Just know that for the classic gems, diamonds are the hardest. As a result they are the preference for engagement and wedding rings. They resist damage and wear, and represent the endurance and eternity of a couple’s love.

Lan Jue’s voice was magnetic. Not too fast, not too slow. His words were plain, his delivery solid. The students listened easily as he continued.

Lan Jue stepped from the dais and handed the tray to Jin Tao. “Pass this around and make sure everyone has a chance to look.” He smiled a little. “And if everyone wouldn’t mind showing a little restraint. In fact losing this diamond wouldn’t affect me, as it’s meant to be given away regardless, but it would take the opportunity away from your fellow classmates.”

A soft chuckle trilled through the students. The atmosphere grew a little

more relaxed.

Lan Jue paid no further mind to Jin Tao and the diamond, and returned to the podium to continue the lecture. “So that’s it concerning the hardness of a diamond. Today, what we’ll discuss is how to assess the quality of a diamond, if you are so inclined. First, is the size. Generally speaking the size of a gem is directly proportional to it’s cost – the same holds true for power gems. I suppose it’s fair to say that the bigger the gem, the more it’ll cost you. Conversely the smaller, the cheaper. It certainly applies as a rule to diamonds.”

“If your interest in a diamond is for it’s value as an item later, then you’re looking for something in the range of one karat or more. The price difference between a point ninety-nine and one karat diamond is significant. The one being passed around class right now is precisely one karat. The size of a diamond, though, doesn’t not entirely determine it’s price however. If this diamond were two karats the price would not be doubled, necessarily.”

“Other than size, in an effort to determine the quality of a diamond, there are a small number of other criteria to consider. Could one assume that two, one-karat diamonds would be of similar prices? This would be false, as their quality could be vastly different. The price, then, could be just as volatile.”

The tray had begun to make it’s way back from the far recesses of the class. The students were all familiar with diamonds, but it was the first time for most that they saw one up close, much less with an explanation. They examined it with interest as it passed.

“There are three others ways to determine a gem’s quality, aside from size. They are color, clarity, and cut. We’ll start with color. For diamonds, it’s simply the whiter, the better. Their ranking in the order of color is indicating by alphabet, with the lowest letters displaying inferior color. The highest, is D. This indicates one hundred percent, pure white. Perfection. Next is E, nearly perfect. Then F, approximately ninety-eight percent white. These three are the top of the color scale. Lower letters are G, H, I, J, and K. The further down the list you go, the more yellowed the

gem appears, and the price suffers as a result. A D-colored gem could be triple the price of an I-colored gem of the same size. Clearly, the color has a significant impact on value. Of course when seeking a purchase you don't always need to chase after perfection. D, E and F gems are immaculately colored, and just as rare."

"The gem before you today has a color rating of F, nearly entirely white."

As the gem passed from hand to hand, Lan Jue continued to elaborate on the intricacies of diamond identification. He followed with clarity, and cut, delivering the information with ease and approachability.

"The perfect diamond would be one whose color, cut and clarity are the top of it's class. These are what are called Flawless Diamonds. This is where the phrase 'flawless beauty' comes from."

Time passed quickly as the class proceeded, Lan Jue carefully providing the knowledge to the gathered students. The diamond and it's tray made the rounds, finishing it's journey back on his podium.

"And now for the moment you all have been waiting for. You all have been patient and attentive. It's time for the lottery."

He picked up the tray before him. "Our method will be simple, to ensure fairness for all participants."

Lan Jue passed out scraps of paper he'd prepared in advance. "Please write your names on the paper, then pass them back up when you're finished. We'll place your tickets in a box and draw one slip. Whoever has their name on that paper, that's the diamond's new owner."

The slips were quickly written and recovered. Lan Jue placed them all in a box he'd prepared earlier, and set it on the podium. He stuck his hand within, rustled the contents, and pulled out a single scrap.

"Alright, and the winner is... Zhou... Zhou Qianlin!" Lan Jue stuttered ever so slightly, surprised by the unlikely result.

What are the chances? But there it was, the winner, Zhou Qianlin.

She herself was taken aback, and her numerous male fans seated behind

her waved their arms in excitement. Still Lan Jue felt something was amiss. A flash of blue light crossed his eyes as he employed his psychic force to probe the interior of the box. In the one hundred or so tickets he found, forty-two bore Zhou Qianlin's name...

Chapter 126: College Exchange Competition?

Forty-two tickets with the name Zhou Qianlin! Holy hell with these guys – I'm going to drown in the sea of hormones here. Lan Jue could only sigh in defeat. He hadn't expected what was normally an entirely fair raffle to turn out this way. The young men valiantly waving their arms in triumph each must have written her name on those papers in lieu of themselves. It certainly served to prove how important she was to the male half of the student population. But it was what it was, and there could be nothing for it now.

"Would Miss Zhou Qianlin please approach the podium and claim her prize."

She did as requested, and approached Lan Jue. Her brows were wrinkled. He looked towards her and understood. He hoped she understood the truth, but he understood how it looked.

Zhou Qianlin plucked the diamond from the tray, pinching it between her fingers. He lifted it to her eyes and took a closer look, then put it back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't accept the diamond. If you would, Professor, please donate it to Grace hospital instead. Call it a donation from the students of your etiquette class."

"Very good," he said, nodding.

Cheers arose from behind them. Of course there wasn't an absence of jeers and shouts of resentment. No small number of young women scowled openly at the situation, likely assuming this was some ploy to ingratiate herself to the public.

However Lan Jue knew better. This was no ploy, Zhou Qianlin was honestly just a good woman. Her conscience wouldn't allow her to take something she didn't earn.

Though the result of the lottery had not proceeded as expected, for most it was the perfect end to the lesson. With it, the class successfully came to

an end. Zhou Qianlin turned and exited, Tang Mi close at her heels. Shui Zhongdie was with them, but as they passed she slowed just enough to stare with interest at the diamond a final time. She playfully stuck her tongue out at Lan Jue before hastening to catch up with the other two.

“Jin Tao, Tang Xiao, if you two would come with me,” he said to his young pupils.

“Yes, Professor.” Anticipation was written clearly on their faces. They knew it; today was the day their training really began.

As Lan Jue passed, he looked pointedly at Hua Li sat in the back of the room. Poseidon rose and followed.

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“Qianlin, why didn’t you just take the diamond? It certainly wasn’t a cheap bauble. And according to what Professor Lan was saying, it was above average.” Tang Mi walked at her friend’s side, firing off the line of inquiry.

“What kind of woman accepts diamonds so easily? Are you really such an air-head or do you just pretend?”

Tang Mi pouted at the harsh words. “What’s stopping a woman from doing just that! You’re just being stuffy. It was a prize! Luck of the draw.”

“From what I saw, it wasn’t so much luck.” Shui Zhongdie finally managed to catch up to the two. “I saw the guy next to me write Zhou Qianlin’s name on his paper. I’m sure he wasn’t the only one as well. Otherwise what a coincidence! Hhm, with Qianlin here the two of us don’t amount to much. I’m so jealous!”

Tang Mi sputtered. “Knock it off. You with your Student President boyfriend. And yet you’re still the flirty one.”

Shui Zhongdie chortled. “What about him. He just fancies himself as my boyfriend. I haven’t hung out with him recently at all.”

“And what has our illustrious chairman been so busy with lately?”

“Still with all the meetings,” she said. “Lir University once again wants to show off how much better they are. I really don’t know what the university’s higher-ups are thinking. Lir University is for mecha piloting, and ours is focused on research and development. What are they thinking with these endless mecha combat competitions? It’s so boring! Just thinking of that smug face of his makes me wanna squish it.”

Tang Mi echoed the sentiment. “You’re right! The last time we lost terribly. We were lucky to have Professor Tang with us that time. Otherwise it would have been an absolute embarrassment. And we’re doing it again this year? The school agreed?”

“What I hear is that the school hopes our constant losses to Lir University we’ll make us want to strive harder. Our mecha combat department isn’t the strongest, to the consternation of our school bullies.”

Tang Mi’s plaintive cries followed. “They’re upset, so much the worse for us! But us girls can’t be cowardly, bring those LU punks on. If any of ‘em say anything I’ll show em what’s up!”

Shui Zhongdie pumped her fists in the air. “You and me both, sister!”

Zhou Qianlin shot them a hopeless look. “It’s gotta be tiring being such war-hawks. In fact Professor Tan and I have been working on a new type of laser cannon. How about I give you guys a first-hand demonstration?”

Shui Zhongdie almost tackled her with a hug. “Qianlin, so catty! Do all your suitors know that?”

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The McCrary high-alt verti-car slowly came to a stop just outside Skyfire Avenue. The doors rose, and out stepped Lan Jue, Hua Li and the two young disciples. The car had been brought today by Hua Li, though it was Lan Jue who insisted on a different sort of transportation after sending

Zhou Qianlin. When he picked up the key from his friend, he couldn't help but sigh in appreciation, returning to modern society.

"Man, sweet! When'll I be able to get me one of these? I had no idea you had so much money, teach!" Jin Tao looked at the car in excitement.

Even Tang Xiao, who himself come from a family of means, looked on in appreciation. What man didn't enjoy his sports cars?

Lan Jue suddenly grew serious. "Come on."

He took them directly to Skyfire Underground. The Avenue's overworld section was a sight more stringent, and Lan Jue feared even his status as a councilman wouldn't be enough to get them in.

As the elevator doors opened, Jin Tao and Tang Xiao stared – struck dumb.

Jin Tao was appreciably better off. He was fearless in the face of the unknown. But Tang Xiao was different. He knew about the Avenue, about what it meant, and his excitement could hardly be contained at finally being here. But what he didn't know was that there existed a second Avenue.

His eyes filled with the old-style buildings, the crowds of people, and he couldn't help but blurt out. "Am I in heaven?"

"Not far off," Lan Jue replied. "Skyfire Avenue is indeed a real place. A place for Adept exchange, and the largest gathering of Talents in the Eastern Alliance. It's loosely managed, free. Here, an Adept can get anything at all that they need."

"I've heard of it," Tang Xiao assured, "But my dad said I had to wait until I graduated before I qualified to be here. The rest I can't recall. I had no idea it would be like this – it's amazing."

Lan Jue revealed a strange smile. "Amazing? We'll see if you still feel that way later."

Chapter 127: Skyfire Necklace

The first time Tang Xiao and Jin Tao entered Skyfire Underground's Zeus' Jewelry Store, their reaction was just as severe as when they entered the underground itself. They were stunned, but not by the jewels. Before them stood Mika and Lin Guoguo.

"Boss." The two women called to Lan Jue in greeting.

He smiled. "How'd it go? Is your cooperation improving?"

Lin Guoguo shook her fist dramatically. "We're making progress! But don't come looking yet boss. Give us some time to get better, and you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"Alright." Lan Jue nodded with a chuckle. He indicated to the two young men beside him. "These are my two newest students. They'll soon become common faces around here. This is Tang Xiao, the other is Jin Tao. Jin Tao will be staying with us for a little while."

"So the decoction I fetched," Mika offered, "was for them, I assume."

Lan Jue nodded. "Jin Tao will use one. Tang Xiao has no need for it. We'll use it tomorrow. Today we'll be spending our time prepping. You're all done with what I asked you to do?"

It was Mika's turn to nod. "All set." As she spoke, she walked over to the young flabbergasted disciples. "I'm Mika. You can call me Miss Mika. Work hard, and don't disgrace the boss."

"Yes, Miss Mika. We'll do whatever the Professor requires, and soon be strong enough to make him proud!" Tang Xiao stuck out his flabby chest as he made the declaration. His normally fluttery eyes were full with determination.

One of Jin Tao's primary advantages over Tang Xiao was his fearlessness towards the unknown, and while he wasn't timid around his new surroundings, he did feel as though he'd entered an entirely different world. It was the first time meeting these two gorgeous women, and yet he felt none of the instant disdain he was used to from others. The feelings

this called up in him were too difficult to describe.

“Yes.” His response was simple, but the emotion within them gave them power.

“Jin Tao’ll go with you. I’ll take Tang Xiao,” Lan Jue said to Hua Li.

“Mm.” Ever since last night, he appeared considerably less upbeat.

They entered the giant warehouse at the back of the store. Thor was conspicuously absent. The warehouse seemed deserted.

Lin Guoguo took over the store business for the time being while Mika joined the others, leading the way. The way was lit by wall sconces, their tungsten light illuminating the strange world they found themselves in. Their mouths were dry from nerves.

Lan Jue fumbled in his coat and produced two small boxes. He handed each of his disciples one. “Wear them. These are the badges that will allow you to enter Skyfire Underground unmolested. Next time you won’t need me to bring you in.”

The boys opened their respective boxes and spied the necklace within. It was no fancy thing, just a simple golden chain with a pendent. It was round, and in its center was inlaid a translucent gemstone.

“It’s a Skyfire Necklace, be sure not to lose it. If you do, you must tell me immediately.”

“Got it!” Jin Tao and Tang Xiao answered with one voice, slipping the necklace around their necks.

Hua Li took Jin Tao out, while Tang Xiao and Lan Jue remained in the warehouse. Lan Jue looked towards him. “If you want to become powerful, your personal powers are the foundation. As I’m sure you know, in today’s world of modern technology a person’s discipline and ability determine their success as a mecha pilot. Because an Adept’s endurance surpasses that of a normal human, they are able to better control and suffer the strains of a mecha suit. So, every single top-level mecha pilot is the product of a perfect symbiotic relationship between man and machine. And the proper power gems. These are the single greatest soldiers at an

army's disposal. Because of this, whether you or Jin Tao, our first priority must be your personal abilities."

"I'll tell you, the risk Jin Tao are undertaking by imbibing this Fantascia Genetica medicine is to employ acquired Western assistance to improve his Talent. Therein lies the danger. But you, your situation is different. You need to be strengthened, forged in the fires. To search for every opportunity, to the very limit, to improve upon what you were blessed with. If there comes a day you think you can't keep going, where you can't handle it, then quit. But if you do, you can no longer call me your teacher. Understood?"

Tang Xiao took a deep breath. He nodded resolutely at his master. "Professor. I will call you teacher for the rest of my life."

"Just words," Lan Jue said indifferently. "Show me you mean it. Today, you're task is to hold your own against your new colleague. Mika, if you would..."

"Yes, Boss." Mika shoved her black-rimmed glasses higher on her tiny nose. She made her way to the center of the warehouse, and turned. Her eyes locked on to Tang Xiao's.

He looked at the woman in her business attire, with her fiery temper. He couldn't help but gulp in fear. His heartbeat rang in his ears. If I'm to take a beating, at least being whipped by a woman like this isn't so bad.

He shuffled to a spot twenty-some meters in front of her, and stopped. The distance was one he'd chosen deliberately. In general it was accepted that an adept's range of discipline had it's limit. Even if their focus was ranged attacks, twenty meters was enough to give him time to react.

"Are you ready?" Mika looked pointedly at Tang Xiao.

"Ready, Miss Mika. Go easy on me." Tang Xiao laughed nervously. His feet shook ever so slightly beneath him.

Wordlessly Mika took off, rushing headlong towards Tang Xiao. However, just before she landed her strike, the ground shuddered from beneath her and a metal barrier flashed to life. She cut off her charge.

Tang Xiao sidestepped to the left and stamped the ground with his left foot. A hearty boom arose in response. His skin coagulated, hardened, and took on a silvery look.

With his level of metallic control, he not only possessed the ability to manipulate himself but also – by virtue of metallic malleability – employ it as an attack. The warehouse itself was entirely composed of metal, which gave him the advantage in that regard.

But, just as he was getting ready to feel proud of himself, the smile melted from his face.

As Mika rushed again at the barrier he'd created, her body began to burn a fiery, translucent red. Her flaming figure crashed against the metal cover, penetrating it. As she did, it melted away behind her in to a pool of molten iron. Tang Xiao didn't have time to react before Mika's fist was barreling towards his face.

Bang!

Tang Xiao's face went askew as the fist landed. Mika's scorching fist had been burned in to his cheek.

However, to Mika's surprise the violent strike hadn't caused Tang Xiao to be cast away as she expected. He only stumbled slightly. How heavy WAS this kid, she thought. With the question rumbling through her mind, she took advantage of his stagger to launch herself unimpeded in to the air. One foot connected with his stomach, and she arced around to connect her other foot viciously with his head.

Chapter 128: Roasted Tang Xiao

Tang Xiao's massive girth tumbled to his backside, as though all the muscles in his body had vanished. Suddenly, his body morphed, changing in to a large pedestal. The sudden shift in position hadn't just been to avoid Mika's violent assault, but also an opportunity to attack. Two large iron rebars lashed out like whips at the woman as she soared overhead.

"Tang Xiao, don't go easy. Give it your all." Lan Jue's gentle voice called out from a short distance away. He stood calmly to the side, hands clasped behind his back, and watched the two exchange blows.

"Who needs him to go easy!" Mika's voice was cold and dismissive. She glared down on him, hovering in the air. Suddenly, two molten balls of fire burst from her palms and began to revolve around her.

The whipping bars of iron came in contact with the fiery orbs. The moment they touched, the iron became red-hot. They melted away, not unlike Tang Xiao had moments ago.

The column that was Tang Xiao suddenly flashed. From it, scores of metal barbs and cutting splinters shot forth. They barreled towards Mika like a cutting wall of debris.

Mika, in response, twisted easily in the air and headed to ground. A half-circle of light a meter across sprung to life near her, and as the metal spikes smashed against it they turned to slag and dropped away.

Her descend continued, and with each inch she grew nearer to Tang Xiao the heat and pressure of her fiery presence increased. The column once more changed, this time dissolving in to a metallic river and dispersing around the warehouse. The titanium white light it was had emitted softened visibly, but the move did manage to avoid Mika's rush.

The fiery succubus smirked. She landed, the tip of her left root resting on the ground while the rest of her floated in a fiery haze. Her right arm raised, and she extended her index finger. She turned, three hundred and sixty degrees, and as her finger moved the air around it caught aflame. When she came full circle, she was surrounded by a wall of fire. It took

only a small motion, and the living inferno lashed out to incinerate the liquid metal wherever it fled.

“Miss Mika! Spare me!” Tang Xiao cried.

Mika stopped, her raging fires diminishing a hair, but that didn't stop her fires from their insatiable hunger. They raced through the warehouse chasing the metal. However, strangely, as they made contact the fires were snuffed out, a though swallowed by the ground itself.

“Hm?” Mika looked on in confusion. Tang Xiao didn't wait for her to recover. Taking advantage of her temporary confusion, she didn't notice when a massive metal hand came reaching up at her from just below her feet. It viciously snatched her up.

Mika was pinned, and though her fierce aura was keeping her from being crushed, the strength and pressure of the hand took her by surprise.

“Miss Mika, how about I tell you a joke?” Tang Xiao's affable voice filled the warehouse.

Mika smiled prettily. “Sure! Go on then.” Her voice was kind, inviting, but her pretty eyes took on a dangerous red light. That familiar, creeping terror of her aura began to slither out over everything like a nightmare.

Tang Xiao said nothing further, for as he proceeded to try and crush Mika, her entire body burst in to a raging column of fire. Her left foot stamped against the ground and she was launched upwards. Where her foot made contact, and with her fiery figure at it's center, a massive lotus composed of flames bloomed to life. The flowers of the hellfire lotus reached out to all corners, it's liking fires lapping towards the ceiling, a hundred meters in all directions. The warehouse became a sizzling world of fire.

The pedals landed over the floors, the red-golden light undulating like lava. The floor began to bubble. The distant walls had grown red from the heat that was threatening to melt the entirety of the warehouse.

“Aaahh!” Once again, Tang Xiao cried out.

A jiggling ball of silvery-white liquid bubbled up from the ground below.

It's surface, too, was red from the intense heat. A white light fired from it towards the distant ceiling, and the ball of melted metal followed.

Mika called after it. "Still trying to run?" Mika swept her arm. This time it was her turn, as a fiery hand appeared from nowhere and snapped up the fleeing orb. The hand squeezed.

"Miss Mika, mercy!" Tang Xiao's pitiful voice wafted towards her. "I can't take it! Ah, ah, Ah, AH!"

Tang Xiao's circular form was visibly compressed. Gradually the heat increased until the entire orb was a simmering red. Tang Xiao's screams also increased.

Mika looked at her boss. Lan Jue's soft voice answered her unspoken question. "This fatty's a cunning one. If he's got enough energy to scream this loud, then he's fine."

"Oh." Mika grinned devilishly. Those familiar with her would know that expression, and would shudder at what came next. She was the Stygian Succubus, what mercy was there in her?

A golden spout of fire appeared, and rushed to join the fiery hand, slithering through it's finger's to the rapidly heating ball in it's palm. "Think you'd grab me, 'ey pig-boy? Miss Mika'll make things hotter for you!"

The entire hand of fire became a dazzling gold. Tang Xiao glowed a bright red, caught in the center of the golden hellfire.

"Ah! Don't!" Surprisingly, Tang Xiao still had the ability to scream despite the searing fires. At the same time, a tiny twinkling fought against the golden light as a drop of silvery liquid separated from the orb. The light spread out, diffusing over the ball of silver liquid like a membrane. It attempted valiantly to isolate Tang Xiao from the fiery prison he was stuck in.

Lan Jue looked on, and nodded. This, was the strength of an adept's core. The pure energy within them. Tang Xiao released a final, piercing howl. Then he fell silent. All that was left was the fierce white light, ever shining

and buried beneath the golden fires.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes, watching them carefully, judging that white light and its changes. He waited a moment longer, then spoke. “Mika, that’s enough.”

Mika waved, and the elemental hand, issued from the flaming column of her palm, was sucked back in to her and dissolved. The smoldering, red ball of metal came tumbling to the floor.

Clunk! The ball became soft and began to deform as though it were made of puddy.

After roughly a minute the waves of heat coming off the metal stopped, and its color returned to normal. The warehouse around them looked as though nothing had happened. Even the spot of ground that had been melted to ruin by Mika’s lotus slowly began to return to normal.

Any outsider, seeing this, would certainly have been pleasantly dumbfounded. Metal, that healed on its own. A property of Technetium. The warehouse’s metal construction was infused with it. Just the smallest amount, but enough to make one’s eyes pop. After all, even the slightest bit of technetium was worth just as much as a top-level mecha.

Over time the melted puddle that was Tang Xiao began to reconstitute itself, once again returning to its silver hue. Though, it was a sight darker than it had been at the outset.

Mika turned to her boss with a grin. “I’ll head out first boss.”

“Mn,” he replied.

Mika paused long enough to chuckle at the silver puddle, then left.

Several more minutes passed before the metal became Tang Xiao’s familiar, though frightfully naked, figure.

His skin from head to toe was red, like he’d been roasted. He was foaming at the mouth, and his breath came ragged. His eyes were rolled back in his head. He looked as though he could die at any moment 1.

Lan Jue approached the battered child and knelt at his side. He felt his

pulse, then nodded.

The power Tang Xiao revealed today was more than he'd shown Lan Jue in any of their previous meetings. It also seemed like his excessive weight really did have a positive effect on his metalmorphosis discipline. For his Talent to natural evolve as it did, it may in fact have been the right call.

When Tang Xiao came back to his senses, he felt like his body wasn't his. He was weak, limp, and half of his body had no sensation.

In this moment, the first thought that came to mind was... gentle. Yes, gentle, and by that he meant Lan Jue. Only now did he realize how easy his teacher had been going on him.

"What's that smell. It's like pork..." A strange voice filled his ears.

Tang Xiao managed to turn his head with some considerable effort. He saw Jin Tao wander in. The guy walked smooth and easy, his face ruddy and smiling like he'd just gotten a full-body massage.

"Eh? Is that Tang Xiao? What the hell happened to you?" Jin Tao looked down on the naked fatty, rubbed his nose, then nearly leapt from surprise. "That smell is you! Hey fat-ass, who tried to turn you in to pork loins?"

Lan Jue chuckled good-naturedly. He once more moved to Tang Xiao's side and reached down a hand. In his palm was a vibrant green stone. A thrill of electricity ran through the gem, and suddenly a gentle green light issued forth. It reached out and covered Tang Xiao like a blanket.

Tang Xiao began to feel waves of refreshing energy course through him, starting at his limbs then slowly moving inward. His breathing became smoother, and yet his chest was tight with violent intent towards Jin Tao.

What felt like ages later, Tang Xiao was able to pull himself up off the ground with no small measure of moans and groans. His skin felt burnt to a crisp, and every little touch was like fire. He was wracked with ticks and spasms. Just looking at him, though, you wouldn't see anything the matter.

Lan Jue handed the green power gem to Hua Li, who'd entered with Jin Tao. He looked at Jin Tao, a strange look on his face. "I hope tomorrow

you're still in such a good mood," he said.

A sudden fear filled him, and Jin Tao couldn't help but stutter a question. "Teach, is it gunna be as bad Fatty Tang over there?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "Of course not. It'll be worse. What happened to him was only the beginning. And your regrets come too late – your sister already passed you over to me. From here on out the rest is up to you. Tang Xiao, rest for half an hour then head back in. Tomorrow, same time, right here. Mika will be waiting. Tonight when you go home, meditate for at least two hours and focus on the changes in your body. Understand?"

"Yes, Professor." Tang Xiao earnestly replied. Hearing that Jin Tao's fate was to be worse than his brought some vitality back. Besides, no matter what people said, being beaten by a lady as pretty as Mika was better than being beat on by some dude. Indeed, he'd had the pleasure of seeing her combat pose. Tomorrow, he'll have to be more careful.

Chapter 129: The History of Richard and Zhou Qianlin

Hua Li and Lan Jue walked from the warehouse. Hua Li repeatedly tossed and caught the green gem Lan Jue had given him moments before. “If people knew you were using the restorative stone or this, they’d curse you as a wastrel. It’s no cheap b-ranked stone, you know. Each time you use it, that’s one less. Eventually it’ll be gone.”

Lan Jue smiled. “Wealthy and headstrong, what can ya do. If it can really motivate Tang Xiao’s discipline evolution, then it’s worth the cost. I’m handing it over to you for the next few days. I’m heading out to participate in that trip soon.”

Hua Li’s response was sour. “You head out to play and leave me with all the hard work. If I’d have known from the onset it’d be like this I wouldn’t have come to help your ungrateful ass!”

Lan Jue slapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and chortled. “Alright, stop complaining. I’ll be back in a few days. By then A-Cheng should also have arrived. It’s tough for the group of us to get together these days. When he shows up we’ll have some good joint training to undergo. We can’t lose this competition coming up.”

“When you come back,” Hua Li began, “I still have that concert. I was thinking, what about holding it at the National Eastern University? After all the students there are all fans of mine.”

“Are you crazy?” Lan Jue shot him a chastising look. “Aren’t you afraid of blowing your cover? What kind of nonsense is that.”

It was Hua Li’s turn to chuckle dismissively. “I’m holding my concert there to make sure you stop stealing away all the pretty girls. I’ll steal that Zhou Qianlin and you’ll be hopeless.”

“Bah! You still think the whole of the galaxy’s women like you?” Lan Jue muttered.

Hua Li loftily let his opinions be known. “Unless they’re lesbians, or

don't know good looks when they see them, there are no other exceptions."

Lan Jue slapped his forehead in exasperation. "This arrogant punk. Do what you like, only make sure you have public security locked down."

"All set. Gobi Entertainment has thrown countless of these sorts of things. Our experience is unparalleled in all the Three Alliances. We know precisely when and how to get it all done with government cooperation."

Lan Jue lifted a brow. "It sounds like you're saying Mo Xing has already arrived."

Hua Li's face turned bitter. "You think she wouldn't? I got her message yesterday. I didn't reply, but I can't hide for long. You know her temper. If I keep avoiding her I'm liable to have an 'accident'."

Lan Jue looked as though he were suddenly counting his blessings. "Your problem, yours to deal with."

"You aren't going to help?" Hua Li shot back at him, full of indignation.

"How can I? You want to go up there and reveal to everyone that I'm Zeus? Good friend to Poseidon? Don't forget, I'm a wanted man throughout all of the Eastern Alliance for what I did. If I dared to reveal myself I'd be run out of town."

Hua Li scowled at him. "In my darkest hour it is revealed you are completely unreliable! Fine, you go then. I'll go find Mo Xing. If she really does lose her temper I doubt I'll be able to handle it."

The two gentlemen separated at the door of the Jewelry Shop. Lan Jue returned to the surface and immediately made for the verti-car. He slipped in once the doors opened and engaged the auto-pilot to return the vehicle to the parking garage. He then began pushing his bicycle. Eventually, he arrived at that familiar corner.

It was precisely ten minutes after she'd finished her classes. She'd so far not used the soulcaller gem to make contact with him. Instead she made for their designated corner directly. As her eyes laid upon Lan Jue, they softened visibly. She pulled herself up on the bike.

Lan Jue also did not speak, but he knew his cue and began to pedal. They slowly made their way from the university campus.

“Are we going to the hospital today?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Lan Jue responded.

They kept going, along that long road, neither speaking. Lan Jue brought her to the foot of the mountain Qianlin called home.

“Bye.” He waved a hand at her.

She smiled back at him, waved, then made her way up the mountain.

Lan Jue watched her as she left, then turned his bike around to leave.

“Her cuz, I was hoping we could have a small talk.” Just then, a chilling voice could be heard from nearby.

Lan Jue paused, and turned his head to look. He spied Richard approaching from the shadows not far off.

“It’s you.” Lan Jue pushed his bicycle towards the young man. “What do you want to talk about?”

Richard responded in quiet tones. “Let’s find somewhere to sit.” As he spoke, he pulled his own bicycle from the treeline and hopped on. They both made for the base of the mountain.

Lan Jue always felt guilty whenever it came to Richard. After all, had it not been for him and his actions at their wedding, he and Qianlin would already be married. He had tried desperately to be kind and fair to the kid the few times they’d met.

Richard appeared to be quiet familiar with the road and their surroundings. They rode for about ten minutes before they found a deserted section of road to stop.

They stopped their bikes and placed them against the trees, stepping in off the road. Lan Jue narrowed his eyes at the suspicious behavior, but followed all the same.

They walked for another few minutes, until they were well within the pressing trees. Richard stopped, then, his back to Lan Jue, and began to speak. "It was a coincidence that Qianlin and I met. She was attending a birthday, last year, and my father was in the Eastern Alliance for a state visit. I accompanied as his entourage, successor to the Austin Family dynasty. It was her father's birthday, the Chief Minister Zhou Xueguan. I met her first at that birthday party."

"From that very first moment, even though it was only the first time I'd seen her, I was captivated. She had that simple, quintessential Eastern beauty. Delicate, without the slightest flaw. If she hadn't spoken, just stood out there, I'd have thought she was a sculpture, the product of the galaxy's greatest artist. From that moment, I knew, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from falling in love with her."

"I used everything at my disposal, found every opportunity to talk to her. She asked me if I was some playboy. Of course I told her no, but then she left. I chased after her, asked what was wrong. She shook her head, and told me she was looking for a playboy. She was looking for a bad boy."

"I changed my tone in a hurry. Of course I was a playboy, I told her. A bad boy. I told her about some things I'd done, trouble I'd caused. Peeping in to the girl's bathroom when I was young and so forth. She started to pay attention to me then. Then she asked, if I wanted to get married. I felt... so lucky. The luckiest guy under heaven. Of course I agreed right away. I told my father first thing, and he was understandably surprised. He thought it was some trap set by the Chief Minister."

"It took time but I convinced him. After his own investigation he determined this wasn't elaborate ruse. So he decided to use this opportunity to deepen cooperation and relationships with the East. None of this was important to me. All I cared about was making Qianlin my wife."

"But that day... that was nothing short of a living nightmare. That guy, out of nowhere, stealing away Qianlin. The wedding was thrown in to chaos and my father, enraged, took me from here. For a long time I didn't know what to do, something came over me. Until I knew she was safe I

was completely oblivious. I just knew I had to get back to her, so we'd be together."

A fanaticism had crept in to Richard's eyes as he spoke. He looked almost crazy; paranoid, angry, intolerant.

"And then there's you. You know, as far as I've been able to discovered Qianlin doesn't have any cousins. Calling yourself that was a pretext. Why. Why does she sit on the back of your bicycle? Be straight with me."

The craze in his eyes began to change, shifting appreciably to a bitter cold. The icy depths of abandonment.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. Thoughts raced through his head as the young man spoke. At first he'd felt sorry for Richard, but now, hearing his tale, doubt filled him. From the story he determined the two of them must not have known each other long. Establishing a wedding date the first time they met? And why would Qianlin want a playboy? A bad guy as her spouse? It all was too strange."

"I'm her bodyguard," Lan jue replied, speaking frankly.

"Bodyguard?" The realization surprised him.

After discovering Qianlin had no older cousins, many possibilities came to Richard. His first thought was of course that the two of them were together. He certainly hadn't expected that he'd be her bodyguard. Lan Jue's revelation left him speechless.

As the heir to the Austin family, his 'sixth sense' had been finely tuned. After determining Lan Jue and Qianlin had no blood relation, there was nonetheless some strange, unexplainable crisis that assailed him. There was something strange about Lan jue, a peculiarity. As though he wasn't what he seemed.

"You're Qianlin's bodyguard? Hired by Uncle Zhou [1]?" His questions came quickly.

[tl : [1] = Here he means Zhou Qianlin's father.]

Lan Jue smiled, cool and relaxed. "Anything more is between she and I.

And why did you call me here, Richard? To make your presence known? To tell me all about your history with her?”

Richard’s voice came low, almost a growl. “The wedding never went through, but Qianlin is still my fiancé. I don’t want you to have any further contact with her. Especially don’t go to pick her up. I hope you agree. If you are indeed her bodyguard then this should be easy to handle – here’s a check. Write a number, accepted at any bank.”

He fished out a blank check from his pocket, and stretched it towards Lan Jue.

It was a strange thing, made of some metal material. It possessed at least ten anti-faking checks, the best electronic money exchange available.

Chapter 130: Another Encounter With the Savage Goddess

Lan Jue laughed, and took the check from his hand. “Alright! Oh, but it looks like the place to write the amount is too small, with all the zeroes I’m thinking.”

Richard blinked at him, curiosity evident in his voice. “How much do you want?”

“To abandon my promise and tarnish my reputation?” Lan Jue looked at the young man. “A few hundred zeroes at least. So, where should I write?” Instead of writing, however, he handed the check back to him.

“Don’t go too far now,” Richard warned, his voice hard.

Lan Jue turned away from him, heading back towards the street. He spoke gently over his shoulder as he did. “You know at first, I didn’t bear you any ill will. I even sympathized with you. But now, with what you did here, I understand why Zhou Qianlin refused to marry you. The next time you want something like this, do yourself a favor and simply don’t bother me with it.” He waved a hand, and left the cover of the forest.

Richard remained where he was. His depressed, angry face watched Lan Jue leave. Dappled sunlight fell upon his sunken shoulders, and suddenly there about another figure beside him. Quiet, dark, almost weightless, it stood not far off.

“Young master, shall I...” The person’s voice was deep, sinister. They motioned with their hands, indicating the neck.

Richard hesitated. He’d done his research, or tried. He’d attempted to find all he could about this Lan Jue, but all he managed was a vague and ambiguous connection with Skyfire Avenue. It was a place that filled him with a sense of trepidation. If it was indeed true that Lan Jue was what he said – simply Zhou Qianlin’s body guard – then there was no need to incite the Avenue’s ire.

“Forget it. Just keep an eye on him.” Richard’s voice was cold, his voice

ominous. He was the heir to the top-most political dynasty of the Western Alliance, and apparently what that entailed was darker than he let on in public.

By the time Lan Jue reached his bicycle, his scowl had curdled. "So he decides not to make a move. Smarter than he looks."

Richard couldn't have known the pity, the guilt that was in Lan Jue's heart for him. Now, however, it was all gone.

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"What's wrong with you! A simple message than you just run off to where ever?! Are you trying to piss me off?" Mo Xiao stood with her arms crossed over her smart business attire. She broke pose occasionally to angrily waggle a finger at the hooded, masked Hua Li standing sheepishly before her.

Hua Li smiled apologetically. "Alright, alright. Don't be mad. You gotta give me at least some free time. You can't have me working all day every day! I'll tire out if you do that. But you were right, see, resting a few days has made my skin much better!" He slipped the mask from his face to show her what he meant.

His handsome face bore a suave smile, and this was enough to evidently cause Mo Xiao to relax somewhat.

"You have the nerve to talk to me about freedom? How many days a year do you actually work? All added together, no more than two months. The rest of the time it's me doing all the work. Even then you still dare to run away, without so much as telling me where you're going. Not even a message on my communicator. I'm out hunting for clues, and if I'd never heard any news would you ever have shown your face again?"

"It's not like that! I wanted to get in contact with you as quick as possible. Look, this entire time I've been here I was thinking about you. Come on, gimme a hug." He spread open his arms and tried to wrap her

up.

Mo Xiao had her palm raised to push him away, but for reasons unknown she felt too weak to resist. She ended up pressed against his chest. It was only a brief connection, but when he finally released her, Mo Xiao's face had reddened visibly. The anger in her expression had also lessened.

"It's always like this," she muttered grudgingly. "Ok. Down to business." Her eyes grew clear and sharp. She was wholly the businesswoman now. "Your idea to hold the concert in the National University isn't a bad one. I've already got some people working on it. They're getting in contact with the University's people. They're excited about it, but have a very strict confidentiality agreement we'll need to agree to. You'll also need to practice your songs. There's no way you're screwing this up on the day. For the next few days you're under strict surveillance."

"Can't happen. I still have something I have to take care of." Hua Li contradicted her in hesitant tones.

"Still?" Mo Xiao glared at him, and crossed her arms. "I know you don't go running off for no reason. Spill. What was so important you had to come running off here?"

"Still A-Jue," he said. "Ever since Hera died he's been languishing out here. I heard a little while ago from A-Cheng that he'd found him. Later he got in contact with me, told me about this run in he had with the Pontiff's Castle. How he'd been hurt in the ensuing fight. I came this time to look after him. Even though I was loathe to leave your side, I had to do my duty!"

"A-Jue? You mean Zeus?" Her eyes grew sharper still, piercing at the mention of the name. The expression in those cutting eyes underwent a series of rapid, curious changes.

Hua Li gave her a strange look of his own. "What is it?"

Mo Xiao puckered her lips in thought. "It's nothing. It's just been a long time since we'd met. How is he now?"

"He's alright," he said. "I can't say good, but not bad. Finally starting to

recover from the death of Hera.”

Mo Xiao nodded. “That’s good then.”

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Two days later. Early Morning

As ever Lan Jue was astride his bicycle, pedaling towards the university grounds. In contrast, however, he’d swapped out his formal wear for a track suit. It served to give him a distinctly energetic appearance. He didn’t look any different from the students he taught, in truth.

The white exercise gear fit him perfectly. His feet were covered in similarly pure white sneakers, simple and unassuming. A backpack slung across his back completed the ensemble.

He parked his bike in the security area, and waited patiently at the school’s large gates. He didn’t tolerate others being late, so naturally he had to abide by his own rules. It was only a little while before nearly all the teachers were gathered. Like him, they were dressed casually. After all, this wasn’t a long trip. About five days, not counting the commute. There wasn’t any need to bring a lot of fancy stuff.

Jin Yan had also arrived early. She was clad in violet sportswear that set off her delicate features. Upon seeing Lan Jue her eyes lit up, and she hurried to greet him.

“You look quite good in a track suit, Professor Lan!” She smiled prettily at him.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve pulled it out,” he admitted. “It feels strange to wear it again. Comfortable, though.”

“That’s good then. You look so young. If they didn’t know any better the others would probably think you were a student here.”

She stopped when she noticed Lan Jue’s face go stiff, almost unnatural. She followed his eyes to the gate, in time to see the willowy figure swaying

their way.

As she passed, the teachers almost automatically hustled to clear a path. Only a few of the braver ones, huddled in groups, dared to greet her.

A pair of jeans hugged tightly against her, outlining her long legs and exaggerating her pert backside. Her top was an exercise shirt, white, similar to Lan Jue's own. Her black hair was tied simply at the back in a pony tail and she wore no make-up. Still, she was beautiful, a natural gift. Despite how baggy her shirt was, it failed to completely shroud her alluring figure. Standing there she looked for all the world like a proud, newly budded daisy.

"What's the Savage Goddess dong here?" His heart rate had increased at the revelation.

Jin Yan realized the predicament and chuckled. "Professor Tan is actually a very nice woman. She just has an... explosive temper. If she didn't, with her charms, there'd be no end of men chasing after her."

Lan Jue's own estimation of the Tan Lingyun couldn't have been further from Jin Yan's. He shook his head. And yet, he kept a respectful distance from her. "It doesn't matter how pretty she is. With such a cruel temper, no man would dare speak to her."

"If you've got something to say then speak up." A voice suddenly interrupted him from nearby.

Lan Jue turned his head, and spied Wang Hongyuan. He wasn't sure when the man had approached. The dance instructor looked at the two of them with a dismissive expression.

Today he was dressed in a track suit as well, this one black. There wasn't much that could be said about his oily hair and skin, but he did indeed keep good care of his figure. His suit was tight, and hugged his stature. He stood straight on thin legs, watching them.

Lan Jue greeted him with an easy smile, and didn't bother with his impolite greeting. Jin Yan, however, was less constrained.

"What are you doing going about talking like that, Professor Wang.

Don't forget we are all electives teachers here, and here you are so ornery."

"I just can't tolerate seeing someone talk behind another's back," he said through a scowl.

Lan Jue's smile disappeared. "And what exactly did I say that was so bad?"

Wang Hongyun sniffed arrogantly, his head high, and stomped off.

"Don't be upset, Professor Lan. Sometimes Wang Hongyun's just like this. He's a little difficult to deal with sometimes, but he's got a good heart. I've heard other teachers say he spends half his salary every month to help out poor students."

"Oh?" Lan Jue looked at the retreating dance instructor with no small measure of surprise. He hadn't expected any part of the guy to be worth a damn.

The appointed time was quick approaching, and a large verti-car was slowly making it's way towards them. It stopped before them, and as the doors opened Director Wu was revealed.

"Alright, if you all would please get in the car. You all are adults, so I won't spend a lot of time on the do's and don'ts. Remember that Planet Taihua is not a wholly developed planet. When we arrive, please make sure you keep safe and help each other out where necessary. Avoid anything dangerous."

As it turned out, Director Wu's leading style was less school leader and more old friend. It brought a smile to Lan Jue's face.

His small speech concluded, the teachers began to file in to the transport. Naturally, the electives teachers mostly sat together. And naturally, Jin Yan sat beside Lan Jue. But what brought a decidedly depressing turn to his day was the fact that – for reasons unknown – Tan Lingyun chose to sit at his other side. There was an aisle between them, but that didn't stop Lan Jue from feeling uncomfortable with the situation. It was made worse when, her eyes sweeping over him, her face twisted in a disdainful sneer.

Looks like we're to be mortal enemies. From then on, Lan Jue simply didn't look her way, like there was nothing there to see at all.

Chapter 131: Planet Taihua

The bus-sized verti-car rumbled to a start, then began its journey. They still had to travel to the university's exclusive space ship, which would then deliver them to Planet Taihua.

Wu Junyi stood near the driver's seat. His ordinarily serious Director's face was gone, and he had a small smile as he addressed the teachers. "Professors one and all, you've worked hard. For this trip, I will be your guide. I hope it will be a pleasant and relaxing experience for all of you. In a little while we'll be on our way, and from then it's twenty hours to Skyfire's closest neighbor, Taihua. Once we arrive, the next five days will be spent enjoying one another's company. For now, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

Lan Jue responded by slipping on his sunglasses and headphones. He sank back in to his chair, and closed his eyes. The sound that filled his ears was pleasant, a sudden gift from Hua Li as he was preparing to leave. It was, in fact, Sounds of Nature – his soon-to-be-released album.

It wasn't long until their bus arrived at the public ship hangar.

The university's ship was bright silver. The NEU identification symbols shimmered on its sides. The teachers filed out of the bus, and on to the ship directly. Then, off they went to Taihua.

As they boarded, Tan Lingyun chose a corner to herself, distancing herself in apparent disgust. Though Lan Jue was thankful for her departure, his pride was further bruised by her hateful attitude. He wondered what was so despicable about him that caused her to act that way.

Jin Yan wasn't aware of his mood, and so chose once more to sit beside him. She asked a few questions about how Jin Tao was doing, but noticed Lan Jue was tired. She knew how to behave in social situations and let the subject lie.

Lan Jue closed his eyes. He felt a shudder rumble through the ship, heard the noise of its engines firing. It brought a sense of calm to him. In

truth he was enjoying this university lifestyle. It was simple, and quiet. Although there were things that required his attention every day, and although he had concerns for his students and what to teach, it was a life he felt was happy and enriching.

Lan Jue slipped in to a meditative state, spurred on by the quietude of his mind and the contentment he felt. His consciousness turned inward, expanding out within him.

Unlike normal people, his own meridians were a light blue color. His skeleton, silver. The flow of his blood and fluids was the same as any normal man, but close examination would reveal sparks of electricity flashing between the erythrocytes.

This was a mark of the ninth ranked talent, the strange conditions of their body. The only way an Adept could control these levels of power, was if they conditioned themselves as conduits of this energy.

To put it simply, there were distinct similarities between a high level Adept and an power gem. Some said that Adepts were little more than intelligent gems themselves. Of course it wasn't that simple, but in a sense it wasn't entirely false.

Every Adept had a Core, the center of their powers. For innate Talents they had it at birth, and it expanded with time and training. For them, the strength or lack thereof was determined by genetics.

When Adepts first appeared among the ranks of humanity, the very strongest were ninth ranked. The Paragons of today all arose from that basic metric, reaching their lofty heights through unending cultivation.

Having an innate Talent was best, as was widely considered, though they didn't have their supreme power from birth. If they did, their own raging energies would destroy them. Like anyone they else they, too, required training. Through cultivation they could inspire their Core to grow, to expand and interact with the external energies that make up the world around them. With time, their power expands to great heights.

But the training regimens were difficult, and boring. Many average Talents were stuck in mediocrity because they couldn't bear the process.

They squandered their opportunities, and the time for proper training passed them by. The foundation was never built, and thus they remained average, for the rest of their lives.

The Core of an Adept wasn't set, and it's location was different for each person. The Psychic Tide, for instance, had her Core between her eyebrows. It was the optimal location for her particular Talent. For many high-level Adepts, their Core was fixed in the pit of their stomachs. Mika and Ke'er were counted among them. Then there were special cases, like Xiuxiu. Her core was actually in her right arm. So, in combat, she led with her right.

Lan Jue's own Core was in the pit of his stomach. However, in contrast to most Adepts, his Core was different.

His was diamond shaped, suspended in the exact center of his torso. It was a deep, endless blue. It twinkled with light as Lan Jue breathed, firing off in all directions with each inhalation, and shimmering as he exhaled. How often it did so was a result of his heart rate and respiration.

Surrounding the diamond core, a pure white light shone. It was a bolt of white lightning that flickered rapidly with power, faster than the normal human eye could fathom. However, it's instability was clear.

Both his Core and that bolt of lightning seemed dimmer than they should be. Their flickers, slow. This was undoubtedly a result of Lan Jue's careful control.

Thunder and lightning were the most explosive of the Disciplines. In combat, their strength was renowned. The drawback was it's instability, for it was just as volatile as it was potent. To protect himself from this, the first thing Lan Jue did after his injury was block his Core's power. Had he not, the fluctuating force of his Discipline would have undoubtedly turned on his own body.

"When you are able to bring your lightning and thunder together, blended as one, that is the moment you will be a Paragon! When you do, that will be your opportunity to follow in my footsteps."

The aged voice reverberated in Lan Jue's ears. Any time that voice came to him, a dull pain followed. The unhappy memories of his youth came rushing back on the tides of that hateful sound.

The tribulations of Tang Xiao and Jin Tao were serious, but compared to the suffering of his own youth they were the lucky ones. For him and his brother, their younger years were spent in hell! The fact they lived through it was damn near miraculous.

Lan Jue gently shook his head, and awoke from his meditation. The motion also served to help him shake off those unwanted memories.

To help wipe the bitter thoughts away his eyes peered out of the porthole to the universe beyond. Thanks to the relatively short distance between their destination and departure, there was no need for wormholes or Deep Sleep. He could sit and enjoy the view.

The boundless horizons of the universe spread out before him. It didn't matter how lofty your status, how great your powers, or how terrible your troubles... in the vastness of space they were less than nothing.

In the distance a pale blue orb spun silently in the dark. Even from out here it was easy to see Taihua's allure. Blues and greens melded together as the dominant hues. It appeared as though Lan Jue's silent ruminations were not brief. They would soon arrive at their destination.

"It really is just full of vitality!" Jin Yan sighed in admiration as she stared at the nearing planet.

Lan Jue nodded slowly. "Just so. Certainly worthy of being a tourist destination. I hope it's a rewarding trip."

"You've never been to Taihua before?" Jin Yan asked, somewhat puzzled.

He shook his head. "I'm not actually from Skyfire. I haven't really visited the surrounding areas."

This captured Jin Yan's interest. "Oh, so where does our Professor Lan hail from?"

“The home world.”

“Home world? Isn’t the environment there already unbearable? The destruction of the previous area was terrible. If it weren’t for the following interstellar migration, then the homeworld...” Jin Yan stopped, winced apologetically, and sneaked a peek at Lan jue.

He grinned, the expression making it clear he didn’t mind. “You’re right! The ignorance of our race almost completely destroyed our ancestral home. But that’s our home, the origin of our lineage. In fact Taihua looks a little like our home world once did. If the home world had never suffered the scars of that chaos, it’d be just as beautiful.”

“Attention please. We’ll be entering Taihua’s atmosphere shortly. Please fasten your seat belts.” The warning and subsequent beeps aroused the travelers from their slumber. Jin Yan pressed the buckles together until that tell-tale snap greeted her. Everyone settled firmly in their seats.

The ship was rocked with a violent jolt, and the porthole became obscured by a fiery red light. The interior lights of the ship flickered on and off as they tore through Taihua’s upper atmosphere.

The journey through the thickening air was a short one, and as the friction eased so did the violent shaking. The ship stabilized, and the scenery returned to view outside the porthole. Moisture dotted the glass as they tore through the clouds, followed by a slight tremble as the ship began to reduce it’s speed.

As the mist cleared the dazzling blue ocean was revealed. Where it ended a vast expanse of green met the sea. For many of the teachers it wasn’t their first time visiting the planet, but they still had their faces glued to the porthole. One after the other they sighed in appreciation.

“It’s beautiful.” Lan Jue, too, could not stop himself from speaking his mind.

“It is! So pretty. If I could move here after I retire it would be incredible.” Jin Yan’s voice was full of yearning.

“I thought development was banned,” Lan Jue said, “You can still settle

here?”

“There’s a small section open for development, to benefit tourism,” Jin Yan explained. “And you know as well as I that in the East there’s nothing money can’t accomplish. If you really wanted to live here it wouldn’t be impossible, just very, very expensive. At any rate it’s more than any of us could afford.”

“I see,” Lan Jue replied.

The ship began to descend. It was slow, in order to allow the passenger to adept to the change in cabin pressure. Half an hour later the ship was touching down on a tarmac surrounded by verdant green forests.

As the doors opened they were struck by the moist, fresh winds.

Chapter 132: Group Leader Tan

Ah, moist, fresh, full of life. It's a place very suitable for a master of the Water element! Were Hua Li here for his cultivation, he'd definitely get more out of it. Lan Jue quietly considered the surroundings as he thought back to his friend. Taihua was, as promised, a beautiful place.

This assertion only increased as he left the confines of the space ship. His eyes filled with greens of every shade imaginable. Scores of vegetation both known and unknown surrounded them on all sides. The air was thick with fresh oxygen, so much that it took a moment to acclimate. It certainly would have a restorative effect on the body.

He took a deep breath, and indeed felt his injured meridians relaxing as the energies of the world around him flowed through them.

Wu Junyi clapped his hands, demanding the attention of the gathered employees. "Alright. We've arrived at our destination, Planet Taihua. Keep in mind that the oxygen concentration here is one hundred and twenty percent of our own back on Skyfire. If you're finding it difficult to get used to, there are oxygen masks available. Try to avoid getting punch-drunk from the excess oxygen. In a moment we'll be heading for the encampment. Starting tomorrow, you all will have some free time to wander around at your leisure. We've come today with forty teachers, half of whom are mecha instructors. After we arrive at the encampment, we'll be separating you in to groups of eight. Stay within your 'team' as you wander, enjoy each others' company, take pictures and so on."

Eight people per team? Hearing this, Lan Jue felt an inexplicable sense of foreboding fill him.

These 'encampments' were in fact so crude as to make the more prudish among them want to spit. It was a single, simple log cabin. As they arrived, the various materials they would need for their stay were handed out.

"So what are the guidelines for tourism here, Professor Jin?" Lan Jue gathered up his offered materials as he asked the woman, as ever close to his side.

Jin Yan huffed. "I thought you'd never ask. Because the authorities wish to protect the environment on Taihua, the East has created a special set of 'cautions' here. As a result things here are a little different, for tourism. The most common thing to do is go on a hike. You must rely entirely on your own feet to do so. We'll be passing through dense, old-growth forests. You also don't need to go too far – just enough to appreciate where we are. Take it easy, Professor Lan, everywhere we'll be going has been checked and surveyed. There is no danger."

Now Lan Jue understood. Originally he thought they'd be staying in a hotel. However, looking again at the goods in his arms, a hotel was not what was in store for them.

A single-person tent, a sleeping bag, a kettle, knife, telescope and MRE. Among a few other things, this was his basic survival kit. A walkabout. This certainly caught his interest.

A soldier in camouflage attire had been the one to give them their gear. He wore a squad leader badge on his shoulder. He looked to be in his thirties. He addressed this with a loud voice. "You have all now arrived at Planet Taihua. Please ensure you adhere to the planet's laws and regulations. In your kits, you've been given a heating unit. However, it does not employ an open fire. ANY use of fire in these forests is strictly prohibited. Also, teachers from the National Eastern University, please do not stray too far from the campsite. In a moment, we ask you to come and register your personal communicators with us. In this way, if you are in any danger we will be able to get to you promptly. We will also input our campsite's coordinates. So long as you ensure you are back here within five days, everything will go smoothly."

"If you're able, you are permitted to hunt and consume any wild animals you come across on Taihua. But do refrain from indiscriminate killing. Only kill what you're going to eat."

Hunting, too? Interesting indeed. Must be a special characteristic of Taihua.

Wu Junyi lent his own voice to the announcement. "Ok. Next, groups.

When we're done, the groups are free to go their own way. The MREs you're carrying are enough to sustain you for five days, but if you're looking for wilder fare you'll have to rely on your own abilities. There are no toxic critters in the tour zone, so feel free to munch on whatever you can catch. However, they aren't going to lay down for you. Some animals are aggressive. When you're out there, keep an eye out and be careful. If any of you feel like the things that were given to you aren't enough, you're free to head to the lodge window and buy some more. Alright, let's split you all up."

Lan Jue looked at the window the teaching director had indicated. He wandered over for a look. The woman manning the place looked like any normal young girl. Spying the tall and handsome Lan Jue approaching, she smiled sweetly.

"What are you looking for?"

"Do you have flavoring?"

"Yup, we offer all sorts. It looks like this isn't your first foray in to the wilds. You've got some experience!" She smiled pleasantly, praising her newest customer.

Lan Jue looked over the inventory. Inwardly he was pleasantly surprised with the stock. As she said, they had pretty much anything he could want. But the prices... at least five times what you'd find on Skyfire. And as he just learned, Taihua didn't allow any food from the outside. The rations they were given weren't cheap either, about all the university could afford.

He stuffed his purchases in to his back and headed back. Returning to the fray, he came across Jin Yan, an odd look in her eyes.

"What is it, Professor Jin? Are the groups set?"

She nodded, and replied in quiet tones. "Professor Tan was chosen as our group leader."

"Ah? That savage lady?" Lan Jue was taken aback, and his volume was a smidge higher than he'd have liked. A few of the nearby teachers looked his way.

“Am I savage, or are you just garbage?” That hateful, familiar voice called out to him.

Lan Jue looked helplessly towards Tan Lingyun as she approached. Lan Jue attempted to recover. “What I meant –“

She cut him off with a disdainful sniff. “A waste of height and space. I hope you don’t hold us up.”

Lan Jue had nothing to say, and could only shrug his shoulders. The ghost of a smile cracked on Jin Yan’s face.

Tan Lingyun moved to the side and began to organize her things. She smacked in to her shoulder in her passage.

“Director Wu.”

Wu Junyi beamed a smile. “What is it, Professor Lan? Do you agree with your group assignment? Professor Tan is quite the looker, eh? ”

Lan Jue smiled as well, but his was a forced one. “Deliberate, I suspect?”

Wu Junyi chuckled knowingly. “In fact she’s a good woman. It’s just that temper of hers. That little matter from before was really unfortunate. So, I decided to put you two together. I’m hoping this trip will help you two reconcile your differences. I’ve got a lot of faith in you, Professor! Every class of yours has more students than the one before. You’re developing a very good reputation. I’m working in your corner at the university, and if you keep up these numbers you’ll be a syndicated teacher in no time.”

“Thank you very much.” Once more, there wasn’t anything Lan Jue could say. Things were as they were, and complaining about it wasn’t going to do any good. Anyway, it was vacation. So long as he didn’t provoke that psychotic woman, everything would be fine.

His group was more than just he and Professor Tan, of course. It also boasted Jin Yan, Wu Hongyuan, and four others. Two men and two women. The two other gentlemen were also, like them, electives teachers. The two women were mecha instructors. Four each, men and women. But, considering the addition of Professor Tan, the group was decidedly tilted in the ladies’ favor. Judging by looks alone, it certainly didn’t appear that the

two male electives teachers were powerhouses.

It wasn't long after they finished orientating their communicators that Tan Lingyun started showing her leadership prowess. She shouted for her team to gather together.

Lan Jue was already there, beside Jin Yan. Still, he was trying his best to remain on the outskirts of their little expeditionary team.

"It's still early, and I'm sure you all had a good rest on the ship. Our goal is to get ten 'k' in to the forest and pitch camp. We'll rest for a bit afterward, then start looking for food. Any questions?" Her words entreated dialogue, but her tone didn't. Her sharp eyes pierced the gathered men specifically.

In trepidation of the Savage Goddess' reputation, the men of the group nearly tripped over each other to express their agreement with her plan. Lan Jue also nodded his approval. The other ladies were just as quick to acquiesce. It appeared as though the women as the mecha department were on good terms with Professor Tan. They've been at her side the whole time.

"Alright, then let's get going!" Tan Lingyun waved them onward, walking at the head of the pack. She made a direct line for the edge of the forest.

Jin Yan and Lan Jue took up the rear. As they followed, Lan Jue leaned in and spoke quietly to his fellow teacher. "Is this really supposed to be a vacation? It seems more like a military expedition!"

Jin Yan's laugh was low and constrained. "Professor Tan teaches mecha combat. She'd reputed to be an Emperor-Class pilot herself. She treats all her students like soldiers, so I guess it's a habit."

As expected, there were no paths or trails in the ancient forest. It was no problem, however, as the one who led them used her machete to make quick and violent work of any limb or vine that dared impede her path. Their forward progress wasn't hindered in the least. She was loud, coarse, and violent, but she'd chosen the most grueling task for herself.

Lan Jue followed along at a leisurely pace – after all, how fast could they

go through a forest as dense as this?

This forest was considerably different from other indigenous forests Lan Jue had visited. For a start, there were far fewer insects than he'd expected. In large forests there were sure to be clouds of flying insects, but not here. The air was clean, fresh. The surrounding flora were enormous, towering towards the canopy, even the bushes. They did need to cut a path to follow, but in the end it wasn't too much trouble to do so.

The deeper they traveled in to the forests, the heavier the air became with fresh oxygen. With each breath Lan Jue was recovering from his injuries. He felt pretty good, all things considered.

After about two kilometers in to their trek, the discrepancies in the different teachers began to show. Professor Tan remained in front, full of vigor and vivaciousness. Behind her, the two other mecha instructors continued in similar fashion. The lack in physical preparedness of the electives teachers was becoming quite clear.

Jin Yan was already out of breath, while Lan Jue and Wang Hongyun were in better shape. The two other teachers in their department were already drenched in sweat, their breaths ragged. Were it not for that overriding fear of their group leader, the fellas would have cried for a rest long ago.

Chapter 133: Fantascia Injection

Tan Lingyun shot a glance of her shoulder, her brows wrinkling at what she saw. “Take a break,” she said, finally stopping.

The two male teachers and Jin Yan sighed, finally given quarter. They immediately sought places to sit and drink in the air with deep, gasping breaths.

Tan Lingyun extricated her canteen from her pack and took a swig, taking the time to peer at their surroundings. Her two female counterparts stood at either side of their impromptu leader. They were in cover formation, looking after the five electives teachers – very much in military fashion.

Wang Hongyuan settled beside Jin Yan. “How are you doing, Professor Jin? Sit a while and I’ll help you up.”

Jin Yan shook her head. “I’m fine. Though it looks like I really need to get in shape. I’m already tired after only this little while.”

Wang Hongyuan frowned. “We’ve all been sitting in a ship for the past few hours. That’s no rest. It’s natural for the body to get exhausted. Leader Tan, it looks like we’re in the neighborhood of a campsite. We’re here on vacation, we shouldn’t tire ourselves out so much. You three are mecha teachers, but us electives teachers are just normal people.”

Tan Lingyun huffed at him. “Professor Jin I can understand, but you guys are also struggling? At this pace, we’re barely moving. Even your average person shouldn’t find this tiring. You all a bunch of soft-footed weaklings?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Professor Wang, I’m ok really.” Jin Yan hurriedly pushed herself to her feet with the aid of Wang Hongyuan, stopping him from speaking further.

Their group leader approached regardless. Stopping in front of Jin Yan, her features softened perceptibly. “Professor Jin, are you really alright? If not we can ease up.”

Jin Yan smiled thankfully. "I'm fine, honestly. Sadly our stamina really isn't where it should be. Perhaps, if possible, we shouldn't rush so much on the first day."

Tan Lingyun hesitated for just a moment, then nodded. "Five kilometers then, then we pitch camp. You guys can make it, yeah?"

Jin Yan turned her head to look at Lan Jue. Their 'etiquette teacher' stood nearby, hands stuffed in the pockets of his pants. He looked unfazed. Seeing her eyes dart his way, he shrugged. "I'm fine."

The two other gentlemen hurried to agree with Tan Lingyun's new plan.

At last Tan Lingyun swept her eyes towards Wang Hongyuan. "Gain a little masculinity, why don't you. And don't pull any of that 'orchid fingers' crap in front of me." [1] She spoke to him, but her general displeasure was surely with all the men before her.

[tl: [1] = 'Orchid fingers' is a hand motion used in traditional Chinese dancing where the middle finger presses against the thumb, and the other fingers are splayed out, not unlike an orchid flower... ostensibly.]

"You!" Wang Hongyun jabbed a finger angrily at her, but he couldn't help the dainty motions derived from years of dance training from creeping in to the motion. His face immediately reddened and he dropped his hand.

The other two women couldn't help but titter at the display.

There in the forest, none of those gathered could know that the satellites far above Taihua were picking up something more interesting than their squabble. Several small dark red dots appeared in their images, spreading out over Taihua and bathing it in dim light.

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"Jin Tao, are you prepared?" Hua Li's question was solemn, serious.

The young man nodded. He was clad in only a pair of underpants, and sat within a nourishment pod. Maybe he really did have a problem with his head, because there was no sense of trepidation in him at all.

“Teacher, why are you always wearing that mask? Isn’t that uncomfortable?” Jin Tao watched Hua Li, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Hua Li lifted the exceptionally large surgical tubing in his hand. “This kid... are you really an idiot or are you just pretending? You actually care about this shit right now?”

Jin Tao chuckled. “Wouldn’t this count as my greatest ability, to remain calm? Fatty Tang got absolutely ruined, and Professor Lan said I would face greater risk. I know what’s coming, and how hard it’ll be to get passed it. But we have to face the things that scare us. If I’m relaxed, the nerves can’t get to me.”

Hua Li looked at him in utter amazement. “It’s no wonder A-Jue chose you. You’ve got some real insight. Fine, I’ll take the mask off and you can have a look.” With that, he used his free hand to pluck the mask free, revealing his features.

“Ah!” Jin Tao cried out in alarm.

Hua Li took pride in the sudden reaction. He spoke with a quiet self-confidence. “What are you screaming about. You know me, eh?”

Jin Tao bobbed his head up and down like a chicken. “Y-y-y-your Poseidon, right? Ah man, you really are a good lookin fella. No wonder you’re everyone’s idol.”

An infinitely suave smile spread across Hua Li’s face. “Alright, time to lie back. Let’s get started. The decoction will be absorbed in three steps. This is the first. The other two will be once a month.”

“Oh.” He settled back in the pod. “Teach... actually Poseidon, man. Hey, looking like that, you aren’t actually a woman dressed as a man, are you? If you are, you’d probably fall for a handsome guy like me, huh!”

“Damnit!” Hua Li’s pleasant smile was gone, dead on his face. He angrily scrunched his face and lifted his head, jabbing a finger pointedly at his neck. “Are you a moron?! You know what this is? YOU’RE a damn woman!” He slammed the lid of the nourishment pod shut, crushing Jin

Tao in to a lying position.

The pod was full of a thick, transparent gel. Jin Tao lay within, eyes wide.

Hua Li took a few angry breaths. Finding some semblance of calm, he injected the contents of the nearby syringe in to the pod port, and jammed a button. Now that things were started, his face became calm. He carefully watched the pod for any changes.

“Jin Tao, relax your body. No matter how bad this hurts, you have to stay conscious. You absolutely must stay awake through the whole process. You need to feel every change in your body. Only this way will you make sure the Fantascia Genetica’s effect reaches it’s full potential. Your teacher wanted me to tell you.. if you persevere, stick to it, you’ll come out a real man. Strong. A hero. If you don’t... well, then you’re doomed to life of mediocrity. A life where the disdain and disregard of others will follow you for the rest of your days. You understand what I’m saying?”

Jin Tao’s smile faded, disappeared. He forced himself to nod, displacing the gel around him.

A myriad of luminescent colors began to appear within the gel. The injection of the decoction wasn’t quick, but these spectral lights and colors quickly overtook the interior of the box.

At first, Jin Tao simply felt as though his body were going slightly numb, a sensation that appeared to be coming from all directions and affecting every part of him. The way he was settled in the pod, however, ensured his breathing wasn’t affected.

Suddenly, in the next instant, he felt as though his very pores were sucking in oxygen from outside. It was a strange but wonderful sensation.

The sense of paralysis increased, slowly spreading throughout his form. As he looked on in shock, he noticed his body begin to quake and jerk uncontrollably. They were small at first, but as time went on they grew more and more severe. With it came the terrible sensation that he was being torn apart; his skin, his muscles, ripped away. From the inside out, it felt like he was being flayed alive.

But it wasn't pain, necessarily. It felt more like, the forces of energy that made up his being were being separated.

He groaned, as he felt his body suddenly go stiff as a board. He remained so for several seconds, with the nourishing gel surrounding him quivering with each tremble of his form.

Looking on, Hua Li saw him undergo a change. Thin white hairs were sprouting all over him, sprouting from every pore. His twitching mouth revealed elongated canines fighting past his lips.

It was his innate ability, brought to the surface. Cynanthropy.

Through the external forces that assailed him, Jin Tao's Discipline was reacting and manifesting on the surface. The fear was, with his abilities as weak as they were, could Jin Tao resist the dangers of the Western Alliance's greatest genetic manipulator?

Hua Li was glued to the pod, watching Jin Tao carefully, his every move and jerk. He adhered to Lan Jue's wishes, making this kid's safety his primary concern. He was also quite clear on the risks and suffering involved in playing with one's genetics. He himself was from the Western Alliance!

He could recall several times he'd witnessed the Fantascia Genetica decoction being used. Each time, the recipient was no less than a level five Talent. Jin Tao's was no greater than second level. More than just his discipline, it meant his physical endurance was also much weaker than was necessary. In the West, there was no way he would be permitted to use the decoction. He didn't have the strength, and failure meant terrible things.

But here he was, through virtue of some lucky star, given his chance at becoming great. Still the decoction would be given in three stages, and this was just the first. Indeed, his suffering would be great. His willpower would be the decided factor in victory or failure. If he failed he would have a nervous breakdown. All of his pain and efforts would be wasted. The priceless formula would be lost. All Hua Li could do was watch, and protect him from the worst of it.

The shaking became worse. His metamorphosis continued, and in the gel he became more and more dog-like. Streaks of blood escaped from his pores along with the dog hair.

However, despite what he was seeing, Hua Li was most surprised by what the instruments were telling him. Not only was this kid lucid, but he was taking the whole thing in stride! There were no dangerous fluctuations in his nervous pathways. On the contrary, there were hardly any fluctuations at all. This was indeed a very rare kind of willpower!

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“Here at last.” Li Wei was one of the other gentlemen in Lan jue’s group. He plopped to the floor with a defeated sigh. He was done, any the end of the world wouldn’t get him standing again. He fished his canteen from his pack and took several long gulps. He looked set to fall to pieces.

Five kilometers through a rainforest and five kilometers in the outside world were entirely different things. The terrain was uneven, sometimes high sometimes low. Though Tan Lingyun was in the front clearing a path, it was no picnic for them either. Li Wei was just a normal guy, and without any background in physical fitness it felt like he’d just spent half his life in energy reserves.

Tan Lingyun and the two other mecha instructors had already begun pitching their tents. They’d chosen to set up their spots on the periphery, creating a triangle. The other teachers would camp within.

Professor Tan had chosen well. A small brook gurgled nearby, and after a brief examination it was determined they could drink freely from it. For now, this was to be their campsite.

Lan Jue was also busying himself with erecting his tent. To him, it was quite a fun and relaxing activity. It didn’t take long for him to finish up, and once he threw his sleeping bag in there he’d be ready to rest.

“I’m off to look for dinner. You all stay here, don’t leave the triangle.”

Standing before them with her machete, Tan Longyun struck quite the commanding presence.

But before she left, something curious came over her. Without entirely knowing why, she jabbed her knife towards Lan Jue, who'd already finished with his tent. "You're coming with."

Chapter 134: Some Unknown Danger

“Me?” Lan Jue pointed a finger at his nose.

Tan Lingyun only grunted, then turned and started off. Lan Jue smiled wryly and followed.

Li Wei shuffled to Wang Hongyuan, who’d recently finished setting up his own tent, and grumbled towards him. “Professor Wang, you’re right. Is this a trip or some sort of military survival training?”

Wang Hongyuan scowled. “This savage woman, she’ll probably never find a husband.”

Jin Yan furrowed her brow at the two men. “Don’t be so malicious. She’s a good woman! It’s just what happened years ago...”

ζ

Lan Jue followed close on Tan Lingyun’s heels as they made their way back in to the forests. The mecha instructor was in the lead, her pace slow. Her eyes swept along the brush, in constant motion.

“You look like you’re in decent shape. Do you exercise?” She didn’t look at him as she asked her question, continuing her earnest surveillance.

“Yeah,” he replied. His response was brief, curt. He had no kindness prepared for this woman – the way she’d treated him earlier was unforgivable.

So Tan Lingyun just went on, talking to herself. “It’s strange. I don’t remember the wildlife on Taihua being this sparse. We’re five kilometers in and we haven’t seen anything.”

“You’ve been here before?”

She nodded. “I come every year. Hunting’s always permitted, the air is good, it’s relaxing. It’s a good way to reconnect with nature. By the way, what was your name? Flat-foot?”

Lan Jue considered silence, but went on. “Lan Jue. You can call me Professor Lan, or my full name if you must. You’ve probably hated men

your whole life, huh. Something must've happened."

Tan Lingyun stopped, and spun suddenly to face him. She nearly speared Lan Jue to a tree with her cutting stare. "Shut. Your. Mouth."

Lan Jue only smiled indifferently in the face of her anger. "If you're so predisposed to hating guys, why'd you make me come along?"

Tan Lingyun hissed chillingly at him. "I needed a pack mule. Stay here, and don't move. I'll take a look around."

She hefted her machete, and stuck it in to the trunk of a nearby tree. She shut her eyes. After a moment, a faint green light began to emanate from her.

As the viridian halo expanded Lan Jue was surprised to discover that she had begun to completely blend in with her surroundings. Hm? What was this Discipline? Despite all Lan Jue's experience, he couldn't guess her Discipline at a glance. The dim light she was releasing was gentle, almost cozy. Her own aura vanished, and it seemed she was almost a tree or shrub herself – not a woman at all.

It was no surprise she liked it here. It appeared her Discipline somehow had a connection with nature. Considering his unfortunate run-in with her before, perhaps physical power as well. So was it that power?

As Lan Jue was lost in his thoughts, Tan Lingyun's eyes suddenly shot open. Shock shone brightly within them.

"They're afraid!"

"Whose afraid?" Lan Jue asked, inquisitively.

"Everything." Tan Lingyun's voice had grown perceptibly softer. "All of them, all the plants here are afraid. At my level of cultivation I can feel the mood of every living thing within three thousand meters. There isn't a single wild animal in that diameter, just plants. Not coming across any wildlife on our trip out here could be written off as a coincidence, but nothing in three kilometers? There's something wrong. Quick, let's head back."

She grabbed Lan Jue, and the two raced back to the campsite.

Lan Jue felt an intense power coming from her hand, and suddenly he felt himself literally being dragged through the air. The physical power exuded from Tan Lingyun expanded and enveloped him within it, like a protective shield. Any plant or insect that was unfortunate enough to draw near was cast away in their wake. He feared even trees wouldn't be able to stand against them.

This...

Lan Jue didn't speak. But if he had to describe the situation, visually it was like flying a kite. He was the kite.

"Base, come in. This is NEU Group Seven Leader Tan Lingyun. There's something strange going on, come in." As Tan Lingyun dragged Lan Jue behind her, she called in to the communicator on her wrist.

"Hello Group Leader. What is it?" A calm voice answered.

She responded, her voice low. "We're five kilometers in to the forest. Trekking in we didn't come across any wildlife. I used my discipline to search, and found nothing. There's definitely something going on here, requested satellite survey immediately. We're heading back to the encampment."

"No wildlife? Alright, we'll take a look. We'll let the other groups know. Come on back. Be careful on the return trek. We'll send out a reinforcement recon team, they'll link up with the coordinates on your communicator."

"Roger."

Lan Jue was not enjoying being the kite. However he had to admire Tan Lingyun's handling of the situation. She was certainly a competent mecha instructor. From the instant she discovered something wrong, her responses were clear, calculated and not in the least wasteful.

They had not gone out far, so by the time her report was finished they were already back at the campsite. Her hand shook, and Lan Jue tumbled to the floor. She called out to the others.

“Alright everyone we’re breaking camp and moving out now. There’s something wrong out here. Drop all excess weight, we’re only bringing solid foods. Hurry it up!”

By this time all the tents had been constructed. The physically beat electives teachers were already resting within. Tan Lingyun’s sudden and vocal declaration took them all by surprise.

The other two mecha instructors rushed to her side. “Lingyun, what is it?”

“I don’t know yet. There isn’t any wildlife in these rainforests, I checked. The plants are also giving off a palpable fear. There must be some unknown danger. We have to rush back to base camp. And then immediately back to Skyfire. No delay.”

“How do you know this isn’t some guess or mistake on your part?” Wang Hongyuan glared at her, rising from the interior of his tent.

That withering gaze she wielded so well fell upon the dance instructor. “It is a guess. But it’s well-founded. We have to get out of here. As group leader I have to keep the safety of the group as my first concern.”

“Professor Wang, I believe her. Let’s get out of here first, then we’ll see. I also feel like something isn’t right.” Lan Jue felt the need to interject.

Lan Jue’s sudden agreement was unexpected, and Tan Lingyun shot him a curious glance.

“You?!” Wang Hongyuan barked suddenly at him like a dog who’d had his tail trampled. “And what are you? Just some new face, fresh and worthless. Why don’t you just PISS. OFF!”

“Professor Wang! What are you saying?!” By this time Jin Yan had also left her tent and, seeing Wang Hongyuan address Lan Jue this way, couldn’t help but shout angrily at him.

The dance teacher only shot her a hateful glare, and stomped back in to his tent.

A dangerous glint flickered through Tan Lingyun’s eyes. She turned to

speak to the two other female teachers. “Get them out of here. Now!” She didn’t wait for an answer, she was already making for Wang Hongyuan’s tent. She flicked her wrist, the machete in her palm glinting ominously.

Rrrrip! A great tear appeared in the side of Wang Hongyuan’s tent.

“You bitch! I’ve tolerated you long enough!” The man’s tittery voice screeched from the entrance. Then, a figure emerged from newly created opening.

A clawed hand reached out, grabbing at the knife in Tan Lingyun’s hand.

“Wha-?” She cried out in surprise and retreated a step. She yanked her wrist to free it from his grip. Her left hand curled in to a fist, a punched at the origin of the hand.

The moment she threw that punch, Lan Jue felt a powerful wave of energy expanding outward from the attack.

Bang! A muffled thud preceded Wang Hongyuan unceremoniously tumbling from the tent. Tan Lingyun stood in the same spot, looking down at him. The only change in her was five white marks on her knuckles.

The dance instructor was a sight different than normal, now. Long, sharp nails had extended from each of his fingertips. His face had grown pale, stretching longer and more slender than before. His effeminate aura was gone, replaced with an unsettling chill.

“An adept? Your power has a darkness to it...” Tan Lingyun’s features were confused, almost trembling, as she looked on his hideous face.

Wang Hongyuan’s voice had become higher still, screechy. “Tan Lingyun, you’re a powerful woman. I didn’t want to strike out at you. But the way you speak, the things you say, and this groundless assumption of danger to make us retreat. We’re here on vacation! Nothing else. If you want to leave, then go, but don’t drag us electives teachers behind you like mules! I have power enough to protect myself!”

Jin Yan was also shocked, looking at the change that had overcome Wang Hongyuan. She hadn’t realized that this man she came across every day, greeted in the office, and sat beside was in fact an adept. And a

powerful one at that, it appeared.

The only one who didn't appear surprised at the revelation was the man standing a few short meters away: Lan Jue.

They couldn't see it, but how could he not recognize Wang Hongyuan's hidden powers? Lan Jue's own thunderbolt Discipline was in direct opposition to such dark powers. So, the moment he met Wang Hongyuan he felt the energies pulsing from him. Wang Hongyuan may not know about Lan Jue's own powers, but the fact that they were opposed meant they were destined to dislike one another from the start.

Tan Lingyun dropped her arm. "Now that I know you're an adept, that's better. I don't want to sit here and argue with you – you're right, we're here on vacation. Still, safety has to be our primary concern. If in the end we find there indeed was no danger, I'll happily accept whatever punishment the school sees fit to levy against me. But, right now, I am the group leader, and you must listen to me. We're leaving right – now."

"And if I don't want to?" Wang Hongyuan challenged.

Chapter 135: The Violet Creature

Tan Lingyun laughed scornfully. “Men only care about face. If you can beat me, then you go ahead and be group leader.” Suddenly, without any further discussion she launched herself at Wang Hongyuan. Like a great bird of prey, she lashed out at the twisted man.

As her figure rose in to the air, that sensation of gathering energy returned anew. It surrounded her like the moments before an explosion.

Lan Jue’s conjectures were finally confirmed, and he knew her ability; Supernatural!

It was an exceedingly rare and equally special Discipline to possess. It allowed her to employ the energies of the environment around her – any environment – to augment her own physical abilities. Even in the vacuum of space she’d be able to draw the radiation of the universe in to herself, making her stronger. It meant no matter where she found herself in a fight, she was ready to manipulate the environment to her advantage. She was never not on home turf.

This was the first time Lan Jue had encountered someone with a real Supernatural Discipline. He’d heard that, fifty years ago, there once was a Paragon with such an ability. Though he eventually suffered his own downfall, in his prime he was among the most powerful people to ever live.

This ability of hers explained how she was able to communicate with the land around her, to feel the fear she claimed the plants were feeling. Hers was clearly a very powerful ability. She had spread her power out through the environment, becoming one with it. So it wasn’t merely her, but everything around them, that gave her such capabilities.

Wang Hongyuan stood directly in the face of her onslaught, unmoving. He spread his arms, and two large black wings extended from his back. They beat once, and suddenly he was at Tan Lingyun’s side. His clawed hands reached for her shoulders.

This was a conflict, but his attacks were measured. He wasn’t aiming to

kill her. Tan Lingyun was surprised at the sudden shift, her reaction slow. Just slow enough for Wang Hongyuan to get her in his grasp.

The man's pride was suddenly upset when he got the sudden sensation he was holding some indestructible metal thing. As his hands found their mark, Tan Lingyun's shoulder reversed, slamming directly in to his chest.

His reaction was swift, dropping his chest and collapsing his abdomen. The wings at his back beat furiously. He looked for a moment as though he were flying upside down, but in fact it was just the speed of his retreat that caused the illusion. It wasn't a solid hit, but he still felt the spasm in the pit of his stomach.

Sure enough, this was the power of the Savage Goddess. Wang Hongyuan felt a tremor of fear snake through him. He knew he was no weak thing, but the abilities this woman possessed were far beyond his own.

Tan Lingyun grunted. She reached a hand out towards him, her fist squeezing in the air. Wang Hongyuan felt, moments later, as though the very space around him was condensing. The speed he took so much pride in was being sapped away.

The Savage Goddess took a deep breath. The fresh green aura that surrounded her bloomed to life in a dazzling display. As it did, it congealed at her back to reveal an enormous viridian phantasm. The towering beast raised its hand, and sent it crashing down towards the black-winged electives instructor.

Boooom!

Lan Jue unconsciously winced, shutting his eyes. It was like Wang Hongyuan was little more than a fly, smooshed by a giant invisible swatter. He crumpled to the ground.

The green light around her faded. She turned her head to look at the rest of them. "Anyone else want to give it a shot?"

Not a peep.

Tan Lingyun's growling voice continued. "We are leaving. Now. Back to

base camp.” She gave no further room for argument. Jin Yan yelped as their group leader unceremoniously threw her over her shoulder. The two other elective teachers were then caught in her grip, one hand for each. Just like that, she was off at a good pace.

The two other mecha instructors hastened to follow. Lan Jue took one look at Wang Hongyuan, then followed their lead.

“Professor Tan, what are we going to do about Professor Wang?” Jin Yan asked, bouncing against Tan Lingyun’s back.

“Relax,” she said, “He’s a stubborn one. He’ll be fine. He’ll be coming along shortly I’m sure.”

Lan Jue remained in the back. Secretly he harbored criticisms, for although Wang Hongyuan’s vampiric discipline was indeed one hard to kill, that slap he’d received definitely wasn’t gentle! Poor guy...

Not long after the others left – a few minutes perhaps – Wang Hongyuan finally managed to pull himself up. The ground below him was actually indented with an outline of his body.

So recently devastated by his opponent, the pride and arrogance had left the man’s eyes. It was replaced with a clear sense of anxiety, doubt.

“An eighth ranked Talent? That woman’s actually that strong?”

He ground his teeth. With a few beats of his leathery wings, he was off chasing after the others.

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A great, earth-shaking boom tore across the horizon, not long after Lan Jue and his party had begun their escape.

Hooooouuhhmm! From the depths of the rainforest, a blinding red light arose. Within it was an oval, a massive scarlet cocoon. Where it made landfall, the area around it has also turned a strange sort of violet. An unhealthy-looking fog of similar color snaked close to the ground.

A small animal, some strange nameless beast, made it's way over from a distance. In the grips of curiosity it stumbled in to the mist, but the moment the strange tendrils touched it, it's hair began to fall out. Then skin, muscle, organs, and finally bones. It dissolved in to a primordial ooze. With the creatures death a faint red light wafted from it, which was drawn in to the nearby cocoon and vanished.

Brrrrmmm! A low growl emitted from the strange object. The cocoon swelled larger, reaching outward, then returned to normal.

Pffftt. The rattling release of air followed, and then a blade-thin object jabbed out from within it. As the egg was pierced, a flood of thick violet fluid was excreted.

Again and again the oval was pierced, shredded, as though some enormous beast was trying to cut it's way free.

Scenes very similar to this one were occurring throughout Taihua's pristine rainforests.

Lan Jue ran after the group ahead of him. But as he did, a strange sensation came over him and he lifted his eyes to the sky. The dense vegetation cover made it indistinct, but it was clear that somehow in the last few moments the sky had grown dark. An ethereal grey hue crept across the planet.

Tan Lingyun's judgments were correct. There was definitely something happening here.

Lan Jue deliberately began to slow his pace, falling back from the others. He raised his left hand, and pointed the shimmering green ring on his pinky fingers towards the forest. The green light within shot out in to the leafy depths.

"What's up with you, out of strength?" Tan Lingyun had turned around to call back at him.

"Huh? No, I'm fine. Coming." Lan Jue quickly shouted back, and picked up the pace.

Eeee! Eeee! Eeee! Just then, the ear-splitting screeches of an alarm were

issued from the communicators of each teacher's wrist.

"Red alert, red alert. Taihua has come under attack from an unidentified source. All tourists make your way to the quickest base camp as quickly as possible. Repeat, red alert..."

The alarm confirmed, without a doubt, Tan Lingyun's suspicions. The two elective teachers who's earlier struggled to keep up found no such troubles now. As they raced along, panic was written clear as day on their faces.

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Aaaaaahhh! A shrill cry suddenly filled the air. The sound caused Wu Junyi's face to slacken.

He dropped in to a slight crouch, then sprung in to the air. He effortlessly soared a dozen meters before pulling himself against the top of a towering tree.

He saw the scene unfold, not far away. A scowl carved lines in his face.

An enormous creature stood in the forests. It's violet figure was perhaps ten meters tall, with three heads and six razor-sharp wings. It stood on four enormous, sturdy legs. It's abdomen was a layered field of magenta, alternating in intensity. It's torso was triangular, and from the sides six great arms like a mantis' claws swept at the air like vicious scythes. The articulated pincers were each seven meters long, and as Wu Junyi looked on, the beast cleared a ten meters area of land around it with them. The giant, sturdy trees were felled like butter before a warm knife.

More unsettling than it's appearance was the mist that was expelled from it. The violet wisps changed everything it came in to contact with, tinting them that same sickly color. Any plant or animal that came in to contact with it immediately withered and died. Whatever it was, the mist devoured whatever life it touched. From where he watched, Director Wu could see a figure, human, lying on the ground as the mist crept over. A

teacher, and before his eyes they melted away under the noxious cloud.

“Bastard!” Wu Junyi shouted at the monstrous thing in a rage. His curled fists rose nearly of their own accord and beat against his chest. He brazenly roared, and leapt from the tree.

Wu Junyi’s normally unimpressive stature swelled as he soared towards the beast. His clothes split and fell away, and before long the teaching director had become a towering, six-meter tall baboon.

His entire body was covered in a dark copper light, and each hair stood on end. His arms were particularly strong, and they reached out as he shot like a cannonball towards the creature.

“Go, hurry! Get back to camp and board the plane!” Wu Junyi’s thunderous voice echoed across the rainforests. Nearby instructors almost tumbled over themselves to flee.

Roughly half of the teachers who’d arrived for the trip taught electives. Most possessed no real combat abilities. And though the others were mecha instructors, naturally none brought mechas with them on vacation!

Now, all they could do was run around like headless chickens.

The mantis-like monstrosity spied Wu Junyi barreling towards it through the air. It’s six razor-like appendages lashed out at him.

“Raaaaaggghh!!” The enormous baboon howled threateningly, bashing his fists against his chest. As he careened nearer, a dull golden light fired out from him. As it crashed against the beast’s pincers, they were cast away. Unimpeded, Wu Junyi headed straight for the monster’s three hideous heads.

But the mantis-beast was surprisingly nimble, it’s four legs strong. It sidestepped and avoiding the attack.

Boom! Wu Junyi crashed to the ground instead. His two strong legs carved deep trenches where he made landfall.

Clank, chink, screech! A series of metallic squeals arose. The beast had made a move of it’s own, and was swiping murderously at Wu Junyi’s

back.

Chapter 136: Thor's Watch

Under the mantis-creature's assault, Director Wu did not react. In truth his own powers were far and away a match for the beast. Strike after strike from it's scythe-like arms left no trace on the baboon's body.

Without looking back, Wu Junyi's powerful legs grew taught, then launched him backwards against his attacker.

Crack! Snap! Two of the mantis-creature's six arms broke and fell away. It reeled back, tumbling away from the impact.

King Kong, a baboon metamorphosis. This was Wu Junyi's Discipline. Director of the Teaching Department, and eight ranked Talent. He was among the best Adepts the school possessed.

One rippling arm supported him against the ground, pushing him up to somersault back in to action. In the blink of an eye he was striking once again at the monstrous intruder. It was startled by his ferocity, but it's reaction was quick nonetheless. Fending off the great baboon, six great wings unfurled from it's back and pushed it into the air.

Wu Junyi scowled at the unpleasant discovery. The damn thing could fly! Already he could feel a sort of numbness creeping up through his body, a result of the strange violet mist the monster was releasing. Whatever it was, it was clearly intensely toxic. For the moment, he was able to mostly isolate the poisons from affecting him, but it's effects would grow stronger the more of his discipline he expended.

The King Kong Baboon couldn't fly, but this didn't mean he was out of options against flying opponents. Wu Junyi had spent decades cultivating and understanding his powers. Both his strengths and weaknesses – and how to overcome them – were very clear to him.

"Aaaagghhoooo!" He roared towards the heavens, spreading his arms wide and baring his chest. Suddenly, he twisted back, preparing for something. In the same instant, a dim golden orb congealed in his left palm. He twisted back around, and flung the shimmering projectile like a canon ball.

The mantis-creature had suffered significantly already under Wu Junyi's attacks. Though it was held aloft by its wings, the injuries it had sustained made maneuvering more difficult. It couldn't get out of the way fast enough, and the golden orb collided in a direct hit.

Booommmmm! The rumbling thunder of impact echoed through the forests. The monster fell to ground, reduced to countless smoldering pieces.

Wu Junyi did not stop to bask in victory. Immediately he was racing towards his teachers. There was no way of knowing how many of the things were still out there. He had to protect his people.

He had made relatively quick work of it, but still a haze of anxiety and depression filled him. There were forty teachers, separated in to various groups. Luckily his own had him to protect them, but what of the others? Lingyun's group may be fine, but the other three...

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Tan Lingyun raced ahead of the others at break-neck speed. As she did, her perception was expanded outward to read the changes in the environment. She couldn't stop for the quiet necessary to feel vast distances, but her Supernatural Discipline allowed her to maintain a five hundred meter diameter around them without issue.

Suddenly, somewhere to her right, she sensed the appearance of a fierce and violent thing. It moved with incomparable speed. Just as she was preparing to react, however, the presence vanished as quickly as it had come. She was decidedly unsettled by the situation. But, she didn't stop, couldn't stop – she just kept going.

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Overhead, a gigantic blue figure raced by like a bolt of lightning, a dangerous-looking spear in hand. It was racing towards another monstrous violet beast. This one was more akin to a scorpion. It was perhaps fifty meters long, but facing the mighty blue figure it might as well have been a toy. The stench of something burning wafted from the creature's body. Like the other, a purplish-red mist oozed from it, killing the surrounding wildlife. But it simply snaked around the enormous newcomer, having no effect.

Suddenly that bolt-like blue spear was in flight, cutting a deadly path towards the scorpion, then pinning it to the ground. As it did, the blue figure was in motion. A dazzling, dangerous blue light shone from its head to fan out in a semi-circle. A moment later, it vanished like a bolt of lightning in to the distance.

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Lan Jue followed close behind Tan Lingyun, his brows furrowed. Flickering bolts of electricity raced just behind his eyes.

It was Thor who tore through the heavens around them, called forth by Lan Jue through Thor's Promise. The ring allowed him to communicate with his mecha, not unlike the spirit-caller gem he used with Qianlin. Everything the suit saw, Lan Jue did too. He could see the horrendous things, and the damage they were dealing.

Like Junyi, his priority was the safe evacuation of all those on the planet. He made sure Thor was there to watch, and protect.

Luckily they hadn't entered too deep in to the rainforests before things went south. In fact, Tan Lingyun's group had been the one to venture farthest in. The various teachers were still relatively fresh, so their retreat was a speedy one.

"We made it!" The base camp spread out before them. Finally, the slightest sense of relief crept in to Tan Lingyun's heart. They rushed

forward towards it, and spied a host of uniformed soldiers rushing to the forests around them. They each carried laser weapons, and spread out to face the encroaching threat.

“You all don’t have any heavier artillery?” Lan Jue grabbed a passing soldier to ask.

“No, the soldier responded with a wry smile, “the environmental restrictions mean no artillery emplacements. We’re restricted from using any high-yield weaponry here. Machinery, too, like mechas. All we got is what we can carry.”

“Then don’t go rushing out on a fool’s errand,” Lan Jue said, “Whatever the hell these things are, they’re strong. You’ll need mechas if you want to stand a chance at wiping them out. Just pull everyone back.”

The soldier reacted with a hard stare. “Our obligation is the safety of the public. There are still many tourists who haven’t made it back. It’s our job to go out and protect them.” With that, the soldier raced in to the jungle. However, a few feet in to the dense overgrowth he stopped. He turned back towards Lan Jue.

“Hey guy... thanks for the concern. I hope we have an opportunity to meet again.”

With that, he snapped to attention, and raced off in to the jungle.

Lan Jue’s eyes followed him as he disappeared in to the trees. This was the quality of the East’s soldiers. They were full of pride, almost arrogance, but an arrogance born of their life of service. Their pride was worthy of respect.

“Hurry, get on the ship!” The commanding voice brought him back to the present. He was suddenly wrenched around by a powerful hand. The scenery around him went lopsided, pulled through the air by Tan Lingyun until they arrived at the ship’s loading doors.

“Hurry up, no wasting time. Get on the plane and wait for evac.” Tan Lingyun’s pretty face was hard and serious. She released Lan Jue from her grip, then raced off to find more teachers.

“Professor Lan, hurry and get on.” Jin Tan’s timid voice called from behind him. Lan Jue turned to see her already on board, urgently waving for him to follow.

Lan Jue took a deep breath. He watched the teachers racing towards the ship, then decided to board as well. The interior of their transport was nearly as chaotic as the outside. Nearly a dozen teachers had already arrived. They panted and stammered about what was happening outside.

Lan Jue returned to the seat that took him here. He shut his eyes, reaching his consciousness out to Thor.

Thor’s advantage lied largely with it’s speed. It’s power and rapid response ensured that most of the NEU’s teachers returned, more scared than hurt. In around twenty minutes, more or less all of the remaining teachers had found their way back.

But Lan Jue could see others, tourists from other parts of the East who’d come to sample Taihua’s beauty. There were ten other sites like their own encampment, with perhaps a hundred other ships parked about. That meant there could be another ninety thousand tourists still running for their lives.

Worse, from Thor’s vantage, that ominous magenta coloration had spread to cover almost the entire planet.

It was a disaster... not just for the Eastern Alliance, but a true catastrophe for all of mankind.

“Our obligation is the safety of the public.” The soldier’s words – likely his last – rang in his ears. He looked like he was young, in his early twenties perhaps. There was a resolution in his smile. He had been calm, and arrogant, as he ran headlong to his death.

Obligation!

Lan Jue’s eyes shot open. Fixed in determination, he shot to his feet and made for the door. As he reached the exit, a clearly dumbfounded Wang Hongyuan was just boarding.

“Where are you going?” He looked at Lan Jue in a shocked curiosity.

“To help,” he replied softly.

“To help? And just how can you help?” The dance instructor’s voice was thick with scorn.

Lan Jue stepped out of the way and let him enter. “However I can. There are still many, many people who haven’t returned.”

He didn’t wait for any more of Wang Hongyuan’s doubts, and ran towards the forests.

The haughty man watched him go. He shook his head as a strange feeling overcame him. Is this guy crazy? He thought. He’s actually running in to the forest. What the hell is he going to do?

And yet he didn’t move, fixed at the cabin entrance. He watched as Lan Jue slowly disappeared in to the distance.

He’s for real... not just for show? He was genuinely surprised. In a flash, he was racing down the steps and after the etiquette instructor.

“Where are you going?” The hard voice shouted at him from nearby. He slid to a stop and turned a dark glare towards Tan Lingyun. “You’ve done enough! This is not the time for your nonsense. Professor Lan just ran off in to the forest, going to help more people. I’m going to make sure he doesn’t get himself killed.”

“What?!” Tan Lingyun stamped her foot in anger. “Who the hell does that waste of space think he can help? All he’s doing is bringing trouble by not staying on the ship like instructed! Don’t just stand there, go drag his ass back here!”

Wang Hongyuan grunted. He was off again, following Lan Jue’s footsteps in to the rainforests.

Tan Lingyun wasted no further time in speculation over these events. She was off in another direction. There were others to bring back.

Gradually the remaining teachers were gathered together, returning with Wu Junyi. Upon seeing Tan Lingyun, he stopped her. “What’s going on,” he said, “what state is your group in?”

Chapter 137: Peace of mind

Tan Lingyun spat her report. “They’re all back. All but that Lan Jue. I don’t know what his problem was, he said he wanted to help and ran out in to the forest. I sent Wang Hongyuan after him. Oh, right – and it turns out our dance instructor is a powerful adept. His discipline is vampirism and darkness. Around level seven. I don’t think he’ll have any problems.”

“Alright. Get on the ship, do a headcount. When we’re all together we’re on the move. We need to get the hell out of here. Suddenly this place is crawling with monsters. It’s unclear where they came from, but they release some sort of poison that eats away at everything it touches. The one I encountered was comparable to a level six adept.

“Got it.” Tan Lingyun nodded and made her way in to the cabin. She busied herself with settling the teachers and counting how many remained.

Ten minutes later Wu Junyi joined them.

“Lingyun, how many?” He asked the mecha instructor.

“Including the two of us,” she said, “thirty seven. Three are missing. Wang Hongyuan and Lan Jue aren’t back yet. There’s only one entirety unaccounted for.”

Wu Junyi’s eyes were heavy with regret. “That teacher’s dead, killed by the monster’s poison. Now we’re just waiting for the other two to get back. Have you tried their communicators?”

Tan Lingyun growled angrily. “These two morons. Their coms are turned off. I haven’t been able to reach them.”

Wu Junyi felt his heart tighten. “We’re out of time. Just now I spotted another one of those things headed our way. Get the flight crew to prep lift-off. I’ll go get those two, and you bring the rest back to Skyfire.” He nearly leapt from the cabin entrance to go search for the others.

“Director, wait a moment,” Tan Lingyun called after him.

“Huh?” He stopped and turns his head back to look at her. Suddenly the

world was spinning, and when he got his bearings, he was smashing against the interior cabin wall.

“I’m sorry, Director. When I get back you can expect my formal apology. But those two belonged to my group, and I’m responsible for their safety. Hurry and bring the others safely back home.” Her voice grew quiet with every word, as she shouted back at him while running towards the tree line.

“This damn woman!” Wu Junyi was livid, but there was no time to chase after her and argue. Standing at the cabin hatch he could see that magenta light creeping upon the horizon.

He looked back at the teachers behind him; scared, tired, and still in danger. He stomped a foot in impotent anger. “Close the doors! We’re getting out of here.”

Wu Junyi was the Teaching Director. He cared for each of his teachers, but he had to keep the health and safety of the majority in mind. Right now, he had no other choice: Getting most of his employees to safety was the other thing he could do.

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Lan Jue tore through the forests. Flickering bolts of electricity snaked just behind his eyes. Thor’s Promise glowed upon the pinky finger of his left hand, calling out to the massive mecha.

Lan Jue’s condition meant he had to rely on his control over Thor. That would be his greatest chance at combat effectiveness. Even now, the sapphire mecha was defending a group of tourists from two alien beasts. It would be a moment before it could come fetch it’s master.

“You idiot, head back to the ship! What do you think you can do for these people?” The angry voice shouted at him from behind. Someone grabbed the collar of his shirt.

“Let go! You’ve already got enough enemies, don’t give me a reason to kick your ass,” Lan Jue snarled.

“You, beat me?” Wang Hongyuan only laughed. “You have your own problems too. Ever since you got here Jin Yan hasn’t given me the time of day. It’s I who should beat the piss out of you.”

Wang Hongyuan stopped when he felt his grasping hand suddenly go numb. Before him Lan Jue’s body became indistinct, then vanished. He reappeared five meters away.

“You’re an adept?” Wang Hongyuan stared at him in surprise.

How could he not be? Ever since Lan Jue had arrived at the college Wang Hongyuan had been furtively watching him. But in the time since he’d felt no evidence of Discipline from him. He assumed he was just a normal man. Only now, in this moment, was his power revealed. For him to be capable of hiding his abilities for so long – not only from Wang Hongyuan but from everyone... he didn’t know what it meant.

There were only two possibilities. Perhaps Lan Jue’s Discipline was specifically tailored towards concealment. Or, perhaps, he was that much stronger than Wang Hongyuan himself.

Lan Jue regarded him calmly, and spoke in a quiet voice. “Please return to the ship, Professor Wang. I have no interest in Professor Jin, just a normal working relationship. How you feel about her is your business, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t vent your anger on me in the future. Right now Taihua is experiencing a crisis, and I can’t in good conscience turn tail and flee. I need to go and help those who are still in danger. When you do return, I ask that you keep my secret.”

He truly did not like Wang Hongyuan in the least, but whatever the man’s attitude towards him he’d chased after Lan Jue to ensure his safety. When it came to making the right moral decision, Professor Wang had made the proper choice. His estimation of the man had risen considerably as a result.

“What can you, one person, do?” Wang Hongyuan shot back, anger written on his face.

Lan Jue smiled at him in reply. “Sometimes a single person’s power simply isn’t enough. But if we all thought that way, we’d only ever be able to suffer problems – not rise against them. I don’t know how much I can accomplish, but by doing what I can at least I won’t have any regrets. Peace of mind.”

Lan Jue rose in to the air, surrounded by electrical flashes of light. They flickered, and suddenly he was soaring towards the recesses of the forest.

Wang Hongyuan stood frozen, staring blankly at the space where the man had been. Lan Jue’s words fought through his stubborn head, and suddenly he stomped a foot. A strange red light crept up through his eyes. His right hand rose, and fished a necklace out from within his collar. He yanked viciously, snapping the chain.

He slowly stretched out his hand, and revealed the pendent therein. More accurately, it was a ring – silver, with a blood red gemstone set within it. It was no ruby, for as he watched it pulsed with a gentle red light.

Wang Hongyuan solemnly slipped the ring onto the index finger of his left hand. He lifted his arm high overhead.

A column of red light burst towards the heavens, and where it passed space seemed to ripple. Lan Jue, not far off, felt the powerful wave bloom behind him. He turned his face back in surprise in time to see the beam fire off in to space.

As he watched, a sanguine-colored figure slowly appeared from the light, growing to enormous proportions.

A mecha, its body a shimmering blood red, rose perhaps eighteen meters in to the sky. It was slender, and from its back flowed a scarlet cloak. It fluttered with the wind, composed of some unknown material that flowed like a waterfall of blood. The whole thing emitted a cocoon of crimson light.

The sanguine mecha was joined with two black halos. They were seamless, and where the mecha stood it was as though they sucked the surrounding light within them. It made everywhere the machine passed

appreciably darker.

A beam of red light shown down on it from the heavens. Within it, his bat-like wings beating against the wind, Lan Jue spied Wang Hongyuan making his way towards the mecha's open cockpit.

An emperor-class mecha?

Lan Jue knew instinctively the class of mecha by virtue of his experience. What he did not expect was that Wang Hongyuan was actually capable of piloting one. It meant he, too, was likely emperor-ranked.

"You aren't the only one who can display gallantry," Wan Hongyuan muttered. His voice sounded like it was right by Lan Jue's ear, carried by a beam of red light.

A small smile spread across the contours of Lan Jue's face. He stretched out his right hand, giving the distant mecha a big thumbs up. "A true man, Professor Wang."

"You're still looking to get thrashed?" Wang Hongyuan shot back, indignant. "Hurry up. If you want to help stop wasting time talking nonsense. It looks like mine is the only mecha on this planet anyway..."

As the final syllable left his lips, the red mecha shuddered to life and lifted its head. A dazzling blue light met its assertions with a thunderous boom, crashing to the floor not thirty meters from where Wang Hongyuan stood.

"Two mechas." Lan Jue's smile turned in to a self-satisfied smirk. An azure blue light burst from the center of Thor's chest and enveloped Lan Jue.

Wang Hongyuan only saw the polished blue surface undulate somewhat, then both Lan Jue and that beam were gone.

The guy actually brought a mecha also? And using space technology power gems. This mecha...

Wang Hongyuan was rather proud of his own mecha, Idoloclast. But his own thin, eighteen-meter mecha looked minute next to the twenty-two

meter beast beside it.

Bolts of undulating lightning snaked up Thor's conductive surface. It's very presence was almost stiflingly oppressive. Waves of powerful energy came and went from it like the tide. The world around it seemed to warp from the unstable energies it released.

This... this can't be...

Wang Hongyuan stared slackjawed at the towering Thor.

"Professor Wang, let's get going. No time to waste. Follow me!" Lan jue's powerful voice echoed forth from Thor. In a flash of light, the sapphire mecha was barreling in to the distance.

Wang Hongyuan was nearly struck dumb in amazement, but he did as instructed and urged Idoloclast in to flight.

"Incoming communication." The mecha's A.I. filled Idoloclast's cockpit, and Wang Hongyuan answered.

Chapter 138: Army of Two

“It looks like you’ve been hiding a lot from us, Professor Wang! We had an emperor-class mecha pilot teaching dance at our school, right under our noses. Who’d have imagined.” Lan Jue’s easy, flippant face appeared in Idoloclast’s cockpit.

Wang Hongyuan’s response was less friendly. “And you’ve been totally forthcoming? At any rate I’m teaching something that actually has some use, something I can’t say for your ‘etiquette’ class. And this mecha, what, god-class?”

Lan Jue chortled. “You make it tough to like you, but no matter what if we can bring things in line here I’ll count you as a friend. Let’s move out!” As he said so, a sweeping blue light shot out from Thor’s head in to the distance.

“Acquiring radar detection information.” A metallic voice once more called to Wang Hongyuan. He immediately began the data download.

The main screen flashed to life with the wide-area probe results. The situation as it was, Wang Hongyuan couldn’t spare the time to keep marveling at Thor’s capabilities, though they weren’t lost on him. He focused on the numerous magenta spots that dotted the screen. How many were there? At least a thousand, according to Thor’s long-range scanners.

“Don’t separate farther than one kilometer. If we want to help others, we have to make sure to protect ourselves first.” Lan Jue’s easy voice had turned serious by this point. Suddenly, Thor was off like a lightning bolt towards the nearest target.

“Got it.” Idoloclast was then hot on Thor’s heels. His mecha had been built to mirror his own abilities, so speed was its forte. With a flash it was racing through the sky towards another nearby enemy.

A small team of tourists were racing through the forests, and between them were rifle-toting soldiers firing wildly in to the trees. A seven-meter long monstrosity oozing that caustic mist bounded after them.

This particular beast could be likened to a toad. A giant, murderous toad. Numerous purple spines ridged it's back, and the path behind them was littered with soldiers who'd been impaled by the barbs – which could be fired off like projectiles. There their corpses would remain, pinned to the forest floor.

“Go, go!” A sublieutenant hollered at the others, urging them to make their retreat. Of his eight remaining soldiers, three were burdened with civilians slung over their back, slowing them down. One child and two women.

“Laosan, Qianzi, come with me and bring up the rear. Everyone else keep it moving.” The commander glared at the beast as it drew nearer. His jaw tightened.

“Sir, let me stay behind.” A young man, looking a week out of puberty called out to volunteer.

“Stop talking nonsense. Get out of here. That's an order.” The lieutenant shoved at him with the butt of his rifle, causing the young man to stagger backwards. Then, he smiled at him, flashing a set of white teeth.

With that he turned, and scrambled up a tree. He clambered to the lower branches and pulled the laser rifle from his shoulder. Slowly, calmly, he aimed towards he approaching beast.

Just then, a dazzling bolt of blue light came crashing to earth, followed by a peal of thunder. The toad-monster felt it, and turned to look. It hopped around, opened it's massive mouth and belched. A violet photosphere shot from it's maw towards the light.

A dispassionate grunt sounded from the light, and then it vanished. For a moment, it was as though time stood still. Then, not far away, there came a violent howl like an oncoming train.

Boooom!

A column of sapphire light barreled through the forest and completely devoured the toad. The ensuing blast of air nearly knocked the lieutenant from his tree.

He winced against the blast then looked again. A tall, dazzling mecha stood where there hadn't been one before. The verdant green trees rustled around it's imposing, azure figure. It was an image that would forever be imprinted on the soldier's heart.

"Mecha? What's a mecha doing here?" The other two soldiers standing rear guard couldn't help but shout out in surprise.

It took a moment for the lieutenant to regain some semblance of stability. His own eyes watched with joy and excitement at the new circumstance. He didn't care where the thing had come from, because it had come just in time to save all their lives. Whoever they were he knew they'd help, because only a human could command a mecha. He knew this majestic machine was going to help them get out alive.

The surrounding vegetation had been pulverized, like it'd be hit with a road roller. The devastation stopped just before the three soldiers.

"Lieutenant, what is the current status of Taihua, I need information." The commanding voice wafted towards them from the mecha.

"It's damn good you came, pilot!" The team leader scrambled to his feet on the tree limb and snapped a salute.

"According to our most recent satellite images, a large host of unidentified creatures have landed all over Taihua. They're hostile, and ooze some sort of corrosive mist that kills everything it touches. Plant or animal, nothing lives once one of these things gets to you. The area we're in now has a higher concentration. If you can, help defend the closest encampment. We need their airship to get the survivors out of here."

"Alright, got it. You three make for evac." The mecha was off again, like a bolt towards the sky and off in search of it's next objective.

Were one to look on from overhead, they would see two figures dancing

through the sky; a shimmering blue gem, and a crimson red shadow. They raced through the forests, and where they landed another magenta monster was exterminated.

“These things are strong, but nothing we can’t handle, Professor Lan. But there seems to be more and more of them cropping up. At this rate the encampment will be surrounded before long.”

“You’re right, they just keep coming. How’s your mecha’s energy capacitors?”

“Sixty-one percent. No problem for the moment.”

“Alright, then we keep fighting. Make sure not to get that mist on your machine.”

“Got it.”

“Roaaaaaggh!” Their exchange was interrupted when an earth-rumbling howl filled the air around them. Thor turned towards the origin of the sound. What Lan Jue saw made his pupils contract.

Another monster stood among the trees. Or, more accurately, far above them, for this one rose a hundred meters in to the air. It looked almost prehistoric, a Tyrannosaurus. But there were differences, like the dozen or so hideous eyes that dotted its head. Its body looked like it was slapped together with chunks of rotten meat. Like the others, this one released an intensely thick violet mist. With its heaven-shaking roar, more of the caustic fumes had been spat forth. In the blink of an eye everything within five hundred meters of the beast turned dark and rotted away.

Wang Hongyuan slammed a fist against the control panel. “I just finished saying there wasn’t anything to worry about, and then this thing shows up!”

“Leave this one to me,” Lan Jue replied. “Keep the encampment safe.” With that Thor launched itself high in to the air.

Coiling bolts of electricity surrounded Thor, filling the sky with flashes of azure light. Lan Jue’s own eyes flickered with electrical power. The previous engagements had relied entirely on Thor’s own A.I. combat

parameters, but the energy fluctuations he sensed from this monstrosity far outstripped any of the beasts they'd faced so far. Lan Jue knew it was time to employ his own Discipline, and released it in to the mecha. Like this, Thor would be at peak effectiveness.

A dull pain throbbed within Lan Jue, but it wasn't more than he could stand. Thor's right arm rose.

White light mixed with blue, coagulating in to a familiar shape. A crackling bolt-shaped spear appeared in the mecha's hand. Thor pointed towards it's target, and the twenty-two meter tall mecha began to descend. As it tore through the air, gaining speed, twisting trails of light followed.

The behemoth certainly noticed Thor's approach. It roared at the blue spec, and the dozen eyes on it's head flashed with power. Twelve magenta bolts of energy fired from them, colliding with the flashing sapphire beam.

A violent blast shook the treetops as the powers clashed. A corona of light and wind roiled in the air overhead. Thor's figure flashed, appearing outside the blast radius. The behemoth's body began to shake

Lan Jue had seen the beast in it's entirety, saw the massive tail it was dragging behind it. It supported it's massive girth with six thick legs, and four clawed arms sprouted from it's torso. From it's back, hundred meter long wings began to spread outward. They beat furiously against the air, yanking the monstrous thing upward.

Thor remained still, hovering in the air. As the behemoth started to rise, a blue light shone from deep within the mecha. Threads of sapphire light emanated outward and wormed themselves around it.

Lan Jue's own body radiated a powerful electric light. Since his battle against Archangel Michael, this was the first step in his battle plan. Thankfully, with Hua Li's help, he'd already recovered to perhaps fifty percent. If not, he doubted he'd able to command his mecha, much less this level of power.

It wasn't long before the entire mecha was covered in flashing electric light. From a distance, it must have looked like it was carved entirely of sapphire. On it's back a golden thunderbolt shone. Overhead the sky grew

black and heavy with clouds, pregnant with roaring bolts of lightning.

“Ugh!” Lan Jue coughed suddenly, splattering the cockpit with blood. Commanding this level of Thor’s power, manipulating weather phenomena... under normal conditions these weren’t easy tasks, but they were much more dangerous considering his injured state.

Bolt after bolt of electricity crashed down from the clouds, striking Thor. The mecha was like a lightning rod, devouring the electric powers as they covered it.

“Damn! Is this guy totally insane?” Wang Hongyuan stared in disbelief at the scene unfolding in the sky above him. The pride he’d felt earlier for Idoloclast seemed a whole lot less in this moment.

Chapter 139: A Forest of Lightning!

This guy's actually able to manipulate the weather to amplify his mecha. What kind of strength does that require?! Could that... does it mean he's really a ninth level Talent?

It wasn't only Wang Hongyuan who was affected by the sight. The massive creature, too, was aware of what it faced. Still the vicious monstrosity fearlessly beat it's wings until, with some effort, it lifted free from the ground. It roared madly at Thor, vomiting a beam of violet energy towards it.

But before the beam could pierce Thor, it scattered and dissolves upon contact with the flashing lightning that surrounded it. Thor was entirely unfazed. In the interim before the beam struck, Thor had changed from a dazzling blue to a blinding gold. Squinting through the blazing light one could see the mecha was blanketed in tightly compacted golden lightning bolts.

"Die!" Lan Jue shouted back at the roaring behemoth, and Thor met the impromptu battle-cry with a forward charge. From where Wang Hongyuan watched, he could see the spear of golden light crashing earthbound. It's glow covering everything within dozens of square kilometers.

The behemoth hadn't risen a thousand metes above ground before it lurched to a stop. It's skin began to split, and from somewhere within it's rotten body rays of golden light escaped. It reeled, roaring towards the heavens, before it burst apart in a searing blaze.

A shimmering figure stood in the air where fragments of the creature were falling away. Around it, the skies opened up and hundreds upon hundreds of golden bolts of lightning came crashing from the dark clouds on high. The world became a dazzling forest of lightning.

Thor released the power it had stored unto it's enemies, the devastating Forest of Lightning.

Below in the tainted forests the multitude of hideous creatures were

quickly turning to coal, burnt to oblivion by the lightning. In the space of an instant, hundreds of the monsters were turned to ash or blown apart. It was like a blast from the gods themselves, turning against the evil pestilence.

Wang Hongyuan swallowed hard. "Glad I'm on his side!"

Even the soldiers and tourists in their headlong rush for escaped were inspired to stop and stare at the scene above them. Not a soul knew what had happened, even the satellites couldn't penetrate the cloud cover to run their scans. All the fleeing masses knew was turning their monstrous assailants to fried carcasses.

Even atheists were on their knees, shouting praises to whatever god would listen. For it could only be a god who possessed this level of power.

Eventually the golden light receded. The large figure at its core descended until it connected once again with the ground.

"Are you alright, Zeus?" Thor's metallic voice rumbled through the cockpit.

Lan Jue, his face pale and sunken, shook his head. "I'm fine. Just made the wound flare up, that's all. You? How much energy do we have remaining?"

"Fifty-seven percent."

"Then continue on auto, I need a breather."

"Very well." Without pause, Thor's thrusters sent it up and away towards the next enemy.

Thor's Forest of Lightning had temporarily eased the immediate danger of the encampment being overrun. Already there were more and more tourists under soldier care rushing towards the airship tarmac. They took off, one after the other, as they were stuffed full of evacuees. They reeled and raced skyward in any direction, just desperate to flee the nightmare they'd found themselves in.

A flash of red, and Idoloclast appeared behind another one of the

creatures. Dual crimson blades shimmered in it's hands. As the seven meter weapons cut through, a dark light remained in the air it passed through.

The creature slowly fell away in to countless chunks of chopped meat.

Wang Hongyuan had already lost count of the number of creatures he'd dispatched. It had been two hours since he'd called Idoloclast and their work begun. He figured at least a hundred, but compared to that guy... he was behind perhaps ten times Thor's kill count.

And yet the creatures kept coming. It was like they were an endless wave. It almost seemed like their numbers were increasing instead. Fortunately it appeared most of the ships in this encampment had already set off, and radar revealed fewer and fewer fleeing tourists.

"How you holding up, Professor Lan?" Wang Hongyuan called through the mech's communicators, somewhat out of breath.

"I'm all good," his voice responded, cool and collected. At present he was controlling the mecha manually to conserve power.

"Reserves are down to less than thirty percent. Nearing the warning line. I count twenty eight ships still remaining at the encampment."

"Alright," Lan Ju replied. "Fall back to the encampment, guard the strip. I'll join you there in about twenty minutes. We need to prep our own evac."

"Got it!" Wang Hongyuan immediately left for his new post.

The two of them had done all they could. Now, they had to get themselves out before it was too late.

Thor paused, hovering in the air. It raised it's metallic head. At this point the whole of Taihua was enveloped in a grey mist. Although Thor was capable of replenishing it's own energy stores, it could only be done through cosmic radiation. Even if some could get through the dense fog, he'd still require time they didn't have.

With how much Thor had endured, it's own stores were only about thirty

percent as well. Still the radar reached out.

Beep! Lan Jue looked at the information, and was shocked to find someone taking one of the beasts by themselves. The power fluctuations were intense.

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Tan Lingyun half squatted under the canopy, an arm stretched out for balance and gasping heavily. Her clothes were almost rags, but it only enhanced the ferocity glinting behind her eyes.

Before her a giant python coiled, watching her with its lidless gaze.

Their fight had been raging for a little while already. She'd raced headlong in to the forests to search for Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan, killing perhaps a dozen of the beasts barehanded along the way. But she was reaching the end of her limit. In fact, were it not for the restorative and vibrant qualities of the environment she was linked to, she'd have been a goner long ago.

The entire beast was a sort of mulberry color, stretching twenty meters long. It was covered in tough scales and thick flesh, and although Tan Lingyun had already managed to put several holes in the thing none of them were grievous injuries. Worse, their last exchange had done some internal damage to herself.

Her eyes were growing dim. The world before her was slowly becoming blurry like staring through dirty water. Tan Lingyun knew this was the result of stretching herself beyond her limit.

She couldn't hold on much longer. Although she knew her decision to remain behind would likely lead to disaster, she had no regrets. She may not have been able to find Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan, but she'd managed to help at least eight other tourists escape.

She'd die fighting, if it came to it!

With another deep breath Tan Lingyun launched herself forward. A glowing green light shone in the center of her forehead – her core. As it revealed itself, wisps of green energy appeared from the surrounding forests and merged with her. She was urged on, powered by the supernatural essence of the forest she protected.

Her right arm lifted, and clutched in her hand was a glittering and translucent emerald blade. She gripped the pommel with both hands. In this instant her thoughts turned to her mecha. If only Druidess were here, exhaustion wouldn't be a concern. But it wasn't, so she had to make do. And even if she died, she was going to make sure this damn snake choked on her corpse.

The anaconda keenly felt the approaching threat. It's scales began to peel away, opening up and allowing a thick cloud of mist to envelope everything around itself. First it was like a spectre, a dangerous silhouette. And then it vanished.

The natural mana sustaining Tan Lingyun had reached it's peak. There was no more room for hesitation. She blindly lashed out with the shimmering green sword.

Where the blade passed, the magenta mist parted like snow before a flame. The green flash revealed, just briefly, the mighty beast. It's howl of pain said the rest.

Strike? Tan Lingyun's heart skipped a beat. And yet, a moment later, she was met with the exact thing she didn't want to see.

She had landed a strike, but what she'd hit was the damn thing's tail. A three meter section of the monster had been cleaved free, belching pools of purplish liquid. A strike, but hardly a lethal blow.

The snake-monster's distended maw lashed out with horrendous speed. At this point the mecha teacher was too exhausted to dodge. She watched the fanged mouth barreling towards her, helpless.

This was to be her end! Tan Lingyun bitterly shut her eyes. Memories of the past twenty eight years flooded her mind's eye. In that time she'd experienced so much, endured so much. She suddenly felt.... liberated. At

peace.

She felt her whole body tighten. Next she heard the violent blast of a thunderbolt, and suddenly the earth was spinning.

Her eyes opened, almost of their own accord. She was greeted with the sight of a massive blue mecha, which held her in it's giant hand. Blinding flares of blue light burst forth, casting the snake away like it was nothing more than a pesky insect. The mecha twisted in the air, firing once more upon the beast from an impossible angle. The monster's head was split open.

As she watched, caught in it's grip, the sapphire mecha moved once again. It hung in the air long enough to spin about, heading to ground in a perfectly executed inverted V-shape.

It twisted and rolled, pressing Tan Lingyun tight against the metal palm. The pressure, and her exhausted, colluded to blanket the world around her in darkness. In the moment before she fainted, all she could remember where the frightening yellow eyes of the mecha.

Boom! Thor landed amidst flying debris and foliage.

Seeing Tan Lingyun clutched safely in Thor's hand, Lan Jue couldn't help but feel a surge of warmth fill his heart.

Chapter 140: Drink Medicine! Break Out!

The calls Tan Lingyun had sent to Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan were in fact received, only they'd chosen not to answer. He hadn't expected she would stay behind on Taihua – and judging by the sheer number of curse words in her messages to them, he judged the only reason she did remain, was to find them.

The woman was cold as ice on the outside, but did indeed have a good heart as Jin Yan assured.

A dim blue light reached from Thor's chest. When it receded, Tan Lingyun was gone, safe inside the mecha. Thor's cockpit wasn't small, easily big enough to accommodate two people. Years ago he'd built it that way for when he rambled with Hera.

Tan Lingyun was covered in grime, passed out, and stinking up his cockpit – but Lan Jue didn't concern himself with that. He reached out to feel her pulse. When he was sure it was simply exhaustion, he breathed a sigh of relief.

For her to last so long out there without a mecha was testament to her strength and ability.

It was time to retreat. It meant conceding Taihua to these beasts, but even something as strong as Thor could get exhausted. He was off again, flying towards the encampment. Idoloclast was already waiting.

There were still a number of empty airships remaining. Wang Hongyuan chose one without a pilot. These ships were mostly run automatically, so piloting one was nothing difficult.

“Professor Lan, on your way back? We've got to get out of here as soon as possible. Radar's picking up several more of the monsters heading our way. **** [1], do all these things know we're here?!”

[tl: [1] = The Chinese calque here is very funny, the mandarin equivalent of the f-word, 法克 for those interested.]

“I'll be there in a moment,” Lan Jue replied. “And I'm bringing Tan

Lingyun along for the ride. I think she came to save us. She pushed too hard and lost consciousness.”

“You’re not talking about the Savage Goddess...”

“That’s her,” he said. Thor continued towards the encampment, only stopping to dispatch two more monsters on the way.

The stabbing pain in his chest was worse. Lan Jue once more cursed the damn angel Michael for what he’d done. If he were at peak condition he’d have been able to sustain the fight for at least twice as long without issue.

Wang Hongyuan tapped in their intended coordinates and lifted off, first towards Lan Jue’s location. Idoloclast had already withdrawn, so he was only waiting for the etiquette teacher to make their escape.

Lan Jue appeared in a sudden flash of light. That mecha’s speed! A light reached out from it’s chest and deposited Lan Jue on the ground. He carried Tan Lingyun on to the waiting airship.

He turned once on board and motioned with Thor’s Promise. It flashed, and Thor vanished through interdimensional space. “Let’s get out of here!”

“Got it!” Wang Hongyuan roared with maniacal laughter [2] and blasted off towards space. But the laugh was short lived, as suddenly the ship pitched to the side.

[tl: [2] = I dunno, that’s what the translation says. Brings to mind images of KSP.]

Lan Jue, just managing to shut the doors, then slammed against the cabin wall. He shouted angrily towards the pilot. “What the hell are you doing?!”

Wang Hongyuan’s tense voice responded. “Look for yourself.”

Lan Jue stuck his face against the nearest porthole, and his heart sank.

Their escape was cut off by the erratic flight of a colossal monstrosity. Volley after volley of energy salvos launched at them from the creature’s head. Ten ships had taken off before them, and already two were falling to earth as flaming debris. The terrifying attack was as impressive as Thor’s

Forest of Lightning.

This was easily the deadliest beast they'd encountered so far, worse than the Tyrannosaurus Lan Jue had dispatched. From what they were seeing, he estimated the beast to be equivalent to a ninth level Talent. More than a match for an average mecha.

"We've done enough," Wang Hongyuan said, his voice low and defeated.

They were still quite a distance from the behemoth. The earlier roll was made to avoid an errant beam of energy that had swung their way. So far they hadn't captured the monster's attention. Now was their chance to get clear.

Wang Hongyuan's words reminded Lan Jue of something. A small smile spread across his face. His eyes were clear and sharp.

"My wife died, three years ago. When she left she took my heart with her. You really don't need to worry about Jin Yan and I. I know everyone who's lost a loved one hurts. I might not be able to save everyone, but even saving one more person means I spare someone the pain I feel. I can save a family."

"When you get back, if the Savage Goddess wakes up, don't tell her it was I who saved her. Promise you'll keep my secret. Now get out of here."

His left hand had risen, and that familiar green glow once more called Thor from the abyss. He waved towards the cockpit, then yanked open the cabin door and leapt out before Wang Hongyuan could lock it shut.

Almost immediately he was caught in a beam of light, and found himself in Thor's cockpit. He settled in, then reached in to jacket. He pulled a small vial from within, and took a deep breath.

Lan Jue poured the contents down his throat. Almost immediately his power began to pulse erratically. His gloomy expression became alive with vitality. The aura that surrounded him was magnificent and terrifying.

Thor trembled from the unstable bursts of energy from it's pilot. "Zeus, in consuming this unknown medicine your body's energy is swelling. Estimates read you can only sustain this level of power for thirty minutes.

Your body will be unable to endure the medicine's effects after that. Your Core will be in danger of being annihilated."

"Thirty minutes eh?" Lan Jue fixed his eyes on the distant monster. "That's enough. Thor, time for a real fight!"

Lights of all shades and hues were seeping from Lan Jue's pores. The energy surrounding him was growing more unstable by the second. But in the same instant an intense flood of energy was welling up inside him. It washed over his Core, injecting it with power.

Thor had already passed critical energy levels, but suddenly it's energy reserves began to quickly replenish. A shimmering azure light bloomed out around it, stark against the grey sky.

If Wang Hongyuan had understood what Lan Jue had chosen to do, then he'd have seen true insanity.

If Jin Tao had known what was to occur, he'd understand the suffering he was enduring amounted to nothing.

Piao Hong had given him two Fantascia Genetica decoctions for his promise to aid them. He'd diluted one, and given in to Hua Li for use with Jin Tao. Three doses, spread three months apart.

He'd just taken the entire vial of highly concentrated Fantascia.

Lan Jue knew precisely what he'd done, and what it meant. He also knew what the decoction was capable of. It's basic function was to catalyze a person's inner potential, and increase their genetic capabilities.

It was a useful decoction for anyone below ninth level. Taken successively it was sure to increase one's abilities. Of course something that powerful didn't come without risks. The sudden rearrangement of one's DNA sequence meant the future trials involved in becoming a Paragon were almost impossible. What's more, ninth level adepts were not permitted to take it.

Ninth level Adepts were already in possession of energy levels no normal human could sustain. Taking the decoction meant their power levels instantly catapulted them in to the realm of the Paragons. It was a level of

power they had no foundation to keep in check, and as a result their power eventually spun out of control and exploded outward.

Lan Jue knew all this, but he had no other option. Of course he could have left with Wang Hongyuan, but they'd only be able to watch helplessly as boatloads of innocents were slaughtered.

Hera was already gone. Like he'd said, these last three years he'd been living without hope or purpose. At this very moment he faced the circumstances with a calm heart. Almost cold. His earlier encounter with that young soldier still swam in his memory. Responsibility, guardians of humanity. Were these not the marks of a true man? Nobility?

Lan Jue didn't know what fate was in store for him, whether or not he'd succumb to the overwhelming power of the decoction. He didn't care. He'd taken the vial, it's effects were already under way. His weakened Discipline, stagnate for these three years, writhed within. It surged up, unprecedented levels of power bursting forth.

It came paired with a blinding pain. Indescribably agony wracked his body, so bad it threatened to suffocate him. But his eyes were sharp, and his hands were steady. His discipline surged through him and into Thor, filling it as well.

The beast had become aware of something in the distance. It turned it's massive girth through the air and, upon seeing the glimmering jewel that was Thor racing directly towards it, opened it's hideous maw in a bloodcurdling roar!

Lan Jue stared back at it with hard eyes. With a flash, Thor was suddenly behind the beast.

The monster's roars faded in to the wind. It remained rooted in place, hanging in the air. Waves of staggering energy pulsed outward, and it's body began to glow. Piercing rays of blue light began to shoot out from it as great tears appeared over its flesh.

Boooooommmmm!

One moment the beast was there, it's cruel jaws poised. In the next it

was a fine red mist, scattering with the winds.

“Go!” Thor’s thunderous and majestic voice rang out through the cabin of each and every ship remaining. Their engines fired up, flinging them towards the heavens. Thor was right behind them.

Lan Jue sat within the sapphire mecha, clad in golden robes, a golden mask, and a golden mantle, watching the sky race by dispassionately.

Chapter 141: Divine Salvation

Now, he was Zeus. Mighty, all-powerful Zeus. By virtue of the Fantascia Genetica Decoction he was stronger than he'd ever been, a power that coursed through him like fire. It didn't matter how many ninth level beasts appeared before him now, none could raise a hand against him.

Lest one forget, he was a being of two converging powers – thunderbolt and lightning intertwined. He was destined to be unbeatable.

Thor tore through the sky, leaving a grey contrail in it's wake. In seconds, it was leaving the stratosphere. As it did it's chest glowed blue. A golden figure appeared in the space before Thor.

Zeus' cold eyes were cast down at the grey planet below. Bolts of lightning raced across his eyes, behind his lids. Golden lightning bolts.

"These creatures couldn't have arrived for no reason. When the East took over this place, they must have sent probe after probe through the planet to prevent just this sort of thing. Taihua was a suitable place for human life, though without any significant resources. And certainly without massive poisonous monsters hiding in it's depths. They must have come from elsewhere. Where precisely who knows, but they can't be endless. Their vitality was drawn from Taihua itself, Something must have drawn them here, and the only way to end an infestation is to obliterate the nest."

"Thor, await me here," Zeus commanded after his quiet murmuring.

He dissolved in to a golden beam of light and pierced the atmosphere once more. Around five thousand meters from the ground he reappeared.

"Hear me! Clouds, come!" Zeus' powerful voice reverberated far and wide. It started small, but increased until it filled the air like rolling thunder.

Ascension! Godly Decrees!

At his command the sky grew dark, heavy with black clouds.

"Bring me thunder!"

Thrummmmmmm! Tremendous blasts roared back at him, echoing far in to the distance. Snaking licks of lightning danced among the clouds overhead, lighting the skies from here to the far horizons.

“Gather!” Zeus’ imperatorial voice crashed among the thunder, overpowering it.

Lightning split the skies, hundreds upon thousands of errant bolts lancing in all directions. The clouds overhead shined brighter than the sun, becoming an ocean of lightning that filled one’s entire vision. The clouds and mists thickened, the lightning crashed down faster. And Zeus was their point of impact. Countless bolts of electricity struck him, again and again and again, until his golden aura filled the sky like a supernova.

ζ

Skyfire Avenue

“What is it, Clairvoyant?” The Wine Master furrowed his brows at the old man as he asked.

Skyfire Avenue’s leaders replied hesitantly. “I just got an ominous sense. We knew when I read his fortunes before that he’d be facing danger, but that he’d eventually overcome his tribulations. Why is it, then, I’m suddenly unable to see what will become of him?”

The Wine Master looked at him in anxiety and confusion. “What does it mean?”

“Only two things could result in me losing the sight,” he said. “The first, that he’s met his end. But that is a very unlikely possibility. If he had the sensations I’m feeling would be much stronger. The second, is his powers have increased to a level comparable to our own. I cannot predict what is to come for him. Are you sure he’s on Taihua?”

The Wine Master nodded. “I am. On a trip, supposedly...”

The Clairvoyant’s voice was deep, troubled. “Head over there. It’s not too

far, it shouldn't be much trouble."

"Alright."

The Wine Master turned as if to leave, but the Clairvoyant raised a hand, stopping him in place. "Wait a moment. When you go, bring the Doctor. He returned a few days ago."

"The Doctor's back? Very well." The Wine Master turned again, and left.

For the first time in a long while, the Clairvoyant felt helpless. "This kid! He never gives anyone a break. He'll end up being the death of me."

ζ

National Eastern University.

Zhou Qianlin was busying herself with an equation, alone at her desk. She was studiously at work far past when she'd ordinarily be leaving. The equation itself was difficult, and far past what she'd already learned. Still she felt like she'd made great progress, both in her research and personal knowledge.

"Qianlin!" The sound startled her, and she jumped in her seat. Her train of thought was lost. She shot an irritated gaze at the door.

Tang Mi raced in to the class as though she were being chased. "Did you hear," she said breathlessly. "Qianlin, something's happened on Taihua. Tons of unknown beasts suddenly appeared all over the place."

Qianlin calmly plucked her cup of water from the desk and took a sip. "Some unimportant business of Taihua had you running in here screaming, ruining my train of thought? How many beasts are we talking?"

"Countless," she replied. "Spreading all over the planet, I heard. And they're really strong – if you don't believe me ask your father."

Suddenly, Zhou Qianlin's body became still. Taihua... Taihua. Didn't he

say...?

Her voice took on an urgent tone. “Xiao Mi, didn’t our school just send a bunch of teachers to Taihua?”

Her friend nodded gravely. “Yeah! Why do you think I came running in here? Your class leader Tan Lingyun is with them.”

Crash! The ceramic cup shattered in to countless pieces, forgotten as Zhou Qianlin shot suddenly to her feet. Her fingers flew over the buttons of her communicator.

It was only a short moment before the call connected. “Qianlin, I’m busy in a meeting – I can’t speak right now.”

With that, her father hung up.

She sucked in a breath, and tried to keep herself calm. It worked, at least on the surface, for her usually gentle eyes took on a sort of disconnected calm. She tapped another number in to her com. Her will reached out through the spirit caller gem in the same instant.

“The number you’ve dialed it out of service.” The uncaring female voice recording on the other end was like a punch to the gut.

There was no response from the gem.

“What is it,” Tang Mi asked, surprised by her reaction. She hardly recognized her now.

Qianlin shook her head. “Xiao Mi, head on home. I have something I have to do.” She raced out of the classroom before her words had a chance to dissipate.

Tang Mi watched her go, utterly confused. “When did she get so fast?”

Qianlin raced through the halls at top speed, once again jabbing at her communicator.

“Miss.” A pleasant female voice answered.

“Give me the most recent news from Taihua.” Her voice was commanding. “I need the latest satellite imagery, and the fastest ship we

have to get me there.”

“I’m afraid the lanes to Taihua have already been closed, Miss. Apparently something’s happened.” The woman’s voice was still smooth and slow, but it was clear there was surprise in it at Qianlin’s demands.

“No matter the cost! I’m leaving for the civil airstrip right now.” She cut the connection before giving the woman any further opportunity for argument.

She looked up just in time to see a figure blocking her path.

“Qianlin, what are you racing off to?” Richard blinked at her.

She skidded to a halt. “Is your verti-car parked here?”

“Yeah! Over in the parking lot.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

“Give me the keys.”

“Oh...” He fished an electronic key from his pocket and put it in her waiting hand.

“Thanks, I’ll get it back to you.” She was off again, disappearing from Richard’s view as quickly as she’d come.

“Qianlin... Qianlin! What are you doing?! I’ll go with you!” He called after her.

“I got it!”

Half a minute later, a verti-car was lifting off from the campus parking lot. It grew bright, flashed, then vanished.

Richard had given chase but was unable to catch up with the girl. His face fell, dark with depression. His communicator rang, interrupting his gloom.

“Mr. Austin, you have been found in violation of the university’s traffic rules. Please return immediately and present yourself to the student affairs office for disciplinary action.”

“Mother-“ Richard only just kept himself from smashing his communicator to pieces.

A blinding light flashed in the heavens. Zeus was at it's center, shining as though he were cast in gold. The light radiated out from him in all directions. His body had begun to grow, to swell. He'd already stretched to ten meters tall. Towering, golden, suspended in air, he truly was like an avatar of the gods.

The tearing bolts of lightning dancing over head began to recede. Zeus stood in their flashing midsts, turning to view his domain. Two great beams of golden light issued from his eyes, bathing the ground below in resplendent light as he tore through the skies five thousand meters overhead.

Thor was on the move as well, five thousand meters above it's master. The mecha's radar was set to its highest frequency, and swept over the planet as it launched in another direction.

"Zeus, all satellite imagery over Taihua is being intercepted. No sign of your presence will be permitted." Thor's mechanized rumble echoed through his mind.

"Good." He sped up.

His body was feeling the full effects of the Fantascia Genetica decoction. Thankfully It was the decoction's ability to strengthen his discipline that allowed him to take control, keeping himself from being torn apart.

At this moment, with the power at his fingertips, he was no more a ninth level talent. He was a Paragon. With this level of control, he felt like the master of the universe. Wherever he looked, he could see all, sense all.

A shimmering cocoon of golden energy surrounded Zeus as he raced through the sky. Scores of golden lightning bolts fired out in all directions with his passage. Any creature that crossed his path, regardless of size or strength, was instantly and ruthlessly wiped from reality. In the eyes of a Paragon, they were no more threatening than scraps of paper.

His communicator was gone. It had been destroyed long ago in his mad assault on the monsters. There was no Lan Jue, only Zeus. All that remained of the man before was the spirit caller gem, and Thor's Promise.

Chapter 142: The God and The Goliath

“Zeus, satellite anomalies have been discovered by the Eastern Alliance. Judging from the communications I’ve uncovered, the first set of Eastern reconnaissance troops should arrive in three hours. By my estimates, the East will attempt to maintain planetary integrity, and thus will not bring it’s warships to bear.” Thor continued to pass on whatever information is uncovered to Zeus.

“Zeus, what is your current physical state?” Thor’s voice arose anew. Surprisingly, this time the mechanical voice sounded almost concerned.

“I’m fine. The decoction has already catalyzed my abilities. For the time being I’ll have no trouble supporting the power. I’m using it to enhance the potency of my Ascension. For as long as the decoction’s effects remain, there wont be any problems.”

“What about when it’s spent?”

Zeus was silent for a moment.

“I don’t know.”

Honestly, he didn’t know. When he imbibed the decoction he only knew that it would empower his abilities, and the risks that might entail. He feared that, had he not immediately resorted to his Ascension and the power it required, he’d have succumbed to destruction already. But what was to come, he couldn’t say. He only knew the power that was coursing through him in this moment.

“Zeus. I believe I’ve found it. Coordinates.”

A flickering thread of information wormed through his mind. It was somewhere in the sea.

It was unfortunate Hua Li wasn’t here. The thought fought it’s way through the flooding power. The sea, it was Poseidon’s home court. Any watery area promoted his abilities to their strongest levels.

None of the former ‘Poseidons’ were ever Paragons. But on the oceans, cultivated to their higher levels, they were more frightening than many of

the lower ranked masters.

Zeus turned midflight, and blazed through the sky to where Thor was headed.

ζ

The blimp-like ship was milky white, and small. It only had room enough to accommodate ten passengers. Next to a battleship it was hardly worth noticing. Next to Zeus-1 no one would pay it any mind at all. It's only advantage was speed, and that's what give it it's nickname; the Cosmic Hummingbird. It's speed was without equal, and it could reach light speed in no time at all.

Unfortunately distance was not among it's defining traits. It's energy reserves were limited.

Zhou Qianlin sat behind the controls of the Cosmis Hummingbird, her hands running over the buttons and levers. The ship was slowly gaining velocity and then, in a flash, was reduced to a beam of light boring in to the darkness of space.

ζ

Skyfire Avenue, Reaper's Arena.

A hexagonal area spread out in all directions. The ground had been etched with golden lines which splayed in fantastical designs. The central areas of the golden veins were inlaid with countless shimmering gems.

Two figures occupied the central area of the special arena. The first was the Wine Master. He looked as well kept as ever, with his hair combed and wearing gentlemanly suit. Across from his was another man, tall and thin, and quite handsome. He looked to be in his twenties, with long black hair that fell to his shoulders. His expression bore a calm detachment. Unlike

his elderly counterpart, he was garbed in a clean doctor's coat, his hands stuffed in the pockets.

"Wine Master, is it absolutely essential I go? I've got quite a lot to do. I've got an appointment with the Beautician, and then tomorrow I've got to see the Barber about a haircut. The Gourmet said something about a choice bit of mutton as well, a stew we're to share tomorrow. Just let me off the hook here, it's been so long since I've enjoyed the Gourmet's fare. Ah, and I have to see the Mechanic about a job for him."

"Shut up! You're as despicable as the Accountant!" The Wine Master's growling voice cut through the Doctor's complaints.

"Cuz I don't wanna go," the Doctor whined helplessly. "Ever since that guy's shown up I've been getting markedly less attention from our female shop owners as well. Who'd agree to helping such stiff competition!"

The Wine Master's response was soft and measured. "Doctor, are you aware of the consequences if you keep disturbing me during this transfer?"

"No idea," the young man said flippantly. "Hey, can you really move this whole planet through space? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Oh it is dangerous." The Wine Master glared daggers at the man. "Originally there's about a ninety percent chance it's fine, though if you keep causing problems we're looking at fifty percent. I'll be able to send, oh, about a corner of the planet to where we need to go. As for you, you'll be sliced to ribbons by interdimensional space, like the result of a hundred thousand swipes of the scalpel. I'm fairly sure your pretty ladies wouldn't want anything to do with you after that, don't you?"

"I'm sure!" The Doctor had suddenly decided to be serious. His lazy demeanor had grown sharp and calm. He wasted no more time with pointless drivel.

The Wine Master nodded with a grunt. He motioned in the air with a finger, and almost immediately the world around them began to warp. The countless energy crystals inlaid in the lines at their feet flared to life.

With the money they were spending on this guy, he was sure to come along despite his protests.

ζ

The large oceans of Taihua should have been a sky blue, but the presence of unwanted pollutants had changed it. An enormous vortex swirled within, red as blood and a thousand kilometers across. A pale purple beam launched out from within, hanging in the air for just a moment before vanishing. Were one able to see within the depths of the sea, they'd discovered nearly all the sea life devoured by the vicious whirlpool.

In a soundless golden flash Zeus appeared ten thousand meters above it. "Here it is," he exclaimed. The god-like Adept shut his eyes, focusing on the pulses of energy radiating from the vortex.

In fact the radiating energies were not overtly powerful. Instead there was the sense of... extinction. He could sense countless cells constituting the vortex, each of which were devouring the world around it at an alarming rate. They grew to maturity, were expelled, and spat out over great distances.

It was the hideous monsters' nest!

Right now it didn't matter how the nest got here. The primary objective was its destruction. It was the only way to stop the endless march of the beasts. If not, the vortex would just continue devouring all life in the oceans, churning out monsters until the entire place was overrun.

But what the hell was it? There were scores of strange things in the universe, but the thing Zeus hovered over known was a complete unknown. He'd neither seen nor heard anything like it before.

Zeus' eyes flashed, and with a motion of his finger the godly aura around him diffused outward. Once again the skies grew dark and thick with clouds. It was an easy thing to produce clouds over the ocean, with the air

so full of moisture.

Flashes of lightning lit the sky. Thunder rolled. And the air was full of an intense electric charge. Gradually it grew dark as pitch, to where only those brief and violent bursts of golden lightning lit the world.

Zeus floated in their midst, his eyes closed. He quietly drank it all in, feeling and knowing everything that occurred around him. He was calm, his mind empty.

Zeus' Ascension granted him control over the laws of nature. Of course, such ultimate power was temporary. But now, he was as the Paragons. The power he wielded, under the influence of the Fantascia Genetica, was absolute.

But was this indeed bending the rules of nature? Every terrible arc of golden lightning seemed like it was born of his own powers, not a product of the world around him. Every dark cloud was like a part of him.

No wonder it was said that mechas weren't an important aspect of a Paragon's life. There were no mechas available with today's technology that could match their sheer destructive ability.

For a moment it seemed even the vortex had become aware of the mountain pressure in the world around it. The seas rolled and heaved. Flashes of red and purple fluttered in it's depths, and a roar rose from within like a challenge.

In truth those roiling waters, that tumultuous sea, almost looked like a massive face. It was a face not unlike the behemoth Lan Jue had destroyed in his first moments after drinking the decoction.

Zeus pressed his right hand down towards the water.

Boom...!

A thick, twisting bolt of golden lightning flashed down from on high. It pierced deep in to the belly of the vortex. The heart of the whirlpool glowed gold, and then spat a pillar of water thousands of meters in to the air. Great spurts of violet fluid hung in the sky before being swept away by the wind.

Steam hung low over the water, and the surface roiled as though it were boiling, or quivering with rage. Geysers fired high towards the heavy clouds as that familiar magenta mist began to congeal over the waves.

Zeus lifted his arms high. The clouds brightened overhead in response like heaven was opening at his command. The entire horizon glowed bright gold. Slowly at first, but quicker with time, scores of shimmering lightning orbs fell to earth like roiling golden stars. They struck that towering sprout of living water again and again, a bombardment of heavenly artillery.

Boom, bang, crack, boom! Blast after deafening blast gave sonance to the devastating attacks as they exploded over the ocean. The tornado couldn't stand the assault for long, and dissipated in to nothing.

Once more Zeus lifted his right hand high over head. In a flash, a crackling spear of writhing lightning appeared where there was nothing. It burned with a golden fire that swirled behind it as it crashed down in to the raging seas. It didn't stop until it pierced the hidden heart of the vortex.

The crashing waves grew still, as though time had stopped. The surface of the water for a great distance around him shined with light.

Boooooommmmm! A thousand meter tall spray of water reached out like the final desperate grasp of a dying man. A tsunami was birthed where the bolt had struck and rippled out in all directions. A golden halo hung over the scene.

"Aaaaagghooooo!" A great and piteous howl was heard, the scream of some enraged creature. From the depths of the ocean arose bubbles of purple fluid that broke the surface and burst, sending spouts of that caustic liquid spewing high in to the air. With them appeared the body of a titanic beast.

Chapter 143: The Cosmagus

It was little more than a giant, fleshy orb, a thousand meters in diameter. It's bulging form was composed of numerous folds and wrinkles. It was similar in form to an enormous brain. Dimples and scars dotted it's surface, leading to a single hideous mouth at it's apex.

As it rose over the waves the wrinkles stretched and flapped, smacking sickeningly against each other. With each fleshy smack more of the magenta mist was expelled.

Aaaaggghhoooo!

The monstrous maw twisted as it's angry roars filled the air. The fleshy orb lurched, and began to rise towards Zeus. It's fleshy flaps had stretched and become wings, which beat furiously at the air and water.

As more of it's body was revealed, it was shown that the left half of it had been burned black. Evidently Zeus' bolts had found their mark. He took it as affirmation of his strategy, and the sky lit up anew as scores of lightning bolts crashed towards the monster.

But this time the beast knew what to expect. The thick purplish mist surrounding it congealed and hardened in to an impenetrable membrane. It's twisted mouth opened wide, stretching a hundred meters in all directions. Peering in to the depths of that maw brought a palpable sensation of despair. The air changed, as everything above it began to get sucked down towards it. The skies roiled as the clouds started to descend. Even Zeus was caught in the vacuum.

The inhalation force was strong enough to devour anything caught within it. The monstrous thing seemed poised to swallow the whole world to achieve it's goal. It's already bulbous girth was expanding larger still.

Zeus glared at it, his face dignified and imposing. He struggled against the vacuum to keep himself from begin drawn in. However, the sudden force of this vacuum was indeed powerful, and unexpected. Not to mention it's new plating, which appeared capable of enduring a blast from a warship.

Punching through that armor would be difficult, even for a Paragon. And Lan Jue wasn't even a real Paragon – he didn't know how to wield this level of power.

His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar deep voice, that hung in the air around him.

“Jewelry Master, you must remember that you're part of a team.”

A single column of silver light appeared without warning. It stretched tall and wide, but beside the swelling titan it seemed miniscule. Further, it didn't appear to do anything to the monster. It flickered and stretched until it was like a curtain of light.

Pssshhhttt! An earsplitting noise burst forth. It sounded like reality was tearing at the seams. Zeus felt the terrible drag of the monster's suction inexplicably cease. The monster froze as though lapsing in to a cataleptic state.

A slash of pitch darkness, black as ink, appeared before Zeus. A powerful vacuum began again, but this one was not from the beast. Instead it came from the fissure, but stranger still it's undeniable suction did not effect Lan Jue's side.

The two mighty absorption forces were at odds, one drawing the other. Whichever was more powerful would come out the victor. In the end, though the monster was powerful, it couldn't match up to the dimensional tear before it.

Phsssup! A spout of purplish-black fluid erupted from the monster. The thick fluid, strangely, acted like a sort of adhesive as it sprinkled over the fissure. Little by little the fluid began to clog the tear.

“Eh?!” A surprised shout called Lan Jue's attention to his side. There was suddenly two more people in the air a short distance from him.

As ever the Wine Master was the very picture of nobility; well dressed, finely kept. He was also, at this time, surrounded by a faint silver glow. A doctor was with him, with a face like spoiled milk. Fortunately he, too, was covered by the Wine Master's protective light or he'd really have

something to scowl about.

“What in the hell is this thing?!” The Doctor exclaimed.

“No idea,” Lan Jue responded. “But what I can tell you is that all the beasts on Taihua have some connection to it. We kill the root of this hideous weed, and the ugly leaves will follow.”

The Doctor looked at the writhing thing below them, a strange glint in his eye. “When we’re done, make sure to leave a little bit for me to do an autopsy.”

“The Wine Master shot Lan Jue a look, changing the subject. “How are you suddenly able to control the laws like this?”

Lan Jue’s smile was bitter. “Fantascia Genetica Decoction. Otherwise too many people would have died.”

“What?” The Doctor’s eyes nearly bulged from his head. “Angry alpacas riding antelopes, you really will eat anything won’t you! Eat something unclean and you’ll get diarrhea. What you ate is far beyond dirty. Are you trying to kill yourself?” In a flash the Doctor appeared before the Jewelry Master’s side. With a flick of his wrist, a syringe appeared in his hand. He unceremoniously jabbed it at Lan Jue’s arm.

Gzzt! A jolt of lightning flicked the syringe away. A Paragon’s skin wasn’t so easily broken.

A look of profound displeasure washed over the Doctor’s face. “It’s imperative you finish this fight as soon as possible. Otherwise there won’t be enough of him to fit in a shoe box.”

At this point the monster had figured out the fissure. The beast didn’t appear to have suffered any damage, but it had stopped its slow ascent. Its mouth had closed, and hovering now as it was its body began to shift again. A strange, deep indentation appeared near its center.

The Wine Master, his eyes stern, beckoned in the air with his right hand. A flash of silver light, and a scepter appeared from nowhere, now clutched in his palm. The whole length of the weapon shone brilliantly, and at its crest was a shining gem the size of a human skull. Black and white flashed

in the stone's interior.

The elderly gentleman swept his scepter through the air. Where it passed, the air turned silver. The light fanned out, then surrounded him and his two companions. Anything that drew near to them vanished as it touched the screen of light.

Brraaaahhp! In that same instant the beast's mouth cracked open and belched at them. Plumes of violet mist issued forth like a geyser. The monster – having swollen to perhaps three thousand meters at this point – shriveled appreciably with the attack. In the blink of an eye it withered down to around five hundred meters.

The purple gusts of air spread out over a distance of three hundred meters. In the center were Lan Jue, the Wine Master and the Doctor, lost in the toxic mist. The blast of air rose higher and higher until it swept passed the atmosphere. Only once it struck space did it begin to dissipate.

A silvery flash, and the three human challengers appeared outside the creature's area of attack. Both Zeus and the Doctor looked uncomfortable, but the Wine Master proceeded unabated. With brows knitted, he swung his scepter again. This time, an ornate and complicated rune appeared, floating in the air before them.

The old man shut his eyes. The silver aura that surrounded him suddenly flashed bright and powerful. The rune rippled, and suddenly there appeared a shadow, as dark as the depths of space.

The Wine Master pointed his staff at the beast. His aura flashed. The rune disappeared.

The monstrous creature was not unaware of the danger. Perhaps it felt something coming, for it quickly began to turn in mid-air. It's multitude of fleshy wings flapped disgustingly from the effort. However it could not escape, for in the next instant the rune cast by the Wine Master appeared plastered on it's wrinkled body.

The beast replied with an earth-shaking roar. It's entire, hideous form writhed and shook. It's outer layers of fleshy appendages fell away as it tried to shed the rune from it's skin.

However compared to it's enormous girth the rune was only a very small thing. It remained where it was, like it had been branded in to the monster's hide.

The Wine Master lifted his scepter high. "Singularity!"

As the Wine Master's hoary voice filled the air, the silvery rune on the beast's body flashed with power. Once again it began to shrivel and contract. But this time, it's mouth was not the source. Instead the monster was slowly being devoured in to itself, through that silver rune tattooed to it's side.

"Aaghhh! Rgghaaaaooo!" Hideous, pained cries reached them. Struggle as it may, nothing the monster did could free itself from the rune and it's destructiveness. Plumes of caustic mist continued to pump from it's fleshy body in vain attempts to shed it.

It was like the rune didn't really exist here, that it was a ghost of another dimension. It bore through the beast unceasingly, rotating as it did. Intertwining bands of black and white followed in it's wake. It circled again and again, over and under, out and in, leaving devastation where it passed.

It's flesh parted, it's blood flowed. The monster's whole body twisted grotesquely as it was carved up. All of it happened in the space of a few moments. The silver light that assailed it continued to move, continued to grow until it was ten meters in diameter. It moved without care for the monster's gradually weakening cries of pain.

It was clear this black hole, called by the Cosmagus, was slowly devouring their enemy. Zeus and the Doctor looked on in utter shock.

This was the power of a Paragon. The terrifying strength of a true Paragon.

The old man they knew as Skyfire Avenue's Wine Master was gone in that moment. Right now, commanding the power of space and time with his shining scepter, he was the Cosmagus – one of the three Alliance's master Paragons.

Finally, there was hardly anything left of the monster for the Cosmagus' black hole to obliterate. The roiling violet seas below had begun to grow lighter. The shuddering waves of energy had started to fade away.

"Leave some for me!" The Doctor was suddenly shaken from his stupor, and shouted his plea towards the Wine Master.

In response the old man lifted his scepter and drew a circle in the air before them. A cut of wriggling flesh the size of a man's head appeared.

The Doctor hurriedly employed his own interspatial equipment to pull a silver box from nothing. He carefully plucked the squirming remains from the sky and put them inside. As the box shut, it's edges spat a chilling mist. The remains of the giant alien monstrosity was inside, frozen solid.

"What is this?" The Doctor stared at the box, his eyes full of wonder.

Chapter 144: Phylactery Stone

The Wine Master shook his head in response to the Doctor's query. "I'm not sure. What is clear was that the power radiating from it was intense. Even under strain from my Singularity, it was raising shields to protect itself. Keep an eye on that bit – even the small piece feels like it's full of life. Jewelry Master, tell us what happened here."

Lan Jue's voice was deep and thoughtful. "From what I've gathered after these few hours, I don't believe these beasts are from Taihua. They must have come from elsewhere. How they got here I can't say. The mist they release is destructive, but it doesn't destroy life – it devours it. They use the life force they steal to replenish themselves. The key to their enormous power and size was Taihua itself, and the sheer amount of animals and plants they could sap for strength. The one we just killed was likely their maker. It somehow released eggs across the planet, then used the surrounding life force to keep producing."

"Your most pressing concern should be yourself," the Doctor interjected. "How much longer do you suspect your body can hold out?"

Lan Jue plucked the golden mask from his face. "I have no idea," he said through a tight smile. "I can't tell you the state of my body. Before now I wasn't recovered from an injury. I was at perhaps forty percent of my capabilities. After only a few hours of combat, I was nearly spent. I also hadn't brought any recovery gems. I just had to keep going. Later I used the forbidden art [1] to temper and control the power the decoction granted me. The higher levels of energy needed to maintain it are staving off the decoction's effects.

[tl: [1] = This mean his Ascension. I'm not sure this is necessarily 'forbidden' but that's how he describes it. Michael's Adventus is another example.]

The Wine Master addressed the Doctor. "Just tell us what needs to be done."

"Well, first we need to get back to ground," he said. "Right now we're all

in danger. His powers could spiral out of control at any moment. You keep him in check.” The Doctor’s face was hard and serious. The undulating electric powers that raced through Lan Jue prevented him from doing any sort of examination.

“Wait a moment.” An azure light flashed from above, depositing Thor directly behind Lan Jue. The mecha was swallowed in to Thor’s Promise. Only then did Lan Jue indicate to the Wine Master that he was ready.

The old man waved his scepter. In the next instant, they vanished without a trace.

The world flashed around them several times before they were deposited to ground. Lan Jue’s body had still not reverted from his Ascension. As before he was still towering over the others, and emitting a dazzling golden light. Erratic bolts of lightning snaked over his body.

“How are you feeling,” the Doctor asked.

“Pretty crappy.” Lan Jue smirked. “It feels like my body’s energies will slip out of control at any moment.”

“Yup, that’s about right.”

“One of the Fantascia Genetica Decoction’s frightening aspects is it’s variability. It effects people differently, and the stronger the adept the stronger the reaction. The potency of the energies it stimulates are also enhanced. You already possess a ninth level Talent, and so the decoction has granted you powers equivalent to a Paragon. However your body can’t sustain that amount of power. Not even close. If you’re going to survive this, we need to drain this excess energy immediately. But this method is extremely dangerous – by it’s nature it’s very difficult to control an entire energy dump. It could end up totally consuming you. Right down to your life force. Hell, even if you make it I can’t say what kind of damage your body will have sustained.” Hesitation was clear in the Doctor’s eyes as he finished.

Lan Jue didn’t appear interested in discussing consequences. He just smiled. “I knew what I was getting in to when I took the decoction. If I live through this it’s already better than I anticipated. Alright, just tell me what

I need to do.”

The Doctor stared fixedly at the enormous Lan Jue. “I really don’t like you. You know that, right?”

Lan Jue cracked a grin. “Is it because I’m more handsome than you are?”

“Bullshit,” the Doctor spat. “Handsome as a pig’s butt-crack. If you hadn’t shown up, then management of the Avenue’s power gems undoubtedly would have fallen to me. I’d be Skyfire Avenue’s Jewelry Master. Worse, after you showed up the Beautician stopped calling me so much. Said you had more class than I did. You can’t understand how infuriating that is. Only now, seeing you like this, all I can say is the Clairvoyant made the right decision. I’ll get no relief for my sense of justice, but I’ll do right by my sense of duty. Now lie down.”

Lan Jue rubbed his nose and laid down on the ground. “Why does it feel like you’re giving me the ‘friendzone’ speech.” [2]

[tl: [2] = In Chinese this is called ‘playing the good guy card’ – equivalent to my generation’s ‘dear john’ letter. Oh, you’re a good guy and all, but why don’t we just be friends. Lan Jue aint got no chill. or the idiom , applying butter to someone]

“Shut the hell up,” the Doctor ordered. “At this point you’re lucky to be alive. I expect ten percent off all future power gem purchases just coming to this hellish housecall.”

Lan Jue broke in to laughter. “You got it.”

“And a bottle of Romanee-Conti if you live,” he finished, walking to Lan Jue’s side.

“And when will you expect payment?”

“Immediately. Suffering that damned interspacial transfer has it’s price. Bottle of conti, no arguments.”

“How am I supposed to get you one?”

“Not my problem,” the Wine Master piped up. “So you better live. You also have yet to go with me for that bottle we discussed. Some gentleman

you are.”

“I’ll need your help,” the Doctor said, speaking to the Wine Master. “I can’t get past his body’s defenses. Once an opening is established to drain the energy, it’ll also need to be controlled. We’ll need to guide it, then at the precisely right moment stem the flow. We need to get it just right – too little and the power will kill him. Too much and we’ll drain his vital force.”

“Alright, just let me know what needs doing when.”

The Doctor hesitated, then fumbled at his collar. He pulled out a necklace, and removed it from around his neck. The swinging pendant strung on it was a purple gemstone that twinkled with a gentle inner light.

Lan Jue’s business was power gems, so his eyes lit up in interest as they fell upon the pendant. “Is that a phylactery stone?”

The Doctor frowned. “Of course it is, stop wasting your breath. You better pay me back for it, too! Any equivalent level power gem will do. But another phylactery would be nice.”

Lan Jue looked the young man in the eye and nodded.

Phylactery stones were c-ranked gems. Of all the known gems, their energy storage capacity was the greatest. Their energy stores were enough to power a command ship for an entire year. It wasn’t the rarest or most precious of the c-ranked gems, but it certainly was one of the most useful. Were a mecha’s core gem a phylactery, it could keep up constant battle status for one or two years nonstop.

Of course it’s rarity was in line with what one would expect for a c-ranked gem. They were only found on a small planet in the Northern Alliance. It took a hundred tones of the raw mineral to produce a single gem. The small planet only really had about a million tons available for refinement, so once all was said and done there would only be around ten thousand of these gemstones in circulation. A total of ten kilograms. But those ten kilos of gems could run a star bastion – though none would dare, it was far too extravagant and wasteful. The North carefully regulated their sale and use.

The one clutched in the Doctor's hand was perhaps thirty grams. Its price couldn't be measured in simple cash.

"Left hand, in the palm. Cut a cross." The Doctor was stern and serious as he spoke to the Wine Master.

Lan Jue opened his hand, and the Wine Master's scepter shined as it shrunk in to the form of a glimmering silver knife. The blade was only seven inches long, with a brilliantly shining surface. However if one were to look closely, they'd see threads of black interwoven with the silver. The opposing colors spun around one another, drawing the eye with their mesmerizing dance.

Lan Jue was keeping the tumultuous powers within him at bay, but he couldn't hold out for much longer. Already the edges of his vision were growing dark. Soon, only the Doctor remained in a world of darkness.

The Wine Master's hand moved with a quick flick of the wrist. A silver cross appeared, stark against Lan Jue's golden palm.

The Doctor sucked in his breath. A bluish-green light flooded out and around him, filling the area with vitality. His right hand fiddled with the phylactery stone, then carefully pressed it against the cross-shaped slice. He turned his head and nodded at the Wine Master.

"Tear." The old man's voice was clear, but quiet. Lan Jue's left hand suddenly shook and the silver cross vanished, replaced with a sudden and violent burst of energy.

The Doctor pressed the gem against Lan Jue's palm with all his strength. Golden blood flowed from around the gem's corners, splattering against the Doctor's white coat. Where the droplets landed, they quickly began to fire off bolts of electricity. The Doctor began to shake and convulse from the shocks.

The Wine Master was at his side in an instant. He clapped a hand down on the young man's shoulder, and a pale silver light wrapped around him like a protective membrane. The slithering arcs of electricity danced over the surface but did no further damage. Still the Doctor trembled, recovering after a few moments.

As he did, the gemstone pressed against Lan Jue's hand had started to undergo a strange change of its own. Its faint light had expanded into a glimmering halo that radiated out from it. By virtue of the stone, the spurts of golden blood quickly slowed and stopped. It was acting as a sort of cork to stop up the wound.

The stone began to flicker, casting off sparks of light that appeared and vanished around them. It thrummed and flashed like it had a life of its own. As they watched, it began to fill with a golden light.

The Doctor released a sigh, no longer shaking from his shock. "Jewelry Master, right now you and the gem have established a link. Phylacteries are strange stones, with the ability to join with almost any form of life. It fuses with anything that possesses a genetic make up. Once it's fused with the host, it'll begin to absorb any energy released by it and release anything else. As a result every gem can only ever have one master. It's for this reason they're rarely directly used with machinery. They are not alive, and thus can't make a link."

Chapter 145: Treatment

All s-ranked gemstones were, by their nature, mysterious. Only those with a talent in understanding them were ever able to glimpse their true capabilities. Lan Jue lay upon the ground, and though able to move remained still and listened to the Doctor's explanation. [1]

As his blood flowed from the open wound, he felt his body begin to relax. The Phylactery's stones pulsing energies were gentle and soothing, and in fact he felt no discomfort with the process.

Gradually, the internal light of the stone changed to a shimmering gold. It had begun with flecks of gold, and they melded together as the stone drank up Lan Jue's flooding energies.

"Alright, good. Now just focus your discipline in to the stone. Infuse as much as you possible can. Eventually it'll become as part of your body. When you've recovered, the energies inside will begin to be absorbed back in to you." The Doctor spoke over his patient as the process continued.

Lan Jue just nodded. He focused his efforts of moving the unstable energies of his discipline in to the phylactery.

In the beginning he was hesitant to release too much in to the stone too quickly for fear it couldn't support it. However soon he discovered he'd underestimated the power gem's capabilities. No matter how much of his excess powers he flooded in to it, it vanished like salt in sea waves. The gem swallowed as much as he gave, insatiable. He likened it like the vast emptiness of space.

This caused Lan Jue to breathe a sigh of relief. He let his constraints slip, his control relax, so that his power could flow at it's own pace. His body shone with a fierce golden light that brightened as his power flared.

The Wine Master looked a little apprehensive as he spoke to the Doctor. "How will you know when his power is sufficiently drained in to the stone? How much experience do you have with this?"

The Doctor shook his head. "I only know how to keep him from dying.

The effect all of this will have on his body, we'll only know when the process is done. We'll need to do another examination then to know the full extent of the damage. A ninth level Talent, the Genetica, a sudden catapult to Paragon, not to mention his previous injuries... it doesn't look good. Thunderbolt Disciplines are among the fiercest of abilities. It would be best to mentally prepare yourself for the worst.

The Cosmagus sighed. "Do what you can. The Jewelry Master suffered this while saving Taihua and it's tourists. It was damn heroic, so we'll do whatever it takes."

The Doctor responded with a sigh of his own. "I must say he's earned my admiration. I can't say I'd have done the same if our roles were reversed. I guess my strengths lie in self preservation instead of blind bravery. I certainly wouldn't have had the stupidity and courage to effectively commit suicide and take Genetica to do it."

Lan Jue's weak voice wafted up towards them. "Even your compliments sound like curses."

The Doctor smirked. "No one ever said anything about compliments. Tell me with a straight face you're not a total moron. Didn't you give any thought to the consequences?"

Lan Jue laughed quietly. "Actually if our roles were reversed I'm not sure you'd have run like you claim. If you'd have been here to see that monster shooting down airships, to see our compatriots slaughtered, used as food for the creatures, you'd see differently. Something like that really opens your eyes!"

The Doctor stuck a big thumbs up under Lan Jue's nose. "You win. Now shut up and concentrate. Later you wont be laughing."

Lan Jue's expression changed as the Doctor's words were confirmed. His expanded body began to shrink back down as the power racing through him was drained away.

The Wine Master's body shook as he looked on. He knew this meant Lan Jue no longer had the necessary power to sustain Paragon status. But he couldn't stop now, he had to keep draining the explosive power of his

discipline otherwise he would be destroyed by it.

“Draw back just a bit,” the Doctor ordered. He knelt again at Lan Jue’s side and held him down with both hands. Once more that gentle green light flowed through him to the Jewelry Master until he glowed as well.

With each passing moment that his powers were draining, Lan Jue felt that danger receding. He felt as though he were stepping back from a precipice. There wasn’t any pain anymore, just... emptiness. Like he was just a shell, like he didn’t exist.

Lan Jue’s smile was forced, for the situation he faced was even worse than he’d anticipated. Sometimes, it wasn’t pain that was to be feared. Sometimes the absence of pain was the most frightening thing.

The phylactery continued to flash, though now sparks of electricity danced on it’s faceted surface. As Lan Jue’s powers waned, he felt his control slipping as well. He was finding it more difficult to direct the flow outward. But the process continued, and after half an hour his body returned to it’s normal size. The golden tint to his skin had vanished somewhat earlier.

Lan Jue’s vitality was weakening. Lying on the ground, he felt it. His face was pale. Not like a mans, but like frost over a statue. His eyes rolled shut when he no longer possessed the strength to keep them open.

Yet the Phylactery Stone did not dim or weaken. On the contrary, it was growing brighter, more vibrant. The stone had buried itself in Lan Jue’s palm almost entirely. Only a small part of it remained visible, twinkling furiously. With as much energy as it was drinking from Lan Jue, their connection was powerful.

The Doctor looked on, his face dark. The purgative and healing energies released by his hands had changed. It was no longer a simple green ray, and was instead now an exuberant jadeite. Steam arose from the top of his head, and he was covered in sweat. He didn’t look too good, himself.

The Wine Master just stood at the Doctor’s side. In this situation, he couldn’t help. All he could do was watch and wait. Only Disciplines that lay in a similar vein could support another.

The Doctor's face was hard, a chiseled mask of concentration. "His condition is worse than I anticipated. The Genetica triggered the very core of his abilities, and it's more potent than I've ever encountered. It was evaporating his blood. Any later and I'm afraid he'd have been boiled from the inside. We're not out of the woods yet, either. His organs are still in danger of being burnt and torn apart. His meridians are bordering on total fracture. Only his bones are managing, leaving about a hundred and sixty three unscathed. The damage he's endured from this is incredible!"

"Is there anything we can do," the Wine Master asked.

"All I can do now is employ my greatest healing abilities. Perhaps they will be enough to help keep his organs and meridians from being completely obliterated. At the same time I can instigate hematopoietic functions and try to bring it back to homeostasis. Bone fractures will be the easiest to handle. But meridians... there are simply too many in the body [2] and as they break they're like a bowl of noodles in there. Trying to connect them all together again is too difficult. The best I can do is ensure the most important meridians remain intact. Even if he lives, I'm afraid he'll likely end up disabled..."

The Wine Master was well aware of the Doctor's healing capabilities. Hearing the prognosis, his face was bleak.

Ah Clairvoyant... surely it doesn't mean your Visions were wrong? Or maybe someone changed fate. This is already past the point of just appearing dire. If the Doctor really is unable to cure him, then he...

Two aquamarine gemstones had appeared in the Doctor's hands. He placed one in the center of Lan Jue's chest, and the other in his own mouth. Almost instantly the gems began to glow.

An hour passed. The Doctor sat beside his patient, legs crossed, recovering his own powers as he meditated. Lan Jue remained where he was, his skin still pale as snow. The gem on his chest pulsed slowly with his heartbeat.

After an hour of rest, the Doctor stirred and continued the treatment. To him, the man laid out on the floor looked like a human-shaped jigsaw

puzzle. It was as though everything within him was fractured and shifted. He would have to be practically rebuilt. It was an enormously difficult process and, had he not immediately employed vast amounts of bioenergy to support the Jewelry Master, he'd likely already be dead.

As they toiled below, the skies over Taihua were gradually clearing. The grey fog that concealed them was dissipating before the sun.

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With a moan, a massive ship broke through Taihua's atmosphere and barreled towards the ground. The East's first contingent of relief troops were inbound.

The ship descended until it was a thousand meters over land, then stopped to hover. The doors opened and several figures issued forth. They fell to earth like dark petals. Or perhaps more accurately, like a dredging net.

They were mechas, and they towered a frightening fifty meters. Each one pulsed with powerful energies. Mechas were separated in to many sorts, with different systems. Ten mechas constituted one unit, and the way they fell to earth in perfect formation gave testament to their high battle prowess. The moment they made landfall, they spread out and got to work.

Shrill cries and plumes of purple smoke dotted Taihua. Once the sea creature had been dealt with, the monsters had stopped multiplying. They were being eradicated. Their fate was sealed once their nest was destroyed.

Mo Yu piloted his own mecha, a Mammoth III Suit, racing at the front of his unit. The Mammoth III was the Eastern Alliance's National Defense mecha system, and every unit had one as the heart of their team.

They were the core defensive unit, the best the East had to offer. They were the pinnacle of mecha research and possessed every weapon they could bolt on to it. They were infantry dreadnaughts, and everything that stood in their way was annihilated.

1. Here I think the author made a typo, since he described this gem as a c-ranked gem in the previous chapter. In my estimation it's meant to be S-ranked.
2. Not really. There are twelve normal meridians, eight extra meridians, and some divergent meridians. Doctor needs to bone up on his Traditional Chinese Medicine!

Chapter 146: Gold 3rd Grade

Two V-Class Swordsmen mechas followed the Mammoth III. These were the melee arm of the unit. Six V-class gunner suits and a white Aegis III were in tow.

Together they comprised an average assault force. A recon unit would likely have replaced their more combat-oriented mechas for other sorts. At present there were ten or so common mecha unit configurations, and the mechas for each alliance didn't differ terribly from one alliance to another.

"Captain, according to satellite imagery the two kilometers thirty degrees to our left are experiencing energy fluctuations. Moreover, the map captures are hazy."

Mo Yu confirmed the information. "Forward, battle formation," he ordered. As the present Emperor-Class pilot, he was the unit's leader. He also bore all the responsibility for their success or failure, and the lives of those in his team. The two V-Class Swordsmen mechas followed behind him in an inverted wing. The others remained a few steps back, the gunners surrounding the Aegis III. As they moved forward, the mechas scanned in all directions, on alert for foes.

They moved inexorably further through the tree cover. For a mecha unit, two kilometers amounted to nothing. As they barreled through the jungle, the trees suddenly parted. Mo Yu didn't need radar to see the two – no, three – people by the water's edge.

What was that green light? They weren't monsters, certainly, so the light must be a result of a Discipline.

"Citizens, immediately identify yourselves. Do it now." Mo Yu's voice boomed at them through the Mammoth III's speakers.

The air rung with the sound of metal as the swordsmen drew their titanium alloy blades. They took up positions on either side of the small group. The gunners hoisted their laser rifles and pointed them at the strangers. The appearance of the ten towering mechas made the scene at

the water's edge far more tense.

"We're from Skyfire Avenue." The deep voice rang in the ears of each soldier, as though someone were speaking directly to them in their cockpits. They each were taken aback by the voice, Mo Yu included. Two of the gunners were startled enough to almost accidentally discharge their weapons.

Skyfire Avenue? Mo Yu was of course aware of the place. He was about to continue his line of questioning when a silver light blinded him, cutting him off. The Mammoth II had an impressively thick alloy hull, and yet despite this there appeared in his cockpit a floating emblem that shone before his eyes.

Mo Yu had done his time, he'd been around the proverbial block. He knew what he was looking at. "Interdimensional Discipline."

The oval medallion was a deep maroon, but as it dropped in to Mo Yu's hand ten threads of golden light snaked out from within it. They were bright, powerful, but held no danger. The signal fluctuations were striking.

The master control unit of the Mammoth III sparked to life, delivering its report. "Identity verified: Gold 3rd Grade Military Official."

Gold 3rd Grade?

Mo Yu was nearly struck dumb by the realization. Like any military organization, the East had their own internal military ranking system. The lowest ranking military officers were designated 'Iron'. Acting Second Lieutenants were Iron 1st Grade, First Lieutenants Iron 2nd Grade, and Captains were 3rd Grade. Copper Grade came next, then Silver. Only upper level commanders were Gold.

Single-Planet Generals were Gold 1st Grade. Fleet Admirals were Gold 2nd Grade. Defense Secretaries and the highest generals were Gold 3rd Grade! And this, this was the mark of the Blood-Iron Marshal.

Mecha pilots were the most numerous military personnel in all the three Alliances. Mo Yu himself was only a junior Captain, but had fought his way up to lead his own squadron. He was only a Copper 1st Grade. An

infinitely vast difference from Gold 3rd.

Wait, he thought, his heart racing suddenly. Skyfire Avenue! Gold 3rd Grade!

But what did it mean, to have these two together? Denizens of Skyfire Avenue certainly weren't capable of acting as commanders in the armed forces, or Defense Ministers. They weren't even able to work in any higher office. And yet they acted as protectors and defenders of the Alliance.

A Paragon!

This... this must mean one of them in a Paragon! As realization washed over him, the emblem in his grip flashed again, and was gone.

Skyfire. Paragon. Interdimensional power. With those three together, the man's identity became clear.

Mo Yu swallowed hard. His voice rang clear and loud of their dedicated internal channel. "Identity acknowledged, secure our rear. Rescind red alert issued for these three."

The other nine mechas retreated hastily. They turned, almost as one, and directed their murderous focus outward.

The chest plate of the Mammoth II hissed and split open. A simple metal ladder spilled out to get it's pilot to the ground. Mo Yu nimbly slid down the ladder and trotted towards the flashing green light.

"No need to come over," the deep voice curtly commanded.

"Yes, sir!" Mo Yu stopped dead in his tracks. He snapped to attention.

"Eastern Alliance Pilot 34, Captain of the Third Infantry Company's Thirteenth Mechanized Combat Squadron. Squad Leader Mo Yu, reporting for duty!" Mo Yu was rushed, excited. His chest rose and fell with his speedy breath, his cheeks were ruddy.

How could he not be excited? This was a Paragon! As an emperor-class pilot he was naturally an adept himself. Fifth level, to be precise.

He'd learned of the existence of Skyfire Avenue when he was small. The Adept's playground. Home to three Paragons, who protected the Avenue

from harm.

Even the Northern Alliance, as powerful as it was, dare not harass the East largely due to these three powerhouses. They were better deterrents than Bastion ships.

A single Paragon's destructive capabilities certainly couldn't match up to a Bastion, however one had to consider the bulk and make-up of a Bastion. Compared to a man? If a Paragon made up their mind to kill someone, their target's only hope was to be a Paragon themselves. It was for this that the presence of Paragons was considered when judging an Alliance's strength.

There were ten known Paragons currently. Seven of them were officially accepted as members of an Alliance – or, rather, there were seven who allowed an Alliance to claim them. They focused their efforts to the betterment of their people, if they so desired.

The North and West boasted two each. But the East, it had three.

Chapter 147: I Can Save Him!

“I must ask you all to clear the area as quickly as possible, don’t allow anyone to come near. One of our companions has suffered grievous injury.” The Wine Master’s voice was calm, deep.

“Absolutely,” Mo Yu responded. “Do you need any further assistance, commander?”

“Make this a restricted area.”

“As you command.”

Mo Yu cast his eyes to the mysterious trio, silently watching them for a moment before running back to his mecha.

His brief glance at the party revealed that there were indeed three of them, but the green light made any further distinguishing characteristics difficult to reveal. Considering the rank of the man he encountered, he didn’t dare press for more information, much less try to spy what they were about. To your average Adept, the Paragons were like living gods. – and the three Masters of the Eastern Alliance were their godly protectors. How could he dream of disobeying?

Three hours later.

“The bone fractures are healed. The damage to his aorta and inferior vena cava has also been reversed. I need to rest for a minute, then I’ll get started on reestablishing capillary channels. From this point on we’ll start seeing some decent recovery. Thankfully the damage from the decoction was centered in his torso and core. The injuries don’t appear to spread to the limbs or head. If it had, it would take powers far beyond my own to bring him around.”

The Doctor’s face was drawn and pale. He was drenched in sweat, as though he’d been fished from the nearby ocean. Wisps of steam emanated from him. With his diagnosis delivered, he immediately settled down to meditate and recover.

Lan Jue remained where he was on the floor. His breath was coming

more ragged than it had before, but looking at him no one would guess his life was in danger.

The Wine Master sighed. After all, even though it looked as though they'd be able to pull Zeus from the brink of disaster, total recovery of his health and Talent would be exceedingly difficult. The destructive power of the Fantascia Genetica decoction had mangled him severely, and total recovery wasn't a sure thing. The worst of the damage was to his meridians, which had been fractured and thrown in to chaos. The Doctor had no means of fixing all of those, and putting them right. His energy was flowing now in to the purple phylactery affixed to his palm, and it was the only thing ensuring his explosive Thunderbolt discipline didn't snap back to obliterate the Jewelry Master.

Right now, their greatest hope was that he'd at least recover to the point where he could live a normal, average life. That he wouldn't awaken an invalid.

The Doctor continued his meditations for the space of a couple hours, then continued with his healing regimen.

"And what about you? Are you holding up?" The Wine Master's deep voice wafted towards the Doctor.

The younger man laughed wryly. "Our Jewelry Master sure did a number on himself with that decoction. But if I wasn't able to handle this, how could I ever hope to be a committee member? Look here!" As he spoke, revitalizing tendrils of green light stretched from all ten of his fingers. They buried themselves in his patient's body.

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"A-Li! Heh heh, a fine brother indeed, here to come and greet me. Where's that kid A-Jue?" Chu Cheng's fiery red hair was easily spotted as he made his way from the entrance of the public air hangar. He chuckled mirthfully as he spied Hua Li, all bundled up like a dumpling. He snapped the pretty boy up in a bear hug.

Hua Li shoved the brash young man away with a scowl. "Oh he's just grand, off vacationing on Taihua. He'll be back in a few days."

“Planet Taihua?” Chu Cheng’s face blanched.

Hua Li saw the change in expression, shooting his companion a questioning glance. “What is it?”

Chu Cheng’s flippant smile melted away. “I heard it on a newscast on my way here. Something happened on Taihua. But come on, A-Jue’s strong enough, even injured, to hold his own or even escape if he has to.”

“What?” Hua Li’s wide eyes were revealed as he snatched the thick sunglasses off his nose. “But he hasn’t even halfway recovered!”

“Its fine, I’m sure,” Chu Cheng said, though his face still betrayed concern. “He always brings Thor along with him.”

Hua Li was already furiously jabbing numbers in to his communicator. His face grew sullen, and he shook his head wordlessly at Chu Cheng before tapping out another number.

“A-Li! Where are you. You know you’re supposed to be here rehearsing and readying your voice. Your concert’s in a week. This absolutely must be a success.” The rough sounds of an angry female voice burst from the instrument on Hua Li’s wrist.

“Mo Xiao, listen to me carefully.” The singer’s voice was tense and constrained, like a volcano about to erupt.

Mo Xiao fell silent, taken aback by his tone. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I need all the latest information about Taihua,” he said. “Also, get Poseidon 1 here as soon as you can. This needs to be done at all costs. A-Jue’s stuck out there.”

“Got it,” she said without hesitation.

Hua LI turned his face to look at Chu Cheng. His red haired compatriot’s eyes were narrowed, and a cold hard light lived in them. “I’m going with you.”

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Seven hours. Seven tense hours where Death loomed close overhead. Finally the Doctor could bear no more and collapsed. The Wine Master

was beside him, and grabbed him before he hit the floor. The younger man looked at him with a smile through half-lidded eyes.

“He won’t die. He may not live a happy comfortable life, but at least he’ll live.” He panted small, shallow breaths as he lay against the Wine Master’s chest. The Doctor was too weak at this point to even lift a pinky.

“Thank you.”

This brought a chuckle from the exhausted Doctor. “That’s all well and good, but I’m going to need to hear it from him when he comes around. But there will always be some issues. There were... so many breaks, fractures through his body. I joined them where I could – bones, joints, vessels, meridians – but he may never fully recover. I’ve connected together fractured meridians but their energies are routed. I don’t have the ability necessary to help him get things back on the right track. We can only wait, see how his healing progresses, then take it from there.”

This brought a light to the Wine Master’s eyes. “Are you saying there’s a chance he could recover his Discipline?”

The Doctor’s smile was a bitter one. “There’s a chance. A one percent chance, but there it is. In reality, we’re hoping for a miracle.”

The Wine Master was about to speak further when he was interrupted. He spied the yellow soulcaller gem on Lan Jue’s chest flicker. Something flashed through the old man’s eyes before he shot his head skyward.

“Come out!” He groped out with his right hand. Suddenly the air split with the sound of broken glass. A thirty-meter long blimp hung in the air where moments before there was nothing.

“Please stay your hand, Chronomagus. I’m here to help Lan Jue.” The voice that accosted them was pleasing to the ear, feminine. The Wine Master, angry and ready for a fight, stopped as requested.

Mo Yu and his team of crack pilots were almost instantly aware of the breach. They raced forward to intercept. However, their advance was halted when the Wine Master shot an arm out towards them.

The newly arrived ship slowly made landfall. The doors hissed as they

opened, revealing a young woman. Her features were hidden behind a silver mask., but her lithe and elegant figure was clear to all. Her long dark hair hung free at her back, framing a pair of blue eyes. Anxiety glimmered within them. She paid no mind to the gathering crowd around her. She raced to the Wine Master, Doctor and Lan Jue as though the others didn't exist.

The Wine Master placed the weakened Doctor on the floor. His bright eyes watched her come.

Having a Paragon's full attention was not a comfortable situation to find oneself in. And yet this young woman didn't seem the least bit put off. She squatted by the Jewelry Master's side and felt for a pulse. Afterward, her sky-blue eyes showed relief. She looked directly at the Paragon.

"I can save him."

Chapter 148: Open Your Core

“I can save him!” They were four simple words, but the resolution with which the masked woman said them was comforting. There was even a hint of relaxation behind the words.

The Wine Master was a fine judge of people, and immediately picked up on her easy mood. “Who are you,” he asked in a tepid voice.

In lieu of an answer, the girl arose to her feet and plucked a necklace from around her neck. It was simple, with a pale yellow crystal pendant that gently glowed in her palm. She wordlessly pressed it in to the Wine Master’s hand. She did the same for the identical gemstone around Lan Jue’s neck.

The evidence she provided him required no further explanation. Still, questions rumbled in the old man’s mind and his eyes adopted a curious silver light. He dropped them towards the soulcaller gem, which reacted with a strong and sudden golden flare.

“Why the mask?” He handed the necklaces back to the girl.

She clasped one gem around her neck before replacing Lan Jue’s. “Because I don’t want him to know it was I who saved him. If I am going to heal your Jewelry Master, my one condition is you keep this a secret. It’s like you’ve never seen me before. Once I’ve done what I can, I’ll leave immediately.”

Her voice was strange, deep. It appeared she had some means of modulating the sound, but it made her tone no less melodious.

The amazement in the Wine Master’s eyes only grew. However, before he could continue his line of questioning the Doctor had come around and begun to make his own commentary.

“I find it curious you have the self-confidence to claim you can heal him all by yourself. I find it hard to believe there’s anyone better than me at what I do.”

The masked woman slowly shook her head. “I’m no doctor, nor can I

heal illnesses. My abilities and my healing methods can only be used with this man alone. I don't know what happened that caused him to end up like this – he shattered like a pane of glass – but I'm confident I can heal him.”

The Doctor's brows furrowed. “I don't believe it. We can't reasonably hand him over to this woman. Even with this ‘proof’ you showed, anything short of him waking up and personally telling us about your relationship I won't accept. Until then his treatment is up to me. Our first priority is his safety.”

She was silent for a moment, but soon shot back with a response. “His current prognosis is grim, as you know. If we waste time the situation will only get worse. We need to begin right now. I'm asking you not to get in my way.”

Finally the Wine Master joined the exchange. “If you can do what you claim than do so, but first you have to tell us the method you'll be using. We must also be sure you don't mean any harm.”

This set the young woman to pondering for a moment. “I'll lower my defenses. Your Excellency can scan my thoughts and Core for any sign of malice. If you do, I'll be at your mercy, and you can end me in the space of an instant. As for my treatment method, there's no point in putting it in to words. When you see me do it, you'll understand.”

“You'll open up your Core?” The Doctor was shocked at her preposition, and looked at her with considerably less suspicion. It was clear what opening one's Core to an outsider meant – you were placing your life, everything you were, at the mercy of another person.

An Adept's Core was the most important part of them, the center of their being. It was through the power of their Core that they were able to control the force and instability of their Discipline. It was like she said, if any ill will towards Lan Jue was discovered, it would be she who would suffer first.

“Fine. Get to it.” The Wine Master had no time for hesitation. The decision was made quickly.

She turned slightly away from him then, and gently tapped her forehead with her right hand. The small motion set her eyes to changing. The depths of her sky-blue eyes suddenly looked as though they housed a pale mist. What started small, however, quickly grew until it filled her eyes. In an instant they were white as snow, clear as diamond, with no pupil. Just a field of white.

Gradually a glimmering image like a snowflake appeared on her forehead where she'd touched. Gentle waves of energy pulsed from her.

"Energy concealment!" The Doctor whispered in astonishment as he looked on.

It was a surprise indeed, for even at his level of cultivation the Doctor hadn't thought this girl was anything other than average. And yet here she was, veritably pouring with power. This really only had one explanation; she had learned and was employing some method of hiding her Discipline, to make her appear as though she was a normal person.

The snowflake image emblazoned on her head slowly began to rotate. It swirled until it became a milky vortex, and from its depths began to exude a powerful chill. It was a cold that transcended the body, threatening to freeze one's spirit.

The sudden cold set the Doctor's whole body to shivering. The cold went to his very bones, and yet his sense of exhaustion seemed eased.

What sort of power was this... ?

As the image on her head continued to twist and undulate, a crystalline object slowly revealed itself. It shone behind the snowflake like a star. It wasn't white, but instead was entirely translucent like a shard of ice. It was a Core, and though not large was spotlessly clear – entirely pure.

"Such a chaste Core." The Wine Master hummed to himself in consideration. His silver eyes flashed, and the tiniest spear of shimmering light shot from them to bore in to the woman's Core. It was visible in the immaculately clear depths of the Core, swirling about within as it searched.

The young woman's body shuddered. After a moment she recovered, and her Core vanished once again within her forehead.

She wasted no further time with speech. Immediately she was at Lan Jue's side once more, kneeling beside his supine form. She glanced over him briefly, then blanketed his form with her own.

This close, she could see the contours of his face, how pale and bloodless his skin was. "You hateful bastard!"

She dropped her head to gently kiss his pale lips. Pale lines of light once more began to exude from between her eyebrows. They traced the lines of that strange snowflake.

The small threads of light reached out and hung in the air for a time before turning back in on one another. They pressed close and congealed until they became a single thread of silvery yarn that connected her to Lan Jue.

The Doctor looked on in silence, carefully watching her every move. He knew once she'd agreed to open her Core that she wouldn't dare cause Lan Jue harm, however he refused to believe she had some sort of ability that could do more than he already had. His confidence had surely ballooned since earning the title of Doctor on Skyfire Avenue, and for good reason, so it was his interest and pride that had him burning to discover just what sort of powers this young girl claimed to possess.

The Wine Master's eyes continued to flash with silvery energy. He was able to sense every pulse, every flutter of the young woman's core, opened as it was to him. Even the quiet, almost invisible pulses of her spirit weren't hidden from him. However, he was careful not to disturb her in the midst of Lan Jue's healing. He watched her, still as stone.

He was a Paragon, almost a god among men, and with that came a great deal of power. Power enough to react the instant this woman had an untoward thought. By virtue of his absolute power over space, he could cut her apart or send her to another solar system.

The mech suits that had been pressing around them at the arrival of the girl, began their withdrawal at Mo Yu's command. They spread out and

continued their vigilant guard. That old man was a Paragon, and his orders were to be followed. They awaited further instruction.

Mo Yu remained, and through the information updates in his army mecha's monitor he was kept appraised of the situation. In just a few short hours most of the beasts found on Taihua had been annihilated. Those that remained were few, and scattered. Soon they'll all have been swept from the planet.

The screen flashed as recent statistics came through. It was a calamity, compounded by the fact the planet was near saturated.

In order to protect the ecosystem, Taihua had stipulations as to how many tourists were permitted at any one time. That number was around a million souls. When a planet is considered saturated, that means it's total population of tourists, security and service workers are near to or have met the occupancy limit.

The result of so many bodies and such horrible creatures was no surprise: a slaughter. Recent numbers put the missing at one hundred and fifty thousand. Another three thousand and sixty soldiers would also call this their last, eternal tour. However, headcounts at evacuation showed only about half of their saturated total were accounted for.

One hundred and fifty thousand was a high number, a frightening sum. But half a million...

The satellites surrounding Taihua had been blocked from spying the situation down on the ground. That thick grey mist had covered everything, until in the final moments a blast of air had revealed something. The satellites had caught the final moments of that battle over the sea. It caught only a glimpse, but in those moments the satellite caught three figures battling a colossal monster. The energy reading from below neared the blast power of an expeditionary cruiser.

Mo Yu watched the information filter past his screen, and instantly recognized it. The place he stood now was where the satellites caught their break. That burst of startling power was just a few meters from where he stood.

Without question, it must have been the Cosmagus himself who saved those that made it out. He was Taihua's great protector, guarding against the invaders to keep losses to a minimum. Mo Yu felt his blood racing. He had the honor of guarding a man such as this, a great Paragon and guardian. It was likely the greatest mission of his life.

The countless silken threads of white energy lowly intertwined. As time went on it became an undulating cocoon around both Lan Jue and the young woman. It grew stronger and thickened. As the others looked on, the two figures within became more and more indistinct.

From beginning to end, that young woman didn't move one hair. The Wine Master could feel her through their link, and knew that she was using the best and most gentle method available. She was channeling her own restorative powers to him through their kiss.

Chapter 149: The Power of the Silkworm and the Mystic Raiment

The great silken cocoon pulsed with power, and eventually their figures vanished from view. Stranger still, there seemed to be no energy fluctuations coming from within – at least, none that the Doctor or Wine Master could distinguish.

The Doctor looked on as well, resting as the strange scene unfolded before him. He watched in silence, absorbed in thought. At the onset he'd watched the young woman work with a distinct light of scorn in his eyes. However, as that cocoon developed and surrounded the two, that light changed to something more dignified. But anxiety and doubt could still be seen. It was as if he'd figured something out only, not entirely. There was still something he couldn't put his finger on.

He wasn't alone in his ruminations. The Wine Master, too, looked consumed by thought. In all the worlds there were only a very few Disciplines he wasn't familiar with. This woman's was one of them.

The energy he'd felt exuding from the girl was infinitely gentle, abnormally pure and far beyond the ken of your average Adept. By his estimation, she possessed a ninth level Talent. It was a great power, despite her weak appearance.

Naturally a ninth ranked healer would have enormously powerful healing abilities, precisely like the Doctor. But there was something strange, and though he didn't know why he suspected her healing abilities weren't so simple as they appeared. She may even be more powerful than the Doctor, for all his training and ability.

Hmmmmnnnnn

Before them the cocoon began to hum and vibrate. The silken tendrils began to quietly break apart and the air around it shimmered with a white aura.

“Hm?” Mo Yu and his team shuffled uncomfortably in their mechas and

watched. Each and every one of them were Adepts themselves – you had to be to pilot a mecha – yet none so powerful as the group they stood guard over. They would fight tooth and nail for even a tenth of the power they witnessed.

The sky darkened, suddenly, for reasons unknown to those gathered. Mo Yu's band of armored soldiers flashed as their integrated lighting systems came online. They were shocked, but not simply from the sudden change of light. This was no normal darkness, they concluded. It was a dark that swallowed light up, devoured it. The blazing lamps affixed to the mechas did nothing to dispel the gloom, becoming little more than dim specs in a sea of black. The only thing that pierced it was that white cocoon.

"Changing the laws of nature..." the Doctor whispered to himself. He quickly scrambled to his feet. With the help of the cocoon's gentle light, he was able to see the Wine Master's face. What he saw mirrored his own shock and confusion.

Yet the Wine Master lifted a hand, silently assuring the Doctor that as was well. After all, he was still monitoring the state of the woman's Core. Without their interruption the shell continued to brighten, making everything around it look blacker still.

Mo Yu sat still as stone in his towering Mammoth III mecha. He linked to the satellites overhead to check their imaging status, to see what they saw. What he found was nothing – the scene looked normal from overhead. It looked like it always had, clear and with no anomalies. The dark could be seen up close, but not from afar. Like some kind of illusion.

This...

A pale fog or steam seeped from the cocoon, white like the light that surrounded it. It was stark and clear against the inky backdrop. As it continued to smoke the plumes congealed until they formed another shell, identical to the one beneath it.

Lights flashed within, beams of it peaking through the cracks. Where the light shone, strange flowery lines appeared upon the shell's surface.

A rapid burst of energy pulsed outward from the cocoon. It washed over

the others leaving no trace, causing no harm. But the Doctor and Wine Master, close as they were, felt it keenly when the power washed over them. They could feel their spirit embrace it, filled to brim with it. They sense the pulsing energies enhancing their inner being.

The Doctor swallowed hard. His stunned voice broke the relative silence as he muttered to himself. "I think I know what this is... It means that story must be true, that there really are people with the Silkworm Discipline. Damn... who'd have thought today we'd witness a miracle."

"Crack – crrrack!" The sound was clear and crisp. Fissures had begun to appear on the cocoon's surface. They started at the top and snaked their way down in shimmering golden lines. The emanating metallic light was dim at first, but their intensity increased as the cracks spread further.

The light tore through the pitch black world like a towering golden spear, a pillar of heaven. It rose unimpeded towards the heavens where it split the sky in half. From above the golden light shone down like rays of the sun, bathing the white cocoon in warmth and light.

The golden luminescence sent the darkness running. Everything came under that glow, shimmering in it's embrace. Even the Wine Master, with all his power and ability, was cast away by the force of the golden light. The Doctor was thrown like a ragdoll just behind him.

At last the silvery cocoon split. From within, a wriggling golden form slunk from the ruins of it's protective shell. It was no more than a meter tall, chubby, and covered in intertwining golden lines. It's flesh, however, was white as fresh snow. Almost immediately after escaping from the cocoon it began to grow taller and wider. A second series of cracks could be heard afterward.

A soothing white light began to emanate from the creature, contrasting with the golden glow that bathed everything else around it. It continued to wriggle and change. First were the wings, pure white and powerful. The writhing figure shifted and evolved in to a golden white-jade humanoid.

It was an angelic figure, beautiful, and covered in white light like it was made from it. It was so pure that onlookers couldn't make out any details.

Still, the sensation they got simply by looking on was one of great purity and beauty.

The silvery light in the Wine Master's eyes vanished. He felt it clearly now, there was no more question. The small piece of his power he'd left in her core extricated itself, and returned to him. There was no further need for it.

Protomorphism. Indeed, it was a power not unlike his own. Whoever she was, she was already peaking in to the realm of the Paragons.

Such a puny looking thing, capable of wielding a Paragon's Talent. It was nearly inconceivable, but for the fact it was happening before his very eyes. There was no malice in her art, and the Wine Master could sense Lan Jue's condition improve far beyond where he was before she began.

"Rectitude!" The emotional voice thundered around them. The words were simple, but they filled the air like a chorus. As the words faded, the ruins of the cocoon near the white figure vanished without a trace.

It rose to its feet. Before it was the second cocoon, still housing the woman and Lan Jue in its protective enclosure. Then, she began to dance. Its movements were gentle, care-free, like a sprite sailing through golden sunlight. The pale white light around it continued to glow soothingly.

As the creature's dance continued, the cocoon adopted a more golden hue. The protomorphic energies at play began to worm their way inside.

"What in the hell is this?" The Wine Master could no longer hold his piece. The Doctor turned his head to look back at the aging Paragon.

"Unless I'm mistaken, this is that Discipline of legend, told to us before even the great Stellar Migration. Pure altruism... Regination."

"Regination?" The Wine Master looked back upon the dancing figure in surprise. "You're telling me this is the Savior, the Queen of the Silkworms?"

The Doctor nodded emphatically. "That's right. The power of the Silkworm and the Mystic Raiment."

The power of the Silkworm and the Mystic Raiment! Nine simple words, but they were enough to cause the Cosmagus to retreat a step. Shock was written clear on his face.

“I was certain this mystical power was lost ages ago. But here it is, before us!”

The Doctor explained: “The legends state that this Discipline, Regination, is passed on only to one member of the family per generation. In actuality it’s called the Silkworm Discipline, but they call it Regination because the bearer holds the purist, most altruistic Discipline in the known universe. As one might expect, the Queen of the Silkworms holds no great combat proficiency, but their speed of cultivation is far greater than your average Adept. The power comes with extended life, greater vitality and an almost inhuman physique – but that’s it. No forceful attacks or great combat ability come standard. And yet, when the conditions are right, Regination can be the single greatest ability in the history of mankind.”

“When possessors of Regination approach a ninth level Talent – quickly, usually, by virtue of their Discipline – they are able to make connections with others. With these connections they are able to transfer their own powers to others. Like this, so long as the person is alive, they can sustain inhuman amounts of harm and come right back. This is what’s called ‘the Silkworm’s Power.’”

“In fact, the more damage someone has sustained, the more benefit they receive from the Silkworm’s ‘Mystic Raiment’, namely that cocoon. The foundation of this healing is the nourishment of marrow and tendons, but the healing seeps way down in to the person’s very spirit. Even their Core can be remade, cleared of impurities. They adopt the Silkworm’s purity.”

“But there are limits. Applying the Mystic Raiment obliterates the Queen of Silkworm’s abilities. Afterwards they must start all over, from the beginning, cultivating themselves back to their former power. In the tales it is said a Queen can only use the Mystic Raiment three times in their entire life. After all, this sort of protomorphism has the ability to complete change a person’s fate – to upend the laws of nature! Who’d have thought

that today, when it was needed, we'd actually witness this power with our own eyes. No wonder she was so sure she could heal him. If even the Mystic Raiment couldn't heal him, he's as good as dead. It looks like our Jewelry Master had a great deal of luck or the grace of God on his side."

As they conversed the dancing figure appeared to grow tired. Her body sagged and her wings extended until they draped over the second cocoon like a blanket. As they looked on the gorgeous creature began to change, becoming liquid. Quietly, the power of the Queen of Silkworms was absorbed in to the shell.

Chapter 150: Hera?

“What is this place?” Lan Jue blinked, and looked all around.

It was a world of white. Wisps of cool white mist covered the floor below him. The sky overhead was a soothing eggshell hue. Everything... everything around him was that same pure white.

As he peered all around, he was struck with a rather unsettling sensation – he couldn’t feel himself. He was here, but at the same time he wasn’t. Like he didn’t truly exist. His heart sank, for he knew that he was dead. The spirit was capable of living in the place between time and space. A man with enough power of will could stop his soul from escaping to other realms. Was this death? Was he to remain here for eternity?

Just as he begun to sink in to depression the mists around him began to congeal. Not far from himself, a figure appeared through the haze and approached. Each step brought clarity.

A pure, white dress. Long, dark hair and shimmering blue eyes. A face so beautiful it almost hurt.

“Hera!” Lan Jue called out to her, and before he knew it he was pulling her in to his embrace.

The young woman hesitated, but soon acquiesced and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“As long as I get to see you again, I don’t care what comes.” Lan Jue’s voice was soft, almost a murmur. A small contented smile spread across his face. “Had I known all I had to do to be with you again was die, I’d have done so a long time ago. How are you? What happened that day? What did you encounter? Was it really just some disaster, like they claim? Why was it the whole thing left me with a strange feeling?”

Lan Jue did not move, did not react. There was no outward sign, but inside he felt himself fill with joy. His spirit soared with a sense of good fortune.

Nothing else meant anything anymore. Finally he was together with his

Hera, and that's all he cared about. Living or dead, he didn't care – so long as they were together. Through the years they were apart, he never put her out of his heart. In his soul, Hera was the only one for him, and here she was.

“And if I hadn't died, would you still have made this choice?” Her voice was soft.

Lan Jue was taken aback. He loosened his grip and placed his strong hands on her shoulders. He looked at her carefully.

“Would you?” She looked back, her question genuine. Those dazzling blue eyes held his own.

Lan Jue took a moment to consider her question carefully. “If there was a one in a million shot at survival, I'd take it. But if there was no choice, no chance, I'd still do it. All just to tell you one thing; your man is no coward. Even if we were to be parted forever, saving these families from the pain I felt would be worth it.”

She looked surprised. “So,” she said, “in your heart duty is more important than love?”

This brought a grin to Lan Jue's lips. “No,” he responded. “This isn't about duty. It's humanity. If I didn't do at least this, how could I call myself a noble?”

The young woman smiled, and drew nearer. She took him in to her gentle embrace. “If there ever comes a second chance, I do hope we can be together. I don't need to know your glory, what honors you've achieved. I just want to be with you. Where you go, I go – my greatest wish is just to see your face.”

“Hera,” Lan Jue murmured. “My queen. I love you darling.”

A strange fog seeped around them, covering the world and bringing a muted silence with it. The mists surrounded the two of them, until everything vanished.

In the rapidly shrinking reality around them, she gently placed her forehead against his own. Two crystalline tears appeared at the corner of

her eyes, and traced a line along her cheek. Upon reaching her chin they fell, and landed cold upon his face.

Her breathing had become arduous, and a golden light began to fill her up. Motes of golden light floated through her, from her, in all directions.

“You’re sleeping, darling, and that’s the good news.” She gently lifted her face, and placed a kiss against his lips. She drew back, the shimmering snowflake emblazoned on her head also vanishing in to nothing.

She wrapped him in a hug. It was strange, for instead of feeling empty for her loss, her heart was full. The one she held was her love, her pride. This was her glory, right here in her arms.

The sky above became blue, bright with the light of day. It appeared as though things were returning to normal. Little by little the pale white light from the cocoon dimmed until it was barely visible. The shell, originally definitely a construct of the woman’s energy, was a solid thing now. It looked almost like plaster, despite the gentle pulses of vital energy that surrounded it. However, as the others looked on, the cocoon changed once more. This time, it seemed to turn to stone, and it no longer moved.

Then, the sound of tearing.

The Wine Master’s eyes hardened at the sonance, and he immediately turned to find the source of the noise. What he saw made his brows furrow.

Mo Yu, too, turned to see. Surprise was clear in his eyes as he saw it approaching. The commands from on high were clear: no one was to approach. What, then, was all this?

It started as a simple blue light, but that lasted only the space of a blink. Before long the light had grown enormous, shining against their gathered faces.

The ship was a hundred and fifty meters long, with a streamlined hull shaped like a dolphin. It slowly drew up to their location, leaving behind a metallic blue contrail. The dazzling tail began to vanish from view even as the ship was stopping.

The side of the ship sported a strange design, lines of gold wrapping around itself. It was circular, with the image of a cresting wave in its center. The very middle of the complicated design housed a rhomboid blue gemstone.

It was after seeing the design that the Wine Master relaxed somewhat. His brows eased, and his frown dissipated for he knew who it was that joined them.

The door to the ship opened as it docked, and two figures emerged, lit against the ship's bright interior.

Just as Mo Yu was preparing to give his snipers the order, the Wine Master's voice rung clear in his ears: "Don't impede them. They're one of us."

As if on cue, the two figures began to move towards the group. It took them no time to arrive at the aged Paragon's side.

"Cosmagus!" Though Hua Li's eyes were certainly revealing signs of anxiety, the young man still made sure to show the Wine Master his proper respect with a bow. The fiery red haired youth at his shoulder followed suit.

"You're here for the Jewelry Master I assume?" The Wine Master asked. Hua Li nodded his head.

Their conversation was interrupted when the Wine Master's ears picked up a sound.

"Cosmagus, don't let them see me. The treatment is almost complete. Get them out of here – they can see Lan Jue when I've finished."

The voice was soft, but clear. The Wine Master, in response, raised his hand and motioned in the air. Much to Hua Li and Chu Cheng's surprise, the world warped around them as they were swallowed in to the void.

They found themselves in some interspatial reality, composed of flickering silver light. Clearly this place was unstable, but remained safe so long as the Wine Master was present and exuding his power.

“C-cosmagus, what’s the meaning of this?” Chu Cheng piped up, a scowl on his face.

“The Jewelry Master is currently undergoing his treatment,” the old man responded. “It should be complete soon. It is important that you don’t interrupt the process. I must ask you to wait patiently until it’s complete.”

Hua Li did not take the request happily. “What’s wrong with us watching A-Jue get treated?”

The Wine Master tried to reassure them. “Please, you two, be at ease. The Jewelry Master is a member of Skyfire’s Council, a very important friend to us. My own care and attention is no less than your own. Unfortunately, how we treat him is a Skyfire secret. I can tell you that he’ll be fine, however.”

It worked, and both Hua Li and Chu Cheng breathed a sigh of relief. A Paragon’s assurances were more than enough for them. On top of that, both the Cosmagus and the Clairvoyant of Skyfire were well known for their trustworthiness.

“We saw what happened on the way to Taihua,” Chu Cheng said. “Those monsters that showed up so suddenly, they had to have come from off planet, am I right?”

The Wine Master explained. “As far as we know, yes. But where precisely they come from we haven’t determined. We’ll need to do more research. The monsters themselves were not weak, and appeared quickly from nowhere. We did discover that they have a powerful phagocytic ability that devours all life around them, which they use to nourish themselves. Just moments ago we took out their progenitor, some sort of living nest out there in the sea. It appears the others monsters we’ve encountered here originated from that beast’s body. Afterwards they spread out and began absorbing the planet’s vitality, which made them stronger. The stronger they became, the higher the demand for life energy, and so they just kept killing everything they came across. As for their purpose or goal, we haven’t been able to discover anything as of yet. Your companion the Jewelry Master showed great courage and nobility, taking out as many as

he could. He waded in to the densest areas of the fight to save the tourists trapped there. It was largely due to him that the death count here is as low as it is. Things could have been much, much worse.”

Chu Cheng couldn't help himself, and pressed for more information. “You're sure A-Jue will come out ok, Cosmagus? He was hurt before all this happened. According to what we've been able to discover, he was fighting for a long time out here. If the creatures were as strong as you say, then he...”

The Doctor rose to his feet and cut the Divine Monarch off. “He'll be fine. The treatment being employed will work so long as he still has breath in his body.”

Hua Li swept his eyes to the young physician. “I'm sorry, we haven't met. You are...?”

The Doctor's heart was in chaos. On the one hand he was intensely excited to have witnessed such a miracle as the Queen of the Silkworms, saving a Talent who by all known medical science should be dead. Of course his pride wasn't in such fine spirits.

“You may call me Doctor. I'm also a member of the Avenue.”

“Greetings, then,” the two mercenaries hailed. Knowing the man was a Doctor, and was present for A-Jue also brought them some measure of peace.

A short time passed, then the Wine Master once again raised his hand. The world twisted uncomfortably, shifting until Chu Cheng and Hua Li once more felt solid ground beneath their feet.

“Huh?” Almost immediately Hua Li noticed changes. The stone-like object that was before them when they arrived was cracked, revealing a large fissure. The small ship set not far off when they arrived was also missing.

Chu Cheng, impatient as he was, was gone in a flash and appeared before the stone. It didn't take him long to spy Lan Jue within, naked as the day he was born.

His face was ruddy and flush. His chest rose and fell with even breaths. Golden light still danced on the surface of his skin, the last evidence of his struggled. He looked better than new.

Chapter 151: Aftermath

Hua Li followed Chu Cheng to the strange rock. They both had to see with their own eyes the result of this treatment. Lan Jue did indeed look like he was going to be fine.

The Doctor pushed passed them to his patient, and placed his hands over his body. Almost immediately the familiar virescent glow encompassed them both. After a few moments of concentration, the Doctor's surprised voice arose.

"All his meridians are as they should be, no longer broken or tangled. Blood flow is one point five times normal rate, vital signs are good. Skin elasticity about twice as good as it was... and that's all I can see now. The rest I suppose we'll discover later. It's almost inconceivable, I mean his meridians were a mess. Now it's like nothing ever happened. They weren't kidding when they said -"

"A-hm!" The Wine Master's sudden cough stopped the Doctor from going further.

The Doctor knew his cue, and stepped over to join the other three. "The Jewelry Master is already in much better condition. All he needs now is rest. He'll wake up on his own after a little while."

Hua Li narrowed his eyes, but he did recognize how much better Lan Jue looked. He relaxed visibly with the confirmation there before him. He turned then to the paragon and spoke in deferential tones. "Sir, are you and the Doctor planning to return to Skyfire soon?"

The Wine Master nodded.

"If the Cosmagus would prefer, we could take Poseidon 1."

"I appreciate it, thanks for taking the trouble."

Ten minutes later, the group was safely aboard Poseidon 1 as it rose. The ship dissolved in to a brilliant blue light, streaking off towards the heavens, then was gone.

Their escape was quickly followed by the arrival of dozens more ships.

The destruction of Taihua was monstrous, and the aftermath would require a great deal of manpower and effort to address. First, of course, would need to be a search and rescue operation for the missing. It would be an exhaustive process to finalize the list of the dead – and then, the families had to be told, and compensations made.

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The airship shuddered gently as it began its descent.

“Hm?” Tan Lingyun awoke with a start from deep sleep. Her body protested every movement with aching pain and groaning joints that caused her to moan in discomfort.

Her eyes were hazy, like the area around her was covered in a fog, but with each passing moment her vision cleared.

“Where am I?” She suddenly shot up to a sitting position, assailed by the crippling pain in her muscles. She winced against the discomfort, trying to look in all directions at once.

It was clearly the interior of a ship. Empty. Save for herself, it looked like there wasn’t anyone else around. It wasn’t a large vessel, and judging by the interior it was for civilian use.

She patted her forehead, urging her sluggish mind to recall the details of the last few hours. What stood out most among the haze was a towering blue figure. But there was more. Eyes, stately eyes that glowed gold.

Such a powerful mecha! Was that the thing that saved me?

“You’re up?” The voice that greeted her was somewhat curt.

Tan Lingyun turned in time to see a decidedly disheveled Wang Hongyuan exiting the cockpit.

“You? It was you who saved me?” Tan Lingyun’s surprise was anything but concealed. Her expression was incredulous. Was it even possible that this dance instructor was the one who piloted that magnificent mecha?

“No, not me.” Wang Hongyuan’s voice faltered, and his eyes grew distant as though lost in a painful thought.

“Not you... then who?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “Some blue mecha just deposited you on to the ship. Then it was gone as quick as it’d come.”

Tan Lingyun’s face fell. She struggled to remember any detail of what occurred, but the more she fought the less she remembered. Only that sapphire machine and those golden eyes.

The reason she stayed behind came back to her all of a sudden. “And Professor Lan?”

Wang Hongyuan hesitated. The briefest flash of sadness darkened his features before he spoke. “I don’t know. We got separated.”

Tan Lingyun, the powder keg that she was, immediately burst in to a rage. “Separated? Didn’t you run out there like an idiot specifically to get him and bring him back? He’s just some man, and you’re supposed to be an Adept with power. You’re telling me you couldn’t even protect a single teacher? You’re as garbage as I’ve always said you were!”

Her sudden outburst took him by surprise, but contrary to their earlier spat the dance instructor did not attempt to refute her curses. “You’re right,” he muttered.

“Compared to him, I am garbage. Go, we’ve already arrived on Skyfire and its time to disembark. I take full responsibility for Professor Lan’s disappearance.

Tan Lingyun took a deep calming breath. She spoke again when she regained some measure of composure. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t meant to be directed at you, it’s just with what we saw, if he isn’t here it likely means... I’m just upset. I’m sorry!”

Wang Hongyuan met her apologies with a sad smile. “You aren’t wrong. We’re the lucky ones to get back alive. But I, at least, don’t deserve to be. I am not as courageous as the others who stayed behind to help. After a catastrophe like this, things have become clear.”

Tan Lingyun sorrowfully nodded her head. “Let’s go... there’s still a lot we have to do.”

“This is the Eastern Alliance News Network, bringing you the latest information from around the galaxy. We’ve just begun receiving reports from Taihua, where we hear a terrible attack has occurred. Monstrous beings from outside of our galaxy attacked the tourist destination. Preliminary reports say that as many as thirty percent of the visitors lost their lives in the ensuing chaos. This truly was a terrible tragedy for everyone involved. Thankfully a number of stranded and missing tourists have already been found as rescue operations continue. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims.”

“Satellite video and images from around Taihua were uncovered, revealing a number of heroic individuals who fought the fiends themselves. Undoubtedly their brave deeds saved untold lives. We will continue to look in to the events on Taihua, and the identity of those heroic people. Whoever you are, we salute you.”

“Already we’ve heard of both the North and Western Alliances calling Chief Minister Zhou to offer their condolences. They’ve sworn to cooperate with our own agencies to try and uncover where these beasts came from, and what exactly they want.”

“The Goby Entertainment group has pledged ten transport ships for use in the search and recovery effort, in addition to their state of the art facilities which they’ve graciously opened up for use during this catastrophe. This comes with a donation of one hundred million NED which they hope can help in discovering where the aliens came from, and bring some small measure of peace to the bereaved.”

Jin Yan sat within the electives building, stunned and silent. She stared off in to the distance, with images of Taihua racing through her mind. She still felt like she was locked in that nightmare, unable to free herself from the fear of certain death. Her body was still shaking.

In the whole of the office, there was only her. When they’d returned, it was Wu Junyi’s first order of business to send all the teachers home to

rest. Jin Yan, however, didn't know what to do. After what felt like half a day she stirred herself to move. Her feet led her here.

She'd been kept apprised of the events as they unfolded, and knew that the last of their number had come back, Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun. Professor Lan was nowhere to be found.

Is he really gone? When she'd heard, it was like the world went dark. The ring of the class bell chimed in her mind, with his voice calling over the din: "This is nobility!"

That elegance, his impish grin, that noble countenance. They all lingered in her slowly beating heart.

Gone... missing! What about Jin Tao? Where did he bring my brother? With him gone, what about the boy? What am I going to tell our parents?

She sat in the encroaching darkness, lost.

She was roused when the sound of footsteps came from down the hall. Clunk, clunk, clunk.

Immediately her head shot up, grasping at the unlikely hope that she'd see that thin figure rounding the bend and entering the office. Desperately praying she'd face him again.

But it was not to be.

White shirt, black suit, slick black hair. Wang Hongyuan silently entered the elective's office.

Without a sound, he walked in, making his way towards the far window where Lan Jue had chosen his desk. He stood before the vacant chair for a time, then dropped to his knees and bowed.

"Wang Hongyuan..." Jin Yan slowly rose to her feet.

The dance instructor rose to his feet and turned to face her. His face was pale and drawn. "Professor Jin," he muttered.

Her response came hard and bitter. "Do you really have no hope that Professor Lan will come back alive?"

He stood silently before her, shifting from foot to foot. It was a dozen long seconds before his sunken voice replied. "I can tell you that he was a damn hero. But I'm afraid..."

Jin Yan's eyes were red and swollen. "Whether or not he's a hero isn't important. I'm only interested in whether or not he'll be coming back!"

Wang Hongyuan said nothing further. His own eyes were red from tears. The Etiquette teacher's final words before they parted were still fresh in his memory.

Beep, beep, beep! Jin Yan shook with a start as the communicator on her wrist vibrated. She looked down out of pure habit, but was met with an unfamiliar number.

Still, she answered.

"Hello, who is this?" Jin Yan fought valiantly to get her voice under control, forcing the sadness down.

"Hello Professor Yan. I was hoping you could help me ask for leave. I'm afraid I'll need a few days of rest before I can return to work." The voice that greeted her on the other end of her communicator sounded tired and worn.

She looked at the contraption on her wrist like it was made of snakes. When she did talk, her voice was several octaves louder than she intended.

"Professor Lan?!"

Hearing her cries Wang Hongyuan rushed to her side. He stared at the number with eyes wide as saucers.

"It's me. After helping where I could I took another shuttle back. I'm already back on Skyfire. Please tell Director Wu and the others not to worry over me. I'll be back to work in a few days.

She couldn't help it. The tears she'd been fighting came unbidden to her eyes and rolled down her pretty cheeks. Only these were tears of a different origin. And as her body shook it was not from fear or sadness, but joy and relief.

Wang Hongyuan grabbed her wrist and pulled it towards him. “Lan Jue, it’s really you? You really aren’t dead?”

Lan Jue’s response was a tepid one. “Disappointed?”

Wang Hongyuan scowled at the communicator. “Why didn’t you let us know earlier?!”

“What’s this about,” Lan Jue challenged. He sounded uncertain.

The dance teacher was quiet, a flood of emotion crossing his face before settling on a small smile. “I’m just glad you’re alright!” With that, he cut the connection, then with as much force and ferocity as a thunder strike he grabbed Jin Yan up in a hug.

Jin Yan yelped. Her tears had stopped, but she heard the choked sobs coming from her shoulder.

“He’s alive... alive. Thank whoever’ll listen the bastard made it! Hah! He made it!”

Chapter 152: Lan Jue's Uncertainty

Lan Jue was propped up in one of Poseidon 1's spacious and comfortable lounge chairs. He had come to about an hour earlier, but still felt out of sorts.

Poseidon 1 had already entered Skyfire orbit by this point. It would be perhaps another hour before they were on the ground. He'd used Hua Li's communicator earlier to get in contact with Jin Yan – hers was the only number from the NEU staff he could remember.

Wang Hongyuan, this guy... A smile crept across Lan Jue's face.

He turned his head and looked at the Doctor, sleeping fitfully nearby. He shook his head, deeply impressed.

He had no idea the young physician possessed such talent in healing. At the time he could feel the cold grip of death reaching out for him. He could sense his own body and the damage it had been dealt; the broken bones, the fractured meridians, the injured organs. After the decoction, he certainly should have died. Just the fact he was still breathing was a miracle. But here he was...

The golden tint that had overcome him after taking the potion remained, but it had dimmed considerably. Now, only a closer look would reveal something out of the ordinary. It became more apparent, however, if the skin was palpated.

His various meridians and collaterals were firm and unobstructed, in better condition than they had been for years. The benefit extended all the way to his Core, which was safe and stable in the hollow of his chest. Shadows of golden lightning still hung around it, but there was no danger. He'd been awake only an hour, but he could feel himself improving rapidly. Already he gathered he was about halfway to total recovery. All in all he couldn't be healthier – not a scratch remained from his earlier fight with Michael or his time on Taihua. Even the secondary effects of the Fantascia Genetica decoction were absent.

Could this be because of the Genetica? Could it have remolded him after

he survived the initial rush of power? But that would simply be too amazing to fathom. The Western Alliance have had this technology for an age, but their research never uncovered anything like this. So the more practical answer was that the Doctor somehow brought him back from the very brink of death.

The questions rattled around in Lan Jue's brain. Unfortunately, he couldn't get an answer out of anyone. Chu Cheng and Hua Li claimed the Doctor had completed his treatment before they arrived. The Doctor himself was asleep. The Wine Master would only tell him it was a miracle.

It was quite the damn miracle.

"We're about to encounter atmosphere. Please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts." The electronic voice filled the cabin and shook Lan Jue from his reverie. The smile on his face spread further.

Whatever the causes he was still breathing, and the experience was certainly something. Going through it brought him a strange sense of peace. Perhaps this was part of a new beginning, a fresh start. There was still so much in the universe for him to enjoy. Not to mention, acting the hero felt pretty good. He was starting to understand why his big brother had stayed in the army all these years. He'd gotten a taste for what it was like to be a guardian.

He lifted his left hand as he pondered, and stared at his palm. The slightest hint of a purple stone stuck out, no more than a centimeter. Occasionally bolts of golden lightning would flicker in its depths.

The Phylactery Stone! Already the power gem was becoming a part of him, inexorably tied to his life force, like it's been there all along. The frightening power of the Genetica – the power that catapulted him in to the realm of the Paragons – was safely contained within. If he concentrated, he could feel maddening fury of it.

What he owed the Doctor couldn't be rectified with simple things, not just for saving his life but all the other positive side-effects he'd accrued here. He had just been saved from the brink of death – good things were sure to follow. The stored energies in the phylactery were only secondary,

for there remained the protomorphic abilities he'd gained while a Paragon. Of course he wasn't a real Paragon, not yet, so the powers were weak. But they were there. Whether when employing his Ascension or achieving Paragon status in the future, what he'd lived through would certain prove to be invaluable.

Hhrrumnnn... Poseidon 1 shuddered gently as they struck atmosphere. Half an hour later they were in the Public Hangar, with a private Gobi cars already waiting for them.

"So how are you feeling, A-Jue?" Hua Li rose to his feet and stretched, dispelling the travel fatigue.

Lan Jue smiled. "Can't get any better than where I'm at. Maybe too good, actually. I'd really be curious to know how it is I'm not a cripple."

Hua Li's response was sans his usual flippant demeanor. "Best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. You have no idea, when we couldn't get you on your communicator we were sure you were dead. Luckily the Cosmagus and the Doctor were around to save you. How about the next time you go out to handle business, you keep your suicidal impulses to a minimum?"

Lan Jue lifted his hands in front of his defensively. "Alright, I concede. I'm still in recovery, don't go teaching me any lessons."

Hua Li stuffed his hands in his pockets, and flipped his fop of blue hair dismissively. "Fine, I have to go prepare for the concert anyway. If I miss any more rehearsals, I'm afraid Mo Xiao will bite me. Alright Chu Cheng, this bastard's your responsibility now."

Chu Cheng chortled. "I'd heard from A-Jue before that there was this old coot of a Wine Master on the Avenue who operated out of a Gothic-style winery. I've been wanting to take a look for myself since forever. It's supposed to be full to the rafters with excellent spirits. What kind of drunkards would we be if we didn't raid the place at least once?"

The Wine Master, himself just arrived from a nearby seat, stopped in his tracks to glare at the red-haired young man.

Lan Jue shot Chu Cheng a warning glance, but the airhead didn't notice.

He had to cough a few times before his fellow mercenary got the hint.

The Wine Master clapped a hand on to Chu Cheng's shoulder before taking the lead and exiting the airship. His pleasant voice wafted towards them from over his shoulder. "The Gothic Winery welcomes you."

"Eh..." Chu Cheng may have been an airhead, but that didn't mean he was stupid. He slowly turned his head to stare at Lan Jue, eyes wide.

"Don't tell me the Cosmagus..."

Lan Jue grinned, apparently pleased with his lot. He patted Chu Cheng on the shoulder as well. "I'm not sure if I should call you homie or halfwit. Think about it, if you're planning to store fine wines from the former area, wouldn't interspatial abilities come in rather handy?"

"Ah, I guess you're right."

Hua Li suddenly interjected. "A-Jue, Jin Tao's situation is good. Normal. He's currently in Deep Sleep, triggered from the genetic changes. I have Mika monitoring him. You should go talk to all your ladies, actually. Are they aware of what happened on Taihua?"

This caused Lan Jue to laugh. "Of course not. If they did I'd already be getting an earful."

Chu Cheng's shot him a cool grin. "No? I'm pretty sure they do. I just heard the recent news reports, they're even streaming pictures and video from Taihua satellites. They're even saying stuff about these heroes that were there for the fight. Are you sure they didn't get any footage of Thor? On top of that your communicator's been offline. How do you think they'd react if they couldn't get a hold of you?"

"W-well..." Lan Jue stopped, his face changing to a look a distress as he snatched Hua Li's communicator and dialed in a set of numbers.

"Boss, are you ok?" Mika's voice arose from the other end.

"fine, fine. I'm already back on Skyfire. See you in a little while." He was working hard to keep any fatigue or worry from his voice. He sounded the very spirit of ease.

“The boss is back,” she said to someone next to her.

“Long live the boss!” A second perky female voice answered.

He didn’t expect her voice to change to a threatening growl so quickly, but when she spoke again he could feel the anger. “So you sneak off to Taihua for a vacation, run in to this catastrophe, and then lose your communicator. Do you have any idea how worried we were? We’re already aboard Zeus 1. Any later and we’d already be on our way to Taihua.”

“I’m sorry, forgive me!” Lan Jue chuckles sheepishly. “My communicator was broken in the scuffle. I’m fine, really. Perfect condition. Oh, and then that means you guys are here at the hangar. I am too, on Hua Li’s Poseidon. Let me go out and join you.”

Chu Cheng couldn’t hide his mirth, and chuckled heartily at Lan Jue’s side. “That’s what you get for getting enjoyment from other people’s misfortunes! At least you’re treating those ladies well. By the way, Hua Li was telling me their full on babes. Xiuxiu’s off the table, but you definitely should introduce me to those other three. Mmm mm.”

“Get lost!”

Despite Lan Jue’s desperate hopes, not a single happy face met him when he joined his Amazons. Even Xiuxiu, the sweetest and warmest of the bunch, stared at him with a cool indifference.

“Ugh, A-Li! Look, we just have the one verti-car. Too tight. How about we call another to come take me back.” Lan Jue sounded guilty, a dog with his tail between his legs.

“Boss!” As a single, pissed off unit the girls stamped their feet and glared at him, hands on their hips.

“Forget I said anything.” Lan Jue hastily bade farewell to Hua Li and Chu Cheng before clambering in to his own verti-car.

Whoosh! In a flash they were on their way back to the safety of the Avenue.

Chu Cheng watched him go, then blinked like he was slapped in the

face. “This guy, no humanity! He just left me here!”

“Right?!” Hua Li glowered at the rapidly vanishing verti-car. “Come on, I’ll take you in.”

Chu Cheng answered in lilting tones. “How about you eh? Other than Mo Xiao, you got any hotties following you around? Just a little eye candy, amiright? That guy there’s trying to build a harem, I tell you. Worse, it’s a harem he doesn’t even use. What a waste! He obviously doesn’t realize that waste and corruption are man’s greatest sins.”

“See ya!” Hua Li clapped his hands, then turned on a heel and made to leave.

“H-heh now, A-Li, you can’t just throw me away here! Look, I didn’t say nothin’. Worse comes to worse I suffer a dry spell for a few days, right? Wait up...”

“Get lost!”

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Within the McKelly P12 Verti-Car

The atmosphere in the car was stifling. Mika and Lin Guoguo sat up front, while Lan Jue sat between Xiuxiu and Ke’er.

All four women stared ahead with sour expressions. Not a word was spoken.

Lan Jue wanted to say something, but every time he opened his mouth he couldn’t summon the words. All he could do was shut his eyes and try to nap.

Chapter 153: The East's Sorrow

The high-altitude verti-car steadily made its descent to the southern parking lot behind Skyfire Avenue. The two doors spread open like mechanical wings, and four attractive women exited.

“Stop faking boss, we’re back.” Mika called to Lan Jue, lazily sitting in the back seat with his eyes shut. She still didn’t sound pleased with him.

“Eh... oh, we’re here! I’m so tired, I’m just going to go right in and head to my room. Just so so tired.” Lan Jue pulled himself from the car and groggily stumbled towards the Avenue.

Zeus’ four amazons naturally fell in to formation around him, placing their boss in the center and walking back towards the shop.

Inwardly Lan Jue was fighting a smile. Dismissing the ladies this time would prove to be a daunting task.

The door to the jewelry shop opened, and he once again found himself in that world of sapphire blue. Lan Jue stopped and raised his hands in a show of capitulation. “Alright, ladies. This is all my fault. Whatever you say is how it’ll be, and I’ll accept my punishment without question. Ok?”

Xiuxiu’s eyes were red, and wet from tears. “How could you be like this, boss? Even with your injuries you still sneak out. Then this happens, you’re out there all alone and what are we supposed to do?”

“Don’t cry Xiuxiu, don’t cry.” Lan Jue hurried to comfort her.

Ke’er was next, and stuck out her ruby lips petulantly. “You’re the one talking about punishment. We just want to talk about what happened and be clear.”

“That’s right,” Mika’s strict voice interjected.

Lan Jue looked towards Guoguo to save him from the angry ladies, but was met with her pained expression.

“So what do you want me to do,” he said helplessly.

Ke’er moved to his side, dragging a stool behind her. She forced Lan Jue

to sit. Mika saddled up before him. “Three rules. Agree and we’ll forget all about what happened today, otherwise... otherwise we’re all leaving. After all, if you can’t even consider your own safety, you can’t be expected to take care of us. If that’s the case what are we still doing here? Right ladies?”

“That’s right!” The other three women chimed in.

“What is this a mutiny?!” Lan Jue glared at the four of them in turn before rising to leave. However, before he could get far the four women converged on him. Four sets of sad, pained, angry eyes pinned him in place. Under their unified assault his indignation was useless. He sat back down.

“Alright, fine. Speak your piece,” he grumbled.

Mika continued. “First, we must always be appraised of your whereabouts.”

“Second, no matter where you go, at least one of us must be with you at all times,” Xiuxiu added.

Ke’er was next. “The third we’ll hold in reserve. If something else crops up that needs dealing with, we’ll revisit this rule.”

Lin Guoguo was last. “In conclusion, I hope you understand that your life isn’t your own. What happens to you has an effect on all of us. You absolutely mustn’t ever dump us again to go galavanting. If you want to see us cry, then go right ahead. But that’s when we leave you forever. We’re here for you the same way you’re here for us, so if there really is a problem you have to face we’ll be there to look after you. Like we said when facing the Archangels, we live and die together.”

“That’s right!”

“You heard it.”

“Mmhm.”

It would take far more than any normal man possessed to stand against the pressure these four Amazons were putting on Lan Jue. He almost felt

himself breaking out in a cold sweat. “Ok, you got it. I agree completely, settled?”

Mika towered over him. “Take this seriously!”

Lan Jue wordlessly and vehemently nodded his head. Finally, the slightest hint of a smile spread across her face.

“Long live Zeus and the Amazons!” Ke’er shot her fists in the air, then high-fived Lin Guoguo. Xiuxiu’s teary eyes dried instantly. Mika stood there looking infinitely pleased with herself, hands on her hips. “Remember boss, a real man stands by what he says!”

Lan Jue was helpless, and simply sat looking at the four victorious ladies. But despite his dressing down, in the depths of his heart he was proud and appreciative.

Ah, home. Indeed, this was his home. And these women weren’t his maids or servants, they were more like sisters. With them near, this was home.

Ke’er giggled as she bounced happily to Lan Jue’s side. “You look tired boss, let me give you a back rub.”

Lin Guoguo followed her. She snapped up Lan Jue’s left hand. “I’ll relax your hands.”

Xiuxiu wordlessly moved to his right, getting to work on his arm.

Mika dropped to a knee and shot him a charming smile. “Foot rub?”

Lan Jue’s voice was serious when he addressed them. “I will not be fooled by your sugar-coated bullets!”

One minute later.

The sound of fitful snoring filled the shop.

“The boss really was tired.” Ke’er’s fingers danced from Lan Jue’s shoulders up to his head. She gently kneaded his scalp.

Xiuxiu replied, her voice terse. “Those beasts on Taihua must have been terribly dangerous, and we still don’t know what happened. It’s clear he

doesn't want to talk about it. From what the news is saying, it must have been terrible."

Lin Guoguo sniffed in agitation, though the look she shot Lan Jue was gentle. "He stayed back to help save the others, otherwise how would his abilities have recovered like this. If he wasn't already hurt those monsters wouldn't have stood a chance."

"Not of that matters to me," Mika sad harshly. "He's my boss, I want him to be safe and at ease. If he died, I'd probably bury myself with him." Her hands inadvertently increased their pressure as she massaged his leg.

Lan Jue stirred somewhat. The Stygian Succubus quickly reigned in her anger, and her grip softened.

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A bloodcurdling roar tore through the dense forest.

"This is Gamma Unit. Gamma Unit reporting. We've encountered some sort of orangutan-like monster. It's quick, and very strong. Our laser rifles aren't doing anything. We need some support, send backup right away."

"Wait, look out. Ah! Com-"

A series of pained screams arose. All was dim, chaotic.

A dazzling, clear blue figure appeared then. In the blink of an eye the purplish beast was burnt black as coal. It didn't even have time to scream.

"Ah! What the hell was that?! A mecha! A huge one. We're saved, saved! Hell yeah! These must be the reinforcements."

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"Damn! Look up there, what the hell is that? Watch it, it's coming straight for our ship."

"No good. Look there, that ship's been wrecked. It's coming right for us. Full speed ahead. Full speed!"

“It’s too late!”

Suddenly, a resplendent flash of golden light washed over them. A dazzling sapphire figure thundered by, followed by a monster’s pained cry.

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The maroon mecha moved with terrifying speed. It vanished in a flicker of sanguine color, appearing again a moment later in another spot. The monster it was facing was cut asunder. The machine continued on without any hesitation, like it was duty-bound.

A group of trembling children stood below it, none older than perhaps ten. Another group of adults were no far off, lying in a pool of blood. It looked as though they had died warding the children from something.

The purple monstrosity collapsed to the floor with a thud.

As the mists faded, the dark red mecha became more distinct. It reached out its large mechanical hand and gathered the kids together.

“Mama-!”

“Daddy!!”

Their shrill cries for help hung in the thick air of the forest. Unfortunately, their parents could no longer protect them.

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The images shone on every eye, three-dimension and stark. As the news images flickered from the holographic emitters, the heart of every on-looker was heavy with terror over what they saw.

Time and again the red and blue mecha appeared before them, fighting off beasts and protecting tourists. The most frequently spied was the sapphire mecha, but it was too fast for the satellite images to get a clear picture. Still it’s flashing bolts of lightning were unmistakable, and with each burst of energy another monster was slain, and another group saved from certain death.

The news also showed another, a young woman covered in green light, who battled the creatures with nothing but a machete.

And then the golden man, with blades of light in his hands that ended whatever beast crossed his path.

Most striking, however, was the last few images. They revealed an enormous colossus, far larger than all the others. It writhes in pain as a quiet silver light slowly carved it in to pieces.

Viewers stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed as the images flashed past them. They fought to watch through misty eyes and choking sobs.

The videos and images continued for another half an hour before they finally stopped. They were replaced with the pretty face of a female news anchor.

“What you’re witnessing is an unprecedented disaster, one that invariably fills each of us with a deep sadness. However, this great tragedy has also shown us the might of the human spirit. Several great heroes arose when they were needed. They charged in to the enemy ranks, fearless despite the odds against them. They pressed on to save the lives of their fellow man. This includes our brave fighting men and women of Taihua who are all worthy of our respect and admiration. Unfortunately, our recent reports reveal that seventy percent of the soldiers garrisoned on Taihua have been lost. Seventy percent of our righteous protectors fallen, having given their lives for our brothers and sisters of the Eastern Alliance, and in defense of our sovereign territory.”

“Other than those brave soldiers, there were more heroes who chose to remain behind and fight against the invaders, who brought great power to bear against our enemies. In light of this information, our station is launching an effort to uncover the identity of these courageous individuals. As we’ve seen, not all of these great saviors managed to escape Taihua with their lives, but it is our duty to find the ones that did and thank them for their service. At the very least, they should be showered with flowers and applause. I’m sure those that were saved by their actions would like to personally give their thanks. To our heroes, your actions bring you glory that rings through all of the three alliances!”

[tl: [1] = As a foreigner, this news report might sound a little strange. Very flowery and dramatic. I'd thought about 'drying out' the language a little to make it seem more in line with what we might expect a news report about a national tragedy to be, but in reality channels in china like CCTV and Xinhua – mouthpieces of the government – deliver reports just like this.]

Her voice rose in power and emotion as she spoke, with the images of the mechas and soldiers flashing continuously on the large screen behind her.

“As we near the end of this broadcast, I'd like to say – I'm still single. If any of you valiant young men are hearing this, I'd like to take you out for a drink.” As she spoke, she rose to her feet to point directly at the streak of blue light that soared passed the screen behind her!

Chapter 154: Ninth Level Seventh Rank!

Lan Jue sat cross-legged upon the bed, his chest rising and falling with each breath as he meditated. He focused his power through him, following it as it filled every corner of his body. He watched carefully for signs of injury.

In truth this was his third check, and so far he was surprised to find not a hint of trouble. No wounds, no hidden dangers.

It was like he was reborn! Without any training or cultivation, he was back to peak condition with only a few hours' rest. What's more, he felt like he may have even gotten stronger.

A breakthrough? Once an Adept got to ninth level, each subsequent improvement came with a considerable leap in power.

He felt as though even his Discipline was gentler, that was the greatest indication. Thunderbolt and lightning were well known as among the more destructive and explosive Disciplines. However, as the Adept's power grew he was able to distill the Discipline in to liquid form. This would stabilize it without sacrificing any power. This was, in truth, the goal he'd been chasing for ages.

Making the jump from ninth level six rank to ninth level seventh rank was like traversing a glorious threshold. It was important not just due to the effect it had on an Adept on his road to perfection. It was also the bane of many a Talent with dreams of being a Paragon.

Lan Jue was indeed happy with the discovery, but he had his doubts about the whole thing.

The phylactery stone embedded in his hand was an s-rank gem, and for good reason. Still it's benefits did not lie in improving or enhancing an Adept's powers. So if not the gem, then the Doctor. The young man brought him back from the brink of death, and improved his overall ability. But that would be incredible, miraculous in fact. Then could this mean that the jump in power came from him alone? No – no, it couldn't be that simple. No matter how he tried there were no more answers

forthcoming from either the Wine Master or the Doctor.

It also wasn't wise or proper to interrogate them further. The Wine Master alone must have expended an obscene number of power gems to come to his rescue. That was the only way he'd able to stride from one planet to another like he claimed. Hell, the only time he'd ever heard of anything like that being performed before was in old stories!

Regardless of the how, the fact of the matter was he was stronger. And now, that meant things could stabilize. Even better, his physical condition was better than ever. Before, where his meridians glowed with only a dull gold light, now they shone brilliantly. This was a change Lan Jue only expected at around ninth level ninth rank. His bones and organs weren't spared the metamorphosis either. He felt like he'd not only survived, but came out like a jackpot winner.

Three days later.

Knock knock knock! The gentle sounds of someone rapping on the door filled the room.

The golden aura around Lan Jue slowly dissipated. He stood and pulled open the door.

Xiuxiu's pretty face greeted him. When she saw him in his pajamas, her face adopted a sense of concern. "Boss, are you alright?"

He answered with a smile. "Take it easy, I'm fine. In fact, I'm better than fine."

The uncertainty melted from her face, replaced with a sweet smile. "That's good. The Wine Master asked that I invite you to visit him."

Lan Jue nodded. "Alright, I'll go meet him."

"And we got your communicator repaired," she continued, handing it to him.

Lan Jue snapped it to his wrist and beamed her a smile. "Xiuxiu, ever so

thoughtful.”

His eyes glanced down to the screen, where he discovered no small number of messages; Chu Cheng, Hua Li, Wu Junyi, Jin Yan and others.

Chu Cheng’s message was something about helping Hua Li prepare for his concert – though God only knew what that waste of space was doing to ‘help.’ Wu Junyi was asking over his health, imploring he take a few more days of rest and reorganization before returning to class.

Hua Li’s message contained specific information concerning the concert. Three days from now, or so the message assured.

“Let me go change,” Lan Jue said after reading through them.

“Sure. Uh, and boss... maybe by the way take a shower,” Xiuxiu replied softly.

“Eh...? Do I have a scent?”

Did he ever. In fact, he hadn’t washed himself since getting back from Taihua. He’d been focusing primarily on getting better.

Half an hour later.

The familiar chime of Zeus’ Jewelry Store rang as a refreshed and put-together Lan Jue exited the store. He wore a blue shirt and black pants, and walked down the avenue with an agile gait. The fresh air was revitalizing. He stopped long enough to take a deep, long breath so that it filled every part of him before making his way towards the Gothic Winery.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. He was greeted by Eva, who smiled welcomingly. “Ah, we’ve been expecting you, Jewelry Master. The Wine Master is in the tasting room waiting for you.”

“Alright.” He nodded, then made his way inside.

Today, the Wine Master was clad in a brown formal suit. He sat quietly at the head of the tasting room’s giant table. A bottle of red wine waited in

front of him.

Lan Jue walked to his side without any pomp or ceremony, pulled out a chair, and took a seat. He glowered disappointedly at his host. “Just one bottle?”

The old man shot him a disapproving glance. “And when do you plan on delivering that Conti you owe me?”

Lan Jue blinked. “Owe you? You were being serious?”

“What do you think,” came the Paragon’s answer.

The younger man chortled sheepishly, revealing a row of pearly white teeth. “I guess I owe so much it’s just not registering.”

The Wine Master reacted with a smile of his own. “No rush. In fact, you may just have an opportunity to pay it all back. We’ll talk about it.”

“What is it?”

“Your punishment, of course,” the Wine Master replied.

“Punishment?” Lan Jue was genuinely taken by surprise. “Why am I being punished?”

The Wine Master glowered through his explanation. “Because your antics nearly cost Skyfire Avenue dearly. Do you think something like that warrants punishment? The cost in powergems that were consumed for me to teleport to another planet you can owe me, we’ll call it part of the job, but your carelessness almost led to the death of a Skyfire Councilman. That must be answered for.”

Lan Jue smirked. “Somehow I feel like I’m going to end up owing you something else.”

“You think this is something disregarded to easily,” the Wine Master asked. “Ever since you decided to become a Councilman, you became part of a team. Sometimes being a team member means receiving, but it also means you’re available to back the others up when they need it. Otherwise what’s the point is Skyfire Avenue? Our organization is loosely established, yes, but we help and protect every Adept under our collective

wing. As for this recent matter, if you'd have informed us right away of the situation on Skyfire I'd have made my way there at once. You wouldn't have needed to take that decoction, and all of this trouble could have been avoided. And even more lives could have been saved."

Lan Jue listened in silence, his face becoming serious as the gravity of his decision became clear.

The Wine Master went on. "In the future I hope you remember your role. If there is a problem you can't handle on your own, the first thing you should do is call on the Avenue. We'll do all we can to help."

Lan Jue's serious countenance broke in to an appreciative grin. "I hadn't expected someone to almost literally move space and time to deal with this. I honestly didn't expect the Avenue to react any faster than the East's reinforcements. I thought the only option was for me to face it on my own. Still you're right, and in the future I'll certainly let the Avenue know first thing, if there's a problem I can't handle. I'll accept any punishment you deem necessary."

The Wine Master nodded approvingly. "In this aspect at least, you're a reputable man. Too impulsive on occasion, but your ability to learn and self-direction are a step above our average member. It's important that we recognize our own failings, and work to correct them. Once our little discussion is finished, we'll begin by revoking your status as a Councilman. You'll be put on suspension. In addition, when the Avenue comes calling for assistance you must offer it unconditionally. If and when that happens, you'll regain your Council seat upon completion of the task."

"Very well," Lan Jue agreed without hesitation. "By the way, Wine Master, how is the Doctor doing? Unfortunately, I don't have any s-ranked gems on hand to offer in payment. It may be a little while."

"Not something you need to worry about just now," the Wine Master replied. "The Avenue will see to compensating him for his time and effort. It was necessary for what we needed, and so the Avenue will assume responsibility for the cost in your place. If you still feel the need to repay

him, you can when you have a power gem of suitable quality to offer. Or perhaps you can give him a cut of your store's revenue."

Lan Jue thought about it for a moment. "Allow me to handle this myself. The store is being taken care of largely by Mika and the other girls, and they hold sixty percent of the stock. I can't simply make a decision without their input. Nor can I expect them to pay my debts."

"Up to you," the Wine Master answered. "There are still a few more things we need to discuss which concern you. For instance, the imminent arrival of the Dark Tower and Pontiff's Castle's representatives. Our most recent reports suggest the Pontiff and Satan might come themselves."

"What?" Lan Jue's eyes widened at the information, slivers of lightning arcing behind his lids. He hadn't forgotten the sins of the Pontiff and his people. After all, things on Taihua would have been very different if he hadn't had been injured in his battle with Michael.

Now they were coming to his home turf. It was time they had a serious discussion.

The Wine Master continued. "The Keeper went himself to call on the Pontiff about what happened. Used it to coerce the Castle's Paragon. The Pontiff came to us afterwards about diffusing the conflict. Is this something you can do?"

Lan Jue's brows furrowed at the thought, clearly pondering the matter. If it wasn't for the crisis he'd encountered on Taihua, he'd absolutely refuse outright. Lan Jue wasn't one to hold a grudge, but this was different. They had knowingly laid a trap for one of his family, planned to kill her. If he didn't seek revenge for something like that, he couldn't call himself Zeus.

But after everything that happened – after the Doctor and Wine Master spent so much to save him – his thinking changed. Skyfire Avenue's needs were more important to him now. He had to think of things from a different point of view, now. What would benefit the Avenue most?

What's more, with the events of Taihua behind him it was time to look at all things differently. At the end of the day, the Adepts of the Castle and Tower were all people. There were differences that needed handling,

certainly, but in the face of this danger to all of humanity it was a small thing.

“I am willing to do this for the Avenue, and defer to the Council’s decision.” Lan Jue nodded firmly, fixing the Wine Master with his gaze.

Chapter 155: The Benefit Concert

The Wine Master broke in to laughter. He lifted his right hand and, with a small motion, a shimmering crystal glass appeared on the table before Lan Jue. It looked handmade, of sophisticated and rare craftsmanship.

The Wine Master lifted the bottle set before him. He tipped it over the glass until two fingers of wine sloshed within.

Lan Jue watched the display, his eyes bright. "So is this my reward for capitulating?"

"That's right."

Lan Jue lifted the glass and swirled its contents, watching as the rich red liquid swung around in a clockwise direction. He dropped his hand and took a wiff. "Very fine. I quite like the Leoville Las Cases. Certainly worthy of being called the best of the Bordeaux Super Seconds."

"What year, do you recon," the Wine Master tested quietly.

Lan Jue took a tentative sip, sloshing the fluid around his mouth. The pungent wine rolled around, covering the sides and tip of his tongue, down to the base before slipping down his throat.

Lan Jue hesitated, and frowned. "The Leoville is among the more balanced Bordeaux wines across the years. They're all quite good, so it comes down to which ones are exquisite, and which ones aren't quite as wonderful. But this one seems... boring, bland. Thin aftertaste. I can't place a specific year, but this must absolutely have been produced in the seventies of the former era. The seventies were the worst years for Bordeaux. Only the 1970 and 1975 bottles were acceptable. This wine isn't one of those. So one of the other eight years, then. You really are stingy! This is definitely among the lowest quality Leoville there are. Even compared to a village wine."

The Wine Master clapped his hands in approval. "Good. Your analysis was very good. But you're here drinking my wine, so what is there to loathe? This particular bottle is from 1972. It hadn't been stored well, and

as such is on the verge of going bad. I figured if we didn't drink it now, we never would. Older wines have a specific taste all their own, you can take larger mouthfuls."

Lan Jue smiled. "Drinking is certainly better than not drinking. So other than this business with the West's Paragons, where are we on your search for the product of the Three Masters?"

"Wait a few days after the Castle's visit. I'm still gathering information about it. We're waiting for the Clairvoyant to come up with something as well. There likely will be some trouble in whole matter, but success will mean quite the benefit. I really do hope the quality and skill of these masters will have been retained after all these years."

Lan Jue nodded. "I have my doubts, truth be told. They're not masters, but the product of. As for us what problem could we encounter? They're wine makers, aren't they? Not powerful Adepts."

"We've never met them, who's to say what they're like? In the end I trust the Clairvoyant's visions. Like recently with you, his visions claimed the situation would be more threatening than dangerous. But he knows the state of things, and how they can change. A person's destiny can change as time marches inexorably forward. In the end all we can do is face it with energy and positivity."

The Wine Master paused then, and snorted gently. "There isn't very much left in the realm of 'curious' that holds my attention any longer. However this, looking for the Masters and their progeny, has always been a dream of mine. Whenever I think about it, think about chasing after this dream, I get more excited than I've felt for a long time. And the closer we get, the more it seems the masters might even still be with us."

"What?" Lan Jue shot to his feet, nearly overturning the crystal glass in front of him.

"That's impossible. Nearly all of the Three Masters were born in the twentieth century of the Former Era. The nineteen thirties, more or less. It's been over two hundred years, almost three. Our genetic technology now is ages ahead of where they were, and even now a person only lives to

about a hundred and fifty. How could there possibly still be a Master among us?”

The Wine Master shrugged. “At the moment it’s a guess, but that doesn’t mean it’s an impossibility. Let me ask, how long does a Paragon live?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “I should ask you. I haven’t reached that level. How would I know?”

“In reality it’s different for each Paragon, in accordance with their own situations,” the Wine Master said, in answer to his own question. “But I can tell you that if a Paragon truly cherished their life, they could employ their own protomorphic powers to delay the problems that come with old age. It’s not impossible.”

Lan Jue looked at him with a curious glint in his eye. “So you’re saying if these masters were Paragons, then...”

“We can’t ignore the possibility. However, this is all still in the realm of conjecture. More information is needed to uncover the truth. At least it’s got your attention, no?”

Lan Jue chortled. “I was a mercenary. A spirit of adventure comes with the territory. I almost can’t wait to get started.”

The Wine Master nodded. “If everything from here on out goes smoothly, we could embark in a month and a half. As for this matter with you and the West’s Adepts, don’t worry. The Avenue will make sure you aren’t given the short end of the proverbial stick. If they’re truly interested in burying the hatchet, they’ll need to show sufficient sincerity.”

Lan Jue sniffed a laugh, draining his glass in one gulp. “Then I’ll leave the issue to you. Let me have some more wine – two fingers only equates to a few mouthfuls.”

The Wine Master’s face betrayed a hint of disgruntled resignation. “I don’t know why I never make no persona non grata here like I always threaten.”

Beep beep beep! Lan Jue’s communicator cut the conversation short.

A message.

Come for dinner tonight. Short and simple, but it brought a smile to Lan Jue's face.

The Win Master's voice intruded. "The Gourmet?"

Lan Jue looked up at him. "How'd you know?"

The old man laughed. "Of course because he invited me as well. There's a few hours yet before dark, let's finish this glass and you can head back to your store." As he spoke he poured once again in to Lan Jue's glass, though only a single finger this time.

Lan Jue types in a response while the Wine Master spoke.

Would it be alright if I invite two others?

Certainly.

Lan Jue drained his glass with a sigh. "Older alcohol has a distinct bitterness. It's a shame the 1970's Bordeaux were such bad years."

The Wine Master glowered at him. "Right, off you go."

Lan Jue chortled, set his glass down and made his exit.

Lan Jue paused as he exited the Gothic Winery and pondered how he should spend the next hours. Eventually he sauntered from his shop pushing the old antique bicycle given to him by the Keeper. He hadn't been to the school in days, he thought, it might be worth a trip over.

Drinking the Wine Master's Leoville had awakened the glutton in him, though it had given him an idea as to what to teach next time. Alcohol was also a fine item! Wine culture was deep and complicated, be it Western reds, Eastern whites or Scottish whiskey, even brandy. He liked them all, and had a working knowledge of each. It was time, he supposed, to teach the kids what he knew.

When Lan Jue arrived at the school he was taken aback. It looked like an entirely different place. The first thing he spotted from a fair instance away; three-meter tall banners had been plastered to the sides of the main gate. The figure on them was one he knew well.

As he closed in he spied two platforms that had been constructed by the gates. Poseidon's Sounds of Nature Benefit Performance could clearly be seen written on banners nearby.

A benefit concert? Lan Jue snorted a laugh as the words came in to view. Mo Xiao certainly had an uncanny knack for advertising, he thought. It had started like any other performance, but had now become a show to benefit the victims of Taihua's crisis. Now championing such a righteous cause, it certainly made the concert seem more special. Bumped up their profile quite a bit. It was certainly a wonderful thing for Gobi to open up their wallets, but the benefit for Gobi Entertainment was nothing to scoff at. It was supremely good publicity. It was no surprise the enterprise had been seeing growth by leaps and bounds since Mo Xiao took over.

With his mind on Mo Xiao, his thoughts went back to the strange expression Hua Li had on his face, that day when they had their heart to heart. Lan Jue honestly couldn't fathom why Hua Li didn't go for it with Mo Xiao. She was gorgeous, and talented. The only thing he could think of was Hua Li must be intimidated by her aggressiveness.

Though if he were being honest, Lan Jue figured he'd react much the same in a similar situation. Too strong a woman would make a man feel suppressed. Hua Li was a guy with a great deal of ability, and his personality reflected that.

Hera was still the best! Her gentle, beautiful face floated up in his memory. Visions of that white world flitted behind his eyes, and her moving voice echoed in his ears.

Things would have been so different had she lived. I'd be with her forever. We'd be right here at the base of the stage watching Hua Li perform. Then we'd eat a fine meal at the Gourmet's before finishing with an exquisite bottle of wine at the Wine Master's.

Poseidon's Sounds of Nature was everywhere, and its influence on the school was even more apparent as he pushed his bicycle inside.

Scores of posters canvased the school's interior. Platforms had been set up intermittently, housing advertisements and publicity broadcasts. There

were even pamphlets specially printed for the occasion and souvenir kiosks. He couldn't fathom how Gobi Entertainment got the university to acquiesce to all of this. They'd come in and absolutely taken over.

Lan Jue lifted his head and peered at the banners flapping in the breeze. Hua Li looked down at him, standing casually in a black suit. Those uncanny features were turned in to an easy, captivating smile that seemed full of sunshine. Even though it was just a banner, those large blue eyes seemed to glitter, making hearts flutter. Passers-by couldn't help but stop and stare on their way to classes.

"This guy!" Lan Jue shook his head, unable to completely hide his criticism.

He tapped Hua Li's number in to his communicator.

"A-Jue, what's up?" Hua Li's tired voice answered on the other end.

"Let's have dinner tonight. The Gourmet's invited us. Where's A-Cheng?"

Chapter 156: To Go, or Not to Go?

“Got something delicious cooking? Any cute girls?” Chu Cheng’s voice was clearly heard on the other end.

Lan Jue was nearly speechless. “How about you don’t come, on second thought. We’re looking for guests with some moral integrity.”

Chu Cheng snickered at the insult. “Hey, I have moral integrity in spades. If there aren’t any pretty women, I can live with it. Oh, speaking of, damn dude your school’s got no shortage of hotties eh? I saw a picture of that one that looks like Hera. Like twins bro! But look, if it’s true you don’t have any interest in her perhaps you’ll let me give it a shot, yeah?”

“Chu Cheng!” Lan Jue’s voice became a growl, heavy with the promise of violence.

“Hah, I’m messin’ with ya bro.” Chu Cheng’s stupid chortling echoed through the communicator. After a minute he regained his composure. “But seriously, A-Jue, she’s like exactly the same. Well, not as nice, but you – “

Lan Jue hung up.

ζ

Hua Li, dressed in a fine formal suit, kicked at the man at his side. “You got nothing better to do, idiot? Lan Jue’s been all broken up about Hera for so long, what the hell are you doing bringing it all back up?”

Chu Cheng stood lazily to one side, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. “Running away won’t solve some things,” he said quietly. “In fact I’m surprised you don’t see this as a good opportunity. Suddenly we have this woman here who looks strikingly like our lost Hera. Who’s to say she isn’t the reason for Lan Jue’s resurgence?”

Hua Li narrowed his eyes, a curious light in his dazzling blue eyes. “Let’s hope that’s the case.”

ζ

After hanging up, Lan Jue's mind couldn't help but turn to that alluring figure. A strange sense of agitation filled him.

She's not Hera! She's not Hera! She's NOT HERA!"

The mantra did seem to bring him a sense of ease.

But what has she been up to these last few days?

Almost without thought, his consciousness reached out through the Soulcaller gem around his neck.

"I'm back." He projected his thoughts out towards her.

No response.

Hm? Apprehension shuddered through him. The benefit of the gem was that the user's thoughts were instantly transferred to the receiver. She should be able to know right away, unless she took it off.

"I'm back." He tried once more.

"Got it." This time there was a reply. Her response was calm, as though nothing out of turn had occurred.

"I'm ready to continue with the bodyguard duties. Tomorrow. Want me to bring you to school?"

"Fine." The reply was short, to the point.

Lan Jue couldn't pinpoint why exactly, but something didn't feel right. His consciousness reached out again. "Where are you?"

"Home. I haven't been feeling well, I took a few days off."

"Not feeling well? What's the matter?"

Zhou Qianlin was silent for a time. After what felt like half the night she answered. "Since when have you been so concerned with everything I do?"

Lan Jue blinked. She was right, since when did he start having such concern for her?

"Are you going to begin classes tomorrow?" He changed the subject.

"Yup."

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

With their little chat concluded, Lan Jue lapsed in to thought. Uncomfortable? Home sick? She was a very tough girl. What kind of sickness would put her out like this for so long?

His mind tumbled over the issue as he pushed his bike towards the exit.

“Professor Lan?” A surprised voice stopped him.

He lifted his head and spied golden-haired Tang Mi trotting towards him.

He nodded in greeting. “Hello, Tang Mi.”

She looked him over a few times. “It’s great you’re back, Professor. You probably aren’t aware, but now there are a whole slew of students who want to join your class. They’re saying you teach a whole bunch of things they can’t learn anywhere else. Didn’t you also go with the others to Taihua? So long as you got back safe that’s great. It must have been so scary with those monsters over there.

“I was lucky,” Lan Jue said. “I didn’t run in to any of the monsters. If I had, I probably wouldn’t be standing here talking to you.”

Tang Mi patted her plump chest. “Then we’re all in luck!”

It was Lan Jue’s turn to question her. “Tang Mi, what about that black haired girl I always see you with. I haven’t seen you two together for a while.”

Tang Mi looked surprised, then a little hurt. “All you men are always fauning over Qianlin. She’s home sick.”

Lan Jue chuckled at her distemper. “Just a teacher’s concern for his students is all. Is it serious?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “I went to visit her. Probably just a cold. She feels weak, so a few days rest at home and she’ll be fine.”

Lan Jue felt the inexplicable tightness in his chest ease somewhat.

“Alright, I won’t bother you then. Class will begin again in a few days.”

Tang Mi called back. “Professor, do you guys really just like those gentle sorts of women?”

Lan Jue answered with a serious expression. “This is a school, young lady. Your task should be to study well, not busying your head with this sort of thinking. I hear you’re already an Emperor-Class mecha pilot, which is an amazing feat for your age. Such being the case, you should focus on studiously exploiting your natural talent. You don’t want to squander this chance, during this special time in your life.” [1]

[tl: [1] = In China, while it isn’t ‘illegal’ for children in university/high school to date, it is highly frowned upon. Students are expected to focus entirely on their studies. Only after they’ve graduated are they expected to find a spouse. Of course they are then expected to already have a car, a house, and an excellent paying job (for men).]

The young lady replied by sticking out her tongue. “Don’t be like that, Professor Lan! We students all find you fun and interesting, you shouldn’t act so much like Director Wu.”

Lan Jue’s expression suddenly changed. “Director Wu is here.”

Tang Mi covered her mouth as she giggled. “That’s right. Teasing sometimes is good fun. But you really are acting like him.”

“Acting like who?” A stately, deep voice boomed from behind Tang Mi.

The young pilot’s face suddenly went stiff. “Ah! W-well Professor, I have things to do. Time for training!” She ran off without looking back.

Director Wu watched Tang Mi flee with a shake of his head. “This girl. So fidgety. She needs to adopt a calmer character, then she’d really be making progress. She actually has more talent even than her brother. The two of them are the pride of our school.”

Lan Jue nodded his head in agreement. “I’m ready to begin classes whenever you like, Director Wu.”

Wu Junyi sauntered to Lan Jue’s side. “As long as you’re feeling well, all’s

fine. This last trip got us all frightened, sad. For that I'm deeply sorry. We'll be having another activity at a later date to make it up to the faculty."

Another activity? Lan Jue had to physically restrain himself from flinching. "That's fine, really," he hastily assured. "What happened out there was a tragedy, no one could have seen that coming."

Giving his farewells to Director Wu, Lan Jue then made his way towards the electives offices. However, the two he'd hoped to meet weren't there.

Wang Hongyuan's status as an Emperor-Class mecha pilot had not been revealed. He was off teaching class as though nothing had changed. Jin Yan was also in class.

Lan Jue busied himself with arranging his desk, and organizing his teaching materials. He aimed to wait until they arrived so he could say hello. However, he fell to busy work to combat the unsettling sensation that had grown within him.

Time passed, and though he can't remember leaving the school, he found himself standing at the foot of Skyfire Mountain when his thoughts abated.

She's just sick?

Should I go in and check up on her?

Is that really the right move?

I wouldn't want people to misunderstand.

Just for a quick minute.

A figured appeared at the peak of the mountain, on the edge of the woods surrounding the nearby villa. For Lan Jue, the various security protocols in place were there in name only.

This was the East's equivalent to the White House, and was suitably large for its status. Its security was tighter than normal, more than likely due to the wedding incident.

Lan Jue stood about five hundred meters from the villa. Miniscule bolts

of lightning raced across his eyes as he spied the dim, partially visible glint of infrared beams. It was the first, outward-most defense system of the house.

“How many romantic love stories would be denied if all women’s houses were like this,” Lan Jue muttered. He chuckled at the situation, then was on the move.

Flickering electric blue light arose, with Lan Jue hidden in its midst. He dropped to a squat position, and stuck his arm down in to the dirt. Suddenly, soundlessly, he vanished.

Anywhere lightning could go, so could he. He was a creature of thunder and lightning. This power to enter and escape at will was known by a specific name, Fulmenating.

The hand he’d stuffed in to the ground had grasped a buried cable. With that the whole of the mansion’s metal structure and electrical network were at Lan Jue’s mercy.

Everything became an extension of himself. He saw all.

He spied Zhou Qianlin lying in bed, demurely covered in a pair of traditional white pajamas. She was covered to the waste in a comforter with her hair splayed out around her. She held a book loosely in her grip, and stirred on occasion.

Her face was somewhat pale, and her eyes weren’t as bright as they once were. She turned a few more pages then, as though tired, shut her eyes and put the book to one side.

Flashing electric light spat from a socket in the corner, its sparks and embers congealing in to a humanoid form.

She looked at peace, resting quietly atop the bed, pure as a lily. She looked so weak he couldn’t help but feel pity.

He spied the Soulcaller gem, still attached to her neck. Lan Jue gently pulled the blanket up until it covered her. He reached out a finger and placed it against her jugular, searching for a pulse.

A moment later a curious look overtook his features, speculation, which caused him to shake his head. He moved around until he arrived at the other side of the bed and climbed on. He gently placed the palm of his hand against her back.

A moment later he let out a long, quiet breath. He turned over, and climbed off the bed. He vanished in to the nearby outlet as quickly as he'd arrived.

A minute after his departure, Zhou Qianlin's long eyelashes began to flutter. She slowly opened her eyes to the world around her. He reached a hand out from beneath the comforter to touch her neck. The corner of her lips turned up in a small smile.

Chapter 157: Discipline Awakening?

A flash of electricity, and Lan Jue's hazy form appeared once again at the edge of the mountain forest. His face bore a peculiar expression.

"Discipline Awakening? Her 'illness' is from her Discipline blooming? And how is it her Discipline feels so much like Hera's did in the beginning? Hera never told me what her Discipline was either, but these energy fluctuations can't lie. They're weaker than Hera's was, though, like it has just Awakened. What's going on?"

His confusion gave way to joy, however, since in the end her problems weren't serious. On the contrary, a person's Discipline awakening was a grand occasion.

It had been three years since he'd lost Hera, but he remembered everything about her as though it just happened. In the beginning, like him, she was a talented mecha pilot. However, she was different from all of the higher level pilots, too. Her Talent didn't appear to have any specific combat proficiency. It just made her body better. Her responsiveness, flexibility, agility and physical strength all were beyond the levels of an average human. That was how she managed to reach the heights of mecha piloting that she had. By virtue of that strange Discipline, her hand speed had been even faster than his.

He'd asked her more than once about it, her Discipline. With such high energy output, he said, why is it her Discipline was never used in combat? It would certainly make her a sight more powerful. She said nothing more than that her Discipline didn't fuse well with mechas. The result was she was never able to break in to the God-class of pilots, and remained an Emperor.

Every time he asked she was secretive, and would only tell him that there would come a day when he would find out what her Discipline was. But she never expected that day...

To feel that power again brought the memories flooding back, so similar to Hera's own. The difference in power was inescapable, but so too was

that familiar feeling.

She was already so similar to her, and then now at his age to have her Discipline awaken, a discipline so similar to Hera's... inconceivable couldn't describe it. Lan Jue knew nothing, not even if she would be able to cultivate her Talent to be stronger. What in the world was this?

With these questions still roiling unanswered in his mind, Lan Jue made his exit from the mountain top. He swung up on to the seat of his bike and began rolling down the path.

By the time he got back to the jewelry store, Hua Li and Chu Cheng were already waiting.

Today's disguise for Hua Li was a hat, and thick black-rimmed glasses. It wasn't a major effort to hide his identity, but then there were never very many people on the Avenue. There wasn't much of a need for his snowman suit.

Chu Cheng was seated on the counter, discussing something with Ke'er in quiet tones. Something unsavory, judging by the small grin on his face.

Ding ding. The door announced Lan Jue's arrival.

"Boss, you're back," Ke'er greeted without hesitation.

Lan Jue nodded in greeting. Chu Cheng's smile was gone, and he stared at the ceiling in the very picture of false innocence.

His friend's very poor cover-up caused him to laugh. "Alright, alright. No need to pretend. We all know what sort of man you are."

Chu Cheng chuckled. "Yeah? And what sort of man am I?"

"A bastard," Lan Jue said without missing a beat. "Xiuxiu, Ke'er. You ladies give this scoundrel a wide berth, you hear me? He's no good for any of us."

Xiuxiu covered her mouth sweetly as she laughed, while Ke'er shot her recent conversation companion a glance. "Well he did just offer to take me out for a meal and a movie, boss. You think he harbors evil intentions?"

“Ah-heh, hm!” Ch Cheng was suddenly overcome by a fit of coughs. It did little to dispel the awkward situation. “Well. I heard you were taking us out there, bro. Hua Li was telling me there’s this Gourmet on the Avenue that makes some delicious grub.”

Lan Jue made his way over to the small crowd and took the glass of water offered by Xiuxiu. He took a sip before answering. “No idea what he’s making, though. We have the time, so how about we head underground. I can see how my two baby apprentices are doing.”

“Off we go then.” Hua Li arose and stretched. He looked tired.

“What’s got you in such a sore mood, A-Li? You’ve got that huge concert coming up,” Lan Jue asked.

Hua Li’s pretty face revealed a hint of lamentation. “Mo Xiao, as always! She’s paying me back for disappearing like I did. She’s got me training twice as hard as I would for any normal concert. I’m sleeping only a few hours a night! You guys have no concept of her cruelty. What’s worse is this righteous kick she’s on, all about how this is a benefit concert and we need the donations for the search and rescue operations. All of this and I have no means of rebellion, she’s got it all locked down tight. Poor me! A-Jue, let’s just elope and get outta here.”

Lan Jue chuckled at his pitiful companion. “Let’s do it. But first you’ll have to find a habitable planet Gobi Entertainment hasn’t got it’s claws in yet.”

“Ah...” Hua Li glowered helplessly at the floor. “God damn I wish I wasn’t doing this stupid concert.”

“Shut your face!”

“Cut it out.”

Both Chu Cheng and Lan Jue spoke together, Lan Jue going so far as to clap a hand over Hua Li’s mouth.

“Don’t you realize what kind of chaos it’d cause if someone heard you say that? The economic ramifications?” Chu Cheng had changed suddenly, from his normally distant and lackadaisical persona to someone

a sight frostier.

Hua Li slapped away Lan Jue's hand. "Fine! Go check on your students. That fatty's progress has been pretty good, he's got some serious potential. The other one's still asleep.

Lan Jue turned his attention to Xiuxiu and Ke'er. "You two come along as well. We'll close the topside store for a little bit."

"Yes boss," Xiuxiu said, moving towards the door and locking it tight. It wasn't as though it mattered much, really – the surface store rarely saw any visitors.

The five of them took the shop's elevator to its Underground equivalent.

"Ah boss, you're here." Mika greeted them as the doors opened. Today she was dressed in a black suit and skirt combo, with her fiery red hair sitting atop her head in a bun.

The second he saw her, Chu Cheng's eyes adopted a hungry light. Wordlessly he shot a glance at Lan Jue, though it's meaning was clear. Lan Jue, however, seemed not to have noticed.

Lin Guoguo also trotted over. "Hey boss. I guess you brought Ke'er and Xiuxiu down here to see how our training's been going?"

Lan Jue smirked and shook his head. "Negatory."

"Oh?" Lin Guoguo cantered her head and blurted, "What's the deal then?"

"You'll find out in a bit," he answered cryptically. "First take me to see Jin Tao."

"Yes boss." Mika led the way, bringing the others to the shop's back room warehouse.

As they walked Lan Jue addressed his number two. "Mika, let me see the shop's inventory list when you get a chance."

"You got it," she said. "I'll have it for you tomorrow."

He nodded. "It was by the grace of the Wine Master and the Doctor that

I got back alive this time. I owe them a great deal. The Doctor had to expend an s-ranked gem as well. We don't have any in stock, but a show of gratitude and intent to pay back is important. Make sure to take it from my own stock."

"What are you on about boss," Mika said. "We're all in this together, stock included."

Lan Jue smiled, but said nothing further.

Chu Cheng made a motion as though he were swooning from behind Mika. Hua Li kicked him back to normal.

Jin Tao was still asleep in the nourishment pod, quietly floating in the strange gel. From time to time, multi-colored flashes of light arced across the surface of his skin.

Lan Jue took a glance at the pod's computer, reading over the vitals. He nodded, apparently pleased with what he saw.

"This kid's got intense willpower. The effects look good. The second two injections should be a sight easier on him."

Hua Li spoke up. "You got a good eye. When I first saw the kid I didn't think much of him. Now I see you were right. He has no real Talent, but his willpower is damn near supernatural. In that way he's got a ton of potential. We just can't know how much this Fantascia Genetica decoction will improve his Discipline."

Lan Jue turned to look at Mika. "When is Tang Xiao coming today?"

"Should be soon," she replied. "He comes every day. He may be fat but he's damn cunning in a fight. He keeps harassing me in the middle of it, so naturally I have to beat the piss out of him every time."

Lan Jue snorted a laugh. "That's his special combat style. Any indication of his Discipline's second Awakening?"

"Nothing for the time being. Still, with the pressure we've been adding his progress certainly isn't slow. Definitely faster than an average seventh level Adept. As far as I can tell it shouldn't be long."

“That’s good then,” he replied. “We’ll keep waiting.”

Hua Li gave him a wondering look. “So what are we all doing down here, anyway?”

“To watch a little spar.”

“Spar?” Chu Cheng asked. “Who what and where?”

Lan Jue looked them over. “Have you forgotten why you came here? We’ve got that challenge we accepted from Piao Hong and the Guardians. If we aren’t up to snuff and lose, big brother’s gunna let us have it. We need to get to training. We haven’t worked together in ages – it’s about time we remembered how to.”

Chu Cheng’s face lit up, exchanging a look with Hua Li. “So you’re really looking to make some improvement, eh? Good, so we’re here to compare notes as adepts or mecha pilots?”

Lan Jue’s grin split his face from ear to ear. “I came to a recent realization. Today we start with our Discipline. After a while, when Tang Xiao shows up, we’ll get to it in a big way. We’ll show them what a real team working together looks like. Tomorrow it’ll be mecha combat.”

Chapter 158: Comparing Notes

Hua Li's face looked pitiful. "Can I not participate? I've been doing nothing but training these last two days. At this pace I'm gunna die, I can feel it."

Lan Jue's countenance grew hard. "Stop whining. At your level you think I believe a little singing and dancing makes you that tired?"

Hua Li's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Shit A-Jue. Have you ever actually watched one of my concerts?"

Lan Jue waved a hand dismissively. "Looking at you is enough. What's the point of seeing one of these prancing shows of yours?"

Chu Cheng, standing next to him, laughed at their exchange. "There's a connection between his physical prowess and his fame, you know. He puts his Discipline to good use during his concerts, too. It's not just singing and shaking his ass. Some crazy special effects. When he says he's tired I believe him. And in the end, who knows how hard Mo Xiao pushes him."

"Lan Jue!" Hua Li nearly gnashed his teeth at his friend, grabbing his nose between his fingers. "I hate your face! You've really never seen one of my concerts!? You don't know people say I'm the most handsome of my whole familial dynasty? No wonder you haven't shown the least bit of interest. I am the greatest celebrity ever known, and when I'm dancing on that stage you have no idea how handsome, charming and awesome I really am!"

Lan Jue simply rolled his eyes. "Why should I be interested? Isn't it mostly young girls that are infatuated with you?"

Hua Li's white-knuckle grip relaxed as he fell in to a combat pose. "We're settling this, right now!"

Lan Jue rubbed his nose. "Fine, soon. You pinch my nose like that and you're asking to be put in the ground."

"No doubt," Chu Cheng interrupted. "What kind of man are you anyway? A-Jue's only just recovered from his injuries and here you are

being so rough. If I were you, A-Jue, I wouldn't put up with any of this nonsense. You should beat the crap out of him on principle. I'll be the ref."

Both Lan Jue and Hua Li turned the force of their glare onto Chu Cheng. He instantly shrunk away. "I'm just trying to seek out justice here, right, looking out! What's all this hostility alluva sudden?"

Hua Li's cantankerous voice growled at him. "People who stir up shit are the worst kind. A-Jue, you and I will beat on this piece of trash, then we'll see what's up."

Lan Jue's fists tightened. "I like it. It's far past time we shut this guy up. Always sitting here profiting at other people's expense."

Chu Cheng's response was angry, indignant. "The hell is wrong with you two, treating me like this? You really take me for that sort of person?"

"Yes!" Hua Li and Lan Jue shouted in unison.

"Ah, Professor!" Their heated exchange was interrupted by the surprised cry from behind them. Lan Jue turned his head to spy the large silhouette bounding towards him.

Lan Jue lifting his hands to protect himself from the jiggly onrush of his student. "Use your words there, kid, save all this gesticulating for the ring. Don't you know how heavy you are?"

Tang Xiao hobbled excitedly towards his teacher, his moon-shaped face jiggling. "It's good to see you back, Professor. Miss Mika's been great with me the last few days, studiously teaching me. Miss Lin Guoguo as well. Under their guidance my power has increased by leaps and bounds!"

Lan Jue couldn't help himself in the face of the kid's sincerity, and actually ruffled his disciple's hair. "Good, keep it up, reign in that sensitivity. Later I'll see for myself how far you've come. Right now it's time for us to head to the Reaper's Arena."

"Huh? There's no need, Professor, here should be fine. I was told only Adepts with high levels of power need to go to the Arena. Miss Mika's teachings are enough for me, there's really no need for you to bother

yourself with me.”

The kid was really scared! He was working fine with the two women. It was harsh, but his improvement was obvious to anyone who saw – only, with them sometimes he was beaten so badly he hardly wished to live. How much worse would it be with his Professor doing the beating? From what he was hearing, it sounded like Professor wanted to take matter in to his own hands, literally. Though he’d never actually witnessed Lan Jue’s true power, he could guess considering how powerful Mika and Lin Guoguo were. Would he even live to see home?

Lan Jue smiled mirthfully. “Don’t be scared. Today you get to rest, just watch and learn.”

“Oh.” Tang Xiao breathed a sigh of relief and said nothing more. He respectfully took a step to the side, out of their way. With so much power around him, he didn’t dare resort to his more wily tendencies. He turned his head and looked at Jin Tao, sleeping fitfully in the nourishment pod. This guy! He was the lucky one, asleep and unaware.

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Reaper’s Arena.

Lan Jue busied himself with setting up their special combat arena, employing the special control apparatus the Wine Master had given him.

Zeus’ Amazons and Jin Tao sat in a separate area, with a panoramic view of the layout. Only Lan Jue, Hua Li and Chu Cheng remained inside.

“It looks like second brother [1] was right when he said you’re doing much better. Are you feeling alright?” Hua Li asked.

[tl: [1] = Here I believe he’s referring to Chu Cheng.]

Lan Jue nodded. “I’ve already checked things out for myself, and I can honestly say I can’t be any better. I can’t figure out how I ended up recovering so well. In fact, did you guys see anything out of the ordinary when you arrived that day?”

Hua Li spoke up. “When we got there we found you asleep in a hollowed

out hole, in something that looked like white rock. I went over to check on you myself and you were fine; calm, breathing. It was like you'd never gotten injured at all."

"A white rock?" Lan Jue felt a flash of... something, but he couldn't pinpoint precisely what was striking about Hua Li's statement. Nor could he recall any of the methods the Doctor used to treat him at the time.

"Alright, well we'll leave that discussion for another time. So bring it, which one of you two is first?" Lan Jue swept his eyes between his fellow Monarchs.

Chu Cheng gave him a surprised look. "What? You're thinking two on one?"

Lan Jue smirked. "Just taking advantage of an opportunity, what's wrong with two on one? Didn't you say earlier you were planning on uniting with A-Li against me? A-Cheng, you're getting more cunning every time I see you."

Chu Cheng snorted, puffing his chest out with pride. "What kind of person do you take me for? A-li, let me deal with this punk first. Three years with his thumb up his keister, I'm positive he's lost all his edge."

Hua Li shrugged. "Alright, he's all yours then." He lunged back a few steps to give them adequate room. He didn't exit to the observation platform, though, but remained at the edge of the ring.

Lan Jue and Chu Cheng stared at each other from across the arena. Little by little their respective expressions became calm and impassive. The two knew each other exceedingly well. Lan Jue had indeed been languishing in sorrow the last three years, but in reality Chu Cheng didn't in the least underestimate or look down upon his friend and mercenary companion. He knew as well as any that of the Divine Monarchs, it was Lan Jue's Discipline that was the most destructive.

Lan Jue looked back at his friend, still and unchanged. He was calm, like the surface of a lake. They stood in silence, staring, until a change overcame them.

A crimson hue slowly began to overtake Chu Cheng's eyes until they looked like burning charcoal. A powerful, stifling aura arose in tandem, and the air around him shimmered as though viewed through extreme heat.

Mika muttered to herself within the observation platform. "Heat-based Discipline."

Lan Jue, meanwhile, was undergoing his own changes. Coiling arcs of electricity flashed across his vision, until his eyes were a startling electric violet. Flashes of power sparked from behind his lids. The unsettling crackle of lightning filled their ears, making skin crawl.

Suddenly, both of them were on the move. There seemed to be some tacit agreement not to employ their Disciplines just yet. Lightning arced from Lan Jue off to the sides.

Chu Cheng's lithe figure launched in to the air, spreading out like some terrible bird. With a twist he was tumbling towards Lan Jue delivering a flurry of kicks.

Lan Jue made no move to retreat, but instead kept up the advance. He did not leave the ground to meet his assailant. His hands shot up, however, and pressed at the air towards Chu Cheng.

Bang bang, bang bang! The sounds of impact filled the arena. With each one the air filled with sparks of lightning and fire.

Chu Cheng fell back to earth with a graceful backflip. He glared across the field and growled while hungry flames exuded from him. Everything around him was illuminated by the angry blaze. If one were to look carefully, they would see drops of golden-red fluid dripping from him.

Lan Jue chuckled. "Who are you trying to scare?" As he spoke lightning began to coil up his form. With a flash he became covered in a crystalline blue light.

Strangely, it wasn't just the color of him that changed. He almost looked as though he were composed of crystal himself. There were no sparks, no thunder – it was as though his Discipline simply manifested.

“Eh?” Chu Cheng couldn’t help but vocalize his surprise. This was different, and until this moment he was sure he was totally familiar with Lan Jue’s abilities.

Electromorphosis! This was among Lan Jue’s most powerful of abilities. It helped to amplify his thunderbolt Discipline. But despite what he knew, this wasn’t the same. Usually when he employed this power, he would be a mess of lightning bolts and electric light – but not this time. When did he learn to control his Discipline so well, Chu Cheng thought, to keep it in check? Not a single iota of his power was escaping his grasp. But hadn’t he been in hiding for three years, without any training? Not judging by what he was seeing!

He was surprised, but Chu Cheng was too good – too much a professional to let that deter him. Without stopping, he lashed out with a chopping motion towards Lan Jue.

A roaring, frightening wall of flame came racing towards the Jewelry Master. The heat it released was so great that the area it passed warped nauseatingly.

But Lan Jue didn’t move, made no effort to sidestep. It was almost as though he hadn’t noticed the fiery wall that was crashing down towards him. With his hands pressed against his chest, his powers seemed even more restrained.

Booooooommm! The fiery attack landed a direct hit, and Lan Jue was lost amongst the roiling flames. Flame and smoke rose to the heavens like a volcanic eruption. Odd crimson orbs were interlaced in the fiery column, rising from the point of impact. The heat was so intense Zeus’ amazons and Tang Xiao could feel it from the observation platform.

The overweight disciple looked on, silent as a mouse. He thought Mika’s fiery discipline was frightening to behold, but the difference in power was clear as he watched this young master at work. Whether power, prestige or intimidation factor, he was on a whole other level.

Mika herself looked on with a manic flash in her eyes. The power and purity of his Discipline was astonishing. She felt the explosive power of it

when the attack landed. He was at least ninth level fifth rank, by her estimation, if not stronger. This was definitely her chance to learn and improve, she thought.

Chapter 159: Spirit of Hades

Lan Jue emerged from the roaring flames unscathed. The roiling inferno burned furiously around him, reflecting off his crystalline body but leaving no mark. The electric blue of his presence flashed in the eye of every onlooker.

“Huh?” Hua Li, expecting the battle from the sidelines, was as struck with questions as his lazy counterpart. Even as distant as he was, Hua Li had to protect himself from the baptism of fire by virtue of a radiating blue light. It served to isolate him from the heat.

His observations were keen, and he knew Chu Cheng was taking it easy on his opponent. Still, for A-Jue to sustain this level of heat without blinking was impressive – even by his standards.

Things were different between Chu Cheng and Lan Jue. For starters, they hadn't really kept in contact for the last three years, and Chu Cheng wasn't aware of much of what had happened to the Jewelry Master. Hua Li, though, remembered their battle from not long ago. Lan Jue hadn't been able to employ his Discipline much at all, but Hua Li could still feel Lan Jue's fluctuating power levels. Comparing them to what he saw now, the lancing bolts of electricity, they were different. It was as though his friend's thunderbolt discipline had become 'gentler.' What could that mean?

Chu Cheng's figure appeared from the bowels of the flames, his dark figure stark and ominous against the fire light. He was at Lan Jue's back, and without hesitation reached a hand out for him. His grasping palm grew red, then gold, like a little sun seeking to devour his enemy.

Lan Jue didn't move.

Poof! The gathered Amazons gasped as Chu Cheng's hand disappeared in to Lan Jue's body.

Chu Cheng was likewise surprised, whereupon he suddenly felt the explosive power of thunder gathering above his hand. Quickly and without warning, his entire body was wracked by tremors. The golden-red

light around him faltered and dissipated.

A trick!

Chu Cheng's agonist response arose automatically in his defense. The young man's eyes flashed gold with energy, after which an unsettling gray shadow appeared at his back. It yanked his trapped hand free.

In a flash Lan Jue's figure raced backwards, colliding with Chu Cheng's chest. He became the center of a blinding corona as crackling bolts of electricity exploded outward in all directions.

Of course Chu Cheng didn't simply allow this to happen – he was a Monarch for a reason. He curled in to himself and erupted, the flames swallowing him in to an angry ball of fire. The nightmarish shadow behind him rushed in, joining with the fires and turning them a deep crimson. With a sizzling hiss, Chu Cheng extricated himself from the collapsing field of lightning.

Lan Jue was gone in a flash. Moments later he reappeared with his hand raised. He beckoned in the air, and with a peal of thunder a lightning bolt was in his grip. He reeled back, and threw!

The writhing spear of lightning chased after Chu Cheng, who was still surrounded by dark hungry flames. By the time the bolt caught up, the flames had turned to grey. Once the attack collided – nothing. No blast, no force. The bolt vanished as though it had never existed.

The fireball fell to the ground and melted away, once more revealing Chu Cheng. His hair stood on end, and his right hand still shook ever so slightly.

Lan Jue watched his friend dispassionately. Blue light still emanated from his crystal form.

"Your electromorphism's certainly improved," Chu Cheng noted.

Lan Jue nodded. "Just recently. In fact, you're my guinea pig. From where I'm standing it looks pretty effective."

Chu Cheng's expression was irate. "When did you become so insidious.

You've been learning from A-Li."

Hua Li chimed in from across the ring. "Want me to throw down?"

"Hold it," Chu Cheng replied with a humph. "Watch me wail on him a bit, then we'll see. Take care now, A-Jue, time to get a little more serious!" He took a menacing stride forward as he spoke.

Chu Cheng was already a tall youth, and as they looked on he began to grow taller still. In the blink of an eye he stretched three meters.

His squirly head of red hair changed as well, turning gray like ash. The nasty smirk on his face melted in to an icy-cold mask, with a long smear of blood tracing a line along his forehead. The aura he exuded was tremendously stifling.

He was covered then in a lengthy black robe, shimmering with embroidered lines of silver. His ordinarily tanned skin faded until it was a ghastly pale. As the slowly boiling flames around him died, those terrifying grey eyes fixed upon Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master watched the change, unmoving, though his eyes narrowed as the forbidden art unfolded. Of the other observers, it was Mika's reaction which was the most pronounced – she even cried out in surprise.

"Hades... Monarch of the Underworld, he's... he's actually Hades!"

Ke'er shot her companion an uncertain look. "What's up with you, Mika? You mean you didn't know? The boss and his three companions were known as the Four Divine Monarchs. The God of Wisdom, Prometheus; Lord of the Afterlife, Hades; Zeus, King of the Gods; and Poseidon Lord of the Seas. Chu Cheng is that second one, Lord of the Afterlife. Of course he's Hades!"

Ke'er sought to educate her friend, but Mika seemed lost in her own thoughts. "No... I always just thought it was a title, some sort of designation. But he – he's the real deal. Like my father, possessing a pure malevolent Discipline. He just hasn't cultivated his powers to their peak, yet. Such powerful abyssal energies... if my father were to ever discover his

true power, there's no question he'd have someone sent to murder him. He'd have him killed, and his powers absorbed. If he were to succeed in that, he'd be more powerful than any of the Paragons. He'd truly become master of the universe!"

Mika knew much about the darker side of the galaxy, and the powers of the abyss. It was a part of her, ever since she was small, to the point where she couldn't be sure there weren't actual ghosts and demons to be found in the universe. What she was sure of, however, was that although ghosts and devils were a part of the world she lived in, they were the enemy.

The Prince of Devils, Satan, and the Lord of the Afterlife, Hades. Each sought to devour the other.

It was often said that, in ancient times, Hades was stronger than Satan. However, for various reason, as the new age dawned Hades was incapable of finding his true self. Satan persevered, slowly growing stronger until they were of equal power.

The story was rarely heard now since the stellar migration. Perhaps those mythical beings didn't exist, never existed. However, in a way they did, through these powerful Adepts. The Prince and Lord, masters of their dark Disciplines, inherited through blood or other means.

Satan, one of the world's Ten Paragons, and his Dark Tower were ever searching the stars for those who possessed the power of Hades. Mika never really thought she'd ever come across the real deal. But here he was – Lord of the Afterlife, Hades, in the flesh.

Lan Jue wasn't still during the process. He, too, took a step forward. Immediately the familiar changes overcame him; his eyes changed to gold, the crackling sound of thunder split the air, and an imperial aura of command surrounded him.

A golden cloak appeared, affixed to his shoulders. Countless bolts of lightning flashed around him, real for just the space of an instant and leaving a charged halo of energy around him. His hair changed to gold, matching his flashing regal eyes.

"Ascension. A-Jue, don't overtax yourself." Chu Cheng's voice snakes

from between the worm-like, pallid lips of Hades.

Lan Jue's response sounded irritated. "What would you expect? You're channeling the Spirit of Hades, my next move is Ascension. What is this anyway, are you saying you've mastered your forbidden art already?"

"More or less. Come on then – see if you can stand my abyssal flame!" Hades lifted a hand towards Zeus as he spoke. A lake of grey fire sprang up beneath Zeus' feet.

Zeus was gone in a flash, appearing ten meters away. His golden clothes smoldered ever so slightly.

The Lord of the Afterlife made another motion with his left hand. Suddenly it was clutching the handle of a blade, black as pitch. It's shimmering opaque blade was grey, and with the flick of his wrist the steel stretched outwards.

"Too long and neither of us will be able to sustain it. Too much damage to our vital qi. Let's let a blow determine the winner; a single strike, and whoever's left standing is the victor. What do you think?"

Zeus nodded. He moved his hand out in much the same manner as his darker counterpart. In a flash, a writhing bolt of lightning shaped in to the form of a spear writhed in his grip.

However, before their deciding clash could commence, a staggering tremble swept through the arena. As they looked around to find what had occurred, both spied strange trembling veins snaking up the walls.

"You're really incapable of making life easier for the ones around you." The Wine Master's defeated voice surrounded them. A blink, and they found themselves in an undulating world of silver light.

Zeus and Hades regarded each other, In wordless, tacit agreement both disposed of their weapons. Their imposing auras diminished, and their fluctuating Disciplines lessened until they were back to their normal selves.

The world warped, and the wine Master appeared between them.

“It looks like you’re planning to level my training arena. Do you somehow expect this interspatial arena to endure your protomorphic powers? If you insist on practicing these abilities, you’re going to have me to contend with as well. Otherwise, find another place to ruin with your horse play.”

Chu Cheng looked sheepish. “I forgot, forgot. So sorry, Cosmagus.”

Another flash, and the Wine Master vanished without a trace. His voice remained. “I see this again and we’ll revoke your sparring privileges!”

“It’s all your fault,” Chu Cheng muttered, “with your Ascension nonsense.” He glared at Lan Jue for getting him in to trouble.

“You don’t care about losing face, do you,” Lan Jue retorted. “You think I’d have used it if you hadn’t invoked the Spirit of Hades?”

“I only used that because you forced me to!”

“Forced you how?”

“Yeah! Forced me, like slavery!”

“...”

“Stop with the garbage back and forth.” Hua Li shouted at them from across the arena. “Are you fighting or what?”

“Yeah we’re fighting!” Both Lan Jue and Chu Cheng shouted back in unison.

Hua Li’s solemn response wafted towards them. “Get to it then. And remember, no protomorphism.”

Lan Jue clasped his hands, then, at the space of his back and grinned at the two. “Both of you.”

Hua Li blinked at him. “A-Jue, I must have heard wrong. Even people looking to be abused aren’t that direct.”

Lan Jue smirked. “I never said I’d be fighting alone. Ladies, it’s time to see how your cultivation’s been progressing.”

Mika, Lin Guoguo, Xiuxiu and Ke’er shouted back: “Yes, boss!”

Chu Cheng regarded them with hesitation. “This... this isn’t right. I can’t lift my hand against a woman, much less four. Far too much a fan of the female species, you understand.”

Hua Li’s words were thick with disdain. “Give it a rest. I don’t think you’ve ever refused to put a hand on a woman.”

Chu Cheng chortled. “That’s different. Those are gentle hands,” he assured.

“Enough, keep it in your pants. Zeus and his ladies are going to be tough to deal with. Don’t hold me back.”

Chu Cheng snarled at him. “Who’s holding who back?”

“You!”

Chapter 160: Unspoken Cooperation

Lan Jue simply stood, bolts of lightning coiling around his eyes. Behind him were his amazons, arrayed for battle; Mika, Xiuxiu, Lin Guoguo and Ke'er.

Across from them were the other two monarchs, Hua Li and Chu Cheng. A faint red aura surrounded one, a gentle blue the other; fire and water, opposing elements that flickered in close proximity. Neither directly impeded the other, but clear and striking fluctuations in their energy occurred where they touched.

“Don’t let them fool you,” Lan Jue said then. “Their Disciplines work well together.”

“A-Jue, what happens next, you asked for. I may not be pleased with raising my hand to a woman, but I won’t hesitate to put you in your place,” Chu Cheng challenged.

Lan Jue’s tepid response followed. “Bring it on. Tang Xiao, make sure you watch yourself.”

The final words were directed at the pudgy boy, a distance behind the two groups. He was in there with the others, as opposed to on the observation platform. In Lan Jue’s own words, he needed to experience what combat was like between top-level Adepts. In this way he’d be prepared when he was ready to join them. But that wasn’t now – now, all he had to do was make sure he didn’t get hurt.

And so, the overweight young man stood practically plastered to a wall, very nearly trembling.

An eight level talent, and the worst of the bunch. Not just ninth level talents, but several surpassed ninth level fifth rank. This was the sort of power that would dominate a battle field – much like they could have in the Shattered Starfields.

“Yes, Professor!” Tang Xiao’s timid voice whimpered towards Lan Jue.

“Commence!” The Jewelry Master’s voice rang through the arena.

Instantly he was on the move. His hands raised, and two crackling bolts of lightning launched out towards Hua Li and Chu Cheng.

Hua Li reacted by lifting his own hands, and a gentle blue shield of energy bloomed to life before him. The purity of his water Discipline meant it was nonconductive, neutralizing Lan Jue's powers.

Chu Cheng was possessed of a much higher strata of arrogance. His left hand traced a line through the air, which summoned a fiery serpent that coiled around him. It hissed malevolently, flaming drops of saliva splattering in all directions.

The two bolts found their mark, and subsequently vanished.

Lan Jue continued his assault. As he did, his Amazons were half a step behind.

Xiuxiu took a step forward until she was positioned directly behind Lan Jue. From where Hua Li and Chu Cheng stood, they couldn't see her. Mika moved, too, huffing dismissively as her body became encased in fire. Her hands began tracing a circle, within which a swirling vortex of flame appeared.

At the slightest motion, countless balls of fire launched towards her targets.

Ke'er stretched her arms out in front of her. As she did, a dozen morphing gun barrels extricated themselves from her body and hovered nearby. A volley of white energy was spat forth, hurtling towards Hua Li. A blue light also began to coalesce around her chest, releasing wave upon wave of undulating energy.

Lin Guoguo's pretty eyes had closed in the interim. She was as though in the midst of a deep meditation, with the whole of the arena lost to her consciousness.

But the moment she closed her eyes, both Hua Li and Chu Cheng were suddenly assailed by a sense of unease. It was a palpable sensation of fear and discomfort, a sense that made them both secretly anxious to employ the full might of their abilities.

Lan Jue rushed at Chu Cheng as his earlier bolts of lightning vanished. His body was again a living streak of electricity. In a flash he was in front of the red-haired young man.

Chu Cheng's own reactions were quick, almost inhuman. His whole body flared like a match, releasing a golden red light. The molten balls of fire from Mika weakened and melted as they reached him. They vanished with a dismissive wave of his hand. With Lan Jue suddenly so close, he launched himself backward in retreat. But as he did, the coiling dragon of flame surrounding him chose that moment to strike. It's flaming jaw distended as the beast shot out. First up, then directly down towards Lan Jue as it attempted to swallow him whole.

Lan Jue stepped to the side. His body congealed in to a golden bolt of lightning and arced away just in time to avoid the jagged fiery teeth. He appeared again in front of Chu Cheng, and pressed his palm against the man's chest.

This was his power, the speed of light!

It was already too late for Chu Cheng to react. By the time he knew what was happening, his entire body was encased in electricity.

However, despite the success of the attack Lan Jue revealed no pleasure, took no joy. On the contrary, he balled himself up and made to retreat.

Just as the lightning raced from his fingers, the fiery dragon was racing onward at increased speed. In no time, it was before Mika. There was a flash of golden red light, when suddenly a figure reached out it's hand towards her. It was Chu Cheng, and as he appeared the copy assailed by Lan Jue dissolved in to smoke and ash.

A false trail, trickery!

It took Lan Jue by surprise. This guy really was a bastard! All of that noise about refusing to hit women, and yet it was a woman he struck at first. Clearly his plan was to take care of them one by one.

All in all, the four women were not that far removed in power from Chu Cheng and Hua Li. With Lan Jue among them, there was no way they

could win. The two Monarchs' only available tactic was simple; as much as possible, weaken Zeus' Amazons – then focus on Zeus.

As Chu Cheng moved to attack, Hua Li joined him. As he raced forward, he lifted his arms to the sky. Instantaneously a blue aura surrounded him and shot outward in all directions like a powerful ocean wave. It served not only to temporarily obstruct Lan Jue, but also to knock back Lin Guoguo and Ke'er. The waves naturally parted when they reached Chu Cheng.

The two had been veritable brothers for years, fighting side by side. This sort of cooperation wasn't verbally expressed – they just knew what had to be done, and when.

Mika did not appear phased by Chu Cheng's advance. Her fiery red hair had fought free of its bonds and flared around her head like an inferno, changing to an angry crimson red color. Behind her appeared the monstrous figure of a demon. The beast was at least six meters in height, and indistinct. A stifling, corrupted aura poured from it, and the only thing that could be clearly seen were its two fiery, blood-red eyes.

“What? The Prince of Demons?” Chu Cheng's eyes narrowed at the revelation. The new information made him slower to react.

He also missed it when, suddenly, a large piece of artillery appeared at Mika's shoulder. It launched a beam of staggering blue energy half a meter thick. A beam that raced right towards Chu Cheng's chest.

Chu Cheng was no slouch when it came to his Discipline, but nonetheless the surprise change in battlefield circumstances took its toll. His own attacks landed, striking Mika, but he took the blast directly as a result.

The blue light flashed and moved away, revealing Ke'er at Mika's shoulder. The other Ke'er, a short distance away, vanished in a puff of smoke.

An illusion?

Hua Li was similarly surprised. To make matters worse, the sudden

shifts were precipitated by a stifling sense of dread that he couldn't shake.

Lan Jue had made no effort to rescue Mika, in part because Chu Cheng's attack was covered by Hua Li's waves. As the waves raced towards Lan Jue, though, they parted before a flash of infinitely sharp white light. Lan Jue vanished and, in a flash, appeared in front of Hua Li.

His body flickered a few times and disappeared, before a tight net of dazzling blue light fell in place around the celebrity.

For Hua Li's part, his body adopted a spectral quality. Countless rays of golden-blue light shot out from within him, paired with a roar like crashing waves.

By the time Lan Jue reappeared, Hua Li retreated through the crushing trap. The golden light he emanated were a sight less powerful than they were a moment before.

Lan Jue flicked his wrist, sending an orb of pale golden light outwards. Hua Li's features changed drastically as he juke to one side, followed immediately by a blast that made the whole arena shake.

It was the power of Lan Jue's Discipline, his speed of light and lightning, that they faced. All one could see was Hua Li and Chu Cheng being unceremoniously cast away.

"Hey, honored teachers, I thought I'd share something with you – something awful that happened to me. I was eating at school when, while digging in to my braised pork I noticed it had started to grow some mold. So I plucked that piece out..."

Chu Cheng and Hua Li were busy with Zeus and his Amazons, when suddenly the strange voice arose clearly through the arena. It bore a distinctly sordid tone.

"What the –" Hua Li reacted first, surprised and irritated by the verbal harassment. He was also fairly sure he recognized the voice. Tang Xiao?

The same saying was different coming from the kid's mouth, rather than Lan Jue's. His compatriot couldn't speak like the young man, didn't have the same oomph. Hua Li, luckily, had already experienced this trickery

once so was not so taken aback. Chu Cheng, however, was surprised at the sudden conversation, and the respect with which it was delivered.

Still, the half-second hesitation was all Lan Jue needed to wrap Hua Li up in a net of electricity. He was crouched, his hand slapped firmly against the ground. The cage that kept he and the entertainer in place was narrow and confining.

Chu Cheng shook himself awake and, ignoring temporarily the threat of Mika and Ke'er at his heels, raced to Hua Li's aid. He knew quite well that if Hua Li was taken out of the equation it would be one against five. Those were, frankly, impossible odds.

"... I painstakingly removed the mold from the piece. I wasn't going to throw out such sumptuous food so I popped it right in my mouth. And shit, wouldn't ya know it – it was a piece of ginger!" Tang Xiao's punchline was delivered just as Chu Cheng was making his attack.

The words cut a searing path through Chu Cheng's brain. He couldn't help but snort in a fit of laughter, and the loss of control caused his Discipline to slip.

A self-satisfied, dismissive huff was heard from behind.

The overwhelming force of a psychic blast hit him straight on like a sledge hammer. Suddenly, he felt his mind devolve in to disarray as his thoughts all crashed together. While the effects weren't physically damaging, he was suddenly too dizzy and distracted to pay proper attention. It was enough of a lapse for Mika and Ke'er to catch up. Chu Cheng went flying as their attack caught him.

The cage shimmered. For most, especially those whose powers were focused on speed, confining oneself in a cage seems like a bad idea. But Lan Jue felt differently.

Hua Li's inherent self-defense capabilities were among the strongest in their group, and so the arcing bolts of lightning that assailed him in the cage were easily dealt with. However, the steady bursts of sharp light emanating from Lan Jue caused Hua Li to expend much more thought and energy to evade.

Chapter 161: Fusion of the Amazons

Zrrrggt! There was a flash of lightning, and suddenly Hua Li felt his body go numb. In the length of time it took for the light to flash, Lan Jue had moved behind him, and was slamming his fists in to the entertainer's back.

Hua Li's defensive capabilities warded the first six strikes, but the seventh and final snuck through. With his water Discipline nearly exhausted, the strike sent arcs of lightning coiling up his body.

He suddenly felt the ice-cold kiss of a blade at his throat, which lead him to quickly declare surrender. "You got me," he said matter-of-factly.

Lan Jue was on the move instantly. The electric cage that surrounded them parted just as the Jewelry Master dissolved in to a stream of light. The glimmering pillar raced through the cage's small opening, stopping before Chu Cheng who stood alone in the distance.

Mika was close behind. With a grunt, she was off again racing towards Chu Cheng and Lan Jue. Her speed made her look like nothing more than a streak of crimson.

Then gold, then blue as Lin Guoguo and Ke'er took their cue from the Stygian Succubus. The three were vicious streams of violent energy, racing to their boss' side.

Chu Cheng shot his hands forward, whipping through the air. In response, the air shimmered as a vortex of raging flame appeared in front of him. It's swirling depths brought with it a powerful suctioning force, which brought Lan Jue to a stop.

Chu Cheng took advantage of the slight reprieve to grope out his right hand. Empty space parted, and plumes of smoke preceded the arrival of a flaming sword which fit perfectly in his palm. It was a similar blade to the one he'd revealed while channeling the Spirit of Hades, with the only difference being the color.

He fainted towards Lan Jue and the three streaks of energy rapidly

approaching his direction. In response, the trembling weapon belched a curtain of fire at his enemies.

Hua Li may have lost, but he'd set up Chu Cheng with a chance. That was good enough.

Lan Jue was tumbling through the air to avoid Chu Cheng's strike. Sufficiently free from danger, he stopped mid-air, just long enough to swipe his own strange shimmering blade of light.

The weapon he gripped was a little over a meter long, the blade and pommel making a cross shape. It's long and narrow blade was white as snow, indented down the middle with a blood funnel.

He hung in the air, hovering above the field of battle with blade in hand. A strange, dark figure was indistinctly visible near the sword. It was black, and writhing like it was composed of black lightning.

But it wasn't. In fact, closer inspection would reveal they were fissures, where the blades stupendous sharpness had cloven reality around it. If Lan Jue released it, one feared the blade might slice through space and simply vanish as it fell.

Hua Li's quick and no-nonsense surrender was largely due to the presence of that sword in Lan Jue's hand, for that was no ordinary weapon – it was Xiuxiu, become the Asura Godblade!

Xiuxiu was not new to Zeus' Amazons, not even close. Her work for him had spanned years, ever since she first entered the mercenary world. From the onset she was at his side, which earned her the name Blade-maiden.

Both Hua Li and Chu Cheng were both well aware; with Xiuxiu at his side, Zeus was at least three times as powerful.

Lan Jue flicked his wrist. The godblade flashed, and released a torrent of energy all its own. The power raced outward as Chu Cheng's own energies were converging on his position. Two different, opposing energies, and as they clashed in mid-air both the energy and Chu Cheng's sword were knocked aside.

In the same instant Mika, Lin Guoguo and Ke'er appeared at their boss'

back.

Mika was the first to arrive. She had transformed in to a ball of molten fire during transit, and landed unto Lan Jue's back. As she did, a glorious flaming cloak wiped out behind her boss. It flowed where there was no wind, and anything that came near was instantly assailed by a suffocating demonic aura.

Next was Ke'er. The blue light that was her raced to Lan Jue's side and settled on his left arm. When the shimmer light abated, a gun barrel with a caliber the size of a chicken egg glinted against the tan skin of his arm. A heavy sapphire aura surrounded the weapon, and it seemed ready to launch its attack with the slightest provocation.

The golden beam of light was the final one to show up, and settled itself atop Lan Jue's head. It shone brilliantly like a crown or halo.

It was gorgeous beyond compare, more than any normal crown certainly. Resplendent beams of light shone forth from it in all directions. Still the most striking aspect was the oval stone set in the center. It was almost like a single golden eye that watched all with its unblinking stare.

"This is somehow acceptable?" Chu Cheng glowered at the sight before him. The burning flames that covered him like a coat dimmed visibly, with a hint of gray light swirling through them. The atmosphere of the entire arena chilled.

A single plume of fire launched outward from him. In a few short seconds it was hanging over Lan Jue, its temperatures so hot that the floor below started to melt in to magma. With the fire above and the lava below, Lan Jue was in clear danger of being swallowed in to one or the other.

The golden eye set within Lan Jue's crown flashed. Suddenly Chu Cheng felt a dizziness rise up within him. It was enough of a distraction that the power of his attacks were diminished.

In the same instant the burning cloak at Lan Jue's back released a wave of fire. It was a strange flame, with black and red racing through it like veins. As it spread forth, it kept the encroaching flows of magma at bay.

The Jewelry Master then hoisted the godblade, and his body fractured in to a host of lightning bolts. His figure reconstituted inches before Chu Cheng, with the godblade tracing a deadly arc towards him.

The ear-splitting sound of reality being rent asunder filled the air. Where the godblade passed, a thin vacuous line of darkness followed.

Chu Cheng's body dimmed, just as the deadly sword cut him in two. But as they began to crumple to the floor, both disintegrated in to pillars of flame that shot high above. Once they towered out of reach, they joined once again to form the red haired youth.

Chu Cheng's flaming blade was once more in hand. He stared chillingly down at Lan Jue, with all his fancy toys. With an intimidating yell, he became a claw of flames that reached inexorably for his golden crown.

Lan Jue's godblade hung in the air, in the middle of its follow-through. Only his left hand was available, and so it was with that that he reached towards the sky. The action spawned a massive hand composed of lightning. The two elemental appendages clashed.

The subsequent blast of errant energy whipped madly in all directions.

Lan Jue's crown flashed once again. Chu Cheng was valiantly pressing the attack, his fiery power in contest below with Lan Jue's electricity. However, he was visibly weakening.

"Erupt!" Chu Cheng's voice rang through the arena. The column of energy he commanded exploded at his command, destroying Lan Jue's summoned claw with it. The air cleared, the dust settled, with neither of the powerhouses' Disciplines in evidence.

However, even though he'd managed to halt Lan Jue's riposte, it wasn't over. Chu Cheng's pupils contracted as he saw the dark barrel of the gun flash, and a dazzling blue orb hurtle his way.

His impressive display in fending off Lan Jue had drained him. He was in a weakened position, and as such did not possess the ability to dodge the oncoming assault. All he could do was bolster his defenses, and hold. He grit his teeth as Ke'er's attack hit him smack in the chest.

Booommmm!

Chu Cheng went sailing in to the distance. He tumbled head over heels, caught in a tempest of energy.

This was the true might of Ke'er's attacks. She was an eight level Talent, but with her power fully stored before use she was as frightening as any average ninth level. Chu Cheng hadn't taken that in to account – and he was feeling the results of his mistake.

Lan Jue – mercenary and Skyfire Avenue – knew an opportunity when he saw one. He also knew how to exploit it.

As Chu Cheng went barreling through the sky, Lan Jue was on the move. In a flash he was above the unfortunate mercenary, with the godblade in his hand. Only now, the blade's body was a shimmering violet. An infinitely sharp bolt of lightning, cutting a bloodthirsty arc towards its target.

Chu Cheng's energies had only just managed to deflect the main force of Ke'er's blast, and so when the godblade came tumbling his only recourse was to raise his hands in defense. Xiuxiu's impossibly sharp attack landed directly in the palm of his hand.

CRACK! The deafening peal of a thunderstrike accompanied the blow. Paralyzing bolts of lightning raced along Chu Cheng's body. As they did, reality split before the red haired young man's chest, spreading open in to a void.

But before Chu Cheng could react or employ the opportunity, Lan Jue was there. The godblade had reverted to its normal white hue, with it arriving a beam of pure light. That beam struck Chu Cheng, pinning him viciously to the ground.

"I give..." Chu Cheng hissed, and those words stopped any further abuse from Lan Jue.

.....

Five minutes later.

“Godamnit, A-Cheng. When’d you become such a dunce?” Hua Li shook his head at his companion, whose face was slowly swelling. “That was an embarrassing display.”

“A-Jue, you and I will never recover from this.” Chu Cheng’s angry voice was somewhat obscured by his unnaturally puffy face.

Lan Jue looked down on him, arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face. “Interested in another go?”

“Only a damn moron’d agree to that. No class – so many people against just me! You all should be ashamed. A-Li, help me out here man, otherwise how am I supposed to eat later?”

Hua Li summoned a gentle ball of blue light, whereupon he then unceremoniously smashed it in to Chu Cheng’s face. The water splashed in all directions, and when it dripped away Chu Cheng’s features were already markedly better.

Lan Jue turned then, looking down at the four ladies who had reverted to their natural states. “Is this what you girls have been practicing?”

Lin Guoguo giggled. “Like you said boss, we’ve been focusing in our cooperation. We were listening to Xiuxiu, talking about how she can turn in to your weapon. That got us thinking. See, we’re all the boss’ bodyguards, right? And if Xiuxiu can do it, so can we. Mika and I are already ninth level, so we have the ability to become our Discipline, like your Fulmination. A token aspect of being a ninth level, unless you have a Discipline like fatty Tang who can change at will. So Mika and I got to talking; what can we change in to that would most benefit the boss? I chose the crown. Mika chose the cloak. Cool right?!”

Ke’er blew a raspberry. “Although I can’t change in to my Discipline yet, it already possesses the ability to change shape. Any sort of energy weapon, I can do. I figured I could give the boss another long-ranged attack at his disposal! The three of us, with Xiuxiu as your sword, and we become your super suit!” [1]

Lan Jue smiled at them. “I was definitely pleasantly surprised. I can see all the hard work you put in to this. Keep it up. Once we get your

cooperation up to snuff, mecha combat will be next. For that you should all study from Xiuxiu. Her piloting skills are already excellent.”

“Got it,” Mika replied.

Tang Xiao had lumbered over to Lan Jue’s side by this point, though he was careful to choose a spot out of Chu Cheng’s direct line of sight.

“And what are you cowering for,” Lan Jue said, narrowing his eyes at his pupil.

The young man replied in a whisper. “Professor... do you think he’s mad at me?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. With me here he won’t be doing anything. But if you see him when I’m not around... hide further away.”

*

1. Power rangers!

Chapter 162: Girly Music

The swelling of Chu Cheng's face had gone down, and was back to normal. He followed Hua Li, rubbing his face as though it still hurt.

"Too rough, A-Jue, jeez. You've been planning this for a while, I'll bet."

Lan Jue shot him a glance. "Premeditated, no, but that doesn't mean I haven't wanted to stomp your face for at least a few days."

Chu Cheng flipped him the bird, then tried to glare a hole in to the fat young man to one side. "Hey fat-ass, I'll remember this. Did your good-for-nothing teacher train you with that loud mouth?"

Tang Xiao's reply was quiet, timid. "Professor Lan didn't teach me that, I came up with it myself after some research. I believe we should stop at nothing when in the heat of battle, anything it takes to win. The process isn't important, just the result. Please don't be upset, teacher! I'm just trying to be self-directed."

Chu Cheng snorted, hard. Hua Li took up the conversation, his own voice betraying displeasure. "So have you shared this little story of yours with your Professor?"

Tang Xiao blushed at the accusation. "The first time we fought I did. He beat me pretty badly. I haven't since."

Hua Li's white-knuckle fist raised as he glared daggers at the fat kid.

Tang Xiao coughed uncomfortably. "So, Professor, if there's nothing else maybe I should just head out. Oh, and I'm sorry but I'm not sure I'll have the opportunity to come over the next few days."

"Oh?" Lan Jue gave him an inquisitive look. "Look kid you don't need to be scared. These guys wouldn't dare run around bullying the younger generations."

Tang Xiao quickly shook his head. "That's not it. There's a school training assembly I can't get out of. People from our rival school, Lir, are coming. They've chosen me as a contestant in a little sparring match. I'm supposed to be drilling mecha combat over the next few days to bone up."

“Lir University?” Lan Jue looked at him questioningly. “What are they doing coming all the way over here?”

Tang Xiao enlightened him. “They’re a mecha piloting university, it’s their primary major. Planet Lir isn’t too far from Skyfire, I heard somewhere that the deans were rivals, after the same girl years ago. Later, it was our dean who came out on top. They’ve hated each other ever since. So, every year they send their crack students our way, supposedly for ‘educational exchange.’ Really it’s a chance for them to show us up.”

Chu Cheng was in higher spirits, then, forgetting his previous indignation. “Sounds like fun, what sort of exchanges are we talking?”

“Mostly mecha combat,” Tang Xiao replied. “And truth be told I don’t know what the dean is thinking, agreeing to it. They specialize in mecha combat! Our university’s focus is research. We’re miles behind them in regards to mecha piloting. Every year it’s the same – a cruel beating. They aren’t concerned about face either. Students compete, sure, but the teachers do also. If it weren’t for the Savage Goddess, we’d have precisely zero showing at the exchange. Professor Tan is the only one to ever really have a chance at winning the thing.”

“Originally we were to have some time before the competition, but then Lir University heard about the NEU opening up their doors for some Poseidon guy’s concert. So they pushed the schedule up. What’s there to hear in this damn concert anyway, retards.”

Hua Li shoved his large-framed glasses higher on his nose. “You’ve never heard one of Poseidon’s songs, have you?”

Tang Xiao stuck out his prominent belly. “Uncle,” he started proudly, “I’m a real man. Who listens to that girly stuff anyway – just deviants and young girls.”

Chu Cheng’s features were a strange blend of surprise and mirth as he looked at Lan Jue. “Taunting is just in this kid’s blood, isn’t it? A skill he was born with.”

Hua Li’s expression was cool and dangerously indifferent as he, too, addressed Lan Jue. “Don’t say I never give you face, got it?”

Lan Jue gently patted his forehead before speaking earnestly to his apprentice. “In fact I originally had wanted to give you the day off but it looks like we’ll need to continue your special training. By my estimate we’re looking at double time. A-Li, take it easy on the kid right? Don’t break him.”

Hua Li nodded as he made his way to stand before the slack-jawed Tang Xiao. The entertainer plucked off his hat and glasses, revealing his sinister grin and dark eyes. “Tell me though, fatty. Do I look familiar to you at all?”

“Huh? O-oh....”

“I’ll make YOU a deviant! How about we make YOU girly?!”

“Ah! Ow! Ahhh!”

ζ

The Gourmet’s tiny boutique was clean, tidy, and quiet, with a classical beauty that stayed with a person.

Hua Li, Chu Cheng and Lan Jue had all changed by this point, and were making their way there.

Someone else had beat them there, a beautiful young woman.

“Seamstress,” [1] Lan Jue greeted amicably with a smile.

[tl: [1] = She was introduced as Tailor before in chapter 65, but Seamstress is a much more fitting title, I feel. ↩]

The woman rose to her feet and welcomed the three young gentlemen with a smile. “Hello. Ey? Isn’t this...” The Tailor’s pretty eyes swept over Hua Li.

It was becoming abundantly clear that Hua Li attracted a great deal of attention without his disguises in place.

Hua Li only chuckled, his response gentlemanly. “Salutations, beautiful madam. I’m Hua Li.”

Chu Cheng also nodded a greeting to the tailor. “Hello,” he said, “I’m Chu Cheng.”

Lan Jue cast an inquisitive eye unto his friend. “A very tepid greeting, A-Cheng. I expected different from you.”

Chu Cheng glowered at his companion. “Going out anywhere with A-Li is the worst. You think we get any attention with this guy around?”

The Seamstress covered her mouth with a dainty hand and laughed. “Not so! Poseidon is even more striking than his holograms, true, but you two aren’t slouches either. You and our Jewelry Master are a special kind of man. Plus, I like men with a good build – suitable as a mannequin.”

That devious light shined in the depths of Chu Cheng’s eyes. “You’re a madam with exceptional taste, that much is clear. Some people are born fine to look at, but it takes a smart person to realize their treasures run only skin deep.”

“It’s been a few years since we were in High School,” Hua Li cut in with a cool voice. “How about we act like it?”

Chu Cheng sneered, looking for a place to sit.

“And what do you mean by that,” the Seamstress replied, grinning broadly.

Lan Jue chortled. “High School, the first awakenings of love. They are used to feeling inadequate, and resort to protecting their fragile egos in front of their lady friends by tearing others down.”

A laugh bubbled up from the Seamstress, true and uninhibited. “You all are quite the interesting trio. The Gourmet is still in the back preparing, why don’t you all take a seat.”

Hua Li picked the seat beside Chu Cheng. Lan Jue, meanwhile, made his way towards the back. “Is there anything I can help with, Gourmet?”

“No need,” the man’s voice responded, wafting towards them from within the kitchen. “I’ll be finished shortly.”

“You called the Wine Master?”

“You just contacted me actually. He said he had something that needed doing, and wouldn’t be able to make it. Looks like it’s just us tonight.”

“Ah man,” Lan Jue lamented. “That means no good alcohol!”

“Let’s try something different today. His liquor isn’t suitable for our meal today anyhow.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “So what were you doing even inviting the man if his alcohol isn’t suitable?”

The Gourmet didn’t care to continue the exchange, and the only sounds that came from the kitchen then were the sounds of cooking. His nostrils flared as the pungent aromas of the meal wafted towards him.

“I’m still waiting for that young woman you introduced to me the last time, Jewelry Master.” The Seamstress regarded Lan Jue from her position across the table. “We were supposed to make some fine clothes for her, but not a peep.”

Lan Jue slapped his forehead. “I forgot, forgive me. After the last meal there were a few things that needed handling. It must have been forgotten in the aftermath. Next time, I’ll bring her around to your shop.”

This brought a smile to the Seamstress’ lips. “She has an incredible figure, one I’d love to work with. You make sure you do.”

Not long after, the gourmet appeared from the kitchen, supporting a large dish with his arm. The succulent scent of cooked meat accompanied him.

Six dishes, each with their own magical allure. Six were meat, and one vegetable. The gourmet indicated each as he introduced the meal.

“Braised pork with preserved vegetables in a soy sauce. Wine-soaked crab over glass noodles. Sichuan style roasted duck. Spring chicken in jams and butter. Sweet and sour mandarin fish. And pan-seared crowndaisy chrysanthemum. All home cooked, but with a complex and pleasing taste.”

Lan Jue’s mouth had already begun watering. “Each one a dish I love. What did we deserve for such a meal, eh Gourmet? If you need something from us, just come out with it – no need for bribes.”

The Gourmet chuckled. “And what need have I of you? I guess we can call it a celebration, of the fact you’re not dead yet. There’s also a soup, but that one is for you alone. I apologize to the rest of you.”

“Uncle!” The startled and strange-sounding voice interrupted him. Every eye in the room turned towards the source.

At the onset the Gourmet had had his full attention on the food, however as the voice greeted him he lifted his head to look with no small measure of surprise.

Chu Cheng was already standing, a shocked expression on his face as he stared at the Gourmet.

The older gentleman’s eyes narrowed, his pupils shrunk. “I don’t know you. Either sit and eat, or get out.”

With that said, the Gourmet retreated back in to the boutique’s back rooms.

Chu Cheng’s expression was dark, and unsure. However, after a few moments he sat back down.

The Gourmet reappeared with a bowl of stew in hand. This time the easy smile that had been on his face was gone, replaced with a gloomy haze.

This didn’t stop the Seamstress’ smiles, though. “I seem to recall, once, you telling me that a cook must be in a good mood to work properly, Gourmet. Only in that way can one create true delicacies, you assured me. Cooking in a bad mood infuses the food with your glum aura.”

The Gourmet looked at her, and grudgingly nodded his head. His expression softened, but he never once looked Chu Cheng’s way.

Chu Cheng uttered not a sound. Contrary to his traditionally loud-mouthed behavior, he kept still and silent.

“Gourmet, the drinks? I’m assuming since these are very traditional, Former Era Chinese dishes, the drinks of our ancestors would pair nicely. White rice wine, perhaps, or millet wine?”

“Mn. You’ve only just gotten better, so nothing too strong. Let me heat

up some millet wine for you,” the Gourmet said as he rose to procure some. He returned a moment later with another tray.

Atop the tray was a small coal-burning stove, which on top of that sat a finely crafted copper tea kettle. The vestiges of its crafting were still evident along the copper body, dents and divots skillfully beat in to a pleasing pattern. The lid was shaped in the form of a coiled dragon – simple and exquisite.

Five black cups were arrayed around the small stove. The Gourmet flicked his wrist, and the cups flew gracefully from the tray to his diner’s sides.

Finally, there was the last delicate china bowl on the stove’s other side, filled with rich dark plums.

Chapter 163: The Gourmet's Story

Lan Jue beamed in admiration. "Copper kettle, charcoal fire, black pottery... the perfect combination for millet wine! Add a few slices of ginger while boiling the alcohol, and that'd be especially beneficial." As he spoke, he took the initiative and plucked up the kettle. He poured out a glass of wine for the Gourmet first before filling the others' cups.

He followed this by taking a smoked plum from the tray, and dropping one in to each glass.

"Drink the stew while it's hot," the Gourmet instructed.

"Alright," Lan Jue said. He pulled the lid off of the bowl and was immediately met with a blast of steam and a pleasant scent. He peered inside, but despite his love of food was unable to determine what the clear stew was made of.

The stew was a pale yellow, and boiling hot. A single spoonful, and Lan Jue felt it like a flood through him, a clean rejuvenating sensation. It warmed him to his core.

He even felt as though his internal energies were revitalized by the tasty soup. A small amount of steam was even lifting off from his forehead.

"What is this?" Lan Jue asked inquisitively.

"Wild grown dendrobium officinale, left untouched for a hundred years, is the main ingredient.," he replied. "In addition we have phoenix chicken from Taihua, and a dozen sorts of medicinal herbs. It serves to nourish the five primary organs, as well as the qi and blood. [1] Make sure you drink it all."

Lan Jue blinked. "Phoenix chicken? You actually found some? And where'd you get the mature dendrobium officinale? It was one of the Nine Immortal Herbs used in Former Era traditional medicine. Didn't they die out a long time ago?"

The Gourmet shook his head. "All of this good food, and here you are occupying your mouth with nonsense. Just eat!" He punctuated the order

by taking a sip of his wine, picking up his chopsticks, and getting to work on the meal.

Lan Jue took another sip of the soup, whose warmth filled him up. He then took a sip of the pleasant wine. Its own warmth, the ginger slices and the smoked plum all served to raise his temperature.

The various dishes arrayed around the table looked simple, but each were specially crafted delicacies. The stifling atmosphere from moments ago was entirely dispelled as they tucked in to the amazing food. Hua Li and Chu Cheng were happily munching away with the rest of them.

Lan Jue's favorite was certainly the crab and noodles in wine sauce. It was thick with juice, an amalgamation of high-grade Shaoxing wine and crab juices. Spread over the smooth, pleasantly textured noodles it's taste defied explanation.

It ended up Chu Cheng and Hua Li both squabbled over the final piece of the braised pork and soy sauce. Eventually they settled on splitting the final piece in half. In no time at all, all six dishes were empty. Even the sauces and juices weren't safe, for the three young visitors sopped that up with rolls of steamed bread.

The Gourmet chuckled at the display. "Be a little careful, next time. I'd hate to lose such a foodie and drinking buddy. Once you're full you guys can head out at your leisure. The next time try to avoid bringing outsiders..."

"Alright," Lan Jue said with a small chuckle. "We'll head out first, then. How about you, Seamstress?"

The pretty women looked up from her plate to reply. "I'll help the Gourmet tidy up some before heading out. Something we ladies are quite adept at." [2]

Chu Cheng shot an inconspicuous glance towards the Gourmet before wordlessly jabbing Hua Li in the side with an elbow. His friend knew the indication, and both wandered out from the Gourmet's boutique together.

By this time the Seamstress was already standing, and gathered several

plates with her slender arms. The Gourmet remained seated, chewing on a cigarette that had somehow appeared in the interim. It hung unlit from the corner of his mouth.

“Go on and smoke, it doesn’t bother me,” the Seamstress said.

The Gourmet snapped a finger and, with the motion a flame sprang to life on his fingertip. He lit the stick and almost immediately the room filled with the scent of burning tobacco.

The Seamstress continued to work in silence, with no statements or questions offered. She just grabbed up the soiled plates, and moved them to the kitchen.

“All arranged and where they’re meant to be,” the Seamstress said once everything had been put away. Make sure to get to bed early, and don’t smoke too much. I’m on my way out.”

The Gourmet nodded, following her with his eyes as she left.

He sat alone in the boutique, coiled plumes of tobacco smoke swirling around his narrowed eyes. The light living in them was complicated, but a clear pang of discomfort was easily discerned.

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Hua Li, Lan Jue and Chu Cheng slowly ambled down the Avenue towards Zeus’ Jewelry Shop.

“Nightcap?” Chu Cheng looked at his two dinner companions.

“Alright.” Lan Jue pushed his way past the store in to apartments. He returned a moment later with a bottle of brandy and three glasses.

Chu Cheng helped himself by snatching the bottle from an Jue’s hands. He poured himself a glass and downed it right away. “Ah, brandy really is something special! Millet wine’s too weak, not suitable for me.”

“What the hell was that about,” Hua Li piped up, cutting through the garbage. “Your uncle? Your real uncle?”

Chu Cheng nodded his head. “I never would have thought to look here. No wonder we haven’t been able to find him. He disappeared two years

ago.”

Lan Jue looked over his way. “If it involves some secret of your family, you don’t need to share it.”

Chu Cheng smiled indifferently. “Something I can’t share with outsider, but you two? You’re family. As a matter of fact, my uncle’s story is now almost more a legend. Are you aware of his strength, A-Jue?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “Only that it’s fire based. I’ve never actually seen him use it seriously. Still, he’s one of the Avenue’s eighteen councilmen so that has to mean something, even if he is lower on the tier list. Really all we know is that he’s an amazing cook. It’s strange, though, that he only ever cooks on occasion. He’ll go for weeks without cooking anything nice. I’ve probably been his most common guest these last few years.”

“That’s because he feels the two of you are similar,” Chu Cheng revealed.

“Oh?”

The red haired man continued. “My uncle’s story is almost like something out of a book. His generation only had him and my father. You know about my family and the inheritance that comes with it – this is also true for the power of our blood. Only for their generation there was something... different. My father only inherited a small bit of Hades’ power, to which my grandfather was very disappointed. He started with my dad right away, to cultivate his powers to a useful point and train him to look after the family business. Then my uncle was born, and my grandfather discovered he was stronger than any Adept in their family in the last hundred years.”

“What about compared to you?” Hua Li asked curiously.

Chu Cheng’s voice dropped. “According to grandpa, uncle’s powers are even purer than mine.”

Both Lan Jue and Hua Li couldn’t help it, and sucked in a breath in surprise. Both of them were quite familiar with Chu Cheng’s level of

power. Today, with the help of the amazons, Lan Jue may have soundly defeated Hua Li and Chu Cheng. But this was a game, a test. If it had been a real life-or-death battle, one where their full abilities were employed, Lan Jue's situation would have been much more dire.

During those early years, when they first met, Lan Jue was only just unlocking the secrets of his Ascension. Chu Cheng was only in his early twenties then, but was already able to command the Spirit of Hades.

Now he's saying the Gourmet's powers are even purer than his? What did it mean? The Gourmet was also at peak age for an Adept, and had years of cultivation over Chu Cheng.

"He isn't a Paragon, is he?" Hua Li asked.

Chu Cheng shook his head. "I don't know. What I do know is that when he left twelve years ago, he was already a ninth level eighth rank adept. Much stronger than I am even now. I'm only seventh rank currently, and he's got fourteen years on me. Judging by this information, I'd say it totally possible that he's a Paragon."

"So what happened back then," Lan Jue encouraged.

"Uncle'd become pretty renowned when he was younger," Chu Cheng said. "The family had placed all their hopes in him. As you're well aware, my family and Satan's line are mortal enemies, always have been. His power forced us to flee to the North. Otherwise without their bastard lineage, our family would be the greatest Force of Darkness in the West. The Dark Tower really should be Hades' Tower. It was grandpa's hope to train my uncle, to make him in to his generation's greatest Paragon. Satan was already old then, and it was his hope that with a new Hades, we could recapture our old glory."

"Until he was twenty, uncle never left the family. He had all the resources of the family at his disposal, but he also had to bear tremendous hardships in his training. He grew hard and cold from it. After he was twenty, grandpa finally allowed him to leave the compound. He wanted to toughen his son up out in the real world. He wanted him ready for the shock his body would go through once he became a Paragon. In truth, age

plays only a small role in an Adept's power. However, it is common knowledge that breaking through to Paragon before forty is best. That is when an Adept is at their most potent. Such was grandpa's plan."

"At first everything was fine. Uncle would leave, travel for a year, then return home for a few months. Almost every time he'd come back significantly stronger than when he'd left. He grew stronger, and the family's hopes and dreams grew brighter. And then, fourteen years ago, when uncle was twenty-eight, they encountered a problem."

"Grandpa had lost sight of what was important. After all, my uncle was a man, not a machine. The stress and expectations were too much. He had no freedom, no way to channel or release that pressure. Grandpa never even considered finding uncle a partner or wife. To him and the family, their only concern was that they'd finally have a new Hades."

"But he was a thinking, feeling man! And by that time he was already very strong, handsome. Naturally he'd attract some female attention. Of course for the first twenty years, he'd never even been out of the house. He was a stiff, and it was difficult for him to get his head around things from the outside world. But as time went on he grew up, became accustomed to the sensations real life had to offer. When he left at the age of twenty-seven, he'd found a girl he liked."

The fiery glint of gossip sparked behind Hua Li's eyes. "So your grandpa finds out about this woman, and forbids them to be together. It's like the plot of a movie."

Chu Cheng laughed wryly. "Even more melodramatic, in fact. When he was twenty-eight, he brought the woman back home to the family. At that point their relationship had had no negative impact on his cultivation, so even though grandpa was unhappy he still allowed it. He knew uncle was getting older and needed a family of his own. But in true tragic fashion, eventually grandpa discovered the truth; the girl uncle had chosen, had Satan's blood pumping through her veins."

1. Medicinal culinary arts are a popular thing in china. Chinese Traditional Medicine differentiates a food or herbs' efficacy based on its taste and reaction. For instance, chrysanthemum tea is often drunk in summer because of its cooling and heat-draining abilities – drink some chrysanthemum tea and you can almost taste it's clearing and soothing ability. Some restaurants, even 'fast food' chains, will put a dishes' medicinal effect next to it on the menus. The primary organs are what they call the five Zang organs; the heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and spleen. They are paired with the six 'fu' organs with which they exchange qi energies and consolidate healing effects. Those are the pericardium (the 'bag' that surrounds the heart), the stomach, small intestines, large intestine, the gallbladder, and the Triple Burner/San Jiao (the three empty cavities in the trunk of a person, i.e. the plueral, thoracic and abdominal cavities.). If anyone is interested in Chinese medicinal theory let me know, I love this stuff.
2. Sexism! A discussion for another time, but you'd be shocked at how institutionalized male dominance is in China.

Chapter 164: I am Just the Gourmet!

“Ah?” Hua Li and Lan Jue cried out in unison.

Chu Cheng nodded his head, indicating he understood their shock. “You heard right. She was related to the Prince of Demons. What’s more, her power was as pure as his. She was Satan’s daughter.”

Lan Jue looked at him, slack-jawed. “Then it must have been exceptionally dangerous for your uncle’s lover, once grandpa found out.”

Chu Cheng sighed. “You bet! Grandpa was furious. He thought she must have been there to spy on us, sent by Satan. He wanted to kill her on the spot – to him, it was absolutely unthinkable to let her leave there alive. By then uncle was in love with her, head over heels. He would risk his life for her, and so he did... by raising his hand against his father. If uncle had chosen to go all out, not even grandpa would have been able to stand against him. But uncle focused on defense alone, protecting the girl as they made their escape. In the end they made it out, but not without suffering grievous injuries.”

“Grandpa sunk in to depression. The entire family was thrown in to panic. They had to rely on protection from the North’s army. After that day, uncle returned home just once. With red eyes he asked grandpa why he had tried to kill the girl. I was there with my father and grandpa when he asked, and we all just stood looking at him in surprise. Without any explanation or discussion, grandpa threw him out. Since then uncle has never come back home. I never would have thought, twelve years later, I’d find him here on Skyfire Avenue.”

“And that’s all I know. I never heard of what happened afterward. Though once when I went back to visit grandpa, he told me he never did send someone out to kill the girl. He only sent out people to find them, but none came back with any actionable intelligence. He got sick after that, and handed the reigns of the family to my father. He lived in seclusion since then.”

Hua Li looked on with a strange expression. “That’d explain your

playboy nature. If you treat women like garbage your pops won't be afraid you'll go the way of your uncle, am I right?"

Chu Cheng shrugged his shoulders. "As possible an explanation as anything else, I guess. In this regard the family has never made any attempts to control me. Nor has anyone ever given me too much pressure. Their only stipulation is I don't leave the North too often. Since we're under protection, the Dark Tower wouldn't dare come to the North and start trouble. They probably know where I am anyway, but taking me on directly is no picnic. Plus, Satan's been pretty absent these last few years. We don't know if he's training, or it's something else."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed as he took in the information. "I had no idea the Gourmet would have such a history. So sad!" After listening to Chu Cheng recount the tale, Lan Jue couldn't help but commiserate with the Avenue's cook. Perhaps the Gourmet felt the same way.

Chu Cheng went on. "This is information I have to report to the family, A-Jue. Will this influence you in any way?"

Lan Jue let a few moments of silence go by. "Give me some time. I should ask him."

After a moment of thought Chu Cheng replied. "Give me an answer before tomorrow. This has to do with our lineage. I know my dad only wants him to come home, so..."

Ding ding ding! The familiar chime of the jewelry store's doorbell interrupted their discussion. A decidedly upset looking Gourmet entered.

All three of the young men straightened, rising to their feet when they saw who it was.

The Gourmet paid no attention to the others. He fixed Chu Cheng with a cold glare while speaking. "Tell them I won't be going back. I have no relationship with the Chu family. I have no interest in ever seeing you, or any other member of the Chu family ever again. If I do, you can't blame me for my actions. From this moment on, all I am to you is the Gourmet of Skyfire Avenue."

With that said, the older man turned on his heels and left. Ding ding ding!

As the tintinnabular sounds hung in the air of the shop's interior, both Hua Li and Lan Jue silently turned their eyes to Chu Cheng.

The young Chu family member didn't appear much changed from the exchange. In truth he'd expected just this result. "I figured this would happen. Oh well, at least we have an explanation for where he went. At the least he's still alive."

"Do you plan to give him an explanation, on behalf of your family," Lan Jue asked.

Hu Cheng's laugh was bitter. "You saw how he is. Do you think he's ready to listen to any sort of explanation from me?"

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Early morning, and Lan Jue was pedaling his bicycle to the foot of Skyfire mountain. He sent a small message through the Soulcaller gem, then waited quietly in the shade of the trees.

Chu Cheng had gone to find Hua Li, reputedly to watch his rehearsal.

Before long Lan Jue spied Zhou Qianlin descending the mountain in her school uniform. Her pretty face was still pale, but contrary to when he had left for Taihua her smooth features bore a smile. She looked like she was in a good mood.

"What's got you in such high spirits?" Lan Jue called to her, a smile of his own on his face.

"Guess," she said through a grin.

"Eh..., how am I supposed to guess? Fine, is it because that guy isn't around bugging you?" He was of course referring to Richard.

"I've been home sick for a few days," she said. "He doesn't know when I'll be returning to school. A few days of giving him the cold shoulder, and he was gone."

Lan Jue shrugged his shoulders. "That's good then. No more pointless

trips in to the bush.”

“What?”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Nothing. Just something between guys. My concern as your body guard. Don’t worry about it little miss.”

Zhou Qianlin glowered at him. “You know my name.”

Lan Jue jerked his head towards the back. “Let’s get going. I wouldn’t want you to be late.”

“Ok.” She plopped on to the back of the bike. Her right hand naturally slipped around his waist.

Lan Jue was surprised at her, this change in behavior, but pedaled forward without bringing attention to it.

“Qianlin.”

“Hm?”

“These last few days you’ve been uncomfortable, has there been anything that feels... different?”

“Actually yes,” she said. “It actually feels like there’s something more within me now. I don’t know.”

Lan Jue nodded. “How about I help check it out later?”

Zhou Qianlin remained silent.

“What is it?” he asked.

Her response was quiet. “I saw in a movie somewhere that men who speak like this to women are no good. They harbor bad intentions.”

The bike wobbled precariously, and Zhou Qianlin quickly clutched tighter to him. “What are you doing?!”

Lan Jue chortled. “You think I’m that kind of person? You think I regard you so cheaply?”

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. Flashes of the first time they met raced through his mind.

The awkward silence stretched for half a minute. "Alright," Qianlin finally replied.

"Huh?" Lan Jue twisted his head to look back at her.

She looked back at him. "Didn't you say you'd help me check? So I said alright."

Lan Jue broke in to a smile. "After your studies we'll head back to mine. I bumped in to the Seamstress yesterday, and he asked me when I would be bringing you around to have some clothes made. She said she was excited to work with you."

Zhou Qianlin looked as though she wanted to speak further, but chose not to. Instead, she only nodded her head.

Since he'd started regularly picking up Zhou Qianlin, Lan Jue's skill with a bike had improved markedly. In no time at all the familiar gates of the university pulled in to view.

They were approaching their standard corner when suddenly a huge dark figure roared passed overhead. Its speed was so great that a fierce gust of wind followed in its passage. The gust nearly pushed Lan Jue off the road.

He fought valiantly to keep the bike under control. There was no danger of throwing Qianlin from the bike, but she yelped in surprise nonetheless.

The two of them scowled at the passing shadow, a sort of blimp. As they watched it pulled up to the universities' gates and stopped. It was a white ship, whose underside undulated strangely like sea waves. It gave the illusion the ship was floating gently in the water.

"Lir University?" Zhou Qianlin muttered unconsciously.

Lan Jue brought the bike to a halt. "Think they're arrogant enough? Driving so fast in the city, not the best representation for this school."

Zhou Qianlin nodded her head in agreement. "Lir University is ranked among the top five mecha piloting schools. So of course they have a lot of great pilots. Not to mention their military ties. As a result, they are rather

unscrupulous.”

Lan Jue interjected. “I’ve heard people say they were coming for a competition, is that right? They major in mecha piloting, and us on research. What grounds could we possibly be competing on?”

“Mecha piloting of course,” Qianlin said. “Clearly to show they’re only here to bully.”

Lan Jue snorted. “I guess it’s a good thing you aren’t a mecha pilot. Go on then, anything you need call me through the soulcaller gem.”

“Alright.” Qianlin made her way towards the university’s gate.

Lan Jue pushed his bicycle behind her as she left, following at an inconspicuous distance.

The ship that had brought Lir University’s ‘diplomats’ hadn’t been allowed to enter the school grounds. Just outside the gates, its doors opened and scores of students in light blue uniforms disembarked. Interspersed were older passengers – teachers, surely.

The NEU had already arrayed a welcome party for their guests. Chief among them was, of course, teaching Director Wu Junyi. Another twenty-some were with him, university big-wigs.

With their flashy arrival, the only entrance to the school was clogged up tight. Qianlin approached as near as she could, but had to eventually come to a stop.

Lan Jue watched them as well, though he retained a natural and easy posture as he approached. To him, it was paramount that no one knew he was escorting Zhou Qianlin.

“Ah, Director Shi! Welcome, it’s been ages!” Wu Junyi’s greetings were pleasant and polite, but the look on his face was a serious one.

The man with whom he spoke was similar to him in age, but he was a fair amount taller. He was covered in a well-fitted turquoise suit that accented his sleek power haircut. He reached out a hand to grip Wu Junyi’s in greeting, flashing a wily smile. “It really has! A whole year. We

were starting to worry we weren't welcome here anymore."

Director Wu chuckled good-naturedly. "Of course you're welcome."

Director Shi continued. "That's excellent then. This year we've come fully prepared, and I'm eager for you to appreciate the skill of our teachers and students."

Wu Junyi's expression began to slip. He cleared a path, and welcomed them in with a sweep of his arm.

Chapter 165: Goddess, Friend

Director Shi did not shirk his duties as guest, nodding pleasantly as he entered the university campus. The array of students and teachers who also arrived from Lir followed at his heels.

“Eh?” A lanky student’s eyes twinkling lustily as they fell upon Zhou Qianlin.

It was always a surprise that, even though everyone was wearing the same school uniform, Qianlin was invariably picked from the crowd. She was ever the center of attention.

“Oh man look, that girl’s smokin’ fine!” The skinny student stopped dead in his tracks and whispered to a tall friend nearby.

The second student stretched over two meters tall with a head of sandy brown hair. He had a solid, strong face and copper-colored skin. Overall he was the very picture of health. He followed the skinny one’s eyes, immediately finding what the fuss was about.

His eyes were penetrating, to the point where Qianlin was instantly aware of his attention. She unconsciously looked his way.

He wasn’t the most handsome man, this tall student, but his looks were almost heroic; strong jaw, hard lines, stoic, with a pair of piercing black eyes that seemed capable of looking right through her.

Those eyes were bright with interest as they snaked over Qianlin’s alluring figure. He made no effort to conceal his intent, either, instead breaking rank to walk her way.

Qianlin froze, trying to decide whether to flee or stay. She eased perceptibly when the familiar voice rang through her mind.

“It’s alright. I’m here.”

As ever Qianlin had more than one pair of eyes cast her way, No small number of male students from her own university tried to block the tall outsider’s approach in various ways. This was their Goddess, and they aimed to ‘defend’ her even though only the older students knew much of

the rivalry between the two schools.

“Get out of my way!” The man growled coldly at the wall of young men who’d suddenly appeared. The aura of his discipline flared, pulsing outward to intimidate the others. It was a strange sensation, almost more like a presence. The students of the NEU were forcibly pushed to either side. The power receded before it encountered Qianlin. To the others looking on it simply appeared as though the young men were doing as commanded, moving out of his way.

However, with the path before him opened the tall student made no further advance. He stood back a ways, staring at Qianlin. When he spoke, his voice was boisterous. “Hey there cutie, my name’s Xiao Han. You sure look good enough to be my girl.”

The surrounding students exploded in a chorus of indignation. No small number of young men approached threateningly.

Xiao Han’s voice was loud, loud enough for both Wu Junyi and Director Shi to hear despite the fact they were already on campus.

Both of them stopped the instant they heard it.

Qianlin, however, seemed unaffected. She was still, calm, and beautiful as ever.

“I’m not interested in little boys.” Her smooth, melodious voice was biting. Her rejection clear, she made for the gates.

“Heh, you heard her guys. All you little boys go run home to momma, now.”

“Sod off back to Lir University!”

“Our goddess is a person of character! Long live our school goddess!”

Xiao Han’s face grew dark. Once more his aura reached out, even more oppressive than before.

At this moment, Director Shi’s voice stopped the inevitable escalation. “Alright, Xiao Han. Save your energy for the competition.”

Xiao Han froze in reaction to the voice behind him. His expanding

Discipline suddenly vanished. He turned on his heels without a word and returned to the dwindling group of outsiders. His exit was cheered on by a chorus of sniffs and curses from the NEU students left behind.

“The young have no sense of social responsibility, Director Wu.” Director Shi shook his head, laughing easily at the situation. “Young-uns, am I right? So full of piss and vinegar, all raging hormones. But we weren’t much different when we were young, eh? Heh heh.”

Director Wu’s response was measured and calm. “Mm, hormones. More like a group of beasts. Isn’t your university supposed to be for mecha pilots?”

“You-!” Director Shi suddenly let his good-old-boy facade slip, but as quickly as he’d lost his temper he was back to normal. “It looks like teaching the young is definitely a passion of yours! I’m eager to see how they perform during our competition.”

“Oh you’ll see it, alright,” Director Wu replied.

Lan Jue followed the bulk of students as they pushed passed the crowd to enter the campus. He worked valiantly to keep Zhou Qianlin in sight.

He was unpleasantly surprised to see her in this sort of situation. Every man that looked upon her was like a fiend, with a strange madness in his eyes. And yet none dared come within two meters of her. It was like they were a group of would-be white knights protecting their queen as they moved as one disjointed unit further in to the school.

What a place, this Lir University! They were so uncouth and aggressive. The relationship between the two large educational facilities was interesting, at the very least.

Lan Jue made sure Qianlin was safe before making his way to the electives building. As ever, all eyes turned to him as he entered.

He stopped amid a round of applause, nearly frightened out of his skin.

“W-what is all this...?”

Jin Yan rose to her feet and approached, a small smile lighting up her

cute features. “We’re happy to have you back safely, Professor Lan. This time it was really frightening for all of us.”

Lan Jue laughed it off. “Wasn’t it? Making it back alive was a miracle! And you’re doing alright, too, Professor Jin?”

She shook her head, and it was then he noticed the red tinge to her eyes. She was fighting the urge to wrap him in an embrace. “Fine, only going through this, surviving, certainly makes it clear how much of a treasure life really is.”

“Exactly! And we’re family here, friends and colleagues in hardship. Isn’t that right, Professor Lan?” Wang Hongyuan spoke up emphatically as he approached from behind Jin Yan. He clapped a hand on to Lan Jue’s shoulder. Though it looked like a gentle greeting, the expression was more forceful than it appeared.

Lan Jue retained his composure, shooting the dance instructor a glance. “It’s good to see you also made it back alive, Professor Wang.”

The two gentlemen’s eyes met. Each saw the caution and admonition within the glance of the other.

Jin Yan tittered at him. “Alright, Professor Wang. Professor Lan just got back, let’s let him rest up a bit before we start beating on him.”

“There’s actually something Professor Lan and I have something to discuss, right Professor?” Wang Hongyuan smiled disarmingly. “Would you mind speaking with me for a minute in the hall?”

“Absolutely!” Lan Jue knew what this was about, and if he hadn’t had been approached by the dance instructor, Lan Jue would have eventually sought him out himself.

The two men exited the office under the suspicious gaze of Jin Yan. They smiled pleasantly until they walked a ways down the hall to a secluded window. Then Wang Hongyuan threw a punch at Lan Jue.

The etiquette teacher didn’t move, effortlessly knocking the hand aside.

“You moron,” the skinny man spat. “What the hell were you thinking?”

I'm honestly flabbergasted you made it out in one piece." Wang Hongyuan hissed at him in a whisper.

Lan Jue's response was equally as agitated. "No wonder you wanted me to make it back. You don't know what happened after you left."

Wang Hongyuan continued, his voice quiet. "How the hell did you get so strong so suddenly? What did you take?"

Lan Jue give him a bitter smirk. "Not even worth it to keep asking. All you need to know is I very nearly died from that fiasco. It really was a miracle I was able to make it back. I do need you, though, to keep the fact that I am an Adept and a mecha pilot a secret."

Wang Hongyuan nodded. "No need to even say it. Just make sure you keep my own secret under wraps!"

Lan Jue's answer displayed his uncertainty. "I'm curious myself. After all, you revealed your secret to us on Taihua. No one checked up on you or said anything when you got back?"

It was Wang Hongyuan's turn to smirk. "Of course they checked up on me, but for better or worse I stayed behind to save people. Nor do they know I'm a mecha pilot. So in the end we came to an agreement. So long as I keep my Discipline under wraps, I can continue teaching dance. There were some provisions, but basically it boils down to this; so long as I stick to the university's rules, I'm fine. Otherwise I'm out."

Lan Jue smiled at him. "The humanity! If the school knew you were that great hero from the news they wouldn't dare punish you for anything."

Wang Hongyuan shot back with a sarcastic rebuttal. "Enough. You know I'm still single – I'll need to get engaged soon, and that anchorwoman looked pretty good. You should think about it, actually. I can't, since it'd kill my girl."

Lan Jue's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean Jin Yan? Since when were you two a thing?"

Wang Hongyuan's posture straightened with pride. "You didn't know about that, eh? A friend in need is a friend indeed is what they say, right? I

actually took her out for a meal yesterday. As a result our relationship is better than ever. All I need is for you to be scarce for a little while, and there'll be no problems. Oh, that's right – you can leave now.”

“Leave?” Lan Jue looked at him in confusion and irritation. “I have classes to prepare! There's a class tomorrow.”

“We just got the news,” Wang Hongyuan continued. “Due to this concert, all electives courses for the next three days have been canceled. The concert is the day after tomorrow. You think anyone will actually be interested in coming to your class under these conditions?”

Inwardly, Lan Jue cursed Hua Li for his interference. “I won't complain about a day off. Who doesn't like a little relaxation. Fine, I'll head out. Good luck!”

With that said, Lan Jue starting walking down the hall to leave. Lately he had a wealth of things to handle, a mountain of things to prepare. Not the least of his worries was the competition approaching in DreamNet. Aside from the implications for humanity, the more immediate concern for him was the honor of the Four Divine Monarchs – a reputation on the line. He had to make sure to get back and practice his mecha combat skill set.

“Professor Lan!” Wang Hongyuan called after him.

Lan Jue stopped and look back. “What's up?”

The dance teacher's mouth curled in to a grin. His voice was clear, but sounded as though it were being whispered directly in to his ear. “You're part of Skyfire Avenue, aren't you. Are you still looking for members?”

Lan Jue shrugged a shoulder lazily. “Whether or not they do, I have no idea. I can make some introductions, though. Ah, right, and later just call me by name. You forget what I told you on Taihua? If we made it back alive, we'd be friends.”

Wang Hongyuan laughed amicably. “Get out of here. Keep away from my lady, you hear me?”

Lan Jue waved and made his exit.

Wang Hongyuan remained where he was, watching Lan Jue leave.

I got a friend, huh, he thought.

Not a bad feeling.

Chapter 166: Still Worse Than Trash?

Lan Jue exited from the teaching affairs building, and made his way quickly back towards Skyfire Avenue. He was curious to learn more about Zhou Qianlin through their check-up. However, that wasn't until later tonight. He had time enough to practice mecha piloting in DreamNet.

The entire campus of the NEU was a mess of chattering students and busy workers, all abuzz over the upcoming concert. It was, after all, the first time something like this had happened at the university. Hua Li was called the First Man of the Alliances – and that was hardly an exaggeration. Be it personal ability, looks, or his family's spending power, he was far and beyond the ken of your average person.

“Professor Lan.” As he moved towards the university's gates, a cold greeting stopped him in his tracks.

“Hm?” Lan Jue turned his head to find the source of the voice. His eyes fell upon Tan Lingyun, walking towards him in a black dress suit and black-rimmed glasses.

Was his fortune really so bad? Just a few more steps and he'd have been free! His expression was stiff as he addressed her.

“Ah, Professor Tan. Hello, hello.” He was clearly loathe to engage in conversation with this ‘Savage Goddess,’ but he had to at least say hello.

“Where'd you go that day? Weren't you aware we'd stayed behind to find you? Do you have any idea of the cost?” She hissed at him in fierce and angry tones, the light of anger slowly growing brighter in the depths of her eyes.

Lan Jue glowered sheepishly as he spoke. “I was only thinking about helping who I could.”

“Dumbass!” She screamed at him.

Her voice rang against the sides of the buildings, and invariably drew the eyes of passing teachers. Lan Jue's own sights were desperately searching for a place to hide or escape.

“Professor, we’re intended to be role models. Surely cursing at someone in public isn’t –“

“Cursing? I ought to beat you! About the only thing saving you from it is the fact that you’re normal, and wouldn’t be able to protect yourself from my power. Not to mention taking out the trash myself will only bring my status down. You know, its people like you I hate the most. Worse than trash, a pure coward. Make sure you keep yourself out of my sight, I don’t want you poisoning my eyes!” She unceremoniously kicked him in the shin before turning, and stomping off.

“Hssss!” Lan Jue hissed in pain and grabbed his lower leg protectively. He hopped up and down on his good leg like a cartoon character.

DAMNIT! Why?! Why is it I end up suffering every time I run in to the Savage Goddess?

Lan Jue slinked out from the campus. Under the curious eyes of the teachers and students he passed, he quickly clambered up on top of his bike and raced away.

After a few kilometers he settled down, and slowed. He was no longer the center of everyone’s attention. But it still stung – this was the second time that awful woman left him the battered victim in front of everyone. The first time, of course, being that day in the hall with Richard.

If that’s what she wants, then so be it. She doesn’t want to see me, and I sure as hell have no interest in running in to her again.

Still, he had to respect how frank and straight-forward she was. There was also a reason for her anger. She’d almost died that day, running through the forests to find him and Wang Hongyuan. In the end it came down to him, and he was the reason for everything that happened to her.

Little by little, the depression and anger within him subsided, replaced by a sense of hopelessness. There was nothing he could do about Professor Tan, but she had her heart in the right place. She was at least a person with a strong sense of responsibility.

Thinking on it made him sad.

Lan Jue made it home, entered his private DreamNet cabin, and proceeded to clean house. The results were heard later throughout DreamNet.

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Nightly DreamNet News. Zeus – powerful mercenary and legend of DreamNet has appeared suddenly after an extended absence. From ten in the morning to three in the afternoon, for five continuous hours, Zeus defeated one hundred and three challengers without a single defeat. No one was able to stand against his explosive power – and in fact, none even landed a blow.

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“Why do you look so tired?” This was the first thing Qianlin said to him, when she met Lan Jue at their corner after school.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “I did some exercise, maybe a little excessive.”

Zhou Qianlin nodded, as though coming to a sudden realization. “I see. Well remember to consider your age, and not overdo it.”

Lan Jue’s face darkened, but when he looked towards her he immediately spied her impish grin. “Fine,” he spat good-naturedly, “go ahead and call me old.”

“Cousin, it looks like you have a short memory.” For the second time today, Lan Jue was interrupted by a rude voice from behind.

Only this time, he didn’t have to turn his head to know who it was. Without a moment’s hesitation, he spun around and took several long strides towards the source.

Richard’s face was a mask of displeasure. Zhou Qianlin had been out of school for some time, and it was his hope to reconnect with her once she returned. He hadn’t expected to stumble across her and Lan Jue bantering flirtatiously.

“Richard,” Lan Jue growled, “this is the last time I’m telling you: leave my family be. If you don’t, I’ll beat you so badly your father won’t even

recognize you.” He shook a fist under the young man’s nose, then turned away with a practiced and dismissive grace. He climbed up on to his bike and beckoned for Qianlin to follow.

Richard was truly stunned. Lan Jue’s viciousness, his ferocity was a complete paradigm shift from the gentle and learned professor he was accustomed to. For a second he didn’t know how to respond.

But by the time he recovered and had a fair comeback on hand, Lan Jue had already ridden off in to the distance with Zhou Qianlin.

“Bastard!” Richard angrily stomped a foot. Suddenly, a dark and mysterious figure appeared at his side.

“Master,” the shadow hissed, “would you like me to take care of him?”

Richard cut him off with a wave of his hand. “That won’t do. He’s with Qianlin. If we want to deal with him, it’ll have to be at a time when there’s no one around to see. We have to be especially careful Qianlin doesn’t trace it back to me. I’m not only interested in her body. I want her heart, too.”

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Lan Jue pedaled evenly along the bumpy road, a smile on his face. “Pretty intimidating, huh?”

“Oh yes,” Qianlin said. “Like a hoodlum, the kind that might kidnap girls. And when did I become your family, anyway? My family name is Zhou, yours is Lan. Have some dignity.”

Lan Jue replied, ignoring the jabs. “I’m your bodyguard. Of course we’re family. At least so long as I’m on the clock. It’s my job to protect you, and he wanted me to stay away from you. I have to force him to leave if I’m to effectively do my job.”

Zhou Qianlin’s response was muted. “The Austin family is the most influential family in the West. You should be careful.”

Lan Jue’s grin widened. “Take it easy, don’t you worry. I’m a competent bodyguard, I promise.”

Zhou Qianlin suddenly changed subjects. “I’m planning on going to Grace hospital tomorrow. Are you coming with me?”

“Yup! I quite like it there actually. It feels like a good, wholesome cleanse of body and soul.”

Zhou Qianlin’s sweet laughter hung in the air as they trundled along the mountain path.

Chapter 167: The Driver

As the two arrived at the entrance of Skyfire Avenue, Lan Jue didn't take Qianlin directly back to his place. Instead they made a quick stop at a nearby store.

The façade was a sight more modern than the shops on Skyfire Avenue. The black wall sported a semicircle pattern, with a series of line below it drawn in to a sharp corner.

Below those, were a series of letters: Wendy Wong.

"Where are we," Qianlin asked. She looked quizzically at Lan Jue.

"The Seamstresses shop! I told you she was urging me to bring you by yesterday. I called ahead and told her you were coming." Lan Jue punctuated the sentence by sauntering towards the shop.

Zhou Qianlin followed behind. "This is a clothing shop?"

Lan Jue replied. "In the interest of truth, this is specifically a custom tailor's shop. The Seamstress' earnings are very good indeed, and the clothes she makes earn universal praise. I get most of my suits from her."

"Great!" Qianlin said delightedly.

The door was closed, prompting Lan Jue to press a button discretely placed to one side. After a few moments, the Seamstress appeared from within.

She was clad in a fine white shirt with a lacey neckline, tucked stylishly in to black pants. The clothes outlined her slender figure. With her sleeves rolled up, she looked ready to work.

As she opened the door, the Seamstress beamed a pleasant smile at Zhou Qianlin. "Hello, Qianlin. We meet again!"

"Hello Seamstress," the young girl responded in equally pleasant tones.

The Seamstress chuckled. "You aren't one of these stuffy Avenue types. Call me by my name, Wendy."

"Alright."

The Seamstress stepped aside, allowing her two guests to enter the shop. It was a small place, by comparison, with only a few mannequins with finished suits dotting the interior.

The interior wasn't as modern in appearance as the outside suggested. In fact, the decor had a much more classical feel. High-quality planks of wood covered the floors and walls, specialty-made cabinets occupied the corners, a dais with three full-length mirrors dominated the center and an Italian office desk was pushed to one side. It wasn't large, but it screamed refinement. Cozy, would be a fine way to describe it.

There was another in the shop, other than the Seamstress as the two made their way in. A man, in gray pants and a vest covering a white shirt, sporting a fine tie. He looked resolute and dignified, but with the slightest hint of a wild side.

He nodded ever so slightly upon seeing Lan Jue. "Jewelry Master. It's been a long time."

Lan Jue was surprised to see the man. "Driver, when did you get back? I heard you were out participating in a competition."

The one they called the Driver smiled. "That's right! Once the competition had concluded, I heard the Avenue has a few things on its plate to deal with soon. I rushed back to offer my help."

Lan Jue nodded in understanding. He turned to Zhou Qianlin, who was standing quietly nearby. "This is Skyfire Avenue's resident racecar driver. We call him the Driver. And this is Zhou Qianlin, my friend. She's here to get some clothes done from Wendy."

"I've actually been waiting here for you," the Driver revealed. "Would you like a glass?"

Lan Jue smirked. "Sure! And why haven't I ever seen you around the Wine Master's place?"

The Driver shook his head. "I'm not overly fond of sharing a drink with that old fuddy-duddy. I much prefer drinking with people my own age." He skillfully plucked a few bottles from the nearby cabinet as he spoke, as

though he already knew well where everything in the shop was. He placed a couple whisky glasses and the bottles on the Italian table between them.

“And you, Miss Zhou?” The Driver raised a questioning brow towards the young woman.

She smiled back at him. “Water is fine for me, thank you.”

“Very well.” He answered by producing a bottle of water and putting it before her. Lan Jue took a seat opposite him.

The Seamstress snatched up Zhou Qianlin’s hand and pulled her toward the back before she had a chance to sit. She pulled shut a curtain to give them some privacy. “Let me take your measurements. Don’t pay any attention to the boys.”

The Driver indicated the bottles he extricated from the cabinet. “Which would you like?”

Lan Jue shot his companion a big thumbs-up. “You are certainly more fun to drink with. At the very least you aren’t as stingy as the Wine Master.”

The Driver’s bright laughter filled the store. “Make sure you tell him that the next time you see him.”

Lan Jue snickered as he took up a previously opened bottle. He pulled the cork free and poured himself and the Driver a small bit. “We’ll try this one first, an eighteen-year Glenfiddich. It’s got a smoother taste. Only malt whisky of the highlands.”

The Driver smiled at his drinking buddy’s expertise. “Starting easy, it looks like your plan is to finish everything in front of you!”

Lan Jue tapped his glass against the Driver’s, the crystalline chime hanging between them. “You took them all out right? If I don’t drink them, you’ll lose face!”

Both of them lapsed in to silence as they partook of the rich golden liquid. Its warmth filled their bellies, spreading out to cover their whole bodies in a comfortable heat. The rich malt scent opened up their pores.

Lan Jue sighed contentedly. “A little while ago I’d asked the Wine Master to drink his 1985 Talisker with me. He got so upset he almost kicked me out, so we settled on a Talisker 18.”

The Driver laughed. “That certainly sounds like the crotchety old man. With all the liquor he has, you could drink yourself blind every night and still have enough to last a lifetime. He doesn’t get it; you spend all your time trying to get more great alcohol, you’ll never be satisfied with actually drinking it.”

“He isn’t entirely wrong though,” Lan Jue said in the old man’s defense. “After all, most of the great alcohol from the former era can’t be reproduced. Drink it, and it’s gone forever.”

“I hear your recent visit to Taihua was a dangerous one,” the Driver said, changing the subject.

Lan Jue nodded. “Yup. I was still recovering from an earlier injury, and was lucky I got back. Fortunately, the Doctor and Wine Master rushed over and saved me. If they hadn’t we wouldn’t be sharing this fine bottle.”

The Driver shook his head. “More specifically, no one with an even temper to share this bottle with. Come, another glass.”

They finished off their small glass before the Driver reached out to snatch up the second bottle. He didn’t bother to change the glass before pouring out another round for the two of them.”

“For our second bottle, we have a very traditional McCarran 25. Rare and excellent,” the Driver explained.

Lan Jue nodded. “Indeed! The McCarran label has a long heritage stretching back it to the Former Era. It was called the King of Whiskies. In fact, not everyone enjoyed it’s fair and placid taste. But at this age it has a beautiful rich flavor, and a lingering after-taste that comes in layers. Complicated. I myself am a very big fan. And when drinking spirits, we’re doing it properly – one doesn’t need to finish the entire bottle in one sitting, and in fact can try a breadth of whiskies by spreading them out. Different beverages give the drinker a different sensation, yes? It doesn’t have as many rules and requirements as red wine to properly enjoy.”

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Within the back room.

The Seamstress continuously praised her younger counterpart as she busily measured Qianlin's figure. "Oh, your figure really is perfect. Perfectly proportional, it's uncanny. And all the charms of a proper woman to boot."

Zhou Qianlin's pretty face adopted a blush. "You're too kind, Miss Wendy."

Chapter 168: Body Check

The Seamstress giggled. "Making clothes is my hobby, and for people like me we don't simply like to make clothes for anyone. No, we prefer doing so for people with the proper physique. Those are our most appreciated clients. For a good tailor, a set of clothing is only as beautiful as the person wearing it. So for you, I've got a formal dress and a summer dress in mind. What color do you prefer?"

Zhou Qianlin thought for a moment. "Um... white?"

The Seamstress beamed. "Excellent. White suits you. It goes well with your pale skin, and sets off your blue eyes and black hair. I don't believe it will need any ostentatious decorations or primping, either – just a few adjustments to really accentuate your body type. You're already really very beautiful, you know. And nothing too fancy, that'd take away from your natural looks. Steal the show, darling. Redundant, no? Simple is best I think, yes."

"I trust your judgment," Qianlin offered.

The Seamstress continued speaking as she measured and recorded Qianlin's measurements. Her voice dropped a few notches in volume. "Don't you find it odd that the Driver would be here waiting for the Jewelry Master?"

Zhou Qianlin nodded her head.

The Seamstress continued her work while speaking. "Actually this store isn't entirely mine. Part of it is owned by the Driver. That makes him part owner and manager, darling. He loves suits you know – obsessed – to the point where our store's profits aren't enough to keep up with his demand. He also likes to smoke his cigars and drink his booze here. He and the Jewelry Master are old drinking buddies. He heard two days ago that our young Jewelry Master would be stopping by, and stayed specifically to speak with him. Men, darling – nothing but smoke smoke smoke, drink drink drink. I've even developed an affinity for the damn stench."

Lan Jue's voice wafted towards them from beyond the curtain. "... 1985

Talisker original cask for the third bottle. It's an old one, and I like the smoky taste..."

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"Alright, so let's pour you out a little more of this one." They heard the Driver laugh as the third bottle's cork popped away. "Then what do you think, hm? What order should we follow."

"Stronger and stronger, naturally," Lan Jue instructed. "The Bowmore would be good, and the last I think. A nice, strong taste without that disinfectant fluid finish. There are other things for me to do today, so this will be enough."

"Got it!"

Half an hour later, the Driver and Seamstress stood at the front of their store, wishing Lan Jue and his guest farewell.

"Take it easy, we'll be back another time for more," Lan Jue said, waving happily to the two behind him.

The Driver chuckled. "We'll be here waiting. Next time no restrictions, I'll have ten bottles of whisky waiting."

Lan Jue responded with a hearty laugh of his own. "A few bottles over forty years old are enough. The Dalmore from a while ago was quite fine, if I remember. The one with antlers on the label. Find us that one."

The Driver's expression warped as he twitched. "No wonder the Wine Master hates calling you over. You're a real bastard! Always the most expensive bottle!"

Lan Jue snickered sinfully. "Be glad I'm not asking for the 60th Coronation whisky. You could race for years and not have the money for one. So good."

"Go, get out of here! I'm scared of you already." The Driver grabbed the Seamstress and pulled her inside. He certainly looked like he had changed his mind about inviting him for another round.

"Ahaha!" Lan Jue's carefree laughter rang along the street as he took

Qianlin back to his shop.

He went directly to the back, Qianlin in tow, under the watchful and curious gaze of Xiuxiu and Ke'er.

After the door closed, Qianlin turned a skeptical eye unto her host. "You brought me back here for a body check?"

Lan Jue shrugged. "Yup, I'll just do a quick check myself. Is there somewhere else you'd prefer?"

Qianlin was almost speechless, but replied all the same. "Fine, let's get started then. Afterwards it'll be time for me to go home."

"Alright, then why don't you sit cross-legged on the bed," Lan Jue instructed.

"The bed?" Her eyes drifted to the furniture as a blush crept across her face.

Lan Jue finally caught the implication and spoke up hastily to his defense. "Sorry, no that's not my meaning. Don't misunderstand!"

Zhou Qianlin rolled her eyes at him, then plopped on to the sofa. "Here."

She sat cross-legged on the sofa, her back perfectly straight. Lan Jue stood at her side, and from here he could spy her perfect neck, drawing a fine line down to her back. His eyes traced further, down her spine to the pleasant curve of her backside.

His depression and sadness had served to quell any interest in women, any emotion at all. But since meeting Qianlin, he found he couldn't entirely suppress those feelings as he once could. In fact, every time they met, he had to make sure he didn't look at her too much. He feared he'd forget himself, and imagine she was Hera again.

Zhou Qianlin waited for what seemed like ages with no sound or motion coming from her side. She turned her head eventually, and caught him gawking.

As Lan Jue met those sky-blue eyes, he shook himself from his stupor. He sat cross-legged behind her, reaching his hands towards her back.

He paused for a moment, and took a long deep breath. He took the time to stabilize the chaos in his heart before finally pressing his palms against her.

Even through her clothes, he could feel how soft and smooth her skin was. He stopped again to take a breath and ease his heart then slowly, gently reached out with his Discipline in to her.

The Soulcaller gem against his chest warmed.

“Relax.”

“Mm.”

In reality, Lan Jue had already checked her once when he'd stolen in to her house. This time was mostly so he could reconfirm, and remember.

After a moment Lan Jue retracted his hands. “I’m sure of it, you weren’t actually sick before. It was a symptom of your Discipline awakening.”

“Discipline awakening?” Zhou Qianlin rose to her feet. “I’m not very familiar with Adepts, but aren’t I too old for a Discipline to be awakening?”

“It’s not unheard of,” Lan Jue assured, “just rare. Strangely, though, I can’t pin down what your Discipline actually is. But whatever the case, this is a good thing. It means your Discipline won’t be terribly strong, but it’ll certainly make your body better. Would you like me to help you with your Discipline cultivation?”

She shot him a sidelong glance. “So long as it doesn’t take away from your bodyguard duties, sure.”

It was Lan Jue’s turn to roll his eyes at her. “You really take me for that kind of person?”

Zhou Qianlin’s face split in an impish grin. “Who knows?”

Lan Jue could feel it. There was something inexplicable, some feeling that sprang up instantly within him whenever they were together. There was a world of difference from now, in this time of peace between them, and when they were upset.

“Alright, I’ll teach you. We’ll start with some meditation techniques. Practice every day when you get home, and you’ll slowly start to feel the changes in your body. Later, if you feel as though there are some significant changes, tell me and we’ll adjust your cultivation schedule.”

They spent the next few moments going over the fundamentals of message. She was a smart girl – Lan Jue only needed to explain twice before she had it down. They practiced together a few times before she found her center, then he let her slip in to meditation for an hour before bringing her back.

“Time to send me back,” she said as she blinked her eyes.

Lan Jue hesitated. “Would you like to get something to eat?”

Qianlin looked at him. “If it’s as good as the last time, absolutely.” Of course, she referred to the Bluefin tuna she’d enjoyed at the Gourmet’s house all those days ago.

Lan Jue shrugged helplessly. “Unfortunately no. Compared to the Gourmet I’m not even worthy of being called an amateur. Simply things are fine though. It’s already dark, aren’t you hungry?”

“What’s for dinner then?”

“Whatever you like.”

“You’re making it?”

“What,” Lan Jue contested, “do I not look like I know how to cook?”

Qianlin nodded her head without a moment’s hesitation. “Exactly right, you don’t. I won’t get poisoned?”

Lan Jue’s face twitched. “I won’t need to. I sorta feel more like strangling you, so what can we do?”

“Take your best shot!” Qianlin smirked at him, getting up in his face.

Lan Jue lifted his arms and made as though for her throat, but stopped an inch away and let them drop in bitter defeat. He stomped towards the kitchen.

“Wait a little while, should only be a minute. It may not be delicious but it won’t kill you.”

Qianlin covered her mouth as she giggled, ignoring him and trotting in to the kitchen.

“What do you have here?” She leaned against the door frame, peering in to the small room.

Lan Jue simply pointed towards the refrigerator.

She slinked over and pulled the door open. She gave its contents the once over before speaking. “Well, at least we’re sure you don’t have any rats.”

“Why.” Lan Jue grunted as he pulled a pot from a cabinet.

“It’d probably starve,” she muttered.

Lan Jue made his way over and, sure enough, less than eighty percent of his fridge was barren. A few eggs, some drinks, and a tomato. That was about it.

“Ehm... how about we go out for some food, hm? Of nothing comes nothing, am I right!” He spread his arms and shrugged sheepishly. He didn’t often go out for groceries, as that was usually Xiuxiu’s responsibility. He hadn’t been home lately, so naturally there’d be little in the house.

“Do you have noodles? Enough spices?”

Lan Jue winced. “I... actually have no idea. But! When I went to Taihua I thought we’d be munching on wild stuff, so I actually bought a fair amount of spices. Take a look.”

He swept his arm, and with a bright silver flash there appeared a bevy of items on the table. The light and items had come from Thor’s Promise.

He was pleased to find that he not only had all manner of ordinary spices, but also cloves and other more exotic fare. All were fresh and ready, kept so by virtue of their interdimensional storage.

“I think we may also have noodles,” he offered before pulling a bag of

noodles from a nearby cabinet.

“We won’t need to go out to eat. You go out and wait.” Zhou Qianlin rolled up her sleeves, then shoved Lan Jue out of the kitchen.

Chapter 169: Hand-Rolled Noodles

“Do you need any help?” Lan Jue popped his head in to the kitchen and called the question to Zhou Qianlin’s back.

“No need, if you help it’ll just take longer.” She waved him away, then began to rummage through his cabinets. She began pulling out the things she’d be needing.

She began by washing all of the utensils – after all, she had no idea how long it’d been since they’d been used. When she was finished, she poured some flour in to one of the cleaned pans. A little water, and there she had some dough which she immediately began to knead.

“What are you making?” Once again Lan Jue poked his head in to the kitchen, curiosity getting the better of him. He recalled the earlier days; when he and Hera had only been together a short time; when he’d only just started his road to fame in the mercenary world; when he took on any and every job they threw his way. During that time, he wasn’t so picky and was simply pleased to have enough of something tasty to fill his belly.

His more discerning tastes didn’t develop until after he’d made the move to Skyfire Avenue. Over the last three years the bulk of his time was spent in decadence, learning about the finer things, and with the exception of lovemaking had all he needed to forget his sorrows.

As such it was strange to him to watch Zhou Qianlin, busily pacing around the kitchen as she worked. It filled him with an odd sensation he couldn’t quite describe.

As far as he could remember, he and Hera had never cooked or eaten together. It had always been up to the individual as to when and what to eat.

Zhou Qianlin spoke to him without turning her head. “Get out. The kitchen is no place for a man. I have everything I need.” With that, she shut the door in his face.

Lan Jue wandered back to the living room, where he settled himself

down on his sofa. He was surprised to find a sense of excitement and expectation welling up inside of him. It wasn't altogether different from the excitement he felt when going to the Gourmet's for a meal.

Of course that peculiar sensation persisted through the excitement. It was a feeling he hadn't experienced in a long, long time.

If only she were Hera, he thought, then all would be perfect. A thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

Ten minutes later

A hiss rose from the kitchen. Lan Jue, almost without thinking, immediately made his way to the door to discover what happened. He pulled it open and peered inside.

He was immediately struck with a gentle but alluring scent, of raw onion in peanut oil. That was the source of the noise.

Zhou Qianlin was in an apron, carefully placing the chopped onions in to the frying pan. She slowly stirred the sizzling veggies with a wooden spoon before repeating the process with a plate of diced and peeled tomatoes.

That hiss again, louder, as a plume of steam arose from the pan. The humming ventilator over the stove sucked it all away. The astringent scent of the onions and the fresh tomato mixed and mingled in the air around him.

Lan Jue took a deep breath through his nose. "Mm, smells good!"

Qianlin didn't attempt to expel him this time, busily stirring the pan's contents. After a moment she threw in another handful of raw onion and continued.

"That's an awful lot of onion." Lan Jue looked at the pot skeptically.

She nodded. "It's no good without enough onion. More is better."

She stirred a little while longer, then stepped away just long enough to pick up a small pot half-full of water. She put it on the stove, and set the fire underneath.

Lan Jue's culinary studies kicked in, then, and he immediately knew what was happening in his kitchen. He spied the noodles laying across his cutting board, too. "Hand-rolled noodles! I'm impressed, I didn't know you could make noodles."

Zhou Qianlin rolled her eyes in faux exasperation. "There's a whole lot you don't know, huh?"

The tomatoes boiled until they became a paste, then water was added. It was brought to a boil to thicken, then salt was added. Next, the fire was turned down and eggs were added. When all was done, the contents were poured together in to the fried onions.

Red, yellow, and green suspended in a light pink broth. A fine gravy of tomato, egg and onion.

With the slightest dab of sesame oil, the dish was complete. Qianlin sighed pitifully. "A shame there's no shrimp. If we did this would be much better."

The second, smaller pot had begun to boil, and the noodles steamed within. She poured cold water within and waited for it to boil anew. She repeated the process two more times, then shut the fire off.

Two bowls; one big, one small, both filled with cooling noodles. Their surface dripped with the aromatic red sauce. A simple but fine dinner.

Lan Jue watched Qianlin as she worked. Like floating clouds over flowing water she moved from one action to another with a natural grace. But there was no wasted movement, no redundancy. Beautiful and efficient. By the time the dishes were on the dining table, the kitchen had been tidied.

She handed a pair of chopsticks to Lan Jue, and noticed his stupefied expression. "What are you looking at? Eat your food."

"Oh." His head dropped to look at his bowl. He swallowed, then tucked

in.

Hand-rolled noodles had a special texture that machine products didn't possess. Paired with the thick tomato, egg and onion gravy, and it was quite the treat [1]. Qianlin was only a few noodles in to her plate before Lan Jue finished. Not even the vestiges of gravy remained.

She furrowed her brows at him. "Eat slower. Noodles are easy to digest but you'll still get the hiccoughs."

Lan Jue wiped his mouth with a nearby napkin. "Mph, delicious. I didn't know you were so skilled. You should come stay in the Avenue, steal the Gourmet's job."

Qianlin poured half the contents of her bowl in to his. "You still look hungry, have some more. If it's still not enough I don't know what to tell you. There aren't any more tomatoes or eggs."

Lan Jue was surprised by her generosity. He looked down at his bowl, then to her, then to his bowl again. She was too busy eating her noodles to notice.

Lan Jue ate without any further words of thanks or praise. He took his time with this helping, and by the time he'd finished so had Qianlin.

She gathered the bowls and walked back in to the kitchen.

Lan Jue leaned comfortably against his chair, never moving from his spot next to the dinner table. His eyes were alive with contentment.

After the bowls had been washed and returned, Qianlin exited the kitchen. "Alright, time to get going."

"Alright!" Lan Jue pushed himself to his feet.

They exited in to the store to find it still open, with Xiuxiu and Ke'er in attendance. Xiuxiu spoke up as she saw them leave the apartments. "Ah, boss. Are you two heading out?"

Lan Jue nodded. "I'm sending her home. I'll be back later."

"Be careful on the road," Xiuxiu entreated.

Ding ding ding! Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin disappeared from sight. As they did, Xiuxiu's pleasant expression slipped, and her eyes adopted a far-away look.

Ke'er spoke, her voice a whisper. "I'm sure there's nothing going on, sis."

Xiuxiu's features snapped back to normal. She shook her head. "I'm fine. Whether or not they do is no business of ours! Anyway, it's closing time."

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Lan Jue stood by his bicycle, watching Qianlin's figure disappear up the mountain path. The whole way home neither had spoken, choosing to respect the comfortable silence. There was no pressure to speak, only that strange, yet familiar, sensation.

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National Eastern University.

Today was the beginning of Poseidon's benefit performance for his Sounds of Nature album. Students arriving early for class were surprised to find their school transformed in to a sea of sapphire blue.

Hundreds of thousands of bright blue forget-me-nots poured from every corner of the university. With the exception of the roads needed to make it to class, every available space was covered in flowers.

The gentle scent of flowers, and that soothing blanket of blue, brought peace and contentment to everyone who entered the university.

Even this early in the morning the university gates were congested with people. Dozens of representatives from media outlets based in all three alliances were on hand, their vehicles narrowing passage to the school and bringing traffic to a halt. Of course members of the East's police services were also on hand to maintain order.

In fact, both the police and Gobi's own security detail were in attendance. They spend the majority of their time keeping the reporters at bay. The concert was slated for two in the afternoon, and none but students were permitted to enter before one.

Some journalists tried to sneak in under the guise of being a student, but none were able to fool the keen eyes of the security personnel.

Clearly the level of excitement here was palpable, but beyond that there was also something else in the air. As far as the media knew, the concert was to be held in the school's expansive auditorium. Other than that, however, they had no idea what to expect. Gobi Entertainment's media division definitely knew what they were doing.

"Look at this siege. It's certainly busy enough." Lan Jue stopped his bike at the corner and watched the hodge-podge as Qianlin scrambled off the back. A strange and happy finding was that Richard was nowhere to be found since their last confrontation two days ago.

"Yeah!" Qianlin said, eyeing the crowd. "I've never seen it so busy. Gobi really is a major business. Of course a lot of this is because it's a benefit performance, but it's a good thing."

Lan Jue smirked. "It looks like you aren't a fan of Poseidon."

She shook her head. "I've never really been one for idols."

Lan Jue gave her a thumbs up. "You have good taste."

"What does this have to do with taste," she asked. "Anyway, I'll go in first." She didn't wait for an answer, just slung her book bag over her shoulders and made for the school.

Lan Jue waited until there was a hundred or so meters between them before pushing his bike towards the campus entrance.

Zhou Qianlin was inexorably caught by a group of reporters, who surrounded her and peppered her with questions before she could escape in to the confines of the school.

Lan Jue could only look on helplessly and pat his forehead. It really was a chore to look so good. No matter where or what, you attracted eyes. Lan Jue thought it might be best to suggest she, like Hua Li, wear a mask whenever she left the house.

He pushed his bike past the crowds with no troubles. He used his bike

like a weapon to cut a path until he was free.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the media. Please do not harass our students as they attempt to make it to classes. If you continue to bring trouble, I will submit a request to the school and they will refuse you entry in to this afternoon’s concert.” His righteous voice cut through the din, infused with his discipline just enough to capture people’s attention.

Lan Jue took the opportunity to shepherd Zhou Qianlin safely in to the campus.

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1. My wife makes this sometimes. One of only two noodle dishes I’ll ever eat. Delicious.

Chapter 170: Big Boobs. No Brain.

“Qianlin!” The shout startled her, and she turned to see Tang Mi racing towards her. But her escape was cut off by a particularly pushy journalist.

Lan Jue frowned in agitation. “This isn’t acceptable. This concert shouldn’t be affecting our students’ ability to study. I’m going to find Director Wu.”

“No need, I’m already here.” Wu Junyi’s bassitone voice interrupted him. Lan Jue then saw the serious looking older Director approach. He arrived with an entourage of security guards.

With a flourish of his hand, they rushed out the gates and forced the numerous congregated reporters to either side. This opened up a path for the students to enter unmolested.

“I apologize Professor Lan. I hadn’t expected this level of trouble for hosting the concert. Just this morning we had over five hundred reporters at our gates. And I hear there are twice as many on the way. From the school’s perspective, we already regret opening our doors to Gobi Entertainment.” Wu Junyi himself appeared helpless to do much against the onslaught of the media. The higher-ups of the university all underestimated the people’s response, and Wu Junyi as one of their number felt equally responsible. It had been a long time since any of them had been chasing their idol’s coattails, so they hadn’t imagined Poseidon’s following would be so massive.

Lan Jue smiled disarmingly. “It is what it is. It’s too late to turn them down now. We’ll make the best out of it, and try to keep order. I think if we requested further police from the authorities, things would be better.

Wu Junyi nodded his agreement. “Just so. Go on in, Professor. I’ll handle this.”

Lan Jue continued into the campus. Tang Mi and Zhou Qianlin where nowhere to be found.

“Qianlin, what were you doing with Professor Lan?” Tang Mi chattered ceaselessly besides Qianlin as they walked through the sea of forget-me-nots.

“We just ran in to each other on the road.”

Tang Mi stuck out her tongue impetuously. “Who believes that! It isn’t the first time I’ve seen you two together. Go on! There’s something between you two, isn’t there?”

Qianlin shot her a look. “Yup.”

“Really?!” Tang Mi’s eyes looked as though they were ready to pop out of her head. “Professor Lan really isn’t bad looking. Still, I’ve been thinking, and I still prefer Zeus. The Professor has class, but he’s no good in a fight. I heard he got yelled at again by your Savage Goddess. They say he was lagging behind in Taihua, and nearly got Professor Tan and another instructor killed. Hummm. Men must at least have the strength to protect a woman, otherwise how are they supposed to feel safe! So, I decided to give up my fantasy with Professor Lan.”

Zhou Qianlin could only cast her helpless gaze towards her friend. “Alright, we get it. Don’t turn in to some bimbo.”

Tang Mi’s voice dropped to a whisper. “So is there really something going on between you two? I’ll tell you, Richard is pretty offended. If there isn’t anything going on, you should really stay away from the Professor for a little while. One look at Richard and you can tell he’s a jealous sort, you don’t want to bring any trouble on Professor Lan.”

Qianlin stopped in her tracks. “Tang Mi, I’m honestly surprised at how smart you’re becoming.” [1]

Tang Mi glared at her. “Huh? You’re saying I wasn’t smart?”

Qianlin snickered, her face bright with malicious intent. “You know what they say. Big boobs, no brain.”

“Ahh! You’re begging for a beating! Qianlin!”

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Lan Jue lazily pushed his bike along the campus paths towards the electives building. The trek struck him speechless. He couldn’t imagine where Gobi Entertainment even got all of these flowers. They likely picked them because their blue color, which matched Poseidon just fine. The amount of money to pull this off...

Lan Jue’s eyes fell to his communicator as it buzzed.

“You here A-Jue?” Hua Li’s voice crackled out towards him.

Lan Jue’s response was less than friendly. “Don’t you think all of this is a little excessive? You’re poisoning this university’s scholastic atmosphere. The school’s already dissatisfied with all this nonsense.”

Hua Li laughed. “Take it easy. There’s no one in the known galaxy with more experience in this sort of thing than us. Mo Xiao has already sent over five hundred additional security personnel as backup. They’ll be there in half an hour. They’ll keep the peace. We’ve also been in contact with the local police authorities, so they’ll be helping too.”

“I heard the concert’s free for students,” Lan Jue said. “I thought this was a benefit performance. Where are you going to get donations?”

It was Hua Li’s turn to get annoyed. “You’re an idiot when it comes to this stuff, guy. You think those reporters aren’t paying to come in and broadcast the show? Are you at all aware of how many sponsors have already committed to this? On top of that, twenty percent of the total profits from Sounds of Nature are going directly to Taihua for help and recovery. It’s a pretty astronomical figure.”

Lan Jue’s response was inquisitive. “Astronomical seems a bit dramatic. How much can you really expect from twenty percent?”

“Not much, only about enough to buy an Expedition Warship,” Hua Li stated tepidly.

Lan Jue was silent for a time. “Hua Li, be my sugar daddy. You got the

money for it.”

Hua Li chuckled. “Alright! Your wish is my command.”

“Ugh, forget I said anything.” Lan Jue laughed softly as he cut the connection. He shook his head with a mirthful sigh. Poseidon and his people were definitely worthy of their title as the richest business group in all the alliances. Discussing money with them wasn’t annoying, it was downright nerve-wracking.

When Lan Jue arrived at the electives offices, no one was to be found, evidently because they were given the day off. He was happy to have the opportunity to prepare his next few lessons in peace.

However, plans changed when, after only a few minutes of work, his mind started to wander and an uncomfortable sensation overcame him. He leaned back in his chair, fingers netted behind his head, and he stared out the window to the gardens beyond.

Yesterday he and Qianlin had visited the old folks home once again. They worked well together, organized and efficient without much need for talk. The entire ordeal left him feeling replenished.

Their grateful smiles, inquiries over his health, and familial actions were all very warming to the spirit.

He still had two years of service as Qianlin’s bodyguard, and now more than ever it was clear he wouldn’t be able to completely extricate himself from her. But so long as things were like this, peaceful and easy, then he could live with it.

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National Eastern University Reception Hall.

The building was well decorated, like a hotel. It was expansive, and was used primarily to welcome guests to the university. Currently the teachers and students of Lir University called it home.

The Assembly Room.

Lir University’s Director Shi was seated before a long table, in the place

of honor. The various students and teachers taking place in the competition were sat on either side.

“All of our mechas have arrived safely?” Director Shi turned his head just enough to address the elderly professor at his elbow.

“They’re all here. In this area at least, the NEU does a passable job. There haven’t been any problems, deliberate or otherwise.”

Director Shi nodded his head sagely. “Today is Poseidon’s concert. Tomorrow, the competition. This year’s games have been separated in to two sections; academic, and martial. We are always criticized for picking on them, since they aren’t a mecha university. So we must trounce them, in both categories. There must be no doubt who the superior school is. The dean will also be in attendance tomorrow, for the entire thing. I don’t imagine I have to spell out for you what this means. Not to mention rewards for students and staff who distinguish themselves.”

“Xiao Han!” Director Shi’s eyes swept towards the far end of the table. There stood the young man who had harassed Zhou Qianlin earlier, pale as a sheet.

“Director Shi.” He stood straight as a statue, his face a mask.

The Director growled at him. “You are our school’s trump card, so act like it. I want you to save that energy for the games, and then destroy them – especially in simulations. Let them know what an absolute defeat tastes like.”

A cold light flickered through his eyes. “That’s what I’m good at.”

Director Shi smirked, and nodded his head. He waved for the youth to sit. His attention then turned to another, a man in his thirties who looked as normal as any other. He spoke warmly to him. “Professor Su, we’ll be relying on you in the instructor’s matches.”

“Mnh.” Professor Su said nothing further, only nodding his head. He made no motion to rise.

Strangely, Director Shi didn’t seem to mind the disrespect, though there was a shine to his eyes.

As the Lir University faculty were having their clandestine collectives, members of the NEU were also eloping to secret meetings.

“Tang Xiao. Tang Mi. You two better put on a good show this time. Our investigations show that Lir has brought no less than three Emperor-Class pilots with them this time. Tang Xiao, you’re already close to first rank. And Tang Mi, you’ve got the strength for a second rank. You two, constitute our main force. Along with Geng Yang, you are our wild cards. It’s your first time entering in to the games, so make sure you work to earn it!”

Geng Yang was a young man not far removed in skill from Tang Xiao. He looked experienced, but young and handsome. He had a head of fiery red hair, which complemented his smoldering crimson eyes. He nodded in agreement.

Wu Junyi swung his head from side to side, regarding his fellow instructors. “Professor Tan, we’ll be relying on you for the instructor’s matches. We’ll simply have to make the best of our situation in the combat arena. Just make sure you don’t get hurt. Luckily we’re a shoe-in for the academics portion. Ziqian, you were in charge of this. What have you got?”

Le Ziqian was the deputy director of Mecha Construction and Maintenance studies, and the director of the R and D Department. He was thirty-five this year, and being honored as the youngest accomplished researcher at the university. He was the famed name behind their school.

He once represented the whole of the Eastern Alliance at a scientific exchange between the other two groups. Thanks to his vision and innovation he was widely lauded by the community.

He was a citizen of Skyfire, actually. This was fortunate, for of course there was no end to the universities that wanted him, or their promises. However, in the end he went with his home, and decided to stay on Skyfire as part of the NEU. It wasn’t excessive to call him the school’s greatest treasure.

1. Best. Friend. Ever.

Chapter 171: Le Zi Qian

This Professor Le was an average man, not strikingly handsome. He exuded an erudite and scholarly air that was enhanced by the pair of gold-rimmed glasses pressed up on his nose. He had the sort of face that made him look as though he were always absorbed in thought, no matter the time. It looked like it would be a chore for anyone to intrude upon his own little world.

Upon hearing Wu Junyi's words he nodded ever so slightly, but said nothing.

"Look, Professor Le, what do you think? Which students should participate in the competition? Lir University suddenly changed the competition date on us, and now we have no time to prepare." Wu Junyi complained.

Le Ziqian shook his head. "There's no need to be worried about this educational exchange. Cold feet solve nothing. Besides, our National Scholars are exceptional students. As far as I'm aware, that Zhou Qianlin from Professor Tan's class is a fair choice. Then we have Yang Zi Mo and Jie Guangsheng from my own class. Those three should be sufficient."

"Alright." Wu Junyi wasn't interested in discussing the matter, and settled it quickly. And regardless of his own opinions, Le Ziqian was definitely the authority when it came to this.

Tan Lingyun was seated next to the brooding intellectual. As he spoke her eyes were glued to him, her face calm. But there was a look in her eye – a lingering flash that was hard to pinpoint.

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Were one to look down upon the NEU campus from on high, they would see it as a shifting sea of blue. What's more, it looked shut up so tight not even a drop of water could escape from it.

Scores of police and security personnel were on hand to lock down the exits. If you weren't a student or teacher, you weren't getting in – period.

Eventually one o'clock arrived. The various members of the media were permitted to enter, but only after a rigorous security check. It was a process that everyone had to endure, students included.

The NEU's auditorium was the largest in the Alliance, capable of housing over ten thousand people. If necessary, however, it could fit three times as many.

At this moment the auditorium was empty. This area was still blocked off by the security guards for the Poseidon concert, who kept it free of media and students. There was, however, a single exception.

A red-haired young man was sat comfortably on a chair in the middle of the first row. Despite all the chaos outside, he was seated cross-legged like he had not a care in the world. His eyes were on the stage in front of him.

"A-Jue, why aren't you here yet? Didn't A-Li tell you to arrive early? We've already set aside a seat for you. Later there'll be a mess of people pushing in here, you're gunna get trampled." Chu Cheng lazily drawled in to his communicator, grinning with pleasure at the prospect of his friend's forthcoming difficulties.

"At the door," Lan Jue's voice replied.

And he was indeed, handing a golden card to the guards blocking passage beyond. Once they saw it, they let him pass with bows and scrapes and a great deal of respect.

The moment he stepped in, Lan Jue's eyes lit up. He'd never actually entered the auditorium before – more like an arena, in truth – but he absolutely hadn't expected it to be like this.

In a glance he could confirm that indeed the arena could hold a downright frightening number of people. It was beautiful and large, with three fifty-meter tall walls hemming it in. Each were covered top to bottom in fresh forget-me-nots. The ceiling above them dripped with shimmering crystal lights. They were in the shape of various sea fauna;

fish, crustaceans, clams, starfish and sea urchins. Anything one could think of when considering the ocean, was present in some fashion or other. This was underlined by the largest piece – a thirty-meter long crystal whale. Never mind how the damn things were made, how were they even safely suspended like that?

The lighting of the auditorium interior was still dim, but the gentle light was working from several angles. It's reflection off of the towering walls covered in flowers gave everything a soothing blue hue. As the lights shone through the shimmering crystals, too, their reflections filled the arena. It looked like they were underwater, with reflections of sunlight dancing on the ocean floor.

The crystalline figures hung a few dozen meters from the ceiling, and as Lan Jue cast his eyes around he was convinced there must have been ten thousand or more of the exquisite decorations hanging here and there. It was of course the stupendously large whale that especially gave Lan Jue pause. Were that thing to fall[1] the death toll would be staggering.

A thick curtain hung heavy over the stage, hiding the contents of the stage from view. Every seat he passed on the way forward sported a single blue flower, and a copy of Poseidon's Sounds of Nature.

Each album was a treasure, as far as the common man was concerned. Poseidon's releases always came with a steep price, the last release running around four hundred NED. This album would be more expensive, undoubtedly. More than ten thousand seats, which meant ten thousand albums. It was an enormous profit to be giving away for free.

Lan Jue shook his head in wonderment as he walked. It wasn't long before he arrived at the front and took a seat beside Chu Cheng.

"I'm a teacher here," Lan Jue complained. "If I'm seen up here sitting so close to you it could bode poorly. I'll stay a while then move to the back."

Chu Cheng chortled at his friend's concerns. "You think there'll be space in the back? Stay here, trust me. I've seen one of Hua Li's concerts before, and the second it kicks off no one will be able to keep their head. No one will be paying attention to you, I promise. Besides Hua Li's already

thought about your potential troubles, so he set your school luminaries off to one side. We'll have international big-wigs and Poseidon staff on either side of us, so no one will recognize you.

"So be it," Lan Jue answered grudgingly. "I have to say, Poseidon Media [2] certainly knows how to do these sorts of things. But the amount of money they threw in to this must have been insane. And that's not counting the whole rest of the school they decorated!"

Chu Cheng chimed in. "Just the surface, bro. The amount of money they give the school just to do the performance here would cross your eyes. You think all these stuffy suits would let some star take over their school for a concert otherwise, much less attend themselves? But in the end you know this is a good thing for the university – not just because of Hua Li and Poseidon Media's name, but also the fact that it's a benefit concert."

Lan Jue shook his head. "This guy! It seems like being a superstar is anything but worth the effort and hardships. And having to hide every time you want to go out... it looks like even Hua Li is tired of it."

Chu Cheng laughed. "What can he do about it? It's in his blood, a product of heritage. If he wants to be rid of it, he's gunna have to find a woman to birth the next victim. A son, and then he'll have to wait for him to come of age. Only then will he have the ghost of a chance at a normal life. The reputation of the Poseidon line is the product of generations. when you think about it, it's like it has a life of its own, an amazing thing."

Lan Jue looked off across the auditorium as he changed the subject. "When the concert's done, how about you two come stay over mine tonight. We have some training of our own to get to."

Chu Cheng nodded his fiery red head. "That DreamNet thing. The news is already all over. Go to any search engine and you'll see the first result is the God-team battles. Second is the Divine Monarchs and this 'mysterious challenger' that we're up against. Then the next ten down the list are about various aspects of this whole thing. There is absolutely no way we're allowed to lose this."

"Ngh." Lan Jue nodded his head resolutely.

Beep, beep, beep! Lan Jue's communicator beeped to get his attention.

Lan Jue answered, and Jin Yan's voice chirped at him from the other end. "Hello Professor Lan. Where are you? The Poseidon concert will be starting soon, we're out here in line. You should get here soon! We'll keep a seat for you."

Lan Jue wagged a finger at Chu Cheng as though to say 'I told you so'. "I'll be there soon, thank you guys."

The young etiquette instructor cut the connection, and rose to his feet. "What was that about no seat in the back? It's safer back there anyway. I like to keep things low key."

Chu Cheng shook his head helplessly. "What about your seat here then? We can't just have an empty spot right here in the middle."

Lan Jue snorted. You were just telling me about how busy this'll get. Give me a moment and I'll find someone outside to fill the spot, alright?"

He didn't wait for Chu Cheng's response, making his way towards the exit. He had become accustomed to the university life since being here. He was learning to enjoy it. It wouldn't be at all worth it for his cover to be blown over some concert. Indeed, it would be best for him to be back with the other teachers.

Lan Jue avoided the main entrance of the auditorium, deigning instead to exit from a side door. However, despite his attempted subterfuge, he was met outside by a crowd so large he nearly yelped when he saw them. It was a veritable sea of humans, but luckily the guards were doing a fine job of keeping order.

Lan Jue called Jin Yan once more to determine their location, and went off to meet them.

He turned a corner on his trek, only to be caught in a deluge of students making their way to the arena. He quickly jumped to one side, but as he did he stepped directly in to the path of another rushing figure. His attempts at being covert caused him to collide right in to them.

He felt like he was hit by a truck. He very nearly let his unconscious take

control and employ his Discipline to keep him upright. Fortunately, he remembered who and where he was. Unfortunately, this meant he had to allow himself to stagger to the side, and fall.

A hand grabbed him by the collar and yanked him straight.

“Be careful.” The voice was chillingly familiar.

Lan Jue nearly crumbled to the ground by virtue of the realization alone. There’s no way, he inwardly lamented.

He slowly, slowly turned around. There in front of him was the single last person he ever wanted to see again.

“You?” Tang Lingyun’s eyes were hard and cold as they fixed on Lan Jue. The disdain was so thick in her glare that he felt as though it might actually cut him.

Lan Jue smiled, but it came out more pained than anything. “When is it not me. Hello, Professor Tan. I’m very sorry to have run in to you. Are you alright?”

Tan Lingyun dropped her head to look at her feet. Lan Jue followed her gaze and saw the invitation envelope for the concert on the ground. He quickly stooped to pick it up, fumbling with it.

Each admission ticket came in a large envelope. He laughed sheepishly as he handed it to her, then hastily made his retreat.

“Who was he?” Le Ziqian asked curiously from Tan Lingyun’s side. They’d arrived together after their meeting. He was just about the only teacher who didn’t stay as far away from Professor Tan as they could.

“A teacher. Electives, I think. A damn waste of space. He almost got us all killed on Taihua.

Le Ziqian chuckled. “Little Yun, you shouldn’t always be so cold. From what I can tell he doesn’t seem all that bad! Polite and courteous. You know this will only get you in to more trouble the older you get. It’s time a phase that has passed its time.”

Tan Lingyun responded with displeasure. “Ziqian, if you’re getting ready

to lecture me I can just go home. If I decide never to marry then that's my decision to make. Men have nothing good to offer."

Le Ziqian rubbed his nose in exasperation and annoyance. He pushed his gold rimmed glasses higher on his nose, grinning sourly. "You shouldn't always burn bridges. Already you can see it in the school – be it student or teachers, they all hide when you pass by."

Tan Longyun laughed. "That's good then, saves me the trouble of having to deal with morons. Women should always be out to protect themselves. Now let's go and get in line."

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1. Foreshadowing?!
2. It looks like the author decided to make some changes to the terminology, or I'm an idiot. Either way, I'm going to make an adjustment here: Gobi Entertainment is the name of the entire company of which Hua Li's family is the primary owner. Poseidon Media will be their PR and activity arm.

Chapter 172: Switching Seats

It wasn't long before Lan Jue found Jin Yan and Wang Hongyuan. By the time he did, he discovered they'd already set aside a seat for him. The dance instructor greeted him by pushing an invitation ticket in to his hand. "I figured you wouldn't have one."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I actually wasn't going to come. This sort of thing is more suitable for younger generations. I'm honestly not all that interested!"

Jin Yan huffed at him. "Talking like you're an old man. Could you be any more anti-social? You know any normal Poseidon concert anywhere else in the galaxy, you'd have to sell a kidney to get one. This one is a big benefit concert and album release – we're only here because we're lucky enough to have our school hosting. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a shadow of a chance any of us could get tickets."

"Alright," Lan Jue said in defeat. "I'm here, so I might as well give it a listen." He made a mental note to have A-Li sing for him just one on one sometime.

People began to file in to the auditorium. Members of the media entered first to set up positions. Afterwards, faculty and students were allowed in to find their seats. There weren't any outsiders or foreigners – like Jin Yan said, tickets were impossible for them to come across.

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The line moved until Tan Lingyun and Le Ziqian were before the doors.

"Tickets." The gate guard regarded the two of them indifferently.

Tan Lingyun handed the man her crumpled envelope without a second thought. He responded by taking it from her. As he did, a single dark golden card slipped free and tumbled to the ground.

The guard hastened to pick it up with a change coming over his dismissive expression. He jerkily invited Tan Lingyun to proceed with a sweeping motion of his hand. "This way if you would, ma'am. There are

already many people inside, allow me to help you find your seat.”

The Savage Goddess was struck by his change in demeanor. After all, everyone else in front of her had simply taken their own tickets and pushed through the crowds. What was different about her?

She craned her neck to look back at Le Ziqian, who laughed as she did. “It looks like beautiful women always get special treatment. Go on in, I’ll be right behind you.

She had no choice but to follow the guard. He pushed through the throng of young, rambunctious students to the front few rows. The closer to the stage they walked, the more she felt like she didn’t belong. She was just a teacher, she thought, it was wrong for her to be up here with the more important folk.

The school had reputedly given out the same normal tickets to students and teachers in an effort to keep things fair. Only the school’s luminaries were different, and sat closer to the stage. She also clearly recalled her own seat, which should have been somewhere in the middle of the auditorium.

“I’m sorry, but can you look again? I’m sure my seat isn’t this close...”

The security guard turned back to her with an amicable smile. “There’s no mistake. Your VIP card is very special – your seat is in the very front. Please, let’s get you seated.”

And so it was, because she had no idea how this came about or how to get out of it. Still stunned at the circumstances, she followed the large man until they reached the very front. They stopped before the seat Lan Jue had occupied earlier.

Chu Cheng was seated next to the empty seat, looking impossibly bored. However, the second he spotted the firestorm that was Tan Lingyun he sat straight in his seat.

His eyes shone, as they were wont to do when in the presence of a pretty girl. He swept those hungry eyes up and down her svelte figure like a scanner.

This girl, certainly the envy of all her friends! And her temperament.. black clothing... she has to be a teacher.

Tan Lingyun, her heart still full of confusion and surprise, confirmed once more with the guard that this was her seat. He assured her it was, so she sat.

She had no idea the danger she was in.

She decided to let things lie, and take matters as they come. Besides, she was incredibly close to the stage. How could this be a bad thing?

“Hello there.”

Her thoughts were interrupted by a magnetic voice from the next seat over.

Tan Lingyun turned her face to the sound, laying her eyes on Chu Cheng.

Although he was seated, she could still tell that he was tall. He was positively bursting with testosterone, as well. He was covered in wine red pants and a vest, covering a snow-white shirt. A black tie finished off the ensemble. He looked... neat.

She nodded her head. “Hello.”

“You’re a friend of Lan Jue’s?” He asked.

Instantly her face curdled. “Lan Jue? You mean that pustule?”

“Pustule?” Chu Cheng tilted his head and looked at her. He’d known Lan Jue for years, and this was the first time he’d heard anyone address his brother like that.

Tan Lingyun’s voice was soft, but biting. “You don’t mean that cowardly waste of air? Useless as a coin purse.”

“A-hehm!” Chu Cheng covered with mouth, feigning a cough to find his expression. His stomach undulated as he fought to keep the fit of laughter he desperately wanted from exploding to the surface. He didn’t want to spoil his image in front of this lady.

He really couldn't imagine what A-Jue must have done in front of this girl for her to be reacting like this. And yet he gave up his card to her. Interesting, he thought, very interesting. At the very least he knew there wasn't anything between she and Lan Jue he had to worry about.

"Maybe we're talking about two different people. Ehm, let me introduce myself. I'm Chu Cheng." He hurriedly changed the subject, and brought his face under control. As he spoke, he extended his hand towards her politely.

She nodded once again, but made no move to grasp his waiting hand. "You aren't from our school, obviously," she replied in that same quiet voice.

Chu Cheng nodded.[1] "Yeah. I guess you can say I'm part of the Poseidon Media group."

Her voice suddenly grew icy cold. "Shut your eyes, and keep your thoughts to yourself. Be careful and you'll stay out of trouble." She sat back against the chair and crossed her arms, eyes fixed on the stage ahead. It was pretty clear to her that this was orchestrated.

Chu Cheng's hand stiffened, hanging in mid-air. Quite the character, this one.

However, in no time at all Chu Cheng was making adjustments to his approach. He let his hand drop and sat properly in his chair. He had spent years perfecting his skirt chasing, his experience was copious. If one method wasn't working, well, he had no shortage of other tricks to try. This Tan Lingyun had piqued his interest.

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Various sounds took turned dominating the interior of the auditorium, from sighs of admiration to gasps of alarm as the students gaped over the decorations. Everything was in a state of chaos.

Lan Jue entered the auditorium once again, though this time as a teacher. He followed close behind Jin Yan and Wang Hongyuan as they waded in to the fray. Their seats were situated nearer to the back.

“Are you in the arena?” Zhou Qianlin’s voice whispered in to Lan Jue’s mind.

“Yup, just walked in,” he said.

“That Lir university student from yesterday morning just sat next to me.”

“Coincidence?” Lan Jue’s face darkened.

“Probably,” she answered. “He just started speaking with me.”

Lan Jue thought for a minute. “Then I’ll switch seats with him.”

“Alright.”

He rose to his feet and began to move. There was no need for him to ask where Qianlin was, for by virtue of the Soulcaller gem he knew her general whereabouts in this confined space.

A cursory search revealed several tall students, but no Zhou Qianlin beside any of them.

Lan Jue spoke gently to Jin Yan, who was seated beside him. “Professor Yan, I spotted a friend. I’m going to go over and say hello. After a minute someone may come to take my seat because that friend and I have something to discuss.”

Jin Yan looked somewhat disappointed. “Not much point, is there? It looks like the concert will be starting soon, you won’t have much time to talk.”

Lan Jue only chuckled, then left.

Zhou Qianlin was seated diagonally behind Lan Jue’s seat. He had to walk a big circle to get to her location, eventually approaching from the opposite side.

When he got there he saw a noticeably irritated Xiao Han.

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Xiao Han’s actions that morning were largely to cause trouble at the NEU, but he couldn’t ignore the attraction he had for the girl.

In his estimation, this one was something special. She had a different

sort of air to her. She was pure, spotless, quiet and perfect. He had always been the chosen one of Lir University, and as a result there had been no shortage of girls at his side. Who knows how many pretty female students have been his study partner. But none of them were like Zhou Qianlin. This was a first.

In fact, he'd spent the last couple days asking around about her, eventually discovering that she was the greatest beauty the school possessed.

"Hey gorgeous, looks like it's destiny that binds us. Zhou Qianlin, right?" He addressed her with a small smirk on his face.

Qianlin kept her eyes fixed forward, deigning not to address his advances.

Xiao Han was not deterred, and in fact continued like a man well at ease. He knew where he was, and keenly understood that making trouble with someone who was always the center of attention wasn't a good call.

"Well Qianlin, I'm Xiao Han. How about we meet properly this time. I'm from Lir University. In fact, you'll see me in the arena when our schools start the competition. If you have time you should come and watch. Here, this is my communicator number." He plucked a strip of paper from his breast pocket as he spoke. He stretched it out to her.

Qianlin, meanwhile, sat unmoving.

A stern look flashed across Xiao Han's eyes. He'd never encountered such stiff resistance at his university [2]. Even newly weds didn't treat him so coldly. It was like he was empty space.

"Did you hear me? Take it." His voice was quiet, hard.

Not a sound from Zhou Qianlin.

His face grew cold. He fought with himself against the desire to just cram the piece of paper in to her hand.

Suddenly a hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Hello there, student," a warm voice entreated. "May I have a word with you?"

Unfortunately, Xiao Han couldn't really hear the greeting. He was too focused on the fact that his entire body had gone numb. And then everything went black.

To anyone looking on, it looked like Xiao Han heard the Professor, nodded, then rose to follow. Lan Jue brought him forward a few rows to his own seat.

"Hey guy, why don't you hang out here for a little while. Me and my friend have something to discuss. Thanks man."

Xiao Han simply sat there as though he were made of wood. Soon, however, his eyes shut and he began to snore.

Lan Jue shook his head helplessly and addressed Jin Yan. "These young people, am I right? Always burning the midnight oil, so bad for you. Now here he is sleeping with such an incredible concert about to start. Well I gotta go talk to my friend."

Wang Hongyuan gave him a strange look. With a gentle push of his Discipline he warped the air so only he and Lan Jue could hear. "The hell are you up to?"

Lan Jue responded in the same fashion. "Giving you a chance! Didn't you say you wanted me to avoid Professor Jin at all costs? Look how good I am to you. You owe me, got it?"

He didn't wait for the dance instructor's response. Instead he just walked back a few rows and took the vacant seat beside Zhou Qianlin.

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1. Now I think it's HE who doesn't realize what kind of trouble he's headed for.
2. Here, the Chinese reads 'He'd never banged against such a hard nail.' Just thought I'd share.

Chapter 173: Poseidon's Sounds of Nature

Zhou Qianlin didn't know when that small smile had first appeared on her face.

Lan Jue took the seat beside her, very serious of expression and mannerism. He looked straight ahead, looking neither right or left as though he didn't know the people beside him, and didn't care to. He was succeeding spectacularly at not attracting attention.

The Soulcaller Gem warmed.

Lan Jue: I put him a few rows ahead. He'll be sleeping for a little while. Sleep's important for those kinds of guys, with surplus hormones.

Zhou Qianlin: Mm. A qualified bodyguard.

Lan Jue: Of course!

Qianlin: So you seem rather comfortable with this position.

Lan Jue: Doesn't matter if I'm comfortable. If you're going to guard someone you take it seriously.

Zhou Qianlin said nothing further. By now all the teachers and students had filed in to the auditorium and found their seats. The twinkling lights began to dim.

Sweeping one's eyes around the area you would find not an empty seat in the house. There were even people in the aisles, settled on stools.

Ever since the place had begun to fill up, the riotous din of people had grown louder. Now, though, as the lights darkened, a hush fell over the crowd. All eyes turned to the stage.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to a world of endless ocean." A warm, pleasant female voice washed across the occupants. It came from all directions at once, bringing with it the gentle sounds of crashing waves.

From all around appeared shimmering halos. They undulated and expanded outwards like ripples in a vast sea. The ears were full of the sounds of water as the rippling lights spread all around. The whole arena

was awash in sapphire, as though they were indeed far beneath the waves.

The air was thick with moisture, and even the slightest hint of sea salt tickled the nostrils. As ten thousand eyes watched, the ripples crashed against the crystalline figures hanging from the rafters. They shone brilliantly, for all the world appearing alive with an inner light. The crashing waves grew gradually louder from small lapping waves to great crashing ones. As the raucous crescendo of a tsunami tore all around, every onlooker's heart skipped a beat.

Lan Jue looked on with rapt attention. Silently he came to the realization the power of water element was thick in the air. This was by no means a product of special effects; clearly this was the power of a water Adept. What's more, the power appeared evenly distributed even throughout the enormous auditorium. This wasn't just the work of one person.

The audience collectively held their breath, all of their attention trying desperately to take it all in. They were, one and all, completely consumed by the spectacle.

"Myriad creatures exist within the deep blue depths. Here, there is only silence... and yet it is full of vibrance. This world is ruled by a handsome Monarch, who guards his people. At his command the waves recede, and in this way he protects us, too."

Once more the moving female voice arose, and as though at her own command, the terrifying crash of tidal waves quieted.

A peaceful silence fell over the arena. Only the gentle slaps of water on sand remained, amid the lingering charm of that voice.

The ocean sounds were almost imperceptible, but there. As though they were under the water themselves. It lent a genuine air to the atmosphere.

From within and among the ambient sounds there came a singing. It was sweet, and melodious, and only just loud enough for you to know it was there.

It was soft, and pleasing to the ear. Mellow, like an undersea scene. In addition, there was a powerful gravity to it, a magnetism that put listeners

on the edge of their seats. There was a sense of omniscience, as though it were narrating a tale. In fact, none could make out the words, but it was a sound that was soothing as it was mysterious. For all the world, they were there among the beasts of the sea, one of them, giving ear to the songs of the ocean.

An opera aria! That was precisely what this was. His voice was perfectly accompanied by the musical sounds of the sea and waves as though they were instruments. And that was it, a perfect trio.

A gentle blue light shone from on high, illuminating the stage. It was just enough light to see the curtain being pulled away. The stage was a staggering blue, that reflected and refracted the floodlights above in a dazzling crystalline display. This was because it was crystal, an aquarium fifty meters high and a hundred meters across. It was filled to the brim with sea water.

However, shocking as that was, ultimately the greatest surprise was what was in the aquarium.

The frothy water danced with a hundred thousand prisms borne from the crystal walls that confined it. They flashed and hung in the water, shimmering against the walls of an enormous palace of blue and gold. The building's colors complemented each other, perfect like a dream. It was surrounded by walls of coral and a moat of swaying kelp. Fish of all sorts swam lazily among the eddies. In the space of an instant the audience went from among the ocean tides to the heart of this undersea world.

This was no holographic projection, no trick of light or shadows. This was a real scene, built in the middle of the arena. So much clearer than a hologram could ever be, and so lifelike.

That faintly singing voice swirled among the ways from within the golden palace. Fish did as they were wont to do, darting about aimlessly – and yet, as the voice strengthened the fish within the tank slowed, stopped, and faced the palace. As though they were listening.

Under the watchful gaze of its subjects, the palace doors slowly began to open. A figure was revealed, slowly coming in to focus as it floated out in

to the light.

His movement was slow, deliberate. It matched his melodious voice. The first thing the audience could make out was his garb. Armor, a deep cerulean blue that shone. He was the very heart of the ocean.

Silken threads of powder blue hair hung free, displaced by the ornate golden crown upon his head. A single drop-shaped gemstone was inlaid in the center.

His eyes were a sea blue that bore the spirit of the ocean, with fair skin and a high nose bridge [1]. It all coalesced in to a face that stopped the breath in your lungs. Unblemished. Perfect. He was precisely what a king of the ocean should be.

As dazzling as he was, it didn't go unnoticed that he was immersed in the sea. How, then, was he singing? It was a trick, they thought, and none suspected it was actually him singing.

Under the weight of the performance the auditorium had lapsed in to a stillness, a silence. No one made a sound. All there was, was that vivid and vivacious voice among the ambient noises of the sea. It grew stronger, louder amid the silence. Even the hardened media, far in the back, were struck agape at the display.

Poseidon's face bore a small smile. He moved inexorably forward, until he crossed the coral walls. Strangely, the schools of fish at his gates did not flee at his approach. Instead, they flocked closer in his wake.

He stretched out a slender hand, long fingers opening one by one. A tiny orange fish drew close and settled there. His alluring voice continued as his eyes fixed upon the fish. And the fish appeared to look back. Louder still his singing became until, just as the crowd was ready to burst, the volume dropped. Poseidon looked on in surprise as a blue light filled his hand.

It wasn't long until that dazzling light consumed the entire interior of the aquarium. The light burst out with the power of a tsunami, eliciting a startled gasp from the audience.

The crystalline blue shards of light twinkled and disappeared, revealing again the underwater paradise. The palace was as it had been, and there stood the king as before. But his palm no longer bore the small orange fish. In its place there stood at his side an adorable mermaid.

She looked perhaps seven, or eight. Young and smiling prettily from the reefs at him. Much like his audience Poseidon, too, was startled by this. Slowly his surprise gave way to a small smile, and he waved her forth with a gentle motion.

The little mermaid giggled. In her joy she swept her bright orange tail through the swirling waters. All the other fish hung around her now, and danced with her as they surrounded Poseidon. Even the most incredible dancers couldn't compete.

Once again the singing increased in volume. Though this voice did not belong to Poseidon. It was hers, crystal clear and beautiful. Compared to Poseidon's throaty vocalizing, her voice may be immature. But it was so sweet, full of naivety. It brought a smile to every face in attendance. It was cozy, sentimental.

She was almost like a spirit, a guardian of love. Her voice was bright and full of hope.

Poseidon extended his hand with a smile, whereupon the young mermaid crept closer. She allowed him to pat her hair.

It was his turn again, and as Poseidon's voice rang out it bore notes of the little mermaid's own hope and vitality. There was a fondness as well, like a brother instructing his little sister. And all throughout the gentle sounds of nature continued.

So beautiful! This was the thought flashing through everyone's mind as they watched. Be it the sounds or the sights, all were so perfect so as to be impossible. A dream or illusion, perhaps.

The media scowled for they knew, no matter how fine their equipment or large the TV, nothing could capture what they were witnessing. But they rejoiced at their luck, at the honor of being here. To see the Sounds of Nature concert with their own eyes.

Lan Jue looked up to see Hua Li singing radiantly upon the stage. But he couldn't help but be a little absent-minded. Could this really be his close friend from years ago? A-Li, really? He really did look like the King of the Oceans, Lan Jue thought. And too damn handsome for his own good.

Zhou Qianlin was also enchanted. She watched everything on the stage with a sharp, keen interest.

The undulating sounds of his voice echoed through every corner of the auditorium. It hovered, reverberated until it filled every inch of space.

Chu Cheng watched from the first row. At one point he learned sideways towards Tan Lingyun at his elbow. "Handsome right? You like how it sounds?"

Tan Lingyun's eyes hadn't once left the stage or the scene upon it since the show had begun. She nodded her head, and her voice was full of sincerity. "Oh, handsome. Probably the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. And his voice is amazing."

Chu Cheng's chest tightened, curses coming unbidden under his breath. Anyone hoping to score chicks with A-Li around was doomed to failure!

"That's the sort you like eh?" He might as well go for broke.

Lingyun shook her head. "Nope."

Chu Cheng was surprised at her reaction. "Why not?"

She turned her face to look at him. "You talk a lot of shit. Watch the show. And of course I don't like him cuz he's a queer."

A queer?! At last Chu Cheng could hold it no longer and burst in to laughter.

Scores of eyes along the first row turned to scowl, but their interest was short lived. They didn't want to miss a moment of the show.

"Well gorgeous, how about I show you a real man? Time to get on stage." He smirked at her.

1. Considered very important in China when determining someone's attractiveness.

Chapter 174: Chu Cheng Goes On Stage

“Well gorgeous,” Chu Cheng said through a grin. “How about I show you what a real man looks like. Time to get on stage.”

Tan Lingyun was considering how to respond when suddenly she felt a scorching heat at her shoulder. Before she could say anything, a burst of thunderous laughter filled the arena.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” The sonorous laughter was so loud it even drowned out Poseidon’s pleasant melodies. All eyes turned to the smoldering red light that appeared at the fore of the auditorium.

The sudden and un-telegraphed change was shocking. Even the school leaders were unable to resist the draw of the show, and nearly jumped from their seats when the sinister laughter began.

The swirling light looked infinitely hot, and flared angrily. As it did so, the crystalline figures suspended on high twinkled crimson. The peaceful underwater world was gone, now a sea of magma.

Poseidon’s face betrayed shock. The myriad fish that surrounded him fled in trepidation to his rear, desperate for shelter. The little mermaid followed suit.

“The king’s subjects were many, beautiful, and easily submitted to his rule.” The laughing subsided and the background music swelled as the voice narrated. It seemed constrained, devoid of its former carefree warmth.

Slowly the audience came to the realization that this flaming pillar was part of the act.

Tan Lingyun was perhaps more surprised than most. She turned her head to look for the man who had been at her side, only to find him now standing before the stage. She couldn’t see him clearly in the light, but she knew it was him. He was awash in red, like the god of fire given flesh.

Almost unnoticed, Poseidon’s voice started again. It strengthened until it filled every ear, demanding attention. It bore a distinctly regal tone, his

voice. Majestic and commanding, and yet there was a note of condemnation as his voice roared with the power of the seas. The gentleness in his voice when he'd sung with the mermaid was gone, replaced with indignation. He gesticulated and cried, entreating the entire ocean to rise in protest against this invading evil. Ripples of light appeared throughout the auditorium in response to Poseidon's calls. Compared to their lazy appearance before, this time they moved and rippled with vigor.

The living flame would not be cowed. As the scene rose against it, the fiery figure raged. It swelled from the human size it once was to a dozen meters or more. Even the temperature in the arena changed, heating up as the fires rose to almost uncomfortable levels. However, a keen observer might note that the fires weren't causing any damage to the auditorium.

The fiery behemoth did not sing, like it's underwater nemesis. There was only a deep and persistent growl that called out. It met and mixed with the powerful notes of Poseidon's call, a cacophonous battle of sound. The crystal figures and glass walls of the aquarium flashed with the opposing fiery and the blue of the ocean. Everything was drawn in to the epic struggle for the soul of the ocean.

Their lights clashed, crashed in to one another. They flashed and flooded the arena from floor to ceiling. A sorrowful note invaded the heated musical exchange as the battle raged.

In the midst of their exchange, the fiery giant rose from its feet. With a terrible roar it lurched forward, becoming a raging lance of fire that raced murderously towards the ocean king.

"Boooooommm...!" The deep shuddering impact tore through the arena, shaking the entire structure and filling the audience's ears with the unsettling sound. Those in the back assumed the shuddering was from the speakers, but those in front knew better. To their shock and amazement, the giant antagonist had actually rammed directly in to the crystal wall of the aquarium!

Poseidon's cries were righteous, piercing. A sapphire blue light had begun to exude from him, prosperous and powerful as it filled the under

water realm he inhabited. The intensity in his voice, and the dissonance of the blasts against the background music was harsh and nerve-wracking.

“Boom!” Once more the giant rushed against the crystal wall. This time even those in the back saw clearly what was occurring before them. To their trepidation they saw the cracks appearing along the wall’s surface. Under the audience’s frightened gaze, the cracks spread quickly in all directions. They crackled threateningly until it spread across the whole of the aquarium wall.

Cries of alarm ripped through the crowd, but Poseidon’s alluring voice called out to them. “Do not fear, my subjects! This evil shall never know victory. I am your protector, and I shall defend you in the face of this threat!”

“Bang!” he giant of fire struck the glass a third time, in defiance of Poseidon’s claims. The crystal fractured under the stress, and shattered in to a hundred million pieces. The water once contained within rushed out like a terrifying tsunami. The water’s roar was not enough to drown out the startled screams of the audience.

“Ahhh—!” Before anyone could move, every seat flared as a golden hoop fixed them in place. There was no escape as the wave barreled toward them.

Zhou Qianlin’s gasp of fear and surprise joined the rest of the crowd. She unconsciously scotched closer to Lan Jue, and wrapped her arms around his.

“Eh?” Tan Lingyun, seated in the front row was similarly surprised at what she was witnessing. A flash of power flared in her eyes. The leather of her seat cracked as he pressed her hands against it. Under the force of her pressure, the golden harness that kept her still broke free. Her hands shot skyward, inciting dual beams of green light to spring to life. It surrounded and enveloped her like a shield as she prepared to parry the force of the encroaching wave.

“Sit down, cut it out!” A voice light with humor captured her attention. That sizzling red light fell over her. Tan Lingyun felt no heat, but the

oppressive force of the light pressed her back in to her seat.

She was not the only rebel. In fact there were many adepts in the audience, and several of them were strong enough to break the harness as she did. But like the Savage Goddess, the moment they succeeded in breaking free that fiery red light pushed them back down.

The fiery power that filled the auditorium grew stronger still, flaring with rage. It roared as the flaming power collided with the wave. Red and blue, fire and water. The colors became the arena's dominant hue as they broke against one another.

Much to the relief of frightened onlookers, none of the resulting wave managed to reach the audience. The only thing that washed against their bodies was the conflicting red and blue lights.

"Unreal," Lan Jue muttered. "No wonder A-Cheng's been hanging around with A-Li for so long. He's also in the show. And this fairyland they've created, that must be Mo Xiao. Flawlessly executed, perfect cooperation."

The resonating sound of singing broke through the din. It was a warcry, filled with the promise of battle. This was Poseidon's promise of protection, bringing the ocean to bear for his people. A will as strong as a fortress, calling the united powers of an entire world!

Red and blue, flashing incessantly, shining harsh and quick as they battled. The crystal statues swayed and shook. The lights filled them as well, flashing against their edges. Some twinkled a pale red, and others bore the soothing blue of their king.

Gradually the sounds eased, and the lights dimmed. Poseidon's voice hung in the air, adopting a sorrowful air. Only the angry red pillar of fire remained vibrant.

Without warning, the entire arean was suddenly plunged in to darkness.

A moment later the world was revealed once again. The crystal wall had reappeared to protect the audience from danger. Where it had, moments before, been nothing but a multitude of fractured glass, now it looked as

though nothing had happened. But the scene within had changed. Now in place of Poseidon's awe-inspiring palace there was only rubble. The pained singing continued, howled from the mouth of Poseidon as he lay upon the floor.

A dark figure approached, black as though it had been burned. The water around it boiled furiously. Its charred hand was wrapped around the little mermaid's throat.

The audience had a chance to get their bearings. It had been an illusion, all part of the show. But it had been so real that many in the audience were still trying to recover from the fright.

Poseidon's mournful voice was hoarse, thick with sorrow. The mermaid struggled against her assailer, her own voice a mixture of pain and fear. No small number of audience members reflected the tears in the little mermaid's eyes.

Tan Lingyun was well aware that this was all a show, but she couldn't help but clench her fists at the visions before her. She ground her teeth at the child's suffering.

The enormous man of fire hoisted the mermaid in to the air. His hand squeezed tight.

Poseidon's singing stopped. His eyes were wide and moist as he called out to the giant. "Nooooo....!"

But his cry fell on deaf ears as the mermaid was consumed by fire. Tears hazed the scene for many in the audience, but the mermaid's death was clear – an icy dagger to the heart.

At his cry, Poseidon's crown shimmered with power. The teardrop-shaped gemstone set at its center bloomed in to a halo of golden light that fell over him like a blanket.

His blue armor shone with the additional light, making the king of the sea appear more severe and dangerous than before. The golden light became a pillar, as with it there slowly dropped a jagged trident in to Poseidon's hand.

Blinding beams of errant golden light shone in all directions. Poseidon rose brazenly to his feet to the rising crescendo of a battle march. His voice belted forth, strong and challenging, to mingle with the battaglia. There was a distinctly murderous sensation to it, now.

The two figured met in battle among the ocean waves. Vortexes of sapphire light fired out from the trident, forcing the fiery beast back.

At last the fiery monster's defenses failed against Poseidon's onslaught, and his great trident found it's mark. It cast the giant backward, slamming it in to the aquarium wall. Once again the thunderous crash of an impact filled the auditorium, and once again the wall cracked and fell away. The antagonist flailed wildly as it flew across the arena and collapsed in the far reaches.

Poof! As they looked on, the audience witnessed the giant's body burst in to flame. A blue light appeared moments later unexpectedly, the king of the ocean hunting his prey.

A deluge of water crashed against the flaming giant. Instantly the attack was met with screams of pain from the beast. Plumes of steam and smoke black as pitch towered towards the ceiling like a mushroom cloud.

The lights cut out. All that could be heard was that shrill, ear-piercing scream. The fight was over.

Poseidon had emerged victorious, and yet still his voice was thick with sadness. The depression from witnessing the death of the mermaid still weighed heavy on the hearts of all those present.

All were awash in sadness, so that at first none noticed the sound of gurgling water. It was like a bubbling stream, undercutting Poseidon's laments.

A pale blue light, soft and dim, began to illuminate the arena. It gradually strengthened until, as though with a life of it's own, the light congealed atop the stage.

The lights revealed the scene, with the crystal wall once more in tact and in place. The golden palace had somehow returned to it's former glory.

The once tumultuous sea waters surround it had calmed. Lights glistened off the water's surface like a fine spring day. The light refracted prisms of sea blue throughout the arena.

Still Poseidon's eyes were full of sadness.

The audience watched, fighting with themselves to squelch the dread and depression that Poseidon's heavy expression inspired. Their desire to rise and comfort was almost palpable.

As the silence stretched on, the tiniest little fish appeared, wandering lazily towards Poseidon. It swum circles around the dejected monarch, growing closer with each circuit.

Poseidon's doleful expression revealed a small smile, though the hurt remained clear in his eyes. His voice whispered forth through the silence, warm and beautiful once again. He sang longingly, as though calling out to the little mermaid who;d fallen at the hands of the monster. His song bade her farewell, giving voice to the pain in his heart but sending her to eternal peace with an assuring smile.

Chapter 175: Shocks and Curtain Calls

Nearly every eye in the auditorium was wet with tears after the display. The need to speak with and comfort Poseidon was only just kept in check.

The king of ocean sang his laments as the fish swirled around him. Then, as the audience watched, a single small orange fish separated itself from the others.

Poseidon stared at it, stunned. A few moments passed, and that paralyzing shock wore off, replaced with an expression of pleasant surprise. The thick and pained quality of his songs changed with the fish's arrival, more joyous.

He reached out a finger, and the area around it light up with a pale blue hue, like he'd turned on a light. It spread, expanded, until the orb of light surrounded the tiny orange fish.

What followed was strange. Within the nutritive cover of the orb, as the concert-goers watched, the little orange fish within began to change. In no time the orb was filled; not with fish, but a small mermaid which looked as though she were just waking up.

She blinked sleepily at the audience, then turned her attention to Poseidon. She called out in surprise and excitement before draping her tiny arms around his neck. Her excited singing was bursting with joy.

No one knew who started it, but waves of uproarious applause spontaneously erupted through the auditorium. It was like thunder, or the crashing of waves against the shore.

Everyone was clapping furiously. Tan Lingyun, Zhou Qianlin. Even Lan Jue was fervently applauding his friend's performance.

At some point Chu Cheng had returned to his seat. He, too, was busily clapping. A wide, excited smile was plastered on his handsome face. Then the curtain dropped.

'Successful' was an understatement: Poseidon's performance was remarkable, like a bolt of lightning directly to the heart of every audience

member. They watched as though they were there, a part of this magical undersea world.

Two hours passed in the space of a blink, with Poseidon never once breaking character to address the crowds. He didn't need to. The show and its remarkable execution said everything that was needed.

The Sounds of Nature. Everyone knew the name, but now they felt it. It lived within them, after witnessing Poseidon bring it to life. The applause continued for a full ten minutes without pause.

By this point the harnesses that had kept them in place had released. Pockets of the audience stood, and before long the entire arena roared from the standing ovation. Their hands were red from the clapping, but no one seemed to mind. What they witnessed had touched them deeply – watching Poseidon's range of emotions and the magic of the story, it was all burned in to their memory forever.

The curtain spread wide. The crystal wall and sea water were gone. The palace, however, remained, along with the other decorations of his undersea realm.

Poseidon appeared on stage, walking slowly to the center. He held the little mermaid in his arms.

As the lights brightened, it revealed a host of guards who'd quietly entered the arena at some point during the show and positioned themselves at the bottom of the stage for protection.

Hua Li bowed slightly to the crowd, a smile soft and warm on his face. His magnetic, moving voice was heard once more. "Thank you," he called to them.

The crowd reacted with calls of their own, all blending together so that the only thing that could be heard was the deafening roar of his fans. Both Hua Li and the mermaid lifted their arms and waved. Bathed in light, surrounded by adoring fans, in glittering sapphire armor... he really did look like a king.

He lifted his hand, entreating silence. After a moment the excited throng

quieted down. By now he could rely on his own requests to keep the audience's emotions in check.

"I'd like to thank every one of you for coming today. This is also my first time performing in an institution of higher learning. It has been my great honor to meet all of you, and to share my latest music with such amazing fans. On each of your seats should be a copy of Sounds of Nature, inscribed in holographic form for your enjoyment. Give it a watch when you head back to your rooms. It's got a different feel than the concert. You'll see."

"Recently I was made aware of the terrible tragedy that occurred on Taihua. I was filled with a terrible sadness, for the comrades we have lost, the lives cut short. And so we decided to donate all of the proceeds earned today to Taihua. We're also giving twenty percent of the sales for every copy of Sounds of Nature to the families of the victims. Our hope is that this might, in some small way, help alleviate their pain."

Once more, a round of applause met his words. This time it was the luminaries and school department heads that lead the expression.

Among them was Wu Junyi. At his elbow was an elderly gentleman who looked to be in his sixties or seventies. He was a congenial looking man, with grey hair and a warm smile. The old man's other side was occupied by Director Shi from Lir University.

The competing director looked exceedingly jealous as he stared at the stage. As a school director himself, he clearly understood what this concert would do for the NEU's reputation. Beyond all question, this school would have the advantage when it came to enrolling desirable students for next semester.

After a long while, the applause subsided. Hua Li smiled and continued. "In reality, the fact that I'm in Skyfire – here with you – was all up to coincidence. I actually came to spend time with a good friend of mine. He brought me here. Obviously he doesn't want me to embarrass him or influence his standing here, so I can't say who it is. But I do have something to say to him, and that is: It's been many long years since I've

stepped foot on a school campus, and coming here to the NEU has brought back all of those relaxed and excited dreams and hopes of my youth. Countless cherished memories bubbling back up to the surface. Now, I do like to think I'm not quite that old yet, but looking out over this sea of bright young faces fills me with a profound envy. Make sure you take time to appreciate this magical time in your lives. College life is a beautiful and important chapter in your story. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank another friend of mine who came today for a cameo appearance. It's my sincerest hope that, if you should run in to him around campus, that you try your best to look past his scandalous exterior."

Immediately following his words, a loud guffaw burst from the front row. Chu Cheng brazenly displayed his middle finger to the stage.

Tan Lingyun turned to look at her neighbor. "You were that fire Adept?"

Chu Cheng shook his head, his face a mask of apathy. "No no, miss. I'm the mighty fire Adept."

"Pfft!" Tan Lingyun snorted disdainfully at his response. "Is it acceptable to call oneself mighty?"

Chu Cheng looked at her then, his eyes a roiling crimson as the fires burned within him. "Well miss, you can find out for yourself if you don't believe me."

Immediately Tan Lingyun's eyes lit up with the promise of violence. "Fine. When?"

"A guest must yield to the convenience of the host," Chu Cheng said with a gentlemanly air.

Tan Lingyun opened her mouth to continue the banter, but stopped as though a thought had occurred to her. When she spoke again, her voice was only just loud enough for him to hear. "Give me your com number. When I've finished with my business over the next couple of days, I'll call you."

Chu Cheng's lips curled in to a wolfish grin. And remained that way as

he gave her his number. He was secretly pleased with the result; as he anticipated, this was a special woman – special tactics were required. Certainly a good start.

With Hua Li's thanks and farewells concluded, the curtain closed once again. He vanished behind them with his entourage of security personnel. He still had a series of media events to get through before his job was complete tonight. He certainly still had his work cut out for him.

Under the direction of the Poseidon group's staff, the teachers and students made a well-organized exit. It was then that Xiao Han stirred from his forced nap.

He shook his head forcefully, like a man who'd been struck. His vision, still blurry from sleep, swept the auditorium as everyone was filing out – much to his surprise. What the hell, he thought. How could I sleep through this?

The people on either side of him had gone already. He didn't even know how he got to this seat, all there was the faintest memory of someone putting their hand on his shoulder. There was half a moment when he felt numb, then... nothing.

Was it that girl, Zhou Qianlin? No, that couldn't it. She'd been sitting next to him when it happened. So who the hell was it? How did they even do it?

He abruptly shot to his feet, glaring in every which direction in the desperate hope he could discover the culprit. At last his eyes fell upon Zhou Qianlin near the auditorium entrance, together with a tall and thin man. He lurched ahead to give chase, but the crowds were too thick. A moment later and he'd lost them again.

ζ

As they left the arena, it wasn't just Lan Jue who felt like he was returning from a fantasy world. Zhou Qianlin heaved a heavy sigh. "It

really was an amazing concert.”

“Qianlin! Qianlin!” No sooner had the words escaped her lips than she heard her name called. She turned to see Tang Mi trotting toward her. She was practically hopping with excitement by the time she caught up. “That was amazing! Really incredible. Poseidon’s so handsome! I think I might be obsessed with him. His voice is just so beautiful. Here feel, my heart’s racing! I think I’m dying.”

She took Qianlin’s hand and pressed it to her plump chest.

Qianlin allowed herself to be man-handled. Helplessly she addressed her friend. “Tang Mi, relax. Aren’t you always telling me Zeus is your idol? Suddenly now it’s Poseidon?” She shot a covert glance at Lan Jue, standing at her side.

“It’s not the same!” Tang Mi whined. “Zeus is my idol, but I’ve never actually met him. But Poseidon we’ve seen with our own eyes! They said Poseidon’s a powerful adept himself, and a God-ranked mecha pilot to boot. Good friends of Zeus’ too. Have you heard of the Four Divine Monarchs? Poseidon and Zeus are both members. If I get in with Poseidon, he’ll introduce me to Zeus. Ahh, if only they had some sort of harem I could join that would be incredible.”

“Ka, ah, hack! Mm!” Lan Jue nearly choked on his own saliva. This girl had no shame! Where all girls like this these days?

“Professor.” A tiny voice entreated Lan Jue’s attention from behind him. He turned to look for the source, and discovered Tang Xiao’s pudgy face looking back at him excitedly from a distance. He walked over.

He shuffled his expansive girth closer, and whispered in to Lan Jue’s ear. “Uncle was pretty great. I didn’t expect such a sissy voice to be so nice. He beat me so bad I’m still hurting, but I think I can forgive him.”

Lan Jue looked down at him with an admonishing frown. “Guess you never know till you try. Aren’t you afraid he’ll show up right behind you, while talking this nonsense?”

Tang Xiao chuckled flippantly. “How could he? He’s got to be very busy

right now. By the way I don't have any classes this afternoon, Professor, but I still have the tactical training they're requiring for the competition. But anyway, I'll see you later!"

With that said, Tang Xiao turned and wobbled away.

Chapter 176: Overburdened Bicycles

Lan Jue watched the young man trot off. It was then he spied Chu Cheng sauntering over towards him with a lazy, unhurried gait. In his fine suit and vest, he was having no trouble attracting looks from the young girls around campus. From time to time he'd shoot a charming smile at them as they passed.

Lan Jue turned his back and made to leave, like he had no interest in dealing with the guy.

Of course Chu Cheng wouldn't be denied, and his reaction time was nearly inhuman. Immediately his voice rose in a shout. "A-Jue, wait a minute!"

Zhou Qianlin and Tang Mi both turned to the source of the greeting.

Chu Cheng made his approach with big steps. By the time he arrived, he was already puffed up and beaming with pride. "What didja thing? Nice, right?"

"Him or you," Lan Jue asked.

"Me!"

"You said two words," Lan Jue muttered. "What's good about it? Tell you what though, I had no idea how talented he was."

A ghost of agitation flashed across Chu Cheng's pained face. "Are you even capable of being a pleasant human being?"

"You're free to keep your distance," Lan Jue replied. "And when you're all steeped in your machismo bullshit don't tell people you know me."

But Chu Cheng had already tuned Lan Jue out, the moment his eyes found the two young women standing nearby. His eyes lasciviously traced paths up and down their bodies.

"Eh? Little sister, you're here as well."

The second the words left his mouth, Lan Jue winced. The damage was done, there was nothing he could do.

“Little sister?” Tang Mi looked at Qianlin and Chu Cheng, back and forth. “Qianlin, what’s going on?”

Zhou Qianlin’s own appraisal and reaction skills were impressive. “I don’t know you,” she said instantly. “Xiao Mi, let’s get out of here. This one reminds me of Richard.” She grabbed her friend’s hand and pulled her away.

Lan Jue watched the exchange in conflicted praise. She was quite the sneak, but he wasn’t sure this was a good thing.

Chu Cheng watched her leave. “She really does look just like her,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “Cut from the same mold. I’m telling you A-Jue, you better know what you’re doing.”

“Will you shut the hell up, or am I going to have to make you a mute,” Lan Jue said in hushed tones. “Let’s go. I’ve got no classes, so let’s head back and get to practicing. I guess we’ll find out later when A-Li will show up.”

Chu Cheng laughed suspiciously. “Such a troublesome business, these concerts eh? If we wait around for a bit we’ll run in to him, I’m sure.”

Lan Jue raised a brow. “He spoke to you?”

Chu Cheng rolled his eyes. “You need to ask? You really have been hidden away from the modern world for much too long. Let’s go!”

The Soulcaller gemstone warmed as his will flowed through it.

Lan Jue: When are you going home? There shouldn’t be any classes this afternoon if I recall.

Qianlin: Original I’d planned to head out after the concert. But I just ran in to the R&D Director who says I’m expected to participate in the competition again Lir University. The R&D section, obviously. He said he wanted to have a word with me. I’ll probably be heading home later.

Lan Jue: Let me know when you’re finished and I’ll go find you.

Qianlin: Alright.

The two young men left the campus. As they did, it was like Chu Cheng

predicted; a furtive figure sneak up up to them trying desperately to remain inconspicuous. Hat, mask, glasses, and a school uniform. A-Li.

Lan Jue pushed his bicycle over to the bundle of mis-matched clothing. “Absolutely wretched. If only your fans could see you now.”

“Hush!” What little bit of Hua Li’s face could be seen was scrunched in admonishment. “Keep it down. You’ll know wretched if anyone finds me here.” He practically growled the words, trying to look every direction at once.

Lan Jue only chuckled. “Your concert today was really something, truth be told. It was just my first time seeing one but I gotta say, you don’t hold back with the Discipline do you.”

Hua Li chortled. “Indeed. Got a pretty moving voice if I do say so myself. First Star of the Alliances, I think it’s fair to say.”

Lan Jue smirked. “That’s enough. Let’s head back to mine, it’s time we finally got back to training our mecha combat coop.”

“Yup, let’s do it. Only you just have the one bicycle, what’s the plan?” Hua Li asked inquisitively.

Lan Jue paused. “This is a problem,” he said, glowering at the bike. “So who’s running?”

Hua Li’s indignation flared. “You’d make the First Star of the Alliances run home?! Do you have any humanity?”

Chu Cheng’s response was equally as wrathful. “You’d make the First Heart-throb of the Alliances run home? Do you have any humanity?!”

Lan Jue looked from one to other for a minute before answering.

“Do either of you have any shame?”

Five minutes later.

A bicycle wobbled precariously down the street in the direction of Skyfire Avenue. Lan Jue was peddling valiantly, Chu Cheng sat on the back, and Hua Li was perched on the cross girder just behind the handlebars.

The bike had long since started protesting with a series of painful squeals.

Lan Jue rode the bike a sight less gracefully than he'd have liked. The three of them with their long legs – none of them were shorter than a meter eighty-five – were too large even for this bike. In its time the antique was among the larger sized bicycles, but despite this it was a struggle to fit the three of them.

“No shame!” Lan Jue breathlessly rebuked his friends as he strenuously peddled forth.

Hua Li spat back at him. “It’s not your ass being split by this damn bar, what are you complaining about?”

Chu Cheng’s rumbling voice interjected. “Quite the experience though. If elder brother was here he’d probably have to stand on the handle bars.”

Lan Jue’s voice was cold and biting. “My brother has more self-respect than the two of you. If he were here the two of you’d both be desperate to hide from a beating.”

Hua Li snickered. “Well he ain’t here is he. Hm? What’s this person doing blocking the road.”

Lan Jue craned his head around the clothing mannequin perched in front of him. It was as his friend said; four people were blocking the small road, leaving no way around.

Lan Jue rolled to a stop and steadied himself on one leg. “The two of you get off!”

Chu Cheng only needed to let his legs relax and drop to the floor to be free of the bike. Hua Li had to wait for Lan Jue to release the handle before he could get down.

“Hey, you guys are blocking the road!” Chu Cheng called out to the four figures before them.

“We’re looking for Lan Jue. If you aren’t him, you’re free to pass.” A cold and threatening voice replied.

The young men where clad entirely in black, and bore a sinister air. They stared with open hostility at Lan Jue.

Hua Li and Chu Cheng looked at their friend in tandem, but it was Hua Li who spoke first. "The hell is this? Looking for trouble?"

Chu Cheng was next. "These guys don't know who you are, huh."

Lan Jue regarded them both. "Time to earn your bike ride."

Chu Cheng was literally hopping with excitement. "Oh! Oh let me! Me!" He was off at a trot towards the four young men before getting an answer.

One minute later.

The bicycle groaned pathetically as it struggled along the path.

"So who'd you piss off, A-Jue? Got these noobs hassling ya. Not a one higher than sixth rank. I didn't even get myself going. What a let down." Chu Cheng grumbled dejectedly from the back.

Hua Li huffed. "You didn't leave any for me, either."

Of course Lan Jue knew where those four hoodlums had come from. He could see the moment they used their Disciplines that they had Acquired talents. Clearly they were from the Western Alliance. Hua Li and Chu Cheng knew this as well, but that didn't answer their question.

If they were from the Western Alliance then their master was obvious. Richard finally grew the balls to go for him? Lan Jue figured it was time the young guy was dealt with. He was becoming a problem.

"Hey A-Li, let's get a song," Lan Jue said, changing the subject.

Hua Li was easily swayed. "Any requests?"

"One of the ones from the concert," he said. "Let's hear 'em again."

"..."

While Lan Jue and his two companions were slowly making their way home, the NEU was still awash in the afterglow of the concert. The excitement was still evident in the passing students and teachers wandering around campus. After all, this was probably a once in a lifetime

event.

“What? Run away?” Mo Xiao had to employ all her will power not to smash the tea table in front of her in to pieces.

Outside, members of the media had already filled up the sizable reception room for Poseidon’s scheduled address. Hua Li had said he was going to change his clothes – and then, he’d just vanished.

“This bastard! I’ll KILL HIM!” Mo Xiao shot to her feet in a rage, fists clenched and knuckles white. She paced back and forth in the dressing room. “Could he be any more unreliable?”

The assistant at her elbow spoke up in quiet tones. “Well he is a Pisces.”
[1]

“I know!” She roared. “Alright... help me with some make-up. I’ll deal with the journalists. Such a goddamn waste of time.”

Ten minutes later.

Mo Xiao stepped out to the junket, and apologized to the media that Poseidon would be unable to participate. Tearfully she explained that the whole experience had been an emotional one. Poseidon was still composing himself, and so was currently unable to hold a fair interview.

The craze that had grabbed a hold of the students had also infected the journalists, and the vast majority understood and sympathized with Hua Li’s fictional plight. The vocal minority who were still upset with his absence were cajoled by Mo Xiao’s persistent apologies. She assured them that Poseidon would give interviews as soon as he was able. She followed by formally announcing the release of Poseidon’s Sounds of Nature special throughout the whole of the three Alliances.

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By the time Lan Jue returned to the NEU campus, the land was covered in the encroaching darkness of night.

Zhou Qianlin was standing on her own, tiredly pinching the skin between her eyebrows. All afternoon had been talks and considerations, to

the point where she was too tired to go on.

“By the looks of you, you haven’t eaten yet.” Lan Jue was standing beside his bicycle, calling towards her.

Qianlin lifted her eyes to look at him, and she couldn’t help a small smile from flashing across her face. She shook her head. “It’s fine, I’m not hungry. Just a little tired.”

Lan Jue produced a lunchbox from the bike and handed it to her. “Here.”

Qianlin took it with surprise. She opened it to see, and discovered a handful of dumplings steaming within.

“Chives and egg,” he said with a grin. He handed her a pair of chopsticks. “We’ll go when you’ve finished, otherwise you’ll get sick if we eat and move.” [2]

“Mm.” Qianlin hummed her agreement. She found a nearby rock big enough to sit on, then tucked in.

*

1. Hey, me too! First Translator of the Alliances right here!
2. The Chinese believe that doing anything while eating is bad. Here specifically, it is said that if you eat and move you’ll ‘eat wind’ – wind is the basis for pain and exogenous illnesses in Chinese medicine.

Chapter 177: Competition Arrangements

Zhou Qianlin ate at her own pace. She dropped her head, and slowly placed the dumplings in her mouth one by one.

Lan Jue took the time to find a spot beside her. He watched the sky grow darker over the horizon. He enjoyed the sense of stillness and quiet.

“How is it? Good?” Lan Jue looked back towards her with a smile.

“Mm.” Qianlin nodded her head.

Lan Jue continued. “You know the drawback to eating chives?”

Qianlin looked at him with curiosity in her eyes. “What’s that?”

“Chives have a great deal of nutrients,” he explained sagely.

“Unfortunately It does have a detriment. You see the smell is so strong you can’t kiss anyone for a while after eating some.”

“Who in their right mind would want to-” She trailed off, her face red with embarrassment.

Her abashment caused her lily-white skin to become pink as a flush crept across her face. Her glance was admonishing and shy. In the dim light of the streetlamp overhead, she looked like a dream.

The two sat close upon the rock as the darkness closed in around them. The smell of the dumplings filled Lan Jue’s nose on occasion. He spoke up, almost without thinking. “Actually, I quite enjoy eating chives.” He was surprised to find himself struggling with the nearly overpowering urge to kiss her.

Qianlin’s face grew redder still.

Lan Jue haltingly produced a travel cup and handed it to her. “What I mean is, when you finish up, drinking some tea will help. It’ll get rid of the smell.”

She tentatively took the bottle from him and loosened the lid. The full-bodied aroma of the tea greeted her.

“Ngh. Smells good. Jasmine!” She took another long wiff.

“Yup.” Lan Jue nodded. “The best for reducing the smell of chives.”

She took a few small sips. Lan Jue sat quietly beside her as she finished her meal.

She did, eventually, finish. Once she had, they got on to the bike and made their way towards Qianlin’s Skyfire Mountain residence.

“Thank god you’re so light,” Lan Jue said in relief.

“Who else have you been driving around,” she inquired.

“A couple shameless bastards.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist for support, and said nothing.

“Why so quiet,” he asked.

“I’m just tired,” she replied.

Lan Jue went on. “Right, what’s going on with this educational exchange thing? Why are they forcing you to participate?”

Qianlin shrugged. “Our two schools have always had a rivalry, though what exactly happened to make it this way I don’t know. All I know is, they do this every year. The previous competitions were all mecha combat, an excuse to beat us under the guise of educational exchange. It’s unfortunately not something our school excels at. So we lose, sometimes very badly. Only this year they decided to add R&D, I don’t know why. That’s why they called me in and want me to participate. That is something our school can do well.”

“What’s the competition arrangements?”

“Tomorrow will be mecha combat,” she said. “Each side will dispatch three of their best students and three teachers to compete in the arena. The combat portion itself is separated in to two parts; the first is in a simulator and the second is actual combat. The simulation will be done in rounds of three. The real fights are ‘sudden death’. After all, mechs are expensive. There’s also of course the risk of injury, so they make the real fights one and out.”

Lan Jue nodded in understanding. “So that’s the way it is. Sounds simple

enough.”

Zhou Qianlin sputtered an acrimonious laugh. “It is simple, but who can stand losing again and again year after year? Last year only Professor Tan was able to pull out a victory against another instructor. She helped us redeem a little bit of face. We lost every other competition, from every other year, but that one.”

“How do they intend to compete for R&D?”?

Zhou Qianlin explained. “One teacher comes with three students, one team for each side. Each team comes up with three problems that they present to the other side for them to solve. The winner is the team that can adequately answer the most questions. We’re expecting Lir to be well prepared, since they’ve finally agreed to the competition. This afternoon Professor Le spend a good deal of time going over the plan. I feel like we have a pretty firm standing. Which is no surprise, since this is Professor Le’s forte.”

Once more, Lan Jue nodded. “Good then. Just don’t overdo it. If there’s something you can’t quite get you can always ask me as well.”

“Ask you,” Qianlin said incredulously.

Lan Jue shot her a glance. “What. You don’t think I’m smart enough? When it comes to mechs there’s very little I don’t know. At the very least I can offer a different point of view.”

Qianlin chuckled at him. “Alright.”

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It had been a full day since the conclusion of Poseidon’s Sounds of Nature benefit performance. However, the school was still a fairy dreamland and slowly dying indigo forget-me-nots.

The Poseidon entertainment group had yet to clear things away, instead considering it a ‘gift’ of a fine view to the students and faculty of the NEU. Of course this didn’t hold true for the auditorium. The harnesses, decorations and myriad crystal sea creatures had all been safely stowed away. This was to be expected, of course, since this certainly wouldn’t be

the one and only Sounds of Nature performance. There were bound to be other shows on other planets.

Even though the show was long over, the excitement remained. Every teacher and student who watched the show left a loyal fan.

Excitement was in the air, but truth be told it wasn't entirely from the concert. The NEU still had one important event to consider – the educational exchange competition.

A single black high-alt verti-car was parked quietly outside of the campus gates.

An elderly man who had been present for the performance stood inconspicuously nearby. Director Shi and Director Wu were behind him, engaged in conversation.

Upon seeing the car, Director Shi's eyes lit up. He immediately walked to the car and pulled open a door.

An aged man, tall with a head of silvery hair, stepped out.

He was strikingly tall – very nearly two meters – with his hair slicked back and a fine grey suit to match. An overcoat hung on his shoulders. He was advanced in age, but that didn't seem to detract from the manly charm of his face, which looked like it had been chiseled from stone. Were he a decade or two younger, he'd be quite the sight.

“Ruchao, it's been ages!” The stocky, elderly man from the NEU stepped forward to greet the newcomer and vigorously shake his hand.

The other gentlemen responded in kind, smiling amicably. “Not so long I think. Maybe a year. But I must say, Renjian, you look like you've put on a few! You need to take better care of yourself.”

Renjian chuckled good-naturedly. “Oh it's nothing, I just take up a little extra space. So long as the wife doesn't run off with another man more svelte than I, there's nothing to worry over.”

An inexplicably sullen expression flashed across the taller man's face. “Shall we head in?”

The fatter one stepped aside and motioned his friend in with a wave of his pudgy hand. The two of them walked passed the gates shoulder to shoulder. They were a somewhat comical sight – Ruchao was at least a head taller than the other.

After a few long moments, both Director Shi and Director Wu followed behind them.

The newcomer was the Dean of Lir University, Han Ruchao. Of course the fatter gentleman was his counterpart, the Dean of the NEU, Xu Renjian.

Their names rang in the education circles of the Eastern Alliances. Both were responsible for many well-trained graduates, who went on to live successful lives in their own right.

The two traded words as the meandered through the university. “So Renjian, when are the games commencing? Is your university prepared?”

Xu Renjian smiled ever so slightly. “As expected. All the best pilots were stolen away by you, naturally. What can we do about it? We make the best of what we have.”

Han Ruchao laughed pleasantly at the candid remark. “You’re far too humble, my friend. Who knows what the result of this year’s competitions might be! We might all be pleasantly surprised. In fact, why don’t we make the whole ordeal more interesting? Maybe a little wager?”

Xu Renjian’s flabby face twitched at the prospect. Again, he thought ruefully. The last year his friend walked away with a b-ranked power gem. No here he is again looking for more. Of course he couldn’t allow the challenge to go unmet, that would be weak.

“What sort of wager are you thinking?”

Han Ruchao didn’t miss a beat. “Some changes this time since we have two competitions, don’t you think? A b-ranked gem for the sparring part seems fair. Same as last year. As for the R&D, how about something a little more interesting for the inaugural year. How does an a-rank gem strike you?”

Xu Renjian felt a pang of fear in his chest after hearing the offer. He was very familiar with the type of person Han Ruchao was, and he never gambled on something he had a chance of losing. Clearly combat was his school's specialty, but for such a wager he must be very confident in his school's chances for success in the R&D competition.

"We'll forget about the a-ranked gem. You know I'm a man of limited means!" Despite his tone Xu Renjian wasn't in the least interested in negotiating a fair exchange. He was simply embarrassed at his lot.

"Ahh, I see." Han Ruchao shook his head piteously at the shorter man. "Never mind then. I was unaware your school was struggling like that – I suppose you haven't had any decent researchers come through lately. With this being the case, I suppose we'll just stick with our former arrangement. A b-ranked stone for the winner of the sparring contest."

Xu Renjian's brow furrowed as their chat continued.

Is this some sort of cat and mouse game he's playing? His plan all along, for fear I'd delay the exchange further?

He found himself in a proverbial pickle. His hesitation and speculation were not lost on Han Ruchao. As the silence stretched, so too did his enigmatic smirk.

Eventually Xu Renjian spoke up. "We'll put a b-ranked gem on the R&D contest. After all the combat portion is already stacked against us, bad luck you know. It's fair this way."

The old fox! A surprised displeasure took root in the visiting Dean's heart. He wasn't fooled, the slippery snake.

"Excellent!" Han Ruchao belted his acceptance with only the slightest hesitation. He'd already gotten what he wanted, anyway.

The two smiled pleasantly at each other. But in their hearts it was a different matter, both with a jagged axe to grind. They laughed and talked as they strolled to the reception hall.

Chapter 178: Last Minute Preparations

As was often the case, Lan Jue had arrived at the mountain early this morning to send Qianlin to school. He likewise heard from her that today was the day the NEU and Lir University were to begin competing at the West Hill training grounds. All teachers were expected to attend and learn from the spectacle. The electives instructors were no exception.

He'd left Hua Li and Chu Cheng back at Skyfire Avenue. They were in the underground, training mecha combat in the jewelry store warehouse while he was busy. Hua Li had shut off his communicator and was once more effectively 'in the wind' – at least as far as Mo Xiao was concerned. Hua Li knew she was no fool, that she probably suspected he was hiding in the Avenue. Luckily, however, she had no way to get in and find him. In this part of the galaxy, there were some things even the Poseidon Group couldn't pull off.

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"Professor, you were looking for me?" Tang Xiao trotted up to Lan Jue, who was waiting patiently behind the electives building in their former meeting place. The young pupil panted from the exertion.

"Right, stop pretending. Your fat, but all this for two steps of running is a tad ridiculous don't you think?" Lan Jue's words were honest and cutting. An apprentice as deceitful as this, he didn't have any recourse.

Tang Xiao chuckled, and sure enough his panting stopped immediately. "Am I getting predictable? I do it to perplex my enemies."

"So I've noticed," Lan Jue said wryly. "Your downright rotten to the core. Are you feeling confident about the competition today?"

Tang Xiao looked almost pained as he answered. "How could I be? It's like a King of Fighters style battle with three people, right. So last year we only knocked out one of their fighters before the second cleaned us all out. This year they're even meaner. They're saying it'll only take one of them to finish us."

Lan Jue looked impressed. “What rank are these pilots?”

“The word is Emperor-Class, but I dunno how accurate that is.” Tang Xiao shrugged. “Students don’t know anything about their competition before the actual bout. The professor war games are even more intense. They’re all at least Emperor First Class. Strong. So they have us beat on every side. It’s a pretty cruel way to lose.”

Lan Jue thought for a moment, staring at his pupil. “Simple. Time’s a little tight, but I can teach you a few tricks. Call it last minute preparation. Are there any restrictions on the mechas specifically?”

Tang Xiao blinked. “Actually, no. Everyone’s permitted to use their own mecha in DreamNet. We’re pretty crappy in that department, too. As you know, in DreamNet each component costs. Every part and gem, and what’s more it’s about equivalent to what you’d get in the real world. The school helps us a little, but they don’t have the resources compared to LU [1]. This is the main reason why we can’t beat people even our own rank, much less stronger. They’ve got some big money behind them. I mean enough to launch a whole contingent of war mechas. They’re just altogether better than we are in every way.”

Lan Jue chuckled in response. “Outfitting is the single last thing you need to worry about as a pilot.”

Tang Xiao’s eyes flashed with sudden interest. “But professor, if I don’t prep my equipment I won’t have any stopping power.”

Lan Jue looked over his pupil for a moment before speaking. “You’ve worked hard lately. Fine, I’ll help. It helps that your combat style is different from others’. Oh, and by the way, if you should run in to that Xiao Han in the arena beat the piss out of him for me. If you win, be patient.”

“Got it!” Tang Xiao snapped to attention, giving his professor a sloppy salute.

Nation Eastern University Reception Hall.

“Is the press release ready?” Han Ruchao inquired of Shi Jiujiu. [2]

“Everything’s prepared,” Shi Jiujiu’s deep voice answered. “The NEU has garnered no small amount of fame simply by hosting that Poseidon concert. This can be to our advantage, however. If we win not only will it improve our standing, the press will turn right around and trample all over their current golden boy.”

Han Ruchao nodded his head in tacit acceptance. “I can’t wait to see that look of utter defeat on his pig face. We’ll beat them so bad he’ll feel it. If he gets ill enough from the shame, maybe he’ll lose some weight.”

It wasn’t a stretch. Rarely did the NEU hold such activities, and now two in as many days. It was only during their field day once a year that the school approached anything as busy as this.

This was different. Right on the heels of Poseidon’s Sounds of Nature benefit concert, was the highly anticipated (or dreaded) educational exchange between Lir and NEU. Under the guise of ‘cooperative improvement,’ of course.

And yet everyone on campus knew this drama was inevitable once a year. They expected to suffer at Lir’s hands, accepting it as their lot.

So here it was again this year, with the people of the NEU bracing for humiliation. But there was a silver lining; at least they got to watch some nice mecha combat. That was something everyone could get behind.

Perhaps that was another reason for this farce they embarked upon year by year. Of course this was not their world, but like anyone the students of the NEU desired to experience and get better at it. Their piloting abilities and the strength of their mechas were crucial to their identity.

In the last five years the NEU had suffered significantly in this area. In the hardware sector alone they were only just catching up with other high level universities. With their reputation so low, they had no means of attracting talented students. And thus cycle continued. Every school

wanted to see their facilities improve, in all areas. Unfortunately, it was easier said than done.

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It was after lunch, and students had begun to make their way in chattering groups towards the mecha combat area situated on the campus' West Hill. Lan Jue got the news moments before from Qianlin via their Soulcaller gem, telling him that Tang Mi would also be competing. The both of them felt like it was an embarrassing shot in the dark.

It really was interesting! He thought back to when he was in school, though admittedly not that long ago. He never had any opportunities to join in activities like these. For the simple reason that none of the universities were interested.

But he didn't know anything about how schools were run these days. He never really paid attention to that sort of news.

His thoughts wandered further, to the beginning of his studies, and almost immediately his face slackened. Those memories always brought a darkness with them when they floated to the surface.

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West Hill, NEU Mecha Training Area

The training field was actually a massive stadium, easily ten times the size of a normal field.

The entire thing was supported by the hills that composed the area to save on costs. Inside, it was separated into several sections. Among them were the forest, mountain, plains and desert. Each one was the result of a simulation, but served as excellent practice fields that trained students in tactical awareness.

Of course, they also had a standard combat arena, though that was used for the real thing.

As the teachers and students of the NEU filed in, they immediately spread out across the spectator's bleachers. Looking over the stadium, it was clear that the National in the school's name wasn't just for show. They certainly would need the help of the Eastern government to pull something like this off. It was the largest arena on Skyfire. In fact, it was among the three largest in the entire Eastern Alliance.

It could handle thirty thousand spectators without trouble. Hanging above the stands were scores of holographic televisions. This way the spectators had a comprehensive view from every angle.

The NEU welcoming committee was on a stage nearby, Tan Lingyun among them. The Savage Goddess was clad today in a white combat suit, that brought out her every proud curve. Yet despite her alluring figure no soul dared venture near, for fear her attention would fall upon them. As Lan Jue knew, misunderstandings were a real danger. Easily provoked was probably an understatement.

Tan Lingyun spun around, and her eyes fell upon Geng Yang, Tang Mi and Tang Xiao. Her voice was low and harsh. "Remember the order. Geng Yang, when the sim goes live, you're up first."

"I'm first?" Geng Yang gaped at her in surprise. He was the best pilot the school had, enrolled in the Emperor-rank for more than a year already. Recognized as the valedictorian of his mecha combat class. He was truly dumbfounded by Tan Lingyun's decision to send him in first.

She nodded. "I don't know what the opposition's roster is, but I do know that beyond a doubt we're no match for the Lir team, at least in terms of raw power. Situations like this, you rely on your ace in the hole to get an advantage. If you go in first, you're guaranteed to take out at least one, and if we're lucky weaken another. An important task, our vanguard. You understand?"

"Yes Professor, I understand." Geng Yang's eyes shone with anticipation, the fire of combat lust deep in their depths.

Next, Tan Lingyun turned her attention to Tang Xiao and his sister. "Tang Mi will be second. Your job is to keep the advantage on our side, to

the best of your ability. Tang Xiao you're last, and for you I have only one demand – just do the best you can.”

“I will, Professor!” Brother and sister answered in unison. To Tan Lingyun, Tang Xiao looked like a good, honest kid. He was obedient, quiet and simple.

Tang Mi poked her brother's pudgy waist. “Bro,” she whispered, “You think you can do it?”

Without a moment's hesitation, Tang Xiao nodded his head in resolution. “I know it.”

“You don't know crap,” Tang Mi said suddenly. “Even if Geng Yang beats his first opponent and weakens the second, I'll still need to try my best to at least drain their mecha's energy stores. In this sort of competition, they won't allow us to stop and charge our suits. It'll be up to you to take on the second challenger and the third. At any rate, if we even get that far, it'd be better than last year. Hell, we'd probably get awards from the school.”

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1. Lir University.
2. Ehm, Director Shi? They don't clarify, so I'm assuming.

Chapter 179: Mecha Skirmishes

Tang Xiao chuckled through his pudgy face. “Such little confidence in your big brother huh, little Mi? I’m doing my best to be a man and make the best of the situation! Professor Tan Must know this, that’s why she put me at the end.”

Tang Mi gave a tepid response. “Bro, don’t be a punk this time. Anything shady and the Savage Goddess is sure to make you pay for it.”

“Alright, alright,” Tang Xiao surrendered. “How about focusing on yourself. I’ll handle the rest.”

By now the sun had begun its slow, inexorable trek westward. Beneath it many had begun to fill the sparring platform. It was becoming an ordeal, for not only were the big-wigs from Lir and NEU in attendance, but also leaders from other schools and Skyfire government officials. All came to watch the schools battle.

This sort of exchange was always sure to garner the interest of the varying schools. As peers they were ever curious as to the state of their competition. It also made for the perfect schmoozing opportunity, with so many important names gathered together.

This was not even considering the mecha pilots. Even the Northern Alliance – the strongest nation in the galaxy – was seeing an alarming shortage in capable pilots. A single mecha pilot was very rarely the determining factor in a battle’s success or failure, but a good pilot often is one of the most important factors.

The three alliances were always in a state of undercover, simmering contention. Even considering this, however, there was an unwritten rule: any conflicts were restricted to mecha pilots. Whatever the issues it was never to extend to warships, simply because their cost was too great. This was something every alliance understood.

Even though humanity had been scouring the galaxy for a couple of hundred years, in the grand scheme everything was still new. There was still a good chance that a frightening and powerful alien race could make

itself known. It was for this reason that the alliances kept their main strength at bay.

Mechas are especially crucial now, as planetary exploration and development has progressed. A skilled pilot was highly prized anywhere they went. They were considered strategic resources to advance the strength of a nation.

Lan Jue sat amidst the crowd. Jin Yan and Wang Hongyuan appeared after a short while.

Before Jin Yan could even react, Wang Hongyuan swept passed her and took the seat at Lan Jue's side.

She stood there looking at the two of them curiously. She had no choice but to take the seat next to Wang Hongyuan.

"Professor Wang. Professor Jin." Lan Jue nodded politely to the two instructors.

Jin Yan smiled prettily. "Hello Professor Lan. You're also interested in mecha combat?"

Lan Jue laughed. "Part of being a man. I'd wager it's just part of our DNA."

Jin Yan grinned. "I'm sure! Men are always interested in things that hit and kill."

Wang Hongyuan's imperious voice interjected. "No! I actually am far more interested in art. Clearly, otherwise I'd never have chosen dance."

Jin Yan sniffed at him. "Well I like it for the manliness of it all."

Wang Hongyuan nearly choked, pupils contracting. He was entirely flabbergasted.

Jin Yan scooted forward a little to separate herself from Hongyuan, and directed her attention to Lan Jue. "What do you think of all that yesterday at the Poseidon concert? How can he sing under water? And that mermaid, definitely a suit. Or something swimming back and forth with her. But she really was like a fish. How can they sing under water?"

“No idea,” Lan Jue said. “Perhaps they have some sort of special contraption. Maybe a secret of the Poseidon Group. You know, if we knew the method it would ruin the effect.”

Jin Yan looked impressed. “Looks like our scientific progress really is going too fast. It was my first time going to any sort of concert like this, Poseidon was quite handsome. I used to think you were pretty cute Professor Lan. Little did I know there existed guys like Poseidon.”

Both gentlemen sat stone still, their faces gloomy and sour.

Eventually Wang Hongyuan coughed to break the silence. “So, ehm, Professor Lan. What do you think of our chances in this competition?”

“I have no idea,” he replied with a shrug. “I’m no mecha pilot, I don’t know what’s going on.”

Wang Hongyuan suffered a slight tick, but quickly recovered. And least until he blurted out, “What crap.”

Lan Jue feigned shock at the accusation, the very picture of innocence. Hongyuan immediately muttered, “Nevermind.”

Lan Jue leaned back in his seat and stared at the looming screen before him. “Anyway it’s fun simply to come and watch. Days like this I really love the college life. Peaceful and relaxing, watching the youth of tomorrow grow in to leaders. It’s a fine feeling.”

Wang Hongyuan paused. He knew Lan Jue meant him. These peaceful days were hard earned. He didn’t want them bothered.

He himself was a smart man. It didn’t take him long to figure it out. He simply nodded. “Well let’s watch the game eh. Should be starting soon.”

Then, as if on cue, the National Eastern University’s Director of Teaching Affairs Wu Junyi appeared upon the stage.

“Teachers. Students. Please quiet down. The Official Educational Exchange Competition between the National Eastern University, and Lir University will begin shortly.”

His powerful and imperatorial voice boomed across the auditorium.

Instantly, the place went still. Not a soul wanted the Director's attention to fall on them.

Wu Junyi paused for a moment. He let his eyes wander over the crowd, and then he continued. "Next, please join me in welcoming our Dean, Xu Renjian onstage to speak a few words."

It was the first time Lan Jue had heard this name. He was further surprised to see the man was in fact nearly as chubby as Tang Xiao.

Xu Renjian beamed towards the audience. "Respected teachers, and honored students. Welcome, one and all. First, I would like you all to raise your voice with me in welcoming the Dean, teachers and students of Lir University to our home."

Xu Renjian was the first to clap his hands together. Only a few scattered applause was all the crowd could muster.

Sitting on the stage nearby, Han Ruchao's expression never changed. He was already accustomed to this kind of reception. He was well aware of the animosity between the two schools.

Xu Renjian's smile grew a little brighter. "Today, the chosen contest in which we shall be competing with Lir University is mecha combat. As I'm sure you all know..."

Xu Renjian's propensity towards pomp and circumstance was quite apparent. He went on for ten minutes before he reached the closing words.

"Director Han, perhaps you would like to share a few words?" At long last he finished, turning the focus on to the opposing Dean.

Han Ruchao rose to his feet, and approached the podium. By his bearing it was clear he was out to top Xu Renjian.

"To every deeply treasured teacher, and dazzlingly brilliant student of our dearest friends from the National Eastern University, hello. I, am the Dean of your grateful guests, Lir University. Han Ruchao. Every year, our two great institutions come to together in a display of integrity, comradery, and mutual desire for improvement. It is the foremost link our chain,

which we have forged in friendly cooperation. Forged, in our resolute search for progress and perfection...”

Lan Jue had thought that Xu Ruchao was quite the talker. But this oddball windbag Han Ruchao was clearly determined to beat Xu Renjian’s word count. He was unmindful of the jeers and disdainful glances as his speech closed after the fifteen minute mark.

Finally, he relinquished the microphone to Wu Junyi. “Alright, thank you for that. Ehm, now it’s time for the contest to commence. First, we’ll begin with the students simulated King of the Hill event. This will take place in a DreamNet arena, whose terrain will be determined by random drawing. The mechas which the students employ are their own. Will the first pair of students please enter the ring.

The actual competition was taking place in a site to the left of the auditorium, where more than five hundred simulators were arrayed. The competitors were there, busy testing and calibrating their mechas for combat. However, what happened there would appear on their screens, and as instructed two students appeared before them.

The massive screens flashed as the students were formally selected, and their terrain randomly chosen.

“That’s Geng Yang.” Lan Jue heard a snippet of conversation from someone in the row in front of him. Lan Jue wasn’t familiar with the line-up for today’s event, but he did dimly recall Tang Xiao saying that – besides his sister – one Geng Yang was on their team. He’d also said Geng Yan was the single best pilot the NEU had to offer.

Wang Hongyuan’s brows shot up in surprise. “Well, it looks like the Savage Goddess is going for the Tianjin approach.” [1]

Lan Jue shot him a glance. “Looks like a subject close to your heart. You sure seem to know a lot.”

Wang Hongyuan just continued. “For this sort of competition, the Tianjin style simply isn’t effective. At best you’ll redeem a little face. It’s perfectly obvious the Savage Goddess doesn’t think highly of our students at all, and plans to shoulder the whole thing herself. No, it’s the teacher’s

competition that's the main event."

Lan Jue gave A nonplused response. "Is Lir really that strong?"

"Lir's university is an uncommon powerhouse of a school," Wang Hongyuan instructed. "They consistently pump out excellent pilots. Of their present student body, they have more than twenty registered in Emperor-class training. For this competition they chose three from their number. So tell me, how do we compete against that? We've got six, maybe seven ready for Emperor class, but only barely second grade."

Lan Jue grunted. "Oh. And what about the teachers who are here to compete? You think the Savage Goddess has a chance?"

Wang Hongyuan nodded. "She should. After all she's our school's poster child. She might have the attitude of a spoiled child, but she's pretty strong. Be it the simulations or the real bouts, she's going to hold a dominant position. No surprise since she's a Sovereign-Level pilot. And an eighth-level Talent to boot. Any school could win a few victories with the likes of her in your corner. Overall, Lir's faculty are stronger than ours. However, if you're talking one on one I don't think they have anyone strong enough to beat her. We had a King of the Hill bout last year, and it took two teachers taking turns to take put her down. So we got one. But she also got another victory in the real combat arenas. They say she's the one bright spot in our school. I heard she's been busting hump this year to prepare. No small amount of preparation, or so I'm told."

"I guess we'll see," Lan Jue said. "Perhaps Professor Tan will put on a good show."

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1. This involves the story of Tianji and the Horse race. In short, during this horse race Tianji decided to pit his worst horse against his opponent's best, his average horse to race the inferior one, and his best horse against the challenger's average horse. In that he way won two of the three bouts, and the competition:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tian_Ji

Chapter 180: Let the Combat Begin

Just as they finished speaking, combatants were drawing lots to decide which arena they'd be competing in.

The result: The arena! Simple, direct, and most suited for precisely this sort of thing. It was the best arena for determining who had the greatest aggregate strength.

The scene upon the giant screens changed, revealing the massive arena that would be their battlefield. Two mecha appeared on either side.

Two names appeared on the screen in each corner, followed by a sanguine colored bar. It revealed the condition of the machines. A third bar was also present, this one detailing the energy levels of the suit.

Geng Yang's name was displayed on the left. On the right, one Hua Qianhu

Gengyang was piloting a black suit. By the looks of it, it was a close-combat mecha – jet black, with thick legs and a spear in its hands. A pair of triangular metallic wings were at its back. Presumably, speed and maneuverability would not be a problem for Geng Yang.

His opponent was the opposite. The mecha was quite slender, nimble, with a massive laser rifle slung across its back. Judging by the look, it was a powerful electron canon.

Once a weapon reached a certain level of power, rifle was no longer an applicable term. This was more akin to a canon, and one direct blast from it was likely to obliterate most suits.

It was a weapon best employed by snipers. The laser electron canon was incredibly powerful, yes, but like anything it had a drawback, and it's was a very poor rate of fire. Fire one shot, and you needed to wait for it to sufficiently cool before the second could be released. The enemy's advantage lay in those few seconds in between.

For a sniper, this arena was likely the worst pick.

Competitions in DreamNet needed no arbitrator. Its systems

automatically kept things fair and even.

Three. Two. One. Begin The countdown rang through the speakers, and the fight commenced.

Thirty minutes was set. After that, the match would be considered a draw. In more complicated terrain this was a possibility, but in the main arena it was unlikely to happen.

As the match begun, Geng Yan wasted no time. In a flash he was airborne, all thrusters fiery like a nightmarish hurricane. Judging by the model and loadout of his opponent, getting in close was the best decision.

The arena was a thousand meters in diameter. It was enough that any long distance combatant could work with it – and alternatively, was a chore for any close range fighter due to the distances they had to traverse. They couldn't safely approach without a hail of laser fire.

But Geng Yang was worthy of his Emperor-grade training. He took advantage of his opponent's need to ready his weapon to launch himself forward without molestation. He rocketing forward dangerously.

As expected Hua Qianhu's first move was to pull the weapon from behind his back, and carefully take aim.

A nearly inaudible buzz arose from Geng Yang's mecha, whereupon a dim grey aura began to emanate from it. This was an integral part of any high-level mecha confrontation involving close-combat fights: magnetic disruption. Its purpose was simple – to prevent weapon locks. If a sniper wanted him down, he'd have to do with his own eyes and no computerized assistance.

The black mecha shuddered in that moment. Its speed increased, zooming forward – and changed direction midair without warning.

"Mm. Disordered Leap." Wang Hongyuan muttered mostly to himself as he watched the fight unfold from the safety of the bleachers.

The basics of Disordered Leaping wasn't difficult. However, mastery and using it properly in a battle required quite a lot of practice, and no small level of talent. A necessary requisite for Emperor-class pilots, disordered

stepping was considered when determining a pilot's ranks and fighting ability.

Hua Qianhu's mechanical arms were still as they trained the electron canon, like he'd been immobilized in the same spot. Only it's upper body moved, in the smallest increments. He was calm, deliberate. By all indications the sniper had no intention to evade the encroaching spearman.

The one thousand meter separation quickly became five hundred.

Beads of sweat had already begun to appear on Geng Yang's forehead, as he fought the controls in the simulator pod. To those on the outside, he looked as though he already had the advantage. What they did not realize, however, was that the closer he got the more lethal his opponent became.

Perhaps only Geng Yang realized the danger. His enemy had yet to fire off a single shot, but every time Geng Yang made landfall to jump again, Hua Qianhu's weapon was half a second behind. It only took one shot to end it. If Geng Yang slowed even the slightest bit, it would spell the end.

His adversary's calm could only be described as terrifying. It meant he was smart, waiting for that moment when he let his guard slip, slowed down just enough to land a shot. Just waiting, and watching, in almost perfect stillness.

Snipers were about specifics; just the right shot, and just right the distance, in just the right moment. He knew as well as Geng Yang, that a sniper's hit average increased exponentially the closer he was to his target. Up to a certain distance, anyway.

Geng Yang didn't attack yet, though he was drawing closer. This was primarily due to the fear that his attack would telegraph his intentions. If the sniper knew where he would be, it was just as bad as standing still.

Geng Yang clenched his teeth, and his hands sped faster over the control panel. The mecha raced forward in response, to the point where an illusory shadow of itself trailed in its wake. It was an indication of true Disordered movement – ghost images. Of course, the faster the mecha went the harder controlling it properly was. Only truly skilled pilots were

capable of pulling it off.

The directors of the competing schools were sat quietly in the VIP box, watching the exchange. Lir's Han Ruchao nodded sagely, then leaned towards Xu Renjian to speak a few words. "Not bad at all, this student of yours, eh my friend. Employing Disordered Leaping to this level is an impressive feat. I'm guessing Emperor-grade."

Xu Renjian smiled ever so slightly. "Compared to your own students, he hardly registers! The result of this bout is difficult to guess. Your sniper is as calm as I've ever seen."

Han Ruchao chuckled, but did not continue the conversation.

Five hundred meters. Four hundred. Three hundred.

Only a few seconds had passed since the fight had begun, but already the distance between the fighters had dwindled to no more than three hundred meters. For close-combat mechas, this was enough for them to employ their entire attack arsenal. But, before Geng Yang could have a chance, the sniper was on the move.

He dropped in to a squat.

Geng Yang's undivided attention was ever on his opponent, and his sudden movement made him assume he was preparing to fire. His figure shimmered, shuddered, until it was three identical figures jumping erratically forward. Three sets of enormous metallic wings unfurled.

However, what he didn't notice was the sniper's stance. It had squat, but not for cover. Instead dual sets of canon barrels stretched out from compartments in the legs. With a flash, ten deadly bursts of laser fire launched his way.

They were accurate, and as feared they raced towards the only path Geng Yang had to advance.

Not a pure sniper? The float sent shivers down Geng Yang's spine.

He heard a blast from the direction of his enemy, then everything was enveloped by a blinding red light.

Boooooooooommm!

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The situation was clear to everyone watching from the stands. Geng Yang had dashed headfirst in to a shell from the electron canon. It was a perfect shot, right in the cockpit, that sent him flying to the other end of the arena.

The familiar digitized voice of DreamNet followed. “Direct hit, cockpit. At best, the pilot survives in a coma. Mecha damage exceeds fifty percent. Winner: Hua Qianhu.”

And thus did the first contest end.

The entire match, from beginning to end, didn’t last longer than two minutes. This included all the dancing around and delays Geng Yang employed. It was safe to say this was an embarrassingly short match.

Hua Qianhu holstered his rifle, never glancing towards the smoldering wreck that was Geng Yang as it crashed to earth a few hundred meters away.

Geng Yang sat in his simulator, viciously pounding his fists against the control panel. He knew immediately the fatal mistake that lead to his ‘demise’.

As he passed the three hundred meter mark, he’d begun to grow nervous. What’s more, after five hundred meters he’d already stretched himself to the limits of his speed. It wasn’t a situation he could sustain for long.

When he spied Hua Qianhu move, he’d assumed it was an attack and put his all in to the onslaught. But it was more than he could take, and for a split second his hands paused. As a result, his mecha lurched. That was all Hua Qianhu needed.

Through the course of the fight, the enemy hadn’t even employed their greatest advantage. Geng Yang hadn’t lost from technological inferiority, but psychologically. His opponent was simply better and more experienced than he was.

Geng Yang despondently pulled himself from the simulator. Tan Lingyun, the reputed Savage Goddess, said nothing to him. She simply patted him on his shoulder. Inwardly, though, she was just as depressed.

Geng Yang's defeat completely ruined her strategy. Not only had they lost their best combatant, they hadn't even weakened the first challenger. How to proceed from here? Tang Mi and Tang Xiao both weren't up to the level of Geng Yang. This Hua qianhu had barely used any of his energy stores – mechanical or physical. It looked like Lir's one student was going to eliminate all three of the NEU's.

In the VIP viewer's box, Han Ruchao sat with a smug grin on his face. "Hua Qianhu is a lucky one. There wasn't any cover in there for him. If it hadn't been for that direct hit, things definitely would have gone differently.

Typical! Such a victory and still he complains of the circumstances. This old bastard is as rancid as he ever was. Xu Renjian fought to keep his expression even.

He continued to gripe. "You agree right? I guess luck, in the end, counts as a strength!"

Chapter 181: Flogging Corpses

Xu Renjian's chubby face twitched at Han Ruchao's incessant, passive-aggressive whining. However, his voice was calm and even as he spoke. "I disagree, it's a very different thing from actual strength. Geng Yang is still inexperienced, and in fact his mecha was more than capable of handling a blast or two from that canon had he managed to succeed in the forward assault. Had he managed properly, that barrage wouldn't have given him pause. Had that first strike not pinned him in a killzone your student's victory would have been far from assured. But it was a clear indication of your school's dominance in this area, Ruchao."

Han Ruchao nodded his head. "Mecha technology is important here, but experience always trumps toys. Every week our university holds a small sparring session, with real mechas. If their suits are damaged, they must earn study credits to repair it. Then, they can continue to participate. Rinse and repeat. We also offer a great deal of incentives in the form of rewards for a good showing. Under this sort of motivation, we foster a vibrant spirit of learning and competitive exchange."

Xu Renjian shot him a glance, but did not speak. A lump formed in the pit of his stomach, the result of the depressed realization that this was destined to get worse. He didn't anticipate his students would ever pull out a victory, he just hoped it wouldn't be an ugly defeat. At present, it looked like he could only pit all of his hopes on Tan Lingyun in the instructor competition.

With the first fight finished, the NEU's second challenger appeared in the ring.

Tang Mi entered with a fiery gusto, ready to risk everything. She was well aware of the skill discrepancy between herself and her opponent, and that left her with only a single course of action. She would focus her strategies on consuming the sniper's energy reserves, in order to set up an advantageous start for her brother. If they could just get the better of this one guy, they'd be redeemed!

Compared even to Geng Yang, she was a weaker pilot. However, where she had the upper hand was in her experience. This was a result of the Tang family's resources. The family was wealthy enough to properly outfit both she and her brother with capable mechas once they'd joined the NEU. As they grew and improved, so too did their suits.

Hua Qianhu beckoned her forward tauntingly.

As the losing party, she had the option of continuing the fight with the current arena or opting for a new one. Without hesitation, she chose to continue where they were. It was the best fit for how she intended to proceed.

The suit she used now was not the same she'd employed in her fight against Nooblet so long ago. Compared to Geng Yang's, it was a far sight flashier.

The streamlined, golden mecha released a shimmering halo of light. By simply looking at it, it was impossible to distinguish precisely what the suit was specialized in. It resembled its pilot in many ways; long legs, crouched and ready for a fight.

"Three. Two. One. Begin!"

The second contest began with the blow of an alarm.

Like Geng Yang before her, Tang Mi's mecha began the fight by leaping upward leaving a contrail of golden light in its wake. All thrusters burned as it tore through the air, and what's more the mecha itself was surrounded in a grey halo and a golden shield of light. Disruption and defense.

It was not that Geng Yang had forgotten to use a shield in his own fight. The constructed and loadout of his mecha was different from Tang Mi's. His particular choice wasn't properly suited for combat against long-ranged fighters like the sniper, even if he had used it. It would not have made any difference.

The golden mecha barreled forward at incredible speed. Its right arm stretched out, and from the palm a blast of golden light fired towards the

distant sniper.

It wasn't straight, but instead traced an arched trajectory through the sky, spinning erratically like a boomerang. It rushed in almost sideways towards Hua Qianhu.

The slender sniper mech dropped in a crouch. It was starting to look like his standard response to any attack.

The golden mecha, like Geng Yang before it, advanced with Disordered leaps. But unlike Geng Yang, Tang Mi's hand speed wasn't quite as developed. As a result her advance, and the jerking motions of her Disordered leaps, was visibly slower. There was no afterimage from her passing.

The golden beam of light whistled over Hua Qianhu's head. The slender mecha stood, never moving from its spot. Still that same, terrifying calm.

A pale pink light spread out from Hua Qianhu's back, stretching over him in a photomask.

"Dang!" His shield came online, encompassing him in a rippling orb of pale pink light.

It was quite the powerful shield! The suit must have had at least a c-ranked gem powering it to maintain such an effective defense.

Tang Mi fumed, both at the situation and in envy of his mecha. She quickly recovered, however.

The boomerang of light hung in the air for what felt like an age before screeching a path once again towards Hua Qianhu. In the same instant, the deafening blast of the sniper's cannon rang out.

A sizzling beam of red light lanced through the air with a frightening metallic roar.

"Miss!"

Tang Mi was attentive, and made adjustments as she watched the sniper move.

Sure enough, the cannon's blast made landfall less than five meters from

Tang Mi's golden mecha. It was indeed a miss, but in the space of a few seconds another thunderous blast was heard. A forest of deadly laser beams came crashing down from on high.

Tang Mi coaxed her mecha to leap high overhead, while in the same instant the thrusters launching her forward went from gold to white. The mecha vanished in a flicker of light before appearing at Hua Qianhu's side!

"She got passed the kill zone!"

The entire NEU section of the audience watched on the edge of their seat, fists clenched as their representative finally got within striking distance.

As Tang Mi reappeared, her mecha had at some point produced two shimmering golden daggers which were now clutched in its mechanical hands. The matching armaments were a frightening pair, almost appearing possessed of their own intimidating aura. High-frequency blades [1]. With these in hand, Hua Qianhu's shield was not as intimidating.

The sniper certainly hadn't anticipated this golden mecha was capable of such speed. He subconsciously jerks his suit to the side, narrowly avoiding Tang Mi's deadly scissor slice.

Lan Jue watched from within the crowd, and quietly shook his head. No one saw, for all their attention was fixed on the large screens before them.

As the sword cut through the air, the golden mecha's chest was left exposed. However, as its arms spread wide in the follow-through a glaring burst of light spat from its torso to launch at Hua Qianhu. It was a textbook, arrogant move. NPD, near-proximity detonation.

The striking distance was less than five meters, and though it was dangerous the destructive power was increased as such close range, even beyond that of the sniper's electron canon. Its utility was compounded by an increased blast radius. It was an important aspect of a close-ranged fighter's arsenal for countering snipers.

Victory! Tang Mi swelled with pride and excitement. The NPD was too close for her opponent to dodge. Even his c-ranked gem couldn't deflect the attack.

But, did she really pull out the win?

The sniper lay prostrate on the ground, but was still movement. The suit twitched and struggled. It's left hand clutched the cannon, and with a fierce thrust of its right the suit was upward once again.

Just as the NPD fores, Hua Qianhu's suit released two beams of light from its shoulder plates. It launched his suit backwards to mitigate some of the damage and push back from the hot zone.

He caught the edge of the blast, but it was enough to violently knock him to the ground.

The sniper mecha twisted while airborne, spinning directly above Tang Mi's head. Time almost appeared to slow as the cannon lined up directly over the golden mecha. He pulled the trigger.

"Booommmmm!!"

The golden mecha's head exploded in a brilliant shimmering display. When the dust settled, the suit's entire torso was missing.

Peng! Hua Qianhu's sniper landed with a thud. It paused, looking over the crowd for a minute before continuing. He slowly walked around the wrecked, placed a foot against it, and viciously kicked the remains to the floor.

Shouts of indignation rose from the crowd as nearly every NEU student and faculty member balked at the display.

That digitized voice returned: "Tang Mi had been annihilated. Hua Qianhu is victorious."

Wang Hongyuan was absolutely livid as he glared at the screen. "Too excessive. He wins and then beats on the wreckage!"

Lan Jue said nothing, but his own face was a mask of displeasure. Lir University certainly was one to go too far. This was clearly provocative

behavior.

Xu Renjian's glowering face turned again to Han Ruchao. "Director Han. Is this what your university teaches its students?"

Han Ruchao looked on as though nothing untoward had occurred. "In combat you must never give your opponent an opportunity. What is the suit is equipped with a self-destruct mechanism? Naturally we teach our future soldiers to avoid this risk. You can't feasibly expect us not to treat this like a battlefield, Renjian. Our instructors use simulation as a foundation, to prepare them for the real thing. It's common sense, I'm surprised you don't understand this."

"You...!" Xu Renjian's face was dark with rage.

The crowds below bellowed their curses at the screen.

There was a term for Hua Qianhu's actions in DreamNet: flogging corpses. It was specifically to humiliate the opponent, despite whatever training they touted, and was universally despised as a practice.

And think of Tang Mi's reputation. She was one the school's Great Beauties, and an Emperor-grade pilot. She may not have had the same following as Zhou Qianlin, but she was still a school celebrity. This was especially true in the mecha combat department, where she was considered their muse. How could anyone suffer this sort of humiliation and keep a level head?

The crowds raged and cursed, oblivious of the filming equipment quietly watching from a dark corner.

"Silence!" Wu Junyi's commanding voice rang out, but even with his deterring presence he had to shout three times before he could illicit a response. Eventually he succeeded in curbing the vitriolic riot that was on the cusp of boiling over.

By the time Tang Mi pulled herself from the simulator, her face was pallid and drawn.

Those many days ago when she'd been dismembered by Nooblet's Brunois Assault, the only ones to witness it had been herself and that

damn landmine. This time, however, two entire universities had witnessed her outrageous defeat.

“Tang Mi.” Suddenly she felt herself enveloped in a comforting embrace.

“Your brother will avenge you!” Tang Xiao’s pudgy face was conspicuously absent of his normal teasing smile. Now, it bore the brutal expression of someone out for blood.

He hugged her tight. He spoke to no one, did not even acknowledge Tan Lingyun. Wordlessly, he stuffed himself in to the simulator and began the set up.

Hua Qianhu shouldered his weapon. He stood proudly at his end of the arena, soaking in the jeers.

A flash, and at the other end of the arena appeared his third and final challenger.

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1. Weapons that oscillate at high frequencies so as to weaken molecular bonds. An example in regards to the MGS universe can be found here: http://metalgear.wikia.com/wiki/High-frequency_blade

Chapter 182: Trainwreck

Hua Qianhu stared in silence at the third and final challenger. It looked like an average mecha.

It was coated in a bright silver plating, with a stocky composition. It was a good deal sturdier than Geng Yang's, but of course the greater volume meant it's speed suffered.

A close combat mecha? Hua Qianhu sat comfortably in his simulator, a smug grin on his face.

Hua Qianhu was the second strongest of the three mecha students that had been chosen for this competition, inferior only to Xiao Han. In fact, he'd already attempted the Sovereign-grade test once already. He'd only failed because he was lacking a little experience.

Though a part of the competition from the beginning, his interests were never in the opposition or even his own team mates. His primary desire was to do well, so that the school could earn more prestige and thus more resources for development.

After all he was very nearly set for life. A student who reached Sovereign status before even graduating was going to have a bright future, be it with an important family, a business collective or the military.

Hua Qianhu was no fool. He knew precisely the strengths and limitations of his abilities. He was well aware that the power he craved wasn't going to come solely by his hard work alone. There was talent and effort, sure, but contacts and resources were just as integral.

Case in point were the power gems a mecha suit employed to run. Expensive was an understatement, more than your average pilot would be able to afford. Luckily Hua Qianhu was a talented student, but he came from an average family. Where he got to now was largely a result of his own efforts, in a place where the university was giving him accolades. But even then, he still couldn't match up to those who came from a wealthy family.

He was graduating in a year. Now he was fighting tooth and nail with himself, pushing as hard as he could. He was dead-set on a single goal, all he wanted – to be a Sovereign-grade pilot.

The conflict between Lir and the NEU was as old as the hills. It was a good opportunity for him to ingratiate himself to the dean. Xiao Han was strong, true, but that wouldn't matter if he never got in the ring. That would mean it was him and him alone that represented Lir University's strength and superiority. He'd no longer be overshadowed.

It was for these reasons that Hua Qianhu was taking this competition so seriously, painstakingly studying his tactics. The arena wasn't the most suitable to his strengths, but he had faith in his abilities. As far as he'd seen, there was no danger of running in to a pilot that was his match.

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"Would you like to draw lots for a new map?" The digitized voice rang through Tang Xiao's cockpit.

Tang Xiao's face was cold, and hard. He growled his response.

"No."

"Three. Two. One. Begin!"

The third student battle began without delay. Were Tang Xiao to lose here, it would mean a crushing, humiliating defeat for the NEU. Losing three to zero would be a humiliation that would be seared in to the school's historic memory forever.

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Han Ruchao sat languidly within the VIP box, content in the results laid out before him. He found the first two victories very agreeable, and Hua

Qianhu to be performing exceptionally. He found the young man's demeaning actions particularly fun to watch. Altogether the sniper mecha's power stores had barely been touched. It looked more than likely this was going to be a complete shut-out.

Xu Renjian's own mood was, naturally, entirely contrary to his Lir counterpart. The moment he'd seen Geng Yang enter the field first he'd guessed Tan Lingyun's strategy. What he did not anticipate was that their best student would be eliminated so quickly. There was more than skill discrepancy there – Geng Yang also had to learn to better recognize opportunity, and the lack thereof.

He'd anticipated Tang Mi's defeat, truth be told. But to lose in such a fashion, in front of the entire school, was a strike at the very heart of the university as a whole. If they lost again this time, the effect on their future recruitment would be catastrophic. Not to mention the strangled death of the entire school's moral, students and teachers both.

But this was the reality he found himself in. What could he do? Who but he was at fault for their inferior learning in regards to Lir?

Within the arena, the fight had already begun.

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As this was the final bout, Hua Qianhu decided to switch up his strategy. Immediately his cannon was aimed directly at the silver mecha's head. A strong energy disturbance sizzled through the air as his weapon spooled.

According to Hua Qianhu's estimation, the one-thousand meter distance between he and his opponent was enough for two good shots. All he needed, was one solid hit.

By now he was supremely confident in his marksmanship, and for good reason. Within his kill zone, even Xiao Han wouldn't dare get on his bad side.

Tang Xiao began precisely how Geng Yang and Tang Mi before him had, with a direct rush. The instant the digital voice called for the fight to begin, he was off in a flash of light.

In regards to speed, his direct assault wasn't much different from Geng Yang's, though perhaps slightly poorer. His blazing thrusters were clearly already at maximum power as well.

Hua Qianhu was certain two shots was more than enough. With his extensive combat knowledge, he could read the result before it even happened. He grinned with satisfaction as his cannon beeped, indicating weapons lock

Hm? Weapon lock already, like he doesn't care? I guess he's mad and making mistakes.

Hua Qianhu was surprised to discover there was nothing Tang Xiao was doing to try and prevent a lock from his cannon. This meant no matter where he shot, the shell would find its mark. It was a critical, catastrophic error on the part of his enemy.

Boom! The sniper took its first shot. Now that it was locked there was no need to wait.

A smile was already spreading across Hua Qianhu's face as he waited for the Hat Trick.

If this whole thing really was the result of his opponent's mistake, then all the better. He was already thinking of how to disgrace this guy in front of his friends. If, on the other hand, he managed to find some way to evade the strike, he still had time for his second shot. He had the dominant position no matter what.

"Aaaahhh!" A howling cry tore through the bleachers as the NEU onlookers collectively cried out. Not every student in the NEU was a mecha pilot, but all of them knew the process inside and out. A close-combat mecha taking on a sniper with no protective jamming was painting a giant target on your own chest. Defeat was inevitable.

The electron cannon's fiery red beam found its target. A virtual flash as

the mecha exploded filled the screen.

Tang Mi's dull, defeated face was turned up to watch the screen. Her pretty face was heavy with melancholy. Was this the result of her brother being too emotional, she thought. It didn't matter, it was over!

Suddenly the cries stopped, as though someone simply turned off the volume. Everyone held their breath.

They'd seen it true, Tang Xiao's mecha really had been struck by Hua Qianhu's cannon. However, as the fires of the explosion raged an enormous figure broke through the wall of fire to rush forth.

A mecha, silver, but now with a dim silver shield of light encompassing it. Were it not for the laser's blast, it would have been entirely invisible and gone without notice.

He actually faced down the electron cannon's shell!

Within the VIP box, both deans watched the screens very carefully. Han Ruchao looked incredulous. Xu Renjian was absolutely shocked.

Both university leaders were calculating the precise stopping power of an electron shell. Next was how much power the suit must have consumed to deflect the blow.

And yet as they watched, the small line on the screen detailing Tang Xiao's energy reserves trembled only just slightly. Hua Qianhu's energy reserves were at twenty percent.

The giant silver mecha barreled through the smoldering cloud where impact had been made, rushing headlong towards his opponent.

But Hua Qianhu's training and experience kicked in. His stunned surprise lasted only a second before he began to react. He was an ace pilot, he knew what had happened – he just hadn't been expecting it.

This time he didn't remain locked in place as he had the previous two fights. He made a hasty retreat to the side. While his mecha twisted and raced diagonally away, its upper body remained stationary, locked still to face his opponent. His cannon locked on Tang Xiao for the second time.

It was unfortunately Hua Qianhu was unable to see the harsh light of hatred in Tang Xiao's eyes, or the hard lines of his face as he scowled. His fat hands were a blur over the controls.

The silver mecha jerked to a stop without warning. The thrusters at its back sputtered, and changed colors.

The formerly incandescent light of the thrusters became a dazzling purple. There was a flash, and the air was sliced by a shimmering violet contrail.

Hua Qianhu blinked, confused by the illuminating display. Then, everything went black.

Boooooommmmm!

Countless pieces of slag and debris tumbled from the simulated skies. The audience had seen it the clearest from the various screens overhead. The silver mecha had essentially turned itself in to a cannon shell – a freight train that had obliterated Hua Qianhu while he'd been caught off guard. The deadly sniper was now no more than a pile of shrapnel. Like he had been struck down by the hand of god himself.

The silver mecha landed with a thunderous boom, skidding to a halt. It stood tall and unscathed, imposing as a demon. It's giant metal hand raised, and waggled its pointer finger in denial towards the Lir University bleachers.

“Hua Qianhu's mecha has suffered one hundred percent damage. Combat complete. Victory, Tang Xiao!”

Chapter 183: Concealment, Assimilation

Gems

Finished?

This match was even quicker than the last two. Sudden, and violent.

Lir University's Dean, Han Ruchao, shot to his feet faster than a llama on jet skis. His eyes were wide and round, utterly disbelieving the scene in front of his eyes.

His expression was matched by Xu Renjian's own face, slack-jawed and dumbfounded. Behind at the edges of his lips, the ever so faint hints of a haughty smile started to show. He knew his students, knew Tang Xiao's abilities – or so he thought. How could this be? Everything was backwards, and Bi Qianhu's attacks didn't even scratch him!

A simulator hissed sadly as the door opened. Bi Qianhu pulled his medium-sized build from the cockpit with a howl, his handsome features twisted in rage.

"B-BASTARD!! How the hell did that happen?! How did he go from a lumbering idiot to a damn light-speed battering ram?!"

The team's Lir University instructor looked on. Surprisingly he was young himself, perhaps in his thirties, with an unusually calm expression. After a moment his brows furrowed – just the slightest bit.

"You got flattened."

This was the young man whom Lir's Teaching Director, Shi Jiujiu, had treated with such respect. Su He.

Bi Qianhu stared at him, fuming. "You think his equipment was better than mine?"

Su He nodded, impassively gesturing towards the screens. "Note his energy consumption."

Bi Qianhu's head snapped up, where he was shocked to discover Tang Xiao had used only three percent of his energy stores. His eye twitched

furiously.

It had been such a short match, but in that time he'd had to ward off his opponents and lug that cannon on his shoulder. And here he was at three percent?

He simply couldn't fathom what was going on, and his head nearly exploded as he witnessed Tang Xiao's energy reserves regenerating. His mecha was actually restoring itself!

"Ch-cheating! They must be cheating!" He shouted rancorously at the screen.

"Shut the hell up! Two victories aren't enough for you?" Xiao Han stood a small distance away, and spat the words accusingly.

"And what does that mean, huh Xiao Han?" Bi Qianhu narrowed his eyes, glaring daggers. The two school celebrities exchanged heated looks.

Xiao Han snorted scornfully. "Listen and learn. My guess he's got at least three a-ranked gems specifically for energy management on that thing."

"A-ranked?" Bi Qianhu turned his head to look back at Su He. The instructor was as before, expressionless and calm as the surface of a lake. He simply gestured towards a third student. "Ming Han. You're up. Select a new arena. Use the advantage of your speed to keep him at bay, don't let him get a hand on you."

"Yes, Professor Su." The entirely average looking youth jumped in to the simulator.

Bi Qianhu stood to one side, still pondering the situation. A-ranked power gems? C-ranked were the only thing he'd ever actually seen employed at one of these things. It was extravagant! After all, the cost of gems in DreamNet weren't even slightly cheaper than those in the real world.

Next, Su He slowly turned his attention unto Xiao Han. "Watch this match very carefully. Distinguish the particulars of his equipment. When it comes down to you, do not under-estimate him. This student's mecha is a near match to yours."

Upon his victory over Bi Qianhu, the vengeance and anger in Tang Xiao's heart eased. Steamrolled... of course. He thought back to earlier, to the things his teacher had lent him for the games. A cruel grin spread across his fat face.

Bring it on, Lir punks. I'll show you the fat man's ferocity.

The arena glowed with a flash of light, and Tang Xiao's second opponent appeared opposite him in the ring. His name hung in the space over his head: Bi Minghan.

The newly arrived suit looked almost like a toy. It was small, and frail, not a centimeter over twelve meters.

A Darter Mech! Tang Xiao drew a breath.

Bi Minghan elected for another map. The world around them shifted nauseatingly as the backgrounds underwent a series of rapid shifts. The flashes slowed until it settled on their new field of battle: the desert.

"Terrain: desert. Combat shall commence in: Three. Two. One. Begin."

Tang Xiao winced against the sudden bright light and heat from the sand. It was a vast and expansive field, so close to reality it was difficult to tell the difference. The rolling dunes stretched for five kilometers in all directions, and the beating sun meant that anyone flying overhead would be lost in the glare.

Tang Xiao was off, like he didn't even need to think. He was the first to react as the match begun, and took a step forward.

The mecha plunged headfirst in to the dunes. Within the cockpit, the controls were unresponsive, silent as a grave.

The audience's omniscient view afforded them more information, like the dim yellow aura that hung over Tang Xiao's silver mecha.

Su He watched the screens, and for the briefest of moments, his brows lifted in surprise.

Xiao Han sneered at the screen, then called out to his instructor. "An assimilation gem, right Professor?"

Su He nodded slowly. "C-ranked."

Bi Qianhu stood to one side. His rage had begun to subside, and he was now more annoyed than angry. The mention of the assimilation gem brought him back to the battle at hand. He recalled the power gem's function as he watched the scene.

Assimilation gems were able to force a mecha's environment to accept it as part of itself. In that way it resonated with the surroundings and fought off radar detection. The Achilles heel lay in the fact that it was too effective. If the pilot found themselves in an area of high energy output – like, say, a sun-drenched desert – it overloaded the electrical systems. Tang Xiao knew this when he hid himself beneath the sands.

Restarting the mecha would take time.

Lan Jue looked on from the bleachers, nursing a bitter expression. This damn fat-ass! There hadn't been any assimilation gems in the kit Lan Jue had provided him. The only explanation was that it was Tang Xiao's own. It was like he was determined to depress the hell out of everyone!

Half a second after Tang Xiao went down, Bi Minghan was on the move.

However, they appeared to have been deposited a distance from one another. Seek and destroy would be the game. Bi Minghan engaged its radar acquisition equipment and began to scan for Tang Xiao's location. The Darter's strength was immediately apparent as it raced over the sands fast enough to look almost ethereal. Two ionized light sabers sizzled in its hands. It was like a monstrous spirit racing through the scalding desert.

The audience was able to observe both contestants on different screens, and by now many who had previously cursed Tang Xiao were forced to mutter praise. Luckily for him, the moment the assimilation gem shorted his suit and activated was the very moment Bi Minghan's radar sweep was passing over him. Was it not for that gem he'd certainly have been discovered and caught unawares.

Tang Xiao made no effort to turn on his own scanners once the mecha was operational. He simply poked a hole in the sand to peer out of.

Of course Bi Minghan was unaware of any of this. As a contestant he wasn't made aware of the situation as the audience was. And so he kept searching the dunes, wary of stopping for fear that Tang Xiao would do to him what he did to Hua Qianhu. His nerves were certainly on edge, ready to bolt and evade at a moment's notice.

Su He's instructions were clear, if not direct. It wasn't important that he defeat Tang Xiao, but instead to drag out a battle. With any luck Tang Xiao would tip his hand, reveal his abilities, and consume some precious energy.

The audience watched with baited breath. They saw Bi Minghan's own energy reserves begin to deplete as he raced around the desert arena at staggering speeds. Tang Xiao's energy levels had regenerated to full.

The previous battles had been short and violent. This looked like it was going to be a different beast. The audience readied themselves for a knock-down, drag-out battle.

Ten minutes passed.

Beads of sweat dripped down Bi Minghan's forehead as he sat in the dark simulator pod. As the time stretched on, his nervousness only increased, and keeping up his mecha's speed was exhausting. Still his opponent was nowhere to be found – like he'd vanished in to thin air.

Twenty minutes.

Bi Minghan was grappling a growing impatience. He knew very well that Tang Xiao must be hiding, but where he couldn't fathom. How was it his radar detection could find absolutely no trace?

Twenty-five minutes.

The time indicator on the screens over the audience's head began to flash red as the final five minutes of the battle began to tick down.

Bi Minghan's eyes flashed down to the control console, where he saw the state of his energy levels. Twenty percent gone, just from racing through the desert searching. The price of his high speed. Still, there was five minutes left in this fight – and a DreamNet competition was judged by

damage to the mecha, not the amount of energy stored.

If it continued until the end, the match would result in a draw – really, a loss for both sides. But since the NEU was already down two wins, it would mean their aggregate score would be lower. They'd lose the competition.

This realization caused Bi Minghan to have a shift in thinking, focusing instead on self-preservation and protection instead of seeking out the enemy. He lifted in to the sky, distancing himself from the battlefield so he could get a better view.

Twenty-eight minutes.

Only two minutes remained until the end, and yet Tang Xiao was still nowhere to be found.

Was this really to be how it'd end? In a tie, a terribly anti-climactic finish. Bi Minghan suspected his enemy was still biding his time, concealing himself until the last minute where he'd reveal his strength.

Twenty-nine minutes!

Bi Minghan decided upon what he thought was the best option given the circumstances – he coaxed his darter mech higher towards the simulated cloudless sky. His mecha was specialized in speed, no slower even than Tang Xiao with his empowered thrusters. All he had to do was keep his distance, just for one more minute. That's all, then he'd done his job.

The console beeped as Bi Minghan's radar caught a ping.

The large silver mecha burst from within a sand dune, filling the air with choking dust. Bi Minghan sat slack-jawed in his simulator as a veritable meteor shower of particle beams filled his screen.

Chapter 184: A 1% Victory

“Bi Minghan has suffered 1% damage. Tang Xiao 0%. Tang Xiao is victorious.”

The emotionless digitized voice hung in the air.

The fourth student battle finished as the time ticked down to zero. Tang Xiao had won his second in a row, by virtue of a single minor attack.

The entire audience burst in to uproarious laughter.

It rang in the ears of every Lir student and teacher.

A 1% victory was usually a display of luck, just barely winning over the enemy. But when it was intentional, as this battle was, it was more embarrassing than flogging corpses.

Bi Minghan burst from the simulator, his face purple with rage. Even Hua Qianhu, whose mecha was absolutely obliterated, looked on him with sympathy.

This fight wasn't lost because of any difference in equipment. No, he lost this one because he was outplayed. His enemy had more heart.

Bi Minghan knew it was a lesson, and an image he wouldn't forget. Behind his eyes he could still see the curtain of red lasers filling the sky.

The laser curtain was a weak strike, but it was an effective long-range tactical tool. It was called a pinning laser, and it was meant to force a target where you want. If you knew where the target would be, all you had to do was pull the trigger. Naturally it's damage wasn't much of a concern, and what's more it's distance and scale were prohibitively expansive.

What was embarrassing was that this ploy was precisely what won Tang Xiao his victory.

Han Ruchao stared at the screens. His face was dark, and great huffs of hair were pushed through flaring nostrils. He snapped his head to his NEU compatriot. "You're indeed quite the teacher, Renjian! Using tactics one would never actually witness on the field of battle! Easily tolerable."

Xu Renjian's response was even and unhurried. "What is a man? A man is to endure, Ruchao. This was a fine showing. He waited until the last possible moment, so as not to give his enemy any chance at a reaction. I think that shows good battlefield tactics, don't you? He has been well trained."

"You..." Han Ruchao only stared at him.

Xu Renjian smiled. "Ruchao, excess anger will bring you health problems. Think of your heart." Xu Renjian couldn't be any more pleased with this moment.

These last two victories were a better showing from the NEU than any in recent history. They were unorthodox, true – but who cared?

It was now time for the LU student body to glare spitefully at the victorious Tang Xiao. A few looked on the cusp of an outburst.

Tang Xiao's little trick wasn't something entirely unheard of. Kids used these sorts of tricks to tease their friends. Everyone knew about it. It was a cruel joke to use it in an actual battle.

But it wasn't just a trick now. It had snatched victory from Lir, turning the tables in a fight they should have won easily. It had changed the game.

Su He frowned openly. He turned to regard Lir's final hope. "Be wary. Do not get careless. This one, the cunning of a fox. Appearances can be deceiving."

Xiao Han's face was solemn. He may have fought his way to the top of the school's power rosters, but he wasn't arrogant in this. "I'll be careful, Professor Su."

The teacher turned back to the screens. "Choose another map."

"I will."

Xiao Han wasted no more time. He strode to the simulator and pulled himself inside.

The silver warrior's energy reserves were back to full. Tang Xiao's pudgy face bore a small smile. He thought about his sisters, congratulating himself on bringing vengeance to her assailant.

Your brother's gunna upset the balance. This is a coup! I may be fat, but that's all strength. Hell, might even I get a girlfriend out of this.

There was a flash, and the opposite side of the ring was host to a shadowy figure.

The mecha was bright red, and the light danced across it like licks of flame racing along the metal. Judging by its construction, it looked like a melee mecha: big, and burly, with a massive saber on its back. The blade was easily ten meters long, and two meters wide. Just seeing it brought a shudder to some witnesses.

"Selecting new map." The digital voice came from everywhere at once.

"New terrain selected: Ocean."

Once again the world around them flashed, shuttered, warped until it settled on a vast blue expanse of sea. Tang Xiao and Xiao Han hovered above the waves, just close enough to make each other out.

Nearly every modern mecha was equipped with systems for underwater combat, but it was rare to find a mecha that specialized in it. So in a way this map was similar to the arena, and it was going to be a tough fight.

Su He nodded his head ever so slightly, pleased with the result.

Tan Lingyun, in the other sim room, frowned as she saw the terrain shift. Her eyes narrowed. She had seen Tang Xiao's explosive power in the first fight, and his trickiness in the second. However, this was going to be a much less hospitable battlefield, against a very difficult enemy.

The silver mecha hung in the air, large and imposing. Slowly, its left hand lifted to give the distant challenger a thumbs up. But its wrist slowly turned as the arm extended, until the thumb was pointed down.

Xiao Han's eyes flashed as anger shot through him.

He's actually taunting me?!

The red mecha burned all the brighter, surrounded in a corona of red light and energy.

"Three. Two. One. Begin!"

Xiao Han raced towards his enemy, the sound of his mecha loud as a jet engine. Bi Minghan's mecha was considered a step up from Hua Qianhu's, but neither came anywhere near Xiao Han's beastly machine.

Tang Xiao's silver mecha followed in kind, racing swiftly ahead. His thrusters blazed, but were absent the purple light from before. He was holding back.

The two war machines closed, until it looked as though they were right on top of each other.

Xiao Han's fiery red mecha's arm flashed, and the giant blade was in its hand. As the weapon was drawn, it flashed through the air. A sonic boom of energy raced outwards with the action.

"Energy blasts?" Tan Lingyun's eyes narrowed. "A Sovereign-ranked pilot!"

Energy blasts were a staple of Sovereign-ranked pilots. It was a different sort of strike, compared to a long-ranged attack – it was congealed energy, manipulated and controlled. It was powerful, and frightening. Usually it required the use of a pilot's Discipline to employ with ease. It wasn't something seen often in DreamNet.

But this was Xiao Han's opening strike. The more astute among the audience noticed the red gem affixed to the massive weapon's pommel, that shimmered with a life of its own. The power flowing through the gem made it more obvious than it originally was.

It was at least a b-ranked power gem. Very competitive equipment.

In the face of Xiao Han's strike, the silver mecha collapsed. Not from a hit, but because the thrusters on its back all shut off in tandem. The

enormous and hefty machine tumbled in to the drink.

Xiao Han's energy blast passed harmlessly overhead.

He wants to fight in the ocean? Does he expect to hide under the waves? Xiao Han considered the possibility, but the fact the bout had just started and Tang Xiao was just in front of him meant that If it was an attempt at concealment, it was a very poor one.

The audience looked on, confused. Suddenly, the silver mecha changed even as they stared on. The shoulder panels separated, and from the cavities therein extended two polished gun barrels. They fired without a moment's pause.

"Boom-boom!"

Xiao Han's reactions were worthy of his status. He swept his buzzing sword and blocked the two shells with little effort. But half a second later, the silver mech burst from beneath the brine and tore in to the distance. This, time, however, it was now literally bristling with protruded weapon barrels.

"Long distance fighter...?" Su He's face twitched as he fought the expression from his face.

What kind of monster had the NEU created? It was built like a melee fighter to confound the enemy, but it was... off. It had used a shield to protect itself from the impact that obliterated Hua Qianhu, but the most telling was the fact that it carried no weapon.

The barrels lit up as a series of lasers raced back towards Xiao Han.

Xiao Han was also surprised by the revelation, but his mecha manipulation didn't seem to suffer. To him, the machine was like his right arm. A piece of him. He stopped only long enough to deflect the beams with his sword, and then he was off again towards his prey.

Tang Xiao released wave after wave of attacks as he raced in to the distance. Xiao Han followed on his heels, dodging the attacks as they came. They raced over the water's surface, spraying up water behind them in a wake.

This wretched bastard! Xiao Han's face was dark with anger. Lying from the outset... It was a thought echoed by no small number of those in the audience.

It was a classic tactic from the games of old – the ranged fighter was kiting his close-ranged enemy; pulling him along, like a kite, and taking pot-shots as he did. And Xiao Han was happy to go along with it. Still this was a crafty one, changing up tactics on the fly and spurting the purple thrusters on occasion to keep the lead.

But really as they chased each other over the waves, it looked more impressive than it really was. The silver mechas blasts were flashy, but not all that powerful. Xiao Han blocked them handily with his weapon. It was catching up, without a single scratch.

Chapter 185: Miraculous Victory

Both mechas were seeing their energy stores in decline. However, as expected, the ranged mecha's energy was being spent faster than the melee's. The battle was shaping up to be a violent one, with a lot of back and forth. Not five minutes in to the match and Tang Xiao's energy reserves were down thirty percent. Xiao Han was only missing ten percent.

Xiao Han raced towards his enemy, cool and calm. All the while he was carefully watching the wretched pilot darting in front of him, waiting for his next trick. He wasn't scared or intimidated; as far as he could see, it didn't matter what trick the guy tried to pull, his efforts would be futile. All he had to do was wait his enemy out. When his energy stores were too low for high speed or other attacks, that's when he'd make his move.

Tang Xiao began to circle around. His suit's power drained faster.

Lan Jue watched from the audience, his face a glowering mask. He inwardly cursed his student. This wasn't anything he'd taught him! This was the kid's own design.

He was fairly certain Tang Xiao's enemy now was the guy who'd been sniffing after Qianlin. A sovereign-ranked pilot with decent abilities and a decent punch. The tools he'd provided to shut down the kid's advantages still went unused by Tang Xiao. Instead he was falling back on his ultimately useless trickery.

Still, there was a ghost of expectation as Lan Jue watched. He still bore a dissatisfied frown, but memories of the fatty's near-victory from so long ago danced in his head.

Fifteen minutes passed quickly. Already, the silver mecha was down to forty percent energy. In terms of mecha combat, this was already in dangerous territory.

Tang Xiao recognized this as well, hence his decision to stop using the empowered thrusters. Now, he only relied on evasive techniques and defensive strikes. Xiao Han was in no rush to close the gap, instead remaining just behind him as they raced over the waves. He was waiting

until the silver mecha was drained. That way his prey had no opportunity for escape.

Su He watched from nearby the simulation pod. His features were once more the familiar calm he'd arrived with. His lips curled in to a frown, suddenly, as though he'd just thought of something.

"Hm, no. He's been tricked."

Both Hua Qianhu and Bi Minghan looked inquisitively towards their instructor. "What do you mean, Professor?"

His brows furrowed as he spoke, his eyes never leaving the screen. "His opponent's energy levels shouldn't be dropping this quickly. By what we saw in his fight against the two of you, his central power gem is likely a-ranked. His power stores would thusly be... colossal. As would his energy regeneration. But in this fight it's obvious his reserves are draining faster than they should be. There's definitely something going on here, I just hope your compatriot recognizes this as well."

His teacher didn't need to worry. Xiao Han was well aware of the discrepancy.

In the beginning he hadn't noticed, but once Tang Xiao's reserves had dropped to fifty percent, it dawned on him. His own mecha used an a-ranked gem as its core, and his reserves were only down thirty percent.

You wanna play games? We'll play games. When your energy drops to twenty percent, and you don't have enough for your shields, that's when I'll move in. The energy he poured through his weapon extended the blade a hundred meters. He wouldn't even need to get that close. The only person this silver mecha was going to mess with was himself.

But Xiao Han was making a mistake that he could never have realized: He was trying to judge Tang Xiao's behavior against a normal person. He wasn't anticipating it was a total bastard that was piloting the thing.

Twenty percent remained.

Tang Xiao's energy surplus was already in the red. His speed was visibly slower. There was a flash of red light, and a sonic boom of energy swept

mere inches from the back of the silver suit.

What was the ace of Tang Xiao's sleeve? Xiao Han chased his enemy, his heart filled with a nerve-wracking uncertainty.

If you won't show me, I'll make you show your cards.

Xiao Han's fingers danced along the controls like lightning. The red light surrounding his mecha dimmed somewhat, but not for lack of power – more like it was drawing in to itself. Moments later, the red light burst out from thrusters behind it. However, despite expectations, the light didn't do anything to modulate his mecha's speed. Instead it transferred to the weapon in his hand.

In the space of an instant, the fiery red sword in his grip flashed and became a dazzling gold. It flashed with a mass of congealed power.

Xiao Han roared as he lifted the weapon overhead. The air around him sizzled with errant jolts of energy as he brought the great blade down onto his opponent.

In the same instant, the silver mecha reacted. All of the thrusters and engines keeping it aloft sputtered and went dark. Once more he tumbled towards the briny seas in freefall.

"You think you can run away from me?!" Xiao Han screamed at him from within the simulator. He pointed his sword downward towards the spinning silver mecha, and a beam of red light shot down towards it with frightening speed. But that wasn't the end, for the second the beam of light issued forth, Xiao Han coaxed his mecha to pursue. Soon the strike and the mecha were barreling right towards the exposed silver suit.

This was the end!

By now the match had already stretched on for twenty minutes. Han Ruchao, Xu Renjian, and all the onlookers could see no way in which the intrepid silver mecha could get out of this unscathed.

What none could see was the smile creeping up Tang Xiao's pudgy face.

BOOOOOMM!!

The red beam cast from the empowered sword connected. Surprisingly, Tang Xiao had lifted his left arm to block the brunt of the blast. In this way he protected the most integral parts of his machine.

The draw back was that his left arm was now a lump of slag. Half his suit was burned black and badly damaged. The sword's power was so great that, had Tang Xiao not blocked when he did, his suit would likely have been sliced right in half.

Success! Xiao Han wasted no further time in hesitation – this was his opportunity. He was on his enemy in no time. His blade was moving again, another strike that set the air around it to undulating. The red beams of energy cast forth tore through the air in a 'Z' shape. If it landed, Tang Xiao would be reduced to half a dozen mangled pieces.

The silver mecha hit the water with a splash. His thrusters remained cold. He simply let himself sink in to the water.

Xiao Han's attack was ever so slightly off, however it was close enough that it struck.

A silver, mechanical skull hung in the air where Xiao Han's strike had separated it from the rest of the suit.

No one celebrated, not yet. In mecha combat this didn't spell the end of a match. The pilots weren't located in the head, after all, but safely nestled in the depths of their suit's chest.

The fiery red mecha wasted no time, and was on his enemy once again. He hit the water and began to sink. The high temperatures of his suit elicited a massive cloud of steam to rise from around him.

The only thing anyone could see was the steam, turning the simulated world in to a blank white canvas.

Before their vision could clear, first came a noise. It was an explosion; one so intense, so frightening that it was difficult to compare. It was like a strike from a starship, birthed from the arms of the ocean.

BOOOOOMMM!

The sudden and violent eruption was compounded by the steam, making vision difficult, fuzzy. Great, towering tsunami waves arose a thousand meters high from 'ground zero.' The water directly above where the mechas fell churned and boiled.

Bolts of bluish-purple danced along the water's surface. The audience only watched, silent, struck dumb by the power of the strike they'd hadn't actually witnessed.

What was going on? What was the result?

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"Xiao Han's mecha has sustained one hundred percent damage. Tang Xiao's mecha has sustained forty-eight percent damage. Victory – Tang Xiao!"

Tang Xiao victorious! It was both a blessed relief and a vicious gut-punch. The Students of Lir University stared in utter horror and disbelief at the words plastered across the screen.

They were all, to a man, utterly speechless.

The water calmed, and from its depths slowly arose a busted up, silver middle finger.

The rest of Tang Xiao's mangled mecha followed, proudly brandishing its remaining arm and the risen finger as though raising a flag.

"You CHEATED!" Han Ruchao shot to his feet, shouting impotently at Xu Renjian at his elbow.

Xu Renjian sat, unmoving. Slowly he turned his head, and when he spoke his voice was hard as iron, and calm as the simulated ocean on screen now was.

"Come now, Ruchao. You're a dean – let's control ourselves, hm? You know as well as I that matches held in DreamNet are impossible to fix. If you have a problem with the way this fight was conducted, yelling at me won't solve a thing. Bring your grievances to the Guardians."

Han Ruchao literally shook with rage. He fell resentfully in to his chair. After a moment he leaned towards Shi Jiujiu at his other side and whispered something.

Shi Jiujiu nodded, and quickly left the VIP box.

The shock and surprise was fading. Suddenly, as though subconsciously communicated, the entire NEU presence in the audience burst in to howls of praise and cheers of joy. The waves of emotion were so powerful it was almost as though the whole West Hill resonated with it.

Victory. A real and honest victory. A miraculous victory!

None could have expected that the thoroughly trounced NEU would turn the battle around with their last fighter. By virtue of a single fighter's power, they took out all three Lir challengers. It was unthinkable.

The jubilant cries were raucous, but there were few if any in the crowd who actually understood what was happened in the last three fights – especially at the very end.

Lan Jue, of course, was the exception. He sat calmly amid the cheering crowds, with a small smile on his handsome face.

Wang Hongyuan just looked at him. He leaned in and spoke softly, just enough for Lan Jue to hear over the din. "How in the hell did he pull that out in the end? Did you see it?"

"Nope," Lan Jue replied.

"No? So what the hell are you smirking about? You look so sinister." Wang Hongyuan glowered, afraid he was being kept in the dark.

Lan Jue rubbed his face with a sigh. Agitation was clear in his voice as he spoke. "What are you on about. This is a knowing smile, alright. Tang Xiao didn't win this fight from one strike – he won the mental war."

Wang Hongyuan was still unclear. "Mental war... what do you mean?"

"Keep watching," was all Lan Jue would say.

A voice cut them off, calling towards the audience from the main platform. "Lir University has request an analysis of the final battle. We

will be reviewing the footage.”

Battle review was one of the best advantages of fighting in DreamNet. It allowed anyone to view a fight from all angles. They could sharpen or slow the footage as much as they liked to pick out every tiny detail. But like anything, it cost money.

No one cared about the price at this point. Everyone was dying to know what the hell happened.

In the expansive simulator warehouse, two pods opened. Tang Xiao and Xiao Han stepped out as if in tandem.

Tang Xiao’s face bore a proud expression, which only grew more arrogant as he stuck his index finger high in the air.

He looked for all the world like a returning, victorious general.

Chapter 186: What Wretchedness!

“Ah, ah, ah!” Tang Xiao proudly wagged his finger in the air, when suddenly a slender figure snatched him up in a bear hug. Tang Mi squeezed him as hard as she good and kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you bro. Long live Tang Xiao! Muwah! Love you!”

Tang Mi hugged him tightly, kissing him once again on each cheek before finally letting him go.

Even Tan Lingyun, the famously sour Savage Goddess, stood a short distance away with a smile on her face. Tang Xiao’s victories were not insignificant, and proud couldn’t describe the whole of the NEU’s feelings towards their student hero. It was fair to say their pudgy pilot had made history today.

Years of suppression and shame had finally been rectified.

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“What was that.” Su He’s face was as close to an outright scowl as it could be as he stared at Xiao Han.

The young man looked on the verge of tears. His red eyes glared ruefully at the fat bastard who’d bested him.

“He’s an insufferable prick. He had the ability to end the fight from the very beginning. Instead he went on to deliberately humiliate me. I’ll kill him!” Xiao Han stomped towards the distant Tang Xiao with his hands clenched in to fists.

Su He calmly reached out and grabbed the fiery young man by the collar. He yanked him back before he could get too far. “Haven’t you lost enough face? The competition isn’t finished yet. We may have lost the first exchange, but that doesn’t mean Lir University has been bested. We’ll make up for this embarrassment in the real battles.”

The fight recorded flashed up on screen as they spoke. Su He turned his back on Xiao Han as though he no longer existed, and began to study the playback.

The video raced through the early moments of the fight. Onlookers were able to review the battle from all directions and angles.

The first minutes were sped up. After all, everyone had seen clearly what had happened in the beginning. However, once the final moments of their exchange approached, the recording slowed.

The silver mecha had yet to hit the water, and was flailing through the sky. But now, with the images slowed, it was revealed that his flailing was a ruse to hide him pulling a dagger from a compartment behind his back with his remaining arm. It was a strange weapon, one that was black as ink and seemed to drink the light. But beyond that there was something else, only barely glimpsed: a bluish-purple orb, clutched in his mechanical hand.

As the frames slowly passed they watched as Tang Xiao hit the water, casting brine and water vapor high in to the air. Xiao Han's fiery red mecha was close behind.

The spray and steam hid everything on the surface from view. Under water, was another story.

The silver mecha's dwindling power reserves never changed, but from behind it the thrusters had burst to life and glowed a furious purple. In a flash the massive suit vanished, appearing directly in front of Xiao Han.

The sudden change in environment had certainly had an effect on the red mecha and its pilot. He'd assumed he was in the dominant position, and rammed in to Tang Xiao head first.

In reality his reaction was the proper one, at least under normal circumstances. A red shield had sprung up around him prior to impact, and judging by the vibrant light alone it was clearly a powerful shield.

The two mechas collided, and in that instant Tang Xiao's hand was in motion. The black dagger clutched in his grip lashed out, and from it sprang forth a caustic-looking black light. It cut through Xiao Han's shield like butter, and slashed a ragged hole in its chest plate.

"Sovereign-ranked?" It was a rhetorical question sputtered by no small

number of shocked onlookers.

Was it possible that the silver mecha was piloted by a Sovereign-ranked pilot? Was Tang Xiao really that skilled? And why, then, did he appear so weak normally?

The fight hadn't ended there. The knife had cut deep in to the mech's chest, but hadn't punctured the cockpit. Xiao Han reeled back and swung his giant sword towards Tang Xiao. Had the silver mech continued the assault, he may not have been quick enough to escape the strike.

So instead, the silver mecha did something strange. He pulled the dagger free and used the relatively tiny weapon to ward off the buster sword. He let the weapon be knocked free, then reached out with his right hand and pushed Xiao Han away by the fissure in his chest plate. Tang Xiao's thrusters sent him reeling in one direction, which the thrust sent Xiao Han tumbling in the other.

The film slowed to a crawl, and spun back a few frames.

The images closed in on the silver mecha's hand. Now, slow as it was, everyone could clearly see precisely what the odd move was about. As the dagger was knocked away, the hand quickly fell and stuffed a small purple orb in to the fractured armor.

Rewind. The dagger had just sliced through the armor, and was being extracted to deflect the red mecha's sword.

Xiao Han detonated, instantly reduced to debris. Tang Xiao managed to avoid the brunt of the explosion by disengaging early.

Now they saw it, and the cheers from the NEU were almost entirely drowned out by the heated curses of the Lir student body.

Indeed, it was as Xiao Han had said. This fight could have been finished in the first minute.

Su He's pupils contracted as he watched. His intonation was thick with incredulity.

"Soulcrusher!"

The Soulcrusher was a weapon. More accurately, perhaps, an ultimate weapon. It was a strike that could only be used once before it was consumed. It had the power to rival an a-ranked power gem.

But what did it mean that he was using something so powerful, so extravagant, in a student exchange? And on a Sovereign-ranked mecha?

The Soulcrusher was a God-ranked ability, one which Tang Xiao avoided by sheer luck.

It was such overkill that he could have won the fight in the first few seconds of the fight. There hadn't been any need for their air chase, goading Xiao Han on. All he'd needed was to be in close enough for the strike to land.

Of course he hadn't done that, instead making Xiao Han chase him for his own demise. He wanted to draw him in, and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Or so he aimed to make it appear, but he'd had the bout won before it even started.

What Su He and the others couldn't see, was what made this particular trick of Tang Xiao's so downright rotten. When the Soulcrusher had been deposited in the broken armor, he'd placed it directly in front of Xiao Han's 'face', something Xiao Han saw very clearly. Were this a real fight, the little orb would have detonated in his embrace.

The fight was finished. Xiao Han's anger and depression were understandable. He didn't know what the hell he was fighting until the very end.

Tang Xiao's mecha wasn't mееle, and wasn't long-ranged. It was an Assassin. As for the rank, Xiao Han still wasn't sure what the hell he was.

The audience was in chaos. The din was deafening as they milled about and shouted over the fight's conclusion. In the VIP box, Han Ruchao's chest rose and fell in angry huffs. He was like a volcano, ready to erupt at any moment.

This was death by torture! Unbridled arrogance and humiliation! What's worse, they lost all of that equipment.

All because of a single Emperor-ranked pilot.

Chapter 187: I've Picked a Master

Xiao Han's heart was a tempest of hurt, depression and anger.

He was a considered a rare talent, first in his family, and relatively well known from an early age. Even though he was so young, he was close to earning his own piloting alias. 1

It wasn't as though he'd never been defeated. He's faced stronger foes, certainly. But in those bouts it was a joy – exciting and challenging. That's how a pilot improved.

But this was different. This was unprecedented, a shameful loss that filled him with rage and indignation.

He knew the fat lard was weaker than him, possibly by a lot. And yet through those damn tricks, and that insane equipment, he was able to pull out a win he hadn't deserved.

Unacceptable! I refuse to take this! How the hell could I lose to him.?

Xiao Han's anger threatened to consume him.

Just then he spied the hateful fatty looking his way. He stretched out his hands with a shrug and a smile on his fat face, like nothing was wrong.

Fatty Tang then rolled his eyes at Xiao Han dismissively.

Tang Mi hung on his neck. "You gotta tell me bro, where'd you get such awesome equipment? What gem did you use to power that shield? And what's up with those thrusters? What was that orb thing?"

Tang Xiao whined as he tried desperately to extricate himself. "You're gunna kill your brother! Lemme go, I'll tell you if you let me breath."

Of course Tang Mi knew precisely how strong a pilot her brother really was. It was no different in DreamNet. She knew her brother was stronger than her, at least, but this? This wasn't normal.

Tang Xiao straightened himself up once Tang Mi had released him. "I've picked a Master," he said with a chortle. "That stuff you saw, all of that was stuff my master gave me from his own DreamNet stock."

“Master?” Tang Mi was surprised to hear the news. “No wonder you’ve been so secretive lately, you’ve been training with this Master right?”

Tang Xiao nodded his meaty head. “That’s right.”

She cantered her head at him in curiosity. “Who is it?”

Tan Lingyun was close enough to overhear, and the subject caught her interest as well. Tang Mi may not have been aware of the Soulcrusher, but she certainly knew all about it! The cost of that was astronomical. The number of people who could afford that that she knew, she could count on her fingers.

Tang Xiao smirked knowingly. “Remember that guy who beat you with the Brunois Assault?”

“You’re damn right I do,” she hissed, nearly gnashing her teeth. “I remember how much I want to rip him to pieces. You said you were gunna avenge me, but instead came back looking like a tenderized ham.”

Tang Xiao nodded. “I actually did find him originally to get revenge, as you wanted. But then I lost, too. That’s when I saw his ability with my own eyes, and asked to be his student. I’ve studied with him in DreamNet every day since.”

Tang Lingyun was next to question him. “What’s this pilot’s name? He must be a God-ranked pilot to have given you a Soulcrusher orb. There are only so many of those running around.”

“Unfortunately my Master has hidden his identity. He’s called himself Nooblet.” 2

“Nooblet.” Tan Lingyun had no words. Whoever he was, he certainly had poor taste. His choice in names made that clear.

“Enough of that for now. Next is the real thing. How are you feeling Tang Xiao?” Tan Lingyun asked.

Originally they had intended for Geng Yang to participate in the live exercise, but Tang Xiao’s showing in the sim fights was absolutely remarkable. All the teachers and students of the NEU were more than

willing to overlook his unconventional methods, so long as he kept winning. For the glory of the entire school.

Tan Lingyun may have been inflexible as a person, but she wasn't an idiot. She knew an opportunity when she saw one, and was willing to make tactical adjustments as required. Geng Yang was also more than willing to give his place up to Tang Xiao, hoping desperately the fatty could pull off another miracle.

"I've learned that I knew nothing. Now I'm starting to pick some stuff up," Tang Xiao assured with a chuckle. He cast a sizzling eye towards the distant Xiao Han.

Tan Lingyun nodded her head. "Good, then you're our guy. Remember, victory or defeat aren't important here. Safety first."

"Got it." Tang Xiao fumbled through a comical salute to his instructor.

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Following a short discussion upon the main platform, things eventually quieted down. An announcement rang out once it could be heard.

"The Simulated Battle Exchange between the National Eastern University and Lir University has come to a close. The NEU had proved victorious. Next we will begin the live mecha exercises. Lir University, having lost the last contest, may chose the field of battle. Each combatant will have access to a bare-bones, unmodified mecha for the duration of the fight. Choose them now. combatant for Lir University, choose your arena."

They were coming to the main event.

This was going to be a different circumstance altogether. After all, a simulation was – in the end – just a simulation. How much the human body had to bear in DreamNet was modulated to protect them. A real fight didn't have that luxury. There was always the possibility of serious injury, even death.

Xiao Han's eyes were red from sadness and anger. Tang Xiao was smiling victoriously. There was even a hint of disdain in his face, and he didn't even pay Xiao Han any mind.

Xiao Han fought against his own raging emotions, squelching them down. He was resolved – already determined to exterminate his competition by any means necessary when the real fight begun.

During the fight, both of them would only be permitted to employ the very basic models of mecha suits. As a result, this fight wouldn't see any discrepancies in equipment. It would be a contest of straight piloting ability. Of course, this included their Disciplines! That was the draw for real battles, the fact that pilots could employ their own strength in conjunction with their suit. Xiao Han was absolutely convinced Tang Xiao didn't have him beat in that department.

His choice: a saber mech.

In fact both Tang Xiao and Xiao Han had chosen the same style of mecha. Xiao Han chose the normal gladiator arena for them to meet.

He didn't want to give this fat trickster any sort of advantage in terrain. He would employ the simplest, most direct, and cruelest method he could wipe that smug smile off his fat face.

In the audience bleachers, Wang Hongyuan reached out to poke Lan Jue at his side. "How long you think Tang Xiao will be able to hold out in this one?"

"Why hold out?" Lan Jue shot his friend a glance. "Why not win?"

Wang Hongyuan's response was no-nonsense. "You saw the other guy. He's a Sovereign-ranked pilot. Tang Xiao, at most, is an Emperor. Maybe not even that. He's fighting in the arena with nowhere to hide or tricks to pull. This time, he doesn't look like he stands much of a chance."

Lan Jue smiled at Wang Hongyuan's assessment. "In this day and age, there's no shortage of miracles," he said sagely. "Even in a ring like the arena."

Wang Hongyuan lifted his brows in surprise. "So you think he'll win it?"

Lan Jue nodded.

“Why?”

Lan Jue turned his head to look at Wang Hongyuan. His smile was wide, and his voice just loud enough for his friend to hear.

“Because he’s my disciple.”

Chapter 188: Tang Xiao's Home Turf

"He's my Disciple." Lan Jue's response was simple and straightforward.

Upon hearing this, the surprise in Wang Hongyuan's face slipped away, and he nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. You're both a couple of bastards."

Lan Jue frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Wang Hongyuan smiled ruefully. "You're a God-ranked mecha pilot. Teaching etiquette. In a mecha research school. What do you think?"

"Ehm..."

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The two combatants entered the arena.

They were two identical saber mechas, composed of titanium-alloy plating. Beyond their standard loadout, there was nothing else for these suits to rely on. They were the suits used by instructors for teaching mecha control systems.

As DreamNet was no longer employed as the judge, two new figures were enlisted for the job; Wu Junyi, and Shi Jiujiu.

The combat arena was a good distance from the audience bleachers, so again the large screens were turned on for a closer look.

Wu Junyi's stern voice cut through the chatter as he delineated the competition rules.

"Remember that this contest is an educational exchange, for the purposes for mutual study. The moment your opponent surrenders, or their mecha is no longer able to fight, the battle's done."

The NEU's resident arena and the one they'd seen in DreamNet were very similar. Both were roughly the same size and composition.

Now, as the battle was starting, silence once again fell over the audience. They were even more excited than before to witness the class of these two remarkable students.

Xiao Han settled back in his mecha, looking over the cockpit. He was well familiar with this sort of saber mech, but underwent a basic check regardless.

“Practice Mecha J1 is attempting to open a connection.”

Hm? Xiao Han stared in confusion at the controls as the mecha’s digitized voice hailed the call. He’d noticed his own unit number when he’d clambered in: J2. Almost unconsciously, he accepted the signal.

“Hey bro, how ya doin’?” The voice on the other end was jovial and sincere.

Xiao Han wasn’t familiar with the voice on the other end, but he knew immediately who and what this call was about. “What do you think,” he said impatiently.

Tang Xiao went on, ignoring his tone. “I actually wanted to apologize. I’m sorry! I actually didn’t want to fight like that, but our instructors told us that’s the way we should compete. You know how it’s like between our two schools.”

Xiao Han spoke back, his voice hard and chilly. “Whatever you say, it’s too late. I will not show you any mercy.”

When Tang Xiao replied, his voice had changed considerably. “Mercy? You got a brain tumor or something? I just called to ask if the rumors are true, that you have a room temperature IQ.” [1]

Xiao Han had no opportunity to reply. Their communication cut and Wu Junyi’s voice interjected.

“Begin!”

Tang Xiao’s saber mech was instantly off like a bullet. Xiao Han’s reaction speeds were markedly slower, with Tang Xiao’s taunts echoing in his head. He wasn’t an amateur, though, and he put the thoughts away to focus on the fight ahead.

Both suits were exceedingly simple, with no bells or whistles. Since their mechas were identical, the only discrepancies in speed would be from

their personal ability. This meant Tang Xiao, having reacted first, had the upper hand.

The two drew closer. A flash sizzled behind Xiao Han's eyes, and immediately the cockpit filled with a stifling power. The titanium alloy sword gripped in his mechanical hand pulsed with a deep red aura.

The two mecha met, though it was not apparent at first glance whether Tang Xiao was employing his Discipline.

Su He had returned to the Lir side of the stadium. His eyes were glued to the screen, calmly judging every movement the two young men made. He was familiar with his student Xiao Han, of course. He knew his pride, the pride that came from being universally favored, had been hurt by the loss – it was sending his heart in to chaos. Still he was confident in his student's ability. He had the advantage in a real fight. And so, when Xiao Han had been preparing, Su He had said nothing. This was an excellent learning experience for the young pilot.

Tan Lingyun had also left the warehouse, and watched the screen with the others of the NEU. Like Su He, she calmly watched as the battle began, though her eyes shone with something else. She was not afraid of a loss – the last two victories she considered a happy accident. No, she was worried the Lir combatant wouldn't hold back if he saw an opportunity. There was a significant threat of harm, maybe even death, if they weren't careful.

Sparks flew as the two giant titanium blades met for the first time.

The first clash was a straight measure of strength. The mechas were the same, true, but that wasn't the final word. Tang Xiao had the advantage, and was on the offensive. However, Xiao Han's Discipline was flowing through his weapon, covering it in a fiery corona of energy.

Then, Xiao Han took his shot.

At first it looked like a miss-step. Xiao Han's mecha stumbled, but only just enough to stagger around Tang Xiao. As he did, the offending foot stamped solid against the floor, and a powerful fiery light was cast up from the ground. It raced towards Tang Xiao, crashing in to him with a

staggering impact.

Xiao Han's thrusters burst, sending him careening forward with the point of his blade leveled towards Tang Xiao's torso.

Dodge, blast, thrust. It was perfectly executed, masterfully planned.

But Tang Xiao knew crafty when he saw it. His mecha rocked to the side as the blast came, deflecting it off the side of his suit. As he staggered backward, he rotated away from Xiao Han's deadly thrust. His own blade whirled around for an upper-cut slash to Xiao Han's back.

Lir's chosen didn't slow down one iota. Instead he reversed thrust and sent his suit reeling backward. As he did, his sword swept back at an impossible angle to deflect Tang Xiao's strike. The two mechas collided with a screech of metal.

Cccrruunnccchh!!

Xiao Han's sudden increase in speed and change of direction caused the two to slam in to each other unceremoniously. Like Tang Xiao in their earlier fight, Xiao Han's thrusters were empowered, becoming an angry red with the addition of his Discipline. It sent his enemy flying, and he was right behind with both hands gripping his giant sword.

Tang Xiao's suit had barely hit the floor before Xiao Han had caught up. But he wasn't alarmed or taken aback, instead hitting the thrusters on one side to push his prostrate suit out of harm's way. As he slid away from Xiao Han, his torso twisted, bringing the sword to bear.

Spiral strike!

Clang!

Once more Tang Xiao was thrust away, but he'd brought his sword up just in time to block the blow.

From the outset both fighters had been aiming for speed. It was simple, but in straightforward melee fights with these standard mechas, it was an integral part of gaining the upper hand.

It was also the first time Tang Xiao was showing anything other than

trickery, and it was real skill. He currently was at a disadvantage, true, but solid basic skills have kept his opponent from landing any strikes.

Xiao Han saw his advantage solidified, then lashed out with a series of blows as furious as a storm. The fiery wall around him burst in to bloom, and with each strike of his sword an explosion of power ensued. Tang Xiao lost ground, retreating under the barrage. His own mecha was beginning to grow hot and blacken. Parts of the armor were beginning to crack.

Tang Xiao was holding on, but only just. Who could say how much more of this he could sustain? Defeat seemed inevitable.

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“Now, Tang Xiao, remember – In general, a DreamNet pilot of high rank will pick his mecha so that it compliments his Discipline. So that means, during the sim battles you better be observant. You might be able to tell their Discipline by the mecha they use. Also, try your damndest to make sure your own Discipline remains a secret. Now with these things I’ve given you, there’s no way in hell you’re losing. Then you’ll have the real fights, and it’s more than likely you’ll run in to that Xiao Han guy again.”

“From what I could read from his energy, he’s just about to break eight-level Talent. But he isn’t there yet, so in that you don’t have a disadvantage. However, he’s probably a Sovereign-ranked pilot. When it comes to combat maneuvers, you’re probably facing an uphill slope. With all this in mind, you only really got one shot at victory. Utilize the fact your enemy won’t know your powers. Then, at just the right moment, explode right in to him. If you can find a way to make it sync with the environment, that’ll help your chances too.”

“Remember, you’re trying to goad him in to a mistake. And every pilot is at their most careless when they think they’ve clinched the win.”

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BANG!

For the third time Tang Xiao flew through the air, engulfed in a ball of flame. Parts of the suit had begun to fuse, glowing gold with intense heat.

Xiao Han launched himself in to the air, blade raised high.

“Let’s finish this!” he shouted. “Meteor Strike!”

“Wow guy, you sure did prove it. IQ of a cool autumn night. You’re actually calling out your maneuvers like an anime character? God sure did make you special, huh Adonis. A beautiful unique flower.”

Xiao Han’s rage had slowly been building with each vicious attack he’d lain on Tang Xiao. But upon hearing the taunts from his fat poisonous tongue, his face blanched. Unconsciously, Xiao Han poured every spec of his power in to the burning titanium blade.

The intensity of Xiao Han’s Discipline was so intense it drew every eye. He fell directly towards his foe, indeed like a meteor tearing through the atmosphere.

Tang Xiao’s suit smoldered. It had already sustained quite a lot of damage. Presently, the most serious was a malfunction in the right leg. It looked like there was no way for him to block or avoid the deadly strike.

And then Tang Xiao’s mecha was yanked forcefully to the side. It slid along the metal as though it were being pulled by some invisible hand.

Boooooooooommmmmmm!

Xiao Han came crashing to the ground in a fiery detonation. The arena’s metal alloy flooring was left with a sizzling metal crater.

There, in the aftermath, Xiao Han sat in his cockpit, eyes wide. He knew immediately he’d committed the most rookie of mistakes. He’d over-extended.

His fingers flew over the controls, coaxing his mecha to flight. But all he heard were teeth-grinding screeches. He didn’t move an inch.

“What the hell?!”

Under normal circumstances, he'd never have made this many mistakes. But anger had clouded his judgement, and he'd forgotten a single crucial detail.

The suit he rode was not the Sovereign-rank mecha he was used to. It was a simple thing, and simple things couldn't be expected to sustain having that much Discipline channeled through them. Already the metal had begun to soften. Or was that the floor? He couldn't believe it, but before his eyes the alloy arena floor was swallowing the feet of his suit. He was stuck.

Xiao Han viciously kicked and slashed at the floor. He would soon be free.

But most times, it only takes a second to grasp an opportunity.

*

1. The Chinese here is interesting, though I had to make something else up cuz it doesn't translate. What he wrote was “You are the second in command of both the Number and Letter kingdom.” The second number is 2, the second letter B. 2B in Chinese is internet slang for a ‘stupid cock.

Chapter 189: Wisdom and Cunning

By this point, Tang Xiao's mecha had risen to its feet. The giant sword it bore swung in a dangerous arc, glimmering with a strange pure white light.

Xiao Han was still stuck in place, but his torso and arms were still functional. He twisted and brought his weapon up to stave off Tang Xiao's blow.

Clang!

The two blades met with an ear-splitting clash and a shower of sparks. As they did, Tang Xiao's glimmering sword seemed to almost grow longer. Then it buckled at the point of impact, twisting around like it had a mind of its own to swipe at Xiao Han's back.

The Lir challenger was perplexed by Tang Xiao's mecha, which had at this point was humming with power and emitted a pulsing white light. Much to his surprise, all the damage the suit had sustained prior to this point was gone. Like it was a whole new foe he faced.

Tang Xiao swept around his immobilized target. His sword flowed, and danced through the air leaving streaks of blinding light in its wake.

Still Xiao Han was unable to free himself from the strangely animate metal flooring, but despite that he was managing to keep himself safe from Tang Xiao's vicious strikes. With a great surge of his power, Xiao Han wrenched his mecha free of the constraints.

"Pitiful! Make a crater and hide in it. Guess that's the Lir way. See ya!" Tang Xiao's cruel and taunting voice crackled through Xiao Han's cockpit speakers.

His suit filled with the sound of steel grating on steel.

He looked down, surprised to find that the floor that had held him fast was the same pure white color of Tang Xiao's restored mecha. It stretched for twenty meters in each direction, with him in the very center. A giant target.

The floor was alive, roiling like stormy sea waves. It washed over the feet of his suit, grinding maddeningly as it did. He had the Discipline necessary to melt away the grasping metal, he knew. But he was also keenly aware of the fact that his suit likely wouldn't be able to handle it.

He watched in impotent horror as a single writhing tendril of white metal wormed its way in to his central command system.

"Bastaaaard!" Xiao Han screamed until his lungs burned. Blood flung from his lips, mingling with spittle. His body, locked within the confines of the suit, burst in to a frightening display of golden-red fire.

Then, he exploded out from within the mecha, launching himself at Tang Xiao in a raging tempest of fire.

"You think I'm scared? Shit!" The giant silver mecha's mechanical fist whistled as it tore through the air.

Boom!

The entire arena shook from the force of the impact. The air sizzled and turned red as the explosion lit the skies. Tang Xiao's mecha reeled back a step, it's arm now a melted ruin.

Xiao Han floated in midair, surrounded by the heinous flames. No small amount of blood dripped from his mouth, making him look like a madman. And perhaps he was, for his greatest strength over Tang Xiao was in his piloting expertise. In terms of Discipline, he and the fat guy weren't much different. What's more, Tang Xiao actually had the upper hand considering the metal construction of the arena they fought in. And he was smart enough to stay in his mecha!

Tang Xiao's thrusters burst to life, sending the mecha tearing forward at full speed. He lifted his sword high and-

"HOLD!" Two commanding voices cried out in unison. Immediately, Tang Xiao brought his mecha to a halt. The match was done.

He lifted his one remaining arm high, fist clenched. Victorious!

The audience erupted in to chaos. Great cheers of joy shook the arena

and echoed off the surrounding hills.

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Disappointment flashed across Su He's eyes. He quietly shook his head. By the end he'd clearly seen his student's shortcomings – that in fact, Xiao Han had lost this fight way back during the simulated battles.

He hadn't lost from a lack of power or ability. He'd defeated himself.

In the end it had been made clear; these NEU students were tactically superior to the pilots of Lir. Be it smarts or spunk, they came out on top.

Xiao Han's humiliating defeat in the simulated battles had forced him to reveal his Discipline. Tang Xiao had played the weakling, goaded his enemy in to an ignominious position. Xiao Han had lost control. As Tang Xiao mentioned, he'd dug himself in to a hole. The fatty used that instant to employ his own Discipline, and secured the victory.

Undoubtedly this young man would grow to be successful. Any who underestimated him, deceived by his appearance, were sure to suffer terribly.

Su He looked at the celebrating Tang Xiao with a blank expression, but he was quite impressed with the kid. Though he was wicked, that word didn't do him justice. No, this one was a special mix of wisdom and cunning.

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"Ah, just the slightest miscalculation lost him the match. It was well fought, Director Han." Xu Renjian's words may have been apologetic, but the smile on his face was anything but.

Han Ruchao said nothing. He only sat, his hands clenched in to fists,

trembling in his lap.

He'd lost. In a situation he absolutely should have won, he'd actually lost.

Gradually, his hands relaxed and loosened. When he spoke, his face was calm and his voice even. "Your school's make some incredible strides in the last year, Renjian. I hadn't expected such a sound victory. You must certainly have a rare talent on staff, to teach your students so well. I look forward to seeing... whoever it is, competing in the instructor competitions."

Xu Renjian twitched, apprehensive and yet at the same time excited. Yes! Tang Xiao's performance today well outstripped his normal capabilities. He knew Tan Lingyun's style and abilities, and this way not it. What Tang Xiao achieved today, was by no means a product of Tang Lingyun's instruction. This wasn't even considering the Soulcrusher he'd somehow obtained in DreamNet. Certainly not Professor Tan's. No, the only explanation was there was a master in the mecha combat department, one that was keeping his cards close to his chest.

Xiao Han was on the ground, propped up by one knee, the very picture of defeat. He supported himself with his arms, panting heavily. His qi and blood were in chaos, his Discipline fluctuating wildly from the strain and damage he'd caused himself. His eyes were not just bloodshot, but a deep crimson as the power raced through him. He growled through gritted teeth.

"I'll kill you.... I'll kill you!"

The one-armed mecha's chest plate cracked open with a hiss of escaping air. Tang Xiao's stout constitution as revealed as he jumped out. His two pudgy arms were held high in the air, triumphantly pumping his fists to the chorus of cheers from his fellow students. He was their hero. No, in this moment, he was their patron saint.

Xiao Han shot to his feet, lurching forward to rush at Tang Xiao.

A slender hand then lay on his shoulder, it's owner completely disregarding the roiling flames surrounding the student. His forward

charge abruptly stopped, and he remained where he was.

The young man was furious, on the verge of exploding in to a rage. An icy voice played contrast. "Why did you lose?"

Upon hearing the calm but accusing voice, Xiao Han shivered. "Professor Su."

"Answer me. Why did you lose?" Su He stared at his student dispassionately. His eyes were like a pair of scalpels, cutting passed to see directly in to him.

A cold shudder went through Xiao Han's spine, but he did manage to calm his anger.

"I... got careless. I let my emotions get the better of me." He hung his head in shame.

Su He's quiet voice replied. "Remember this well. What he gave you today wasn't humiliation. It was a gift. Let me worry about the glory of our university now. Go back to the lockers."

"Yes, Professor." Xiao Han's respect for his teacher was obvious, and intense. His tone was low and subservient as he answered. The flames around him died, and he left the arena with his head hung low.

Su He did not follow. Instead, he made his way to the center of the arena.

Tang Xiao was there, celebrating, but he was also carefully watching the competition as always. He took pride in his ability to infuriate Xiao Han, leading him to his defeat. But he was surprised that this Professor, who looked so young, could calm him down and reign him in with just a few words. Now he was coming his way.

Tang Xiao wasn't frightened, though he pretending not to notice the man's approach. He continued to thrust his fists in the air towards the cheering crowds.

Su He slowly made his way towards the overweight student, stopping not far away. He looked towards the audience for a moment before speaking. "Next are the instructor battles. Our side will have only one competitor.

Please tell the NEU to select three teachers, and I'll meet them in DreamNet. If any of them can beat me, it'll count as a total loss. Select three for the real fight as well. They may all engage me together, if they prefer."

His voice was calm, almost quiet. It was strange, for even despite the boisterous cries of the crowd, and without any microphone, his voice was quite clear. In fact, the whole audience could hear him as though he was standing right beside them.

"Eh?" Tang Xiao's arms dropped as he stared at Su He.

Xu Renjian and the other NEU administrators sat in stoic silence, their brows furrowed and eyes narrowed.

Arrogance. Exceptional, humiliating arrogance. He was boasting that he could single-handedly defeat the best the school had to offer.

The joy in the NEU students' victory, and the pride in their school, had yet to be spent. It swelled as their indignation flared.

"Let's kick these Lir punks all the way back to where they came from!"

"This one's got some sort of mental problem."

"Yo! You need some anti-psychotics! Someone bring him to the nurse!"

Su He was beset on all sides from the angry calls.

In only a few words, the young teacher had managed to anger the whole of the NEU.

Xu Renjian shot a cold glance towards Han Ruchao. "What's the meaning of this, Dean Han? We've gathered here for a friendly educational exchange, not to provoke the ire of our students. If this is what our exchange has come to, I see no further benefit in proceeding."

Han Ruchao smirked at his colleague's distress. "Now now, Dean Xu. You're making mountains out of mole hills. There's been no provocation here. Just a part of the game, that's all. You have to understand that studies have been stringent lately, and this is doubly so for our illustrious instructors. Ultimately, we could only convince Su He to participate. It's

fine, Dean – as Su He said, if he loses then you have bested our school in this area as well.”

Xu Renjian took a deep breath. After a moment, he put back on his business persona, and set aside the indignation his companion was clearly trying to instigate. It wasn't just them here in the VIP area, but luminaries from Skyfire as well. Were things to turn violent, or out of control, surely they would lose face as the hosts. In a way, that would be as much of a loss in and of itself.

Su He allowed his eyes to sweep over the crowd, staring them down for a moment. Afterwards, ignoring the jeers and hard stares, he sauntered back towards the lockers as though nothing had happened. He was as emotionless as the mechas that surrounded them.

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Le Ziqian scowled openly from the audience, following the teacher as he left the arena grounds. “Him?”

Beside him, Zhou Qianlin turned to look inquisitively up at her teacher. She was competing tomorrow in the research portion, so she and the other two competitors were at Le Ziqian's side to prepare.

“What's the matter, Professor Le? You know that man?”

With a cold, dignified expression, Le Ziqian nodded. When he spoke, he ever took his eyes from the Su He. His deep voice was only just audible. “This is trouble. I have no idea what he's doing at Lir University, but it doesn't bode well. He's arrogant, and aggressive – for good reason. With him here, our chances at winning the instructor portion are dire.”

Chapter 190: I Beg You to Help Professor Tan

Zhou Qianlin was surprised. “Could he even be a match for Professor Tan?”

Le Ziqian nodded. “His name is Su He. Have you heard of him?”

“Su He? You don’t mean the East’s famous Su He, do you?” Qianlin’s eyes opened wide at the revelation. She stared at her professor, flabbergasted.

Once again, he nodded. “I haven’t the slightest idea how Lir managed to convince him to join. It’s quite the problem. Even I’m impressed with the man, and I’m a hard one to enthuse. And unless I’m mistaken, we’ll be against him tomorrow for the research competition as well. Big problem. No wonder they agreed to it, with him on their side.”

“He was an academician at the Eastern R&D University by the age of twenty-six, and a Sovereign-ranked pilot. He should be around thirty-three now, about the same age as me. Differences in ability, however, are hard to determine. We participated in a competition before, and I envied his practical knowledge. In my youth, he was about the only person I truly admired.”

Qianlin looked concerned. “What should we do, Professor?”

A familiar, bitingly cold female voice rang through the arena. “If this Lir University puppet is so vehement about it, who am I to deny him. If he beats me, they win – just like him. He won’t gang up like they want us to, to make us look cheap.”

Le Ziqian patted his forehead in frustration. “This temper of yours, Lingyun,” he said with a sigh. “I understand her thinking, but it’s misguided. Three on one, we might have stood a chance. In an even fight, though...”

He trailed off, lost in some secret thought. He piped up again suddenly. “Mm, yes. This has to do with our Dean, Xu Renjian. Dean Xu’s research

group is always in contest with Su He's, and in fact the two are the largest in the alliance – with two radically different views on the subject. I fear Su He is here for one purpose, and that is to challenge Xu Renjian's authority. That is why he's with Lir University.”

Qianlin thought in silence for a moment before replying. “Do you think he'll take it too far?”

Le Ziqian's answer was delivered through a bitter smirk. “I like to think I understand the man, at least a little. Ordinarily, the most striking feature about him is his calm. Almost apathetic. But this guy's conceit runs to the bone. The student Tang Xiao beat was more than likely his little apprentice, so their fight will be about him regaining face. As for Lingyun...”

He lapsed in to silence, anxiety clearly written on his face.

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Wang Hongyuan leaped to his feet. Lan Jue tried to yank him back down. “What are you doing?”

Hongyuan slumped back in his chair. “Such an arrogant bastard. He wants to go three on one? Lemme show him what pride gets you.”

He'd barely finished the sentence before Tan Lingyun's voice filled the arena. A cheer went up from the audience around them.

Lan Jue only smiled. “The Savage Goddess' gumption really is impressive, eh?”

“Lingyun is strong,” Hongyuan conceded, “but do you think she's strong enough to beat that punk?”

Lan Jue shook his head.

Wang Hongyuan gave him friend a scolding look. “You look down on her that much, eh? She's an eight-ranked Disciple and a Sovereign-class pilot. You still don't think she's capable?”

“For him to propose this sort of contest, he must know more than the Lir leadership lets on. Plus, I know that man, and he’s undoubtedly stronger than Lingyun. His name is Su He,” Lan Jue remarked.

“Su He?” Wang Hongyuan wasn’t familiar with the name.

Lan Jue stared at him blankly. “Professor Wang. You’re not from the Eastern Alliance, are you. Unless I’m mistaken, I’d say Western. If that’s the case, it’s no surprise you don’t know him.”

Wang Hongyuan’s brows narrowed. “And that’s the reason for his vanity, I suppose. If Tan Lingyun should lose, I’m not sure this punk will stay his hand.”

Lan Jue opened his mouth to speak, when suddenly that familiar warmth arose against his chest where the Soulcaller gem rested.

Qianlin: You think you could help Professor Tan? That guy from Lir is supposed to be very strong.

Lan Jue: How am I supposed to help her?

I don’t know...

...

I’m begging you.

Agh...

Are you unable to?

Fine.

Is that your answer?

Ngh.

Thank you.

No problem. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this guy. I’d be interested to gauge his progress.

Huh?

Lan Jue said nothing further, and the Soulcaller gem cooled.

“I have to visit the restroom. Excuse me.” Lan Jue rose, and meandered his way through the crowd.

Wang Hongyuan watched him leave from the corner of his eye. A smile spread across his face.

Jin Yan poked him. “Where’s Professor Lan go?”

“The bathroom,” he answered. “Call of nature, he’ll be back in a bit.”

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Tan Lingyun cut the connection on her communicator. She watched Le Ziqian’s name fade from the screen.

“Su He!” Tan Lingyun’s pupils contracted. Le Ziqian’s revelations hadn’t deterred her, in fact only strengthening her resolve.

She looked up, surrounded by Wu Junyi and no small number of instructors from the mecha combat department.

“Professor Tan.” Wu Junyi took a step forward.

She took a deep breath. “I apologize, Director. I was impulsive. I should not have represented the school in that fashion. If we lose I’ll bear the consequences. You’ll have my resignation.”

Wu Junyi shook his head, smirking. “Alas, the Dean asked me to come here and tell you, you’ve done well. Your decision is the school’s decision. Win or lose, just keep our school’s positive momentum going!”

Tan Lingyun’s pretty face lit up in a rare smile, and she nodded her head. She settled on the floor, crossed her legs, and closed her eyes. She had to mentally prepare for what was to follow.

Wu Junyi wordlessly waved to the others, and the small group dispersed.

There was a thirty-minute interval between the student and teacher battles. It was sufficient time to reset and prepare.

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Lan Jue leaned against a wall, tapping a number in to his communicator.

“Jewelry Master? What are you calling me for?” The voice that answered sounded less than pleased to hear from him.

“I need a favor.” Lan Jue said, smiling at the reaction.

“No! I haven’t forgotten how you guys treated me the last time.” The man sounded decidedly displeased.

“Remember that women don’t like petty men,” Lan Jue cooed. “You aren’t a petty man, are you Accountant?”

Indeed, it was the Accountant, and he remembered just as well as the poor man the way they left him stranded. Ostensibly the excuse was that there wasn’t any room in the car for him, the Amazons and Zeus all together. So they’d just left him there to find his own way back.

The Accountant’s angry voice shot back at him. “Don’t give me that crap. Introduce me to one of those ladies that follow you around, then, and maybe I’ll help.”

Lan Jue’s voice adopted a scornful tone. “You’re asking me to help you chase skirts. Just the fact you’re saying it makes your grandpa lose face. Are you going to help me or not? I can always ask someone else. Your grandfather definitely must know someone with the expertise I need. Someone who wouldn’t refuse a comrade in arms.”

“You will not mention any of this to my grandfather!” The Accountant suddenly sounded flustered.

“Then stop talking nonsense. So what’s the answer.”

“You’re like a damn slave master,” the Accountant lamented.

“I’m recording this.”

“What the hell do you want!”

Half an hour passed in the blink of an eye.

Su He and Tan Lingyun strode to their respective simulators and began running diagnostics.

“The simulated combat competition between the National Eastern University and Lir University will begin shortly. The combatants shall be; from the NEU, Professor Tan Lingyun; from Lir University, Professor Su He. Would both challengers please prepare. The combat map shall be chosen at random.”

Tan Lingyun’s hands darted over the simulated controls, tapping away to their own rhythm. The screen flashed with each command. She was ready, at her best, and anxious to get under way.

“The map for this battle shall be: Sky.”

An air battle!

In truth the Sky arena wasn’t entirely in the air. There was cloud cover, for instance, and more. They changed the necessary tactics and flow of a fight. In the end the differences between an air and ground fight were as different as night and day. It opened up entirely new avenues of strategy, however there was a higher reliance on pilot control.

In the next instant, two mechas appeared in the map.

Tan Lingyun’s suit was a pale green, which rose eighteen meters tall. Just by the look of it, it was clear dexterity was its focus. This was affirmed with the two small metallic wings bolted to its back frame. The whole thing was surrounded by a faint green light – undoubtedly a characteristic of a powerful gem at its core.

Su He’s suit was yellow. It was taller than his opponent’s, with a streamlined construction that made it look more aerodynamic. A massive laser canon was strapped to its back. Like Hua Qianhu before him, this one looked like a sniper mecha.

“Three. Two. One. Begin!”

The digitized voice rang out, and with that the deciding fight in the

instructor combat exchange commenced.

Already the NEU had cinched the student battles. Winning here, and in the real fights, would mean an unequivocal victory for the research school. But they were only halfway there.

The entire audience sat on the edge of their seat. Every eye was locked on the giant projector screens.

As soon as she heard the word begin, Tan Lingyun's mecha was on the move. The pale green suit emitted a cocoon of disruptive energy as she raced towards her opponent. However, a close look would reveal that her seemingly straightforward rush was actually punctuated with precise jukes and dodges.

It was a step above disordered movement, a style they called Anticipative Advance. The tiny movements deterred ranged combat, while still optimizing forward momentum. A high-level tactic used primarily for snipers.

This fight was going to be an intense one.

Chapter 191: Miracle? Masterstroke!

Tan Lingyun burst forward in a speedy dash the moment the bout began. Her Anticipative Advance was near flawless. Her speed and control made it clear, she was a solid Sovereign-ranked pilot – but the difference between her and Xiao Han was expansive.

Xiao Han was only just crossing the Sovereign threshold. He was learning the basic techniques, largely from textbooks and indices. Tan Lingyun, on the other hand, was old school. What's more, she was the most capable pilot in the NEU – at least, as far as they knew. Her Sovereign experience was extensive, comparatively. Even in the whole of the Eastern Alliance, she was a name that was recognized.

But her opponent was not so easily cowed. As Tan Lingyun raced forward, Su He's reaction was unexpected. Instead of dodging or racing away, he chose not to make an escape. There was no attempt to keep their distance fixed, nor did he heft and aim his weapon.

Instead, he urged his mecha to dart head-on towards the oncoming Savage Goddess.

What was he planning? Countless confused stares followed the yellow mecha, unsure of the tactics at play.

The two mecha drew ever closer. Tan Lingyun sat in the dark simulator, the full intensity of her focus on the screen before her. Like the others, she wasn't sure what Su He was doing by charging her. But her indomitable will was stronger than the metal her suit was made of. She refused to be intimidated.

The green mecha's arms splayed out to the side, and with them the small wings spread wide. Its mechanical hands flared, and a pair of three-meter long spikes protruded from the palms.

They were clearly close-ranged implements, and as they appeared the Savage Goddess coaxed her suit faster. The thrusters keeping her aloft changed from an angry red to a dazzling white. Less than one hundred meters remained between the two fighters. She tore ahead like a green

hurricane.

Su He's yellow suit stopped just then, hovering in the air. It seemed somehow, fuzzy.

Crash! The crunch of impact as the suits collided rang from the screens.

Su He remained where he'd stopped, but Tan Lingyun's forward momentum had her reeling another hundred meters away.

Onlookers noticed, then, the weapon the yellow mecha bore. They had appeared at some point before impact, and the wicked looking things stretched from hand to shoulder, wrapped around his arm. It was an odd item that originated from the suit's elbow.

Close combat? He had the giant canon on his back, but appeared to have chosen to engage Tan Lingyun in close.

Professor Tan had, by this time, swung her suit around her another pass. As she did, the audience could clearly see two deep gashes along her shoulders.

She was already damaged. In fact, were it not for her energy shield, she'd likely have been cut in half. At first, this looked like a simple hand to hand fight, but this was a shock to everyone.

Most onlookers couldn't clearly discern what happened when the two mecha collided. All they saw was that, suddenly, Tan Lingyun's mecha was damaged.

Su He's yellow mecha was on the move once again. But it was in no rush – no charge or tricky advance. It looked more like a leisurely jog. Once it drew within about a hundred meters, the mecha... flickered. At first it looked like a glitch, or maybe some malfunction of the suit, but as the audience watched the screens they saw a ghost image of the yellow fighter appear – for just a split second.

What the hell was that? Everyone was at a loss. It was a normal reaction, for only the highest level mecha pilots would have an inkling.

“Ghosting?” Wang Hongyuan gasped in alarm. He twisted his neck to

talk to Lan Jue, but found the seat beside him empty. Lan Jue apparently hadn't yet returned from his 'bathroom break'.

Wang Hongyuan turned his eyes back to the screen, his heart fluttering. Of course he knew it was ghosting. It was the result of intense speed, where a pilot's thrusters were engaged and shut off so quickly the mecha appeared in two places at once for just a moment. It was a God-ranked pilot ability.

DreamNet simulations were calibrated for safety. That meant that abilities and attacks were only employed to where the pilot could stand it. If they couldn't, the simulation forced them to stop for safety. So, in DreamNet using the ability was somewhat easier due to the calibrations, but even then it was well beyond the ken of a normal pilot. Wang Hongyuan wasn't capable of the feat himself, since his hand speeds weren't fast enough.

Ghosting also had different 'levels'. At the highest levels it was said the after-image was persistent, like it really was a doppelganger. An attacker couldn't distinguish the real one from the copy. The very best pilots were reputed to do just that, with distances up to ten meters between the real mech and the ghost.

Su He wasn't at that level, and the images he cast lasted so briefly it was hard to notice. Still, it was there, and nearly half his torso long. That was an accomplishment most pilots could never achieve.

The tactical benefit of the maneuver was misdirection. Making determinations on target, direction and more were made infinitely more difficult. Even radar couldn't pick it up. It was traditionally used versus snipers, but this time the sniper Su He was the one using it.

Tan Lingyun watched from the simulator, her mind blank.

The crowds couldn't see clearly, even with their eagle-eye view, what had happened. But Tan Lingyun, she should've. Should've, being the operative term.

The moment before impact, her green suit had been launching towards Su He, spikes bared like animal claws. For a moment she thought she'd

landed the blow, but before her eyes she saw the spikes go through him, and then he vanished. He stood just slightly out of harm's way. In that same instant he had mauled her.

Had she not instinctively poured full energy in to the shield, she'd have been reduced to scrap right then.

Tan Lingyun was stunned, and took stock of the situation. She was fast, with a hand speed that was more than sufficient for her rank. On average, a Sovereign pilot required twenty moves per second. She was capable of twenty-five, which in and of itself was an impressive feat.

But in that split-second confrontation with Su He, she was already well aware of her disadvantage. The young man's hand speed was around forty, nearly double her own. Forty combat maneuvers in a second, that was what she faced.

Wang Hongyuan was able to distinguish the ghosting method, so of course Tan Lingyun could as well. He wasn't a God-ranked pilot, but damned if he wasn't close to it.

It was over. She'd already lost, it was just that simple.

To the uninitiated the difference between a Sovereign and God-ranked pilot seemed surmountable; just a single rank difference. However, in reality even ten Sovereign pilots didn't stand a chance against one God. That's why they called them that. In the world of mecha piloting, the higher you climbed the greater the differences between peers.

Once one became a God-ranked pilot, there were no further ranks to attain. But that didn't mean all pilots were the same there, either, and those in the know understood that there could be vast differences in ability from one God to another.

Mmmhzzzz!

A powerful sense of dizziness washed over Tan Lingyun. In the next instant, she was assailed by the unpleasant sensation that she was being pulled apart. Even here in the simulation, she was forced to employ her Discipline to stave off the terrible feeling.

She lost? This was the feeling one had when they were being obliterated in DreamNet. It was a feeling she hadn't encountered in quite some time, she thought bitterly.

She brought her powers to bear, to fight off the evil feeling. However, she couldn't shake the dimness that was suddenly clouding her vision. She was struggling to even see the controls in front of her. Her body and eyes weren't working in tandem.

Impossible! This was a simulation, not a real mecha fight. And if her suit was destroyed, the fight would have ended already.

What was going on?

Tan Lingyun took a deep breath, and tried to regain her composure. She focused her attention back on the fight at hand.

Outside, the audience was an in absolute uproar!

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It was indeed an uproar. Students and teachers alike gaped at the screen. They hollered and gesticulated, stunned by the display.

What did they see? A miracle.

In the moment Su He's yellow mecha split in to its double image, those pilots in the know felt their hearts sink. But their depression was short lived. The green mecha that was their mecha blurred before their very eyes just before the Su He approached and landed his blow, and split in half.

It hadn't been cut in half. Instead, it appeared to miraculously change midflight until it birthed a second copy. An identical mirror-image.

Su He's strike had passed right through the phantom mecha, but the true one remained. This is what the crowd had witnessed.

A miracle? No, a masterstroke! And the people stared on with eyes wide and mouths agape.

Was this even possible for a pilot to do? Before this moment, no one would have thought such a thing possible.

Wang Hongyuan was among them. He had just been bemoaning Su He's ghosting ability.

But this was real ghosting. It had birthed an actual phantom image. And it was their own Savage Goddess who'd pulled it off.

He suddenly felt like an injection of blood rushed through his mind. He was on his feet, overflowing with excitement.

Seeing something like this was a memory that would etch itself on your spirit forever.

Chapter 192: Lei Feng!

A yellow projection and a green doppelganger faced each other in the sky.

The moment had passed in an instant, barely the blink of an eye. But it had lit a fire in the hearts of the entire audience.

Su He sat calmly within the sim pod. His features were peaceful, though there was a cold light in his eyes. And then his eyes went wide – he couldn't believe what he'd just seen.

Clearly he had the upper hand in mecha control, or so he'd thought. But then...

It was real ghosting. What could this mean? He understood probably more than anyone.

Godly. Only God-ranked pilots could do what she did.

For Su He, his after-image could stretch about three-fourths the length of himself to any direction. It was the height of his abilities, constrained by his hand speed which hovered around forty-six.

As everyone knew, hand speed was very important to a pilot. However, training it wasn't exactly easy. Specifically, getting it above ten moves a second wasn't all that hard, but every inch of progress beyond that was a fight.

Second-class Emperor pilots needed a fixed speed of twelve movements per second to be considered as such. First-class pilots needed fourteen. Sovereign second-grade required eighteen, while first-class was twenty.

For pilots, reaching twenty commands was a watershed moment. There was good reason they said the difference between a God and Sovereign pilot was an immeasurable gulf – and the hand speed required for it was a fair indicator as to what that was.

A God-ranked pilot required a hand speed of forty to even be considered for promotion. It was the most basic requirement, and one the vast majority of pilots would never achieve in their lifetimes.

As such, the number of registered Sovereign pilots out-numbered their Godly counterparts by several hundred times. In all the three alliances, the total number of Sovereign pilots hovered around ten thousand, whereas there were only a few hundred God-ranked pilots.

Su He himself wasn't yet a full-fledged God-ranked pilot. Although his hand speed was sufficiently fast, he was still lacking in several of the other criteria. Still, he was confident he'd have his title in less than three years.

He was proud of his achievements, and confident in his abilities. In fact, as very nearly a God-ranked pilot, he rarely encountered anyone that was a challenge to him.

Xiao Han, it could be said, was his 'half student,' he'd trained him some since coming on for the competition. And although on the surface he was calm, inside he was a torrent of rage at the loss his pupil suffered. His presence now the arena was to hurt his enemy's pride, as they had hurt his.

However, the moment he saw the ghosting image of the green mecha appear before him, he knew he had to swallow his indignation.

His spine was straight, and a cold shudder passed along his spine from head to tailbone. He was determined, no more hesitation.

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The nimble green mech had miraculously employed the perfectly cultivated ghosting maneuver to avoid Su He's attack. But since, neither had made a move to advance.

They were separated by five hundred meters of air and clouds. They hung in the air, regarding one another.

It wasn't just the crowd that had been startled by the events of their fight. Tan Lingyun, alone in the dark of the sim pod, was just as stunned. Mostly, though, her surprised lay in the fact that she was somehow still in

the fight. She had no idea what had just happened, or why her opponent was giving her such a wide berth when he had the upper hand. Why wasn't he smashing her suit into little bits?

She reached out to urge her mecha forward almost unconsciously. The fight was not yet finished, and her own pride and willpower wouldn't allow her to give up. She knew the chances of her losing were great, but she wouldn't give the Lir bastards the satisfaction of seeing her quit.

Her fingers danced over the controls. And nothing happened.

At first she thought maybe she wasn't pressing hard enough. She banged on the keyboard, but nothing happened. Her mecha simply wasn't responding.

What was going on? Was there a problem? Was her suit broken? Systems crash? No, her suit wasn't some cheap slapped-together thing, but an expensive combat machine. It was an excellent quality suit, one in which she'd never encountered a problem before.

A deep voice rang through the simulator.

"If you want to win this fight, then you'll sit there and not move. Concentrate, and watch closely."

"Huh?" Tan Lingyun was absolutely struck dumb by the circumstances. "Who are you," she blurted out without thinking.

The voice answered softly. "In Ancient China, there was a man – a hero – who dedicated himself to serving the people. His name was Lei Feng [1]. I suppose that's what you can call me."

"Serving the people? Lei Feng?" Tan Lingyun could only repeat the words. She was at a loss.

But she had no time to dwell on her confusion. Su He's yellow mecha was moving, brandishing its massive laser cannon. Almost instantly there was a dazzling red blast.

Snipers were experts at being adroit, nimble. This was paired with skill and speed, so that at the highest ranks a sniper didn't need any form of

radar or even aim once their target got within a certain distance. They could discharge their weapon based on feel. It had a name they'd taken from the old days, gunslinging.

Also in this moment, Tan Lingyun again felt that intense discomfort as dizziness flooded through her. However, this time she was quicker, and her Discipline flared up in defense. Her eyes remained clear, this time, and she was shocked at what she saw.

An image of herself, standing not far away. Ghosting!

The first time the audience saw this move in action, it was exciting. This time, the onlookers nearly exploded in uproar.

The two green figures merged, without her input, Su He's deadly laser skimming harmlessly passed.

God ranked! Now, Su He had no doubt. His opponent was actually a Godly pilot!

Having a hand speed of forty moves her second didn't automatically mean one was a God-ranked mecha pilot. However, if a pilot's speed reached fifty moves – fifty effective moves – then there was no question of their status.

But that wasn't the whole story. Tan Lingyun's shadow was entirely separate from the original mecha, and that meant fifty moves was the absolute minimum. By what he saw the after-image was also stable and persistent, that meant fifty-five moves.

Twice now she'd employed the ghosting method with flawless execution. She'd revealed herself to be a masterful pilot, with a frightening speed of hand.

For the first time, Su He's mind was blank.

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Not far from where the teachers fought and the students observed, a tall

white building peeked over the hill.

It was the sim warehouse for the mecha combat department. It was abandoned now, like the rest of the campus, as the competition continued outside.

But there was one pod nestled among the many dark simulators that was powered on.

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Skyfire Avenue.

The room was full of clutter; various books and pieces of electronic equipment were strewn hodge-podge with no particular system. Many of the books looked worn and well-read.

A figure with tousled hair was perched atop a chair, cross-legged. His eyes were wide as he watched the screen before him, the lollipop in his mouth nearly falling free.

Images of the exchange competition flashed across the screen, illuminating the area around the man.

“Heh, alright so DreamNet itself is impossible to hack in to – it’s processors and servers are simply too strong. Those sim pods at the school, though, are nothing. You’re gunna owe me a favor for this one, Jewelry Master. But damn is he fierce! I didn’t see the actual fight last time when we were in the Starfields. I had no idea he was this fast. Is he even a human? He’s even fast than me!”

Bang bang! A knock rattled the door.

“Who is it?” The scruffy looking man shouting towards the visitor begrudgingly.

“Master, the Lord would like to see you.”

“Eh! What’s that old man up to. I’ll be there in a moment.” The man

shot to his feet, and ran his fingers through his mess of hair. As he rushed out of the room, it was clear he held this 'Lord' in high regard.

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Su He's eyes lit up as something popped in to his head. It was the look of a man who'd discovered something invaluable. There was something else there as well, hard to define – a sort of fervor.

A god-ranked pilot. At last. Excellent... simply excellent.

By now he'd already forgotten his mission here. He'd forgotten about the thousands of eyes that watched. Right now, in this moment, all he wanted was to pit his all against this worthy opponent.

He knew well that the fact he hadn't broken in to God-rank yet was closely related to the fact that he hadn't any suitable challengers to spar with. At his level of ability, it was difficult to find things that stretched him. It was pressure that forged a great pilot.

This was a chance he couldn't afford to waste, no matter the circumstance or consequence.

The yellow mech launched in to motion. However, this time it wasn't directly towards Tan Lingyun. Instead he went upwards, getting lost in the clouds and mist.

The green mecha was also on the move. The wings at its back constricted, and thrusters sputtered to life. A glimmering contrail remained as Tan Lingyun raced towards Su He.

The green mecha made no attempts at dodging or concealment as it charged ahead. It seemed as though the pilot were entirely unconcerned with potential attacks from the sniper.

However, nestled in her simulator, Tan Lingyun saw this was anything but the brazen calm her mecha displayed. Through her heightened perception, she could feel the simulator rocking, though it's movements

weren't as fierce as they had been moments before. Still, the frequency of the shudders where about the same. What this meant was that, even though the mecha looked to be flying straight, it was moving around at such speed and frequency that the yellow mecha couldn't use its instrumentation to get a lock. They were similar to the ghosting maneuvers, but doing so while charging forward was in another class entirely from doing so while standing still. It was undoubtedly the sign of a highly skilled pilot.

Tan Lingyun didn't even know if there was a name for it.

She was full of curiosity at her predicament. Just as the voice had commanded, she knew the most important thing for her to do in this moment was watch carefully. Memorize every detail. She knew her future improvement depended on it.

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1. [Link to wikipedia article about the man](#), a PLA soldier and cultural hero. Lei Feng is the premier people's hero, a man whose exploits (likely largely fictitious) were always entirely for the benefit of the working man and the communist government. He's the Chinese version of mother Theresa, though I'm convinced he was built up to be an icon of communist propaganda. But that's a discussion for another time, the important cultural reference is that his life is celebrated every year. During the celebration young people in schools are forced to participate in community beautification projects like planting trees, or told to stand on street corners and help the elderly. The result is that the fine public improvement campaign is marred by constant pro-government rhetoric and disenchanted youngsters who are upset they have to stand in the scorching heat. People will espouse the virtues of a 'Life like Lei Feng' almost by rote when national pride is brought in to the equation, but largely disdain the holiday and the thinly veiled government propaganda that's attached to it.

Chapter 193: THIS is God-Ranked!

The difference in equipment quality for the two mechas wasn't much. As such, the green mecha wasn't significantly faster than the yellow.

Before long Su He's mecha dipped in to the cloud cover. The stately green predator followed half a second behind.

Here the benefits of a sim match were made apparent, for as they drilled through the clouds and mist the spectator's screens filtered them out and revealed a crystal clear picture. Now, they could see every minute detail of the fight despite the environment.

Su He did not pause as he penetrated the clouds. He became distorted and difficult to pinpoint, with a fuzzy grey light hovering around him. He looked very much like the clouds he hid in. More importantly, however, this aura he exuded hid the fluctuations of his mech and discipline power.

Slowly, he lifted the laser cannon to his shoulder. He continued to move backward through the mist while carefully aiming for the encroaching green hunter.

The suit stopped. Tan Lingyun felt the vibrating of the sim pod come to a halt, and although she couldn't see Su He she was immediately filled with dread. What was this person doing? Why were they stopped when a sniper likely had their sights trained on her, especially a sniper as strong as this?

It was an opportunity Su He couldn't afford to miss. With a sizzling bang, the laser cannon released its first shot. The clouds turned an angry red as the sizzling laser raced towards its target.

But what happened next was a strange turn, for just as the laser was set to obliterate Tan Lingyun, a powerful green aura gushed forth. The nimble mech side-stepped ever so slightly, as the verdant light congealed in to a thick layer before its chest.

The laser burst in to a fiery explosion, but the brunt of its force was avoided with the juke. The rest was deflected by the intense shield.

The impact force caused the suit to spin around.

Su He saw how his attack was mitigated until it was useless. In surprise and frustration, he began the procedures to ghost his suit once more.

He knew God-ranked pilots didn't do anything unless it specifically granted them a combat advantage. There was definitely a reason the green mecha had stopped to suffer the strike.

As expected, the moment his shadow appeared he saw a green flash streak by. He broke out in a cold sweat.

The light had been one of the suit's spikes, fired from its hand at incredible speed.

Su He stopped on a dime, refusing to let inertia pull him to the side. It was a poignant display of his mastery. The sudden change in trajectory saved him, for as anticipated a second flash of green raced past. Had he kept going, that spike would have impaled the cockpit.

Sweat had already soaked through Su He's flight suit. The intensity was oppressive, and an underlying fear crept through his brain as he continued to narrowly avoid destruction.

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In the sim pod.

Tan Lingyun watched the exchange on her screens, absorbed in every tiny detail. Though she wasn't the one piloting the suit, she was nevertheless full of a deep satisfaction.

Her observations were interrupted when that deep voice from before filled her cockpit. "The reason for leaving myself open for the blast, was to resolve this fight as quickly as possible. He's got a very powerful shield defense system installed in his suit, capable of blocking our radar. Add in the cloud cover, and he's practically invisible. Nearly all high-level snipers are outfitted like this. So, the best way to determine a sniper's location is

to have him take a shot. The precondition, of course, being that you're confident you can avoid or block the shot."

As the voice was instructing, she did indeed see Su He's mecha partially concealed in the clouds.

Su He had indeed avoided the two attack, but in the course of evasion was forced to stop his retreat. In the same instant Su He's location was revealed, the green mecha launched forward at top speed. Spin, launch, sprint – three actions that blended seamlessly in to one. No movement was wasted.

By the time Su He reacted, trying desperately to turn and flee, the green mecha was already hovering directly in front of him.

However, Su He's training was immaculate, and his estimation of the situation appropriate. He knew that running at the needed speed would take time, time he didn't have. If he tried, his enemy would catch up quickly, with his back exposed. What's more, though his cannon was a far sight better than his student's, it still needed time to cool before another shot could be fired. There wasn't time for him to fire one off before Tan Lingyun could land a fatal strike.

So he didn't run. Instead his hands relaxed around the grip of the laser cannon, allowing the powerful weapon to fall away. His arms rose and warded him, the blades wrapped around them dull against the gray clouds. Close combat was his only option, now.

The green mecha was unarmed, having fired its spikes earlier.

Finally, the two mecha met once again. The audience watched with baited breath, throats tight with anxiety.

The green mecha stuttered. Ghosting?

No, or... yes?

It appeared as though there was some problem, that the maneuver failed. Though there was the hint of a phantom, it wasn't as expertly executed as before. The image was only partially separate from the real thing, not unlike Su He's own attempts earlier.

But Su He saw something else entirely.

Indeed, the ghosting image didn't entirely separate, however it wasn't two mechas he saw. It was three.

Three? Damn! What is his hand speed?! Su He was thunderstruck, and excitement shone in his eyes. He held no fear for such opponents, only anticipation. His fingers danced over the controls fervently.

The yellow mecha's torso began to rotate at intense speed. The weapons stretching from its elbow sockets became a blur. He became a wall of whirling steel.

Su He was not one for defense. Otherwise he wouldn't have chosen a sniper mech for the battle. Right now, though, he had no choice. He faced three enemies now essentially, and he had no idea where the next attack could come from. Nor did he know what manner of attack it would be, considering his opponent's abilities. All he had to rely on was his ultimate defense.

Suddenly, a giant mechanical fist appeared in front of his face. She seemed to pay the spinning blades no mind.

Is she crazy? This was Su He's first thought. After all, those weapons he wielded weren't ordinary alloy blades. They were high-frequency concussive steel, the best you could buy. It was for this reason that Tan Lingyun's shields had failed to deflect the attack, and the strike had still managed to damage her suit.

And it didn't even have any weapons, resorting to fists. She was asking for death.

Su He didn't know what his enemy was planning, but he did know that hesitation when fighting someone of this caliber was a death sentence. So he punched buttons on his keyboard, and the whirling weapons exploded outward like a deadly metal dervish. They swiped mindlessly, viciously at his attacker. The terrible humming blades captured his adversaries fist between them.

Did she have time to retreat? No. Nor was there any trickery. The green

mecha planned to eat the attack straight on.

Tan Lingyun cried out in alarm, watching from within the dark sim pod. She couldn't understand why this person who called themselves 'Lei Feng' was acting so recklessly.

Crunch!

The sounds of impact reverberated through the air. The yellow mecha went flying, arms flailing and chest plate dented.

The green mecha's thrusters fired at full strength, at the suit dissolved in to a piercing ray of light that shot forward.

He caught up, and the two suits stopped in that heavy cloud cover.

A moment later...

Boom!

The yellow mecha exploded in a fiery inferno.

"Su He's mecha has sustained one hundred percent damage. Victory: Tan Lingyun."

Not a sound arose from the audience. They sat in silence, disbelieving, unsure of what happened.

"How... how did you do that?" Tan Lingyun asked quietly to the darkness of the simulator. She didn't care who this Lei Feng actually was, she just had to know how he'd taken victory. It had all happened too fast for her to see.

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The VIP platform. Han Ruchao and Xu Renjian were comical mirrors of each other, staring wide eyed and slack-jawed at the screen.

Su He's defeat had turned his earlier threats in to a joke. He'd lost, and lost terribly. Their one-on-one bout, engaged at his request, ended up being a gift to the enemy.

“Renjian... did you see how your instructor won the fight?” Han Ruchao couldn’t help but ask his NEU counterpart, asking the question almost unconsciously.

Xu Renjian shook his head. “I didn’t see it clearly. The two suits were of about equal power. It looks like she won with her bare fists, though Su He’s defense should have deflected them. Somehow the strike must have landed, and then... empty space.”

Han Ruchao sucked in an angry breath. “You’re certainly a sneaky one, Renjian. Keeping your cards very close to the chest. If this were some accident I could accept the loss, but... You must introduce this miracle pilot of yours to me later. I had no idea your university had managed to lure a God-ranked pilot on staff.”

Xu Renjian shot his rival a bitter smile. “I am pleased at our victory, Ruchao, but I am just as confused as you are. As far as I knew Tan Lingyun was a Sovereign-ranked pilot. I have no idea when or how she’s managed to make such a leap in power. It was quite the surprise, I assure you! Surprised doesn’t even describe it.”

Xu Renjian shook his head, his face jiggling. He had to let go of his disbelief, for he’d seen it true. He went on, his face a mask of seriousness. “I suppose we should settle the terms of our wager, then.”

Han Ruchao’s face twitched as though in pain. “As straightforward as always.”

Xu Renjian huffed disdainfully. “And if you’d have won? We’re all adults here, admit when you’ve lost and pay up.”

Chapter 194: Lei Feng Appears!

The sim pod opened.

Su He pulled himself from the dark and stuffy simulator. His face didn't display any of the things you might expect; no depression or anger. Instead, he looked excited. Whether from emotion or the drama of the fight it was hard to say, but it was so intense that his hands were shaking.

He ran across to Tan Lingyun's pod without hesitation.

However, the teachers and students had learned their lesson from watching Xiao Han. They warded Su He's advance.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tang Xiao gave the young instructor a hard look.

"Nothing," Su He replied. "I have a great deal of respect for your instructor. I just wanted to properly introduce myself."

Finally, Tan Lingyun's pod opened, and the Savage Goddess pulled herself free. Her face was a mask of calm, like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

"Greetings, Professor Tan," Su He greeted with a nod of his head.

Tan Lingyun acknowledge him with a nod.

Su He took a breath, then spoke up with excitement clear in his voice. But there was also a pleading undertone. "Professor Tan. I am well aware that my own abilities are far inferior to your own, but I am very excited to watch your artistry in the physical battle. I am very fortunate to be able to learn from your instruction."

Tan Lingyun was understandably stupefied. The mighty woman, in this moment, was intensely afraid of being discovered as a fraud.

It was evident that, had 'Lei Feng' not intervened, she would never have been a match for Su He. The battle had been a profound experience for her, one in which she got to experience fighting on an entirely different level first hand.

But the real fights were next, where Discipline and mecha combined. How could she maintain this ruse then? However, under the watchful eyes of her students, she had to keep it up.

If she acted in accordance with her nature, she'd absolutely have told the whole truth. However, in this moment, it wasn't just herself involved. She represented the entire school. What's more the God-ranked battle still had a hold on her heart, challenging her self-control. She may have only watched the exchange, but that didn't mean she didn't learn something. At the very least, she came away with a God-ranked pilot's thought process.

Her mind was still mulling over just how her green mecha had managed to defeat Su He's in the simulation.

Tan Lingyun brought her attention to the present. "Impressive close combat abilities. But answer a question for me; do you know how it is you lost the fight?"

The onlookers watched as their champion spoke. She seemed possessed of a mysterious and profound disposition, her words instructive rather than inquisitive. For all the world like a professor teaching a student.

Su He answered. "I know a part of it. In the moment when your suit collided with my defense, you most likely employed oscillation. The frequency of your fist and the vibration of my blades must have been at similar rates, nullifying my weapon's advantages and dispersing their force. The rush and strike sent me flying. It broke my defense leaving my chest exposed. That's when your second rush finished me."

Students and teachers on both sides were enlightened by the explanation. Finally, they understood how the green mecha had achieved victory.

Tan Lingyun also understood, then, what had happened. She nodded. "Let's prepare for the next round."

Everyone there bought it. Everyone, that is, except Tang Xiao. Something nagged at him.

Oscillation? Professor Tan was capable of the maneuver? A God-ranked

pilot? Something wasn't right. Tang Xiao knew only one person who could employ such a skill.

And what a skill! Employing oscillation at just the right frequency to nullify those frightening blades. Could Professor Tan really do such a thing?

Tan Lingyun walked towards the combat arena, calm and unhurried. There was no sense of hesitation or concern in her. The circumstances of their victory had been strange, but it opened up a whole new realm of knowledge to her.

It wasn't ever Sovereign pilot who had the opportunity to witness a God-ranked battle first hand. It was an experience she knew was absolutely invaluable.

Oscillation! And the ghosting maneuvers earlier had shaken the simulator something fierce. To control the mecha despite that movement was an incredible feat in and of itself. Was this a glimpse at the power of God-ranked mecha pilots? She honestly didn't know whether she'd have an opportunity to reach anywhere near that level in her entire lifetime.

It wasn't just the masterful control of the suit that was inspiring, either. Watching the God-ranked pilot's battlefield domination was also amazing. From the very instant Su He entered the simulated arena he was fighting for survival, and though his reactions were appropriate for every situation, the green mecha was able to adjust at every turn to maintain the advantage.

That was true ability! God-ranked pilots really were in a class all their own, she thought.

Tan Lingyun's excitement was no less than Su He's, though she kept it under wraps. She had been loathe to leave the simulator, anxious to get more instruction from the mysterious 'Lei Feng'. She strongly believed that further instruction from this master would see her skills skyrocketing.

That deep voice was seared in to her memory. She may have walked away calm, but her heart thudded wildly in her chest.

It was a wonderful sensation. When the fights were finished, she planned to return to the pod. With any luck, 'Lei Feng' would still be there.

She arrived at the arena before she knew it. It was time to pick her suit.

Su He had arrived as well, though he had yet to pick his machine. He waited silently, watching Tan Lingyun approach. He offered her a respectful bow, then climbed in to a rifleman mecha.

Tan Lingyun took a deep breath. Whatever she was to face, she would face with grace. Indeed, she didn't care whether she won or lost in their next encounter. Already her success and that of the Tang Xiao before her was an incredible leap forward for their university. Her sole fear was that she couldn't live up to the showing in DreamNet. She was afraid it would raise questions.

Of course simulated battles and real fights were markedly different. They were using the most basic mechas available, and discipline would also play a role in this fight. The fight and its tactics would be entirely different. All were excuses she could rely on. So if she lost, she thought, then so be it.

As she pondered the circumstances, she walked over to the closest mecha – a saber suit. She had a preference for close combat.

"Pick the second suit."

That deep voice rang in her ear, as though he were standing right beside her.

She stopped dead in her tracks, eyes wide.

Yes! It was 'Lei Feng' once again. He's asked me to pick another suit... does this mean he has a way to help me? Is this even ok?

Though her heart was filled with surprise and delight, she constrained herself and did as instructed. After all, her opponent was not one to be trifled with. Was a second miracle in her cards?

These simple practice suits weren't equipped with fancier equipment like tractor beams or transporters. As such she had to rely on ladders.

She pulled herself up with little effort, and hit the power button for the suit. The chest plate hissed as it snapped open. The inner cockpit was revealed.

These suits were possessed of only a small, factory standard cockpit. There was only just enough room for the pilot.

And there was already someone inside.

It was him? HE was 'Lei Feng'?

He was dressed in strange clothes, like they were from the former era, and a golden mask. The only thing she could see was a pair of electric blue eyes.

The various students following her, however, saw no one.

The masked Lei Feng gave her a wave. Then patted his lap.

Wha-? Get in and sit on his lap?

Her face blazed red, unsure of how to proceed.

"You better hurry if you want to win this fight." The deep voice called out to her.

She couldn't afford to hesitate, not with everyone watching. She grit her teeth, and climbed in.

What to do? What to do?

Tan Lingyun tried to keep herself dignified, but all of that fell away when she pulled herself in to the cockpit. Never in her life had she had to contend with a situation like this.

The masked man reached down and pulled her up by the arm. To Tan Lingyun, it was like some great unseen force was yanking her in to his arms. The chest plate shut, under the masked man's command. The cockpit felt intensely cramped.

The man's hands her under her armpits, adjusting her position so that she had her back to him and her butt on his thighs. The seat harness swept passed and clicked, pressing her against him.

She felt his warmth against her, the strength of his torso. She felt heat rise up within her as well; here she was locked in a small room, pressed tightly against some man! One could imagine Tan Lingyun's anxiety.

"Who... who are you?"

"Lei Feng!"

"It's you!" Tan Lingyun's heart fluttered. Her shyness and curiosity about the man diminished somewhat, and she tried to crane her head back to get a better look at him.

Chapter 195: Don't Move!

"Don't move." Lei Feng's body stiffened. He was seated in close quarters, embracing a beautiful woman whose pert backside was nestled firmly in his lap. Beautiful suffering. And it only got worse the more she squiggled.

"Oh." She stopped. "So what next?"

Lei Feng's deep voice replied. "Later, when I tell you to employ your Discipline, make sure you exude it outwards. Follow my instructions to the word, and pay close attention to what happens. Remember everything you see and feel today, because this is what will improve your abilities."

"Who the hell are you?" Tan Lingyun blurted out.

Lei Feng was silent for a moment. "Not important. All you need to know, is that I'm here to help."

"But why are you helping?"

"We're about to begin. Concentrate."

Su He was already in his suit, and moving towards the arena.

Two long arm stretched from around Tan Lingyun's tiny waist. Slender fingers settled on the suit's controls.

Her heart skipped a beat. Unconsciously, she dropped her head, and saw the pale hands as they worked. They were thin, but not bony. Pretty, was how she would describe them.

Pretty indeed, especially for a man's hands. She found it curious a man could develop such feminine fingers.

She also spied the strange green ring on his left little finger. The diamonds, sapphires, and that strange triangular jadeite, all twinkling in the cabin's dim light.

It was the ring that struck her most. She didn't understand why, but it felt familiar. Where she might have seen it, however, she couldn't say.

Where this any other man with such a ring, she'd look upon him with contempt. However this ring, on this man's hand, was somehow different.

It filled her with suspicion.

Those hands became a blur as they danced along the controls. Their movements didn't effect Tan Lingyun at all, as though she weren't even there to impede them. Lei Feng was doing his best to sit straight, with arms stretched forward to reach around her. It was very much like her was holding her in his embrace. She felt his breath at her ear as he craned his head to one side of her neck, in order to watch the screen.

His warm breath, proximity and indeed even his aura caused her face to redden visibly.

The saber mech lurched in to motion. Large steps swept the suit through the prep area, following on the rifleman's heels.

"Professor Su. Please choose the arena." Wu Junyi called out towards the sim match's loser, giving him the opportunity to choose the battlefield as per their agreed upon rules. He, along with Shi Jiujiu of Lir, were the acting referees for this fight just as they were for the students.

"Arena." Su He called out his choice without indecision. Indeed, the Arena would be his natural choice. It was the simplest and most direct terrain to experience his opponent's God-ranked mastery and Discipline. That was his aim, to witness and experience the powers of a God-ranked pilot, to challenge himself under such pressure. He was almost sure the struggle would lead to a personal breakthrough.

What he didn't know, was whether this God-ranked pilot he faced was going to apply enough pressure.

To Tan Lingyun it felt like her heart was beating a hundred-sixty times a minute. She could hear its thud in her ears.

"What are you thinking? Pay attention to what I'm doing. Listen for my command to use your Discipline." His voice snapped her back to the present.

She was the Savage Goddess, she reminded herself, a woman whose emotions were far better managed than the average young woman. She bit the tip of her tongue, hoping the pain would quell her discomfort with the

situation. She fixed her glimmering eyes on the hands in front of her.

The audience outside was buzzing, both with excitement and anticipation. As the battle neared, so too did the fervor of the crowd rise.

The screens overhead where replaying the recently completed sim battle.

They watched once more as Su He's yellow mech first displayed it's ghosting abilities, humble though they were. Then came Tan Lingyun's display, shocking them all over again. It proceeded to the battle within the clouds, culminating with Su He's oblivion.

The fight hadn't been an overly low or long one. The entire thing had been over in around ten minutes. The audience watched as the replay continued in slow motion, though they were surprised to find that, even despite the slower speeds, it was still difficult to clearly determine what was going on. The primary reason for this was that the suits were incredibly fuzzy when employing their ghost techniques, even at greatly diminished frame rates. It was a poignant testament to just how fast they really were.

The students of both universities couldn't pull their eyes from the screen. For them, still in school, they knew the opportunity to watch an exchange of this caliber was a rare treat. It left a deep impression on every single pair of eyes that watched the screen.

Who wouldn't want to reach such levels of mastery, after all? Of course their desires were tempered with the understanding that only an exceptionally few people ever reached that level. For the vast majority this was the closest they'd ever get to God-ranked, and they drank in every moment like a fine wine, savoring it.

This was especially true for those in the know, who could recognize the fighters' level of ability and illuminate the fact to their peers. They were the ones who got the passionate responses going.

Yes, it was a treat for all that they could watch such a high-level exchange with their own eyes. It was largely this fact that resulted in Lir University's dean, Han Ruchao, change in mood.

He sat in quiet reflection, wondering whether he should work to mend the strained relationship between their respective learning institutions. They had a God-ranked pilot, after all!

There were probably only three universities in the whole of the Eastern Alliance that were capable of possessing a God-ranked pilot on staff. Only two saw their preeminent pilot involved in any actual teaching, and only rarely.

If word got out about this pilot, Han Ruchao mulled, the NEU would certainly enjoy a much higher enrollment rate. Worse, they'd adopt the attitude that came with being a famously strong university.

It was no wonder, then, why Poseidon had chosen to hold his concert here. Han Ruchao suspected and feared his presence was likely due to the fact they had a God-ranked pilot here among them. And a beautiful woman, no less.

Xu Renjian, unlike his Lir counterpart, wasn't consumed by the gossip. As the Dean of the NEU he was absolutely clear on the abilities of his school and staff. This was especially true for Tan Lingyun. He could even say he watched her grow up. She held herself apart, was often cold and prickly, but was in the end a very fine young woman. She was frank, and dutiful. Where she truly a God-ranked pilot, she wouldn't have kept that a secret from him.

He had been present every step of the way, as Tanglingyun had grown and progressed. He'd never heard any indication that she was such a talented pilot.

There was a great chasm between a God-ranked pilot, and a Sovereign. It was a chasm that was famously difficult to cross. This he knew.

So what was going on? Tan Lingyun, despite all he knew, most definitely displayed the mastery of a God-ranked pilot in the simulation!

Xu Renjian's confusion roiled within him. He certainly had to find Tan Lingyun when all was said and done, and ask her about this whole situation.

At one corner of the bleachers.

Zhou Qianlin sat among her peers, biting her pink lip as though deep in thought.

Is that him? I'd asked him to help Professor Tan, was this his work? But how? And now here, in the real fight, there's likely little opportunity to help her. How can he?

She was suddenly assailed by a pang of regret. Of course she wanted to help her class leader, to save her from embarrassment. However, she was also afraid of having her bodyguard reveal himself. If he revealed his true powers, it would be impossible for them to maintain their close proximity. He wouldn't be able pick her up or drop her off, or protect her at all.

Every spectator watched, their moods as numerous as they were. They waited in anticipation for the fight to begin.

The two mechas entered the arena; one swordsman, one rifleman.

Every soul present watched the screens before them, especially those in the mecha combat department. The last fight had been hard to imagine, with their high-level mechas and the separation of DreamNet. But these were suits these students used every day, about to employed in ways they could only dream.

What could these machines do, in the hands of top-level pilots? Not to mention the Discipline employed by the powerhouses. The students of the NEU all knew their Savage Goddess was an eight-level Talent, and would become stronger when paired with the suit she commanded.

The two suits lumbered in, then separated to opposite sides of the arena. Su He pulled his laser ripple in to his hands, and fixed his shining eyes on the distant challenger.

The saber mech's stride was slow and easy. There was nothing in the

gait that revealed its pilot's frightening proficiency.

But was that so?

For Su He, that was not the case. He could see that each step of his opponent was covered by subtle defensive maneuvering. Each step was just as capable of defense as explosive attack. He had no doubt Tan Lingyun could coax her suit to its top speed in the blink of an eye, any moment she wished.

As the young instructor looked on, the statistics and information of their respectful suits danced through his mind.

Considering the suit statistics had reference value, however a pilot's Discipline had to be taken in to account. It was that variable that made determining the enemy's power and speed almost impossible.

"Ready to start." Lei Feng's deep voice hummed in Tan Lingyun's ear.

She felt a nervous twinge rattle through her. Her eyes rose to the screen, and her hands rose to grip the harness that pinned her to the masked man. Her predicament forced her in to a demur posture she wasn't used to, but there was clearly excitement at the prospect of what was to come.

Suddenly, a powerful attractive force arose from behind her. Tan Lingyun yelped, as she felt herself pressed tighter against the wide, warm chest of her benefactor.

It was an electric attraction, somehow forcing the two of them in to tighter proximity. Her presence in the tight cabin made it infinitely more difficult for Lei Feng to control the suit. The motion of the suit during combat was also likely to set her off balance, or cause injury. Lei Feng anticipated this, and pressed them together until they were practically one body.

Chapter 196: Diffusing Blade

“Begin!”

Both suits ground and clanged with the sounds of metal on metal as Wu Junyi’s voice rang out.

Su He’s rifle was in his hands and firing before the director even finished. The air sizzled as the angry flash rapidly closed the distance between Su He and Lei Feng. And yet, if he was aiming for the suit, he missed his mark.

The more astute in the audience, however, knew his plan. He had aimed for where Lei Feng would be, instead of for the suit itself. This would force the encroaching saber mech to stop, pinning it in place, at least for a time.

But Lei Feng was not foiled. He recognized the point of Su He’s early engagement, too. In response his metallic leg shot up, and the momentum had him reeling to the side.

It was well executed. Not only was the laser strike avoided, but the juke had him charging directly towards where the rifleman was sidestepping.

After the gun had fired, Su He coaxed his suit diagonally backwards. The saber mech was close behind.

Su He grit his teeth, fighting the discomfort that had begun to fill him up. His opponent was simply too good. He was dodging, but wherever he went his enemy was hot on his heels. Each passing moment made the pressure in his chest worse.

The rifleman planted its metal foot, suddenly changing directions. In the same moment he fired off several blasts from his laser rifle. The shots spread wide but despite their random appearance, were in fact aimed specifically towards the routes Lei Feng would have to use to advance. His shots were still defensive, attempting to create some distance between him and his enemy.

And once again Lei Feng saw it coming. The hulking saber suit stopped... and refused to move closer.

This was one advantage of the Arena, at least for long-distance fighters. While there were no obstacles in the way, forward mobility was difficult without any cover. Still, Lei Feng seemed disinterested in closing the rapidly spreading gap.

Tang Lingyun saw within the tight confines of the cockpit, staring raptly at the hands tapping away in front of her. The slim fingers tapped away at the keyboard, moving along as though it were the most natural thing for them to do, like they were a part of the machine itself. She couldn't make out what keys he was pressing, exactly, but she could sense the rhythm in his keystrokes.

Indeed, they did have a special sort of tempo. His hand speed didn't even appear too fast – really sort of relaxed. And yet the suit moved and stopped as though it had a life of its own. Everything was smooth like running water in a stream.

It looked like his hand speed was hovering around ten maneuvers a second, according to Tan Lingyun's calculations. But despite the low number the moves were executed with frightening precision.

She couldn't see what he was doing exactly, but she could tell – along with everyone else – that there wasn't any wasted motion in anything this 'Lei Feng' did.

This was an indication of true ability, of a master pilot! She couldn't pull her eyes away, silently praising her benefactor's skill.

"Guess. What do you think our opponent's Discipline is?" Lei Feng's voice called to her.

Tan Lingyun thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. But I can guess since he has a long-ranged suit, his powers revolve around energy promotion and precision. It could also be tracking or concealment. It must be within one of those categories."

Lei Feng nodded. "You're right," he said softly. "But he's a pilot of higher class, who's still deciding to stick with a sniper. We can't discount his close-combat capabilities. This means it's even more likely his Discipline involves energy manipulation, which we know is a very explosive and

powerful ability. If that's the case, one well-placed strike from him can end the match. Whether in practices matches or real fights, make sure you keep a close eye on these sorts of pilots. They're capable of sudden and frightening strength."

By now Su He could also feel something wasn't right. A faint red aura sprang up around him.

With the addition of the strange light, Su He's suit adopted a more nimble gait. Its retreat was faster and more fluid. What's more, as it fired again the laser blasts had turned an angry red, distinctly more empowered than the white flashes from moments before. The rate of fire had increased, too.

"Pure energy control?" Tan Lingyun muttered thoughtfully.

"No. Not that simple. Energy injection. It's time for us to reveal our hand, too, and finish this quickly."

The suit dodged the rifle blast with little effort. An undulating green light began to emerge around the saber mech suit.

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Xu Renjian's brows furrowed as he saw the green light appear. Natural energy manipulation... that was certainly Tan Lingyun's Discipline! Could that mean she really was a God pilot?

The saber mech adopted its own nimble stance, like a cheetah waiting to strike. It raced to the side, whereupon the audience gasped at what they saw.

The suit was going so fast it dissolved in to a flash of green light. The beam shot through the arena faster than the eye could follow. It would appear for half a second as the light changed direction three times, but would vanish again just as quickly as it appeared. Somewhere in the interim, Lei Feng had drawn his alloy sword.

Low-end suits of this caliber weren't suitable for maneuvers like

ghosting. The construction of the suit wasn't suitably strong enough to handle it. Not only would the suit fail to execute the ghost properly, the pilot could actually shake their suit apart in the process.

However, under the protection of the strange green light, the saber mech had achieved speeds nearing that necessary for ghosting. It advanced with frightening speed, and before they knew it the audience could see Tan Lingyun's mecha closing in to striking distance on Su He. Fifty meters remained between them.

Lei Feng brought his sword-bearing right arm up, slashing viciously towards his opponent. A sonic boom of green light tore through the area between them.

Su He dove to the side. His suit wouldn't be able to sustain a direct assault from the close-combat suit. But the moment he did it, Su He knew he'd made a mistake.

It wasn't a sword slash that Lei Feng had lashed out with. It was a burst of energy not ten meters long.

The fighter mech took advantage, lurching forward to intercept the marksman. Ten meters remained between them.

Bang, bang, bang, bang! It's common practice for a pilot to use the forward momentum of their roll to swing them back onto their feet, but Su He didn't do this. Instead, half on his knees, Su He fired off another volley of lasers. With only ten meters of separation between them, the shots didn't have to go far.

His enemy was using a close-combat fighter, but a basic model. Without the ability to use ghosting or other such dodging maneuvers, how could he manage to avoid being shot when he was only ten meters away?

Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. That's what it looked like.

Premature advance! This was the first thought that raced through Tan Lingyun's mind. She may have still had a long way to go before she reached God-ranked, but she was still an eighth-level Talent. By her estimation, their opponent was of similar strength in that regard. Maybe

even stronger.

And now here she was, facing the full power of the marksman's blast. All she saw was the massive disadvantage.

There was, of course, the fact that the dense lasers could overheat her enemy's weapon. But if they were going to take advantage of that fact, they'd first have to survive the volley.

The saber mech's forward advance was brought to a screeching halt, and stood straight and tall like a nail hammered in place. The green aura surrounding it pulsed outward, emitting waves of gentle light.

Red versus green. Their collision was brilliant and colorful. Red light filled Tan Lingyun's vision, as the laser strikes spread out all around her. Had Su He missed on purpose?

But as she watched those fingers dancing along the control panel before her, her eyes went blurry.

The whole suit began to tremble tremendously. Countless slight but violent shakes set her teeth to rattling. She felt like she was being shaken apart.

Thankfully the attractive power pinning her to Lei Feng strengthened in that moment. She felt herself go numb.

The shaking was so intense that she saw six hands tapping the controls in front of her. They looked like little more than six trembling shadows.

Schwing! The long sword stretched outward, the green light flashed.

Su He's marksman suit was pinned to the arena floor, a shimmering green alloy blade running it through. The main control systems had been severed.

What? How did...!

It was the sim match all over again. Everyone had seen it, but no one understood what had happened. How could the rifleman mech miss at ten meters?

Lei Feng pulled his sword free, extracting it with a flourish. Each motion

was trailed by a streak of green. He walked back to where he'd started the match, casting a large shadow behind him.

Su He's breathing was rapid, as he sat in the dark cockpit. He remained in the darkness, unmoving. The last few seconds played over and over again in his mind.

Diffusing Blade? She... she used the diffusing blade?

In that instant he had seen dozens of swords approaching, flashing and leaving an afterimage as they tore through the air. Green flashes of power followed wherever they moved. Each swipe of its sword was so precise, they'd deflected every single laser round. It'd taken his enemy a fraction of a second. Just like that, like it was the easiest thing in the world. Then it was over.

This was how you crushed someone's spirit. From beginning to end, Su He hadn't the slightest opportunity available to him. Though he didn't know it, the saber mech's ability to use diffusing blade meant no shot from his laser rifle would find its mark. He would have been more effective fighting bare-handed!

A bitter smile slowly spread across Su He's face. 'There will always be those stronger than you.' It was a phrase he knew well before leaving university himself. But to really encounter that person... his excitement couldn't be quantified. However, his ultimate, impotent failure tore at his pride viciously. He was little more than a roach in the face of this master.

In this moment, faced with someone stronger than he, Su He came to a crushing realization: he still had a lot to learn.

Chapter 197: Biting The Hand That Feeds

With a fight like this, who won and who lost was practically an afterthought.

The entire VIP box stood; the two deans, the school administrators, even the Skyfire luminaries who attended. As one, they bowed respectfully toward the distance saber mecha.

“How... how did you do that? Just now I couldn’t make anything out. You operate too quickly for me to follow. So what did you do?” Tan Lingyun was as frustrated as she was curious.

“I’d have been faster if you weren’t holding my arm in a death grip.” Lei Feng’s response was audibly irritated.

Tan Lingyun looked down, surprised to see her hands tightly squeezing Lei Feng’s forearms. She didn’t remember doing this, but it must have been to stabilize her at some point during the match. Almost like she wanted him to wrap his arms around her.

The vacuum force that kept her in place relaxed. Finally, she felt some relief, though she couldn’t help but notice the cold she felt without that wide chest behind her. Her own back was slick with sweat.

“I used the sword to deflect his laser shots.”

“The sword?” She said it almost as an afterthought. She wriggled on his lap, trying to find a more comfortable position.

But as she did, Lei Feng’s voice from just before the match rang through her head with that cautionary command. She sputtered apologetically. “I’m sorry! Something was poking me.”

Lei Feng’s body went stiff at her words. “It’s fine, the competition’s over.”

“You still haven’t told me how you used your sword to deflect the attack.” She still wasn’t satisfied, and so fired the question without second thought.

“You’ve heard of the diffusion blade maneuver? A swordsman technique. This is a simple suit, as you know, and can’t sustain strenuous movements. But if it’s just the arms, it can manage. It’ll still certainly need some maintenance when you put it back.” Lei Feng elucidated her in calm tones.

“Diffusion blade?” Tan Lingyun swallowed hard. Of course she’d heard of the move. It had its own reputation.

It was developed about thirty years ago, by a pilot who spent his life seeking out and challenging the best there were. He only ever fought with a sword, and trained until he had reached the very peak of mastery with it. During his time, he created several specialized techniques to use with a sword before finishing.

But according to Tan Lingyun’s own knowledge, most God-ranked pilots couldn’t use the technique properly, much less an average one. Manipulating a sword so that it creates an after image wasn’t hard, but being so fast that your phantom strikes actual had substance, could damage or guard... that was exceedingly difficult to pull off, for anyone.

The suits had been removed from the arena. Tan Lingyun’s suit slowly lumbered towards its starting position in the mecha hangar.

“When you leave, you mustn’t tell anyone I was here. I don’t want anyone to know. You are the one who won the match, understand?” Lei Feng’s voice was deep and commanding.

“Mhm.” Tan Lingyun nodded. “Can you tell me your real name?”

“No!”

Tan Lingyun thought for a moment before speaking again. “Well... will I be able to contact you somehow?”

“We’ll meet again if fate determines it should be so.”

“Why did you come to help me?”

“At the request of someone else.”

“For me? Have we met?”

‘Lei Feng’ had begun to grow impatient. “You certainly have a lot of questions. We’re here, time to get out. Remember what I told you, otherwise I can guarantee you’ll never see me again.”

The suit’s chest plate loosened with a hiss, and spread wide to reveal the cockpit. A deafening cheer arose once the audience saw.

“Can I study mecha piloting with you? My com number is...” She quickly relayed the information to her benefactor, then scrambled clear of the suit.

Lei Feng was finally able to move, and squirmed uncomfortably in the pilot seat.

Tan Lingyun quickly shut the cockpit door behind her, and locked the outside panel. She then slowly, soundlessly descended the ladder.

Geng Yang, Tang Xiao and Tang Mi were waiting for her at the bottom. The other competing students and teachers surrounded her the moment her feet touched the ground. Cheers resounded through the entire arena.

“Long live Professor Tan!”

“Long live our Goddess!”

The cries came again and again, shouted from the lips of the entire gathered NEU body.

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On the VIP platform.

“I’ve lost. No ifs ands or buts about it. Tomorrow, once the academic portion of the competition is completed, I’ll have someone deliver your power gems. You’re quite impressive, Dean Xu, even just in being able to cozy up to a God-ranked pilot. How about we go down and congratulate our latest champion?”

Xu Renjian chuckled good-naturedly. “Dean Han, I’m afraid now might

not be the most opportune time. As I'm sure you know, the comfort and condition of a school's God-ranked pilot is their first priority. We don't have a chance to speak with her just now. Also, if I may speak frankly, a pilot who reaches the God ranks traditionally bears their own... peculiarities. I wouldn't want to upset her, wouldn't you agree?"

Han Ruchaos' face grew hard, but just for the space of an instant. In no time, he was smiling again. "Indeed, indeed! That's fine. I suppose that concludes the day for us, then. We should head back and relax, ourselves. We'll see you tomorrow for the academic competitions."

"Take it easy, Ruchao."

"Yup, no need to send me off." [1]

The two gentlemen shook hands, and locked eyes. Each bore smiles, but their eyes told a different story. Deep in their hearts, they spat the same curse at the other.

This old fox! [2]

The atmosphere all around the NEU was jubilant. Today, they had been lucky enough to bear witness to two heroes. The display had inflamed their enthusiasm and school patriotism.

Tang Lingyun wasn't quite so bad as her peers. After all, the Savage Goddess had a reputation to maintain. And now, that reputation included the 'fact' that she was a God-ranked pilot. She was surrounded already by adoring fans.

Tang Xiao was the first to rush over, warding his instructor from the rush of students and teachers. In this moment, she was thankful for his wide girth. He was the only thing keeping her from being washed away in a sea of excited students.

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The Spirit Caller gem warmed.

Zhou Qianlin: That was you, wasn't it.

Lan Jue: What do you think?

Thank you. You are our school's hero.

I can live with being a Nameless Hero. And it wasn't just because of your request that I helped. Tan Lingyun has a famously bad temper, but she deserves respect. Moreover, I'm as much a part of this school as you and she. Only, there's a problem...

What problem?

It looks like the Savage Goddess here has decided to bite the hand that fed her. She locked me in the suit.

What should we do?

It's fine. I have my ways. I'll see you by the university gates in a little while. I'll send you home.

Oh, no good! Tomorrow we're competing in the mecha science and technology meet. I'll probably have to be here until very late.

Alright, then I'll head back first. For goodness sake don't tell anyone what went on today, I don't want anyone to know.

Neither do I.

Hm?

Nothing...

Seated in the dark and silent cockpit, 'Lei Feng's' hands shimmered with electric blue light. Gently, he placed them upon the metal of the cockpit's frame. Little by little, his body dissolves in to electricity until he vanished from sight.

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Su He was pulled free of the destroyed mecha by Shi Jiujiu. He got to his feet, but it was clear by his expression he was still dumbstruck.

The two fights he'd participated in today had left him with a very deep impression. Winning and losing had never been terribly important to him, but what had crushed him was the huge discrepancy in power he was forced to face.

God-ranked. He knew he was on the cusp, slowly advancing to God-ranked himself. But he'd never have expected there was still so far to go, and so huge a difference.

It was true that he hadn't used the suit he was most comfortable with, but what about the other? Surely it was the same for her? If his opponent had been able to use a suit they were adept with, he feared the fight would have been over much faster.

Lir University dean Han Ruchao stood within the arena, waiting for Su He to regain his bearings. The older gentleman motioned him close, then patted him with grandfatherly affection on the shoulder. "You fought admirably, Professor Su. There was no fault in your performance. Your opponent was simply too strong."

Su He slowly shook his head. "Such a huge disparity. There is no doubt that I was the inferior pilot. I never had a chance."

"It's alright," Han Ruchao interjected. "We have the next round tomorrow. We're still depending on you, Professor Su. If we win those, then we can walk out of here with our heads held high, as equals."

Su He managed a smile with some effort. "You all head back first, Dean. I'd like to be alone for a little while."

"Very well." He patted the man on his shoulder once again. Lir's Dean shot Shi Jiujiu a meaningful glance before turning, and walking from the arena.

A little while later, Su He was walking by himself along the pathway. The road connecting the arena to the main campus was a lengthy one. He didn't mind.

Everything he'd seen and felt during the two fights swam through his muddled brain. The memories were as distinct and visceral as when he'd first experienced them.

His trek continued in this fashion until someone called out from a few yards ahead. "Mentor!"

A simple greeting, but the words had a strange sort of power. Su He put

away his thoughts and looked towards the voice.

He spied a young man, with his back against the trunk of a nearby tree. His face was lit up with a beaming smile.

“You talking to me?” Su He lifted a brow.

“Yup!” The young man responded.

Su He quietly regarded him for a moment. “Have we met?”

His accoster chortled. “A long time ago, yes. I’m not surprised you don’t remember. Lan Qing is my older brother.”

Su He’s whole body shook and stiffened at the Supersoldier’s name. He looked incredulously at the younger Lan.

“Your older brother is Lan Qing. That means... Lan Jue?” Su He sounded more surprised than anything.

Lan Jue nodded, that smile still on his handsome face. He walked closer, until they were face to face.

“What’s up? I imagine you’re feeling a little down after that loss.” Lan Jue said.

Su He was an exceptionally intelligent man. Suspicion welled up within him as he asked, “Do the fights today have something to do with you?”

Lan Jue’s response was calm, calculated. “I was your opponent, mentor. Do you think there’s anyone in this university who’d be able to handle you so easily?”

“You?” Su He pinned Lan Jue with his bright eyes. When he spoke again his voice was hard. “You.”

*

1. This is the penultimate Chinese departure. A small exchange, everyone stands, and attempts to send the guest off as far as they’ll let them before they refuse to move an inch until their hosts go back to their house. Of course the more you like someone, or the more respect

you have for them, the further you send them off, and the more effort you put in to ignoring their pleas for you not to.

2. A fox is considered a trickster or troublemaker in China. They are simultaneously respected for their wily nature, and despised because it always comes at the expense of another. Calling someone a 'xiao hu li', or little fox, can be pretty insulting if you don't know the person well.

Chapter 198: The Old Man Beckons

Lan Jue nodded his head. "It's not breaking the rules, either. When you threw down the proverbial gauntlet, you called for anyone from the school. I am a part of the school."

Su He looked at him in surprise. "You're a teacher here?"

"Yup," Lan Jue replied, "though I'm only really interested in an easy and care-free life. You helped us a lot back when we were schoolmates in university. I've been wanting to see you for a while, in fact. Now, I'm going to need to ask for your help in keeping this secret."

Su He's breath had quickened since the beginning of their conversation. Lan Qing, and Lan Jue! To him, the two names were like a curse. Memories of days past crashed against his brain like a tidal wave.

The memories ran deep. He recalled being young, Lan Qing and Lan Jue had just entered in to the university. He was a national scholar in his school, and already a Sovereign-ranked pilot. He stood out from the others in his class as exceptional.

At that time his school had a policy, in which upper classmen were expected to take care of and show around newer students. They would lead them around, and acclimate them to university life.

Su He had been assigned to Lan Qing. A name that would forever be branded on his mind.

Everything Lan Qing did, he did with supreme concentration and care. It took him no time at all to get right in the swing of things. It was easy, as all he did every day was study religiously.

Su He still clearly remembered that the young Lan Qing was often asking for help and advice. His response had been to be aloof and superior, sometimes even arrogant towards the new student.

However, Lan Qing didn't seem to mind. He poured all of his energy in to his studies.

This continued until one day, when Su He told him not to waste his life

with those books and notes. If he wanted one day to be a strong pilot, then he needed to get out there, and experience it for himself. Su He then brought him to the sparring arena.

That was when Su He's nightmare began.

He saw it in his mind's eye like it was yesterday. Three matches, with worse results even than he'd suffered today. Three terrible defeats at the hand of that quiet underclassman. He never had a chance. Like Su He, Lan Qing was also a Sovereign-ranked pilot but he had only just enrolled in classes.

Worse still, the entire debauche had been recorded by the school and kept for posterity. It was for good reason, for not three years later Lan Qing was a God-ranked pilot. A God-ranked pilot, still in college. His college! From then on Lan Qing didn't attend any of the national scholar classes, in fact leaving school entirely. It was said he left for a very important reason, one which attracted Alliance-wide attention.

If that had been the end of it, it would have been fine. However, a year before Lan Qing left, his younger brother had also enrolled in the same school.

Whether by the university's design or cruel coincidence, Su He was selected as Lan Jue's chaperone as well. By that time, he was already preparing to graduate from the scholar program.

Once again Su He bore witness to the inconceivable. In precisely the same amount of time it took Lan Qing, Lan Jue became the second God-ranked pilot in four years to graduate from the university. Like his brother before him, he never entered into the national scholar program, and left school. He, too, left a legend.

What Lan Jue did after he left, Su He had no idea. His brother, though... everyone knew Lan Qing's name. The Anlun Supersoldier, Hero of the East!

The Great Protector, who saved a whole planet, and thus the alliance.

Su He thought back to his lengthy time as Lan Jue's chaperone. He was

even smarter than his brother, from what he could remember. Both were equally mysterious. No one knew where they'd come from, but their talent and strength were still spoken about in that school to this day.

"I never would have thought I'd run in to you here, much less that we'd meet in the ring again. I appreciate you showing mercy." The last few words seemed difficult for Su He to spit out. However, now that he knew it was Lan Jue he'd just faced in the Arena, everything started to make sense.

Without a doubt, he did get off easy.

"My classmate's abilities have improved tremendously since the last time we met. Still, there are some... limitations."

Su He fixed him with a stare. "What do you mean?"

"My dear classmate," Lan Jue began, "you still haven't recognized your biggest failing. And that is, you're too fixated on your genetic talent. Unless I'm mistaken, your Talent is explosive energy. It's an incredible Talent, which even though you're eight-level can contend easily with many other kinds of ninth-level Disciplines. And yet even back then, you were convinced you would have a difficult time reaching God-ranked, simply because you weren't ninth-level."

"I was still young and inexperienced then, and so had no way to contradict your belief. But now I can, and I must tell you that your thinking is flawed. I've met several seventh and eighth-level Talents who achieved God status. You must stop pressuring yourself in this. Focus on your mecha ability, let go of your old mindset, and strengthen your self-confidence. Mentor, your greatest fault has always been a lack of confidence!"

Lan Jue's words were like a thunderbolt. He simply stood there, staring at him.

His former classmate smiled, waved, and left.

Sometimes the slightest scratch could change the view from a window. Sometimes even the slightest chance can bring a revelation.

Su He had long been preparing for God status, but it appeared now that

he had been taking the longer road.

Lan Jue did not return to the school once leaving Su He, it was too rowdy. Presumably everyone was still excited over the upset the NEU pulled. More than that, he was also afraid he might inadvertently run in to the Savage Goddess. He may have been wearing a mask and disguise, but the trouble that would ensue if she still managed to find out would be catastrophic. He just wanted to go home and change clothes.

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Tan Lingyun eventually and with great effort managed to extricate herself from the throng of excited faces that penned her in. She convinced them to disperse, and only once the coast was clear did she return to the mecha warehouse.

Once more she climbed the ladder to the saber mech's cockpit. She gently rapped on the metal chest plate, and when she spoke her voice was apologetic. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to lock you in here, I just thought it important that we talk."

As she spoke, she coaxed the cockpit open. That was when she discovered it empty.

'Lei Feng' was gone.

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Beep-beep-beep! The ring of a communicator demanded attention.

"Ah, Accountant. What." Lan Jue spoke in to the device on his wrist.

"What's with the mood, Jewelry Master? Still trying to burn bridges?" The Accountant's voice was thick with irritation.

Lan Jue just laughed. "Nothing! I actually wanted to thank you. When it

comes to hacking you're a wizard."

This seemed to placate the ornery man. "Well, yes. There was actually something I wished to discuss with you."

"What is it?"

"I was just speaking with the old man," he began. "I'm likely going to visit your university. As I understand it, you're currently host to one Lir University for an educational exchange?"

"Yup!" Lan Jue looked surprised as he spoke in to the communicator. "The old man actually pays attention to such small things?"

The Accountant huffed. "Of course he doesn't care about some educational exchange. But someone – I don't know who – called and asked if he could speak with him about the most recent research and development news from the last few years. The old man has me going in his place, already got me a temporary student I.D. and all. The problem is that I'm not familiar with the campus. The Keeper said that, seeing as you're already there, you could show me around. So you can bring me with you tomorrow morning."

Curiosity welled up within Lan Jue, and he couldn't help but speak up. "Did the Keeper tell you to meet with someone named Su?"

"That's right!" The Accountant's excited voice bubbled from the communicator. "I guess he already spoke with you about it?"

Lan Jue could only sigh helplessly. "Alright. I'll pick you up tomorrow."

"Actually if you're free, the Keeper said he wanted you to come and see the results of some research he's been undertaking. That thing you brought back from Taihua, in fact."

Lan Jue was stunned at the revelation. "Alright, I'll head there now."

As was customary, Skyfire Avenue was calm, quiet, and deserted. Lan Jue walked down the small street, surrounded by the classical architecture he'd grown to love.

His footsteps rang against the stone blocks that constituted the walkway, lending to the quaint atmosphere. Whenever Lan Jue came back, he was always struck with how fresh and pure everything felt. This is what it felt to have a family, he thought.

Still, Lan Jue's pleasant mood was developing cracks. The reason was obviously what the Accountant had revealed about the research results.

The traumatic experience of Taihua was still with him, and probably always would be. It wasn't about the beasts, despite their capabilities. At full strength he was confident he could have dealt with that massive sea creature himself.

What was troubling, was their enigmatic origins and purpose. Their ability to devour all life around them was terrifying. His own powers were sufficient, yes, but it would take a prepared team of average mecha pilots to handle such a threat themselves.

When paired with the information he'd received from Piao Hong in DreamNet, it made matters all the worse. This was an issue that threatened the safety of the entire human race.

It took him very little time to arrive at the Skyfire Library where the Keeper did his work. By the time he did, the Accountant was waiting for him by the door.

"Why are you waiting for me outside?" Lan Jue inquired.

The Accountant didn't repose, instead rubbing his hands together lasciviously. "So, Jewelry Master... are there a lot of female students at the university you work for?"

"Tons!" He replied.

The squirrelly man's eyes lit up. "Look, ehm, I've been under the Keeper's strict thumb since I was small. Any measure of freedom is hard to come by. In some regards I'm still a... 'blank sheet.' So you think you

could help a brother out?” [1]

Lan Jue stared at him, speechless for a moment. “Help you. Chase skirts. That you can do yourself. Can you even teach this sort of thing? Cuz in fact, I’m no good at it either!”

The Accountant looked indignant. “No good?! You expect anyone to believe that? Like you aren’t surrounded by beautiful women all the time? Four! Four of them!”

Lan Jue patted the smaller man’s shoulder, and sighed piteously. “I’ve never chased a woman in my life. They all chase after me!”

*

1. I know, the Chinese actually does say this, but in English it has different connotations. I kept it this way because a skinny, socially awkward pervert saying this paints a perfect picture of the Accountant in my mind’s eye.

Chapter 199: Results and Hypotheses

For a moment the Accountant just looked at him. Soon, however, he was grinding his teeth. “You know, you’re a spoiled kid in need of a spanking.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “If you like we can head to the Reaper’s arena and you can give it your best shot? I’d be down for that.”

The Accountant’s expression changed. He adopted a faux dismissive air. “We shouldn’t keep the Keeper waiting. Let’s head in.”

The first impression when one walked in to the library was; scholarly. Most of the reading in these places was in line with modern technology, which meant it was largely populated with electronic media. Paper books were considered luxury antiques these days. It’s reputedly said that material from the famous writer Tang Jia San Shao, author of the masterwork Douluo Dalu, rivaled the cost of a high-class high-alt verti-car.

All of the books in Skyfire’s Library were paper, though one might come to expect this from the Avenue. The aggregate worth of everything gathered here was beyond measure.

The Accountant brought Lan Jue directly to the Library’s third floor. They pushed their way in to what looked like a very spartan room.

The walls were lined with book shelves, and the center of the room was dominated by a classic-style wooden chair beside a window. The window was open, allowing a cool breeze to waft through among the leather-bound volumes. The tall tree outside rustled incessantly as the air caressed its leaves.

The Keeper called out, waving towards Lan Jue as they entered. “Ah, you’re here,” he said. “Have a seat.”

Lan Jue did as instructed. Meanwhile the old man waved his helper away. The Accountant shot Lan Jue a begrudging glare before exiting and closing the door behind him.

Lan Jue watched, then raised a brow towards the Keeper with a grin on

his handsome face. “What is it that’s so important the Accountant can’t be allowed to hear it?”

The Keeper coughed, his frail body jerking with the effort. “Too fidgety. Unreliable. Still a lot he doesn’t know well enough. This is to avoid an extreme reaction... so no face is lost.”

“If someone is always looked at like a child,” Lan Jue began “how can you expect them to learn to walk on their own? You shouldn’t look down on him so. He’s young, but capable.”

The old man grinned. “Didn’t he just ask you to help him find a girl? If you could it might actually help the poor child.”

“Ah?” Lan Jue stared at the Keeper, surprised.

The old man’s yellowed, rheumy eyes regarding the young Jewelry Master. “And you may call me the Keeper, not ‘old man’. Once young men reach an age, they’re nothing but walking tubs of hormones. They all need to unwind, release. Besides, I only have the one grandson. I hope that he’ll continue the family line. And here in the Avenue, his prospects either aren’t suitably talented, or the age difference is too great. Only you two are similar, and you’ve got a much more stable head on your shoulders. So I leave him in your hands. I ask that you help me by taking him around with you. It’s mostly for this reason that I’ve asked him to follow you to the NEU. He needs more experience out in normal society.”

“Alright. If it’ll help you feel better, I’ll look after him. With me he’ll grow up in a hurry.” Lan Jue shot his old friend a lopsided smile.

The Keeper nodded, then changed the subject. “The results of our experimentation with the sample you brought back from Taihua is ready. Unfortunately, it causes more trouble than it solves.”

Lan Jue sat a little straighter in his chair. Already he was feeling nervous. “What were you able to discover?”

The Keeper delivered his report, not unlike a professor lecturing a classroom. “This is a beast that has never been recorded in any of the three Great Alliances. The piece you brought back had an enormous

amount of life still in it, and energy reserves to rival an s-ranked power gem. But where this 'life'... this vitality in it keeps it going, it's a virulent toxin to us. So were a man to take this energy into himself, he'd see his natural life energies increasing. However, it would also mean suffering the debilitating effects of the poison – which rapidly lead to death.”

“To these beasts, however, this poison is not an issue. Nor is this energy present created by themselves. As you’ve seen, they obtain this through a sort of phagocytosis. They assimilate the vital essence of their surroundings, and convert it in to power they can use. Through our research we’ve managed to reach a hypothesis; the most likely possibility is that the progenitor you encountered in the ocean was the only outside visitor to Taihua. When it arrived, it wasn’t that strong, however it expanded in size and power through incessant phagocytosis of the surrounding vital energies. Once it obtained a certain baseline of vitality, it began producing ovum. The gestation period between asexual conception and hatching is remarkably fast, though it relies on consumption of its surroundings to do so.”

“We’ve come to assume that the progenitor’s ultimate aim was to deploy its children throughout Taihua, and use them as gatherers and providers for its own sustenance. It condenses it in to the energy core you brought back. If this creature is permitted to continue this process unhindered, it would eventually consume the entire planet.”

“I’ve already discussed this with the Wine Master. He says he believes the beast traveled through space. We can then assume once a planet has had its vital essences depleted, these creatures migrate elsewhere to continue their voracious advance. Without any more samples to experiment with, we currently have no way of testing its phagocytic abilities in depth. We can’t tell how long or how quickly it’s transformative phases last. We can assume, however, that it is quite fast. The more beasts the progenitor creates to sustain itself, the more frightening this process becomes.”

Lan Jue nodded his head thoughtfully. “Fortunately the progenitor’s powers were limited, according to what we discovered fighting it. If we’re

capable of discovering them quickly, they won't be much of a problem. A single shot from a battleship would do it.

The Keeper chortled with grandfatherly admonition. "Beware of blind optimism. How do you know this creature is the strongest of its race? What if it only serves as a transporter? It's best to acknowledge the possibility that there are more challenging subspecies we've yet to encounter. Will your theoretical battleship be able to contend with that threat?"

"You never make a point without some motive. Tell me what you've discovered," Lan Jue replied.

The Keeper shrugged. "Nothing discovered. Simple deduction is sufficient. One only need recognize the stupendous amounts of energy present in the sample. Were that creature left to its own devices for much longer, killing it would have been substantially more difficult. To put it another way, the creature itself was unable to completely utilize the power it contained within itself. So what does it need so much for, precisely? The simplest explanation: to leave it room to grow."

Lan Jue took a deep, slow breath. "If that's the case, we're looking at a serious problem. And other than us, everyone else remains entirely ignorant of the threat."

"These are troubled waters," the Keeper muttered sagely. "Our ancestors espoused these potential problems even before the age of space exploration. Inevitably, they claimed, we would encounter the multifarious denizens of an ever expanding universe. Among them may very well be creatures stronger than us, smarter than us. Creatures that wish to impede our progress and annihilate our species. In the universe as it was in the old world, the rules are the same; survival of the fittest. If a species seeks survival, seeks expansion, seeks a firm foothold in the vast galactic expanse, they must rely on their own strength and the strength of their peers. This is especially true for the human race. Our enemies are potentially limitless, their strength incredible. However, humans have their wits and drive, and our incessant forward march of progress has seen a solid foundation developed. We have bastions, and motherships. The

chances of encountering anything that can contend with the likes of that are small. For that reason, we can take heart, and ease our worry. As we continue to expand, to explore... as we continue to encounter the unknown, the most important thing we can do in the present is make ourselves better. The Wine Master, Clairvoyant and I know about the DreamNet competition, and for the reason we all stand behind you in full support. Of course, this matter is yours to deal with as you see fit, but rest assured we are here should you need our assistance. Do you understand?"

Lan Jue smiled. "I do."

The Keeper humphed once again, as he leaned back against the old wooden chair. He looked tired, somehow older after their exchange.

The expression in Lan Jue's eyes changed. He'd met with the Keeper several times since arriving in Skyfire Avenue, but it was the first time he'd seen the all-powerful Paragon like this.

"Is something bothering you," Lan Jue asked.

The Keeper's wrinkled face broke in a bitter smile. "Bothering is an understatement! If it were simply a bother, it wouldn't have perplexed me for these many years."

Lan Jue blinked. "So..." He felt that, since he said that much, the Keeper still had more to tell him.

The Keeper sighed. "You know, I'm not the founder of the Skyfire Library. It was someone else. Many of these volumes were here before I took over."

Of course Lan Jue didn't know this tid-bit of information. He continued with curiosity. "So you mean, you weren't the first Keeper."

The old man shook his head. "No. The man who owned this place before me wasn't called the Keeper. They called him the Bookworm. A fellow who loved books more than life, and the most renowned scholar of his day. I originally came to Skyfire Avenue attracted by the Clairvoyan's fame. I had questions I needed answers to. Suddenly, I found myself in possession of another man's book repository."

Chapter 200: The Keeper's Request

“There is no master among intellectuals, and no losers among soldiers. I trust you understand this truth. With so many books, this place attracted my attention. As a result, after I had asked the Clairvoyant my questions, I decided to stay. I hadn't been here a month and, eager to show my prowess, I read and commented on the collected works you see here. Around that time, I met the Bookworm, and immediately he and I launched in to an academic tirade. I was young then, and confident in my knowledge of all subjects. So our arguments continued, off and on. Before we'd known it, a month had passed.”

“We had a healthy respect for one another. We'd known each other for only a short time, but had already become good friends. In our world of academics, books and learning are the only thing we care to concern ourselves with. That short time, surrounded by books and intellectuals, was of great benefit to me. It's plausible to surmise that, had my life been absent this exchange, it's very unlikely I'd have reached the magnitude of success I enjoy now.”

“Around the middle of our second month of discussions, we discovered a significant discrepancy in opinion regarding one academic issue in particular. Both of us were combative, irritable, each unwilling to concede to the other. It became so fervent, so combative that we decided it could only be settled with a wager. Should the Bookworm lose, he would relinquish the Library to me, and remove himself from the Avenue. Where I to lose, it would be my task to pursue and deliver books equivalent to the aggregate cost of those already in stock. More than fifty percent of those would need to be unique volumes, not copies of those that were already owned.”

“To be frank, I was already in love with the Avenue. I agreed on impulse. Immediately we set about soliciting input from every luminary the academic world had to offer. Many came to participate in our intellectual battle.”

At this point in his story, the Keeper paused. His eyes betrayed a look of

disappointment. “Of course you can guess the final result, considering I’m still here. He chose exile. Even prior to his exodus, I harbored deep regret even in victory. I told him to disregard our wager, that he could remain as before. But he had a terribly sour temper, and ignored my pleas. He left in silence, alone. We didn’t see him again for thirty years.”

“And then one day he came back. He sought me out, and once again challenged me to a competition. The wagers would be the same as our first encounter. By that time, by virtue of my learning, I had already reached Paragon status. As ever, he was no challenge to me. He lost again. By then his shortcomings were clear to me. I knew that intellectually he was more than capable of competing with anyone, however physically he was constrained and unable to realize growth. As such, I held the advantage.”

“What happened between he and I, even all these years later, is still a regret that lies heavy on my heart. I often wonder how deeply I wounded him by taking his precious Library. This was why I had hoped so desperately for him to return. But I never saw him again after that second encounter. We spoke by communicator, once. He told me he would never be able to better me, no matter how long he studied, even if he spent his entire life in the pursuit. But he made me promise... one day, if his pupil were to defeat mine, that I would pass the Library unto him once I died. He would inherit this place.”

“I agreed. Perhaps I felt as though I owed him still, but the hope he would remain never abated. I’ve tried to follow in his footsteps since then, to do and study as he’d have done. As my knowledge and experience increased, I put his theories to work. The more effort I put towards it, the more I admired the Bookworm. Although our experimentation methods were in opposition, the end result was the same. I wasn’t wrong. And neither was he.”

The Keeper seemed more fatigued than before, going so far as to close his eyes. “Still, with his knowledge he’s certain to have found a way to prolong his life, as I have. An invaluable treasure for anyone, but especially a scholar.”

Lan Jue took advantage of the lull to ask him own questions. “What do you need from me?” Lan Jue knew the old man wouldn’t have shared this story with him if he hadn’t needed something relating to it.

The Keeper smirked, bemused by his young compatriot’s tact and intelligence. “Wait until the academic competition at the NEU has concluded. Once it has, I’d like you to spend some time with the Accountant. Go with him to the Bookworm. I’ll be giving you something I’d like you to deliver. Tell him he was not wrong all those years ago. Tell him I’ve nearly reached my time, and he should return to claim his library.”

Lan Jue nearly gasped in alarm. “Keeper, your health...”

Suddenly the old man broke in to a fit of laughter. “I thought you were smarter than that,” he said with a grin. “These small tricks are... inspiration. I could sit and wait for him to show up, but give him a little incentive and the chances increase exponentially.”

Lan Jue heaved a sigh of relief. He was well aware of how significant the Keeper was, to the whole of the Eastern Alliance. This wasn’t just due to his Paragon status, but also due to his immeasurable scientific knowledge. He was a treasure of the academic world, and if something should happen to him, it would be a great tragedy.

He took a small computer chip offered by the Keeper, shooting the impossibly old pedant a grin. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to be just as convincing when I deliver the ‘news.’”

The Keeper nodded. “Go then. If he should have any questions with regards to mecha combat, I’ll leave that to you. And as for my impetuous grandson, help give him some stability if you can. I imagine he’ll be of some considerable use to you. I’ll find someone to substitute your classes while you’re away.”

Lan Jue was helpless to deny the old man, but inwardly he cringed. Off again. He could count the number of classes he’d taught since taking the job on one hand.

The Keeper was astute, and saw Lan Jue’s reservation written on his face.

“Not to worry, it’s close. You’ll be back in no time. At most you’ll miss one class. I hear you’ve acquired quite a reputation at the university already. Though I can’t imagine what benefit this class of yours has on the student population, I have faith you aren’t abusing your position or taking advantage. Anyway, you’re busy, I won’t take any more of your time. Ah yes, and do help my grandson find a woman willing to look at him.”

Lan Jue couldn’t express how much respect he had for the old master. However, he couldn’t help but laugh and shake his head at their parting words.

His certainly was a... unique personality, the Jewelry Master mused.

Lan Jue said his goodbyes, and left.

The Keeper lazily rose to his feet as the young man exited the study. Like a candle sputtering in the wind, on the verge of being extinguished, he hobbled his way to the open window and looked out over the Avenue.

“I’m here waiting, old friend. It’s my hope things go back to the way things used to be! You must know, I’ve done so much, prepared so much, to give to you. How could you pass up an opportunity like that? Come quickly.”

ζ

Lan Jue returned to the Jewelry Store. During the trek down the Avenue, Zhou Qianlin told him through the Soulcaller gem that he needn’t come back for her tonight. She was to remain at the school and study.

He wasn’t bothered by the news.

Lan Jue went to the Underground, where Hua Li and Chu Cheng were practicing. He didn’t go immediately to meet them, however. Instead he went to the store front.

“Boss.” Mika greeted her employer with a smile.

“Hey, Mika. What do we have available in our power gem inventory? How many a-ranked specifically?”

“Twenty-three in storage currently, plus or minus a couple. As per your instructions, we’ve been holding on to a-rank gems, barring special circumstances.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Alright. Pick out a few that compliment you and the other girls’ Discipline. Distribute them as needed. As to what precisely, I leave to you ladies to figure out.”

Mika’s eyes lit up. “Planning to take us for another adventure, boss?”

Lan Jue smirked. “Always thinking about going out to play. In fact I will have to make a trip in a few days, but I won’t need all of you to come along. Xiuxiu and Guoguo will be enough. You and Ke’er should stay here and look after things.”

Mika immediately stuck out her lower lip in a petulant pout. “You don’t like me boss? Why aren’t you taking me,” she whined.

Lan Jue gave her a flat look. “Cut it out. You’re the boss down here, so act like it. No matter the circumstances, our store can’t have its doors shut all the time. I’ll take you and Ke’er the next time. Also, representatives from the Dark Tower and the Pontiff’s Castle will be visiting soon. Take that in to consideration when you’re selecting what power gems you need.”

The tone in her boss’ voice, and the news of the two Western powers coming here, struck her like a brick. Her coquettish belligerence was gone, replaced with a stoic frown. She nodded. “They’d best not provoke me.”

Lan Jue patted her shoulder. “This is Skyfire Avenue, not the West. There’s nothing to worry about. Alright, well It looks like these guys are gunna be in there a little while still. I’ll head back. Guoguo, we depart day after tomorrow.”

“Yes, boss!” Lin Guoguo was jittery with excitement.

Lan Jue made his way back to his personal apartments. He took up position, cross-legged on his bed, and began to meditate. He’d tried to remain diligent, after his experience on Taihua. And there yet remained many areas where he wasn’t operating at full capacity. He still needed to

keep himself steady.

ζ

The next morning, Lan Jue was rattling along the road towards the NEU campus. It was a familiar scene, but for the fact he bore a different passenger.

The Accountant beamed in childish wonder at the antique bicycle he sat upon. Smiling, he cried. “Jewelry Master, this bike of yours is a museum piece! Very interesting indeed. How long have you harbored such childish interests, I wonder? Forsaking verti-cars for this novel contraption. Very curious!”

“Brings you closer to nature,” Lan Jue explained. “This way you can actually experience it. Good views and a low-carbon lifestyle!”

The Accountant giggled his tittery laugh. “Yes, ah very good indeed! Next time I’ll fetch one for myself as well. We’ll ride together to school.”

“What, are you planning to stay and take classes after the competition?” Lan Jue inquired.

The Accountant nodded, saying “Of course! I’m an excellent student. I’m only here, really, to experience the lifestyle.”

As he was not carrying Zhou Qianlin today, there wasn’t any reason to stop at their usual corner. He drove instead directly to the gates, and stopped. Two others were already there, looking anxiously at them.

Chapter 201: The Journey to Lir

The Accountant scrambled off the back of the bicycle. “There was some talk of people greeting me when we got here, Jewelry Master. These must be them. Let me say hello.”

The younger man quickly tapped a few digits in to his communicator.

As if on cue, two gentlemen from within the security kiosk extricated themselves, and made their way over.

Just a couple of days ago Lan Jue would not have recognized the stocky man who trotted over, but now he recognized him immediately as Dean Xu Renjian. The teaching director, Wu Junyi, was hot on his heels.

“You must be our newest addition. Hello, hello!” Xu Renjian eagerly greeted the Accountant, and vigorously shook his hand.

Wu Junyi gave Lan Jue a curious look. “Professor Lan, how do you know this young gentleman?”

“Saw him on the way in,” Lan Jue began. “Thought I’d offer him a ride. You all look busy, so I’ll leave you to it.” He wanted to keep his interaction with them brief, otherwise too many questions about his relationship to the Accountant might arise. It would certainly have an effect on his work here in the university.

By now Xu Renjian’s attention had also swept towards the etiquette teacher. It was his first time seeing their newest instructor, but he knew him by reputation. “Ah, you must be Lan Jue. The one the grandmaster recommended [1]. Let me think... etiquette, right?”

Lan Jue smiled politely, and nodded his head.

Xu Renjian was all smiles and propriety. “And hello to you as well, Professor Lan. You’ve been here for some time already and this is the first time we’re meeting. I am the Dean, Xu Renjian. If you should need any help, make sure you give me a call, or you can ask Director Wu here [2]. Of course, the both of us will do our best to make sure our teachers have everything they need.”

“Thank you very much, Dean Xu.” Lan Jue channeled his etiquette experience, engaging his superior with poise and politeness. He took this as his opportunity to leave and, waving goodbye to the Accountant, pushed his bicycle passed the gate and into the campus.

Grandmaster? Could Xu Renjian be the Keeper’s disciple? The Keeper must be even older than he looks... It’s no wonder he’s the shining star of the East’s scientific community.

Students weren’t required to watch the academic portion of their competition. By the time night rolled around and Lan Jue picked Zhou Qianlin up to bring her home, he saw that she looked despondent.

“What’s wrong? Did you lose?” Lan Jue asked with a smirk.

Qianlin nodded. “We might as well not even have showed up. We had a new student show up today, someone sort of twitchy. He said he wanted to compete against Su He. The issues they argued were so far over my head, I couldn’t even understand what they were talking about. After an hour, the new student ultimately lost. But, he didn’t seem bothered about it at all. He spoke a few words to Su He, who then quickly left. He didn’t seem overly happy about his victory, either.”

Lan Jue, of course, knew what was going on. Inwardly he scowled.

“Qianlin I... something’s come up, again, I’m sorry. It looks like I have to leave once more for a few days.” Lan Jue was genuinely put-out by his constant absences. This was the third time he’d had to ask for leave since joining the university staff. He was going out more now, than he had in the last three years combined.

Zhou Qianlin balked. “Again?”

“Planet Lir,” he explained. “Host to Lir University, obviously. It’s very close to Skyfire, so I’m suspected it won’t be more than three or four days that I’m gone. I’ll definitely be back before a week.”

Qianlin nodded. “Go on then. Will there be any danger this time?”

Lan Jue just stared at her, stunned. He hadn’t anticipated this conversation would go so smoothly. Looking at her face, he saw no

indication she was upset or displeased with the decision.

She smiled at him. A dazzling smile that disarmed the suspicious Lan Jue.

“Why are you staring at me like an idiot? Men are like eagles, and shouldn’t be constrained in a single place. At any rate I’m keeping track of your absences. We’ll add them to the end of your contract.”

Lan Jue smirked at her. “Here I was hoping my excellent demonstration yesterday might’ve shaved some days off my sentence.”

Qianlin rolled her eyes. “Is this such a painful prison for you? Let’s get going, it’s getting late. To Grace Hospital. I haven’t gone lately because of everything that’s been happening at school. I imagine my friends will be worried.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Alright,” he said through a smile.

The busy work they did at the old folk’s home always eased his heart, gave him a sense of comfort. Every time he went, for a little while he forgot all his pressures and responsibilities. In his estimation, charity wasn’t just about helping others. It also had a cleansing effect on one’s soul.

ζ

The next morning, Zeus-1 was slowly rising from the public air hanger. It slowly turned towards Planet Lir, then was off with a flash.

The Accountant was seated uncomfortable before the master controls. Occasionally, his eyes would flit to Xiuxiu and Goguo.

Smack!

A hand came out of nowhere, slapping the lecherous young man in the forehead.

“What the hell, Jewelry Master?!” The Accountant spat indignantly.

“Eyes to yourself,” Lan Jue muttered. “And get out of my chair.”

The Accountant grunted his displeasure. “I have a love of beauty, what’s wrong with looking?”

“A lot. Who says you can just willy-nilly stare at the girls of Zeus’ Jewelry Shop?” Lan Jue glowered.

The Accountant sneered at him. “Fine, as you wish. Anyway, I saw much prettier at the university campus. She was like an angel fallen from heaven. I was captivated the moment I saw her. If it hadn’t been for the distraction, I wouldn’t have lost like I did. Really, just so beautiful. Ugh, you just don’t know. Dark hair, soft and smooth like silk. Big beautiful blue eyes clearer than the sky, deeper than the ocean. Long, natural eye-lashes... all natural, no make-up or ‘enhancements’ necessary. Incredibly beautiful. You must help me woo that one, Jewelry Master. If I were to have a girlfriend like that, I could die tomorrow and be happy.”

Lan Jue’s expression curdled as he stared down the Accountant. “You need talent to be good at chasing women. I guess I could teach you the three basic fundamentals, though.”

“Oh? What are they?” The Accountant stared wide-eyed and excited at his new pick-up coach.

Lan Jue counted them off with his fingers. “Be bold. Be careful. And be resilient.”

The Accountant’s brows furrowed. “What does this mean?”

Lan Jue explained, adopting his professorial air. “The meaning is this: If you like a girl, and you want to profess this to her, you need to take the initiative. You have a fifty-percent chance of success right there. But if you’re just sitting there, thinking about it, worrying over it, you have zero chance. Understand?”

Clearly the Accountant only half-comprehended the lecture. “I understand. Are there any risks?”

“Of course there are,” Lan Jue replied. “For example, say for instance you’re pursuing a girl who is protected by a bodyguard. Tragic for you. You

might get beat so badly your grandfather would beg to put you out of your misery.”

The Accountant chortled. “He’d never have the chance. I’m no slouch, I’ll have you know! It’s not easy to get the best of me!”

Lan Jue only smirked knowingly. “Oh yeah? You should give it a shot, then.”

Without hesitation, the Accountant shot to his feet and made his way towards Lin Guoguo with purposeful strides [3]. When he spoke, his voice was thick with a sort of slimy charm. “Guoguo. I love you. Be my girlfriend, what do you think? The Jewelry Master told me to come over here and woo you. He said I had a fifty-fifty chance at success.”

Lin Guoguo didn’t even give him the benefit of looking his way. She focused on the control panel before her, but did speak as one might when dismissing a telemarketer. “I guess you’re part of the other fifty percent. Get away from me before I make you regret it.”

The Accountant turned, giving Lan Jue a pained and indignant glare.

Lan Jue could only helplessly shake his head. “In old Earth they used to say, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

The Accountant took a deep breath, getting his facial expression back under control. He shot his eyes towards Xiuxiu.

She knew what was coming, and her response was to lift her left hand. The motion summoned a fan-shaped array of impossible sharp light between them that, when it moved, sounded like it was cutting the air it passed through.

The Accountant spat fiercely. “My dark-haired angel is a vast improvement over the both of you! Not an iota of appreciation among any of you, hmph!”

“Increase to sub-light speed,” Lan Jue said softly, ignoring the Accountant’s impotent complaints.

“Roger!” Lin Guoguo coaxed the thrusters in to high speed. The ship

shuddered, and quickened.

Lan Jue stood with both feet planted firmly on the floor. The Accountant yelped as he was thrown clear across the bridge.

ζ

Planet Lir.

It was a beautiful planet, one they called the Sapphire of the East.

Ninety-percent of its surface was covered in sparkling blue water, while the planet itself was roughly three-fourths the size of Skyfire. It was possessed of a rich and abundant marine environment, and all the resources that came with it.

Specifically, the planet was home to many special sorts of power gems and undersea precious metals. Essential items for high-level mecha construction.

Zeus-1 hovered over Lir's largest city, it's capital Dwarka. Just below lay the public airship hangar for the city.

"Extend the boarding bridge in advance. Extinguish main engine reactor."

"All stop."

The ship began it's slow decent in to the hangar. The girls took off their safety harnesses, while the Accountant moaned in pain. He pulled himself to his feet, casting a resentful glare towards Lan Jue.

"Off we go," their captain stated, waving for them to follow. He was the first to disembark.

The Accountant followed, careful to remain behind the former mercenary. Hmph, he thought, without me here they wouldn't even know who to get in to contact with. I'll make you beg me for the information!

A shuttle delivered them from the hangar to the pickup-area. The four of

them walked out from the gate, with the two beautiful women at the forefront. They gathered no small number of curious stares as they exited.

Today, Lan Jue was clad in a light grey suit. As ever, it was well fit and finely tailored. It made him look taller, and very handsome.

“Lan Jue.” The Accountant eagerly awaited the Jewelry Master’s request, ready to shut him down in retaliation for his poor treatment. Just as he was salivating at the prospect, that call shattered his dark fantasy.

Lan Jue waved towards the beckoning voice. Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo followed dutifully as he walked over.

Su He was clad in a black track suit. He made a show of stepping forward to greet them, and embraced his former charge with a hug.

“You got here fast! We only just got back ourselves. I got your message and decided to just wait for you here. Just you three?”

“I’m invisible, I suppose,” the Accountant grumbled. “How do you two know each other?”

Su He shot the Skyfire representative a glance. “Ah, my bested opposition. You’re here, too, I see.”

*

1. Meaning the Keeper.
2. This is a very common Chinese offer, which doesn’t really mean what it says. Connections are very important in Chinese society, and the idea of ‘you scratch my back, I scratch yours’ is one of the pillars of its societal foundation. However, you can also really ask for help from someone above your station if you have leverage; something they want, their respect, a mutual friend, etc. His insincerity is made clear when he mentioned’ or talk to Director Wu’, putting up a far more reasonable alternative for Lan Jue’s station as a junior teacher.
3. Gotta appreciate his gumption! Would you be so eager to date a woman who can explode starships with her brain? Could you imagine

having an argument with her? 'Damnit honey, that's the THIRD time you've made me punch myself in the face. Couples counseling just isn't getting through to you.

Chapter 202: The Power of Skyfire?

The Accountant's eyes nearly popped from his skull. "You dare address me this way? I was lenient with you yesterday. Plus that damn gorgeous girl was distracting me. Otherwise, you think you'd actually be able to best me?"

Su He ignored him, turning to Lan Jue. "Let's go. We have a car waiting outside."

"Alright."

"Hey, why aren't you listening to me?!" The Accountant yelped, racing after them.

"Shut up!" Lin Guoguo muttered his way.

ζ

Lir was considered an ocean planet. As expected, then, it's capital was a bustling port city. Dwarka was ideally placed to take advantage of the area's natural resources.

Lan Jue faintly recalled the Lir Group, which ran the planet, and their reputed power. It was a shame, he thought, that he did not bring Hua Li or Chu Cheng. Hua Li was afraid Mo Xiao would find out, and Chu Cheng's excuse was he wished to focus on his training. Lan Jue was still trying to puzzle out what the real reason was.

The mag-lev car waited for them outside of the arrivals gate. It was large enough to suitably accommodate a dozen people.

"Would you prefer to rest in the dorms for a little while first, or shall we go directly to meet the professor?" Su He casually asked the question of Lan Jue, who sat at his shoulder. The Accountant didn't appear to factor in to his considerations.

"First to bring us to your professor," Lan Jue said. "We need to show our

respect. Plus, the earlier we get through our business, the more time we'll have to enjoy Dwarka and relax."

The Keeper had always treated Lan Jue well, placed his trust in the young man. Lan Jue was intent on completing his old friend's task quickly and effectively.

Su He smiled. "Alright, then we'll head directly there. Just as a precaution... the Professor doesn't have the warmest disposition. Take care."

Lan Jue nodded.

The mag-lev car gained speed, racing along the street. Lan Jue stared out of the window, and watched as all the culture and peculiarity of Lir's capital city passed by outside.

The street itself kept with the nautical theme, composed of azure blocks. On each side of the concrete river rose spindly buildings which were blue of all shades. It was a world of blue that suited Lan Jue just fine. No wonder the whole place had seemed like a blue jewel when spied from Zeus-1 – it was almost impossible to differentiate the ocean from land when the whole city bore this color scheme.

"Well mentor, I guess you all like blue around here," Lan Jue offered as he watched the city pass.

Su He nodded. "Yup. Lir is a very special planet. Every plant, every animal is blue. The whole place is infused with the water element. And while you might suspect we get a lot of storms and tsunamis, you'd be wrong. They're a rare sight. All the sea life is gentle as well. In terms of environment we can't match up with the likes of Taihua, but Lir is definitely a unique place. And if you have a chance we have a number of island resorts for things like honeymoons. Remember that when you get married."

The topic brought a sharp pain to Lan Jue's chest. He nodded his head, though he made no further attempt to continue the conversation.

"Ah, by the way Lan Jue. Unless my memory fails me Dwarka will be

hosting an auction tomorrow. It'll be the biggest one in recent years, selling top-level items from around Lir. Reputedly the final item is an s-ranked power gem. Of course I can't be sure. Naturally you know the strategic advantage of s-ranked gems. An auction isn't permitted to sell one outside of the Eastern Alliance territories, or to outsiders."

"An s-ranked power gem, eh?" Lan Jue's eyes lit up at the prospect. It was a rare opportunity, to be sure. Although he did possess an s-ranked gem collection of his own, more was always appreciated. "If we have the chance we should go take a look," he said.

Su He smiled cordially. "No problem. I'll set it up, and we can go together."

They sped along for a good half an hour, eventually coming to a halt before the façade of a simple building. The sight of it brought a hardness to Lan Jue and the Accountant's eyes. It looked exactly like the Skyfire Library.

They filed from the car. Su He lifted his face to peer at the towering building, then sniffed. "The Professor's obsession will never let him be. I imagine this looks a lot like the library on Skyfire Avenue, yes?"

The Accountant nodded his head vigorously. "Precisely the same!"

"Alright, let's head in," Su He said. "I've already let him know we're coming."

As he spoke, he led Lan Jue and his entourage in to the familiar structure.

Once again Lan Jue and the Accountant were taken aback. The interior, too, was just like the Keeper's home – but for the fact the bookshelves were empty. Row upon row of shelves lines the walls with nothing upon them, just a large empty room.

Su He chuckled as he watched their reaction. "The Professor has said that one day, he'll win back everything he'd lost. He would fill this place with his spoils of war."

The words brought a heaviness to Lan Jue's heart. It would appear this

trip wouldn't be as easy as it had first appeared.

They made for the stairs, and took them for the third floor. This was all very familiar, since the structure of the building was identical to the one he was just in. He saw now that the Keeper was right, and the Library was absolutely the product of this Bookworm. After all, his knowledge of the architecture would have to be immaculate to copy it with such detail.

The five people arrived at a small room. Lan Jue recognized it as twin to the one he had been in just a few days before, speaking with the Keeper.

Su He lifted his hand, and knocked.

An aged, crackling voice called out. "Enter."

Lan Jue pushed the door open, while simultaneously gesturing to his two Amazons. Wordlessly they took up position outside the room, on either side of the door as their boss entered.

Inside, an old man sat opposite a desk. In his hands was a newspaper, which he was currently absorbed in reading. Sloppy would adequately describe his overall look, Lan Jue thought. His clothes were torn, and stained in several places.

The elderly man had lost most of his hair, a snowy ring the only thing remaining, leaving his scalp bare. Liver spots dotted his face. He stared at the newspaper through coke-bottle lenses, breathing laboriously. Like the Keeper, he looked to have one foot in the grave.

"I'm back, Professor." Su He quietly addressed the elderly man.

"Ngh! Didja win?" The old man's quavering voice asked. His eyes never left the pages of the newspaper.

"Yes, in fact, I did."

"As you should have," he grumbled. "The old man has no worthy successor."

Hearing this, the Accountant stepped forward to share a piece of his mind. Lan Jue saw this, and yanked the young man back.

The old man continued. "What are you doing bringing these people

here? They have nothing to do with this. Get them out.”

Su He hastily interjected. “Professor, these two are from Skyfire Avenue.”

“Get them out of here. Are you deaf?” The old man threw his newspaper against the desk in frustration, glaring at Su He. His yellowed eyes became sharp as daggers. The small room was suddenly filled with an oppressive sense.

The highest reaches of ninth-ranked Talent. Lan Jue could instantly determine this old man’s power by that feeling alone. He wasn’t as frail as he appeared.

Su He dare not move or speak. He glanced apologetically towards Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master smiled disarmingly. “Bookworm. That was your designation, wasn’t it? I’m here not only to represent the Keeper, but on behalf of Skyfire Avenue as a whole. As I see it, you may think you have an enemy on the Avenue, but there are only friends. There is no benefit in keeping allies at arm’s length.”

The old man’s mouth curled in to a disdainful sneer. “You, practically a child, are here saying you represent Skyfire Avenue? It does not bode well. Clearly the little suburb you call home has lost a great deal over the years. I guess they’ll let just anyone in these days.”

Lan Jue gave the old man a capitulating smile. By way of a response, he extricated his Skyfire Council badge and placed it on the table in front of the Bookworm.

The old man glanced at the emblem, and a subtle change came over his features. He plucked up the insignia and peered at it intently, then unceremoniously chucked it back to Lan Jue.

“How does that mean you speak for the Avenue,” the crotchety old man grumbled. “I’ve had no interaction with Skyfire for years anyway.”

Lan Jue sighed. “Bookworm, forgive my lack of tact but you’re not the young man you used to be. Clearly you’ve lost the desire to show up the Keeper. With your loss of faith, there’s no reason for me to be here. It was

a mistake coming.”

The Bookworm tried to murder Lan Jue with his glare.

Two sets of eyes met. Lan Jue felt a strange, dizzying sensation wash over him. He wasn't looking at a man, he was looking at the collected knowledge of humanity. He could see it in those sharp, attentive eyes. His tenacious, psychic force was almost palpable.

The dizziness lasted only a second. With some effort, Lan Jue dispelled the uncomfortable feeling. Then he turned, and slapped the Accountant.

It didn't matter that the Accountant wasn't prepared. Even if he was, how could he compete with the ex-mercenary?

The Accountant twitched uncontrollably as tendrils of electricity raced up and down his body. He stared wide-eyed and disbelieving at his fellow Skyfire denizen.

Lan Jue spoke quietly to the old man. “This is the Keeper's sole blood relative. Hopefully this will help you convince you I'm interested in helping.”

Su He looked from one to the other, flabbergasted at the exchange. The Bookworm was no less confused.

“You help me? And how do you intend to do that, exactly?” The Bookworm's challenge was cold and dismissive.

Lan Jue explained. “I am a part of the Avenue, but I'm also an Adept. An Adept with aspirations. I'm confident that one day I'll get what I'm looking for, but for now my power isn't sufficient enough to earn that. The Avenue is strong, but with your help I think we stand a chance. I'm confident you can easily handle the Keeper and take back what's yours. My only request is, that when you have what you want, you help me get what I want.”

The Bookworm stared at the young man with shock evident on his liver-pocked face.

“You're planning a hostile take-over of the Avenue.”

Chapter 203: Tribute

Lan Jue smiled, but did not answer.

The Bookworm's voice betrayed his skepticism. "And how can I trust you, hm?"

"Let me answer by offering tribute. A gift, for our first meeting. I'm confident that, once you see it, you'll understand why I think you have the opportunity to defeat the Keeper."

Lan Jue placed something on the desk in front of the older man.

The Bookworm snatched up, turning it around in his fingers. It looked like a precision data disk.

His pockmarked right hand tapped the armrest. Suddenly, the front and back of the desk in front of him separated from the body of the furniture. Large flat screens rose from the cracks. State of the art optical computing equipment followed suit, until the desk was a modern technological mainframe.

The Bookworm slipped the disk in to the computer. The towering screens flickered to life, revealing line upon line of seemingly disconnected data.

Watery eyes narrowed as the old man speedily read through the endless cascade of information. His hands raced across the keyboard, a blur of dancing digits until the information shifted and reordered across the six screens overhead.

Lan Jue watched the old man, suddenly alive with motion. His eyes were crisp and clear, and he moved like a man in his twenties. He stared at everything in front of him with a single-minded purpose. He could see the flows of data reflected in his eyes.

A flush gradually rose through the old man's pallid cheeks. He stared wide-eyed at the screen, and a shiver had crept in to his hands.

"How in the world did you get this?" His hands stopped shaking, and his sharp eyes swung to Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master grinned. “None of your concern. I suppose I can tell you, once you’ve confirmed you’re willing to go along with my plan.”

The Bookworm’s breaths had started to come quicker. “I’ll need time to look this over in its entirety. Come back in two days. For now, you can go.”

Lan Jue nodded. He stopped to pick up the Accountant, who’s motor functions had completely shut down.

The young man was livid beyond expression, but that didn’t stop him from trying to share a few choice words. Unfortunately, his body wasn’t responding – he could only lay there in his attacker’s arms and glare daggers at him, twitching madly.

“Leave him here!” The Bookworm croaked.

Lan Jue nodded, visibly pleased by the request. He handed him over to Su He, then turned and left.

As Lan Jue exited, Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu fanned out behind him. They didn’t stop until they were well past the doors. By then, Lin Guoguo couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer.

“Boss, you can’t be serious. You don’t really intend to team up with this Bookworm to take on the Keeper.”

Xiuxiu just huffed incredulously. “Silly Guoguo. You still don’t understand our boss at all. You mustn’t ask such a stupid question. That was the boss making himself look needy and weak to lure in the enemy. Plus, he couldn’t even read the information.”

Lin Guoguo suddenly came around. “Oh, but we left the Accountant there. Aren’t you afraid the Bookworm’s salty relationship with his grandpa could lead to some trouble?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “He wouldn’t. If he did, he’d be far beneath the Keeper’s help. These men were involved in intellectual combat, nothing physical. And this old man himself was a committee member back in his day, he knows better! As for the Accountant, he’s a master at self-preservation. Don’t you doubt that.”

Lin Guoguo shrugged. "Alright, so what should we do now?"

"Wait. Someone will come and show us our rooms," Lan Jue assured.

They hadn't even finished speaking before the doors to the library opened and Su He came trotting out. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw Lan Jue waiting outside.

"You scared the crap out of me," Su He grumbled, giving his former classmate a sarcastic thumbs up. "But well done!"

Lan Jue chortled. "Seems like Mentor caught on."

Su He shrugged helplessly. "We're researchers. We analyze everything we come across. I weighed the possibility of your proposal's success, and guessed less than fifty percent. If I still didn't understand by that point, wouldn't that make me a fool?"

"You're a hateful bunch, scientists," Lan Jue said with a helpless shrug.

Su He laughed. "Like you I'm no scientist. Obsessive maybe. At first I thought the professor would figure it out pretty quick, but he's in there now pouring over everything. And don't fret, I've arranged to have your friend brought out later."

"Let the bookworm have his time with the data," Lan Jue said, "our job's half done. We'll be back in two days. Hopefully I could bother Mentor to help us find a place to stay. Then tomorrow we could all visit the auction."

Su He nodded, and smiled. "Alright. And tonight we'll treat you to a fine example of Lir cuisine. I think you'll find it very interesting."

"Excellent," Lan Jue responded, smiling in return.

The hotel they'd prepared for Lan Jue and his crew wasn't far from the Bookworm's Library copy. It was located in a simple but sophisticated looking building.

The interior was furnished with fine antiques, none less than three decades old. The rooms were large, and like everything else were decorated in shades of blue.

By the time they were settled in, it was already night.

“Would we be able to bring the Accountant with us for dinner,” Lan Jue asked. “I don’t know if the Bookworm has wised up or not, yet.”

“Whether or not he has, I’m afraid that’s unlikely. It’s the professor’s custom to ask exhaustive questions as he goes over the data. After all, as the Keeper’s grandson he knows more about the paragon than anybody. I’m afraid your friend’s stuck in there for the next two days. It usually takes three or more to starve, so he should be fine.”

“The Keeper explained it to me before we left, that he wants his grandson to suffer some of what life has to throw at him. This is probably a good opportunity for growth, don’t you think?” Lan Jue nodded in agreement with himself.

Su He burst in to laughter. “Alright, let’s get something to eat. I’ve already made reservations.”

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Lir’s ‘interesting cuisine’ was indeed that.

Every living thing in the planet’s vast oceans was blue. They stayed that way, even after being cooked. They didn’t have the fishy flavor one would expect from seafood, instead bearing a taste and consistency more in line with vegetables. Very strange indeed.

Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu, who preferred lighter tastes, ate quite a lot.

After dinner the two girls left first, returning to their room to rest. Su He walked with Lan Jue back to his room.

“Would it be too bothersome if we spoke for a moment,” Su He asked.

“Not at all,” Lan Jue answered. He coaxed his former classmate on with an encouraging gesture.

The two of them entered Lan Jue’s room, Su He picking a seat on the couch.

Lan Jue sat across from him. With a wave of his hand, a silver light flashed, and floating before the two of them a silver box appeared.

Lan Jue plucked it from the air, and opened it with a practiced hand. He extricated two whisky glasses from within, along with a bottle full of golden-amber liquid. The bottle itself bore an elegant design, and its contents cast a pleasing amber hue as the dim lights shone upon it.

“Single-malt?” Su He asked.

Lan Jue smiled and nodded. “That’s right! Alcohol is first among my many hobbies.”

Su He chuckled. “Not so many I think. I’ve a few myself. This eighteen year Macallan isn’t a product of the former era, but is no less a classic among classics. There’s a reason they call it the king of whiskies. Looks like I lucked out today.”

Lan Jue opened the bottle and poured out about an ounce of whisky each for him and Su He. “It got the title not just because of its pedigree, but also its outstanding yield. In reality it isn’t a particularly special whisky but it is mild, traditional and proper as far as whiskies go. Best to drink when one’s mood is calm and even. The alcohol content isn’t outrageous, either. Come, drink.”

The two young men raised their glass in a toast, then drank the whisky down.

Su He was first, and took a sip from his glass. It was smoky, with a malty undertone and a hint of cream. Breathing in, the flavor took on a freshness. As it slipped passed his gullet, a warmth sprang up from within him. More comfortable than he could express. Like being covered in a warm blanket.

“Good stuff. You certainly know how to enjoy life! In this aspect you certainly have me beat.” As the words left his lips, the shadow of disappointment flit across Su He’s face.

Lan Jue smiled. “Mentor. You’re a man, not a machine. You need to relax every now and again. When your full effort is needed, you should give it

your all no doubt. But where does it come from? It comes from resting, recovering, so that you have the energy when you need it. You're too high-strung, too careful. If you want my opinion, I think you need a good long vacation. At least three months. Find a girl you like, ramble around some... open up a little, let go. Don't lay a finger on a mecha in those three months, don't worry over some research problem or another. Just take the time to relax and be in the moment. After that, you come back rested with a better mindset, and your opportunity will come to you."

Su He listened patiently as his classmate spoke. "I'm used to this robotic lifestyle."

Lan Jue shook his head. "No. In fact your accustomed to being appreciated. You were the favorite one, all those years ago. But after you were beaten by my brother, you became exceptionally harsh on yourself. Ever since, all the time, you stretch yourself too thin. I remember my brother telling me once you weren't far from God-ranked. But here we are, years later. I still trust my brother's judgement. So why haven't you broken through yet? Have you put your big brain to that?"

Su He didn't answer. He sat in silence, thinking. Every now and again he'd quietly sip his drink. He felt like this sip was stronger, with more body. The malt flavors overpowered his taste buds. Once again that false warmth encroached upon his whole body.

Chapter 204: I Am Hera!

Lan Jue leaned back, making himself comfortable on the lounge chair. He took sips from his glass of whisky while watching the skies darken through the hotel window. His eyes narrowed, and a gentle sigh passed his lips. “You know, I’ve experienced quite a lot in the last few years. I’ve lived a life of decadence ever since joining Skyfire Avenue. Every day it’s been fine alcohol and delicious food, no need to ponder on life or times. I didn’t care about anything. And yet, not long ago, I discovered that my abilities and cultivation weren’t as rusty as one might expect. On the contrary, I was stronger. My will had matured.”

“Mentor. There are many, many wonderful things in this universe. Not just in our little corner, but everywhere. Get out, see new things. I can guarantee it’ll be beneficial for you. The path to perfection is built on understanding. A phrase that I give to you, which helped me find my way. You’re still young. Even way back then, I felt that God-ranked was not your ultimate end.”

Su He stared at Lan Jue in surprise. “But my Talent...”

Lan Jue shook his head. “See? Just like I said. It’s still the thing you’re the most concerned over. Even after I’ve pointed out your hurdles, you have yet to find a way out from underneath them. Remember this, mentor; Anyone over seventh rank has an opportunity to reach Paragon status. It isn’t just mindless effort, either. Luck plays a role, but when you reach that epiphany it’s like crossing in to another world. I heard this from my grandpa, and I’m convinced every paragon in the modern age would agree with his sentiment.”

“Epiphany?” It was as though something just clicked in to place with Su He. He drank off the rest of his whisky in one gulp. He poured himself another glass, and took another drink.

Red had begun to creep up in to his cheeks, and his eyes adopted a far away look.

After about ten minutes, the internal fervor he was struggling with

subsided. His eyes brightened as he returned his focus to Lan Jue.

“If one day I manage to reach those heights, remind me to treat you to the universes finest single-malt. I think I will take a vacation. I’m gunna do it!”

He shot to his feet, alive with inspiration, and made for the door. He yanked it open, and was gone down the hall with lengthy strides.

Lan Jue remained seated, sipping his drink. The smile on his face refused to abate. “I wonder what heights he meant,” Lan Jue muttered to himself, “God-ranked or Paragon? This guy, still so sly. If he wants that bottle, he’ll have to work hard for it.”

Lan Jue poured himself another glass and meandered in to the balcony. The cool night air caressed his face. It was moist and cool, refreshing, filling him with a sense of cleansing renewal.

Lan Jue stared in to the distance. But he wasn’t looking at any one thing in particular, instead letting the world pass by with a thousand-yard stare. His mind was blank, empty. Always look forward, he then thought – easier said than done.

Simply give something up, and you may never truly be rid of it. The only way to progress, was through acceptance.

Yeah... I’ll give it a shot! Hera. If you can hear what’s in my heart, then teach me. Lead me to what I should do.

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Planet Skyfire, Mount Tian.

He’s probably already on Lir. Zhou Qianlin peeked at the time displayed on the face of her communicator. She lay stomach-down on the bed, letting her long hair frame her pretty face.

He didn’t pick me up for school today. It was strange, I must be getting used to seeing him every day. I heard Richard suddenly gave up and left

for the West, too, though I don't know why. Now, without his interference, life is going back to normal.

When he comes back, picks me up and sends me home, then things are on track. Then things are perfect.

But will it be like I want? Will it happen?

“Beep beep!”

“What's up?” A deep voice crackled through the unit on her wrist.

Zhou Qianlin was shocked to discover that, at some point during her musings she'd actually dialed his number in to her communicator.

“Sorry. I, ehm, dialed the wrong number.”

There was silence on the other end.

Zhou Qianlin didn't speak either. She could hear the sound of wind.

For a time, they remained like that, maintaining the silence.

After a long moment Lan Jue's voice arose. It sounded drawn. “Tell me... you must be Hera.”

Zhou Qianlin was dazed by the accusation. A tear crept down her cheek from shimmering blue eyes. She took a long, deep breath. Her voice trembling, she replied:

“I am Hera!”

“I miss you.” Lan Jue's voice was thick with sadness.

“I miss you too.” Zhou Qianlin quickly dropped the connection. She pulled the covers over her head, and broke in to tears.

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It was early morning, and the wind was gently rattling the window. The sound roused Lan Jue.

The outside was already bright. Rubbing his aching head, Lan Jue pulled

himself out from under the sheets.

The balcony door was still open, allowing the wind to race through the room's interior. He spied the empty whisky bottle on the end table.

He shook his head, trying to clear the haze from his brain. The Jewelry Master was finding it difficult to remember the events of last night. He faintly recalled something, maybe a dream. She said she missed him.

The corners of his mouth sketched the contours of a smile. He rose to his feet and, through a cleansing flush of his internal energies, expelled the hangover effects.

"I run in to you every time I'm drunk. That's why I love drinking. It helps me find you, Hera. You're still alive somewhere, aren't you... at least in my heart."

He walked in to the bathroom and turned on the shower. He stood underneath the nozzle as jets of cold water washed over him. It was numbing, but helped to wake him from his deep slumber.

By the time he exited the bathroom ten minutes later, covered in twinkling droplets of water, he felt ready to handle whatever the day had to throw at him.

"Hera, I promise you, I'll snap out of it. I definitely will. Drinking brings me to you, which is great, but... I promise, I'll scale it back. I'll be strong, so that only you know how frail I really am."

He got ready, choosing for today a pale blue suit. When in Lir, do as the Lirians do, he thought.

Lan Jue went downstairs to ferret out some breakfast, when he ran in to Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu.

"Ah boss, you're up! Still haven't had breakfast eh?" Lin Guoguo beamed prettily at him.

Lan Jue nodded and shot her a smile of his own. "You guys eat already?"

Lin Guoguo giggled. "Yup! But if you like we can stick around and keep you company."

Lan Jue smirked. "Wouldn't it make more sense for me not to eat, then?"

Xiuxiu looked at him in curiosity. "Why do you say that?"

"I've already got a feast for the eyes right in front of me," he said with a wink.

Xiuxiu's immediately flushed a shade of red Lan Jue had never seen before, while her eyes betrayed her appreciation for the compliment. Guoguo, meanwhile, was frowning admonishingly. "Not the slightest hint of sincerity, boss."

The smile fled from Lan Jue's face. "What! Of course I'm being sincere."

Lin Guoguo moved closer to him like a tigress, a lopsided grin on her face. She placed her hands on his shoulder, rose until she stood on the tips of her toes, and whispered in to his ear. "If you are, we'll be waiting for your knock on our door tonight."

Lan Jue's face was a mixture of shock and something else. He gave a nervous chuckle. "I-I'm a wholesome gentleman. Stop it!"

Lin Guoguo stuck her tongue out at him. "The worst kind of wholesome gentleman. Let's go Xiuxiu, and let the good boy enjoy his breakfast in peace."

Lan Jue watched the two of them go, speechless. He shook his head, and couldn't help but laugh at her antics. These girls, he thought. Ridiculous.

He thought about the Accountant, and hoped things weren't going too poorly for him. He knew it wouldn't be a pleasant circumstance, however the younger man had made no attempts to reach Lan Jue on his communicator. It could be a lot worse than he thought!

Lan Jue ate his breakfast, then sat for a while with a glass of tea. After sitting in quiet contemplation for a little while, he tapped the Keeper's number out on his wrist.

"Hello!" the Keeper's hoary voice grunted in acknowledgement.

"It's me," Lan Jue said.

"Ngh. Have you met with the old coot yet?"

“Yup. He’s a little harder to deal with than you let on.”

He went on to relay everything that had happened with the Bookworm the night before.

“Very good. So be it. And don’t worry, he won’t do anything untoward to the Accountant. Leaving him there is a good thing. He’s always saying I’m too strict, so let him see what real strict is. He’ll come back praising my name.” Notes of smug pleasure resonated in the old Paragon’s voice.

Lan Jue blinked at the voice coming from his wrist. “Are you really the Accountant’s grandfather?”

“Stupid question! Alright, then if there’s nothing else. Now that he’s seen what you gave him, the next step will be much easier. I leave it up to you.” The Keeper didn’t give Lan Jue a chance to respond before severing the connection.

Lan Jue just stared at his wrist. This old man was crazy pants, asking others to do his bidding while he sits in his library!

Just then two people stepped in through the hotel doors and attracted the Avenue denizen’s attention. They were a man and a woman, the man being Su He. Beside him stood an attractive, small woman. She looked to be of similar age to Lan Jue’s former mentor, and quite pretty. A small smile was spread across her face.

Su He himself looked like an entirely different person. He stood tall, veritably beaming with happiness and excitement. Compared to the despondent man he’d drank with last night, this was a miraculous change.

“Ah, Lan Jue. Here you are! I was just knocking on your door looking for you. Have you eaten? Su He pulled the young woman beside him as he took a seat across from his guest.

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly. “I have. Mentor, care to introduce us?”

Su He slapped his forehead. “Ach, my manners. Here, allow me. This is Ya Xiu [1]. My girlfriend. Ya Xiu, this is Lan Jue. The one I spoke with you about last night.”

Ya Xiu's face reddened, but still politely extended her hand towards Lan Jue. "Hello, Lan Jue. I'm very happy to meet you. I'm even happier you helped Su He come to his senses."

Lan Jue laughed. "All I did was talk, the work was all Su He's. I can't take the credit for any of that."

An extra from the author: 'When I got to the part of the story where I write 'I am Hera', there were tears in my eyes. I'm often asked if indeed Zhou Qianlin is Hera, and in fact my own heart is in knots about it. Ultimately, will she be? Right now, I have no answers. I can only write my story, and see what happens in the end. We will follow the plot, and maybe someday in the near future a revelation will be forthcoming.

For Hera, I beg for your support, and beg it keeps coming.

*

1. 'Elegant Beauty' is the direct translation of her name.

Chapter 205: Sea Creatures

Su He said, "I've already bought myself a luxury cross-alliance tour. Once our business has been concluded here, I plan to take Ya Xiu here out for a vacation. We're gunna start with a three-month tour of all the planets in the East. Like you said, it's important to get out and see the galaxy. In the future I plan to take a few months off every year to travel. This time it's the East, then I'll visit the West, and finally the Northern Alliance. After that, who knows where the wanderlust will take us."

Lan Jue chuckled happily. "You adapt quick, mentor! Truly your powers of comprehension and deduction are mesmerizing."

Su He smirked. "Last night, after leaving your room, I had an epiphany. Somewhere in my thirty years of life I'd forgotten how to appreciate all the beauty around me. I've failed to appreciate the people around me. But I found this out while there was still time. That's why, yesterday, I decided it was time to make some changes. So I proposed to Ya Xiu – this is to be our honeymoon."

Ya Xiu's face reddened as she smiled prettily. His friend's proposal methodology was unorthodox, he thought.

Of course Lan Jue would not delve too deeply in to the young couple's secrets. He just smiled and congratulated them heartily.

"Lan Jue," Su He continued, "today's auction begins in the afternoon, the biggest one of the year. It's called the Tear of Neptune Auction. Unfortunately, the showing for the items on auction concluded already. They'd been going on the last few days. So we figured we'd take you on a stroll through Dwarka first. In the afternoon we'll participate in the sale."

"Sounds good! Thank you very much, mentor." Lan Jue of course couldn't refuse such a warm-hearted offer.

As one might anticipate, Lir's entertainment revolved largely around water. Su He rented them a catamaran, large enough to comfortably house all five of them.

These sorts of boats were more stable than your average single-hull boat. While it was at the whim of the waves in bobbing up and down, it was absent the pitch and roll more traditional boats suffered from.

The sea breeze was calmer today, and the sun shone brilliantly overhead. The sky-blue ocean was supremely clear, to the point where they could see various sea creatures leisurely floating about on either sides of their boat at varying depths. Sometimes it seemed like the whole ocean around them would shift and change color as particularly large shoals of fish swam by. It was a beautiful sight.

The oceans that planet Lir were famous for where famous for good reason. They were full of 'anima', of life and vitality. As the small crew bounced along the waves there was no scent of mold or fish. There was only a fresh, moist wind that caressed their faces.

Lan Jue stood on the upper level of the boat. He stared in to the distance, steadying himself with a grip on a nearby handrail. It was a feeling he couldn't express in words.

Su He walked to Lan Jue's side, and stared out over the ocean with him. His face bore an easy smile. "So those two girls, which one's your girlfriend? Don't tell me they both are! You've got some skill, to have them live in harmony!"

Lan Jue broke in to laughter. "Neither. They're like my little sisters. They help me look after my store."

"Can there even really be a purely platonic relationship between a man and a woman." Su He pondered aloud.

Lan Jue's response was genuine. "Of course."

"In this respect I'm certainly not qualified to contradict you," Su He replied. "I don't have a lot of experience there. I trust in your abilities, they've proven to consistently be more effective than mine."

Lan Jue's features twisted in to a wry smile. Like I was never the beta male?

Lin Guoguo's called up from below, interrupting their exchange. "Hey

boss, look at this huge fish coming our way.”

“Huge fish?” Lan Jue narrowed his eyes and searched.

The Psychic Tide nimbly climbed up the ladder to the floor her employer occupied. “It’s at least forty meters long. So big. It’s coming right this way. Professor Su, are there any dangers from the sea life here?”

“There are always predators, in every ocean. The circle of life, after all. But for us, we’re very unlikely to run in to something dangerous. Worst case we scare them off,” he answered.

As he spoke, Su He launched himself over the railing. He landed on the bottom level of the boat as naturally as though he’d floated down. He looked out over the horizon, a dim red light surrounding him.

Lin Guoguo’s eyes flashed a brilliant gold, but only for a moment. She spoke softly to Lan Jue at his shoulder. “Professor Su’s Discipline is kind of like Ke’er’s.”

Lan Jue nodded. “That’s right, it is similar. His explosiveness is more severe than Ke’er’s, but he doesn’t have the sustain she does. His Discipline is Energy Detonation. Hers is energy tempest.”

Lin Guoguo nodded her head in understanding.

In the distance, the waves split. In that instant they spied the massive girth of a sea creature. It floated with the waves, rising and falling as the waters broke around it.

From the boat they could see it, a massive marine animal with a body entirely covered in spindles. They were largely concentrated along its spine, making it look like it had a saw sheathed on its back. It was swimming quickly their way.

Su He lifted his hands. Soon after the two appendages shone with a bright red light. The powers crackling around his hands congealed, until they formed two balls of energy. He didn’t seem to move, but nonetheless the two orbs of light raced off. They didn’t find their target, instead falling in to the ocean and exploding a few meters in front of it.

Boom, boom! The two rumbling explosions filled their ears. Plumes of frothy water shot in to the skies. Clearly Su He had employed his Discipline to scare the beast away.

Lan Jue smirked. “A kind soul. He doesn’t have the heart to kill a fish.”

“Ey? No way.” Lin Guoguo called out. Her eyes were fixed on the pillar of water, and the blue halo that extricated itself from it. It formed itself in a shard of crystalline water, that grew thicker and longer with each passing second then raced towards the boat.

Lan Jue was also surprised. “An element-controlling sea monster?”

In no time, the water shard had reached them. This was its territory, borne from the energies of the sea. From the time Lin Guoguo had seen that something was amiss, to when Lan Jue noticed it, the blade had already found them.

Su He was just as confused as they. He clasped his hands in front of him, and soon thereafter another orb of sizzling red shot outward. It stretched until it became a shield, protecting the front of the boat.

But something strange occurred. It was as though the sword had grown eyes, for as the shield appeared the spectral weapon changed course. It swept sideways, then viciously took a swipe at the side of the boat. It was a move designed specifically to avoid Su He’s defenses.

Su He, not to mention Lan Jue and Lin Guoguo, were stunned at what they saw. However, Lan Jue’s reaction was swift. He stretched out a hand, and pressed it in a downward motion. A crash of thunder, a flash of lightning, and the blade was intercepted by a charged bolt of electricity.

The impact elicited an ear-splitting blast. The shard of sharpened water shattered. The force of their collision nearly lifted the boat out of the water. It was pushed back, and bobbed furiously atop the waves.

Su He staggered, perched as he was at the bow of the ship. The red energies exuded out from him helped to keep his feet glued to the deck.

Two yelps from Xiuxiu and Ya Xiu bubbled up from somewhere below.

“Nasty critter!” Su He fixed the creature with angry eyes at it quickly sped away from them.

Just as he was preparing for another attack – this one likely to end the beast – he spied a golden light slowly wafted down in front of his face.

Dozens of indistinct golden halos separated themselves from the strange light. They raced outwards, surrounding the sea creature.

A second sword had been sent after them by the creature, but as the golden lights encompassed its creator the sword changed. It swung to the side, no longer set for a collision course with their boat.

Su He raised his head toward the light, and was surprised to discover Lin Guoguo suspended in the air within. Her whole body released a dim golden light, and it was from her that those strange bubbles had come. She looked like a mystical faerie come to earth.

Su He swallowed, then laughed at the circumstances.

Her abilities weren't about flying, and yet here she was. That meant, he knew, that this young woman was at least a ninth level talent. But she still called Lan Jue boss? With such powerful companions under his command, Su He wondered just how powerful Lan Jue really was at this point.

Little by little, a calm overcame the fervent beast. Its head had risen above water, and as they looked on its two dark red eyes changed to a shimmering gold. It remained in place, slowly sweeping its tail this way and that through the churning waters. The waves of energy released from it felt weaker.

“Su He, it looks like our rudder was damaged. What's going on!” Ya Xiu cried out to him, concern evident in her voice.

The captain they'd hired to sail the craft also made an appearance, his face a mask of confusion and anger. They stepped out to watch the amazing scene unfurl before them. Ya Xiu seemed to take it in stride, but the things happening on his boat were more than the captain could grasp. He was just a sailor, after all.

Lan Jue made his way down to the bottom deck, where he met Su He.

The younger man looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry. I had no idea we'd run in to something like this. Captain, call in for some assistance. I guess there's nothing for it but to wait for a rescue boat to pull us back in to port."

Lan Jue disregarded his friend's apologies with a smile and a shake of his head. "No need. As we saw, Lin Guoguo has her ways." By this time Lin Guoguo was making her way back towards the other on the boat. Strangely, the massive sea creature looked like it was following loyally in her wake.

"Ah! That's a Nethermaw, and a big one too! Who'd have thought we'd run in to a fisherman's nightmare today." The captain watched with eyes wide and jaw slack.

Lin Guoguo finally arrived back on the ship, and settled on the deck. "I just had a nice chat with it. Actually this thing isn't so violent. It just isn't as perceptive as other fish. It heard out motor from far away and thought it had to protect itself."

"Well, it broke our rudder," Lan Jue announced. "Have it pull us back to shore. Save us the trouble of waiting for a rescue boat."

"Alright!"

A few minutes later, and the Nethermaw was towing them in with mooring ropes tied to its spines. The catamaran bobbed in the beast's wake as they made it back towards town.

Su He grinned at Lan Jue. "I'm sorry. We charge out on a whim and come back with our tail between our legs. This is actually the first time I've ever actually seen a Nethermaw. It was interesting, I just wish it was under different circumstances."

Chapter 206: Tear of Neptune

Lan Jue patted his friend's shoulder. "We're closer than that Mentor, no need for any of this formality. You're a kindhearted soul, so you didn't want to strike it. Otherwise I'm certain there'd be little left of it for us to admire. We're having a great time, truly, and we'll be back just in time for lunch. Then, the auction."

Su He smiled. "It looks like the rigors of the real world have matured you, freshman. I remember back in our school days you were quite the celebrity. No small number of challengers, too, which you beat soundly."

Lan Jue awkwardly rubbed his nose. "You know young people, full of piss and vinegar. Don't hold it against me."

The Nethermaw was considerably more powerful than their boat's motor, so they were back to shore in half the time it took them to reach the point where they encountered the creature. Now, so close to the world of man, Lin Guoguo relinquished her control over the beast. It left, while Su He used his own powers to guide the boat to its allotted berth.

Lan Jue disembarked, shaking his head and laughing. Upon first encountering the sea creature he was cursing his luck, images of Taihua looming in his mind's eye. But Lir proved to be a safe place.

To make up for their unfortunate boating experience, Su He organized a particularly sumptuous lunch. Both he and his guests thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They abstained from drinking, since they had an auction to attend in the afternoon.

The morning had been warm and sunny, but now as afternoon approached the sky had grown overcast. A storm was brewing on the horizon, but the crisp winds still bore that strange fresh sea scent.

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The auction took place in the heart of Dwarka, in an old art museum. It

was a fabulous building, with a very interesting name; the Tear of Neptune.

The construction was blue, like everything else, with a crystalline façade that shone in gradients of color. The entire thing was an oval, making it look like a massive, masterfully cut sapphire. From the outside no metal was visible, leading the viewer to surmise that the whole thing was made out of glass or crystal blocks placed together. There was no longer any sun, but the gorgeous building still refracted the dim light from its surroundings.

Lan Jue and his party made their way there after lunch. They took a picture before the doors of the modern architectural wonder, then entered.

There were already a fair number of people milling about the museum's interior. Su He quickly made his way over to register their group, then returned and handed them each their name tags.

There was still some time before the auction, so Su He lead them to the museum's coffee shop. They drank coffee and looked over the auction's brochure. They had to decide which items they were interested in.

Lan Jue lazily flipped through the pages. Each one bore a single item plastered large on the glossy sheets. They were professionally photographed, and bore an introduction underneath. The more expensive pieces were given several pages.

Most of what was to be auctioned today was art. From time to time Lan Jue would nod his head appreciably. Like most other high-culture hobbies, he was a fan. The vast majority of pieces held to the Lirian standard of blue everything. It was a preference Lan Jue shared.

"Take a look at this one, boss. It's gorgeous. We should buy it and place it in the shop, what do you think?" Lin Guoguo leaned over and shoved her brochure in Lan Jue's face.

It was a sculpture, blue, made of something like autinite in the shape of a mermaid. Its face bore a small smile, waves of long hair fell from its head, and every single scale on its tail was meticulously detailed. It was a masterful work of art, to be sure.

Lan Jue folded his hands in his lap, and smiled with a nod. “Not bad! If you like it, we’ll buy it.”

“Thanks boss!” Lin Guoguo tittered excitedly.

“Boss,” Xiuxiu entreated timidly. She handed him her own brochure, flipped to a page near the back.

Power gems! The words scrawled along the top of the page instantly drew Lan Jue’s eye.

Xiuxiu spoke. “The main draw is an s-ranked stone. Called the Tear of Neptune.”

Lan Jue raised his brows as he looked over the information. “Let’s see what it does.”

The worth of an s-ranked gem could never be measured by money. They were considered important strategic resources for every Alliance. As a result, the number of s-ranked gems circulating in the public market was exceedingly small. Most were powering mother ships and Bastions. Their enormous bulk required the powerful gems to operate.

For one to appear at auction was a very special event.

Now that Lan Jue had recognized the opportunity, it wasn’t one he wanted to miss. He still remembered that he owed the Avenue a gem. If he came back with this gem, the debt he owed for being saved would be repaid and then some.

Xiuxiu immediately began tapping away at her communicator. After a few moments, she stuck her arm in front of Lan Jue so he could see.

Tear of Neptune. It was a gem exclusively found on Lir, and the only one it produced.

Appraisal: Though the Tear of Neptune was indeed an s-ranked gemstone, it was the least regarded among them. Its function was the removal of impurities, possessing had the ability to purify any energy material. So, though it was s-ranked, it’s function was best when paired with an appropriate a-ranked gem.

Remove impurities?

Two simple words. But they were enough to strike a chord with Lan Jue. He quickly read through the remaining details.

In both its rarity and power level, the stone was considered s-ranked. To get one one-carat gem, one thousand tons of the unrefined rock was required. Only five thousand tons of rock were dredged per year. The unrefined stone itself was dranked. While this certainly couldn't compare to five s-ranked gems, it was more valuable than five a-ranked.

And so, even though it was the highest grade of stone available on Lir, it was still produced only in small numbers. And an s-ranked gem needed to be at least three carats.

The one they had on auction was five carats. It was a work of art among quality goods. Still, it was a Tear.

A year's worth of rock for one gemstone! Its cost would surely take the manufacturing materials in to account, so surely it wasn't cheap. And so, the main item wasn't terribly exciting. It was the first time such a gem would be offered at auction, but the determination was to pass on it. It was seen as a disgrace to s-ranked gems.

Chapter 207: The Auction

Lan Jue carefully read through the Tear's introductory paragraphs. As anticipated, the Tear of Neptune was reputed to have an exceptional ability to remove impurities.

Once energy was channeled through the gemstone, it would emit a gentle light. Any gem was easily perfected when paired with the Tear. Once the s-ranked gem's work was done, only the purest forms of energy remained in its target. Everything else was unnecessary, and was removed.

There were certainly other gems that held similar properties, but none were as thorough as this. However, there were only b-ranked stones that were similar to this one [1] ! Clearly, there was a world of difference with regards to cost when considering a b-and s-ranked gem. However, even b-ranked gems were able to remove ninety percent of impurities.

Another reason why Tears of Neptune weren't so highly sought after.

Finally, near the end, there was a closing note: The Tear of Neptune – chasing the perfect gem.

After reading through the introduction, Lan Jue flipped through the brochure in his hands. There were many other gems on offer, of many different sorts. They ranged from d-to a-ranked, though clearly there was significantly more lower end stones available. The d-ranked gems alone weighed in at ten kilograms.

Once more this underlined the pricing scheme for a gem that requires five thousand kilograms of the stuff.

"Boss, your black coffee." Lin Guoguo came back from the coffee bar, bearing a mug for her employer. She placed it on the table in front of him.

The dark, thick liquid was bitter, full to the taste, but it was a flavor Lan Jue enjoyed. Plus, his stomach never digested dairy products well [2]. A mild case of lactose intolerance. Hence the preference for black coffee.

He took several sips of the stuff, and almost instantly felt waves of refreshing energy course through him. He shut the brochure in his hands,

closed his eyes, and enjoyed the relaxing sensations.

Just as he was taking the final sip of his brew, an announcement hailed the beginning of the auction.

The auction had lead the organizers to temporarily refurbish the large chamber in the center of the gallery. The second Lan Jue stepped inside, he could feel powerful waves of energy coming from all around him.

He took only the briefest look around. In that moment, he identified no less than thirty Adepts, at least sixth-ranked. There were ten more who were seventh-ranked. Two ninth-ranked adepts were backstage.

It was quite the powerful assembly, to be sure. There were powerful security measures to match.

The auction was soon to commence, and people were filling the seats. More than a thousand had already picked a spot.

Lan Jue and the others managed to finds seats on the center of a lane near the front of the hall. To his left sat Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu. Su He, and Ya Xiu sat to his right.

“So has anything caught your eye?” Su He asked in curiosity.

Lan Jue nodded. “A few things. Let’s see how many I walk away with.”

The great double doors leading to the chamber were closed. Two Adepts took up position on either side of it, their eyes sweeping over the crowd. The lights dimmed. Just as they did, before the onlookers could let their eyes adjust, a single blazing spotlight sprung to life. All eyes were on the stage.

An elderly gentleman appeared from backstage, clad in a masterfully tailored grey formal suit. His clothes were immaculate, without blemish or wrinkle. His silver hair was slicked back, and looked in fine condition for a man of his age. On the contrary, he seemed full of vitality. In a way, he was a lot like the antiques he was slated to sell. The more you looked upon him, the deeper the sensation went.

Lan Jue raised a brow. He could feel that this was one of the ninth-

ranked adepts he'd sensed when first entering.

"Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests, greetings and welcome. It is my great honor, to host this year's annual Tears of Neptune Auction. Out in the crowd I see many familiar faces, but I also see new friends I'm confident will happily join our community tonight. The Tears of Neptune Auction, is the largest auction held on Lir, occurring once a year. It has a storied, twenty-seven year long history of joining buyers with new treasures. This year, we have a more extensive – and more expensive – selection than any year prior. I can assure you, that you won't regret your presence or future purchases."

The elderly man's voice was cast through the room by virtue of a microphone pinned to his lapel. It was magnetic, and pleasing to the ear.

Lan Jue leaned slightly towards Su He on his right, and spoke to him in low tones. "Mentor, are there any restrictions or requirements to participate?"

"Many," Su He assured. "Clear proof of identity, enough money for a deposit, and a good standing within the Alliance for starters. Yesterday I set us up through the Bookworm's name. With him in such good standing, there was no need for you to submit to a check. The Bookworm acts as our guarantor."

Lan Jue cracked a smile. "So if we run around stealing stuff it'll probably tick the old man off. He'll be in a world of trouble!"

Su He laughed. "Yup! He'd probably kill me. Or, more likely, reduce me in to a series of data matrices."

"There are numerous items for us to bid on tonight, so this old man won't take any more of your time. Let us begin. The first ten items were donated to us by people from all walks of life. All of the proceeds for these items will be given to local Lir charities. This is as good a reason to be liberal with your money as you can find – get something nice, and help people in the process. Now on to our first item, The Mergoddess Surveys Her Kingdom."

Another individual made his presence known, pushing a large cart onto

the stage. It was simple, lending itself to the quaint antiquity that surrounded them. Within it were scores of goods for sell.

The item indicated was quite simply a work of art; shell, pearl and stone had been expertly combined. However, the most expensive part of the piece was the massive blue Lirian pearl, flawless in every way. The shells had been cut and engraved in the shape of a young woman. She sat upon the giant pearl, which made her look like a maiden resting in the depths of the ocean. It was remarkably true to life. Closer observation would reveal that her legs were in fact a fin, covered in meticulously detailed scales. All in all, it was a work of art one rarely came by.

The bid caller gave a brief introduction, then said “Since this is for charity, we’ll skip the lower offers, please. Ladies and gentlemen, your bids.”

Lan Jue nodded to Xiuxiu and his shoulder.

Xiuxiu lifted the small placard in her hand that read ‘#568’. “Ten thousand NED,” her melodious voice called. It was pleasing, but loud enough to be clearly heard.

The bid caller was certainly surprised by the bid. New Era Dollars were hard to come by in general, with the average monthly income hovering around three to five hundred. Ten thousand NEU was well beyond the asking price.

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1. If you recall, the Mundus crystal from Chapter 57, I believe, did the same thing, though it was only c-ranked.
2. The Chinese do not eat Dairy products often. They have various sorts of yogurt, but that’s about it. No milk, no cheese, and if they do eat something with those things they don’t like the flavor. It simply isn’t a part of the Chinese diet. As a result, most of them can’t handle dairy well.

Chapter 208: Living Metal

The excessive offer sent mumbles racing through the auction hall. Everyone turned to look their way.

Upon seeing it was a beautiful woman who made the bid, their curiosity turned to well-meaning smiles and furtive glances.

“Clearly this beautiful young woman has a heart of gold. We humbly thank you for your charitable contribution. Ten thousand, going once.”

No one lifted their voice to contest the price.

“Ten thousand going twice.”

“Ten thousand... sold! The deal is concluded.”

He struck his gavel against its sound block, indicating the sale of their first item. Just as fast as it was brought on stage, Lan Jue’s new sculpture was carted off.

Xiuxiu allowed her arm to drop, when a young woman came to record the sale. The deal wouldn’t be complete until the end of the auction, but she needed to register her pledge now.

The bid caller nodded congenially towards Xiuxiu. “We’re off to an excellent start thanks to this young woman, who’s generosity will undoubtedly make the charities very happy. Alright! Next up is our second item...”

As the auction continued, Su He turned his head towards Lan Jue. “You know the price of that piece was set at...”

Lan Jue lifted a hand, cutting Su He off. “This is my first time on Lir. I just wanted to leave a little mark of my passage. Not just money, but goodwill. Moreover, charity is good for cleansing the spirit. So the amount isn’t entirely altruistic.”

Su He chuckled and said nothing more. He shot his friend a thumbs-up.

Xiuxiu’s example helped the other nine charity items sell at higher prices than their projected value. None reached the ten thousand mark

Lan Jue had set, but they contributed no small amount to the cause. After all ten items were settled, they paused to collect data.

The bid caller took the time to explain the charity, detailing its goal of putting the money towards fighting genetic diseases and cytological research.

The exciting commencement of the auction had raised the excitement levels of the gathered auctioneers. None had expected such a sky-high price.

Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu took turns picking out items they liked. The most expensive was thirty-thousand NEU.

Lan Jue simply sat, watching the parade of items pass by with appreciative glances. None, however, really seemed to catch his eye.

Su He also participated, bidding on several items. He purchased two bits of jewelry, which he undoubtedly did with the intent of giving them to his new wife. Ya Xiu watched, the affection in her eyes growing. She slid her hand in to his, their fingers interlacing. Their love for one another was clear.

“Now on to the rare metals.”

With that the older man stepped down. A young woman took his place as the bid caller.

“Remember that all of the items we see here today have come from our own planet Lir. These rare materials are no exception. We have thirty-seven items up for auction today, with six available in large quantity. I encourage our honored guests to pay close attention. Don’t let someone else snap up your opportunity.”

They were approaching the main event, with the rare metal section underway. The participants were growing more excited with each passing moment, salivating at the prospect of a good buy. Many of the more serious auctioneers were opening their eyes, and focusing their attention upon the stage.

“Our first item: seacopper. Ten times harder than brass, enough to rival

gemstones. It is also a third the weight of brass. It is an integral material in the construction of alloys. Today, we have ten tons of seacopper on offer. The bidding will begin three million.”

The previous art section hadn’t seen an item surpass even one million. This was starting to get in to the big money.

“First lot of seacopper. Bidding commence.”

“Three million!”

“Three-hundred ten million!”

“Three twenty-five!”

The bid caller shouted out the numbers with the help of assistants below the stage. The seacopper was gone quickly.

All, that is, but for a single remaining piece of indigo blue seacopper. It bore the color of the sea that birthed it, and was such a hue that looking in to it was like staring in to the depths of the ocean. However, upon closer inspection it was revealed to be textured. This sort of copper was only found three thousand meters under water, which made obtaining it very difficult. It also made it valuable. She had spoken true, it was a fine metal for alloy construction.

One ton of this metal combined with another was enough to build a Sovereign-ranked mecha.

Lan Jue recognized the auction house’s strategy. The rare metal would further inflame the auctioneers, as it was one of the best rare metals they had on offer.

Each of the ten tons were sold for around four million each, carved up and separated to their respective buyers. A full four tons was purchased by one man.

As Lan Jue anticipated, the next item didn’t live up to the seacopper that had proceeded it. One after the other, items were paraded in front of him and sold but Lan Jue saw nothing that would compare to the seacopper in use or value.

“The next few items are rarer still, and their prices reflect this. And so, with your attention we’ll continue. First, we have refined technetium.”

Lan Jue’s face darkened at the mention of the metal. His mind filled with memories of Pearl, and the task he’d done to find who he thought had been Hera.

“Today we’re offering fifty grams of technetium, who’s miraculous effects need no introduction. If metal were given the same ranks as gems, this would be an A. Fifty million starting bid, let’s get going.”

At the bid caller’s instruction, numerous bidders throughout the hall began to cry their numbers.

Rare metals like technetium had the most utility when used in the construction of mechas. A single gram of the stuff was enough to give ten kilograms of alloy metal the ability to heal itself. It was most often used in and around a suit’s core mechanisms.

It was an amazing material, otherwise that woman Pearl would never have had the gall to trick Zeus in to getting some for her.

The technetium offered was ‘only’ fifty grams. But even in such small quantities, it was rare to find this metal on the open market. As a result, the hall was abuzz with excitement. In no time at all the bid had risen to seventy million, and was still going.

“Is this something you’re interested in boss,” Xiuxiu asked.

Her employer shook his head. “There are too many competitors. It’s final price will exceed it’s going rate. Besides, if ever I need anything like this it’s best simply to talk to Chu Cheng.”

Chu Cheng would certainly get him the lowest possible cost. Connections were important here, as this sort of item wasn’t obtainable by everyone.

At last the bid closed, with the price of the technetium skyrocketing to one hundred and ten million NED. The buyer was a gentleman in the front row.

One hundred and ten million dollars. It was enough to build two sovereign-class mechs. With the current buying power of NED [1], one can imagine how rankling the price was. It was already far beyond what it'd be worth if purchased straight. Most of that could be chalked up to its rarity.

The auction continued, with another six or seven rare metals on offer. The bid caller paraded them one by one, but there wasn't anything Lan Jue found particularly interesting.

"Now we've come to the final three items in our rare metals category. The first we'll discuss is very curious. It may very well be the only one of its kind. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would look this way." As the bid caller introduced the next item, she indicated the cart on the stage beside her.

Upon it there was a velvet cover, which was pulled away to reveal a crystal box. Inside the crystal box was their prize.

The metal itself was a pale blue, however it's quasi-liquid surface was dotted with a plethora of star-like impurities that were a dazzling deep sapphire. However, that wasn't the strange part. Under the watchful gaze of the bidders, the metal began to move of its own accord, like it had a life of its own. It rolled back and forth within the box ceaselessly.

Dozens of pairs of shocked eyes followed it.

"That's right, ladies and gentlemen, this is a living metal. The very first of its kind ever discovered in the Three Alliances. It is also a gorgeous piece, with an exterior pleasing to the eye. While we aren't sure of its precise function, we are reasonably assured that it has powerful energy multiplication abilities. During our tests we injected the metal with our softest, gentlest energies. Immediately, we saw a return of over twice of energy investment. Because the metal seems to slow down function when paired, so it has difficulty stabilizing the energy it produces."

"This metal is a product of our very own planet Lir. It was discovered more than two thousand meters beneath the surface of the ocean, and is likely the only one of its kind. Subsequent attempts to find more like it in the area came up dry. This is an absolutely unique piece of history, and its

price will reflect that. In addition to its auto-motive capabilities, our tests also revealed an inherent tenacity. We employed no less than ten lasers of various strengths and sizes in attempts to damage the metal, all to no avail.”

Curiosity danced in the expressions of every bidder present. And yet, all were silent.

“Let’s start the bidding. Due to its unique nature, as a one-of-a-kind living element, we’ve set the opening bid at ten million. Please only increase bidding by no less than ten thousand.”

The reaction of the crowd was diametrically opposite to how they reacted to the technetium. After the bid caller finished her introduction, no one moved. No one spoke. Not a single placard raised.

There were several in the crowd who bore interest in the special metal, which danced and hopped on its own. After all, how interesting and entertaining it was to watch! If only it’s functions were understood in their entirety, then the metal would surely be the focus of a flurry of bids.

But as it was, no one wished to commit to the expense for something they knew nothing about.

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1. That being, people making only 300 NED a month are able to live reasonably.

Chapter 209: Dreams of Astrum

One million NEU. Not a small number. Enough, in fact, to purchase a special c-or normal b-ranked power gem. Who would be willing to spend that kind of money?

The female bid caller looked out over the silent crowd, her face stoic. She called out the starting bid a few more times, with no takers, while secretly bemoaning the lack of interest.

The pricing scheme for the metal had been determined by its energy multiplication functions and its beautiful appearance. There was no shortage of auction goers, and the women among them especially should find the piece alluring.

And yet, judging by the scene before her eyes, the bid caller assumed they had judged the piece of unique metal and had found it wanting. No one, not even the women, seemed interested in paying the price. Some didn't even raise their head to look.

Unfortunately, it was the movement of the thing itself that was causing the female audience members to fear it! The thing had a life of its own, how could they be sure it was safe, much less useful? They could get hurt. The fear was compounded by the recent events on Taihua, which spurred a deep distrust – maybe even a hatred – of unknown life forms. That, the bid caller surmised, was the reason for their apparent disinterest.

As the seconds ticked by, the young woman's face grew more distressed. Are we really going to be stuck with this thing?

As she was preparing to give in, a placard shot up from somewhere within the crowd. "One million, bidder 570 bids a million NEU for the living metal." The relief was audible in her voice, and when she continued her volume had increased in power and octave. "No other takers? Perhaps the very only specimen in all the Three Alliances. This is quite possibly your only chance to own this very special item. Any other bidders?"

Lan Jue slowly allowed his arm to drop, resting his placard in his lap. The number 570 was scrawled across it.

Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo exchanged a glance, full of curiosity, but said nothing. Whatever the reason for their boss' interest in this, they stood by him unconditionally.

Su He was also surprised by the development, but like the two Amazons kept his piece. This was a public auction, who knew what the people next to them were doing, if they were listening. Being inattentive could lose you the item and disrupt the proceedings.

It was common courtesy in a setting such as this to be quiet and respectful.

Still the bid caller cried the prices. For a full minute she fought to raise the items price, but none spoke up.

"Final call... sold!" The hammer cracked as it struck the sound block, the deal was done. Lan Jue was now the proud owner of a living metal nugget.

A small smile pulled at the corners of Lan Jue's lips. In the same moment, a sliver of silver blue energy soundlessly emerged from the ground ten centimeters away from him. It wriggled back into his body, merging with his discipline, unnoticed.

One million NEU. It was a hefty price tag, one Lan Jue certainly couldn't afford to pay simply on a whim. He wasn't a wastrel.

Just then, as the bid caller was recording the sale, he'd employed his lightning discipline to send out a small bolt of electricity. Quietly, without drawing attention, the extension of Lan Jue's power slithered under the stage. It drew close to the cart where the living metal lay, but did not interact with it. He didn't need to; Lan Jue could clearly feel the waves of energy the slab released.

Rare metals were expensive, but rarely surpassed the price of power gems. This was largely due to the fact that power gems came with enormous amounts of energy already within them. These rare metals were only possessed of their own special quality. Most didn't have their own energy stores to speak of.

But this one, Lan Jue felt, was different. Through the extension of his

Discipline he'd been able to feel pulses of energy being released from the chunk of metal. He couldn't put a price on this thing. What's more, the closer he got the more violent its shaking became.

An electric field! This was Lan Jue's first determination. Somehow the material was releasing its own electric field. The revelation certainly affixed some value to the strange piece.

Lan Jue was an Adept who commanded the forces of thunderbolts and lightning. It was certainly rare to find an Adept who possessed the power of two Disciplines – especially disciplines that complimented one another – but they weren't impossible to come across. About ten percent of adepts above rank five were blessed in this way. The reason for Lan Jue's dominance, was his commitment to developing both of his disciplines equally to the best of his ability. And then there was this piece of metal. Like him, it had two functions, a similarity he was growing steadily more interested in.

Lan Jue made the bid, and though he couldn't be sure of the metal's exact properties, he didn't regret the purchase.

Experiences were different for everyone, and the resulting insights were as varying as the people who had them. Lan Jue knew several Paragons, and each one possessed a weapon that played off their strengths. He called them Astrums, and each were able to meld with and amplify their master's abilities. However, the most difficult part of obtaining an Astrum was finding components that paired with one's Discipline.

The Wine Master's scepter was an example, and Lan Jue couldn't imagine what the Paragon had to do in order to obtain it. It surely must have cost him, though.

Many Paragon's codenames were actually the names of their Astrums, and the name of the power they commanded.

A million NEU, to try and make his own Astrum. Of course the cost was worth it.

Naturally, the bid caller wasn't aware of any of this. All she knew was she'd made the sale, and sighed in relief. Essentially she was just here to

take notes and keep a record of sales.

The final price was less than they'd hoped, but this wasn't the first time they'd tried to sell it. Several other bid callers had given it their best in previous auctions, but were ultimately unsuccessful. Just getting it off their hands was a good thing.

"Next we come to the final items in our rare metals display. Are we ready?"

The bidders began to come back around, giving the caller their full attention.

The second-to-last began at six million NEU, higher even than the technetium. However, Lan Jue made no effort to cast a bid. The very last of the rare metals sold for nine million.

It wasn't that Lan Jue wasn't interested in these rare materials. He was. It was a matter of practicality, for he didn't see much use for them in his situation. Plus, his interests lay in a later potential purchase.

Finally, the sales were done, and the deals recorded. Once again the level of excitement in the hall had begun to rise.

Eventually the bid callers and assistants got the room under control. Once she could be heard, the young man stated that they would adjourn temporarily. She went on to explain that those who'd made a purchase could see them about completing their transactions.

Lan Jue turned his face towards Su He, still seated at his elbow. "Excuse me a moment, mentor. I'm going to go finish up."

Su He blinked. "There's no rush. It's fine, wait until the auction is over. It'd be an inconvenience if you buy anything more later."

Lan Jue smiled. "That's alright, I also feel like I want some fresh air." Lan Jue stood, and left without any further discussion.

Naturally Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu rose to follow their boss. As he walked out from the aisle they fanned out protectively behind him. Neither spoke, but both bore hints of surprise in their eyes.

Both women knew their boss well, and they knew him to be relaxed and laid back. This rush was certainly uncharacteristic. He only got this way when it was important.

Xiuxiu was especially curious. She had caught sight of the look in his eye, that excitement therein. He hid it well but no one knew Lan Jue better than she, and it had been a very, very long time since she'd seen that look.

Items over a million NEU were watched over by individual receptionists responsible for their safety. It didn't take long, under the receptionist's guidance, to pay what they owed for their items. They left their purchases there, giving the staff their hotel address for delivery. Only the last item, that living metal, did Lan Jue take personally.

It was smooth, a titanium white now with sparkling blue dots interspersed across its surface. Closer inspection only increased its beauty.

Lin Guoguo gasped in appreciation, in spite of herself. "It's so pretty! Soft-looking and fluid... like a big ball of snot!"

Xiuxiu giggled. "Ugh! Guoguo! So disgusting!"

As Lan Jue took the crystal box the metal was stored in, he stopped. A look of pleasant surprise overcame him, but he did not yet open his prize. Instead there was a flash, and the box was gone – stored in Lan Jue's inter-dimensional storage space.

The receptionist who'd been assigned to look after the metal saw everything. When she looked back to Lan Jue, there was a light of respect in her eyes.

Inter-dimensional storage wasn't something within reach of your average person. Not only was a Discipline rank of six or higher necessary, one also needed the financial resources to set the whole thing up. Those power gems which allow for the creation of a stable, spacious alternate dimension, were always top of the gem lists.

For example, creating a space large enough to fit a mecha would require nothing less than an a-ranked inter-dimensional power gem.

There were spaces created that were large and stable enough to house

entire battleships, themselves the product of s-ranked gems. The largest known inter-dimensional space was under Northern Alliance purview; they called it the Glory of the North, and it was big enough for an entire capital ship.

However, the more commonly used pockets weren't obscenely expensive – c-ranked, only. They were the most expensive c-ranked gems you could purchase, though.

They made their way back to the auction hall, with Lan Jue smiling the entire trip back. What he really wanted, was to head back to the hotel right away.

Sensing auras from a distance and actually getting your hands on something were a world of difference. The second he gripped the box he knew; this metal did indeed have a powerful electric field.

Chapter 210: Pelagic Pearl

It was certainly a startling field; weak, but complicated. The deeper he delved in to it, the more his thunderbolt and lightning Disciplines resonated. His own power was strong enough to counter-act the strange sensation, but a lesser man would certainly have difficulties controlling the chaotic powers.

The one million dollars was well worth it!

There were other metals that produced an electric field, of course. Lan Jue had even encountered several of them. However, this was the first time a metal had begun to influence his Discipline just by being close.

Lan Jue was well satisfied with his purchases. This metal alone would require more careful study when he returned to the hotel later. Years of experience and study have possessed him with a calm state of mind, but it would be best to examine the stuff in Skyfire Avenue.

After a while the remainder of wandering auctioneers returned to their seats. The show continued shortly thereafter.

The bid caller changed once again. The older man had returned to take over.

Now he was clad in a snow white suit, and a red shirt that gave him a sort of old-timey charm. A younger man wouldn't have been able to pull it off.

"Thank you and welcome back, ladies and gentlemen. Now we come to the final section of the Tear of Neptune auction. I'm certain many of you have been waiting with baited breath for this very moment. That's right, here we've come to the final leg of our time together; power gems! Today we have sixteen gems on offer, all of them the product of our very own planet Lir. Our basest gemstones are c-ranked, so we have something for everyone. Don't miss your chance!"

"Please bring out our first item."

An assistant pushed the cart back onto the stage. The scarlet velvet

covering the item was removed, revealing a crystal display box. Within sat a twinkling pitch black pearl.

If they were sticking to their normal formula, then this item would their third major draw for this section, surpassed only by their last two sales. They did this to keep the excitement levels high, and drive up competitive prices. It was a common practice in auctions.

“The Pelagic Pearl, an a-ranked gem. In total, we have three identical gems available for purchase. They’ve already been beautifully cut for your convenience and appreciation. It’s ready for any application, especially as the core gem for your mecha. The power gem has three special characteristics, making it a star among a-ranked gems.”

“First, the gem is chalk full of an enormous amount of personal energy, making it an excellent source of alternative energy. As I’m certainly everyone is aware, Sovereign-class mechs have gems such as these to help with energy consumption. The more prosperous the energy gem, the more powerful the mecha it can support. This single five hundred carat gem can power your top of the line mecha for three hours of uninterrupted combat.”

“Secondly, the gem has a pure and powerful water element power. Water Adepts who channel their power through it, will see their capabilities doubled at the least. A concrete number for how much more powerful one is when using the gem is difficult to provide, as it’s contingent on how well one’s Discipline melds with the gem. To our knowledge, a well-paired team of Adept and gem can reach as high as five times their normal abilities.”

“The third and final ability of the pearl, is its regenerative powers. Drop it in the water, and the power gem will consume the water energies around it to heal. If the gem runs out of energy, keep it in the water for three hours and you’re ready to go again.”

“Amplification, preservation, regeneration, all in one balanced package. Let’s begin; we’ll set the opening bid at one million NED. Bids must continue in twenty-thousand dollar increments. Begin!”

The interest in power gems had always trumped lust for anything else in all three Alliances. As the bidding commenced, no less than ten auctioneers brought up their placards. The price rose frighteningly fast.

“Hey freshman, what do you think of this a-ranked gem?” Su He asked.

Lan Jue turned his head to reply. “Balanced, yet moderate. It’d be much more suitable for water Adepts.”

Su He nodded.

A few minutes later the pearl was sold, to a man in the front for 1.8 million NED.

An energy gem that’s reached this level didn’t even have a market price. It was uncommon enough that there wasn’t a previously set game or hardware situation for them to fall back on.

The pearl eventually sold to a gentleman in the front, for eighteen million NED.

Energy gems that reached a-rank were very rarely seen on the public market. They were rare enough so that price no object when those in need finally came across one.

Things continued as before, with the items following the Pelagic Pearl being significantly less interesting. In fact none were better than ‘mediocre.’

Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo occasionally bid on pieces that came up, without needing to wait for Lan Jue’s input. As decent deals presented themselves, the two young women would involve themselves. Even still they didn’t buy much.

Before long, they’d come to the second to last item on auction.

“Next for your viewing pleasure, we have the last item before our main event. This is another a-ranked power gem. However, I must tell you, this is a gem that’s at the absolute peak of its class. Let’s take a look!” He swept his arm towards the cart.

A blue, opaque gemstone sat within a crystal display box. In all it was

about the size of an adult fist, and round like a ball. It's interior looked like a storm of rolling clouds and mist, accompanied by an indistinct halo of dim light. Even with the barrier of the crystal box between them, Lan Jue could still faintly sense the energy waves given off by the power gem.

Lan Jue's face changed, just the faintest bit. Su He's eyes betrayed surprise as he exclaimed "A Brine Orb. I didn't look carefully at the brochure, I had no idea."

Lan Jue's quiet voice responded. "It was there, but the picture didn't do it any justice. Looking at it now, it's clear it's an excellent specimen. Once again, very suited for Water Adepts."

The bid caller continued with his introduction. "The Brine Orb. Storied, powerful. An a-ranked power gem that pairs well with any Adept, especially when serving as part of a weapon. It gives the bearer the element of water to control during combat."

"As I'm sure all of our illustrious guests are aware, the Brine Orb pairs well with the water element's sustainability. I can tell you that, while testing the gem, it was able to sustain a stable emulsion of water element for thirty minutes. This is the longest recorded time for any Brine Orb. On top of that, the power it possesses rivals an eighth-ranked Talent! Whoever you're facing, this power gem can protect you – unless you're running around picking fights with Paragons. It's like carrying around your own bodyguard who has no need for food or sleep, and is immune from death. After use, submerge the gem in water for twelve hours and you're ready to go again. If you submerge it in the ocean, you'll only need three hours."

"I believe that's enough of an introduction for us to get started. We underwent extensive testing, considering it over and over again before the auction. We've determined that the starting price for this wonderful power gem couldn't be any less than twenty million NED, without doing it a disservice. Bids must increase at five hundred thousand NED intervals. Let's get going!"

"Twenty-five million!" A hand shot up from the front few rows. In a

blink the gem was now one fourth more expensive.

The bid caller had been right by describing the Brine Orb as one of the best a-ranked gems. The bulk of its price tag came from the fact that it only took a very small amount of one's personal energy to enervate the gem, and call on its elemental powers. What the introduction didn't mention was that fresh blood was how one got the most out of the power gem. It created a link between the gem and the host, so that only one person was ever able to use that gem. The gem would remain under an individual's whim, until that person died.

As for Lan Jue, at his level of power there were other a-ranked power gems of more use...

"Fifty million." A calm voice called out their bid. The voice was soft, yet everyone in the room could hear them clearly. Stranger still, a strangely oppressive sensation filled the area as the voice called forth.

Everyone went silent. Everyone in the front turned their heads, looking for the origin of the sound. However, they were shocked to discover that everyone was looking in different places – the voice came from a different location for every listener. Fortunately they eventually found the raised placard. 570 was clearly written on its surface.

"Number five-seventy, fifty million NED." Even the bid caller's voice was somewhat surprised. It wasn't an outrageous price for such a high ranked gem, however it was already twice the current price. With statistics like that, anyone would be shocked at the increase. On top of all of that, to possess such an overbearing sensation with just your voice, set even the bid caller on edge. As a ninth-ranked adept himself, he knew clearly the sort of power that was. Number 570 was at least as strong as he was.

"Any other interested parties?" The bid caller asked.

Not a sound. Silence met the elderly man's question.

Fifty million was a high number, by any metric. They also had no interest in testing a man who could command such power with his voice alone. Who he was, whether it was him or those at his side, none of that mattered. They had the power and resources to take what they wanted.

A high price to pay, and doing so would also potentially offend a powerful Adept. There were several things to consider, hence the silence.

Most of those present were businessmen, merchants, traders. They understood the way worth and risk interacted. There wasn't enough draw for them to take the risk.

Lan Jue dropped his placard. His face was calm, without expression. Beside him, Su He looked his way in curiosity. His new wife was similarly surprised. All she really knew about this man and his two female servants was that he was her husband's friend. She had no idea he had so much money to throw around.

"Fifty million, going once!" The bid caller had no choice but to abide by the rules of the auction. He began to call out the final chances. The oppressive sense, paired with the fact that the price was near enough to the auction house's goal for the item, meant he wouldn't waste any further time shouting for increases.

Still, silence.

Suddenly, a voice in front shouted out. "Fifty-ONE million!"

"Sixty million!" Lan Jue raised his placard once again. His face still bore that calm mask.

The challenging voice was quiet, shot down by the cool and indifferent increase of nine million dollars. While the voice may have been calm, it was like a blast of thunder in their ears. The whole place shook uncomfortably. The faces of the many businessmen drained of color.

Such power! This is no ordinary ninth-ranked Adept. Such was the thought going through everyone's mind.

"Sixty million, going once."

"Sixty million, second call."

"Third and final, sixty million. Takers?"

"SOLD. Sixty million."

The hammer smacked the sound block. The deal was made.

Chapter 211: The Tear of Neptune

The organizers hadn't anticipated one of their draw items would be auctioned off so quickly.

Lan Jue sat amidst the gazes, cool and collected, face calm. He may as well have been seated beneath a cloudless sky enjoying an afternoon breeze. The only indication he was even present in the moment, was his eyes sweeping the front row.

The bidder who'd attempted to take Lan Jue's prize quietly stood up. He bowed at the waist, then removed himself from the auction.

The elderly bid caller watched him go, nerves causing his heart rate to quicken. Of course he knew why the bidder left. It was a common enough occurrence. This situation was mild when compared to some other events he'd hosted. Sometimes arguments could erupt. However, no one wanted to offend somebody so overtly powerful.

"Finally, we come to last item in today's auction. Our main attraction, of which I'm certain you're familiar. I present to you, manufactured right here on Lir, the s-ranked Tear of Neptune."

On the cart, in its own crystal box, rested a teardrop-cut stone.

The gemstone had a dream-like quality, emitting a gentle blue light that was pleasing to the eye. It lent the powerful item an aura of mysticism and peculiarity. The light seemed to emanate from somewhere deep inside of it, and yet despite its striking appearance the waves of energy emanating from it were gentle. It felt cleansing, like the near proximity was enough to reinvigorate you. Even negative thoughts and sour moods abated under the pleasant warmth of the stone's aura.

Lan Jue's eyes flashed with electric power. Just as quickly, however, they were back to normal.

"How much available funds do we have for transfer," Lan Jue asked Xiuxiu.

Xiuxiu answered by giving him a thumbs up.

Lan Jue nodded, and said nothing further.

The bid caller went on. “As everyone knows, any planet that produces an s-ranked gem is called a ‘Gem Planet.’ It is a distinction Lir enjoys, thanks to the five karat gem you see before you; the Tear of Neptune. The very museum we sit within was named after it.”

“The Tear of Neptune. Touted as the purest power gem in the universe, and not just for its own purity of energy. It spreads that virtuousness wherever it goes, effecting everyone it comes in contact with, sharing its untainted power. Carry it with you, and say goodbye to troubling thoughts or emotions. Enjoy days uninterrupted by afflictions of the mind and spirit. And that’s not all...”

The bid caller’s earnest introductions continued, but there was no reaction from the buyers below. All of the momentum gained from the sale of the Pelagic Pearl was gone.

“Alright, let’s get to the bidding. This is the largest Tear in the history of production, available tonight to you for a starting bid of four hundred million NED. Increases must be more than five million at a time.”

Silence.

Four hundred million. It was a minuscule price for an s-ranked gem. In fact, it was difficult to even give a price for the better gems of this class.

Once more the problem lay in the largely uninteresting power of the gem. It may be in a class of exceptionally valuable gems, but couldn’t count itself among their number.

Simply put, it’s primary function was to cleans and purify another power gem’s energy. It improved its overall quality. However, the process required a great deal of sustained energy output. The gem itself couldn’t release energy, only take it into itself. This was first. Secondly, the better power gems already had very few impurities – true for most of the known s-ranked gems. The Tear had no positive function for those.

Under circumstances such as these, who would agree to paying such a high price for a Tear of Neptune? This was already the third year they’ve

paraded this stone before the auction bidders. It was beginning to look like once again, this year would pass without a sale.

Time ticked slowly by. With each passing second the bid caller's expression became less and less hopeful. According to their rules, if an item underwent auction three times and no one swiped it up, it was no longer worth presenting. What would they do with the gem then?

During its first showing, the gem had been priced at six hundred million dollars. They'd already lowered the price by a third, so even if it sold it was already below cost.

Originally the hope was that someone with more money than sense would commit to the Tear. Now it looked like it was them who would have to eat the cost. It simply looked like this was not something people wanted.

"Four hundred million." Once more, the imperatorial voice from before called out a bid.

The bid caller physically jerked at the sound. The first time he heard his voice, it brought a host of negative emotions in tow. This time, though, it was like a smile from the face of god.

"Four hundred million. The gentleman with number five seventy. Are there any bidders willing to go higher?" His voice had become noticeably higher in pitch.

In the end his question was just an interlude in a play where everyone knew how it ends. Half a minute, a few more calls, and...

Bang! "Sold!"

At last, the most expensive piece ever offered in a Tear of Neptune auction was finally sold. The final ticket price, four hundred million dollars.

For the third time, Lan Jue was the focus of everyone's attention. And for good reason; the aggregate cost of everything else purchased today was five hundred million. Not including his purchases.

Su He swallowed back his surprise, the corners of his mouth twitched. “Are you really a teacher?”

“I may also run a small shop,” Lan Jue told his friend. “The next time you visit Skyfire you should come by Skyfire Avenue. My place is there, Zeus’ Jewelry Shop.”

Two groups of security personnel entered. They flanked both sides of Lan Jue, separating him from the crowds as he left to finalize his purchase. It was a unique situation, and they wanted their big spender safe.

It was ultimately Xiuxiu that actually finished paying everything off. She was handed their highest level of VIP card in the process. A car came for them, waiting underground in a series of tunnels. The whole thing was specially crafted to protect their buyer’s safety and anonymity.

Lin Guoguo gripped the Palegic Pearl tightly to her chest as they left, while Xiuxiu was left responsible for the Tear of Neptune.

Lan Jue and Su He took up seats in the front of the car. Xiuxiu, Lin Guoguo and Ya Xiu were in the back. They fit comfortably; these sorts of cars were large enough to comfortably house eight travelers.

“Xiuxiu, you’re the boss’ assistant here and you just let him spend all that money? But I guess I can’t blame you, he looked quite determined!” At last Ya Xiu couldn’t hold her piece any longer. She asked the question of Xiuxiu in quiet tones.

The blade maiden laughed. “The boss always has his reasons, especially when he’s determined. And as far as I’ve seen, he usually makes the right decision.”

Lin Guoguo was also grinning. “You’re more than welcome to try and brainwash the boss in to behaving with his money,” she said.

Ya Xiu helplessly shook her head, but said nothing else. In the end things like power gems were more than their worth. Who knew in the end if it would be worth the cost.

Ya Xiu and Su He traveled with Lan Jue and his two Amazons until they

reached the hotel. Everyone was in a fine mood when they made plans to meet the Bookworm together tomorrow.

“Guoguo, come to my room,” Lan Jue ordered.

This surprised the young woman, whose face instantly went red. “Today may not be the best day boss.”

Xiuxiu, for her part, watched the exchange with a clear glower on her face, and her brows knit tight.

Lan Jue knocked on her head with a loose fist, his face a mask of agitation. “What the hell is going on in that head of yours? Xiuxiu, you’re coming too.” He didn’t wait for an answer, and left.

Lin Guoguo was flush with embarrassment, and stuck her tongue out. Xiuxiu covered her mouth and giggled. Both women followed as their boss made for his room.

Once they had, Xiuxiu shut the door behind her and took a step toward her employer. “Here’s the Tear for you, boss.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “You hold on to it,” he commanded. “When we get back we’re giving it to the Skyfire Council. I have to pay them back for the help they gave me on Taihua. In the hands of your average adept, this gem means little. But for us, we can do amazing things with it. Guoguo, give me the pearl.”

“Mhn.” She handed the pearl over as instructed. Lan Jue immediately stored it away in his inter-dimensional storage space. The remainder of the items they ordered would be delivered to the address they’d given the auction house at a later date. There wasn’t any need for them to lug them all back with them to Skyfire.

There was a silver flash, and suddenly a crystal box appeared in Lan Jue’s hand where a moment before there was nothing. Within, the liquid living metal sloshed about like it had a life of its own.

Lan Jue carefully placed the box upon a nearby table, then turned to Lin Guoguo. “You’re a psychic,” he began. “See if there’s any way for you to communicate with this.”

Now she finally understood why the boss had called her, and she nodded. In a blink, her eyes shimmered an immaculate golden hue. Waves of gentle psychic energy flooded the room.

Quietly, Lan Jue watched his Amazon work with rapt attention. Meanwhile, the light in Guoguo's eyes grew more intense as time passed. Strangely, the metal seemed to respond by releasing a dull silver glow all its own. It might the bright blue spots along its surface even more brilliant.

Narrowing his eyes, Lan Jue took a closer look. He paid particular attention to the electric field, which didn't appear to react. In all it seemed unchanged from when he first checked it.

Fifteen minutes later, the golden light in Lin Guoguo's eyes gradually vanished.

"No good boss," she said. "I tried several methods to try and communicate with it, but there was no response. I never felt anything like sentience from it. But I could feel the purity radiating from it. The gem has a strange sort of energy resistance quality that I came upon, that tried to resist me. It succeeded in keeping me from seeing all things about it. I can tell you that it has an extreme softness to it, an all-encompassing forgiveness. And yet there's a... tenacity to it. It has its limits."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed in thought. He speculated for a moment. "That's proof then. If Lin Guoguo is unable to communicate with it using her psychic powers, then the metal is either lacking psychic ability or isn't intelligent. That, or it's somehow managed to hide this information deeper than we can penetrate. Alright, you guys can go. I'll keep at it."

"Alright. Well since we're finished, boss, what's for dinner?" Lin Guoguo inquired.

"That I leave to you," he replied. "I want to look over this metal. I have a feeling this little treasure will prove very important for me."

"Hm." Lin Guoguo pouted, but grabbed Xiuxiu by the arm and left Lan Jue to his own devices.

Chapter 212: Bliss of An Empty Mind

Lan Jue sat in silence, staring at the metal on the table in front of him. He looked lost in thought. The crystal box the metal was held in remained closed.

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Dwarka, the Imitation Skyfire Library.

“Ha ha ha! Hahahaha! Of course, of course it would be this way. My original determinations were correct. Completely right! Hahahahaha! Keeper, you old bastard, I knew you were unwilling to give in. Of course I have to verify it. This old man won’t lose to you again!”

The Bookworm danced happily around his apartments. The Accountant sat slumped against a chair not far off, his face pale.

The last two days – two whole days – the Bookworm had been asking him questions non-stop. No food, no water, and if the Bookworm didn’t like the answer he punished the Accountant with physic blows.

Against such oppressive power the Accountant couldn’t do much. This crazy old man’s knowledge was as vast as the oceans, and his questions were poignant and cunning. The Account did his best to appear cowed, but his brain was ever working on the problem before him.

Two days without food and drink, wracking your brain morning to night. The Accountant was close to breaking.

The Bookworm celebrated by himself for what felt to be a good half an hour, before returning his attention unto the young man.

“Mmn. Now that we’ve taken care of that, this kid has no further use.”

The Accountant was greatly frightened, and despite his slow descend towards unconsciousness he snapped back to life. “Y-you shouldn’t act so recklessly! Look, I’ve done all you asked, answered all your questions. Think of how my grandfather would react if you did something untoward? And the Jewelry Master!”

The Bookworm curled his lips in a hideous grin. "Your grandfather? Distant waters hold no respite for the man dying of thirst. I wouldn't count on him, no. But that tricky gentleman, yes, we'll wait for him to show up. Heh heh. I'll deal with him, too! Daring to deceive me... hah!"

The Bookworm came slinking back, bearing in his hand a strange bottle. In a blink he was standing before the Accountant, the sadistic grin on his face betraying his ill-intent.

"Hey stupid... bet you're hungry, right? Thirsty? Soon you won't feel any hunger... any thirst. Uncle here will get you something delicious, this decoction here! It's a wonderful draught that took me ages to figure out. I actually prepared it for use on your grandfather. However, now that I've worked out his game... now that I know I can beat him!... then I don't need it. It's yours. If you hold any grievances about any of this, keep that to yourself, and you can blame your grandfather for all of it. Heh heh heh."

"No! I'm not thirsty! I'm sure we can find a solution to this. Your gripe is with my grandfather, why not just go after him? Ooohh-!" The Accountant struggled mightily as the Bookworm's skinny hand gripped his lower jaw. He unceremoniously dumped the cloudy, purple liquid in to the Accountant's mouth.

The Bookworm flicked the younger man's adam's apple. He heard a gulp, and knew the concoction had been swallowed.

"kah, ugh, hach, gah! You... you will not die a natural death! My grandfather will avenge me!" It was about this time the Accountant began to feel a strange sensation in his brain. It was like an explosion through his mind, and the world before him went dark. He'd fainted.

The Bookworm's sinister expression slowly receded. For the briefest of moments, it was replaced by a strange smile. "You old wretch. Bastard!" He suddenly looked much more like his age, hobbling pitifully with a crackling voice. However, his eyes remained as clear and cutting as ever.

The bookworm cast the bottle away over his shoulder. The thoughtful look that that invaded his eyes began to change. He looked to be simultaneously concerned and excited.

“Professor.” A deep voice called from outside the door.

“Come in,” he replied.

The door opened at his command. Su He and Lan Jue entered.

Upon seeing them, a distinct chill overcame the Bookworm’s expression.

Lan Jue smiled at him. “Have you looked it over?”

“What do you think,” the Bookworm replied curtly.

“The Keeper asked me to give it to you,” Lan Jue said. “Factual proof. You both were right, and neither were wrong. [1]. You say you wish you could go back, and now’s your chance. Back then, no one had made any efforts to deceive you. The Library needs it’s master.”

The Bookworm’s eyes flashed. “Do you presume to come here and test my IQ, young man?”

Lan Jue’s eyes flashed to the Accountant, passed out in a nearby chair. He gradually lowered his head. “The Keeper also asked me to tell you, that he’s not long for this world. His hope is to return to you what’s rightfully yours, before he passes.”

The Bookworm’s whole body shook suddenly as though he’d been struck. When he spoke, his voice bore an icy chill. “Child, twice now you’ve come before me. And twice you’ve lied. Lie a third time, and what do you think the result will be? I don’t care who you are, or where you’re from – no one would be able to talk me out of the things I’d do to you.”

Lan Jue sighed. “Whether or not I am lying, you only need to dial a single number to find out. Determining the truth from lies is not difficult in this instance.”

The old man almost staggered. He recovered by quickly turning his lithe frame around, walking to the window, and punching in a number on his communicator.

Beep, beep.

“Ah, you old coot. You finally agreed to get in contact with me?” The Keeper’s voice crackled through the line.

The Bookworm's voice was harsh, mean. "I heard you're dying."

"Does that please you," the Keeper replied.

The Bookworm sneered. "Oh yes. Of course I'm pleased. Terribly pleased. When are you going to kick the bucket? I'd love to come participate in the funeral."

The Keeper's voice came back thin, and weak. "About three months. I'm glad you're happy, Bookworm. Sad would also be fine, though – everything passes. You know it's a nice feeling, with everything leaving your mind. I've spent the last little bit trying to hold to that, an empty mind. It's a wonderful sensation. Putting all of that away keeps the heart in a positive place."

The connection was cut off.

Lit by the light from the window, with his wrist raised and stone still, the Bookworm looked like a thoughtful statue.

Lan Jue hadn't moved. In fact, he seemed somewhat lost in thought. He'd heard the exchange. And despite his earlier conversation with the Keeper, he had to wonder; was this all a trick, or was his old friend...

Silence prevailed within the Bookworm's apartments for a time. A gloom came over Lan Jue's expression.

The Bookworm spun around, speaking quickly to Su He. "Help me pack. We're leaving for Planet Skyfire immediately. I'm curious to see how this old man dies. Such splendid news! Best would have been if he'd died years ago, but this will do. I hope he dies before my very eyes. I'll curse him. I'll shame him. I'll make his death a misery, his last thoughts will be of sorrow and regret!" The elderly scientist roared at them from across the room. Moisture had begun to gather in the corner of his eyes, seeping through the creases and wrinkles. His whole body shook ever so slightly.

"Yes, Professor." Su He left at once to prepare.

An hour later, everyone had made their way to the public airship hangar in the heart of Dwarka.

Upon seeing the beautiful azure make of Zeus-1, the Bookworm's brows wrinkled. His eyes flashes, and then were covered by streams of cascading data.

He waved a hand towards the ship, and a white light appear before the bow.

"What are you doing?" Lin Guoguo balked. Lan Jue held her back.

The white light glided over the length and girth of the ship. Once it reached the tail, it vanished. The strange light in the Bookworm's eyes also faded in to nothing.

Hi lips curled in to another unwholesome grin. "Who designed it?"

"I guess I did," Lan Jue replied.

The old man chortled, but his face went slack as quickly as quickly as it changed. "A cute little toy, but it'll do."

Both Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu shot him uncomfortable looks. Lan Jue silenced them with a glance, before they could voice their displeasure. The small group climbed on to the plane. Lan Jue carried the unconscious Accountant slung over his shoulder.

He never asked the Bookworm what had happened to his fellow Avenue denizen. The tears he'd seen when the Bookworm spoke to the Keeper was all the answer he needed.

The Bookworm scuttled in to the master control room, with Su He close on his heels. The older man was emotionally unstable, everyone knew, and so Su He had to postpone his own vacation until after his Professor was settled on Skyfire.

"Please buckle your seat belts. We'll be taking off shortly."

Zeus-1 slowly rolled onto the runway. As it did, a pale light surrounded it until, suddenly, an electric blast fired from the engines and launched Zeus-1 in to the skies.

"Hey kid," the Bookworm said. He had chosen a seat nearby, and craned his neck to look at Lan Jue.

“Your command?” Lan Jue replied with a smile.

The Bookworm gave him a sidelong glance. “Do you want to improve this bucket you’re riding in?”

“Of course,” the Jewelry Master said. “Why? Do you have any suggestions?”

The old man chortled. “I was an aerodynamics engineer in my youth. Even today, the majority of the East’s navy employs my designs. The reason I’m telling you your ship is no good, is because of all the waste. Improper use of the materials and power gems you’ve installed have led to this. None of what you’ve tacked on is employing it’s highest potential. I can improve overall performance by thirty percent as is, but if you add a few materials we could double its output.”

Lan Jue was surprised at the accusation and subsequent offer. Zeus-1 was the single most advanced ship of its class, he thought to himself. A top-of-the-line battleship couldn’t compete with it. If the Bookworm was speaking true, what sort of levels could Zeus-1 reach?

“What sort of price are we talking?” From the Bookworm’s face, Lan Jue knew this wouldn’t be free.

“There’s always a price,” the Bookworm cooed. “I can hardly be expected to work for free. These last few years I’ve been busy with my own research and designs. Unfortunately, I’m in need of testers. Su He has told me that you’ve attained the rank of God pilot years ago. A first-rate pilot. If you’re willing to help complete my research, I’ll help you put together a blueprint for this leaky bucket.”

*

1. Remember, this is in reference to the fight the Keeper and the Bookworm had years ago that they bet on, wherein the loser (bookworm) left. This is proof that neither lost.

Chapter 213: Research Subject?

At this moment, the Bookworm looked for all the world like the Big Bad Wolf from the red riding stories. “I guarantee that, in this area, you won’t find a better person in all of the East – nay, all three alliances. The Keeper, the old wretch, is a master of weaponry and simulation. When it comes to design, though, I leave him in the dust. Blocks behind, mind you.”

Lan Jue listened respectfully. “And what does your experiment require me to do?”

The Bookworm was suddenly alive with the vitality of a man twice his age. He shot up from his seat after popping the safety harness free, and made his way to a spot with a little more open space. He reached out with his right hand and, as if in response, a silver light appeared before him. Before his eyes the light split, spread, until it created a hovering silver portal.

From the other side of the strange fissure, an enormous mechanical manipulator [1] forced its way through. In it’s ‘hand’ was something that looked similar to the sim pods they used to enter DreamNet. It deposited its payload, then vanished.

As the sim pod was placed upon the floor a loud and startling sound of suction filled the cockpit. The pod fixed itself to the floor, essentially becoming another part of the ship.

Upon seeing the pod Su He’s face blanched. But he quickly shut his eyes and, when he opened them again, it was as though he’d never seen the machine before.

“This is it. My experimentation process takes place entirely in a simulation. I call it the God-Pilot Rating System, G.P.R.S. As you probably are aware, the difference between a Sovereign-and a God-ranked pilot is immense. It is not wildly uncommon for a pilot to break the threshold in to God-hood, however the Three Alliances never communicate this information. And, once someone has reached God-ranked, there aren’t any systems of differentiation, or rankings. This makes it very difficult to

determine who is strongest and weakest among the known God-ranked pilots. I designed and created this testing apparatus to remedy this problem, using it with pilots to place them in a new rating system. It was built with nothing but the most modern, top-of-the-line technology. And let me tell you this, I was one of the master researchers of DreamNet. If my research leads to success, this system will feature within DreamNet itself. But more than that, it possess a very special ability... this item you see before you may just solve DreamNet's problem of being unable to allow pilots to employ their discipline in a simulation. That is to say, with my design, even in a simulation, you'll be able to fight to the best of your capabilities. You can fight with your mecha, and your power, as a cohesive unit."

Upon hearing the news, Lan Jue's face clearly displayed his shock. He understood the implications at play. There was no amount of money that could measure the importance of this DreamNet upgrade. Giving sim pilots the ability to use their discipline safely for practice was practically the beginning of a new epoch!

After all, the cost of manufacture for a mecha suit was quite high, and training in reality always came with the possibility of injury to the pilot or damage to these expensive pieces of equipment. If what the Bookworm claimed was true, and a simulation was better able to mirror real life, this would give young pilots more opportunity to train. This, in turn, meant better pilots in the long run.

Lan Jue couldn't help respect the old man, who's stoic features were trained on the younger adept. He unclipped his harness, saying "Elder, even if you didn't promise to improve my ship, I'd still help you with this. Would it be alright if I ask how much a pod like this will eventually cost?"

The Bookworm nodded. "Because of the many items needed in order for the pod itself to resist Discipline power, it's quite expensive. At least ten times the cost of modern sim pods. However, we might have found a way to get around that. It has to do with the various levels of Discipline and Adepts, and using pods specific to them. In this way we can solve a pressing issue. After all, the destructive power of a first-rank Adept and a

ninth-ranked Adept is enormously different. Moreover, ninth-ranked Adepts usually won't be in dire enough financial straits to be unable to purchase one. What's you're looking at is one of the latter models, capable of sustaining against anyone but a paragon. Virtually indestructible. But I warn you... if you do decide to participate in this testing program you must complete it in its entirety. Otherwise, the program will believe you're still testing and won't let you exit. There is no way for me to open it from the outside. The entire testing process takes about three hours, and we have more than enough time before we reach Skyfire."

Lan Jue's eyes flashed in anticipation. "No problem. It's my honor to help you complete this test."

The Bookworm nodded. He slapped his right hand against the side of the pod, and slowly it's doors opened to reveal the small cockpit within.

The exterior of the machine didn't look any different from the sim pods already in use, but for a small keyboard similar to the one found on the outside of mech suits. At a glance, no one would be able to tell this machine was any different from the hundreds of others scattered throughout the Alliances.

Lan Jue wasted no time in climbing in.

The Bookworm's voice followed him in. "After the door closes, the test will begin. Don't hold back, pay attention to the pod's reactions. I'll be able to watch from outside as well."

"Alright." Lan Jue shot the Bookworm a big thumbs up to indicate he understood.

The pod door slowly began to close. It shut with a hiss, completely isolating Lan Jue from the outside world.

Su He swept his eyes towards the Bookworm. "Professor... are you sure this is alright?"

The Bookworm scowled at his disciple. "What's not alright? Would you like to take his place? This punk dared to try and deceive me, heh, we'll see how long before he begs for death. In fact this probably isn't even a

bad thing for him. That old bastard asked him to come on his behalf, so he must like him quite a lot. Trusts him. I'm simply curious how much he can take, since the lying scrooge gave him this task. In a little while why don't you go check up on the one that passed out. See how his body has reacted."

"Yes, Professor," Su He said. He dare not say anything further.

The Bookworm then returned to his seat and, calling forth his own inter-dimensional locker, produced a strange helmet from within. He quickly placed it on his head.

ζ

As the doors closed, Lan Jue's world was plunged in to darkness. He dutifully, almost unconsciously affixed his harness even without any light. He wore no flight suit, since he'd assumed he wouldn't need it on their journey on Zeus-1, and so instead was seated comfortably in his leisure clothes. He unconsciously placed his hands on the control board. He knew it all explicitly, by feel.

A helmet slowly descended from somewhere, fitting itself to his head.

"Neural connection established. Test commencing." Suddenly, the interior of the pod lit up. Lan Jue found himself somewhere else entirely.

It looked like an arena, upon which he stood nestled in a sim mecha suit. The suit itself didn't appear to be special in any way. Just a normal fighter. Nor was there any energy bar present – so it appeared the energy restrictions had been removed for this simulation.

"Test One: hand speed. Please avoid the incoming mortar attacks. You may not avoid the strikes by neutralizing them. If the mortars score a hit, the test will end. The emotionless electronic voice filled the pod. As soon as the instructions were delivered, arcs of golden light began to rapidly approach from all directions. There appeared to be ten incoming strikes in all, all of which descending quickly right where Lan Jue waited.

It wasn't a mass attack, this first volley. Instead, it seemed designed to restrict his dodging options. That was even more frightening than a wall

of mortar shells.

Lan Jue, however, felt no pressure as the golden light washed over him.

Slowly, Lan Jue's mecha dropped in to a crouch. Then, in a flash, he exploded off of the arena floor, becoming little more than a flashing beam of light.

Outside of the pod the Bookworm nodded, causing his helmet to wobble atop his head. "Disordered advance. Nice. Decent hand speed."

The piercing bolts of light drew ever nearer. Lan Jue, however, was like a strange silver fish flopping from one location to another. He would wait until just the right moment, then leap out of the way.

This was a test you could participate in using normal pods as well, though the difficulty level of this far outstripped the one offered in DreamNet.

By Lan Jue's estimation, a hand speed of even forty wouldn't be enough to pass this opening part of the test. Clearly this test was designed for god-ranked pilots.

More waves approached. As he watched not only did they become more intense, but also appeared to be coming faster. They tore through the air, bringing with them a screeching, ear-piercing wail.

Sound interference? They were coming faster.

Lan Jue's mecha matched the increase in speed. Flashing, racing faster, even changing location as they drew closer. Sometimes they would be little more than distant dots of light, and then sometimes they would be clear and closer than they appeared. Still, none could come close to the wild mecha, which danced between the blasts effortlessly.

On occasion, Lan Jue would also employ ghost abilities and similar high-level skills to avoid the strikes.

As the test progressed Lan Jue was pleased to discover his silver suit was capable of taking quite a beating. No matter how Lan Jue chose to use it, the suit reacted normally. There were no indications that it was being

pushed too far. He felt like he could relax his inherent caution.

Lan Jue was further surprised to discover that he was able to perform his maneuvers and actions calmly, without excess effort. His reaction time, hand speed, everything was far from his limit.

Once an Adept had reached the levels Lan Jue had, their understanding of their own body reached a keen knowledge others were incapable of. Any difference could result in a significant effect at ninth-ranked. Of course his also meant that even the slightest increase in hand speed at this level was a heroic feat. Lan Jue could feel that his hand speed wasn't the same as it used to be.

Ten minutes later.

Lan Jue's fingers danced like specters across the keyboard. Were others able to see the scores of incoming attacks, they would be horrified. One after the other fell in terrifying volleys, with no gaps in between them!

Still, the silver light danced in between them, again and again just barely avoiding obliteration.

For this test, just one of those dangerous bolts of light would spell the end.

Outside, the Bookworm occasionally slapped the armrest of his chair, betraying his displeasure with the situation. With his helmet he was able to see everything Lan Jue did – and how he did it.

Fifteen minutes later.

Bolts of lightning had begun to race along Lan Jue's body. The silver mecha had also, at some unknown adopted a blue hue, and it's speed had increased exponentially from when they began. Still the blue light deftly avoided the attacks from all directions. He was too fast for the human eye to see, at this point.

Twenty minutes!

"Booommm!" The sound of a detonation ripped through the cockpit. The lights vanished, and things returned to as they were at the onset of the

test.

Lan Jue's hands shook slightly. He shook them to try and bring some life back to his fingers. Beads of sweat had begun to congregate on his forehead.

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1. For those of us who aren't robotics engineers:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manipulator>

Chapter 214: The God-Ranked Battle

The constant, high-speed maneuvers were difficult for Lan Jue to keep track off. Indeed, he'd already lost track of how long he'd been dodging. He did know that, at around the thirteen-minute mark, he'd begun using his lightning discipline. Thankfully the machine worked as the Bookworm assured – it was able to read and translate his discipline in to the simulation. Through that power he was able to inject his mecha and make it move the way it did.

But really, it was a carefree and enjoyable experience to test one's limits! He'd been involved in very many tests over the years, but in all of those he couldn't recall one that went to the length this one did.

His hands ached, but there was a competitive excitement in his eyes.

It was a gift, and to him it seemed like there really was no difference in the simulation and the real world.

Also, through the course of the test, he found himself to be stronger than he remembered after his recovery. Even his hand speed had improved.

“Test complete. Hand speed: ninety CPS [1]. Total peak hand speed unknown. Peak hand speed for the first test: ninety CPS.”

Ninety?! I've reached ninety commands! Lan Jue stifled a gasp at the surprising results.

He'd been stuck at eighty-seven for six years. It wasn't as though he hadn't vigorously trained to change that in the past, but he hadn't had many opportunities to train it.

Now he was hearing from the simulation that he'd reached that hurdle, and passed it.

What's more, that may not even be his peak speed.

Of course Lan Jue was not aware that his mysterious increase in power was a result of the Silkworm Discipline that'd saved him. The power that had poured through him was enough not only to heal his ruined body, but

improve it. Lan Jue was only starting to clearly see the benefits his troubled have reaped.

Outside the simulator.

Slap! The Bookworm viciously smacked the armrest of his chair with a wrinkled hand.

Su He, recently returned from checking on the comatose Accountant, jumped at the sound.

“The kid actually passed! Hmph! But we have more fun in store for him, and I doubt he’ll be able to handle it!”

Within the simulation.

“Practical combat skill determination commencing. Please note, pilots will feel the simulation as they would in real life. Battles will continue until complete, or until the pilot sustained critical, life threatening damage.”

The cold mechanical voice hung in the small sim pod.

Practical combat, eh? Lan Jue’s eyes flashed with anticipation. He was excited to get started.

“Weapons selection.”

Several sorts of weapons, of many different styles and sorts, appeared before the silver mecha for selection.

Lan Jue picked up a spear with very little consideration necessary. He reached out for another, but they all vanished.

A beam of red light appeared in the distance. It was a mecha, ruby in color, that released a fiery red aura as it raced his way. This was a practical combat test, he recalled, not a competition. As such, there wouldn’t be any

starting whistle or other outside indications.

His simulated opponent bore a large sword, with a blade as red as the rest of the suit. In the span of a few breaths, he'd arrived before Lan Jue.

The silver mecha braced itself by shifting its left foot back and bringing its spear up before it.

The encroaching red light fell to earth. Lan Jue did not move.

With a flash the red light washed over him. It was startling, but left no damage. The Jewelry Master suddenly thrust his weapon straight upwards.

Dink! The sound of impact rang out. The red mecha shivered, lost its balance and tumbled to the side.

It was clear now that the first appearance of the red mecha had been a mirage. The simulation was employing ghosting techniques.

The Silver mech moved the instant the red light flashed over him, shimmering with arcs of blue electricity. He was like a bullet, charging ferociously towards his enemy with spear outstretched.

The red mecha, in response, swept its sword back once it got back to its feet. A fiery red aura sprung to life around it.

The silver mecha continued its approach. The suit's forward motion was clear at the onset, but suddenly Lan Jue shifted, approaching obliquely. A flash, and then his direction changed again. He left a dazzling blue contrail in his wake, tracing his erratic advance.

The spear flashed keenly in the Jewelry Master's hand. The strange conical blue light that followed him vanished, as the silver mecha disappeared from view. Then, without warning, Lan Jue barreled headlong in to the red mecha.

Boooooom! The ensuing impact was so intense that it seemed the whole simulation shook. Lan Jue's opponent was thrust to the ground like a sack of metal parts. The fire that surrounded it spread out in all directions. Lan Jue took the moment to recover his balance and, with a vicious swipe of his spear, obliterated the spot where the pilot's cockpit would be.

Boooooommmmm! Lan Jue's unfortunate opponent exploded, with shrapnel flying every which way. The pieces dissolved in to disparate flashes of light, then vanished.

As his first opponent vanished in to oblivion, a second mecha appeared a distance away. This one was orange, and a sniper judging by the similarly-colored rifle it bore. A moment after appearing, a frighteningly fast orange light raced towards him. The orange mecha reappeared at Lan Jue's back.

The silver mecha vanished, as though it ceased to exist in the simulation. When he was spotted once again, he was floating in the air overhead. With a ferocious blast, the mech raced towards the orange attacker at impossible speeds.

It was working. His power was flooding through the suit, forcing it to move at the speed of a lightning bolt!

The orange suit was pretty quick itself, but whether from programming limitations or simply a failure of the suit, it couldn't compete with Lan Jue's speed.

The following encounters between the two were brief, vicious, and in the end there was nothing left of the orange mecha but a pile of scrap metal. Arenas were really no place for a sniper.

In no more time it took to tie his shoes, Lan Jue had defeated two challengers, both coded to be god-ranked. They were only just the beginning stages of God-ranked, though. Despite his apparent dominance, he knew that extended battles like this would really put a strain on his capabilities.

More importantly, though, it was also pushing him towards the peak of his prowess. The unbridled emulated combat, his hand speed... he lost himself in the moment. There was nothing else he need consider but for the obstacles before him.

The result: two God-ranked challengers, defeated in less than five minutes.

The next enemy to reveal themselves was a yellow mecha. The moment the mecha appeared, Lan Jue knew it wasn't like the others.

The orange mecha hadn't had time to completely employ its Discipline before Lan Jue put an end to it. This yellow one, though... it was smart enough to use it right away.

The moment it landed the ground beneath its feet became an earthen yellow [2]. Immediately following, great boulders extricated themselves and rose of their own accord in to the air. Lan Jue stood in the midst of them and, as he looked on, the numerous crushing stones fell towards him from all directions.

The yellow mecha blended well with the tempestuous boulders, disappearing among them.

Earth Discipline! What's more, even the topography bowed to the whim of this simulated enemy.

The question was, how would it manifest itself?

The silver mecha rose in to the air amidst a shower of sparks and lightning. The boulders raced towards him and just as Lan Jue's escape seemed impossible the sky suddenly became a deep, navy blue. From the cloudless sky, scores of angry lightning bolts crashed to earth.

The arcing bolts of electricity blanketed the entire Arena. As they fell, they exploded against the levitating hunks of stone. The fractured pebbles were flung every which way, as the many earthen projectiles were obliterated.

Strength in the face of one's enemies! This was Lan Jue's creed!

His enemy's invisibility was too strong, his cover too wide. He decided to play upon the strength of his Discipline: to blanket the world in lightning!

Under that terrifying anger from the heavens, and the cascading debris of burning rock – who could survive? His enemy had chosen to become his element. Lan Jue used his own to destroy it.

The skies quieted abruptly, the shuddering roar of thunder peeling

through the sky. Bits and pieces of the yellow mecha – most no bigger than a screw – tumbled to the ground in a shower of slag.

Lan Jue had no respite. Next came green, cyan, blue and purple mechas.

Lan Jue determined that they must also possess elemental powers. Notably the purple one, which bore a very rare Discipline: Darkness. Now, not only would Lan Jue have to contend with the inherent caustic properties of the Discipline, he'd also have to do it in the dark.

It took him ten minutes.

Seven battles. Seven mechas. Seven heaps of scrap.

Scars and scraps dotted Lan Jue's battered silver warrior. However, despite the damage it looked ready to take on another seven.

Within the sim pod, Lan Jue was soaked through with sweat. His eyes were bright as the stars.

Outside of the sim pod, the bookworm clutched the armrest with a white-knuckled grip.

Within the simulation, sunlight flashed off of a silver mecha as it came to ground a distance from Lan Jue. It was slower than its predecessors, more dramatic. It gave Lan Jue a moment to catch his breath.

Lan Jue could sense that, after seven intense battles, his Discipline was strained. It was to be expected, since his enemies have all been God-ranked ninth-level adepts!

The purple mech he'd disposed of was ninth-level seventh rank Darkness adept. That was where he'd expected the majority of his energy. Where it not for his innate double Disciplines, for their combines power, he'd probably have lost long ago.

Now came the eighth. Judging by the exterior, this silver mecha looked a lot like his own.

Lan Jue could instantly sense a danger about this one. It was a sensation he was familiar with.

If the former sequence was being upheld, then this time he'd be facing a

Ninth-level Eighth-rank fighter. With his powers so diminished, how could he defend himself?

A ghost of a smile emerged on Lan Jue's sweat-soaked face. He lifted his left hand from the keyboard, and slowly clenched his fingers in to a fist.

A halo of dim blue light slowly spread outward. The light wasn't strong, and bore no intense aura. But there was something strange.

Lan Jue's eyes flashed a bluish-purple, and the light that surrounded his suit adopted the same hue.

Outside of the sim pod.

"The hell is this? A phylactery?" The Bookworm shook with impudent rage. He'd seen Lan Jue defeat the seven previous mechas. Seven of them, all God-ranked! And still he fought.

His simulated opponent had unlimited energy to employ. A real adept had so much luxury! These fights had drained him immensely, and already Lan Jue was surprised he had more to give. How much longer could he hold out?

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1. Commands Per Second.
2. As an interesting aside, yellow is the color of earth in China. I assume, though I have no proof to back it up, it's because the color of the soil – especially in the north – is a very pale tan, almost yellow. Compare this to, say, farming communities in the U.S. where healthy dirt is very dark. where in Mauritius its mostly red or brown. my garden has ash-like colour as it was a colonial graveyard and dump site (lots of bullets).

Chapter 215: Little Monster

The bluish-purple power enveloped him, Lan Jue could feel his discipline recovering. The phylactery stone embedded in his palm was the last bit of energy he could draw from.

And it was enough: phylactery stones stored enough to satiate Paragons!

The Bookworm glowered bad-temperedly as he watched the simulation unfold. But he was confident this eighth mecha would prove to be the young man's undoing.

With a flash, Lan Jue's silvery opponent vanished. Then, bolts of a strange black power bloomed to life all around him. Powerful vacuums pulled at him every which way, causing his suit to lose balance.

Inter-spacial Discipline! Tears in the fabric of space!

Lan Jue was stunned. He finally understood why his opponent had seemed so familiar – it was the Wine Master's aura.

The silver challenger appeared once more in the sky above him. As he looked up, he was met with a silvery beam crashing down from on high. An orb of silvery light, containing with an unstable inter-spacial core.

In terms of explosive power, the inter-spacial disciplines weren't quite a match for thunder. However, if you were to consider them by the metric of pure destructiveness the two were quite evenly matched.

The electric power surrounding Lan Jue's suite fluctuated violently. The outer layer prepared itself from the oppressive strike of the orb.

Just before impact, the manifestation of Lan Jue's power changed, adopting a brilliant golden hue. The majestic, battered mecha he commanded was suddenly surrounded by an overpowering golden aura.

"Skies, defend!" A commanding voice filled the arena. Everything stopped. It was as though the world had frozen, and now everything in their surroundings was painted gold.

The entire simulation.

“Moron, what are you doing!? Stop it!” The Bookworm quickly lept to his feet and sent a wave of light careening towards the sim pod. The errant power lay over the pod like a membrane, blanketing it.

Within the simulation.

The engineered world around him vanished. The Bookworm’s irritated face appeared in the darkness before Lan Jue.

“Ehm...” Lan Jue sheepishly avoided the old man’s irritated expression. He immediately allowed his Discipline to disperse.

Screeeetch. The sim pod’s hatch creaked open allowing a plume of dark smoke to billow free.

Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo had raced over. They rustled to see inside and spotted Lan Jue’s sweat-soaked form. He looked fine, though, so the women visibly relaxed.

The Bookworm, who looked to be mostly dead most days, moved with a speed that was simply staggering. He effortlessly yanked Lan Jue from the simulator. His voice was furious. “Look at what you did! What the hell were you thinking?! Who told you to use proto powers? [1] Did I not tell you this machine can’t sustain Paragon level abilities?”

“Hack, cough!” Lan Jue coughed, giving the Bookworm an awkward and apologetic glance. “I’m very sorry, sir. It wasn’t intentional. I was caught up in the fight... I forgot it wasn’t real. You really made something incredible here. A damn miracle, almost. Ever since attaining God-rank, I felt like DreamNet had nothing more to offer me. Now, it has the capabilities to employ Discipline. It’s a game changer. Elder, you’re amazing. I’m sure your name will go down in history as one of the Three Alliances’ greatest scientists.”

The Bookworm’s face softened under the deluge of praise. He let go of Lan Jue’s shirt. “Change your clothes, you stink. This little... monster!”

Lan Jue chortled and trotted off. It had been two hours of joyful, carefree practice. Excitement still filled him with energy.

It had also been his first time tapping in to the phylactery stone. Every

day during his meditations he'd inject some of his energy in to the stone, but he had yet to fill it entirely. One could only imagine the staggering amount of power it could contain. Just then it had taken him only a dozen seconds to have his power returned to just under half. It was a point he had to remember – It could heavily influence his combat time. Previously he had to be careful not to overtax himself, and be economical. Now, not so much.

As Lan Jue made his exit, the Bookworm stared forlornly at his ruined invention. He busied himself with diagnosing the problem.

His original hope had been to watch Lan Jue suffer a vicious beating in the simulation. But who'd have thought he'd actually break the damn thing. Though it was, after all, only a semi-finished product.

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Zeus-1 steadily made its descent into the Skyfire public airship hangar. The Accountant was still in a coma as they touched down. Lan Jue had to sling him over his shoulder before disembarking. There were too many people to handle on his own, so Lan Jue had to hire another verti-car to fit them all. Thus they all made their way to the Avenue together.

The car stopped just outside of the Avenue. As they approached, Lan Jue used his Councilman's batch to get Su He and the Bookworm temporary blue badges for entry.

"Elder, will you be visiting the Keeper right away?" Lan Jue asked.

The Bookworm's face was strange. His expression was almost sentimental. There was something there, but whether it was regret or pure madness was difficult to discern. Eventually, he nodded his affirmation.

"Let's go. I want to see if that wrinkled toad really is dying."

Lan Jue and Su He exchanged a look. Lan Jue pondered for a moment, then spoke again. "I'll accompany you. Xiuxiu, Guoguo, you guys head

back. I'll take the Tear now."

"Yes boss," Xiuxiu responded. She immediately fished the Tear from her luggage and handed it over.

He Bookworm's eyes flashed as he watched the exchange. "You bought it, eh? From the auction?"

Lan Jue smiled. "I have a use for it, elder. You'll see later, I suspect. Shall we? This way, please." As he spoke, Lan Jue urged him on with a welcoming motion.

The Bookworm slapped his hand away. "I know this place better than you do," the crotchety old man rumbled. He stomped off down the Avenue with big strides.

Lan Jue and Su He fanned out behind the old man. The Accountant bounced along on Lan Jue's shoulder.

As always, a permeating sense of peace and calm surrounded the library. Anyone who came here to actually read the books understood that there were a number of strict stipulations. For instance, damaging a book required the culprit to offer another of equal value, or otherwise you paid with your life.

As one can imagine, the result was very few visitors. The books were all in pristine condition, though.

Upon entering the Library, the Bookworm ignored all that and stomped directly to the stairwell. Still his nose twitched incessantly as he did, taking in the particular aroma of an old book shop. He bore an expression of regret.

Returned at last. But why, he pondered, did he not feel any joy over it?

He moved through the place without even having to look around. He was as familiar with it as he was his replica back on Lir.

Once he got to the Keeper's office, he didn't even knock. He simply pulled open the door and walked inside.

As the door opened, the large swivel chair behind the enormous office

desk swung around. An old, craggy face came in to view.

“I was just wondering who would be so uncivilized as to just barge in, then I remembered you were coming,” the Keeper’s frail voice called out.

The Bookworm spat out his response. “Who are you calling uncivilized?! You’re the uncivilized one! And a soon to be dead swine as well. Hurry up and die, piss off, give my library back to me.”

Lan Jue pushed his way in, the Accountant still slung over his back. He eventually maneuvered him on to a nearby chair.

“What did you do to my grandson,” the Keeper grumbled.

“I poisoned him,” the Bookworm replied.

The Keeper sighed. “You’re a senior citizen. Can’t you act like a normal human person?”

“Bullshit,” the old man said crassly. “What’s not normal about me? I’m a hell of a lot more normal than you! You shit Paragon, mister Arcane Magus, you can’t even extend your own life. What right have you got to talk.”

“I was lying,” the Keeper said in that same quiet voice.

“Lied? Pfft-“ The Bookworm’s response was automatic, but after a second the words sunk in and his pupils narrowed. When he spoke again his voice was monstrously enraged. “W-what?! You lied? You’re not dying?!”

The Keeper chuckled, unfazed. “Mmhm! By the time you’re dust I’ll still be stomping around.”

Lan Jue suddenly had the sense he should leave the two alone, and escape while he still could. It was getting more dangerous by the second!

He stooped down to pick up the Accountant once again when he heard a voice from behind him. “It’s fine, leave him there,” the Keeper said. “Give me that Tear of Neptune.”

“Eh?” Lan Jue straightened and faced the old man. “How did you know I was bringing you the Tear?”

The Keeper chuckled, this time bearing a note of polite disdain. “We think alike. I heard that this s-ranked gem had been sold, then remembered you were in Lir. Then since I was already looking, I checked through the Tear’s information. By coincidence, I tapped in to the auction feed just in time to see you purchase it. Not bad, it holds promise.”

Lan Jue was speechless. Coincidence? He was expected to believe that? People could just willy-nilly tap in to auction house video feeds?

“I’ll kill you myself, then, you rotten bastard!” A figure raced wildly at the Keeper.

“Wait!” The Keeper shot out a hand, and the Bookworm skidded to a halt. “Let me show you something, then you can continue with your murderous rampage.”

The Keeper produced a box as he spoke. Within lay the energy core they’d ripped from the Tai Hua monster.

It immediately drew the old exile’s eye. The anger, however, remained. “I’ll tear you apart in a little while.” With a flick of his wrist, an instrument of some sort appeared in the Bookworm’s hand. He swept it over the box.

With the crazy old men occupied, Lan Jue felt it safe enough to approach and hand over the Tear, safely nestled in its crystal box. The Keeper smiled in thanks, then wordlessly motioned for him to depart.

Lan Jue smiled in return, proud at completing his mission. Indeed, it seemed the Bookworm’s ‘anger’ wouldn’t result in any misfortune.

Lan Jue soundlessly made his exit, pulling Su He along behind him.

His former classmate looked worried. “You think the two of them will be ok?”

Lan Jue smirked. “They’ll be fine. If your teacher was really as angry as he let on, they wouldn’t be pouring over research material together. I also believe, now that the Keeper has convinced the Bookworm to show up, he’ll find a way to convince him. Let’s let the two old friends work it out on their own. Let’s go, I’ll show you where you’re staying.”

1. Lazy translating. I believe earlier I translated the ability to fundamentally alter the rules of nature/physics as 'protogenic'.

Chapter 216: Stealing in to the Boudoir

Su He breathed a sigh of relief. “So long as there isn’t going to be any trouble, then great. I was so determined for a vacation, and was worried my plans would be dashed to pieces. I’ll stay for another couple of days to observe, and if there really aren’t any problems I’ll be on my way.”

Lan Jue lead Su He to Skyfire Avenue, where he’d arranged a room in a luxury hotel for his friend. After dropping him off, Lan Jue didn’t immediately return to his shop. Instead, he returned to where the high-alt verti-car had been waiting.

The Soulcaller gem hummed with power:

Lan Jue: I’ back.

Zhou Qianlin: Ah, you’re back quick!

What are you up to?

Meditation. What you taught me. I feel like it’s very useful. I can feel the energies moving within me, it’s very interesting. This is Discipline, huh? What exactly is my Discipline?

Once your Discipline has been cultivated to a certain level, it will reveal itself on its own. Maybe you’ll turn in to a tigress.

YOU’RE a tigress!

How about I go meet you. I bought a little special something on Lir I want to give you. And by the way I can see where you’re Discipline’s at.

Alright, so when will you be here?

Ten minutes. I’ll meet you downstairs.

Alright, I’ll tell the guards.

No need. We don’t have to trouble others. I have my ways.

Oh.

Their conversation ended there. Lan Jue’s McKelly verti-car soundlessly rose in to the air, and took off in a beam of light.

Zhou Qianlin leaped from the bed and immediately went to her closet. She nibbled her lower lip as she rummaged through her options, eventually extricating a white dress. She changed quickly, pulling her loose hair in to a pony-tail. It was a very relaxed look. Her eyes couldn't conceal her excitement.

Five minutes later.

Tap tap! A soft noise came from the window lattice.

Qianlin shot to her feet and made for the window. She drew back the window curtain to reveal Lan Jue outside, clad in black.

She shut off the infrared security measures, and pulled open the window. Lan Jue silently pulled himself in. Safely inside, Qianlin took a quick peep outside before shutting the window and pulling the curtain.

"You're pretty good at skulking around. You'd make a good burglar." Zhou Qianlin said through a grin.

Lan Jue couldn't respond, he was too busy lost in thought after seeing her in the white dress. However, he recovered fairly quickly.

"How have things been at school these last few days?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Nothing special. Richard went back to the West and hasn't returned. Other than that, everything's more or less back to normal. Of course everyone's still excited about the concert and our victory over Lir. They had quite the influence on our school. The mecha combat department is tearing ahead at full speed, and Professor Tan has been given tenure. She isn't even thirty, and already the youngest tenured professor in the school's history."

Lan Jue smiled. "I'll be taking that title in the near future, probably."

Qianlin could only roll her eyes. "You. A tenured professor. Your work week consists of three days fishing, two days sunbathing. You can count the number of classes you've taught on one hand. Oh, by the way I heard a

few students talking about you the other day. I had suggestions.”

“Oh?” Lan Jue replied.

“They like your teaching style,” she began, “but your lifestyle is very different from most of the students. So, I suggest you tailor your classes more towards things they’ll actually encounter. I bet that’ll get you an even better response.”

Lan Jue was speechless. His face was scrunched in thought as he pondered her recommendation. She’s right, he thought. I’ve been addressing them, teaching them as though they were already nobility. That’s not a bad thing, but they’re still too young and too unrefined for a lot of the content. I think it best I teach them about fine liquors another time.

Zhou Qianlin went on. “I’m not saying your classes aren’t good, just...”

Lan Jue waved his hand, cutting her off. “I understand, you had good intentions. And you’re absolutely right. I really hadn’t thought about it until you said so, after all this is my first semester teaching. I’ll make the necessary changes.”

Qianlin smiled pleasantly at him. “Great. It was your own decision to teach etiquette anyway. If you’d come as a mecha combat instructor we wouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

Lan Jue huffed. “If I had all the other instructors would be out of a job. That’s no good, am I right?”

Qianlin’s lips curled in to a smirk. “Megalomaniac.”

Lan Jue, taller than she, looked her over, followed the curve of her slender neck. He puckered his lips thoughtfully. “Alright, let me see how your Discipline is progressing.”

Qianlin’s face reddened ever so slightly. “How are you going to do that?”

“Give your hand,” Lan Jue answered.

“Ok!” She stuck her hand out towards him. Just then, a voice called. “Qianlin? Are you asleep? You ate so little at dinner, I brought you a glass

of warm milk. Drink it before you go to bed.”

The voice was getting closer. The last few words were spoken just outside her door.

Lan Jue, by this point, was holding her hand in his. For a moment the two of them were in a daze, unsure of what to do. It was the first time they'd encountered an interruption, especially under such clandestine circumstances, and both were at a loss.

Knock, knock, knock!

Lan Jue reacted first, pulling Qianlin in to his arms and speaking quietly in her ear. “Answer the door, I'll hide.” He nudged her towards the voice, and she obliged.

As her hand gripped the doorknob, she unconsciously turned back. Lan Jue was already gone from sight.

She pulled open the door.

Her mother, Bai Xiao [1], stood outside. In her hand she bore a tray, upon which was a glass of gently steaming milk, and a cookie.

“Qianlin, are you alright? Why is your face so red?” She walked in to the room, concern written on her face.

“I'm fine,” she replied hastily. “My face is red? Probably because I just took a shower, so I'm still a little hot.”

Bai Xiao placed the treats she'd bought on a nearby nightstand. She gave her daughter the once over, her face skeptical. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed something on the floor.

“Ah, darling, your floor is so dirty!”

Qianlin gulped. “Really? Yeah I guess so. I'll clean it up.”

Bai Xiao nodded. “Go get a cloth.”

Qianlin entered the bathroom connected to her room. Her heart beat like a drum; she didn't know where Lan Jue was hiding, and he could be found at any moment.

She pulled open the bathroom door. Lan Jue was nowhere to be seen.

As Qianlin left to find a rag, her mother furtively rushed to look under the bed. Then the writing desk. Then the closet.

Qianlin returned in time to see her mother shuffling through her things. She blinked. “Ma, what are you doing?”

Bai Xiao shut the closet door, smiling sheepishly. “Mama’s just checking to see if you need any new clothes! It seems like you prefer white clothes these days. I see it more and more in your things.”

“Yeah,” she replied, nodding her head.

“Ai-you, [2]” Bai Xiao whined. “Mama’s tummy hurts. I’m going to use your restroom.” She didn’t wait for a response, immediately making for the door while covering her belly.

Qianlin dropped in to a squat and begun cleaning up the dust on her floor. Tiny beads of sweat had begun to form on her brow. She mustn’t fall for her trap! How could she face her mother? A man in her room, so late at night...

After a short while Bai Xiao reappeared from the bathroom. She smiled pleasantly. “Alright dear, make sure to go to sleep early, I’ll leave you to yourself.”

“Thanks mom. You make sure to rest, too.” Qianlin followed her mother to the door.

Once her mother was outside, and the door locked behind her, Qianlin breathed a long sigh of relief.

Just as she was about to call out for Lan Jue, a finger pressed against her red lips. The Soulcaller gem warmed.

“Shh.”

Qianlin, wide-eyed, turned her head to look to the side. She spied Lan Jue, flickering in an undulating aura of blue light. He’d just crackled out from the nearby wall socket.

Her wide eyes looked at him incredulously.

Bai Xiao was outside her door, ear pressed to the wood. She waited patiently for something, a sound or sign that something was amiss. She eventually left, though suspicion was still clear on her face.

Lan Jue was back to normal shortly afterward, fully extricated from the power socket.

“Alright, she’s gone.” It was Lan Jue’s turn to sigh. “Your mother must have been a forensic detective in a previous life. She has the eyes of a hawk.”

Qianlin stuck her tongue out at him. “Yeah! I was told she used to be an investigator. A shrewd one. But how in the world did you get in to a power socket?!”

“Lightning is my discipline,” he explained. “Part of that is I can become lightning. By virtue of the transformation I can follow any electrical or power line.”

“That’s amazing,” she said. “But, that means... you can enter my room through the socket, there’s no need for the window.”

“Hack, cough, ehm!” Lan Jue’s mind filled with memories of the one time he’d done just that. He stuttered over himself as he answered. “I- impossible, see, cuz, your house has protective measures in place for electricity. Surge protectors and the like, right? I can only stay changed like that for a short time anyway. Yeah... yeah, so there ya go.”

“Really.” Zhou Qianlin fixed him with her gaze.

Lan Jue looked like the very avatar of truth and morality. “Of course really! Alright, let’s get on with this check.” He snatched up her hand.

Qianlin felt a tingle go through her arm, making her cheeks redden once more. She didn’t fight him.

After a few minutes Lan Jue relinquished her hand. Now it was his turn to be shocked.

“Your cultivation is progressing very quickly... unnaturally so. From nothing to something, and first-ranked too. It’s not a terribly difficult

landmark to reach, but in only a few days? To improve so quickly, without any outside forces to help... it's inconceivable."

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1. Means White Dawn.
2. Literally the sound every middle-aged Chinese woman makes.

Chapter 217: The Pearl's Defense

The first time Lan Jue had performed this check of Zhou Qianlin's abilities, they had just indistinct and only just beginning to manifest within her. This time, however, there was no mistaking its presence. It was far more substantial than it was the last time. For an Adept whose powers just awakened, didn't even know what their discipline was... it was startling, the speed at which it was evolving.

"It must mean your genetic talent is very strong..."

Generally speaking, the strength of one's innate talent and the speed at which their Discipline grew were inexplicably tied. As everyone's level of congenital talent was different, so too was their cultivation speed. The better their Talent, the faster their improvement. If, for instance, a person's Talent could reach in the levels of ninth-rank, even if they didn't spend time cultivating their abilities they would rise to a certain plateau all on its own.

Some people express it as genetic talent being the denominator, and their actual power level as the numerator. The higher the denominator, the easier it was for the numerator to quickly increase. But if the numerator wanted to break the bonds of its denominator, it would take special circumstances.

Whether through the West's Fantascia Genetica Decoction, or the North's cyborg programs, there were ways to break that denominator or catalyze its evolution.

But 'quick' couldn't appropriately describe the speed at which Zhou Qianlin's powers were rising. Lan Jue thought back to his own youth, when his discipline had just awakened. His growth wasn't nearly this fast. Jin Tao was the only person who could match it, and that was due to the genetica decoction.

"Is there a problem?" Qianlin asked.

Lan Jue shook his head. "Nope. It's just your progress is incredibly fast. Strange. We should keep this under surveillance. We'll wait a little while

then check again, maybe then we'll be able to get a clearer picture. I had no idea it was even possible for something like this to happen to someone your age."

"What do you mean 'my age'?" Qianlin said through a frown. "Are you saying I'm old?"

Lan Jue grinned ruefully. "No, of course not. Much younger than this body guard. By the way, I brought you a souvenir." As he spoke there was a flash of silver light, and suddenly a crystal box was in his hands.

The Pelagic Pearl twinkled within, awash in misty blue light. It tinted the entire room, like a drizzly afternoon.

"It's beautiful." Qianlin admired. Her face betrayed the surprise.

Lan Jue flipped the box open and extricated the pearl. The thing itself was very small, perhaps the size of a cherry, and yet looking at it was like staring at a portrait of the universe. It was covered in layers of gradient blue, making it look like you were peering in to the misty depths of space.

He placed the pearl in her hand. "Make sure to take good care of this. There may come a time when you're in danger and I can't immediately reach you. If that happens, pour your Discipline in to the pearl. It'll create an elemental ward that will protect you. But first make sure you cover it with a drop or two of your blood. It's necessary for the pearl to recognize you and your power. Afterwards the pearl will head your command."

Surprise emerged written across Zhou Qianlin's pretty features. "This must have been very expensive. I can't accept it."

"Nah not expensive at all," Lan Jue lied. "Anyway, this is me doing my job! Another way to make sure you're being protected. After all, I can't be at your side all day every day. What if I have to take a trip to another planet? With the pearl in your possession, it makes me feel better. I can relax a little. You should think of some way to keep it on you at all times. A necklace, earring or something. When you find out what you like I can help have it made for you. For now, just keep it around."

Qianlin was still shaking her head. She stuffed it back in Lan Jue's hand.

“Really too valuable. I don’t want it.”

Lan Jue had bought the pearl at auction specifically to give Qianlin. He hadn’t thought that she wouldn’t want it. It certainly wasn’t something he anticipated. [1]

“Why not?” He asked. “Just because it’s valuable? You really don’t need to worry about any of that.”

Qianlin raised her head, looking him in the eye. “We are neither relatives nor friends, how could I take something like that from you?”

Lan Jue, seeing she was hesitant, backed away a few steps. “Look, I’m just your bodyguard. Protecting you is my responsibility.”

A calm came over Qianlin’s features. “So you do it yourself, don’t rely on a pearl. I don’t need it.”

Lan Jue looked at her, helpless. “Then how about this; I’ll loan it to you. When my contract is completed and our working relationship resolved, you can give it back. What do you think?”

Suddenly Qianlin smiled, stepping closer to him. “My dear body guard, you must think I’m stupid. Don’t forget that I’m a national scholar in the NEU. You can’t assume I wouldn’t know about Lir’s famed Pelagic Pearl. A high-class, a-ranked power gem that can only bind with a single person. A drop of blood, and it has a master forever.”

Lan Jue just stared at her for a moment, then an embarrassed grin spread across his face. “You sure are well informed boss! Bought I’ve already bought it, and it can’t be returned. If you don’t take, it’s a waste.”

“That’s not my problem,” Qianlin said through a sweet smile. “Alright, it’s time for you to go. A man and a woman alone so late at night is improper.”

Lan Jue looked at her beautiful face, her moist lips, that impish smile. She made him want to throw himself to the ground in a fit. This girl! He thought. She makes me want to-Lan Jue took a calming breath. “I’ve made up my mind, there’s nothing for it. If you want accept it, please forgive my impropriety.”

Qianlin took a cautious step back. “What are you talking about?”

Lan Jue chortled maliciously, and took a step forward. “What do you think?”

Before she could answer, his hand shot out to cover her small mouth. A flash of light, arcs of lightning, and Qianlin collapsed in to his waiting arms.

Lan Jue held up her unconscious form. “You know what, boss? My job as your bodyguard means sometimes I have to take extreme measures to keep you safe. All of this is necessary, as part of my duty.”

He pulled out her hand. A small pinprick of light, no thicker than a needle, appeared from his hand. It struck her finger, and a droplet of blood issued forth.

Lan Jue gently placed the pearl against her finger. As he watched, the pearl drank the blood into itself. The dim light it normally expelled became a powerful halo that bathed the room in blue light.

Then, the light congealed around Zhou Qianlin and was drawn in to her.

Zhou Qianlin’s body was numbed, she could neither move nor speak. But there was always the Soulcaller gem.

Zhou Qianlin: Don’t think you can skirt your duties as my bodyguard by giving me this thing! You absolutely must protect me in person!

Lan Jue: When did I ever say I was trying to get around our deal? I made a promise, and I’m going to stick to it. I may not always be best suited for the job, but isn’t this an example of me protecting you to the best of my abilities? You know I have a lot on my plate, and if something happens when I’m not around what will you do? This is exactly why I brought you the pearl. So behave.

It took a good five minutes for the intense light let off by the pearl to subside. Once again it was the pretty, quiet little pearl it had always been.

Lan Jue finally released Qianlin from the control he’d had over her. She quickly and violently shot to her feet. She was livid. “You forced me!”

Lan Jue coughed uncomfortably. "I've already explained my reasoning. I haven't done anything I wasn't contracted to do, boss."

Zhou Qianlin turned her face away, striking him from existence.

Lan Jue snorted bitterly. "Bite the hand that feeds... this girl can't recognize good intentions!"

Zhou Qianlin's head snapped back to him. In one fluid movement she grabbed his arm, pulled it out, and viciously bit him.

Lan Jue didn't move or attempt to evade. He didn't employ any methods to lessen the pain. He just took it. His expression even bore a sort of softness.

Qianlin veritably gnawed at him, but when she noticed he wasn't reacting she let go. She lifted her head and glared at him.

Her hard eyes met his gentle gaze, and the two simply looked at each other. Her look softened and then, soundlessly, she pressed herself in to his arms.

Her silken tresses had come loose, their fragrance filling his nostrils. The scent was burned on his heart. He raised his arms, as though to wrap them around her, but after a few moments frozen in the air he let them drop. Like he'd lost his nerve.

He took a deep breath, then pulled her to arm's length. "It's late, I should go. You should sleep soon. I'll bring the pearl back once I've fixed it up." Without waiting for her response, he fractured in to a thousand bolts of electricity and vanished in to the wall socket.

Qianlin swayed slightly on her feet, without his weight to support her. It had startled her. She thought back to it, that brief moment... clearly she'd felt there was some impenetrable barrier between them.

Lan Jue made his exit from the villa and Mount Tian as quickly as he was able. He wasted no time returning to Skyfire Avenue.

When he got back, he didn't immediately go to sleep. He pulled out some tools, some precious metals, and set about fiddling about in his

apartments.

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Under the intense heat, the silvery-white metal began to change. Under Lan Jue's deft guidance, slowly it began to take shape.

His cutting tool flashed, slicing away the metal and leaving slivers along his desk. Eventually, a fair and elegant bracelet began to reveal itself.

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Early morning.

Zhou Qianlin washed her face and brushed her teeth, preparing for the morning. Listlessly she picked at her breakfast, then slung on her backpack and silently made for school.

Did he come today? He just got back from Lir yesterday, he's probably too tired. He probably won't be coming.

There was public transportation that served Mount Tian. Certainly she could find something that would bring her to the city. Sometimes, when Lan Jue wasn't around, she would use them to get to school with Tang Mi. Sometimes just herself.

Although she was the Eastern Alliance Chairman's daughter, she was careful not to employ any privileges it might afford her. She was like anyone else. A normal citizen.

*

1. For real woman. It's not a diamond engagement ring, take the damn pearl! Of course, it was more expensive than a couple dozen diamond

rings...

Chapter 218: Quite the Adventure

Today, Zhou Qianlin didn't bother to call Tang Mi. Perhaps there was still some expectation she'd run in to her bodyguard.

She followed the familiar road down mount Tian.

As she did, she noticed the bicycle parked to the side. A familiar figure stood beside it. Grey suit, green shirt, and a grey jacket today. Fresh and clean, with a lopsided grin on his handsome face.

Qianlin couldn't help but mirror the smile the moment she saw him. She quickened her pace to catch up to him.

Lan Jue pushed his bicycle forward as he walked to meet her. Once they met, neither said a word. Qianlin climbed on to the back of the bike and they were on their way.

The antique bicycle carried them smoothly along the road towards the university campus. At once point Lan Jue's left hand left the handle bars just long enough to hand something to Qianlin.

She took it in her hands, a white metal bracelet. It was delicate and beautiful, without any unnecessary flourishes. The pelagic pearl had been set along it's spherical make.

Her lips curled up in an appreciative smile. She said nothing, did not refuse his gift, instead immediately slipping it on to her wrist. Her smile spread wider. She slipped her arms around his waist and scooped closer.

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Tan Lingyun had been agitated for days! Indeed, the Savage Goddess was in a foul mood – worse than normal.

She'd become the focus of everyone's attention since the games, but it was the last thing she wanted. Being constantly under scrutiny wasn't a feeling she relished. What's worse, she didn't even deserve it.

Where is that guy hiding!

She felt like a thief. Every day she accepted the praise and attention of teacher and student alike. As she did, however, she also furtively observed the male faculty for signs they might be the mysterious 'Lei Feng.'

Unfortunately, she'd had no luck. She'd started with the mecha combat department, carefully watching every male teacher there for any indication. Contrary to her hopes, though, nothing revealed itself.

He'd vanished as mysteriously as he'd arrived, like a phantom.

Who? Who on earth is he?!

Tan Lingyun sat within the teacher's lounge, lost in thought. Her fingers were buried in her hair, entangled – much like her heart felt.

For years she'd had a contentious relationship with nearly every man she'd encountered. In her eyes most were trash, hardly worth her attention.

But that day, for the first time in ages she'd met a man who made her feel like a weakling. The encounter had left quite the impression on her.

She couldn't even clearly pinpoint why this strange man suddenly occupied so much of her attention. The only thing she absolutely knew without a doubt, was that she needed to find him. She needed to!

"Professor Tan, isn't your class starting soon?" The teacher seated at the desk next to her offered the gentle reminder.

Tan Lingyun's head shot up, frightening the teacher who'd addressed her. She fixed her hair, muttered a curt thank you, then left for the classroom.

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At the same time, Lan Jue was lazily seated before his own desk. His eyes were closed as he enjoyed the quiet moment.

He was a little tired after his return from Lir, but it was not because of his late-night jewelry-making. Instead, he was still recovering from the exertion of the sim tests he'd endured from the Bookworm.

He was still excited over the prospect of an upgraded DreamNet. Although he hadn't had the opportunity to finish the entire process, the God-ranked battles alone were clear indication of it's worth.

He wondered how the two old friends were getting on. He hopes there weren't any problems.

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Skyfire Avenue, Skyfire Library.

"Eh? It's actually fine. Interesting, interesting!" The Bookworm hopped from foot to foot in excitement like a small child.

The Keeper stood before an expansive testing table. Upon it were arrayed various research equipment. In the center rested the Tear of Neptune. The piece of Tai Hua monster they'd recovered rested upon another apparatus.

At this moment a pale, gentle blue light was being emitted by the tear. It spread until it covered the monster core. The living matter had begun to change as the Tear's power flowed through it.

The turbid aura that surrounded it had faded, and its natural coloration had changed. Little by little it went from purple, to clear, to a deep jasper.

It was a quick change, that took only the night to complete. A dozen or so hours had seen the process through.

Neither the Keeper nor the Bookworm had slept, instead bringing the full force of their collective intellect to bear in researching the items. For researchers of their caliber, a single night of work was only the beginning.

It hadn't taken the Keeper much effort to persuade the Bookworm to help. All he'd needed to do was explain where the subject had come from,

and what he suspected it did. The novelty of it was enough to get the Bookworm's full cooperation.

The Keeper nodded his white-maned head. "It looks good. The Jewelry Master is a clever boy. He thought of this on his own, without my input. The Tear of Neptune itself isn't worth its weight, but if it can join with this energy core and catapult it to s-ranked, then it'd be priceless."

The Bookworm shot him a crooked eye. "So you're hoping to see it release all that energy."

"Horse-puckey," the Keeper grumbled in irritation. "That would be an unimaginable massacre."

There's no saying how many would lose their lives in order to create such an energy crystal."

The Bookworm huffed. "At any rate, purifying it will require no small amount of time. We should address the situation between you and I. You, you old bastard, tricked me to get me back here. You tell me, how do we rectify this?"

The Keeper grunted. "What makes you so sure that I'm lying?"

"You said so," The Bookworm accused.

The Keeper replied. "I only said that so the kid wouldn't worry. Three months. That's really all the time I have left. Everyone assumes this frail exterior is feigned. I've also spread that I am the oldest living man in the universe. However, as you know, I am the oldest among the Paragons. I asked you back because, if and when I do pass, I can do so with an easy heart."

The Bookworm just stared at him for a time. "You're really dying?"

"Shouldn't you be pleased?" The Keeper said quietly.

"Bullshit I should be happy," the Bookworm hissed. "Who will I have to curse? Who will be my arch enemy? How am I supposed to be happy?!" The Bookworm veritably roared at his old nemesis, but there was a sorrow gradually creeping in to angry eyes.

The Keeper gave a small laugh. “If it was a choice, who would choose death? Not you, not me.

My death will undoubtedly effect not only the Avenue, but all of the Eastern Alliance. Worse, the Clairvoyant is nearly as old as I, leaving only the Wine Master to protect our little slice of neutrality now that we’re reaching the end of our stories. The West and North are also aware of this, if only faintly. And so, it’s a fair assumption that they are sending their agents here to feel us out, under the guise of a friendly visit. Not long ago I took a trip to the Pontiff’s Castle myself, both to impart justice on behalf of the Jewelry Master, but also to let them know I’m still breathing. But the Pontiff, the wrinkled bastard, must have noticed something. Now he’ll be coming to this exchange himself.”

The Bookworm slapped his hands on the table, the sound like an explosion in the small study. “Don’t talk to me about this garbage. I haven’t been a part of the Avenue for years!”

The Keeper responded through croaking laughter. “That’s where you’re wrong – you absolutely are part of the Avenue. You always have been. They never removed your name from their roster, so even in your self-imposed exile you’ve always been one of us. What’s more, even though I may indeed die soon, who’s to say what the future will hold?” A cunning smile spread across the old pedant’s face.

“You’re saying...” The Bookworm trailed off.

The Keeper indicated the energy core. “It’s not just me. You’re getting on in years yourself. Hell, you probably only have a few more days over me. And with that being the case, we should spend our final hours immersed in the work we love. If we end up cheating death a while longer, we’ll be a couple crotchety old scoundrels denying everyone their wish for our demise. Heh! It’ll give those bastards one hell of a headache!”

The Bookworm’s eyes brightened. “Well, if you really do manage to stave off dying for a little while, I can give you a break. But the second you die, I’m whipping your corpse in to tiny bits.”

The Keeper laughed at his old friend’s threat. “I doubt it. What’s more, it

looks like your old scars are finally healing. In the end, neither of us were wrong. We were correct, just in different ways. But don't you want to see it for yourself? In all my years, I've found a way to do it. A bit of a bottleneck, but not impossible. See, your biggest failure is physical limitations, is it not? And if we could figure out this problem, what then? Heheheh!"

The Bookworm stared dumbly at the Keeper, and again the change in his thinking was revealed in his eyes. "You crazy bastard. You..."

The Keeper patted him upon the shoulder. "Perhaps I am. Hell, at our age crazy is the only thing that keeps us going. Like they say 'You're only given a spark of madness, don't lose it.' Trust your elder, I'll take you on quite an adventure!"

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Knock knock! The gentle noise roused Lan Jue from his slumber.

"Oh, Director Wu, what brings you here?" Lan Jue shot up in his chair, surprised by the appearance of his employer standing directly in front of his desk.

Chapter 219: The Old Fox's Coercion

Wu Junyi nodded. "I knew from the outset you got hired through a recommendation from that respected old master. Knowing that, I didn't want you here as an electives teacher. Frankly speaking, when the dean asked that we start you at the associate professor level, I balked. I was in complete disagreement. Now I saw that I was short-sighted. I'd like to apologize to you, Professor Lan." As he spoke, he actually bowed low at the waist to his employee.

Lan Jue immediately leapt to his feet, pulling Director Wu up.

Just then, a powerful expulsion of force radiated from Wu Junyi's shoulders. It was intense, and far beyond what any normal man could sustain.

Lan Jue's response was immediate, and subconscious. His Discipline flared to protect him, however there was nothing to protect himself from. The frightening aura had dissipated.

No! Lan Jue's face scrunched in a frown the moment he realized he'd been tricked. It was too late.

Sparks of dancing electricity raced over Director Wu's body. A yellow light covered him like a membrane to protect from the emulsion, and yet he still had to step back until he bumped against the wall.

Lan Jue straightened, and a bitter smile spread across his face. "What's this about, Director?"

The Director chuckled, pleased at the success of his deception. "It's my own fault we never realized our school has such a great talent! Now that we know, however, it's time to make adjustments. Professor Lan, as Director of Teaching Affairs for the National Eastern University, it is my opinion you are no longer a fit for teaching electives. I ask you pick a more suitable post, for everyone's benefit. Hm... lightning. That was your discipline, wasn't it? Powerful!"

Lan Jue sighed. This cunning fox! He was smart enough to catch the

holes in my story.

“Director Wu, as it stands you currently have two choices: First, I immediately resign and leave the school. Second, you act like nothing has changed. I continue on with my etiquette class and no one’s the wiser. Peaceful, quiet co-existence.”

A pale blue light flickered around the mercenary king, an icy-cold light in his eyes. The entire teaching office grew heavy with an oppressive energy that threatened to suffocate Director Wu.

Wu Junyi’s suspicions had begun when he’d witnessed him arrive with the Accountant. It was the young scientist’s reputation that was the biggest give-away. And so, hearing Lan Jue had returned today, he went first thing to go and confront him. The sudden release of his powers had been a test.

As expected, Lan Jue had had no choice but to react with his own powers. He saw everything clearly then, why else would he be smiling so profusely?

Facing the younger teacher, under the weight of that terrible aura, he stood strong and still as though nothing were amiss. He let the Jewelry Master’s power wash over him like a tide, and did not resist.

“Fine.” Such was the Director’s response, much to Lan Jue’s surprise.

Of course Lan Jue didn’t really want to leave. He’d promised Zhou Qianlin he’d protect her in several years of service, and there was still so much left to his ‘sentence.’ What’s more, he was truly enjoying this relatively relaxed lifestyle. He was becoming used to it. Under these conditions, how could he want to give all of this up?

Wu Junyi’s face bore a small smile. “With your capabilities, Professor Lan, refusing a post of your choosing is a monumental waste of your talent. However, logic dictates that there must be a reason for your presence. A man of your status, here on a mission, certainly will not leave until that mission is complete. If you’re willing to walk away from your duties, then I have nothing more to say.”

Lan Jue fixed Wu Junyi with those electric blue eyes. He stood tall and proud, a king in his kingdom – and he was, for as teaching director everything here was under his purview. But if he was a king, he was a rascally one!

“Director... being too smart is traditionally very bad for a person’s health,” Lan Jue threatened.

Wu Junyi would not be cowed, and when he addressed Lan Jue he did so with a righteous countenance. “My death means nothing if it’s for the development and future of our University.”

Lan Jue’s face went stiff. He was starting to realize that Director Wu’s greatest strength didn’t come from his Discipline, but instead from his scheming brain and insufferable pride!

“Is that really what you want?” Lan Jue asked helplessly.

Wu Junyi responded with a soft laugh. “Of course not! I’m here as a Director, re-evaluating an employee. It’s criminal to cover up a person’s talent, don’t you agree? Ah yes, and unless I’m mistaken the pilot of that blue mecha on Lir was you. Indeed, you are the hero of Lir – a hero for all of humanity. I’m sure there would be no end of media attention as they tried to uncover your plethora of courageous deeds. As your colleague, I feel it’s my responsibility to help you disseminate this information. I also deeply feel it would be in both of our best interests that we work from the same office.”

Lan Jue released a frustrated sigh. He wanted to allow his Discipline to explode like a volcano, but he fought to control it. Growling through gritted teeth, he addressed the cunning older man. “Conduct yourself with some kindness and integrity, Director!”

Wu Junyi chortled, a sinister smile plastered on his face. “I have always treated my companions with integrity! And now that you’ve shown your hand, I think it’s fair to assume Professor Tan’s miraculous upset during the educational exchange also bears your fingerprints. Tang Xiao has also been cagey about his whereabouts, so I took a look at the school’s security footage. He seems to be coming here to the electives building an awful lot

lately. You are an instructor – we, are all instructors here. For the benefit of the next generation, for the future of our university, Professor Lan, I'd like to officially invite you to advance to an official post!" Wu Junyi's voice had slowly grown more powerful and imperatorial as he spoke, until his majestic announcement rang with power and sincerity. [1]

Lan Jue found his situation both hilarious and aggravating. This normally upright and righteous man, Director of the Teaching Department, now seemed nothing short of a miracle worker! With nothing but the faintest hints of subversion, he was able to uncover nearly all of Lan Jue's lies.

"I ask you give me some time," Lan Jue said in resignation.

Wu Junyi nodded without a hint of hesitation. "Of course, how long do you think you'll need? I trust an hour is sufficient?"

"You're pushing it," Lan Jue hissed.

Wu Junyi raised his hands in capitulation. "Come now, contain yourself. I'm kidding. Three days. Professor you must understand, I haven't the slightest idea why you're here, or how long you'll remain. Radical action was the only option left to me, to ensure you help our university as much as you can for the time you're with us. I'm sure you can understand where I'm coming from."

Lan Jue waved his hand in irritation. "Fine. Three days. You'll have your answer by then." With that, he returned to his seat.

Wu Junyi's face bore a smirk dripping with guile and self-satisfaction. He turned on his heel and left.

However, he was stopped in his victory march by a pudgy face coming around a corner. Xu Renjian approached, and in a low voice asked, "How'd it go?"

Wu Junyi gave him a big thumbs-up. "You're a damned genius, dean. A damned genius! Hehe. He's got nowhere to go. And he verified all of your suspicions. That was him on Lir, and he was behind our victory in the games. I had my own suspicions about how Professor Tan could suddenly

become so proficient.”

The pudgy man’s face wobbled as he nodded. “Keep all of this in the strictest confidence, not a word to anyone. He he he... Now that we’re taking full advantage of this young man, after the grandmaster sent him to us, I almost feel bad.”

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“Ah-choo!” Once Lan Jue had settled onto his chair, a sudden overpowering sneeze overcame him. [2]

Director Wu is really too cunning! But no, that can’t be right. It couldn’t just have been him. Even as Director he couldn’t extend such a deal without the approval of higher-ups. There must be someone else pulling the strings.

The Dean! Two old foxes sussing me out. No wonder!

Lan Jue knew there was nothing for it. Now that it had progressed to this point it would be enormously difficult to wriggle his way out of it unless he asked the Keeper himself to intervene. But even that wouldn’t work! What Director Wu had said was true; their cause was righteous, the development of the next generation, and improving the strength of their mecha department. How could he refuse?

Did that mean he hadn’t any choice? Was he going to be forced to move to mecha combat?

Lan Jue was painted in to a corner. All he’d wanted was a quiet, peaceful life! If he accepted the post he’d absolutely have to put his whole heart and soul in to it. He’d certainly become the center of everyone’s attention. There weren’t any guarantees that his history as Zeus wouldn’t eventually be revealed. He had no shortage of enemies, not to mention his flagrant kidnapping of the Eastern Chairman’s daughter. During her wedding! If that were to happen, his only option would be to hole up in the Avenue for protection.

Was this truly the destruction of the peaceful existence he’d worked so hard for?

With no classes scheduled for the day, and his mood soured, Lan Jue prepared to leave for the Avenue. He had to think about things, carefully find his way.

He pondered the issue as he left the building, out onto the campus grounds.

What could he do? What was the right play? How could he protect both his identity and his hope for an easy life? He needed time to really examine the problem.

A cold voice intruded upon his thoughts as he wandered the streets. "If you dare run in to me, you'll be writing your own death warrant."

Lan Jue's head shot up, and who should he see directly before him but the Savage Goddess herself, Tan Lingyun.

Lan Jue was in no mood to deal with her or her irrational anger. "Are you incapable of going around?!"

"Go around?" Her finely sculpted brows shot up. She, too, was in a sour mood after being unable to locate 'Lei Feng.'

Lan Jue decided it wasn't worth it, and stepped to the side. "Go on then, move along." It was, after all, the gentlemanly thing to do.

Tan Ling huffed, and stormed off. As ever, she glared at him scornfully as she passed.

Lan Jue's eyes lit up as he watched her leave, as though something had crossed his mind. His right hand curled in to a fist and beat against his chest. "Got it!"

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1. To truly understand the gravity of this proposal, you have to understand how government positions work in China. Working in a university is considered a solid government job, wherein you can almost never get fired. Tenure isn't required, it's just a life-long post unless you do something exceptionally crappy like murder someone.

Even then it can be swept under the rug. Now these positions are, ninety-nine percent of the time, actually legally purchased. You spend several hundred thousand yuan and you can buy your way in to an eternal, cushy gig. They're very rarely given on merit of ability, so for Wu Junyi to offer this to Lan Jue is veritably unheard of, and is a significant display of his respect for him.

2. This is equivalent to the Western old-wives tale that your ears burn when someone's talking about you. In China they said you sneeze when someone's talking behind your back. Or when you had too much ice cream before sleeping.

Chapter 220: Mysterious Teacher

He quickly tapped Wu Junyi's number in to his communicator.

"Director Wu!"

"Hello Professor Lan. Have we come to a decision so soon?" Wu Junyi, on the other end, was nervous after receiving the call. From his earlier trickery he discovered that Professor Lan was at least a ninth-level Talent. It was not a fact he could afford to disregard.

Lan Jue answered. "I do have an answer for you. I can teach your mecha combat class, but I have a few conditions of my own we need to discuss."

"Go on," the Director coaxed.

"First, you must swear to keep my identity a secret," Lan Jue began. "You can't tell a soul. Second, I wish to keep my etiquette class without any changes. In addition I'll wear a mask when I teach to protect myself, and you will ensure that no one – no teacher, organization or student – find out who I am. Tell them I'm some visiting professor. In this way we can both work to limit the chance of exposure, preventing it from affecting my life."

"Not a problem!" Wu Junyi didn't hesitate in the slightest, accepting Lan Jue's demands on the spot. All he and the Dean were interested in was that he worked for them. Who he pretended to be in the process didn't matter to them at all.

Lan Jue went on. "So it is, then. Let me know once the classes have been arranged. Remember, not a word of this matter to anyone. I must warn you that, if my identity should become known... well, the consequences would be dire."

Wu Junyi did not take the statement lightly. "You can relax, Professor. I give you my word."

With that, Lan Jue severed the connection. He found his bicycle and returned to Skyfire Avenue without any further delay. The matter was what it was, he thought, but at least now he could hold his head up. Still,

he thought, he better speak to the Keeper – if he could avoid this at all, it would be better. Truth be told, he was also curious how the old man was getting on with his rival. He was a little afraid of the trouble they could get up to.

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Immediately Lan Jue made for the Library, upon arriving at the Avenue. However, he didn't walk right in. Instead he waited outside for a moment to see if there were any waves of power coming from the building.

If something felt amiss, he still had time to run.

The Library was quiet, though, not a sound to be heard. He secretly breathed a sigh of relief. He pushed the door open and entered.

He climbed the stairs, careful to be as silent as possible, when suddenly a craggy voice filled the hall. "Why are you skulking around? Hurry up and get in here."

"Oh." Lan Jue hurried his pace.

He found his way to the Keeper's office, and pushed open the door. What he saw, stopped him in his tracks.

The two old men were seated pleasantly, facing each other across a table, sharing a plate of dried fruit.

Standing behind their respective masters, were Su He and the Accountant. Both were holding bottles. The Accountant was currently refilling the Keeper's glass.

Su He turned his face to peer at Lan Jue as he entered. The Jewelry Master's former classmate shot him a smile.

"It looks like you two are getting along," Lan Jue began.

The Bookworm huffed. "We'll be sure to take your marvelous deduction under account. I've already spoken with the old bastard, and from now on

you're gunna be my guinea pig. Once I get that sim pod fixed and running again, you'll continue with our experiments. No excuses!"

Lan Jue chortled. "I won't. I'm eager to continue."

The Keeper's face lit up at Lan Jue's answer. "I guess the results have been good so far!"

Lan Jue nodded his head. "Excellent, in fact. There are some small detail adjustments that need to be made, and perhaps the difficulty could be increased, but overall it's something really incredible. God-ranked pilots can finally find a place in DreamNet to further hone their abilities. It'd be even better if there was more variety in combat modes."

"In the future the Bookworm and I will be conducting the experiments together," the Keeper revealed. "We'd like to have a working prototype ready as soon as possible. Over the course of these trials we hope to improve everything about it, and we'll need your help to do that."

Lan Jue looked delighted. "Very well. I only ask you give me two of them when the bugs have been ironed out."

The Bookworm shot him an angry look. "What's the meaning of this? When we've got this squared away we'll have the most advanced simulator in the universe. The price will be astronomical! You're dreaming if you think I'll just give you two."

Lan Jue laughed. "Fine, one then. After all I'm the one in there expending my time and energy, am I right?"

"Hmph!" The Bookworm glowered dubiously. "I'll think about it!"

Lan Jue could only smile helplessly. He knew this old man's bark was worse than his bite. He was going to be using this thing anyway, once it was complete, and it wasn't like they were going to be the pilots to test it.

Su He interjected. "Hey classmate, the Master's already made up his mind. I've spoken with him, and later I'll be leaving for my vacation. When I return I'll come for the Master, and to express my gratitude."

"I hope to hear news of your breakthrough soon, Mentor," Lan Jue said.

“Sometimes it’s important just to see the beauty the universe has in store for us.”

Su He beamed. “More and more I feel the same. Hopefully one day I’ll have enough ability to face you in the ring and hold my own. If I win, it’ll mean I’ve reached my ultimate goal.”

“Same here!” the Accountant blurted out.

The Keeper’s lips curled in to the ghost of a grin. “Such indelible self-understanding. Stop making us laugh.”

The Accountant glowered, hurt evident in his features. “What’s so funny about that?”

The Bookworm was the one to answer, his quavering voice soft. “For some things, talent is the biggest determining factor. Your Talents don’t lie in that area, so why would you waste your effort? With the skills your grandfather has taught you, how can mecha combat compare? Planning to steer a Bastion ship, are we?”

The Accountant’s eyes lit up. “I’ll be able to drive a Bastion ship?!”

The Bookworm looked embarrassed simply to be having the conversation. “Moron, it was an analogy. Do you think a single person can pilot a Bastion? Do you have any common sense? What has your grandfather been teaching you?”

The Keeper glared across the table. “Take it easy on my nephew! What’s wrong with the way I’ve taught him?”

The Keeper’s objection didn’t appear to dissuade the Bookworm in the least. “Your teaching’s are a waste, especially on this thick-skulled twit. Or maybe the concoction I gave him made him dim.”

The Keeper slammed a fist against the desk between them! Their respective glasses danced and threatened to topple off of the table. “You dare to continue down-talking my family?!”

The Bookworm slapped the table just as hard, and shot to his feet. “What are you going to do about it? Dimwit?”

Lan Jue waved to Su He, and made his escape before he could be dragged in to the argument.

These two old madmen! It was a phrase that described the both of them admirably. A love-hate- relationship if ever he'd seen one.

Lan Jue employed the nearby elevator once exited the Library, making his way to the Underground. Chu Cheng and Hua Li had spent the last few days in the warehouse there training. He went to check on their progress.

There were very many in the Underground today. Most of the stores on either end of the long street looked deserted.

Lan Jue made his way towards his own shop. On the way, however, his trek was interrupted by a figure coming his way. It was none other than the man the Beautician had called ruthless and sinister – the Barber.

Upon seeing Lan Jue the Barber stopped in his tracks, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "It's been a while, Jewelry Master! You're quite the difficult fellow to keep track of, you know. In fact, the Council put me in charge of the reception for the big meeting coming up. Even when you're here you aren't attending meetings, so there's no need for you to trouble yourself with these matters."

Lan Jue couldn't help but grin. "Didn't they push the whole thing back a month?"

"And yet there's still a mountain of work to do," the Barber responded. "How we receive our guests reflects the honor of Skyfire Avenue, as I'm sure you're aware."

Lan Jue still seemed unconvinced. "Of course I do, that's why I've been focusing on my cultivation! So you'll be leading the welcome party when the two powers come knocking?"

The Barber's face went stiff. The battle the two had those long months before had left a deep impression on him. He had been working on his own abilities of late, but he also knew his place before Lan Jue.

Lan Jue only smiled. "If there's nothing else I guess I'll be heading on. If you need something call me on the communicator." With that he walked

on towards the jewelry shop, leaving the Barber in silence.

It was nonsense, saying he had no need to participate. Nobody had said anything to him! Besides, the Wine Master would have told him if there were any preparations to be made. This was all the Barber looking for trouble!

Ding ding! The jewelry shop bell tinkled pleasantly as Lan Jue pushed his way in.

Mika was behind the counter, crouched down and looking at something. She lifted her head at the sound, and smiled as she saw her employer enter. "There's our diligent boss. Just got back tomorrow and already here you are in the store. I heard you spent no small amount of money this trip! Where's the stuff?" He reached out her hand expectantly.

"Most of it should be arriving soon," he assured her.

Mika snorted. "I'm talking about the Tear of Neptune and the Pelagic Pearl! Those two are the pricey ones."

Lan Jue could only shrug. "I gave the Tear to the Keeper for his experiments. To pay off my debt to the Avenue. I gave the pearl to someone else. The cost of those will be deducted from my share of any profits. That should be enough, right?"

Once again Mika huffed, clearly irritated by the circumstance. "You run the place and yet have no head for finances, boss. We have the money, but haven't you ever heard of saving? You spend the money, so it's done. And fine, you gave them away. Now buy something for our own store!"

Lan Jue laughed sheepishly. "Didn't I put you in charge of stock?"

"Business hasn't been so good," Mika replied.

"Not just us?" Lan Jue asked. "I did notice there were only a few people out today, on my way here. What's going on?"

Chapter 221: The Great Adept Tournament

“I’m not sure,” Mika said in response to her boss’ query. “It seems to be the same for everyone lately. By a third, and it’s the evening rush hour as we speak. It’s like the place is deserted. So the short answer is no, I don’t know.”

“It’s actually clear as day. The North and the West’s Pontiff’s Castle are holding a big Adept competition. The prizes are amazing, and the alliances are making a pretty big deal out of it with all sorts of resources and manpower being thrown around. Their intentions for that is clear. They are saying there are three s-ranked power gems as rewards to the winners. Aside from the champion’s prize, the North has also sworn to build a mecha to their specifications, using only the latest and greatest technology. It’s the same for all levels of prizes, probably to attract the universes better Talents to come and participate. That being the case, you can imagine why we’re seeing the result here.” Lin Guoguo had appeared from the back, a tray in hand. Several power gems were arrayed atop it.

Lan Jue’s brows furrowed at the news. “This is the first I’m hearing about it. The Keeper didn’t mention anything.”

Mika’s chuckle bore a chilly undertone. “Of course we wouldn’t be able to participate. The North and West arranged this whole thing as posturing against us. The Avenue’s prestige has only grown over the last few years. Then you have the Keeper’s visit to the Pontiff’s Castle, which was revealed recently, where he threatened to use his abilities to tear the hole castle down. After coercing the Pontiff’s submission, suddenly the Castle and the Dark Tower delay their visit for a whole month. Probably to prepare for this tournament.”

Lan Jue looked thoughtful. “Do you know when exactly this is supposed to take place?”

“In about three months,” Mika answered [1]. It’s being held on Planet Luo.”

A twinkle flashed in Lan Jue’s eye. “Got it. I’ll ask Chu Cheng about it

later – he should know more.”

“Think we should participate?” Mika asked.

Lan Jue pondered the question. “Even if we do, you and Ke’er couldn’t come. With so many adepts around, I wouldn’t be able to properly protect you.”

And that was the truth. If the North and West both decided to focus their efforts on capturing Mika while on Luo, there wouldn’t be anything he could do.

Mika, though, huffed dismissively. “Still so antsy about them. At worst we have a mighty struggle.”

Lan Jue helplessly shook his head. “Alright, well you just keep working on your cultivation. How are you feeling lately? Anything requiring my attention?”

“I’ve been training just as you instructed,” Mika replied, “slowly motivating the power in my blood to manifest and strengthen. Even though I’m only at the beginning of fusing my powers, there haven’t been any problems yet. Your determination was the right one; bottling it up is much worse than letting it flow. Simply keeping it locked away would allow my devil’s blood to grow in power, and eventually explode forth. At that point it’d be too late. So I’ve been working on controlling it, fusing it into myself, so diffuse some of that terrible power and prevent it from negatively influencing me. Once that happens, my progress should speed up considerably.”

Lan Jue smiled at her, and nodded his head. “Excellent. Very good. Well keep after the store, at least for a little while. If it remains this slow then lock up shop, take the time to rest up. I’m off to find A-Cheng and A-Li.”

With that, Lan Jue made from the warehouse set in the back of the jewelry shop. When he got there, he didn’t find the two training as he’d expected. Instead, they were seated on the floor with plates of snacks between them, talking as they munched away.

“Aren’t you guys afraid of getting fat, eating all this junk?” Lan Jue

teased the pair as he sauntered towards them.

Chu Cheng snickered at him. "If there's any danger of us getting fat, then the whole world should fear for their waist lines. You're back then – you know, you make a terrifically bad landowner. And a worse friend. We've been locked in here and you haven't taken us out to relax this whole time. Vanished, poof, like a magician."

Lan Jue adopted an imperatorial air. "I'm a hardworking gentleman, unlike you two loafing about. Why aren't you two training today?"

It was Hua Li's turn to speak up. "We wanted to use the sim pods to train, but it's too difficult. Unfortunately, the sim is the only place to properly train our coordination. However, without the ability to use our disciplines we're stuck. We heard you might be training with us soon, anyway."

"I'm back aren't I?" Lan Jue answered. "You know there's a new sim pod being developed as we speak. If everything works out, the problem of discipline and mecha unification in DreamNet will be solved. We wouldn't have any further problems pushing ourselves to our limits in that situation."

Chu Cheng was visibly surprised, and Hua Li looked at his friend incredulously. "Bullshit. Where'd you hear that? If that were true how have I never heard of it?"

Gobi Entertainment was among the largest cooperatives in all the Three Alliances, and an integral sponsor of DreamNet. Hua Li prided himself on the belief he would be the first to learn about these sorts of things.

"That's probably because it hasn't been finished," Lan Jue explained. "It's still in its development phases. We should have some very good news in the near future, I promise you. Oh, and by the way, I just heard from Mika and Guoguo about this tournament on Lir. Have you heard about this?"

Hua Li shrugged. "Of course. They reached out to me to do the opening ceremony. Why, are you thinking of going as well? I heard there weren't any invitations sent to the East, though. This is something cooked up by just the West and North."

“A provocation from you all?” Lan Jue pondered quietly.

“What’s this ‘you all,’ I have nothing to do with it,” Hua Li countered. “Politics disgusts me. I’m surprised you haven’t gotten that yet.”

Chu Cheng, meanwhile, shrugged his shoulders. “I may go and participate. After all, I’m always getting nonsense from pops about ‘wasting the family fortune. Hmph. Maybe coming back with some winnings will shut him up for a little while. Hell, I guess I have to go! You think this is that sensitive a matter, A-Jue?”

The Jewelry Master nodded. “Very sensitive, I’m afraid. We have two of the three alliances gathering together all the adepts they can, specifically barring the East from getting involved at all. Isn’t their intention clear?”

“This I actually do understand. The East may be less powerful than the West and North when you consider aggregate power, but when it comes to Adepts you occupy the top spot.” Hua Li picks at the food as he explained. “Look at the Avenue alone, where its three Paragons outmatch anything the other two Alliances have. Two paragons each. Moreover, the biggest of the baddest of those powerhouses is in your camp. That alone is a massive deterring force. I heard the North is actually researching ways to manufacture a paragon. Fusing the greatest adepts they have with precision equipment and power gems to catapult them to their highest levels. I don’t know if they’ve succeeded or not.”

Lan Jue frowned. “The North hasn’t been sitting around. Ever dreaming up ways to take control of the other two Alliances. Your Western Alliance teaming up with them is a doomed marriage from the start, I’m telling you.”

Hua Li shrugged. “Who can say definitively? You want my people to try and put a stop to this?”

“What your mouth, A-Li!” Cu Cheng’s face had grown critical. He spoke low to his comrades. “This tournament has been arranged by the most powerful Alliance in the universe, and the two biggest organizations of the West. The Pontiff’s Castle is even putting aside it’s feud with the Dark Tower to get it going. Gobi may be powerful, but not powerful enough to

stare down all the adepts from two Alliances. You're a Westerner yourself."

Hua Li grunted dismissively. "What's that got to do with anything? I'm the black sheep of the family. Compared to you what's it matter if I lose the whole company. I'm sick of this family inheritance anyway. And when it comes to my brothers, I don't give a damn who they are or where they're from."

He said the words with sincerity, without any hint of bluster. However, as ever, he paired it with his trademark charming smile.

Chu Cheng slapped his forehead comically, muttering to himself. "Thank whatever powers are up there you aren't a woman, otherwise I'd be your biggest threat."

Hua Li stuck a leg out to kick at his companion. "Go die in a hole [2]. Pervert. I am a woman, but A-Jue's the love of my life. Whaddya ya say, A-Jue, let's elope." That unsettlingly gentle, feminine quality invaded his voice as he spoke. He whined at his friend prettily.

Lan Jue's whole body shook, and he quickly shook his hands as he suppressed the urge to vomit. "That's enough, alright. We'll revisit that thought in your next life, when you're an actual woman, how about that? Let's get in DreamNet and back to training."

Chu Cheng lazily unfurled and got to his feet. "Let's do it. Still two on one? Your amazons aren't around, but I still think you could handle it!"

"I've told you a dozen times to go kill yourself. What are you still doing here," Lan Jue spat. "Have some pride."

Hua Li cracked his knuckles. "I think it should be the two of us against him, A-Jue."

Lan Jue slowly nodded his head.

The three broke up their little pow-wow, and made for their respective sim pods. A few moments late three avatars met in DreamNet.

Dreamburg, DreamNet.

Three figures stood amid the deserted streets.

“So where to? The Arena?” Chu Cheng, appearing now as Hades, asked.

“Onward,” Lan Jue said in response. “By the way, has someone gotten in touch with big brother? Does he have any time to meet up with us?”

A distinct tinge of fear appeared in the depths of Chu Cheng’s eyes. “You couldn’t pay me to talk to him about this. It’s asking for a beating.”

“Yeeeeeaaahh, I think A-Jue’s best suited for that job,” Hua Li said. “That guy’s temper... and who’s to say he isn’t in some super important meeting or something.”

Lan Jue could only helplessly shake his head. “Is he really that scary?”

Chu Cheng and Hua Li both vehemently nodded their heads.

“Guess I’ll give it a shot,” Lan Jue sighed.

He tapped a number in to the communicator. Three rings later, someone picked up.

“A-Jue?” Surprise was clear in Lan Qing’s voice as he answered the call. Beneath that, though, was the tough and commanding tone of an officer.

*

1. Wait, how does she know this? Didn’t she just say she didn’t know why there were so few people? Lin Guoguo is a ventriloquist as well.
2. Onnahole, search this , basically same hole.

Chapter 222: Triple Threat

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you busy?” Lan Jue couldn’t hear the chill that had crept in to his voice.

“No, what is it,” Lan Qing responded.

“I’m with A-Cheng and A-Li,” Lan Jue explained. “We’re in Dreamburg, and where wondering if you’d like to join us in training for a little while. There’s only half a month left before this god-team battle we’ve committed to.”

Lan Qing was silent for a moment. Eventually his quiet, constrained voice replied. “Alright. Wait for me at the entrance to the arena.”

“Got it.”

As he hung up, Lan Jue lifted his eyes to see both Hades and Poseidon looking at him in horror.

“What...” DreamNet’s version of Zeus looked at the two of them in confusion.

Chu Cheng heaved a long sigh. “We really do live in an unfair universe,” he lamented. “Why the hell is the big guy always so nice and gentle to you. To me he’s cold as death!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “That’s enough. You have no idea what kind of temper my brother has. He’s just this sort of person, he demands precision. Oh, and you do know that they record everything here, right? Bro is a rather vindictive guy...”

Chu Cheng, gritting his teeth, glared daggers at his young companion. “You’re just desperate for an ass-whoopin’ aren’t ya.”

“You betcha.”

The three of them squabbled good-naturedly as they made their way to the arena. As they walked, they encountered several other god-ranked pilots making their way to various places. They all made way for the three storied Monarchs. Even in DreamNet they were respected and honored.

Who wouldn't recognize Zeus, Hades and Poseidon, in their masks and robes? Even though the god-team battles were not far away, the Divine Monarchs were still top of the lists for now.

They arrived at the arena before long. The three of them silently awaited the final member of their team. [!. Super excited to see Lan Qing's godly incarnation! And yes, I know Prometheus isn't a god.]

Before long, they spied a figure approaching.

He was clad in black robes, and a black mask. Over it all hung a dark set of armor. It seemed like his very presence turned the beautiful and vibrant colors of Dreamburg in to pale shadows of themselves.

"You're all here." The black-clad man approached the three monarchs, and stopped.

Chu Cheng chortled. "It's been a while, boss. How've you been?"

Lan Qing, appearing as the others in his godly form Prometheus, nodded in response. His masked face turned to Lan Jue. "I'd like to speak with you about Tai Hua, later."

"Alright," his younger brother said with a nod.

Prometheus looked at the time scrawled across the face of his communicator. "I've got a meeting in an hour. Let's get this started." He didn't wait for a response, making for the entrance without hesitation.

The three others followed close behind, and the group vanished in to the arena. Several groups of pilots watched from a distance, murmuring quietly to one another.

"That's Prometheus! You never see him around!"

"Yeah, that's got to be him. Who else would be leading three of the Divine Monarchs around? What are they doing here?"

"The god-team battle they've been advertising is soon. They must be here to train."

"Probably. Shame they don't make their training public. It wouldn't matter the asking price, there'd be scores of people coming to see them

fight for themselves.”

“Well you probably won’t have to go without your wish for long. Once their exhibition fight comes, you’ll be able to see them with your own eyes.”

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With Prometheus in the lead, the Four Divine Monarchs entered the arena together, for the first time in ages. In the blink of an eye an arena was chosen, and they appeared within it. Such was Lan Qing’s way; quick, efficient, direct.

They appeared in disparate flashes of light, but not as themselves. Instead they arrived prepared, in four giant and magnificent mecha suits.

The Four Divine Monarchs, four horsemen of the apocalypse, astride their mighty ‘steeds.’ Prometheus within Coeus [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coeus>], Hades in his machine Cerberus, Zeus athwart Thor, and Prometheus commanding Triton.

Cerberus was a dark, blood red. Thor, a shimmering cobalt blue. Triton was a fresh sky blue. Coeus was a deep, penetrating black.

Seeing the four legendary mechas side by side, there was very little visually to tell them apart, aside from the color. Of course, in reality they each had their different styles and load-outs. Powerful swells of energy radiated from each of them.

“So how do we go about this,” Lan Jue asked.

Chu Cheng rushed to answer. “I’ll be on the boss’ team, you can be with A-Li. Two on two, perfectly fair!”

Hua Li didn’t say anything. Lan Jue, however, gave an irritated response. “Really, fair. We’re brothers, we should be on one team and you and Hua Li should be on the other.”

“Alright,” Lan Qing’s voice quietly interjected. “We’re wasting time. The

three of you against me.”

Cerberus turned its metal head to look towards Coeus. “You sure, boss?”

Coeus didn’t answer. It’s two ‘eyes’ began to glow with a sinister power as it returned Cerberus’ stare.

Hades coaxed his mecha back a few steps, until he stood beside Triton. This left Thor alone between them and the leader of the Divine Monarchs. “It’s all you A-Jue! You start her off, me and A-Li’ll back you up.”

Zeus’ eyes narrowed in the great mecha’s cockpit. He could almost feel his blood boiling.

“You certainly don’t have a very high opinion of us. Boss.” Lan Jue fixed his brother with a glare.

“If you hadn’t wasted the last three years, maybe you’d have the right to complain,” Lan Qing replied in his infuriatingly calm voice.

Chu Cheng sucked in a breath. “Damn guy, absolutely no respect! A-Jue, you know I’m not one to hold a grudge, but I simply can’t suffer this insult. I’m glad I’m on your side! Beating the crap out of the big guy is one of my major goals in life. Imagine how awesome it’d feel beating him in to submission!”

Lan Jue took a deep breath. Outside, Thor crouched, preparing to spring in to action.

“Let’s go, then.”

Coeus looked up, just as a stabbing green light shot from its eyes. Without any further wasted time, the great leader of the Monarchs was on the move.

There was a flash of green light, then suddenly an indistinct figure was assailing Thor.

The deep blue mecha was also in motion. Instantly coiling arcs of electricity began to race along its surface. This was no Discipline – DreamNet couldn’t handle that yet, but instead the result of equipment installed in the simulated mecha itself. Zeus made no effort to dodge,

welcoming his opponent's approach.

Lan Jue had complete confidence in his fighting ability within Thor! Both Thor and Cerberus were prepped for fighting on the front lines. Triton was a master of battlefield control, whereas Coeus was set to be effective in all areas. However, the drawback was as the old saying went; jack of all trades, and a master of none. Prometheus was wise enough to start with where he bore the greatest advantage – frontal assault.

Both were too fast. Be it Coeus or Thor, their approach and subsequent clash was too fast for either to employ weaponry.

Keen eyes could see that as they collided, the electrical light around Thor flared to life. The blue mecha's towering figure blurred, like it was a dream or illusion. Just before impact, Thor had become a chaotic orb of electrical fire! Afterwards, Thor appeared five meters beside his target.

This was a special battlefield advantage for ghosting; concealing your attack.

Upon seeing their team captain rush to the fore, Cerberus and Triton were in the fight. They spread out to either side as Thor raced ahead, seeking to flank Coeus.

Despite Chu Cheng's earlier claims of fear, his charge was instant and merciless. Dark red light enveloped him, sizzling with heat as he brandished an enormous alloy sword. Both weapon and suit acted as one, sweeping around to catch Coeus in the side.

Triton was coming around from the opposite direction, its body a shimmering bloom of gentle blue light. As it approached a crystalline blue orb of power shot forth and enveloped Coeus.

It had been a very long time since the three had fought together. However, it was carried in their muscle memory – they fought in almost perfect harmony, playing off each others' strengths.

It looked like they had Lan Qing locked down. But just then, Coeus' metal figured flashed.

Waves of cyan light pulsed outward, and when it receded there were

three shadowy figures where a moment before there'd been but one. Each picked a target – Thor, Cerberus and Triton – and went in for the strike.

“Three doppelgangers?”

All three of Lan Qing's challengers looked on, stunned as though struck by lightning. They spoke the words in unison, wide-eyed and shivering in their respective cockpits.

In the eyes of the common pilot, ghosting was a magnificent display of ability. For god-pilots, three doppelgangers was legendary. [1]

It was the peak of mastery for that ability, and it was one very rarely seen in the whole history of mecha piloting. It was practically impossible to describe its combat value.

The very basic requirements necessary to achieve such an astounding feat was a hand speed surpassing one-hundred CPS [2]. One-hundred maneuvers, every single second! Of course the mecha suit needed to be able to handle such inhuman speed. It required an s-ranked speed amplifying power gem to make it happen.

Lan Jue, Chu Cheng and Hua Li were themselves God-ranked pilots. They were each well aware of how difficult something like this was to do. They knew that even hovering around a hundred CPS wasn't enough to use three doppelgangers effectively in a fight. To use it as perfectly as their leader was, needed at least a hundred and twenty. There was no one in all the Three Alliances who could match this kind of speed.

It was no surprise, then, that Lan Qing's three challengers were stunned at the revelation.

How could this be?

A pilot's emotional state certainly had an effect on the suit they commanded. Zeus stood still as he processed the information, but his attack had landed on the center image.

To Thor's astonishment, the cyan-hued figure dissolved in to a halo of light and vanished. That one wasn't his brother.

No, Lan Jue thought as understanding washed over him. Not truly three of them!

If his brother's three doppelgangers were truly the result of Ghost mastery, they'd each possess damaging capabilities. That is the most terrifying aspect of it. One god-ranked pilot suddenly becomes three to contend with.

But what Lan Jue faced wasn't that. It was an illusion. It was not, as they feared, true cloning.

The strange bubble Triton cast forth naturally enveloped nothing but air. He had retreated and conjured a reflective shield to protect himself from the cyan shadow's onslaught.

Once the figure collided with Triton's shield it, too, vanished.

Fake? That only left one!

*

1. Just to make it clear, he's moving so fast at all THREE of them, at the same time, that there are three afterimages of his mecha performing different combat maneuvers. I can't even drive and change the radio station at the same time without a button on my steering wheel.
2. Remember, commands per second.

Chapter 223: The Power of Coeus

The moment Lan Jue realized the image in front of him was fake, his eyes immediately shot to Hua Li. Zeus looked just in time to see that, like his own, the image Hua Li had targeted was simply an illusion.

Both he and Poseidon had forgotten the same fact; Lan Qing's specialty was not hand speed! Though a renowned Monarch, his hand speed wasn't anything so completely outside the norm for God-ranked pilots. It was silly for them to have believed he improved so much in a few short years, to the point where he was able to simultaneously create three doppelgangers.

However, this realization came too late.

The third and final figure racing towards Cerberus looked identical to the three that came before it. It rushed its target like a cyan specter. However, unlike the other two, when Hades brought his weapon up to strike, the shadow evaded.

The attacker flashed and shuddered through reality like a force of evil. Where there had been one, there were now nine separate images racing towards the dark red mecha.

They burst outward like an explosion, with the first three dissolving as they met Cerberus, but strangely did not do any collision damage. However, the whole of the frightening mecha reacted by releasing a powerful aura of dark red light.

The remainder of the illusions flashed all around him. They raced in circles until Hades was lost in an orb of cyan light. What followed was a series of vicious strikes from every which direction, scarring the iron-clad sides of the red suit.

Lan Jue reacted first, immediately moving towards his beleaguered friend the moment he saw him in trouble.

But before he could approach to save his friend, one of the figures extricated itself from the group. It raced his way, faster than a shooting

star.

The first thing he noticed was how perfect it's trajectory and advance really was. He didn't even have time to prepare for evasion before the figure approached. He'd only just turned completely to face the pinned Hades and, instead of racing towards his friend to offer support, he had to focus all of his efforts on defense.

Bang! Thor lashed out with its spear of lightning, catching the oncoming form dead center. But instead of being blasted back, as one might expect, the frighteningly fast silhouette dodged to the side and dashed off in another direction. Directly towards Poseidon. Had the sky-blue mecha not stopped its forward advance the moment it saw the figure coming, they'd have run directly in to one another.

There was a palpable fear of Coeus, living in the heart of each of them. Poseidon, the current target, knew he couldn't sustain a direct attack from their leader. So he turned sideways to make himself a smaller target, and stretched his trident outward.

The cyan light surrounding Cerberus had become a raging tempest of violent power. The red light captured within it was becoming dimmer by the second, while shards of shrapnel launched out in all directions.

Thor and Triton made no move to save their companion. They understood very well the capabilities of Coeus. Going after Cerberus would accomplish nothing, and in fact may lead to them becoming ensnared themselves.

The two blue mecha stood back to back, and allowed their powers to amalgamate.

"Those aren't doppelgangers. The big guy's illusions, most likely." Hua Li's voice called to Lan Jue through the mecha's communication system.

Lan Jue responded with a deep, pensive voice. "Yeah, but we found that out too late. From the outset we've been dancing to his rhythm. I hadn't expected him to immediately employ the phantoms. And this power isn't assisted by any discipline. He painstakingly employed the maneuver to make us think they were doppelgangers, and in the confusion went in for

the strike. Chu Cheng got caught in the trap.”

The swirling tornado of cyan light lifted away and landed a distance from the others. It looked like a half moon, perhaps five meters long in total. It was a blade of light, curved and frightening to behold, with a handle set in the middle. One of Coeus’ moonblades.

Boom—! A blast tore through the arena, interrupting Hua Li and Lan Jue’s discussion. There was an enormous red eruption, followed by the expulsion of a single beam of cyan light. The weapon that had been cast so far away had inexplicably vanished.

Triton hefted its massive trident, and a shimmering blue aura burst in to bloom, rapidly expanding in to the distance. This was one of the suit’s special characteristics to assist in battlefield control; a probe. It was a blast of energy not unlike an ocean ripple. It passed harmlessly through the phantoms, in search of their true enemy.

Thor raised its spear. It stood still and attentive, careful not to react without thought, though the blue light pulsing from it was growing stronger.

“You disappoint me,” Lan Qing’s harsh and critical voice called out.

The strange cyan light coalesced to form Coeus, standing a short distance before them.

Lan Qing’s mecha had sustained severe burns on its left shouldered, blackening the alloy. However, it was clear the damage wasn’t having much of an effect. It was the last-ditch strike of their defeated comrade that had scarred him.

Lan Jue and Hua Li were silent. In terms of pure speed, Coeus had both of their suits soundly beat.

Were Thor capable of sustaining Lan Jue’s Discipline here, the jewelry master would be able to catch up to his brother with the addition of his lightning. But he didn’t have the dexterity.

The intimidating mecha shimmered, and split in two. Both mirror images raced towards Lan Jue and Hua Li respectively.

There it was! Triton's probe confirmed it; these weren't illusions, they were true doppelgangers.

Triton rapidly moved behind Thor, who slowly separated in to two doppelgangers of its own.

Lan Qing was somewhat lacking in hand speed, when compared to his brother. The doppelganger maneuver required a punishing level of dexterity, but this was something Lan Jue didn't shy from.

The mirror images racing their way bore crescent-shaped moonblades in each hand. Where he standing still, one might notice that the two weapons could join to create a single loop.

Thor lashed out with his spear like a snake, it's sizzling tip roaring through the air towards Coeus' cockpit.

One of the moonblades rose in an attempt to deflect Thor's deadly spear. However, just as the blades were about to touch the spear burst in to a countless number of smaller piercing lightning bolts that shot off in all directions.

The two doppelgangers reacted by bringing their moonblades together, and as they did there appeared a curtain of protective light around the offending mecha. It was sufficient to deflect every one of the lightning strikes.

"Eh?" Lan Qing's surprised voice crackled through Lan Jue's cockpit. Clearly Thor's lightning attack had caught him off guard.

Triton had not been cowering during the exchange. By then its trident was gone, and it was standing with its arms outstretched as though it was holding something in its embrace. Waves of intense energy were caught between his arms, growing more and more powerful as the waves washed over one another. A small opening had appeared from the mecha's chest plate, and it was from there that the energy was being released. The orb of light was growing more powerful by the moment, as energy was being fed in to it.

Parting of the Waters! One of the most devastating of Triton's abilities.

So great was its destructive capabilities that even the best outfitted mecha suit couldn't stand a direct blast. The drawback was that it required time to build up, giving the enemy time to avoid it.

Thor had corrected this by masterfully holding off Coeus, and blocking Triton from view as it prepared. It was enough time for Hua Li to get ready in total secrecy. Now all that was needed, was for Thor to coax Coeus in to the kill zone.

Lan Jue had pulled all the stops. He was surprised at his hand speed, faster than he'd ever been. It had allowed his spear's lightning attack to explode with power similar to his forest of lightning. It was a torrential attack, that succeeded in forcing Coeus to retreat.

Lan Qing's mecha couldn't Thor is pure explosive power. Still he felt somewhat helpless because, though his hand speed was clearly superior, his enemy's massive weapons would always be able to easily deflect his blows.

Where this fight one on one, it would be Lan Jue who would be fighting uphill. Luckily, though, he wasn't alone.

"We've got it, A-Jue!" Hua Li called out.

In an instant, Thor was on the move. The massive suit dissolved in to a blinding blue light that shot headlong towards Coeus. The furious charge left Lan Qing no option but to withdraw further. He knew Thor's destructive capabilities would materialize faster than his own could.

He was flustered, reacting instead of controlling the battle's flow. Caught off guard, all Coeus could do was spin its mighty blades haphazardly in attempts to keep Thor at bay.

But Thor was simply too fast, too furious. Thor focused all of its energy, and as he raced forward seven interlaced beams of light tore through the skies. Each one viciously slimmed in to the Hero of the East, one after the other. It was all he could do to protect himself, like a tree trying to stave off destruction in the midst of a hurricane. Each beam of light took with it shards of twisted metal.

At last the tempest passed. Coeus hovered in the air, clearly destabilized.

It was Hua Li's chance, and he didn't miss the opportunity. His Parting the Waters strike was released, creating a tremendously massive column of blue light that exploded outward just as Thor landed its final strike. It was that last little push that shoved Coeus directly in to the oncoming coup de grâce, and spun him around away from Hua Li.. After such a blitzkrieg, his defeat seemed certain.

Lan Jue's hand speed had reached its limit. He shot a glance at the control terminal which recorded the maneuvers, and saw that his last strike had reached a maximum of ninety-two CPS. It was the his own personal best. Unfortunately, his hand speed was too much for the suit's power gems to sustain. Were that not the case, he could have employed the Seven Stars. That, he was confident, would have ended the fight there and then.

The thought tumbled through his head as he watched the final moments of their exchange unfold. He looked on confident in the knowledge that nothing his brother could do would save him in the face of his rapidly approaching demise. There was no dodging, no deflect his friend's terribly blast of power. He couldn't even see it coming.

Boooooomm—! The two mecha collided with one another. Prometheus coaxed his suit to race forward and crash in to brother's sapphire mecha.

But just as its fate seemed sealed, Coeus tipped his hand.

Chapter 224: Total Victory

Coeus unexpectedly cast aside its two moonblades. Its whole metallic figure shuddered as they fell to earth. The suit swept its left arm around Thor's electric spear, pinning the weapon against it. With a mighty pull Coeus forced Thor to lurch in to a shoulder smash.

The juke and pull completely neutralized Thor's thrust. It was masterfully executed, effortless, and seemed as natural to Prometheus as breathing.

Looking from a distance, one could see Coeus and Thor, devoured by the terrifying light of Triton's Parting of the Waters!

Thor's defensive capabilities were second only to Tritons in their little band of pilots. However, the sapphire mecha had just expended all of its energy in the previous strike, leaving nothing left to protect itself. How could it be expected to sustain such a horrible attack?

Zeus' enormous mecha went soaring, cast away by the Parting of the Waters. A series of shuddering explosions followed. Although the blasts didn't seem as apocalyptic as those Cerberus had suffered, it was clearly the end of the fight for Thor.

Coeus' slowly turned in midair. Scrapes and dents had appeared all across its formerly polished surface. Hovering overhead, its dark cyan figure smoldering, the mecha looked like a demon come to earth.

Under the circumstances, Prometheus had taken on three challengers and came out with significantly less damage than one would expect. Meanwhile, both Cerberus and Thor were defeated. Only one remained to face him.

The expanse of arena was looking desolate and inhospitable to Triton, as it hovered in the air a distance from the terrifying Lan Qing. Although he knew Coeus had sustained severe damage in its fight against his two friends, Hua Li was also keenly aware that their leader had yet to use his strongest attacks. He calculated about sixty percent energy reserves remaining for his opponent.

One-on-one. Hua Li was beginning to feel hopeless.

“Boss, there doesn’t appear to be any need to continue...”

Triton lifted its metallic arms in surrender.

Lan Qing huffed. There was a flash, and he was gone.

Lan Jue and Chu Cheng were waiting outside by the door to the Arena. Both of their faces were similarly steeped in anger and depression. They were each very aware they couldn’t take Lan Qing on individually, but they hadn’t thought they’d be so handily beat on pure mecha combat alone. From the very beginning they couldn’t find their rhythm. This was certainly one reason for their dour expressions, but more than that was the painfully large gap between the three of them, and their leader.

Lan Jue had felt he’d impressed lately, both physically and in his Discipline. He should be equal to his brother! This fight served to clearly and incontrovertibly underline the difference that remained between them.

The two young men said nothing, and waited until Poseidon and Prometheus appeared from within the ring.

They didn’t even need to ask – their fate had been sealed from the onset. The three of them sighed in unison.

Prometheus displayed no pride in his victory. He swept his eyes over the other three. “Are you aware of why you lost so quickly?” his quiet voice expressed.

Chu Cheng spoke first, his tone full of bitterness. “Even from the start, we knew in our hearts we weren’t a match for you. We didn’t give it our all, and we ignored our advantage.”

“You have a wealth of combat experience over us,” Lan Jue interjected. “You knew to take every advantage posed to you.”

Hua Li thought for a moment before speaking. “We were at a disadvantage the moment it became three on one. We had no momentum. I believe that, if we’d come one after the other instead of together, each of

us would have pushed to our highest point in the battle. You wouldn't have come out of it the winner in that circumstance."

Lan Qing nodded with each determination. "You're all correct. However, even knowing this, even training until your hands bleed and you collapse from exhaustion, you still would never catch up to me."

Lan Jue felt his anger flair. "Why?" he shot back.

Lan Qing, unperturbed the tone, went on. "None of you have experienced true suffering. You haven't been tempered in the fire. Were you the leaders of men, your companies would be defeated in short order. Routed. If you had to fight off assassins an average of three times a week... if you had the level of crisis awareness and experience that I did, then you could be my equal. If you truly seek power, you need to step out of your comfortable existence. None of you have any less talent than I. The difference is your desire to improve. If that continues, you'll never even get close to me. A-Li is incorrect – even if you came at me one at a time, in the end the only result is your inevitable defeat. You simply can't make me suffer enough."

Were it anyone else, the three Monarchs would balk at their arrogance. But this was Prometheus. He was a different case altogether.

Chu Cheng's laugh was hard and full of hurt. "So what, you want us all to be soldiers? We're all from different Alliances, if we did there's no telling if one day we'd face each other in battle."

Prometheus' eyes softened appreciably. "Unlikely. At least for the next little while, we won't need to worry about civil human strife."

Zeus' masked face hid his surprise, but his voice didn't. "You know something?"

Prometheus nodded. "News from the proverbial horse's mouth. The Northern Alliance has lost contact with an armada of navy ships it'd dispatched."

Zeus' surprise intensified. "This quickly?" As far as he knew, the North had only just recently sent the ships out to look for the monster planets!

Could it really be possible for a fleet of ships to disappear so quickly?
Unbelievable!

These sorts of missions were always lead by a Capital Warship, an exceptionally powerful weapon of war. It was two classes above a common battleship, and with something so powerful at its head the combat group was capable of obliterating entire planets.

Lan Qing went on. "It looks like our earlier conjecture has been proven correct. We have a violent and previously unknown alien species heading for galaxies under the protection of the Three Alliances. Our analysis indicates the attack of Taihua is connected. Under these circumstances, do you think the alliances will waste time and resources on fighting each other?"

Lan Jue, Chu Cheng and Hua Li stood silent, their faces dark and brooding.

The universe was ever a mystery, bringing both wonders and terrors. Humans were powerful, yes, but who knew how many unknown species were out there? Like these aliens, were they hostile? Could humans protect themselves if they should meet?

In such an infinitely vast universe, who could say humans were the height of power? With an infinite space to explore, the chances of discovering something that could force humans in to extinction was not negligible. Even if they hadn't had faced these monsters already, their rapid and clandestine approach towards human lands could not be well-meaning. Over the last one hundred years of space exploration, one thing has been proven true; all creatures, human included, liked their personal space.

The small group stood in silence for a moment, a cloud of depression hanging heavy over them.

After a time, Lan Jue looked up towards his brother. "Do you want me to join the army?"

Lan Qing responded by shaking his head. "No, that's not what I want for you. You have your own road to walk. If you came with me you'd

unconsciously come to rely on me. This would be bad for your Talent. Your destiny lies further down the road. The decision is yours, and I can't interfere in it."

Lan Jue silently nodded his head. His thoughts turned to Wu Junyi, and the pressure of the request he'd laid upon him. Now more than ever, he knew it wasn't something he could refuse. Soon it would be time for humanity as a whole to fight for their right to survive.

"I'd like you to explain your experience on Taihua, in detail." Lan Qing asked.

"Alright." Lan Jue nodded, then went on to explain everything that had occurred during his time on Taihua. No detail was left out.

When his younger brother got to the part about the Fantascia Genetica, Lan Qing's eyes grey hard and harsh. However, he said nothing, and just listened carefully to the rest of the tale.

"You did well. Of course, you are my brother, after all. You can bank on the reality that I will make the Pontiff's Castle pay for hurting you. This, though, is strange. Skyfire Avenue is the strongest of the Adept organizations, but it is also the loosest. I don't believe that doctor who claimed to heal you actually possessed the capabilities to do so. What do you think?"

"I had the same thought," Lan Jue agreed. "The phylactery only served to drain the tempest of energy that was within me. Perhaps he would be able to heal my injured meridians, but the side-effects of taking the genetica would be too extensive for him. And now, not only aren't there any residual issues, but instead both my Talent and physical health have improved. Total contrary to reason. It may be possible if there was a paragon around specializing in healing, but in all the ten known paragons there is no such person."

Lan Qing turned his attention to Chu Cheng and Hua Li. "When you two got there, did you discover anything out of the ordinary?"

Hua Li pondered the question. "When we saw him, he was in some sort of grey stone [1]. It was oval shaped... really sort of like an eggshell."

“Yeah, I thought the same thing,” Chu Cheng added. “He was laying in it. When we got there, it looked like everything had just finished. The Cosmagus was there, so we didn’t ask too many questions. At the time we were just concerned for A-Jue’s health.”

Lan Qing looked them over. “So the Cosmagus would know the answers we seek. A-Jue, you’ll need to find a way to get it out of him. If the Avenue has someone capable of healing such dire illness, this could prove invaluable in any number of ways. They shouldn’t keep that hidden.”

Lan Jue nodded in acceptance. “It won’t be easy. If they do really have someone with this ability, it’s unlikely the Avenue will want to share that information. After all, that would be a very rare find. At any rate, I owe the Avenue my life. I’ll need a way to pay them back.”

*

1. I can’t recall whether or not I mentioned this before, but this is an allusion to a popular Chinese trope, wherein a powerful being is born or escapes from a strange cocoon. For the monkey King, he was born from a rock, was buried under a mountain, and then later escaped. He was powerful enough to challenge the whole of heaven. There was also a more contemporary example in Hulu Wa, or the Calabash Brothers. First a farmer drills open a hole in a mountain and evil demons escape, then grows seven calabashes from which seven powerful babies emerged.

Chapter 225: The Bamboozled Teaching Assistant

Lan Qing's quiet voice wafted towards the other three. "I have to get back. I'll be on time for the god battle. You all need to push yourself. Think on what I've said."

Chu Cheng and Hua Li nodded their heads. Lan Jue did as well, though there was a moment's hesitation.

With a flash, the black-clad Prometheus was gone.

Hades and Poseidon gave audible sighs of relief. Hades, now safe, couldn't help himself from complaining. "What kind of 'brother' is he, anyway? He gets worse every time I see him. Why did he choose to go after me first? You tell me, it's because he knows I'm stronger than A-Li, right?"

Poseidon glared at his mouthy companion. "Oh yeah? And how exactly are you better than me? Especially when it comes to defense, you got nothing on me."

Zeus interjected, his voice gentle. "I actually do know why he chose to attack you first."

"Why, then?" Hades inquired with genuine curiosity.

"Because you talk too damn much."

"..."

ζ

Dusk was quick approaching as Lan Jue bounced towards the NEU gate cockhorse on his bicycle. He'd already set a time to meet Zhou Qianlin via the Soulcaller gem.

Once she showed up, he wordlessly made for Grace Hospital. It was dark by the time he took her home. They only exchanged a few words during

the entire evening, but the more time they spent together, the more there grew a wordless sort of mutual understanding between them. As they sped along home, Qianlin would often wrap her arm around Lan Jue's waist for support. He didn't stop her.

After he dropped her off, Lan Jue returned home. He ate a simple dinner, then spent some time at his writing desk composing something. When he finally did go to sleep, it was late.

Jin Tao was still in deep sleep, hidden within the nutrition chamber they'd left him in after the fantascia ginetica infusion. By now there were subtle differences in his physique becoming apparent. His bones were sturdier, his muscles stronger. Slender golden hairs covered his entire body... almost like he was reverting to his ancestral roots.

Tang Xiao had made his way to the Avenue after school, a religious habit he maintained after the competition. He appeared with a zeal that showed he'd forgotten – or was heroically ignoring – the pain his visits invariably ended with. Of course his zeal was in part due to the fact that Mika was his instructor, and the more vicious she was the more Tang Xiao pushed.

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Morning. NEU Electives Office.

Lan Jue's communicator beeped as he hung up. He rose to his feet, and walked to the nearby office window. As the warm sun blanketed him in a comfortable tungsten glow, he slowly stretched his lithe figure. From the outside, he looked like an angel.

NEU Teaching Affairs Office.

Wu Junyi closed the connection on his communicator, a knowing smile spreading across his face.

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“Hm, Professor Lan’s gotten here so early, today. A, that’s right, he has class. And what high-brow content are we expounding today?” Wang Hongyuan spied Lan Jue as he stepped in to the electives office. He smiled pleasantly as he called out the greeting.

Lan Jue chuckled good-naturedly. “Early! Hongyuan, I am a professional and diligent professor. Can I infer from your tone you don’t agree with me?”

Wang Hongyuan’s lips curled in an accusing grin. “Sure you are. Diligent? Have you ever worked a full day here? Hell I’m lucky if I see you at all on any given day. Not sure that qualifies as diligent. All we have to do is look at your class schedule – you can’t even guarantee two classes a week.”

Lan Jue meandered over to Wang Hongyuan’s desk. “How about you and me have a little chat outside.”

Hongyuan’s eyes followed Lan Jue as he approached, curiosity in their depths. “What do you want to chat about?”

“Nothing bad,” Lan Jue assured, resting a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Let’s go.” Despite his words though, there was a no-nonsense tone to his voice.

Wang Hongyuan had seen what Lan Jue was capable of. He knew he was no match for the man. Helplessly he rose to his feet, and followed the etiquette professor from the office.

Once they entered the hallway, Wang Hongyuan interrupted their trek with a few quiet words. “This is a school, professor. Don’t act recklessly.”

Lan Jue blinked innocently at his contemporary. “What are you talking about? If I were to do something like that, it wouldn’t be against you. You aren’t the Savage Goddess.”

Wang Hongyuan shot Lan Jue a nasty sneer. “I’m pretty sure not even god knows what you’ll do. If you got something to say fire away. I have classes to prepare.”

Lan Jue grinned. "It's like this then. Yesterday Director Wu came to the electives office looking for me. With nothing but conjecture and hearsay, he puzzled out my abilities."

Wang Hongyuan was understandably surprised by the news. "He found out you're..."

Lan Jue nodded.

"What are you going to do?" Hongyuan asked, his brows furrowed. "Leave?"

Lan Jue shook his head, and grinning, went on. "Why should I leave? I'm a catch, aren't I?"

Wang Hongyuan snorted. "I know Director Wu. Clever as a demon. I'm sure once he found out you're a God-ranked pilot, he was pulling out all the stops to get you under his thumb."

Lan Jue sagely nodded his head. "Indeed, the old fox is a tough one to deal with. I didn't have any choice but to acquiesce to his demands. Starting today I'll be assuming another identity and teach mecha combat as a 'visiting professor.'"

Wang Hongyuan's lit up at the news. "Mecha combat eh?"

This elicited a nod from the intrepid instructor. "Didn't you find anything odd about what happened on Tai Hua? It was downright inexplicable. How is it that these powerful beasts just happened to appear? There's a high chance we'll eventually encounter even more intelligent life somewhere out there in the universe. If that's the case, anything we can do to strengthen humanity as a whole is exceptionally important. With that in mind, I accepted Director Wu's terms. Of course I'll be wearing a mask during classes to protect my identity. I'll also be continuing with the etiquette classes. I told our esteemed Director that, should anything happen and my identity become known, this great find of his will vanish as quickly as he came."

Wang Hongyuan nodded in understanding. "That'll work. With your instruction, it's safe to assume we'll see a number of excellent pilots

graduating from our program.”

“Naturally,” Lan Jue replied. “I have my worries, though. After all, our school is not a traditional mecha combat university. Our students aren’t the greatest picks from the gene pool, Talent-wise. That’ll be their biggest hurdle in improving as pilots. I hope I’ll be able to find a few with higher natural ability, so we can train them as instructors and at least create a solid foundation for future improvement. That would net the most benefit. When all is said and done, it’s better to train a single Sovereign to Godhood, then a bunch of newbies to half-way decent status.”

The dance instructor just looked at him. “What’s all this nonsense, speak straight.”

Lan Jue answered by fixing the man with his stare. “Would you like to learn a few things from me?”

“Me?” Wang Hongyuan jabbed a finger towards his own nose, looking at Lan Jue in obvious surprise.

The god-ranked pilot only nodded.

“But I’m older than you are!” he exclaimed.

Lan Jue shrugged indifferently. “Knowledge is independent of age or length of study. If a teacher knows and can impart, then they are a teacher. You should know this.”

Wang Hongyuan looked unsure. His words only confirmed it. “Too sudden, I’ll need to think about it.”

Lan Jue patted his friend’s shoulder. “Sometimes opportunities are only available for the moment. You got till the end of the day – if you aren’t interested, I’ll find someone else.”

Wang Hongyuan visibly shook. He glowered in irritation. “Is there anyone as obnoxious and pushy as you?”

Lan Jue only shrugged his shoulders. “Then you go ahead and find another God-ranked pilot to come and teach you.”

Wang Hongyuan had no answer for that. “What rank are you anyway.

Really.”

“There are no ranks for God pilots,” Lan Jue explained. “Though right now there are those trying to find a way to do so. But if you mean Discipline, then seventh-degree.”

“Seventh!” Wang Hongyuan whistled appreciatively. His normally sour expression gave way, and he couldn’t help but yelp. “Alright, I’m in!”

Wang Hongyuan was a seventh-ranked adept. It was enough that he knew what it meant to be faced with a ninth-ranked, seventh-degree Talent. The veritable top of the Adept pyramid – very nearly the peak of human cultivation. And so young, to boot. It was inevitable that he would break in to the highest levels of power.

Lan Jue gave him a small grin. “Call me teacher, lemme hear how it sounds.”

Wang Hongyuan gaped at him. “Me. Call you teacher. Hell no! Maybe when we’re actually learning something. Speaking of, how are we going to learn? Most of the students know who I am.”

Lan Jue’s face grew solemn. “You want to learn, but you refuse to call me teacher?”

Wang Hongyuan’s face grew red, then white, then red. His hands wrung together, almost unconsciously. Of course he was very interested in learning with Lan Jue; not just for piloting, but in Discipline as well. It’d been a very long time since he’d seen any improvement in either area.

But this Professor Lan was younger than he. And he was an instructor himself. For Lan Jue to force obeisance in this was more than he could stand!

He considered the trade-off for a moment. He gritted his teeth, struggling with the words. Seeing this, Lan Jue cut in. “Never mind, there’s another way. You don’t want to be my student I can’t force you. We’ll do this then; you can also assume a disguise, and be my teaching assistant. This way when I’m instructing the students you can listen in. You won’t be getting the benefit of being a student directly, but you can study on your

own. How's that?" [1]

The relief in Wang Hongyuan after hearing the words was almost palpable. "Excellent. In truth, bud, I've got no problem calling you teacher. It's just, I need to maintain a presence and reputation here you understand. So don't take it personally! How about I call you teacher in private, whadda ya think?"

Lan Jue chuckled and patted his forehead. "Fine, don't worry about it. We're still and always will be contemporaries. After all we faced the fire together, stuck through it in a life and death situation. How can I really force you to do something like that. So it's settled, then. I'll let Director Wu know you'll be acting as my assistant teacher. I have to head out and prepare for the afternoon class. Five o'clock, that the first class for these 'visiting professors.' I'll get a mask for you, too. Find something you don't usually wear, something people wouldn't recognize. Hairstyle, too."

He called the instructions over his shoulder as he swaggered down the hall.

Wang Hongyuan followed him with his eyes, until the young braggart vanished around a corner. He remained in place, dumbfounded, though there was gratitude in his heart. He was nothing special, and yet he acted inappropriately when a ninth-rank seventh-degree Disciple offered to train him.

What he didn't see was the self-satisfied, guileful grin plastered on Lan Jue's face as he left.

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1. To explain this a little better, we require some further insight in to Chinese culture. Mianzi, or face, is a massive underlying aspect of life in the far east. It's a major underpinning factor in everything from family gatherings to highest-level government. What Lan Jue is asking in forcing his elder in both teaching experience and age to address him with that level of respect, is effectively emasculating him –

making him lose face. You might think, then, that Lan Jue's a bit of a dick forcing Wang Hongyuan to address him that way – but not really. Teachers demand a great deal of respect in China, and in fact it's an absolute necessity in classrooms that the teacher command absolute respect. While that's slowly hanging nowadays, the old Confucian ideal of respect thy teacher is still given a tremendous amount of lip service. It's not only not unreasonable, but expected that a teacher's students not only address them as such, but also bow and scrape and do whatever their teacher requires.

Chapter 226: Culinary Edification

So it was that Lan Jue had his assistant teacher squared away. It was a good deal, for teaching mecha combat wasn't an easy task. He'd thought over the situation last night, and came to the determination that it would be quite troublesome to teach the class entirely by himself. It was true that the mecha combat department had other teachers, but their knowledge base was woefully insufficient for what he needed. Wang Hongyuan was best suited for the position.

It wasn't a farce, telling Wang Hongyuan that he would be learning as well. However, speaking was an art form – had he approached Hongyuan directly about being his teaching assistant, the chances of him refusing the offer was high. He'd fear for his own secrets, which he'd fought hard to keep concealed.

His method had solved the problem before it'd even become one. In fact, Wang Hongyuan was thankful for the opportunity. As for Lan Jue, he felt much more positive about the whole ordeal. If he was going down, he was taking someone with him – it made it a less bitter pill to swallow.

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2:00 p.m.

It was time again for another etiquette class. This time, however, there were clearly much fewer students than the last time. Around half of last class' students were present.

It was a shameful display! Certainly the students felt similarly.

This Professor Lan was too irresponsible, they lamented. It had been ages since anyone had even seen him. There was certainly an attraction to the class, but likewise his extended absence made attendance difficult to maintain. Of course, there was also another reason why there were so few students today.

The NEU allowed all of their students to enroll in mecha combat as an elective. However, those who chose to do so were required to pay an extra fee. After all, resources were needed to teach the class. Suits, mechas, weaponry and more needed to be made available to the students.

The NEU's bizarre and brazen defeat of their rivals, Lir University, had made mecha combat the flavor of the day. Suddenly, everyone wanted to become a god-ranked pilot. It was almost impossible to get in to the Savage Goddess' class anymore. It was no surprise, then, that there were so few still willing to pay out for an etiquette class.

Zhou Qianlin was among them, and she'd arrived early to participate. Tang Mi was at her side, as usual. She's accidentally told her long-legged companion that Professor Lan was holding another class. Once Tang Mi knew that, their afternoon was booked without question.

Originally, Zhou Qianlin had no intention of attending. She had quite a lot of class work to finish. But, she recalled Lan Jue's conspiratorial tone this morning, when he claimed there would be fine foods on offer today. Eat a light lunch, he'd urged.

Zhou Qianlin knew that, when Lan Jue said there would be good food, he wasn't lying. She knew his taste. And what girl didn't like a fine meal? She decided to see what he was talking about.

Even though the numbers were still woefully small by comparison, Qianlin and Tang Mi's presence brought a fair few more than there would have been otherwise.

The seat beside Tang Mi was occupied by her brother. Tang Xiao was still enjoying his status as the hero of the NEU. Suddenly his weight didn't matter, as was evident by the more than one hundred love letters he'd already received [1]. The veritable cloud of smugness that followed him made it clear how he felt about the matter. It fueled his evening masochistic beatings.

Suffering now leads to success in the future! Tang Xiao repeated the words to himself every day, a mantra to keep him on track.

The moment Lan Jue walked in to the room, everyone's attention

instantly focused on him. The reason was his unconventional dress.

Today, it was a snow-white chef's uniform; the white double-breasted jacket, the white pants, the apron, and the toque to top it all off.

"What's all this about?" Tang Xiao followed his instructor with his eyes, confused at what he was seeing. It was like a cartoon...

Once their make-shift chef arrived at the podium, he turned and waved his hand toward the door. From outside, a group of people shuffled in to the classroom. They set up a large, circular table at the front of the class.

Lan Jue spoke. "Alright everyone, gather round. Give space. Make room in the middle. I hope you all didn't get too full at lunch, otherwise I'm afraid you might regret it."

Tang Mi poked Zhou Qianlin, seated quietly at her side. "What's going on?"

"How am I supposed to know," Zhou Qianlin muttered.

It ended up being a blessing to have so few students today. Twenty-something, and that was all. It was a small enough class that they could all comfortably gather near the front.

At Lan Jue's instruction, the students pulled their chairs close and found a place around the expansive table.

"So you treating us to a meal, Professor?" Tang Mi couldn't help but ask.

Lan Jue smiled at her. "I suppose, something like that. An understanding of fine cuisine is an integral part of etiquette. Today, I'm going to teach you about Ma La Tang..."

Zhou Qianlin began to pay more attention after his introduction. Lan Jue had taken her suggestions, and instead of sticking to subjects beyond the ken of these middle-class students, he'd chosen something more accessible. This way a far more practical subject to learn about.

One's sense of taste was certainly the strongest! It was as good a place as any to start. It was a dish he'd requested from the Gourmet, since he couldn't create such a masterpiece himself.

Zhou Qianlin couldn't remember a time she'd been this full. She felt absolutely inundated with the fresh, spicy flavor of the meal. She could still feel it on her tongue. Her face was red from the heat of it, and she took sips of cold water between panting breaths. She noted, with some amusement, that her lips were numb.

Despite her discomfort, though, she was better off than the others.

Tang Mi was leaning against the back of her chair, groaning intermittently. She thought she had a formidable appetite, but it had only been two hours since her big lunch, and this was twice as much. It was too delicious for her to pass up. Too delicious for her to stop eating!

But Tang Xiao was the most entertaining to watch. The unfortunate chair beneath him groaned and creaked with effort. And then broke to pieces, to the delight and surprise of a laughing classroom.

"Alright. Now, I hope you all have a good idea of what real Ma La Tang tastes like. That's all for today's class, next time we'll have something new to discuss." Lan Jue could see the satisfaction on his students' faces. Today's class was a successful one.

Once class was finished, he stepped out. Jin Yan was waiting for him.

"Ah, Professor Lan. I'm late! Class is over, isn't it. I was covering a class this afternoon. What did you talk about today? What's that wonderful smell?" Her nose scrunched adorably as she sniffed the air, filling her nostrils with the heady scent.

Lan Jue thrust his thumb over his shoulder towards the class. "There should still be some left. You should go in and try some, Professor Jin. Tang Mi, tell Professor Jin about Ma La Tang." With Jin Yan passed off, Lan Jue turned and left. He'd hired the workers to clean up once everyone was finished, so he didn't have to.

Ten minutes later, there was one more poor soul groaning from their poor self-control.

Lan Jue was still clad in the aromatic chef's uniform when he returned to the electives office. He found a spot to change his clothes.

"Professor Lan. Five o'clock this afternoon you're teaching, right? What's the subject matter?" Wang Hongyuan was suddenly at his side, quietly pushing him for answers.

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1. <http://www.mortarinvestments.eu/products/tanks-2/vt-55-recovery-46#currency=USD> - What?! So you're telling me all I have to do is trample a few people with a giant metal contraption and I can take my pick? Holy crap guys, who wants to spring for a defunct soviet tank with me?

Chapter 227: A Wild Guest Instructor Appears!

“Ah, that reminds me...” Lan Jue replied. “I’ve already let Director Wu know you’re going to be acting as my assistant. I’ll give you a mask, change your clothes and then we’re ready to go. The Director has hand-picked fifty students to populate our inaugural class. They should be top of their group. Today we’ll be going straight to simulations, and start there. Once you’re changed, head over and start setting up the pods. Get us a spot to train. I’ll be there a little while later.”

Wang Hongyuan’s attitude toward the young etiquette teacher was a sight different than normal. He nodded his head without hesitation or complaint. “Alright, right away. Let me get the mask.”

With his back to the other teachers, blocking their view, Lan Jue opened his inter-dimensional storing space and pulled free a silver mask. Wang Hongyuan took it, shot Lan Jue a thumbs-up, then left to get ready.

The etiquette teacher watched him leave, a smile on his face. This is the worth of a teaching assistant.

The Soulcaller gem warmed.

Zhou Qianlin: Soooo full! But it was delicious, thank you.

Lan Jue: Happy to. By the way, I’ll probably be leaving the school late this evening. Do you want to wait or find another way home?

What’s keeping you on campus so long? What are you up to?

Director Wu saw through our charade. Once he found out I’ve been behind the last few big news items, he forced me to agree to teach a mecha combat class. I had no choice but to accept, under the condition that he keeps my identity a secret. I’ll be a special ‘guest instructor’. Ugh...

Well can I join?

You...

Me what? Is there a problem? You said yourself I’m an adept now.

Director Wu said he'd chosen the students for this class himself. Do you think you can find a way in?

He's already approached me. He said they were opening a special mecha combat class, calling class one of Advanced Robotic Combat conditioning. He wanted to know if I'd be interested in joining. He said practical experience in mecha combat would improve my research. I said I'd think about it.

The surprises never cease.

He wants me to join the student government, commissary in charge of studies he called it. What do you think?

Why not.

ζ

"Agh, Qianlin, I'm so full I could die. But so, so good. I can feel myself falling more in love with Professor Lan every time I show up to one of his classes. He's not strong, but in peacetime he's nothing short of a dream guy. He's already conquered my stomach, and well on his way to my heart." Tang Mi feigned a doe-eyed, smitten expression to Zhou Qianlin who was seated at her side.

Qianlin smiled at her. "I decided to join you in that mecha combat class, Little Mi."

Tang Mi sat up straighter in her chair. "Weren't you just on about not wanting to hurt anybody? Why the sudden change of heart?"

Qianlin's smirk was as mysterious as it was teasing. "Why dwell on the past."

ζ

“The sim pods are ready, teacher. You can come on over whenever you’re ready.” Wang Hongyuan’s voice carried through Lan Jue’s communicator.

“Alright, I’ll be there shortly,” he replied.

Mecha Combat Department, Simulator Warehouse.

Wu Junyi looked severe with his serious countenance and black suit. His cold demeanor instantly set the gathered students on edge. They could feel the stifling pressure, simply by his presence.

The students were dutifully arrayed in five rows, and stood as they waited for class to begin. Every one of them was clad in a black pilot jumpsuit.

Wang Hongyuan stood beside Wu Junyi, his identity protected by the silver mask. He looked over the excited youths in their crisp uniforms and, without understanding why, he felt his own blood boiling with anticipation.

They didn’t have to wait long. After a short while, the rhythmic of footsteps could be heard from outside. The door opened, and a figure stepped in.

He was instantly the center of attention.

A golden mask hid his features from view. A blue flight suit hugged his lithe, athletic figure. As he entered, a powerful aura followed.

Curiosity blazed in the eyes of all onlookers. Who was this masked man? When Director Wu had introduced the class, he’d told them only that they would be bringing in a guest instructor, and nothing more.

The masked man immediately made his way to Wu Junyi with large strides. He stopped once beside the man, gave him a nod, then looked over the gathered pupils.

Wu Junyi returned the greeting in kind, then faced the students. With a smile on his face, he addressed them in his characteristic imperial tone. “Alright students, allow me to introduce you. This is your new guest instructor and his assistant. You may address them as Drillmaster.” His

opening words were simply and brief. He indicated the masked men as he spoke.

“Today, those of you standing here will participate in our first special Advanced Robotics Combat – or ARC – class. You were chosen based on your inherent genetic Talent, and academic excellence. I can assure you right now that, if you take this course seriously, under the drillmaster’s instruction you will undoubtedly grow to be respected mecha pilots. You’ll be contributing members of the Alliance. However, I must impress upon you the fact that your presence here is a privilege. Simply being chosen does not mean your attendance is assured. If any of you are incapable of keeping up, or are not improving as expected, you will have your spot taken away. I’m sure that anyone unfortunate enough to have this happen to them will regret it tremendously. As such, we expect two hundred percent effort here, ladies and gentlemen. If you do, not only will you progress further than you ever imagined possible, you’ll be doing your Alliance a service, becoming a skilled and sought-after mecha pilot. With that said, I yield the floor to your drillmasters.”

Wu Junyi relinquished his spot before the students, stepping to the side so the masked man could take his place.

The golden-masked stranger took up position as naturally as though he lived in the center of attention. They could only see his eyes, which twinkled with a mysterious power as he looked over the gathered pupils.

“Salutations. There is no need for me to deliver some long self-introduction – in fact I’m sure several of you are already thinking up nicknames for me. But let me stop you there, because I know exactly what you’ll be calling me in just a little while: The Demon. I suggest you get used to it now, because you’ll be cursing it before we’re done today. If you can’t handle it, you can leave – but understand that once you quit, your opportunity to learn with us is forfeit. For those that remain, I can’t tell you how far you’ll go. What I can tell you is that if you graduate from this program, you’ll be welcome anywhere in the East. There’s nothing else to say. Pilots, pick a pod.”

Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan watched the students filed in to the many

sim pods scattered around the warehouse. Within the group, the golden-masked Lan Jue spied several familiar faces; his overweight disciple, his sister and – in the very back, her enticing figure outlined in a form-hugging flight suit – was Zhou Qianlin.

Chapter 228: Prince of Devils?

“Getting in to the special ARC curriculum was one of the luckiest breaks I ever had in my life – and at the same time, one of the unluckiest. That short period will forever be etched on my soul. It was then I learned the true meaning of hardship. There were so many times when I just wanted to quit, to walk away. But, every time those thoughts entered my mind I looked to the people standing beside me. If they could sustain in the face of these difficulties, why couldn’t I? Of course I could! I would think about my future, about what would happen if I became a legendary pilot. I promised myself that the first thing I’d do was defeat the demon drillmaster! Not just a demon... he was the Prince of Devils, and I promised myself I’d show him the torture he put us through.”

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These crack students were very familiar with the sim pods that dotted the warehouse. One after the other, they entered them as naturally as climbing in to bed.

Director Wu patted Lan Jue’s shoulder, then turned and left. He did not remain to supervise for, after all, it was he who sent for Lan Jue to teach the class. He trusted the young man’s capabilities explicitly, not to mention it was a plan concocted in tandem with Dean Xu. It was beyond lucky to have found this God-ranked pilot hidden among their staff, and a great boon to have him teaching for them. If in the end their gamble paid off, it would be the dawn of a new age for their university.

Lan Jue nodded towards Wang Hongyuan, and the two entered their own sim pods to get the class under way.

As they did, a figure ran in from outside.

The Savage Goddess looked heroic, almost valiant in her tight-fitting flight suit. However, her face was dark with rage. She arrived just as

Director Wu was making his exit.

“What’s the meaning of this, Director.” She veritably growled at her superior as they met in the hall.

The teaching affairs director reacted to her attack with a nonchalant air. “What’s the matter, Professor Tan? Is there something I can assist you with?”

The Savage Goddess spoke with a clear undertone of rage. “You’re asking me what the problem is? What’s the meaning of calling away all of my best students, including Zhou Qianlin. And now I’m just hearing now about this Advanced Robotics Combat class you’ve started. Why wasn’t I told about any of this? What’s this class all about?”

Tan Lingyun had had her own mecha combat class in the afternoon. She’d first noticed something wrong when, during roll call, she discovered all of her best students were absent. Not a one was present. She only learned about the ARC curriculum after asking about them. She was out the door practically before her students finished telling her about it.

Director Wu looked awkwardly at the famed instructor. “Lingyun. Calm yourself. Everything happened rather quickly, so we didn’t have the opportunity to bring all of our instructors up to speed. The fault lies with me, but understand that this is very fortuitous for our school. An advantage for our students that couldn’t be disregarded. This is a chance that comes only once in a lifetime. So I must ask that you forgive me the circumstances, and trust that all will be explained moving forward.”

Doubt and displeasure were written clear on the Savage Goddess’ face. She walked with the Director as they left the building.

“What on earth is going on, Director? Is this ARC class really that important?”

Wu Junyi conversed with her in somewhat hushed tones. “We’d originally hoped to keep this a strict secret. However, your contributions to this school, and your professional ethics are without question – so I’ll tell you. You must promise not to share this information with anyone. If you do, it could cause immeasurable damage to our university. Do you

understand?”

Tan Lingyun’s face gradually shed its angry expression as Director Wu went on. When she spoke, her voice was also hardly a whisper. “So what’s going on?”

“We’ve invited a God-ranked pilot in to our school,” Wu Junyi began. “A guest professor. However, as you know these pilots are rare and powerful individuals. This man’s particular demands were that his identity remains a secret. Not a soul is to know who he truly is. He’s promised to carve out some time every week from his schedule, to train our students in his craft. Because his tenure here is temporary, we concocted this class as the best opportunity to utilize his abilities while he’s here. It was for these reasons we didn’t discuss this with you – or anyone else, for that matter.”

“A god-ranked pilot?” The single phrase came as an utter shock to Tan Lingyun. Her pretty eyes were large, and her face was incredulous. A mysterious figure swam through her mind as the information was revealed.

Wu Junyi only nodded in confirmation.

Tan Lingyun felt off-kilter. The revelation threw her heart in to chaos. Her red lips slowly curled in to a smirk.

“What’s his name?”

Wu Junyi shook his head at her. “I can’t tell you. I’ve promised to keep this a secret. If I break this promise he’ll leave, and we’ll have thrown away a chance at having a God-ranked teacher instructing our students. You tell me, how would that affect our school?”

The passionate woman immediately nodded, indicating she understood. But she drew to a stop, and her eyes stared off in to the distance as she pondered.

Wu Junyi stop as well, and turned to face her. “I hope you understand the circumstances Professor Tan, and the gravity of it all. From the school’s perspective, this was unquestionably the right move. If it has caused you any trouble, allow me to apologize on behalf of the administration.”

She was shaken from her silent musing, immediately shaking her head at Director Wu. “I’m anxious that so many of our best students are being called away. Even considering this instructor’s status as a God-ranked pilot, I’m still worried. I have a request.”

Director Wu regarded her calmly. “And what’s that?”

“I would also like to participate in the ARC classes,” Tan Lingyun announced. “If this instructor you’ve brought really is a God-ranked pilot, then he must be quite powerful. In that case, I could stand to learn a few things as well. It would benefit everyone.”

Surprise lit up the director’s face, but after a moment he nodded. “Certainly, I encourage you to participate. They should already be in the sim warehouse with class under way. I’ll go with you, explain things to the instructor.”

The two of them turned around, and entered the room Wu Junyi had just vacated. They found a couple empty pods, and turned them on.

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DreamNet, National Eastern University Special Area

By now all of the students had arrived, together again in their various mecha suits. Each were as unique as the students who piloted them. Naturally, one’s financial resources played a part in the mecha they possessed in DreamNet. Like anything, the more money you had at your disposal, the better your equipment would be.

It meant there were a wide variety of students under his direction – both in terms of skill and equipment.

What was surprising to them, though, were the two very low key – and yet very familiar – mecha suits standing before them.

Sabermechs! The most basic model available without just being a metal frame. Each had a name hanging over their head; Little Flea, and Nooblet.

What kind of special instructors are these, they thought? Did they think this was a joke? One by one, hidden in their dark sim pods, the students' faces adopted various shades of contempt.

Of course, not everyone shared the same idea.

Neither Tang Xiao nor Tang Mi cracked a smile. Upon seeing 'Nooblet' flash before her, Tang Mi's teeth immediately began to grind in rage. However, she bit back on the old young to her pride. She knew without a doubt that this Nooblet was as good as they say.

As for Tang Xiao, who else was more aware of the truth around Nooblet than he? This special instructor, their drillmaster, the Prince of Devils, was his master!

He'd had suspicions the moment he'd heard Lan Jue give his speech. Calling himself a devil was an even more obvious hint. However, his Master was employing some sort of voice modulation, so the voice wasn't what he was expecting, and it threw him off.

He couldn't believe the school had somehow convinced Professor Lan to teach mecha combat. It was that fact that caused him to be surprised.

For the last few days, Tang Xiao had dutifully been showing up to suffer the torturous blows of Mika. However, despite the discomfort he could clearly see improvement in his practice bouts with the Stygian Succubus. In the half a month since they began, he felt his previously stagnant Discipline improving by leaps and bounds. And there was something else, something more. It felt like a wall... a membrane or something that was preventing him from moving faster. But he could feel it tearing.

It was an intense source of excitement for Tang Xiao. And after that day, when he routed the Lirian challengers, his respect for his Master only grew. With a woman like Mika under his command, how powerful was he?

His only regret up to this point was that the Master hadn't trained mecha combat with him personally. That changed today, much to his surprise.

“You all think your mechas are pretty nice, right? Your pride and joy.” Any icy, accusing voice hung in the cockpits of each student.

Silence prevailed. Fifty students, the tops of their classes, each suffered a collective shudder as fear passed through them. Of course they were arrogant, regarded as treasures of the university. And yet they knew, instinctively, that their masked teachers were something more than normal men.

Lan Jue’s cutting voice rattled in their ears. “Today’s class is simply, children. You have one task only; defeat Nooblet, and Little Flea. Once that happens, we call it a day. You’ve got the next five minutes to discuss tactics, then we see how much work we’ve got ahead of us. While you chat, my associate and I will turn off comms.”

Two flashes punctuated the drillmaster’s instructions. A peridot and onyx mecha appeared once the glare receded.

Nooblet stomped over.

It was Wu Junyi’s voice he heard first. “I apologize for the sudden interruption, Professor. This is one of our faculty, Tan Lingyun. She herself is a sovereign-ranked pilot, and would like to participate in your class. She’s very excited to study under you. Will this be alright?”

Tan. Ling. Yun. The green mecha, those three syllables, set the students in to a tizzy.

Tan Lingyun was here. The Savage Goddess! In the eyes of her students, she was God-ranked, and no one could tell them different.

But that’s right! With Professor Tan among them, why would they bring these strange outsiders to teach? Could this mean that this man could be even more powerful than their dear Savage Goddess? Were that so, it would mean this man was God-ranked himself! Was it possible?

Chapter 229: Blitzkrieg

Tan Lingyun, in her brilliant peridot mecha, immediately recognized the sorry state of the instructor's suits. The corner of her lips curled in a frown. Could this mean that this mysterious teacher was not the one she sought? She felt her hope slipping.

"Join your unit, then. If you're to join, you'll follow instructions just like the others. You'll participate in the test like them. They'll fill you in on the details." With that said, Nooblet and Little Flea lumbered away to give them space.

Wu Junyi's black mecha vanished. Tan Lingyun coaxed her suit to join the gathered students.

They expressed the situation to her, and she was surprised to discover that this drillmaster and his assistant were expecting to take all on of these advanced students on their own, with subpar mechas. These kids may not have been the best in the East, or even to the level of Tan Lingyun, but compared to a couple base-model sabermechs they were practically juggernauts.

Even if they truly were a God-ranked pilot, the likelihood of them being able to take on every one of them was slim to none.

Tan Lingyun couldn't help but ponder on the possibility that one of these was Lei Feng. If that were the case, the two already had a massive advantage.

"Well, since they've told us to put together a battle plan, I suppose I'll do it. Tang Xiao!"

"Present."

"Here's what I need from you..."

The Savage Goddess quickly ran through their plan for the coming struggle. Nooblet and Little Flea remained separate in a distant corner of the simulated campus arena.

"Are you sure about this, Professor Lan? Two against fifty-one, you think

there's a chance?" Wang Hongyuan's tone was skeptical.

Lan Jue's response was indifferent. "What's wrong? No self-confidence?"

"Comparatively I am much weaker," he answered. "How can I not be a little concerned?"

Lan Jue's voice crackled through his communicator. "If I didn't have an answer for this, how could I ask you to call me Teacher. If we win, hopefully that will convince you that I really have something to impart."

"Alright!" Wang Hongyuan spoke without hesitation.

Lan Jue went on to explain his plan. The dance instructor nodded repeatedly as he listened, and with each word he felt his blood grow hotter. By the time they were ready, his pulse was pounding, ready for battle.

In order to teach someone with significant talent, it was important to first prove you had something to offer. Once your domination was confirmed, then you needed their respect. Only then would they listen to instruction, and execute them fervently.

And so, today's class had one purpose, as far as Lan Jue was concerned; flexing his muscles.

Relying upon her familiarity with the students, Tan Lingyun quickly allocated jobs to each of them. Every one of the fifty students had their specific purpose. She was in her natural habitat, commanding others. With fifty-one against only two, she was confident victory would be theirs. According to her own experience, a top-level mecha pilot needed a complimenting suit to truly employ their strength – not a couple rickety training mechs.

They may be God-ranked pilots, she thought, but their mechas weren't. Even with sovereign mechas they may stand a chance, but these? The limitations of their mechas meant there were many skills and tactics they'd be unable to perform. Sustain, strength, speed... they were deficient in every category.

They would know savagery! So what if they were God-ranked, she

thought. Arrogance often leads to defeat! This was something she would teach them. She would not allow them to look down on the capabilities of her students!

A hard, stubborn light shone in Tan Lingyun's eyes. For days she had been furiously searching for that man, all to no avail. Further, as the center of everyone's attention her mood swings had become more severe. News of a mysterious woman god-ranked pilot had already begun to circulate through the internet.

She knew she wasn't. She was disgusted with the reports, ashamed. And yet she was unable to refute them, or explain the situation. It brought honor to the university, and she couldn't in good conscious take that away.

This was a fine opportunity, she thought. Someone blindly stumbled in to her sights, and now it was time to let off some steam.

Boooooom!

An explosion sent a shudder through her, and she saw the fires on the periphery of her vision.

Fifty faces turned towards the source of the blast.

What they saw was a mecha reduced to slag, glowing red-hot as fires twisted the metal. The frightening screams of a student rang in their cockpits.

They came one after the other; boom, boom, boom! Three tearing blasts like frightening peels of thunder. Three more suits were reduced to scrap.

"What's the meaning of this?! We were never told to begin!" Tan Lingyun roared over the communicator.

The drillmaster's dismissive hiss crackled through every communicator. "You expect your enemies to alert you when they choose to strike in a real fight? I told you five minutes, and five minutes has passed. Each passing second is a grain on the hourglass of your life, Professor. Your ancestors have paid in blood to teach you that."

Her eyes shot to the time on her control console – five minutes had

indeed passed.

Five minutes wasn't an adequate amount of time to plan, and what's more Tan Lingyun had arrived late. In fact, it had already passed the five-minute mark by the time she'd arrived. Lan Jue had been carefully watching the clock.

Nooblet and Little Flea had used the time and their students' distraction to circle around and flank them. Once it was time, they struck.

Caught off guard, the students' team paid with the 'lives' of four of their own. When it came to mecha combat, Wang Hongyuan couldn't hold a candle to Lan Jue. However, that didn't mean he was a weakling – he was a Sovereign-ranked pilot, after all. The students were about as distant to him as he was to the etiquette teacher.

Tan Lingyun was livid, wrath filling her heart, and yet could find no means to contradict the drillmaster. She expressed her frustration with an indignant snort through gritted teeth. "Everyone, spread out!" Even before her instructions were complete, she was on the move. Her green mecha was a beam of shimmering light as it raced towards Nooblet and Little Flea.

Her strategy was simple; keep the battle to one front, with remote attacks keeping their enemies pinned to one location. They would take full advantage of their superior numbers, thus increasing their over-all destructive capability. With the distant long-range mechs carpet-bombing her foes, she doubted their simple sabermechs could withstand it.

It was a fine plan, and in fact the right determination, but for the fact she'd forgotten to keep track of the time. The lapse had thrown their strategy in to disarray.

A flash of color filled her screen, and suddenly there was something tearing through the sky toward her.

It was an act so perfectly timed it instantly filled her with unease.

The figure cut her off at the highest point of her trajectory, just before she'd planned to plummet towards her two foes. She'd already input the

commands, leaving herself open to the strike.

She did the only thing she could, and twisted so that the spikes dotting her mecha were positioned to intercept the rush.

Tan Lingyun watched it coming, and saw that it was the alloy blade of a sabermech.

Ting! Blocked!

The spines and blade collided. What followed was bizarre and infuriating for, as she watched, the blade seemed to vibrate and deflect off the spikes to deal a blow against her mecha's frame.

Immediately Tan Lingyun called up her photomask shields. She'd broken in to a cold sweat, after just barely avoiding destruction.

She had no choice but to pause in midair and react.

Below them, Nooblet was on the move. After throwing his weapon, he had not stopped to watch the result. His deft movements danced between incoming missile salvos. His movements brought him dangerously close to a group of students.

Closest suit was a close-combat mecha, bearing a long spear. It faced the incoming assailant without hesitation or retreat – a fine display of talent and experience. With a flick of its metallic wrist the pikeman's weapon split in to three opaque silhouettes, aimed at Nooblet's head and shoulders.

Nooblet's forward rush would not be dissuaded. The simple mecha twisted mid-charge and the spear strikes bounced harmlessly off the metal armor. Nooblet grabbed the weapon mid-strike, while in the same motion lifting a knee.

Bang! The muffled crunch of metal-on-metal prefaced the student flailing in to the distance. The spear now rested in Nooblet's hands.

Without even pausing to look, Nooblet swung its new weapon in an arc to deflect the three strikes coming his way from the students' allies.

By all accounts this basic model suit should be far less of a threat than

these high-classed mechas, and yet each their strikes met one of his they were inexplicably deflected without much effort. Nooblet extricated himself from their attempts to pin him down.

The students had begun to recover, filing in to their tactical formations. The long-distance fights spread out around the arena's edges, while the close-combat fighters repositioned for the rush.

BOOM! One of the long-ranged fighters became a cloud of smoke and debris. It's laser rifle glinted in the hands of another sabermech. The simple mecha's alloy sword was softly glowing in the raging fires of the defeated enemy, protruding from the enemy's energy reserve apparatus. It was the sudden release of so much energy that had caused the terrifying explosion.

Little Flea's figure appeared between the dancing fires. The gun in its hands shook as ten beams of condensed destruction fired outward.

Laser rifles, obviously, required sustained energy infusion to work properly. Riflemen mechas were designed to continuously pump energy in to the gun. This is what allowed them to fire off so many rounds at once. As a result, Little Flea would be able to fire off a few rounds, but it was not sustainable.

It was all he needed. The ten blasts raced off towards ten mechas. The students only saw a flash of light before everything went dark.

Self-preservation was a natural response when under assault. Though intending to focus on the distant Nooblet, the students providing cover fire stopped to pull up their close-range shields.

The pause in their attacks was enough time for Nooblet. Little Flea was also on the move, sword once more in hand. His next target was the nearest close-ranged mecha.

Chapter 230: Nooblet's Back

Fifty-one against two. The two drillmaster had chosen to separate the work, with Lan Jue responsible for close-combat fighters, and Wang Hongyuan dealing with ranged attackers in order to give Lan Jue some breathing room.

Tan Lingyun, by this point, had recovered from having her charge cut short. She was still confused, however, for the discrepancies between her Sovereign-class mecha and their base models should have meant its projectile wouldn't phase her. And yet it had, giving them the opportunity for a counter-attack.

She had had a fine view from her height, to witness Nooblet handily defeating her students as well, despite their equipment advantage. It was then understanding dawned upon her, and she felt shock freeze her fingers.

Oscillation! That was how he'd done it. The thrown sword, its defensive capabilities... whatever weapon the sabermech held became a terrifying tool when oscillating. The skill disseminated an attacker's power, and fractured their defense. Hence it's storied reputation.

Tan Lingyun thought upon her own abilities, and while she could indeed employ some level of oscillation, she was nowhere near as practiced as Nooblet.

She watched as a beam of silver light raced towards Nooblet from behind. It was positioned so that the drillmaster couldn't see its approach while, in the same moment, another student charged at him from the front to occupy his attention.

Nooblet stopped, deflecting the attacks from the students surrounding him as though he could see in all directions. Upon freeing up some room, Tan Lingyun watched from the skies as her opponent's spear dimmed, almost like an illusion. It seemed to draw in to the mecha, only to be spat out a moment later in all directions much like her own spikes [1]. The five closest mechas to the Prince of Devils shook visibly. They stumbled

around like shell-shocked until, as one, they all erupted in to balls of fire and light.

Looking down upon the scene, Tan Lingyun thought it looked like half a dozen firey blossoms.

Tan Lingyun raced towards Lan Jue in defense of her students. As she did, though, her thoughts turned over what she just witnessed.

Mirror blade!

Although he'd been using his spear, the maneuver was definitely mirror blade. There was no doubt in her mind: this was Lei Feng.

Tan Lingyun raced on, though she was still some distance away. The other students looked on in fear and alarm as their companions were cruelly bested. All but for the furtive silver mecha that was still unharmed. A photomask shield crackled around it, and it was by virtue of this student's speed that the shield had deflected the terrifying attack. Seeing their opportunity, the silver mecha rushed forward at top speed, purple light erupting from behind it towards Lan Jue who stood in the glaring light of the five fire balls. However, strangely this student held no weapon. Instead they spread their arms wide during the advance, as though to wrap the drillmaster in a hug.

The cunning pilot was none other than Tang Xiao. Ever since realizing this was in fact his master, he'd been flush with excitement. But he was also a pilot, and so he'd carefully watched the battlefield situation as it unfolded. He saw his master's skill, saw his classmate's mistakes, as well as Professor Tan's advance.

His teacher was using a sabermech, and that meant that with the right opportunity, they still had a chance. As such he chose what he felt to be the best option: under cover of his classmate's fiery 'death', rush in.

Of course Tang Xiao was no fool. He knew his own close-combat fighter wouldn't be able to pin Lan Jue for long. However, that wasn't important. Tang Xiao only had to constrain his master long enough for Professor Tan to finish the job.

A single, concentrated strike from a Sovereign, focused right on that sabermech, would spell the end of this game.

Heh, Master, I should apologize!

A dark and sinister smirk spread across the kid's pudgy face.

However, as he burst through the flames relying on his shield to protect him from the scalding heat, Tang Xiao saw Nooblet slowly turn to face him.

No! Tang Xiao saw his window closing, but it was too late! The power gems his teacher had gifted him made him frighteningly fast – the drawback, though, was that there was no time to stop.

Tan Lingyun's mecha converged upon them as well. Spikes protruding from her palms glinted dangerously, aimed for Nooblet's cockpit.

Lan Jue reacted. He swept backwards to avoid Tang Xiao's bear hug, just enough so that when they collided the majority of the silver mecha's power was rendered moot. Tang Xiao felt the impact, ineffectual though it was, bounce his master harmlessly away.

In the moment their suits collided, Nooblet had grabbed the silver mech's arm. Lan Jue swung his suit around, using Tang Xiao's own forward momentum against him. They spun in a circle and, with just the slightest tug, Nooblet sent the silver mecha flying through the air. Directly in to the oncoming Tan Lingyun.

Boooooooooom!

Perhaps Nooblet couldn't destroy the silver mecha by himself. After all, Lan Jue had given Tang Xiao quite a lot of exceptional power gems. But a direct strike from the Savage Goddess meant the only thing Tang Xiao could do is bemoan his fate.

It had been wrong of Tang Xiao to assume his master had overlooked him. Lan Jue was very well aware of his student's cunning and had watched him carefully from the onset.

The reason he hadn't gone for Tang Xiao first was for just those reasons.

Those gems, and his sneaky nature were a dangerous pairing, especially when he piloted such a basic suit. Even a surprise strike may not have been enough to end him. He had to wait for just the right opportunity.

It was something he'd learned from Lan Qing, and creatively applied as needed. Although the principle behind using this skill was different now than when Lan Qing had used it on him [2], but the end result was the same. Tang Xiao had perished at the hand of Tan Lingyun, and the impact had cast the Savage Goddess away.

If the onlookers had been required to describe that exchange, there was only one thing they could say: Perfection.

Rising on to the tips of its mechanical toes, Nooblet stretched an arm out. The spear it had used to clear the path returned to its hand. It was off again, penetrating in to the heart of the nearest group of students.

He swept his eyes across the battlefield for a quick headcount. He spied twenty-one long-distance mechas remaining. Adding the close-combat suits brought the number to twenty-nine. Thirty, including their leading Professor, the Savage Goddess.

In the brief time that had passed since the fight begun, more than ten close-combat fighters had been disposed of. Wang Hongyuan, for his part, had felled three riflemen before being forced to adopt a more defensive posture.

Tan Lingyun had watched impotently as her strike obliterated Tang Xiao. However, the intense rage that fueled her ensured that the surprise didn't lock her up for long. A moment later she poured everything she could in to another headlong rush towards Nooblet.

Lan Jue was already pushing speeds the sabermech could only barely sustain. The students around him pushed in to high gear, and began firing wildly all around him. It looked as though there were no means of escape for Nooblet.

However, in this critical moment Lan Jue was in rare form. He juked East, dodged West, taking advantage of every small gap and split second until a route presented itself. He burst through to freedom, his spear

lashing out like a precision claw. With hardly any thought, his weapon found the critical weak points in suit after suit as he raced by.

Two more of her students were defeated in the space it took for Tang Lingyun to close the gap, ended by that unpredictable spear.

“Everyone pour full power in to your shields!” Tan Lingyun roared in to her comms. Her mecha charged forward even faster, hoping to rely on her speed to overwhelm his ability. The spikes in her palms swelled and changed in to beams of blinding light, that burst outward to envelop Nooblet. In the same instant a row of sharp spines broke out along the peridot mecha’s spine. The tip of each twinkled with a caustic green light.

Specializing in close-combat didn’t mean that a suit wasn’t devoid of long-range options. Top of the line mechas certainly took both methods in to account during construction. It really came down to a pilot’s tendency towards one or the other.

However, a basic sabermech didn’t have that option.

Tan Lingyun’s combat experience was extensive. She’d recognized the problems and limitations with her opponent already. The greatest disadvantage was this Nooblet’s limited attack power. Even with oscillation, trying to one-hit-kill her students through fully-charged shields was a herculean task.

Of course there were disadvantages to pouring all your energy in to shields. The energy needs meant that other systems – especially speed-would suffer, and their overall sustain in combat was diminished. Under the circumstances, though, it was the best decision.

The remaining combatants executed Tan Lingyun’s order immediately. The results were as expected; though oscillating and perfectly executed, Nooblet’s spear could break the energy barrier but not the alloy hull of the suits.

By now, Tan Lingyun had gotten within striking distance.

Would this spell the end of Nooblet?

While Nooblet’s strikes weren’t enough to defeat the student before him,

the impact force did lock him in place. Nooblet made no effort to turn, or in fact any measure to block the strike coming from behind. Instead he toppled forward with the spear strike, leaving the student in place.

Tan Lingyun's deadly spikes found nothing but air, but the beams of intense light that she'd fired did find a target in her unfortunate student. The Sovereign-class mecha claimed its second victim, though once more it was someone from her own side.

All eyes turned to the explosion. Lan Jue, no longer the center of attention, expertly transitioned from the floor to another student's side with no wasted movements. The spear in his hand lashed out like a terrible viper three times, each one landing with pinpoint accuracy.

Boom! Another one gone.

Two more students appeared on either side of the drillmaster then, one gold and the other green. Lan Jue's cockpit filled with an urgent beep as both opponents got a lock on his position. With masterful cooperation they advanced, once bearing a spear and the other a two-handed buster sword.

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1. Read Chapter 191.
2. Read Chapter 224.

Chapter 231: What Moral Integrity?

The two newly arrived challengers had chosen their timing well. Lan Jue was still recovering from his strike. He had no chance to retreat, especially with Tan Lingyun hot on his heels.

“Not bad!” The chilly praise crackled from Nooblet’s suit.

Tang Mi and Geng Yang sat in their respective suits. Since combat had started, the two carefully watched the drillmaster for an opening. They’d been patiently waiting for just this moment.

Nooblet planted its metallic foot and, with incredible speed, spun entirely around. Both Tang Mi and Geng Yang felt their weapons connect with their target, however they suddenly felt themselves being yanked off balance. Before they knew it, they were both stumbling in to Tang Lingyun’s path.

Tang Lingyun saw what was coming and pulled back the assault. She recognized his game, and would not serve as his inadvertent helper any longer.

However, the Savage Goddess was surprised to find that she was still tearing forward. A thrusting force was keeping her mobile. She could only watch as her deadly spikes rammed right in to Geng Yang and Tang Mi.

Her attacks were especially dangerous due to the fact that they were specialized Sovereign-class weapons, that bypassed most defensive shields. The ear-splitting sound of fracturing metal followed Tan Lingyun’s spikes ending her two students.

Naturally her sudden forward momentum wasn’t out of the blue. Somehow, Nooblet had distance himself from Tang Mi and Geng Yang, with enough time to get around Tan Lingyun and seal their fate.

The spikes at her back spat beams of powerful green light, attempting to give herself some room. By then, however, Nooblet was already gone.

This brought the friendly-fire count up to three, with Tan Lingyun laying waste to her own team from Nooblet’s manipulations. Worse, they were

three Emperor-class pilots. Tang Xiao, Tang Mi and Geng Yang had been her strongest pilots.

Tan Lingyun's heart was cold and anxious. She certainly had a temper, as everyone was aware, but she was usually able to keep her head on straight in a fight. She was able to keep it together enough to understand her folly, and the defeat of her three best students shook something loose in her head.

I've got to be the one dictating the pace here, she thought. He doesn't have the attack power to defeat us by himself. Twice he's redirected my attacks against my own soldiers. The fact both enraged and surprised her. It was just a damn sabermech! And yet it was not only rendering her Sovereign-class suit ineffectual, but actually turning her strengths against her. It was as astounding as it was maddening.

"Spread out. The rest of you focus on the flea!" Once again she shouted her orders, her voice hard and commanding. Thirty-one of their number had already been defeated, the rest did as instructed.

Was it really so easy to defeat all of these students? Tang Lingyun had recognized the problem, but she was sure Nooblet wasn't going to give her another chance.

The carnage continued, with ten more students defeated in as much time as it took to look at them. The rest were terrified. But where they couldn't even fathom the destruction they suffered, Tan Lingyun saw it all clear. To them, he really was a demon. As a result of their fear and confusion, Tan Lingyun's orders were followed, but instead of an organized diffusion the students ran headlong in every direction. No formation was maintained. The students were routed.

Nooblet was gone before Tan Lingyun could pin him down. He raced towards the closest group of students. However, he made no move to attack them when he arrived. Instead, he ran with them at their side to avoid Tan Lingyun.

Now that the Savage Goddess knew his limitations, and how he'd planned to overcome them, she was significantly more careful. And yet,

despite her best efforts many of the students fell under Tan Lingyun's onslaught, caught between her and Nooblet as they attempted to flee.

Once they'd fully employed their shields, none of the mechas were capable of outrunning the sabermech or the Savage Goddess. Their squealing retreat was punctuated now and again with thunderous explosions.

If there was anything Tan Lingyun could take solace in, it was that Nooblet wasn't just using her to defeat the others. Likewise, he positioned his enemy in the line of fire of their long-distance comrades. Several of them achieved locks on Nooblet's position, but firing invariably meant assassinating one of their own. The drillmaster would shed their lock, timed perfectly so that their attacks would hit other students he was passing.

With so many enemies, Nooblet's situation awareness and battlefield control was nothing short of spectacular. More importantly, however, was the fact that his tactics hardly drained any of his energy reserves.

Little Flea only added to the nightmare, wreaking havoc along the outer edges of the arena. Though he wasn't as adept as Lan Jue, Wang Hongyuan was more than a match for the many riflemen around him. Their focus was on speed and power, not so much defense. So it was that the two drillmaster danced among the enemies, Nooblet within and Little Flea without, knowing precisely what the other needed to come out victorious.

More and more students fell with each passing second. What had begun as a crowded area was slowly but surely growing deserted.

From outside of the simulation, the defeated students could still watch as the combat unfolded. The longer they stared, the greater their amazement grew. Before today, none would have imagined a basic model mecha could be piloted with such mastery.

On the surface, it didn't appear as though Nooblet was doing anything special. Still, somehow Tan Lingyun was unable to catch up with him. Success explosions continued, as more and more students left the fight.

Nooblet was never among them.

Only ten fighters remained against the two instructors. Their despair was thick and palpable. However, Tan Lingyun could see she was getting closer. Several times Nooblet escaped her strikes by just the skin of his teeth.

The Savage Goddess suffered to contain her flood of emotions. From pleasant surprise, to shock, then anger, amazement and finally... calm.

She took a deep breath, allowing a sense of peace to wash over her. She knew from the beginning she'd been forced to follow Nooblet's lead. By this point, there wasn't much she could do to reverse the situation but try her best. Her final hope was that the limitations of the sabermechs energy reserves would work in their favor. She didn't need to worry over her own, so if she could just sustain this pace she could come out on top.

She was keeping an eye on Little Flea as well. The teaching assistant's own powers were considerable, but certainly not on the level of Nooblet. With Nooblet gone, she would have nothing to fear from him.

Boom! The final close-combat fighter erupted in to a shower of steel and fire, once more at Tan Lingyun's hand.

Finally, only two remained in the center of the arena; Nooblet, and Tan Lingyun. Four riflemen were still in the fight, racing along the outskirts in a vicious dogfight with Little Flea. For the present they appeared to be in a stalemate.

"Halt!" Nooblet's voice rang through the simulation. It was cold and hard, but not emotional.

"Halt? Do you yield?" Tan Lingyun responded.

"I do. I'm out of energy. What's more, you were never my target."
Nooblet said.

Tan Lingyun's peridot mecha rumbled to a stop. She huffed derisively. "Energy reserves are a part of combat. You lost, that's that."

Nooblet stopped as well. His response was tepid, even. "I said fifty

against two in the beginning. You weren't part of the equation."

"Without me here you'd-!" Tan Lingyun roared, but she stopped upon realizing what she'd said. Indeed, her own kill count was significantly higher than his. All friendly fire! After being so blatantly led by the nose, how could she act so indignant?

A profound sense of disappointment washed over her.

Just then, Nooblet once again was on the move. They were close to start, but once the battle finished their suits were even closer.

Upon hearing that he'd given up, Tan Lingyun had retracted the spikes along her mecha. She's completely dropped her guard.

Who would have anticipated that Nooblet would continue, after having ceded defeat?

Its thrusters launched Nooblet forward. The spear in its hands punctured her shields and, with a groan of metal, the spear lifting her up and tossed her in to the air.

The spear in Nooblet's hands fractured, becoming a countless barrage of light beams. They crashed against Tan Lingyun's green mecha like raindrops against a tin roof. Dozens upon dozens of strikes enveloped Tan Lingyun, screeching terribly as they met steel. The students, both in and out of the simulation, watched in bewilderment.

The spectators saw it most clearly. The suit's spear had broken in to a countless number of mirror images that struck at Professor Tan from all angles. Was this a result of intensely high hand speeds?

Tan Lingyun was similarly shocked. How could a God-ranked pilot have such repugnant moral integrity? What sort of despicable person would wave the white flag, only to continue attacking? It left no one any chance to strike back. The strike against the chest plate of her mecha had caused the entire suit to shake violently, setting her off-balance and unable to control her suit.

The many spears congealed back in to one, with Lan Jue striking the final blows.

Nooblet's spear was battered and dull. Despite that, it had still ended the Savage Goddess, and remained lodged in the mecha's chest plate.

Nooblet heaved the spear high, with Tan Lingyun's ruined suit dangling from the tip. Glinting beneath the harsh rays of the simulated sun, the green mecha exploded in to a shower of twisted metal. The blast filled the sky like a firecracker.

The remaining riflemen were stupefied, which left Little Flea with no resistance. Shocked, and with no will to continue, they were handled with little fuss.

The Prince of Devil's harsh, taunting voice reverberated within every pod. "This was a classic example of what not to do. Until you're sure of your enemy's defeat, never drop your guard. Otherwise, you'll end up like her. Mecha combat is life and death... survival or extinction. Moral integrity has no place here."

Chapter 232: You're Lei Feng?

"There is no place for moral integrity." The simple phrase was like a slap to the face. Tan Lingyun silently ground her teeth, alone in the darkness of her sim pod.

Bastard! Using me as an example of what not to do! He's the one with that low-down attack, and he accuses me of not being vigilant?! I won't let this slide. I can't let this slide!

The distinctly one-sided battle had come to an end. Two on fifty-one. Just two basic mechas, against the best the school had. Nooblet and Little Flea had relied on nothing but their own skill and ability to show the NEU's most outstanding students what really power was.

"Everyone, out of the pods!" The barking command rang through everyone's communicator.

One by one the various pods set around the warehouse opened, and relinquished the sweat-soaked students within. Their shell-shocked faces hardly registered the real world they were faced with.

Not once since becoming pilots, had any of them suffered such an agonizing, frustrating defeat. They stumbled around in a daze, trying to puzzle out what had happened.

What they did know, at least now, was that the most basic, fundamental mecha suit available had the ability to completely route a group of Emperor-class pilots, and a Sovereign.

Until a few minutes ago this was so far outside the realm of imagination, that they'd have laughed if someone would have told them otherwise. Some even swayed unsteadily on their feet as they left the pods, unable to process what had happened. The rest stared blankly in the far-away stare reserved for disaster survivors. Their fundamental idea of themselves and their role as a pilot had been fundamentally altered.

"Gather!" The shout shook them from their stupor. Almost unconsciously they did as commanded, gathering in to columns.

Zhou Qianlin stood near the back, unconsciously chewing on her lower lip. There was a distinct bitterness written across her pretty face. She had been piloting a rifle mech – in fact, the only rifle mech Nooblet had destroyed himself.

At the onset of the fight, she'd used the Soulcaller gem to alert Lan Jue as to her location. She'd warned him of it so he would leave her be. What she got was Nooblet's sword in her energy reserve tank.

This guy had no idea how to treat a lady, she thought. She would ignore him completely for the rest of the day! Her thoughts seethed as she planned her passive-aggressive punishment. Still, there was just the slightest hint of a smile in the corner of her eyes.

"You bastard!" Just then, one of the pods opened. It immediately released a burst of green energy, and a flash of light charged directly towards the golden-masked drillmaster.

The moment the cry resounded, it was as though all joy was drained from the world. An imposing, strangling area blanketed everything, pouring in waves from Lan Jue.

He didn't even look at her. Instead he lifted his right hand, and a small orb of dark blue light fired off to intercept the green beam. Its speed was startling, and the two dazzling light collected in the space of a breath.

Grrzzt! The students in formation watched wide-eyed as the green beam hung in the air, and turned a shimmering blue. Chaotic arcs of electricity lanced out in every direction as a silhouette fell to earth.

There was a flash of blue light, and the Prince of Devils was gone. He reappeared before the Savage Goddess, their great and terrible hero, with his hands on her shoulders.

Tan Lingyun's body was numb, from head to toe. She wanted desperately to tear this man apart, but her frozen nerves refused. Snakes of electricity still criss-crossed over her, causing her to shake violently with each pass. Every single hair on her head stood erect, like a massive afro!

Lan Jue drew his hands back from the prostrate Tan Lingyun. His eyes

swept back towards the deathly silent students. “If there’s anyone else who has a problem, they’re welcome to bring it to my attention.”

The warehouse was quieter than a room full of fifty-three people had any right to be.

Their Savage Goddess was an eighth-ranked Talent. In as much effort as swatting a fly, this Demon had completely incapacitated her. Who would dare contradict this man after seeing that?

Tang Xiao looked upon his teacher with a strange expression. He secretly jabbed his fat thumb upward in encouragement.

So good. So good! Lan Jue’s heart was so full of righteous joy it threatened to choke the heavens [1]. His desire for vengeance had been percolating, building for months now. She had been such a bully he could hardly stand to look at her. Hah, and here she was like a chia pet!

Wang Hongyuan’s expression was monstrously appeased, though it was hidden by his silver mask. His own heart was full to bursting with a dark sense of satisfaction. It was all the greater considering the fact he couldn’t do this himself.

Lan Jue slowly walked back to the gathered students. “Are you aware of why you lost so quickly?” [2]

“Drillmaster, I have no idea!” Tang Xiao called out, loud and in true military fashion. He stepped forward to separate himself from the others.

Lan Jue slowly nodded his head. He could count on his disciple to be cooperative.

“Fall in,” he said quietly, to which Tang Xiao replied by getting back in to formation.

Lan Jue went on. “Fifty-one against two, and you still lost. You lack steel. From our short skirmish I can already see that your fundamentals are shot. So, we’ll be going back to the basic saber and rifle mechas. We’re going back to the very beginning, to temper yourselves in the ways of proper mecha combat.”

“Scientific research has discovered that everyone benefits from a low-level electrical shock. It helps assist in mitosis – cell division. The stimulation strengthens resistance and furthers one’s Discipline. Today, then, we’ve got one last thing to do before I dismiss class...”

Lan Jue stretched out his hand, and gently pressed downward. A lance of blue light tore across the sky, whereupon ten bolts of lightning – thick as a man’s wrist – came crashing to earth. Right on top of all the students.

The students no longer need lament the cruel treatment of their Savage Goddess. They got to experience the sensation first-hand. Now there were fifty students and a teacher laying numb and infuriated on the floor. The arena looked like a war zone. However, as promised, the catalyst had caused each of their Disciplines to react in order to protect them from the strike.

Zhou Qianlin had herself been struck by the residuals of a bolt. Like the others she felt herself go numb, though it was only just slightly. She had sustained the strike much better than her peers.

“Right, I think we’ll end here for today. Tomorrow, same time.” His voice was quiet, and with that said he languidly strolled towards the arena exit.

“Wait right there!” Lan Jue hadn’t employed a strike intended to damage any of them, and the Savage Goddess was an eight-ranked Talent after all. As a result, she had already begun to recover from the embarrassing incapacitation. When Lan Jue stopped to look, he saw her running towards him.

Lan Jue stopped, and watched her approach. When she drew near he spoke. “Today, in front of the entire class, you assaulted an instructor. I’ll let it slide this time, but if it happens again don’t blame me for the result.”

With her afro bobbing comically, Tan Lingyun finally caught up to the masked drillmaster. Her eyes were bright as she looked at him. “Are you Lei Feng?”

Lan Jue snorted, and turned away.

“Are you Lei Feng?!” She stumbled after him.

All she saw was a flash, then once more she was staring at the sky as her body shook from countless volts of electricity.

“Who I am doesn’t matter. If you’re interested in participating with the other students, then be here the same time tomorrow with all the others. You can be my teaching assistant.” As he spoke there was a flash in the drillmaster’s hand. A silver mask appeared, which he placed upon Tan Lingyun’s quivering body.

He did it again! Oh no... no I have to pee... this BASTARD!

Lan Jue walked on, unaware of Tan Lingyun’s unfortunate reaction.

Wang Hongyuan walked a few steps behind, silent as a mouse. He didn’t want to be the Prince of Devils’ next victim. He knew Lan Jue was strong, but he didn’t know how strong.

Their time in DreamNet hadn’t only surprised the students, but Wang Hongyuan as well. From outside it looked as though Nooblet and Little Flea had worked in tandem, but Wang Hongyuan knew that his own actions had been simple and self-serving. Nevermind anything else, had Tan Lingyun chosen to go after him first, he wouldn’t have been able to fend her off!

After a little while most of the students recovered. While there were still others fighting against their own bodies, the rest pulled themselves up to a seated position. Those with short hair themselves had a hairstyle to match Tan Lingyun’s.

“So this demon was Nooblet! Brother, you have to avenge me!” Tang Mi growled viciously through gritted teeth. The mortifying defeat by Brunois Assault she’d suffered from Nooblet was still a sore wound.

Tang Xiao fixed his sister with a serious stare. “Tang Mi, how would you say I treat you.”

The young girl blinked. “Very well!”

Her brother’s voice was full of sadness and indignation. “Then why are

you so insistent on throwing me in to the depths of hell? I've told you, he's my master! Did you not see how strong he is? Even Professor Tan can't stand up to him, how the hell am I supposed to avenge you? You give up this crazy idea of revenge immediately."

Tang Mi huffed. "What about it? Who's more important, your master or your little sister? Maybe you can't right now, but that doesn't mean you can't in the future! We'll work hard, so that one day we'll make him pay for this. I don't know why, but you're sure smitten with this guy. I should be worried about you!"

Tang Xiao glared at her. "You think too much. When do you think you'll have another opportunity to meet such a talented pilot? And a powerful adept, no less – ninth-ranked! A god-ranked pilot, that can take on the Savage Goddess without a second thought. Hm?"

"How did the school manage to convince this monster to come teach, anyway. Acting young and inexperienced with a name like 'Nooblet'. Shameless! How is what he did today called teaching? He beat us, and then shocked us. This is abuse!"

Tang Xiao's tone grew comforting. "You'll get used to it." He knew from experience that their nightmare was just beginning. It was his teacher's style. He shuddered to think what was in store for the next class.

ζ

Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan quickly made their way to a private room Wu Junyi had prepared for them, so that they might change. Afterward they stepped back out in to the campus.

"So, what are your thoughts, Wang Hongyuan?"

*

1. The word they use is 爽, and unfortunately there isn't a perfect way to translate it. It's basically a supreme sense of happiness and contentment. The person who taught me the word described it thusly:

that feeling you have after taking a massive crap.

2. Read Chapter 224.

Chapter 233: Private Instruction

“So what are your thoughts, Wang Hongyuan?” Lan Jue asked with a smile. His voice had reverted to a more congenial tone, almost lethargic.

Looking at him, Wang Hongyuna felt almost as though he were in a trance. He couldn't even determine whether the person in front of him was even really a man.

This was the same person who, just moments before, was as cruel as the name-sake he'd given himself. Before the eyes of DreamNet and the NEU students, he treated them like slaves and prisoners. Yet here he was now, polite and smiling.

Wang Hongyuan's expression was stiff. “Pretty good... just, was it true what you said about the lightning. That it would promote their Discipline?”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Of course! As long as it's within a reasonable scope, and it's bioelectric energy, then it will indeed boost their abilities. So that is to say, we can't use the electricity we employ to, say, power our televisions, but an adept's bioelectric current will have an effect. How much will vary from person to person, though. Why? Are you interested in giving it a try?”

Wang Hongyuan grit his teeth. “If what you're saying is indeed true...”

Crack!

Before the dance instructor could even finish his thought, Lan Jue slapped a hand on his shoulder. There was an ominous crackling noise, then suddenly Wang Hongyuan's body went stiff as a board. Arcs of electricity danced over him, filling the air with a charged buzzing noise. The man's meticulously slicked-back hair now stood out in every direction.

Ahh, so nice! Lan Jue stretched his arms out in a display of contentment. He nodded his head to the violently twitching Wang Hongyuan, then left.

Darkness had begun to creep up, turning the sky purple. By dusk most of

the classes had already finished for the day.

As he meandered through the campus walkways, he came across Tan Lingyun walking the opposite direction. Fury was written plain as day on her pretty features. She really looked in a bad way. Her hair was tousled, and part of her face had been burned black. Her clothes were damaged as well, covered in tears and burn marks. She certainly looked like she'd suffered some inhuman treatment.

Lan Jue, recognizing the danger of the situation, immediately stepped to the side of the road to give her space. He was playing the role of etiquette teacher once again, so he had to avoid conflict.

Naturally Tan Lingyun saw him as well. Much to Lan Jue's surprise, however, she didn't sweep by, but instead stopped right in front of him.

"Hey! Have you seen someone come by here, with a golden mask? About as tall as you are. Maybe a little stronger." Her tone was accusing and impolite.

Lan Jue rubbed his nose. Stronger than me, eh? She needs her eyes checked, I guess.

"Nope!" Lan Jue's response was simple, to the point, and likewise not very amicable.

Tan Lingyun huffed at him. "If you do, find me right away."

"Mmhm." The etiquette teacher replied by nodding his head, simultaneously sizing her up as he did so. Despite her pitiful appearance, he found that there was a difference in her. Her rough edges had been somewhat smoothed, if only just slightly. In her complimenting flight-suit she was actually quite feminine. However, there still remained that wild, untamed energy about her.

"What are you doing." Just as she was about to leave, she noticed the guy drawing his eyes over her. She hadn't stopped long enough to see what she looked like, but she could imagine she wasn't at her best. She narrowed her eyes dangerously at Lan Jue, desperately hoping he'd dare crack a joke.

"Nothing!" Lan Jue animatedly shook his head.

“Nothing?” That tell-tale hardness crept in to the Savage Goddess’ eyes. She was absolutely lousy with choice curses and violent intent. She took a threatening step forward, and grabbed the front of his shirt. “You think something’s funny, don’t you?”

He could only helplessly allow himself to be man-handled. “Professor Tan, please control yourself. Take it easy.”

“Take it easy, my ass!” She pivoted on her foot and, whipping Lan Jue over her shoulder, violently thrust him to the ground. She stomped over, growling like a wild animal.

Lan Jue lay on the ground, all twisted limbs and odd angles. Higher voltage next time, he thought. This woman! Why in the world was she always so violent? He had to remind himself, though, that while on the outside she was as monstrous as they came, she had a good heart. After all, she’d thrown him on the lawn instead of on the concrete.

He clambered back on to his feet and set about fixing his rumpled clothing. His musings were interrupted by Zhou Qianlin’s voice, ringing through his mind.

Zhou Qianlin: Don’t send me home today! I’ll be going with Tang Mi.

Lan Jue: You’re angry.

No I’m not!

Now that you’re a student, I have to treat you the same as everyone else.

I want to study piloting. Of course I’ll study hard.

Good, then I can teach you.

Then come by my place tonight. I have a simulator we can use.

So you really aren’t angry!

Yeah, I’m just upset that I’m so unskilled. You really are something else.

Naturally. Otherwise how could I be your bodyguard. Are you sure it’s alright if I go at night?

My parents are out on a trip. There’s no one home.

Are you trying to find out if I'm a bad boy?

Would you dare?

...

With that, their conversation came to an end. Lan Jue slapped his forehead in frustration. He muttered darkly to himself. "Am I too nice? Why is it everyone bullies me!"

Of course Zhou Qianlin being interested in learning to pilot a mecha was a good thing. If what Lan Qing told them was true, humanity would be facing a significant threat in the near future. Being able to protect oneself would be an invaluable skill. There was also the matter of the unnatural speed with which her Discipline was improving. He promised himself to check her progress again soon.

By now Lan Jue had retrieved his bicycle, and was trundling along towards Skyfire Avenue. He ate a quick dinner with Chu Cheng and Hua Li, then furtively left without alerting anyone. To save time, this trip he chose to use his verti-car. In a few minutes he'd arrived at Mount Tian.

By now he was well familiar with the single road leading up the mountain. He made his way towards the chairman's residence at the summit, but not before alerting Zhou Qianlin to his presence. He used his electric metamorphosis abilities to quietly enter the home.

Qianlin had already prepared everything, and though she'd experienced Lan Jue's strange entry habits before, she was still surprised when his form appeared in a flash of light from a nearby socket.

"You're here." Her face was grown slightly red. Her thoughts turned to their conversation, where she'd inadvertently mentioned the absence of her parents. She mentally chided herself for the embarrassing slip. What sort of respectable girl spoke that way to a man!

Lan Jue kept a straight face, and when he spoke his tone was strict. "Refer to me as Drillmaster. Is this your learning attitude?"

He didn't wear the mask, but in all other aspects he was once again the Prince of Devils from earlier.

Qianlin was surprised by the sudden change. She quickly recovered, though, and stuck her tongue out at him. She paid no mind to his blustering façade.

Lan Jue's expression was hard and unfriendly. He'd wanted to frighten her!

"Pffft!" Seeing his irritated and surprised expression, Qianlin couldn't help but snort a laugh. "Fine, Drillmaster Lan, hurry up and get this lesson under way. Do you want to go to the pods?"

Lan Jue fixed her with a fierce stare. "You think you're good enough to use the pods, with the level you're at? We start with the basics. Stretch out your hands, and let me see." [1]

"Ok," she replied, then stretched out her hands palms up.

Lan Jue looked over the appendages, deep in thought. Uncanny, he thought. Even the palms look exactly like hers.

He grabbed one of her hands and pulled it up to eye level.

The blush in Qianlin's cheeks darkened, but she didn't struggle. She let him examine to his heart's content.

His eyes carefully followed the lines of her hands, while at the same time he kneaded the flesh with his thumbs. Her hands were soft, and supple like there weren't even any bones. Tender, and slightly cold, he couldn't help but to warm her hands in his own.

With each passing moment Qianlin's face was becoming more and more red. Her breath was coming a little quicker. His hands were not calloused, and like hers bore long slender fingers. However, where they different was in grace – his hands moved with an unconscious finesse. With her smaller hands in his, she felt warm, and safe. She felt her heartbeat quicken.

"Done yet?" She felt like she was having trouble controlling her own emotions, made evident by the challenging question.

"Hm?" Lan Jue blinked, as though coming back from some other reality. He released her hands with a nod, oblivious to anything out of the

ordinary. “Alright. You got good hands for it. Your meridians are pliable and tough, good flexibility, all things necessary for a high CPS. But remember that hand speed isn’t everything when piloting a mecha, but the inability to reach a baseline speed means you’ll never be able to reach the higher levels of mastery. Your Discipline has yet to fully emerge, but I can feel how quickly its improving. A tremendous pace, really. If this keeps up, you’ll be a second-rank Talent in no time. Have you had any feelings? Something to tell you your Talent has awakened? It feels like... there’s something else within you, all of a sudden. Or maybe that you are something else.”

Zhou Qianlin shook her head.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes in thought and, pondering for a moment, went on. “Anyway, keep up with your cultivation exercises we discussed. At least it isn’t hurting. If in the process you feel discomfort anywhere in your body, let me know immediately. I’ll help make some adjustments.”

“Alright,” she answered, and nodded.

Lan Jue flicked his wrist, and where there had been nothing a moment before, there now appeared two beads in his palm that looked to be made of glass. They were perhaps only a centimeter in diameter.

“Take a look!”

He stretched his hands out, a bead in each palm. He rhythmically began to wiggle his fingers.

As they did, the small bead tumbled from finger to finger, and the grooves between, from one side to the other and back again. The motions weren’t fast, but they were very fluid like the tide.

“See what I’m doing?” He asked.

“Mmh,” she replied.

*

1. You see this sometimes in the West, but it’s a common trope in the

East, and used as – they believe – an acceptable metric to determine whether you have the ability to be effective in a job that uses your hands (mostly instruments, like the piano, guzheng or pipa, but also art like calligraphy). If your fingers aren't perfect for it – long, thin, slender and nimble – they won't even bother to teach you.

Chapter 234: Genius

“Right. Now you try.” Lan Jue placed the two glass balls in Zhou Qianlin’s palm.

She extended her palm as she’d seen Lan Jue do, with the balls in the center. She paused for a moment, as though thinking, then began to appreciably undulate her fingers.

Qianlin’s fingers were longer than Lan Jue’s, and thinner. However, she left no space between them as the pearl rolled, so that the ball bounced precariously from digit to digit. At the onset it was clear she was struggling, but little by little a fluidity crept in to the ball’s movements. It was absent the smoothness Lan Jue had displayed, but her control was impressive. Qianlin herself stared fixedly upon them, concentrating on her work.

Lan Jue nodded approvingly. “Your kinesthetic control is good. Let’s make it a little more difficult. Now have the left-hand pearl roll counter-clockwise, and the right side clockwise.”

“Mh.” She paused, considering his instructions, then began to roll the balls in circles along her palms and fingers.

She adapted quickly, performing well but for a few brief pauses. But before long the new exercise was mastered.

Lan Jue watched in silence, surprised at her speed. It appeared she had a real talent for this. Of course, a woman’s poise and suppleness were innately superior to your average man’s.

“How am I doing?” Qianlin continued to roll the balls around as she shot her instructor an inquisitive glance. There was the faint glint of pride in her eyes.

He pursed his lips and nodded sagely. “Not bad. That’s enough.”

“Got it!” Qianlin complied, allowing the balls to settle in the hearts of her palms.

Lan Jue had more balls in his hands now, at some point plucking them

from some unseen locale. He took back the two from Qianlin as well. "Watch carefully," he instructed.

Each hand had two balls; one in the palm, and the other near the fingertips. With Qianlin lending close scrutiny, Lan Jue had the ball in his palm move towards the radial end of his hand, while the distant ball followed it's trajectory in a circle until the two glass balls had switched places. Both hands undulated in similar fashion to the exercise before, but this time the balls rolled and danced around one another.

In theory the addition of an extra ball wasn't much, but practically it was significantly more difficult. Lan Jue's movements were slower than he was capable of, so that his student could observe.

The exercises were called palm spinning, either mono or duo. It was a viable metric to determine hand speed, as someone who could maintain a good speed and fluidity with the balls could sustain ten CPS [1]. If you couldn't complete this exercise, then there wasn't even any point in getting in a mecha suit.

"You give it a try." The balls were passed to Qianlin.

She didn't say anything, but leapt right in to it. The movements were fine, but when it came time to swing the ball around she hadn't used enough power. Both were cast in to disarray, and fell to the ground.

Lan Jue snatched them up and put them once more in to her hands. Qianlin's face was red.

"I must seem pretty dumb," she said, hanging her head sheepishly.

Lan Jue shook his head. "When I first started doing this, it took me three days to master the basics. You're just starting, don't rush. When it comes to controlling anything, the most important thing is a calm heart. Pay attention to your state of mind. Start slow, and when you've got the movements down you can add speed."

"Got it." Qianlin began again, with Lan Jue at her side periodically giving pointers. Tiny details, tricks and pointers were delivered in her ear as she practiced.

Time passed, with Qianlin carefully working the exercises. She never complained, never commented, only diligently performed what her teacher demanded.

Lan Jue's surprise only grew as their session continued. She really did have a natural ability for this, and her choppy movements were already much smoother. She was as yet unpracticed, but the rhythm and foundation were there. It had taken him a whole day to get to this point, when he started learning. If this was any indication, the fact she started her training late didn't look like it would stop Qianlin from achieving a very high CPS. The suppleness of her movements were as good as a child's.

"Spend the next two days working on this, and once you're ready we'll move on to the next. This is specifically to help your hand speed, and you'll see the benefits of it soon if you keep it up. Speaking of, tell me what you think about your mecha manipulation ability."

"I haven't reached second-grade yet, I think," she answered. "All the basics I know, but I'm not proficient. I haven't studied much."

Lan Jue nodded thoughtfully to himself. "That's fine. It'd be better if we started from the beginning anyway."

Qianlin looked up from the balls. "Why do you say that?"

Lan Jue explained. "If you've been teaching yourself, or you had a bad instructor who taught you poorly, you're likely to have developed a number of bad habits. Reversing these mistakes would be much more difficult than just starting over with the proper methods. Your improvement will be faster, too. If what I'm seeing here with your hands is any indication, your hand speed improvement will be impressive in the beginning. Once you hit intermediate, we'll see if your Discipline will be able to help you push it further. We'll need to see whether or not your body will be able to handle higher speeds or mecha manipulation. The higher your abilities become, the more stress the suit's actions will put on your physique."

Qianlin gripped the ball in her hand, and raised her tiny fist towards Lan

Jue. "I'll study hard. Who knows, one day I might be better than you!"

Lan Jue chuckled at her zeal. "I'll hold my breath." Before Qianlin could answer, he'd dissolved in to electricity and vanished in to the nearby wall socket.

Qianlin stared at the wall with a small grin on her face. Her eyes dropped to the glass balls in her hands and, with an obstinate glint, got right back to practicing.

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Lan Jue was also smiling as he left Mount Tian. He was surprised at how good of a student Zhou Qianlin was. By the time he'd met Hera, she was already an outstanding pilot. Her hand speed had been as good or better than his own! He hoped her little sister would one day reach that level.

His mind turned back to his own days practicing hand speed, and the experienced he had. When you spoke about the four Monarchs, everyone talked about their power and ability. No one knew the torment each of them had suffered in their childhood.

He couldn't speak for Chu Cheng and Hua Li, really, but it was certainly true for him and his brother. For them, it wasn't glass balls they practiced with, but razor blades. For those few years at the beginning, neither he nor Lan Qing's hands were ever fully healed. He didn't know what they'd done to deserve such bitter punishment.

His brother had gotten the worst of it, often times as a result of trying to protect him. Often he'd sneakily replace Lan Jue's razors with balls for him to practice with, then help him improve.

The reason Lan Qing's hand speed would never match up to Lan Jue's was due to that very fact. At one point he'd been severely punished, and sustained a serious injury to his hand. Though it eventually healed, his potential had been cut short. If it hadn't been for that, there's no doubt Lan Qing would have bested his brother in this regard, too, long ago.

How much emotion bubbled beneath that cold and solemn exterior, Lan Jue wondered? I've really never blamed you, brother. I only blame myself.

Lan Jue lifted his eyes to the heavens, thinking about his kin. He knew him to be on An Lun. He knew war was coming, and when that day came he would proudly fight by his brother's side.

ζ

Early morning.

"What's with the panda eyes," Lan Jue said when he encountered Zhou Qianlin.

Qianlin gave a soft laugh, rubbing the dark circles under her pretty eyes. "It's nothing, I just didn't sleep very well. I had bouncing glass balls in my brain all night."

Lan Jue shot her a gentle smile. "So it is in the beginning. It'll be better once you get used to it. You also shouldn't overtire yourself, pace yourself and once you feel proficient let me know."

"Alright." She said nothing further, situating herself on the back of the bicycle and wrapping an arm around his waist. She rested her head against his back and shut her eyes.

Lan Jue could feel her gentle breathing against him. He kept his pace slow, so as to make the ride as smooth as possible.

It didn't take long for Qianlin to fall asleep, even perched on the small back seat of the bike. A smile curled the edges of her lips, as she enjoyed some unknown dream.

When they arrived at the university gates, they once more played their roles. One entered before the other, as though they didn't even know one another. She walked on ahead, but Lan Jue's trek was blocked by the appearance of Director Wu.

"Do you have a moment to speak," the Teaching Director asked in low

tones.

“Mmhm, but don’t come looking for me like this. An observant person will know something’s going on. I was serious when I said I’d leave if anyone found out my identity.” His tone was quiet, but firm as he reminded Director Wu of their agreement.

“Relax, relax. I’ve already gone over all of this with the Dean. We’ll support you in any way you need, and spare no effort in keeping your identity secret. If there’s anything you need, you only need ask.” Wu Junyi’s pledge was sincere.

Lan Jue nodded. “So what do you need from me?”

“I was looking over the recording of your last class in DreamNet,” Director Wu began. “I’ve got to tell you, you’ve been hiding a great opportunity from us! You really are something special. I just wanted to thank you, and say how lucky we are to have you with us.”

The school’s DreamNet area was all under surveillance, and while of course Wu Junyi had no intention of sharing the video, he was curious how Lan Jue would teach the class. He was, after all, still the Teaching Director. He had no complaints or worries, but had simply been curious. He remembered how excited he’d been after Professor Lan’s first etiquette class. He wanted to see if that success would carry over.

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1. Use this https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14T_mBnp19g to help you visualize <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrqeR-iLKYA>

Chapter 235: Closed Special Training

“No need for thanks.” Lan Jue said softly.

Wu Junyi regarded his young employee. “Professor Lan. Thinking on the ARC class, do you think that one class a day is sufficient? All of our students seek to improve, and they’ll do that quicker if they’re working with you more. Otherwise we’re just wasting time. I intend to open the classes up, and have them working with you all day long. Of course you won’t need to be there all the time. If you create a lesson plan, I can have another instructor or your assistant lead the class in your absence.”

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. This was a problem, for truly one class a day wasn’t enough to impart the information these students needed to improve. If they wanted to get better, they would have to work ten times as hard.

Luckily the students weren’t aware of Wu Junyi’s plans, otherwise they would be trembling at the prospect. They were standing on the precipice, looking out over an abyss of suffering. If Lan Jue agreed, they’d be tumbling towards a world of pain.

“Let me put together a teaching curriculum, Director Wu, then we can see about implementing it. Just make it clear that these classes require absolute discipline. They’ll be exceptionally difficult, and once you start you can’t back out. You can’t just quit halfway through. This may lead to some complaints by the family, who will likely cause you some trouble. I’ll do my best to reduce the likelihood of this, though. Now that we’re making it full time, it’s best to include evenings as well. I’ll also need a closed out space, big enough for training. The first condensed ARC class will run for two months of intense training. What do you think?”

Wu Junyi narrowed his brows. “Make the ARC classes closed?”

Lan Jue nodded in response. “That’s right, close it off. Yesterday I got a feel for their power level as a group. Frankly speaking, they’re foundations are alright but their practical combat experience is absolutely deplorable. Even their combat philosophy. If we want them to feel and understand

that they're here learning, they can't be allowed to simply give up. We want to turn quantity in to quality, and that means imparting knowledge through strict discipline."

Wu Junyi fixed Lan Jue with a resolute stare. "If that's so, we'll do it as you say. You have the university's full support, Professor. No matter the methods, you have the backing of myself and Dean Xu. Teach as you see fit."

Lan Jue was genuinely surprised. He hadn't expected Director Wu to agree so readily. He figured the director would at least have to consult his superiors before anything could go forward.

"Alright, then I'll submit a lesson plan later today. No point in wasting time, we'll get the new class started tomorrow." Lan Jue murmured thoughtfully.

"Good," Wu Junyi replied. "I'll get things started." With that he bid farewell to Lan Jue, and left.

He watched the director leave, a small smile on his face. "They're lucky to have a director like him," he mused. "At the very least they won't be missing opportunities. I have to ensure I do my best, this time, and help the East develop a generation of talents."

He lifted his wrist and tapped a number in his to communicator.

"Boss." Mika's voice answered from his wrist, her voice affectionate and lazy.

"Mika," he replied. "How's Jin Tao been doing lately? Has he finished absorbing the first round of treatment?"

Mika's response was quick and informal. "He's doing great. The first round of treatment should be finished in the next few days."

"Alright, let me know when he's finished. I'll help him get used to the Discipline increase myself."

"Alrighty."

Taking the Fantascia Genetica decoction required three stages, each

lasting about a month. Of course the time varied from person to person, so Jin Tao would require observation.

From what he'd seen in the student battle yesterday, all of the students sported at least a fifth-rank Discipline. Where they would eventually end up in that regard, he'd just have to wait and see. There'd be more information at the end of their intensive training course.

His hope was that he'd temper them in to hardened pilots in this short period. But, what about Zhou Qianlin?

The Soulcaller gem warmed:

Lan Jue: Qianlin, there's something I need to speak with you about. I just had a conversation with Director Wu, and we've decided to close off the ARC classes, make 'em private. For the extent of the class, students will have to stay in the school. They'll live, train and study together.

Zhou Qianlin: Alright, so what?

Your Discipline is still weak. Your body... I think it might be best if you drop out. I can train you individually.

No. If it's no problem for others, then it's no problem for me. I've told you before, I'm not some princess with a silver spoon in her mouth. I'm the same as everyone else. What you did during class was right, we don't want others to know about our relationship. I'm to be treated the same as everyone else. And if they can stomach it, so can I. I'm not going anywhere.

With that said, Lan Jue felt the Soulcaller gem cool.

Lan Jue stared blankly at nothing. This girl... an iron fist in a velvet glove, he thought. She may look soft on the outside, but she had an unbreakable spirit. Perhaps she didn't understand just how torturous this class would be. Although it would not be as bad as the hellish treatment he and his brother suffered, it would certainly change the way these students thought about improvement. She wouldn't come out of it unscathed – would she be able to handle it?

He squelched the qualms within him, pushing them away.

He wandered towards the electives building, lost in thought. Almost in a daze, he made his way to his desk and sat. Only then, much to his surprise, did he discover the steaming cup of tea situated there.

“You’re back, Professor Lan.” Wang Hongyuan greeted him as he sat. He approached, indicating the tea. “I bought some. Jasmine tea, give it a try. It’s pretty good.”

Lan Jue gave him a skeptical look. “What’s all this? Making up for some unknown evil, eh?”

When Wang Hongyuan answered, his voice was low but excited. “I realized you were right, Professor. My Discipline has been stagnant for a long time, but after the shock I received yesterday I’ve felt it improve. I spent the night focusing on cultivation, and sure enough it was stronger. I was hoping that, if you had some time you could shock me again.”

The edges of Lan Jue’s mouth twitched mirthfully. As he’d told them, bioelectric shocks certainly could enervate one’s Discipline. For Adepts a blast wouldn’t do any lasting harm, but may help push their powers to a higher degree. But that wasn’t certain. He’d just thought to give it a try when he shocked Wang Hongyuan, but apparently it had really helped.

“Aren’t you afraid my control might slip? I could kill you.” Lan Jue asked the question through a smirk. He lazily lifted the teacup and sipped the fragrant liquid within. The lingering, pungent scent seeped through him, filling him with a sense of ease.

Wang Hongyuan laughed. “If you did, I wouldn’t have any regrets. It’s settled, then.”

“First I have something to discuss with you,” Lan Jue said. “A few minutes ago I spoke with Director Wu. He wants to make the ARC class a closed, intensive course. Since I can’t be there all day, every day, I was hoping I could rely on you to fill in the gaps. And as a heads-up, the Savage Goddess will definitely be there. There’s no way she’ll give up the chance to participate in this class.”

Wang Hongyuan’s excitement only grew. “Not a problem, Professor. Do you think I should post-pone my dance class for now?”

Lan Jue shook his head. "That won't be necessary. It won't take a lot of time out of our schedule, and besides if you were to suddenly stop the classes it might raise suspicion. You could inadvertently reveal your identity. While you're teaching, I can look over the students."

"Alright." The dance instructor nodded in acquiescence. His experience yesterday confirmed it; if he stuck with Lan Jue, it certainly wouldn't lead to any disadvantage on his part. It was a short-cut to improvement.

"What are you guys talking about?" The curious voice interrupted their exchange.

Jin Yan walked in to the office, and immediately spied Lan Jue and Wang Hongyuan chatting, all smiles. It was a strange enough scene to cause her confusion.

"There sure has been some changes between you and Lan Jue since you've gotten back from Taihua, Professor Wang. So harmonious all of a sudden."

The dance instructor smiled. "We're all colleagues here. Why shouldn't we work together as a unit? At any rate I'll have to get going, I've things to take care of. Nice chat, Professor Lan." Wang Hongyuan shot Jin Yan a winning smile before returning to his desk.

Jin Yan approach Lan Jue, looking at him through skeptical eyes.

"What's with the look?" Lan Jue asked.

"I hadn't realized you were so charming," she answered. "I've known Wang Hongyuan for some time. He's a serious man, avoiding frivolity. Even to a fault, maybe. And yet, lately the two of you have been the best of friends."

Lan Jue laughed. "It's like he said: we're all colleagues. We should all try our best to get along."

Jin Yan piped up, as though suddenly remembering something. "Oh yes, and by the way Professor, how is Jin Tao? I hope he isn't causing you any trouble."

Lan Jue shook his head. "It's actually been a while since I've seen him. I imagine your family is also worried. You shouldn't be, in a few days the first round of treatment will be complete and he'll be back to classes. However, I'll still need him to stay in the Avenue at night. He can't return home yet. I'll have him find you as soon as he is able."

Jin Yan lit up with pleasure at his assurances. "Thank you so much."

For the first few days Jin Tao was gone for his training, his family felt liberated. Without the trouble-maker around, they enjoyed a level of peace they hadn't had in ages. However, despite his rocky history it didn't take long for family to long for their own. Whether it was Jin Yan, or her parents, they had begun to desperately miss the naughty kid. The fact Jin Tao hadn't kept in contact with them at all since started compounded matters, and increased their apprehension about the whole arrangement. It was for this reason Jin Yan had sought Lan Jue out, to find more information about her brother. Now, after hearing from him that her brother was fine, she felt more at ease. It was a pleasant quality he possessed, she thought, by making other people around him comfortable.

It had been nearly a full day before Lan Jue showed his face in the office. He'd been occupied by the ARC class all day. His thoughts wandered back to the first meeting, and he pondered over how to improve. There were always ways to improve, but he had to be careful he didn't make it too similar to the life he and his brother suffered through. He wanted to strengthen those fifty students, not kill them.

Chapter 236: The Clairvoyant's Starry Sky

Skyfire Avenue. Gothic Winery.

"Wine Master. We just received news from the Pontiff's Castle. They said they and the Dark Citadel will be arriving in ten days for the meeting." The Barber gave his report solemnly.

The paragon nodded his head. "So be it. How goes the preparations? With the presence of both the Pontiff and Satan, the Clairvoyant will be in attendance as well. He's decided to be part of the welcome party."

The Barber continued. "Everything you've asked us to prepare is more or less ready. However, I do have some opinions about a couple of the greeters."

The Wine Master smiled knowingly. "And who is it you'd like to discuss."

"The Jewelry Master," he answered. "He is also a councilman who's been assigned to this duty, but he hasn't once made an appearance. In fact, he's never even in his store and is exceptionally difficult to get a hold of. Those women who run his store are impossible, each more arrogant than the last. They forced me out of the store, the last time. The Jewelry Master himself is prideful, arrogant, unreasonable and impossible to deal with. I suggest he be removed."

The Cosmagus laughed in spite of himself. "Alright take it easy. Everything's fine, you're just being a little narrow-minded. I know all about the little competition you and the Beautician had with him in the Reaper Arena, just as I know who instigated the whole thing. Take care of your own business, that's all we're asking. As for the Jewelry Master, I would suggest you work on developing a better relationship with him. It is true that he hasn't done anything to help prepare, but it is also true that the Archangel Michael won't be in attendance."

"Why?" The Barber seemed confused. The Wine Master's gentle chastisement made him blush, but the mention of Michael made the slight all but forgotten. The Archangel was possible the strongest player in

the Pontiff's circle aside from the Pontiff himself, and the Lord of Angels [1]. He was a terrifying, ninth-ranked ninth-degree Adept.

The Wine Master's response was soft and conversational. "Because he and the Jewelry Master had a... run in. The wounds he suffered were dire, and in fact he's still recovering."

"What?!" The Barber was struck dumb with amazement. "What did this happen? I just saw the Jewelry Master a few days ago!"

"Not long ago," the Wine Master assured. "The Jewelry Master was injured as well, so I made him exempt from participating in the preparations. Wait until the two powers arrive, and he'll be among the welcoming council members. This will not be the case for Michael. Need I explain further?"

He didn't. In the time after their fight, Lan Jue had recovered fully whereas Michael still wasn't capable of making the trip. What did this mean? It meant their Jewelry Master was even stronger than the Pontiff's Angel of War.

The Barber already had a high estimation of the Jewelry Master's power, but saw him as a pesky waste of space on the council despite their similarity in age. Could he really be so powerful as the Wine Master described? He felt a chill run up his spine as he thought back to their friendly match. They were never even close to competing with his abilities. This guy's power...

The Wine Master rose to his feet. "There is also the matter of the Great Adept Competition occurring in three months, sponsored by the Northern Alliance with the West's powerhouses in attendance. Undoubtedly, part of the reason the two castles are coming is to feel us out. Me and the other two elder councilmen will handle what we can there, so you needn't worry. Handle your business, do the job you've been assigned, and things will go just fine."

A hard, cold light grew in the depths of the Barber's eyes. "If it were up to me we'd show them why the Avenue is a force to be reckoned with. Do they believe they can join together and that we'd be frightened? Skyfire

Avenue is not so easily cowed.”

The Wine Master shook his head. “You shouldn’t always be so confrontational. We are a loose organization, remember, even down to our council members. We don’t have the sorts of restrictions – and thus planning – that they do. Remember also that this competition of theirs may have nothing to do with us. There are... other things to consider.”

“What sort of things?” the Barber asked curiously.

“Now it’s still too early to say, but I’m sure you’ll hear more about it later,” the Wine Master assured. “But that’s enough for now, you’re still busy I imagine.”

“Very well.” The Barber gave his response, then made his way from the Gothic Winery. His heart was beating as he thought upon the Jewelry Master’s purported fight with Michael. This was no small feat! It looked like he was really going to need to correct his attitude around the young adept.

A short time after the Barber left, the Wine Master also exited the winery. He made his way towards the Skyfire Museum.

Today, the Clairvoyant was clad in long, white robes tied at the waist with a simple cotton belt. The robes were interlaced with a veined pattern of thread, bearing twinkling gemstones that surrounded him in a dim halo of light. He topped off the ensemble with a tall, white hat.

He looked older, since the last time the Wine Master had met him. His skin was thinner, and his color pale. However, age hadn’t seemed to touch those piercing eyes.

Even as a Paragon himself, the Wine Master always felt strange in the Clairvoyant’s presence. It was like he was in a daze, somehow separate from reality when nearby.

“Clairvoyant.” The Wine Master politely nodded his head toward the older gentleman.

The leader of the Avenue offered a small smile in response. His warm voice flowed around his amicable smile. “I knew you were coming.”

The Wine Master made his way across the expansive chambers to stand before his old colleague. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” the Clairvoyant assured. “No need to worry over me. I’ve a few years yet before there’s any cause for alarm.”

The Wine Master looked at him skeptically, eying his strange small. “And what’s got you so happy?”

The smile spread further on the old man’s face. “One of my visions has been confirmed, the Bookworm is back in the Avenue, the Keeper is going through something similar and improving... it puts me at ease, after a fashion.”

Surprised crept in to the Wine Master’s face. “You mean the Keeper...”

The Clairvoyant nodded, without saying anything further.

“What about you?” the Wine Master hurriedly followed. “If the Magnate is improving, surely we can use his methods to help you get better?”

The Clairvoyant shook his head, though the smile remained. “No. My circumstances are... different. We’re both advanced in age, to put it mildly, but his troubles come as a result of exhausted vital essence. He’s little left. Mine own problems are similar, in a way, though my years were clearly delineated the day I became a Paragon. My end is a result of destiny. No matter what power or method we employ, there’s no escaping the master plan. When you achieve the same levels the Keeper and I have, you’ll understand.”

The Wine Master frowned. “But, you...”

The Clairvoyant raised a hand, cutting his companion short. “After the Castle and Citadel have come and gone, I will seclude myself. I’ll need to conserve my energy, and prepare for the Final Prophecy. It is something that may very well effect the lives of all future generations – and I am sure it will occur. My own life is a limited one, and I have always sought to use it where it was most needed. Now the Keeper, for all his knowledge, is not a leader of men... so when I begin my preparations for the end, I will need you to take over Skyfire Avenue.”

The Wine Master's brows furrowed in concern, but he nodded his head nonetheless.

The Clairvoyant let loose a gentle laugh. "You've known me and this business for so many years, there's nothing you won't be able to handle. You'll likely see it long before you get as old as I, but the truth of the world is that life and death are fallacies. All energy is permanent, it only changes form. So long as you keep me in your thoughts, I'll live on."

The wine Master huffed. "You've done so much for humanity, not to mention the Avenue. We won't survive without you!"

This caused the old man to chortle. "Don't be so melodramatic. You know the old adage; out with the old, and in with the new. As one generation passes, the youth shall rise to replace them, as they have always done. Humanity will thrive, it is an undeniable rule of the universe."

The Wine Master looked apprehensive for a moment, then spoke. "The most important aspect of the Castle and Citadel's visit is almost certainly to check on how you and the Keeper are faring. How should we respond if they should ask?"

"Go with it," Skyfire's leader replied. "The Keeper likely won't make an appearance. It'll be you and I who meet with them. Their purpose in coming may not necessarily be of ill intent."

"Oh? Have you seen something?" The Wine Master inquired.

The Clairvoyant smirked. "No, just years of experience. It has been quite a long time since anyone seen the Pontiff or Satan out and about – having them make an appearance is a good thing."

The Cosmagus nodded his head silently. He saw no further purpose in taking any more of the Clairvoyant's time, so he left of his own accord.

The Clairvoyant remained where he was, and simply watched as his companion left. Afterwards, he made his way to the tallest level of the Skyfire Museum with unhurried steps. Now, with nothing but the walls of the museum to bear witness, he certainly looked like a man in his twilight

years.

It took him several minutes to climb the twenty-odd steps to the top. He was met with a pair of massive double-doors. The old man stood before the seven-meter tall doors, dwarfed by their immensity.

Despite his frailty, the Clairvoyant only need gently push the doors to have them open. They moved soundlessly, as though they weighed nothing.

As the doors split, a strange light emanated from the fissure. Bathed in the sudden luminance, the clairvoyant's body appeared to undergo a strange shift.

His body, bent from rickets, straightened. His white hair thickened and became black. Under the power of that strange light, his youth was returning. In the space of just a few moments, the old Clairvoyant had become a valiant looking young man in his thirties.

The myriad gemstones interwoven throughout his robes shimmered like stars.

The small, easy smile on his face never changed. He strode across the threshold, and the doors closed at his back, isolating him from the rest of the world.

Soft golden light followed his every footstep, expanding out in complicated flowery patterns. They expanded, twirling amongst one another until they filled the entire circular room. Were one to look up, they would discover a vast and endless expanse of starry sky. Everyone one of the twinkling suns shimmered with a golden light.

Endless skies, infinite light, countless stars... bathed in the soothing glow, the Clairvoyant strode to the center of the room.

The light hung over him like a blanket. He was coated in the golden luminescence as though it were shining out from within him. Behind him, in stark contrast, arose an orb dark as pitch. It floated upward until it was level with the back of the Paragon's head.

Lifting his head to the heavens, the Clairvoyant's eyes looked

unnaturally clear. They reflected back every twinkling light he gazed upon.

The crystal ball at his back suddenly glowed with a furious glare. Rays of blinding light shot in every direction as it hovered like a terrifying eye. It's expulsion of luminescence grew until it filled everything, even the skies above, until there was nothing but white.

The golden stars scattered like fireflies. One by one they fell to the ground and joined the magnificent patterns. The Clairvoyant stood amidst the stunning display silent, still, as though frozen. In a blink, the young man became encased in gold and stood there still. Like a statue.

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1. In reference to Metatron. You can read more about the angel TJSS based this character off of here:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metatron>

Chapter 237: I Am!

Again the ARC students were in formation, ready to begin. Again, Tang Xiao stood at the front of the group. It was the same group from yesterday, and their mood was strikingly different from the first class.

Where yesterday there was excitement, today they stank of fear.

It certainly couldn't have felt good to be blasted with bioelectricity. It was like being perpetually stabbed by a hundred thousand tiny needles. While simultaneously your body was too numb to do anything about it.

Moreover, the last time they'd seen just a smidge of this demon's ability, and it was terrifying. Even the 'god-ranked pilot', their Savage Goddess Tan Lingyun had been completely unable to offer up any resistance. The Prince of Devils has used a basic sabermech to obliterate a high-level instructor and fifty of the school's best students. What else could he be capable of?

There wasn't just fear, though. There was also excitement, faint and buried beneath the terror, but there. They felt like they were passing through a threshold, to a whole new realm of possibility.

They were mecha pilots, and the pride of the school. How could they not thirst for improvement, and grow excited at the prospect? After all, everyone knew implicitly just what being a great pilot meant; an infinitely bright future.

They were still students, not fully integrated in to adult society but excited at the prospects. Hot-blooded and anxious, they each imagined how high their abilities might soar.

But what would today's class be like?

Tan Lingyun had arrived early, and stood at the head of the group wearing a nasty expression. Today her hair had been brought under control, and she'd changed in to a less desperately singed flight suit. She glowered at nothing in particular, lost in thought.

The blow to her own self-esteem had been minimal, after yesterday's

loss. However, the real damage came from the whispers. Already word was spreading that she wasn't a real God-ranked pilot. She ultimately didn't care, though – her primary focus was finding that 'Lei Feng', and this guy... this golden-masked devil, he had to be him.

He helped because he's also part of the faculty. He said it himself. What kind of person is he? Today, I'm going to find out.

Zhou Qianlin was also in attendance, in her place near the back of the group. She had been first to learn about the change to the ARC class structure, though of course she couldn't tell anybody.

Tang Mi was at her shoulder. She leaned in, and whispered to her friend. "So what sort of bad things were you up to yesterday, Qianlin? You're acting weird today, sleeping during class... it's not like you! Something about this class got you bothered?"

Qianlin rolled her eyes at her friend. "There's plenty that bothers me – you, mostly. I was going over what happened yesterday, so I went to bed late."

Just then, two familiar figures stepped in to the warehouse. Their respective gold and silver masks twinkled in the fluorescent light.

The moment they appeared, the chatter among the students died, until the silence was absolute. The young pilots stood with backs straight and eyes forward.

Yesterday, Lan Jue's whole purpose had been to prove his strength to the students. They were adults, and they knew to respect strength. He approached until he arrived before the gathered pupils, and stopped. His eyes fixed upon Tan Lingyun.

Tan Lingyun stared right back.

For a long moment the two simply looked at one another. Eventually, however, the demon's intense stare was too much for Tan Lingyun, and she dropped her eyes.

"Professor Tan, if you'd like to remain you can do so as my assistant. However, I demand that you respect this class and my instruction. If you

can't do that, I must ask you to leave. Anyone who tries to disrupt this class will be removed." Lan Jue's cold voice rang out, filling the warehouse.

Tan Lingyun hesitated, regarding the golden-masked drillmaster. She eventually and vigorously nodded her head. "I accept."

"Don your mask, and stand beside me," he ordered.

Tan Lingyun took a deep breath, and choked back the comments she so desperately wanted to voice. Instead, she fumbled in her suit for the mask Lan Jue had given her at the end of yesterday's class and put it on. She moved to his side, and turned to face the students.

Lan Jue returned his attention to the students. "Starting tomorrow, the ARC class will be considered a closed curriculum. This means we'll be training all day, every day. You won't be going home to your mommies.. This is the final time I'll say this, before this class really gets under way: if you want to quit, now's the time. If not, I'll let Director Wu know to tell our parents you won't be having dinner. The training period will last for two months. During that time all required resources will be provided by the school. I can promise you right now, that by the end of this class each of you will advance at least one rank as a pilot. I can also promise that these two months will be the worst of your short lives. Once your decision is made, there's no going back. Joni or not, this is the time to make your choice. Going forward, those who remain will be treated as soldiers, not students. You have five minutes to think on it."

Lan Jue lifted his wrist and peered at his communicator.

The students had learned from the last class that if this demon said five minutes, he meant precisely five minutes. The situation quickly washed through their brains: Closed class? Two months?

It wasn't as though they were unfamiliar with the concept. Every prospective mecha pilot student was required to undergo an intensive three-month training before they could enter the mecha combat program. Everyone in attendance had been through it.

Two months, then, was certainly acceptable. They knew on some level this would be difficult, but the Prince of Devil's assurances that an

increase of at least one rank was an enticing prospect.

A mecha pilot's rank wasn't just a means to determine their relative strength. It was also a metric by which society would treat them, when they entered the real world. For those interested in military service, for instance, a third-class pilot would simply be admitted as a private, perhaps not even given the opportunity to pilot a suit. However, a second-class pilot would immediately be assigned a combat group. These were the bulk of soldiers, private first-class in the army. Students who graduate from a combat program and enter the army untested began two ranks lower. Once they prove themselves, and get to understand life as a serviceman, those ranks would increase quickly. The equivalent rank for a first-class pilot was Lieutenant. Emperors were Majors, sovereigns became Lieutenant Colonels. A god-ranked pilot, if they chose to join, was immediately granted the rank of Colonel, without the need for any checks or provisions.

So for these young men and women, still enrolled in their classes, the allure of raising an entire rank was too good to pass up. This was especially true for those students stuck at first-class.

The National Eastern University's mecha combat program currently had three thousand enrolled pilots. Of those, there were only fifty who were first-class or higher, and they were standing in front of him. Of the fifty, twenty-eight were first-class, second grade. Sixteen were first-class. Five were Emperor-class, second grade, and one who'd just been promoted to Emperor.

If what Lan Jue said came to fruition, and all of these students jumped up a rank, then the NEU itself would be catapulted in to the top five mecha combat schools, practically overnight.

Five minutes passed quickly.

"Those who've decided to give up, get out of my sight." Lan Jue called. There was a harsh and demeaning light in his eyes.

No one moved.

Each of these pilots before him were considered exceptional students in

the NEU. They were prideful, and if no one else was going to leave how could they? They'd never be able to show their face in school again. Plus, what was two months of struggle when the result was an immeasurable increase to their future prospects?

One minute later.

Lan Jue nodded. "Very well. You are all very courageous to remain. I assure you that in two months, you will feel no regrets for your decision. That'll be because you'll have plenty of time for regrets before then. Remember that no matter what happens, physically or mentally, you will complete every task put before you. There is no failure permitted, understood? Tonight you will go to your homes, class begins for real tomorrow at eight a.m. Gather here, then we'll leave for the training grounds. Bid farewell to your parents tonight, children, you won't be seeing them once Director Wu lets them know what's coming. Dismissed!"

Was this it? There was to be no training tonight?

Scores of nervous students let out audible sighs of relief. They left in twos and threes to see their families.

Lan Jue did not leave. He remained, watching them scatter until only himself, Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun remained.

"Professor Tan." Lan Jue turned towards her.

"Hm?" Tan Lingyun had never taken her eyes off of him.

"Once we begin you also must remain with the students," he instructed. "I'll be giving you certain tasks that you must adhere to, and execute to the best of your ability."

Tan Lingyun simply stared at him. "Are you Lei Feng?"

Lei Feng? Wang Hongyuan, standing on Lan Jue's other side, was surprised and curious at the name. Lei Feng was a hero from the former era! When did Lan Jue become a long-dead cultural icon?

Lan Jue craned his head to look towards Wang Hongyuan, and waved a hand in dismissal. Though the desire for gossip blazed bright in his heart,

the dance instructor wouldn't dare offend his new instructor. He took his leave.

The expansive classroom was now only populated by two.

"Are you?" Lingyun asked.

Lan Jue nodded his head.

"I am."

Chapter 238: Tan Lingyun's Excitement

"I am!"

Tan Lingyun's eyes widened until they were like saucers. "Is it really you?" An intense blush reddened her cheeks – this mighty woman blushed like a schoolgirl, recalling everything that happened when they were locked together in that mecha suit.

"How... how did you get out, that day? I clearly remember locking the cockpit." Tan Lingyun said softly, her head hanging.

"You still have the nerve to talk about it, after biting the hand that feeds you?" Lan Jue hissed back in irritation.

Tan Lingyun's head shot up. Her tone was apologetic as she attempted to defend herself. "No! That wasn't my intention. I just wanted to know who you really are. I needed to find out your identity and thank you for what you did."

"Figure it out yet?" he asked.

"Remove the mask and let me see."

Lan Jue's eyes were hard and accusatory. "Tan Lingyun, let me make this clear. I am a special instructor under employment by the NEU. Right now, you may be an assistant, but you are also my student. If you wish to truly break in to God-class, then you need to concentrate on absorbing everything I have to teach. These pointless obsessions are a waste of time – are you hearing me?" Lan Jue's voice had risen in volume, until the final few words were veritably shouted at her.

Tan Lingyun jumped slightly at the force of it. She straightened in indignation. "I... understand. How shall I address you, Drillmaster? As Lei Feng?"

"Whatever you like," Lan Jue responded absently. "Call me Drillmaster in front of the students. Now if there's nothing else you can take your leave as well. What's coming in the next two months will be more difficult than you or the students can imagine. Go home, enjoy your time. It'll be

the last opportunity you have for two months.”

“Lei Feng,” she interjected, “you claimed that everyone who participates will raise one pilot class. Is this true?”

“Who do I know,” Lan Jue said dismissively. “I’m just trying to get them interested in the process. It was to stop them from quitting half-way through.”

“Ah?” Tan Lingyun blinked, surprised by the revelation.

Lan Jue payed her no further mind. He turned to leave without saying another word.

But Tan Lingyun wasn’t finished. She trotted after him. “Lei Feng. Let me take you out for a meal, as thank you for helping with the Lir competition.”

Lan Jue stopped in his tracks. He turned his head towards her. “That’s not necessary. I didn’t help you, I was helping the university. You just happened to be there, so don’t feel as though you owe anything. Just do your job these next two months.” With that said, the warehouse filled with light as Lan Jue dissolved in to a streak of white-hot lightning. When the blinding light receded, he was gone.

So fast! Tan Lingyun stood stunned, her eyes bright.

This was a real man! A powerful man. Excitement filled her.

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Lan Jue changed his clothes, and went out among the others once again as the etiquette teacher. He rubbed his tired face, kneading the hard lines away so that the noblesse avait l’air might return. A small smile sat upon his lips as he walked through campus.

As fate would have it, once again his trek led him directly in to the path of Tan Lingyun. However, this time their chance encounter didn’t result in confrontation – on the contrary, she walked by as though he didn’t register to her at all. With excitement clear on her face, she swept by like Lan Jue didn’t exist.

What is she so happy about, he pondered. Maybe she thinks our future classes are going to be easy.

A sinister light filled his eyes as he watched her go. I'll do to them what dad did to me and my brother. Hah! I'll forge you kids in to useful members of society yet.

"What's with the evil grin?" Zhou Qianlin jumped as she came around their usual meeting corner, and spied Lan Jue with his decidedly unwholesome smile. Her bodyguard's mild and graceful exterior had a shady feel today.

Lan Jue coughed, and chuckled sheepishly. "Nothing, just thinking about the olden days. What? Are you really thinking of sticking with the class? I'll tell you that if you do, I'm not going to take it easy on you. It'll be difficult, more difficult than anything you've done before."

Zhou Qianlin was steadfast. Her determined stare met his. "I'm not afraid!"

Lan Jue's smile fell away, so that when he spoke again the words were serious and heavy. "I'll ask once more; are you sure you want to join the ARC program? I'll work you to your limit, past what a normal person can endure. You will not be given any exceptions, no quarter. These two months will require inhuman levels of persistence. You will not be able to back out later."

Zhou Qianlin's own expression was solemn and serious. She took a breath. "I can handle it!"

Lan Jue nodded. "Very well. Good luck!"

Lan Jue clambered on to the bicycle, and held it steady while Qianlin shimmied on. They bounced their way towards Mount Tian, mostly silent until they reached the foot of the mountain.

"Alright, you can go back. With the changes to this class I'm sure you have a lot you have to do." Qianlin said.

Lan Jue nodded. "You, too. I'll come and get you tomorrow morning."

She shook her head. “No need. Tang Mi said she’ll come and get me with her car, since we’ll have things to bring with us. You can go to the school director, Prince of Devils Drillmaster!” She couldn’t help but grin at the dramatic title.

Lan Jue followed suit. “Laugh it up. Soon you’ll be saying that with sincerity.”

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Upon returning to Skyfire Avenue, Lan Jue made his way directly to the Underground, so that he might check up on his student Jin Tao. As anticipated, the first round of treatment had concluded and the young mutt had absorbed it all without incident. Everything was normal. Three days at most, he judged, and Jin Tao would wake up from the induced coma.

“Mika, I have a list here of things I’ll need you to help me purchase right away.” Lan Jue handed his office manager a slip of paper.

She took it and gave it a quick glance. Surprise flit across her pretty face. “What’s with all the medical equipment, boss? You know how black-hearted the Pharmacist is, this is going to cost us.”

Lan Jue’s response was delivered through a grin. “Don’t worry about it, just get what we need. It’ll be reimbursed. The Pharmacist’s goods might be expensive, but they’re better quality than you’ll get anywhere else outside the Avenue. The East’s medicines may not be as potent as those developed in the West, but they’re the product of thousands of years of experimentation and development, and that makes them something special [1]

“Alright.” Mika didn’t push the issue further, and left immediately to do as requested.

Lan Jue had already run the list passed Director Wu, who gave his consent. But the price of these materials were so high that the school could only afford a portion. He’d gone to Lan Qing for the rest, hoping to apply for a grant from the army.

These young pilots were the property of the Eastern Alliance, he figured. More than that, they were where the East pinned their hopes for the future. It was for these reasons that Lan Qing approached the grant, without any conditions applied.

“Guoguo,” he went on, addressing the other Amazon. “I’ll need you to prepare some things for me as well. From our own stock.” He produced another paper and handed it to her.

Lin Guoguo snapped it up and looked it over. Her tones curious, she asked “What do you need all these power gems and medicines for, boss? Are we training an army?”

“That’s about right,” he said with a smirk. “And an experiment.”

“Oh. Alright, I’ll get it done.” And with that, Lin Guoguo also headed out.

Next, he tapped Hua Li’s number in to his communicator. “Hey Hua Li,” he began. “Get Chu Cheng and come on down to the store. The girls are out and I’m keeping an eye on things, but we have something we need to talk about.”

It wasn’t long before the two showed up.

“What’s going on? I heard you’re acting as Drillmaster for the NEU now.” Chu Cheng regarded Lan Jue with no small measure of surprise.

Hua Li’s face was similar. The two Monarchs exchanged a wordless glance.

Lan Jue replied first by shrugging his shoulders. “If those three monster planets are real, then humanity is set to face a nasty problem in the near future. We have to do everything we can to prepare, am I right? Lan Qing was right, the other day: we’re not going out like this. What I’m doing isn’t just for them, but for me – so I’ll have a clear conscience in the knowledge that I did everything I could. If the fight breaks out, I’ll be on the first ship to An Lun.”

Chu Cheng chortled. “It wasn’t a criticism!”

Hua Li nodded in agreement with his fiery counterpart. “We’re just

wondering why you never told us about this? It's sure to be a good time! Do you have any idea how boring it is here? And it's not like I can just up and leave. Wouldn't it be better if I hide at the school? And we have the god battle in less than a month – lots of fun stuff on the horizon.”

Chu Cheng nodded in sagely agreement. “Indeed, indeed! There's just a gaggle of cuties in your school too, students and faculty both. Ahh, the pursuit of knowledge is such a wonderful thing! A-Jue, we're all brothers here. You must get me in the program.”

Lan Jue looked at the two, slack-jawed. It took him a good few seconds to recover. “Idle hands are the devil's playthings, huh...”

Chu Cheng laughed. “Right? We never see you, so we're stuck in the Avenue training. We've got cabin fever! And with three paragons ambling around, I have to walk on eggshells all the time. Certainly the university campus would be a different story. With our good looks and formidable skill, there's sure to be no end to the pretty girls who'd throw themselves at us!”

“Shut the hell up,” Lan Jue muttered. “A-Li, maybe. But you can get lost! I'm responsible for my students – I'm not throwing a wolf in among them!”

Chu Cheng's anger flared. “Why? You're always on about moral integrity. Worse case I won't run around chasing girls, but I won't reject them either. Come on, you know that's fair.”

Lan Jue shot him an icy glare. “I'm trying to keep my identity a secret. If you guys go, you'll have to do the same. With masks on, how do you intend to pick up women? And you being who you are, I can't imagine you'll be able to resist the urge to show your face the first time a nice pair of legs walks past. Nope, absolutely not, you're not going anywhere. A-Li, you can come – just put on a mask.”

“No problem, Hua Li said delightedly. “There's no difference between a pollution mask and whatever you'll have me wearing. Even if you didn't say anything, I couldn't brazenly be walking around in the open. Hell, if you told them that the magnificent, beloved, worshipped Poseidon was

their drillmaster... shit, they'd all faint before we even got the class under way!"

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1. This is in reference to the assurances that Traditional Chinese medicinal theory and application is different from Western medicine modalities, both practically and in approach. Eastern medicine tends to focus on the root of an issue, with symptoms being utilized for syndrome differentiation so that the germ of the issue can be eradicated. Often – well, traditionally, anyway – these symptoms were secondary to the cause of the problem and only treated forcefully if they're life-threatening. This is true for their medicines as well: Many of the pharmaceuticals we enjoy today are the result of isolating and chemically reproducing therapeutic effects derived from herbs. Chinese medical formulae often use the herb itself instead of a synthetic. This results in less potent pharmaceuticals, but also less extreme side-effects, and less stress on the liver. So in short, Chinese medicine has always been about 'slow and steady wins the race', even forgoing quick relief of symptoms, whereas the Western medicinal system has become 'make it go away as soon as possible.' There are arguments for the validity of these statements on both sides, but that's the crux of the argument from a TCM perspective.

Chapter 239: Unhappy Youth

Lan Jue slapped his forehead in frustration. “Enough, you two. I got one megalomaniac and one sexual predator. How in the hell did I get stuck with you two as my brothers!”

Chu Cheng slapped a hand down upon Lan Jue’s shoulder. “A-Jue, I swear to you no one will discover my identity. But you’re underestimating my charm, because even with a mask the girls will be swarming me. I don’t expect you to understand. So go on then, tell us what you’re gunna do.”

Lan Jue revealed his plan for the students and future dealings, simple and uncomplicated with nothing held back. The other two gentlemen were clearly bemused by the prospect, and their excitement only grew as he continued to lay out his plan.

“Isn’t that too... savage?” Chu Cheng couldn’t help but share his opinions, after hearing everything.

“Yeah!” Lan Jue replied, his own tones conflicted. “I’m honestly afraid these young people won’t be able to stick to it.”

Chu Cheng’s tone grew solemn. “This is your problem, A-Jue. You’re always underestimating how much we can handle. How do you think humanity’s become master of the stars? How is it we came to colonize and rule over so many planets? Because we’re amazingly adaptive. We’re ferocious! When I was young and in training, a few of my teachers employed cruel methods. Sometimes I hardly wished to live. Hell, you could probably learn a thing or two from them for your schemes.”

Hua Li took up his favored imperatorial inflection. “Do you two have any humanity? You’re sitting here discussing the best ways to destroy the future of the Alliances by crushing their flowers under foot. My own training was very different from the two of you. Like baptism in a rainstorm. My father told me once, ‘if you seek to control the oceans, you must stand firm against the roaring waves.’ I think he was right. We of the Poseidon bloodline, we have our family secrets but you two are my

brothers. There's no reason to hide any of this from you, so I have no qualms in sharing it. What do you think?"

Lan Jue and Chu Cheng both shot their thumbs towards Hua Li. Pointed Downward.

Three young men, with three very different ideas. Lan Jue took their thoughts in to account, while simultaneously shuddering. It was like the Three Stooges asserting they were smarter than Einstein. If the three of them really did join to teach, then it really would be like a vision of hell.

When Mika returned she saw the three troublesome youths conspiring quietly. She couldn't help but slink over, and in doing so caught a few sentences. When she cried out it took all three men by surprise. "What is this? Planning some sort of terrible thing no doubt."

"Don't worry about it," Lan Jue replied. "Medicine?"

Mika produced the myriad pharmaceuticals she was asked to purchase. It was a large bag, with many smaller ones inside.

Lan Jue turned his eyes towards Hua Li. "According to our new system, we're gunna need a higher dosage. But I'm running low on funds..."

Hua Li shrugged. "Money will not be a concern. This is about the future of humanity. Mika, buy whatever you need – I'll reimburse you. No expenses spared!" As he spoke, he produced a small card from his pocket and handed it to the Stygian Succubus.

Chu Cheng wrapped Hua Li in a bear-hug. "Hey money-bags, take care of me too!"

Hua Li's knee shot up towards Chu Cheng's gibly bits, forcing Chu Cheng to retreat. "Keep away from me, you stink like all kinds of body fluid! Come at me again and you'll suffer death with no descendants!"

Lan Jue beckoned the other two closer. "Alright, alright – stop messing around. Let's continue planning. Time waits for no man, after all. This first ARC program will last two months, and from what I can tell a normal program will not be enough. They don't need rigorous, they need tragic. We have to think about how to prevent deaths or madness."

The other two solemnly nodded their heads. “That’s a problem,” they said in unison.

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Early morning. Lan Jue had gotten up in the early hours, along with his two troublesome comrades.

“Are we taking the verti-car?” Chu Cheng asked piteously.

Lan Jue shook his head. “My identity is still a secret. I go every day by bike – if I’m suddenly arriving in an expensive car it’d attract too much attention. You two come by car, if you’re joining.”

“No way,” Hua Li said with a lilt in his voice. “I thought riding the bicycle was awesome. Quaint and amusing! You can take the car on your own, A-Cheng.”

Chu Cheng sniffed righteously. “How is this acceptable? We three brothers have to stick together, and since you both want to rise the bike I guess I am, too. I call the backseat, though – you got the crossbar this time, A-Li!”

“Don’t you have any humanity?”

“Dunno, how much does it cost?”

“We’ll play rock-paper-scissors for it!”

“Fine!”

Ten minutes later, Lan Jue was groaning piteously as he pedaled the antique bicycle along the road. Hua Li had been stuck with the crossbar, and his mood was accurately revealed by his pained expression. Three pairs of long legs bounced and banged as they fought their way towards the university. ‘Crowded’ did not do the scene justice.

“I should have played for the seat, too!” Lan Jue moaned, pedaling valiantly.

“Why the hell is that,” Hua Li grumbled, turning his head back to glare at Lan Jue.

Bitterness crept in to Lan Jue's voice as he spoke. "Do you know how heavy you two are? I'm just surprised this bike hasn't crumpled already. If it did you two would be dead for sure."

Chu Cheng chuckled at his colleague's displeasure. "You're the host, and this is a good display of manliness." He sat in the VIP seat atop the back tire, sans the discomfort of Hua Li and the effort of Lan Jue. He had no reason to complain.

The remaining trek to the university was a difficult one. Once they arrived he hurriedly kicked his two team mates off of the bike and walked the rest of the way to the gate himself. He didn't have to worry about getting them in to the university. He'd also already given them their golden masks.

Upon entering campus Lan Jue was surprised to discover Wu Junyi waiting for him once more. This time the director was waiting inside, and stood silent and stoic. It was as though he were just there to observe the students filing in to classes. Seeing his serious expression, the students didn't loiter around.

Lan Jue approached, and stopped his bicycle once they were face to face. "What are you doing here again?"

"Waiting for you!" The director replied. "The students are all prepared, and things have been organized as per your instructions. We've chartered a bus to take them directly to West Hill. I already set up everything for them there. We're all set."

Lan Jue nodded. "Good. Where's the bus?"

Director Wu indicated with a wave of his hand. "By the mecha combat department. Once you're ready to go, you can be on your way."

Lan Jue looked towards the department, then turned his attention back to Wu Junyi. "I brought two others with me today. Help them in, in a little bit. One of them is wearing a pollution mask, you'll spot him right away. They'll be helping me teach over the next several days. They won't be able to help us all the time, but when they're here it'll make the classes even better."

Of course, director Wu couldn't have known 'even better' meant 'even more terrifying.' When he replied, his inflection was full of enthusiasm. "Even better! I'll bring them in right now, then send them to the bus. Go ahead and get changed."

Lan Jue nodded, then left.

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Mecha Combat Department.

The tour bus was beautiful, clean and white. Students were milling about, placing bags of all shapes and sizes underneath the bus and filing in. As they were going to be gone for a month, there was a considerable amount of baggage to consider – especially true for the female students.

Zhou Qianlin was the exception. Unlike Tang Mi – who came with a massive rucksack – Qianlin arrived with only a small bag of clothes and toiletries.

The presence of Tang Mi and Zhou Qianlin gave the other students a false sense of security. They believed that, with these two beauties permitted to join, the classes couldn't be that difficult. For these young men, all full of spunk, this was a very good situation for them to find themselves in. Or so they thought.

Tan Lingyun had also arrived, quite early. She wore a flight suit, which showed off her impressive figure. She did not sit, but instead stood at the front of the bus and watched the happenings with vibrant, excited eyes.

For her, this was certainly a good thing. After all, the belief was she would exit this program a God-ranked pilot. It was the only thing she could think about.

It was Lei Feng's ability, the power he displayed, was a determining factor in her enthusiasm to be sure. Even without considering everything else that was in store, if she learned the different tricks and skills he'd displayed, that alone would launch her to God-hood.

Wang Hongyuan was also in attendance, though in contrast to Tan Lingyun, he was seated in the very last row of the bus. It looked as though

they shared a tacit understanding; one assistant in front, the other in the back, watching. The reality was less altruistic, that being that Wang Hongyuan simply wanted to limit his exposure to Tan Lingyun as much as possible. The chance of blowing his cover was too high.

By now, all the students were settled, chatting loudly among themselves. Just then, a tall figure appeared in the bus' doorway.

The moment he stepped foot in the bus, silence took over everything. All eyes turned to him, and it felt as though the temperature dropped a good few degrees.

He was tall, with a golden mask and a decidedly frightening aura.

"Hello Drillmaster." The first few rows of the bust called out to their teacher in unison. The others followed suit on their heels. No one dared show this man disrespect.

Lan Jue swept his eyes over the gathered students. In the end his glance fell upon Tan Lingyun, standing at his side.

She spoke without hesitation. "Drillmaster. Fifty-one registered ARC students and two Assistant Drill instructors, all present and accounted for. We're ready to go on your command."

Lan Jue simply nodded. "We've got two more coming."

Two more? Curiosity welled up within the Savage Goddess. Who else could be coming?

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind, then the two final travelers stepped through the door. Every student on the bus stared, eyes wide, as the mystery individuals appeared.

Chapter 240: Three Demon Drillmasters?

As the two figures entered the tour bus, every ARC student's eyes popped wide. The reason for their astonishment was simple: their masks were golden as well.

Beyond that the two were of similar height and build to their Drillmaster, with only slight differences visible. In fact, only their flight suits differentiated them.

Their drillmaster had split himself in three?

Tan Lingyun was not spared the jolt. Two more with golden masks – could this mean they were also God-ranked pilots? When did they become a dime a dozen?

Lan Jue's deep voice filled the bus' interior. "These two gentlemen will also be your Drillmasters for the near future. You may refer to them as you refer to me."

"Hello, Drillmasters!" the students cried.

The red-haired one was obviously Chu Cheng, and the blue-haired one Hua Li. The masks ensured neither need be concerned about their true identity, which was especially important for Hua Li. The two of them nodded in response to the greeting, but said nothing. For Chu Cheng, this was largely due to the fact that he was too busy ogling the several pretty girls in attendance. It was inevitable that both he and Hua Li would eventually turn their attention to Zhou Qianlin, who was seated near the back. They hadn't expected to see Hera's doppelganger among the students.

"Off we go."

The bus lurched forward at Lan Jue's command. In no time they were out of the school and on their way. Wu Junyi was not present; he'd already relayed his commands to the school and West Hill. From here on out, all decisions were Lan Jue's, and orders were to be executed upon his request.

The bus rumbled along the road outside of campus and began to pick up

speed. West Hill was a lump on the horizon.

West Hill had its own special personnel on staff, who'd been arranged by Wu Junyi to accommodate the training. When they finally arrived, Lan Jue was first off the bus.

"Get off the bus, and hand over all your communicators and any other equipment you can use to communicate with the outside world," Lan Jue commanded in his regal voice. "If I find anyone holding out, punishment will be severe."

No outside communication? Suddenly, the students felt like their original idea of a pleasant school outing wasn't quite what was in store.

None dare deny the God-ranked pilot, so one by one communicators were relinquished to Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan. Hua Li, Chu Cheng and Lan Jue stood in front, silently watching.

What about the Soulcaller gem? Lan Jue's head swam with Zhou Qianlin's voice.

That's fine. You can only communicate with me anyway. What we're trying to avoid is sharing information with the outside world. Lan Jue was entirely in 'Drillmaster mode', so his deep 'voice' was somewhat curt.

Once everything had been collected, Lan Jue asked the base personnel to help the students get checked in. He gave them twenty minutes to settle in and return.

"After twenty minutes, gather in the training field. I'm desperately hoping someone shows up late." His chilly voice was heavy with the promise of violence. His commands relayed, Lan Jue turned and left.

Chu Cheng and Hua Li fanned out behind him. Chu Cheng's excited voice whispered his way. "Woo, A-Jue, so vicious! Next time lemme give it a try. Seeing you like this brings me right back to when I got my start. Ugh, those memories are hard to remember!"

"No doubt! But it's damn interesting." Hua Li responded.

Lan Jue sighed helplessly. "You two are truly a pain in my ass, you know

that? And here you are taking pleasure in others' misfortune."

ζ

Tang Mi and Zhou Qianlin walked side by side as they went to check in. Tang Mi quietly spoke to her friend. "Qianlin, I heard my brother say the Prince of Devils – Nooblet from the first class – is his Master. This whole ARC class is odd! Beginning with the fact they took all of our communicators! The training we took when we enrolled in the university wasn't anything like this."

"Better management, probably," Qianlin replied. "This training will also be much stricter, I think. We should brace ourselves."

Tang Mi chuckled dismissively. "I'm in awesome shape, it shouldn't be any trouble. If you're worried over your delicate feminine curves why'd you join the training!"

Qianlin shot her a glance. "Delicate? Maybe to you. In willpower, though, you're not even in my bracket. We can put money on that."

Tang Mi laughed openly. "You wanna compare yourself to me? Do I seem that low-down?"

"Keep your voice down," Qianlin said with a glare. "Don't you see everyone staring at you?"

Sure enough it was hard to count how many people were interested in just how 'low-down' Tang Mi really was.

"You better hurry, Little Mi. Twenty minutes isn't much for you lady folk." Tang Xiao had been walking ahead of them. He'd turned back when he heard his sister's voice.

Tang Xiao may have had the advantage over the other students, but his advantage was also why he was so apprehensive. He knew very well how vicious his Master could be. When he said twenty minutes, he damn sure meant twenty minutes. A second late, and he was sure Master would make good on his earlier promise.

Twenty minutes later the three Drillmasters and two Assistants were

waiting on the training field. Lan Jue was waiting in the center, with Chu Cheng and Hua Li on either side. Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun were beside them.

Students had been steadily trickling in. Tang Xiao, with his bulging belly and trunk-like legs, had been first to arrive.

The female students were naturally among the last to arrive, with Tang Mi being the final comer. Lan Jue was watching the clock.

Seeing this, Tang Mi was running to join the others. Her heart was racing as she remembered her first run-in with Nooblet, and the subsequently cruel defeat she suffered from his Brunois Assault. It made her furious [1]. Tang Mi, who was almost never tardy, was moving slowly on purpose. Not only was she the last to arrive, she was also ten seconds late.

“Drillmaster, all fifty students have arrived.” Tan Lingyun eyes Tang Mi as she gave her report.

Lan Jue nodded.

“Tang Mi, to the front.”

She did as commanded, and separated herself from the group. Her head was held high, and there was a defiance in her eyes that said ‘what are you going to do about it?’

“To the front,” Lan Jue said softly.

“Alright,” Tang Mi replied. She took another large step forward, bringing her a few feet from the Prince of Devils.

Lan Jue first turned his attention to the other gathered students. “If you recall, I said twenty minutes. Within that time frame, everyone one of you arrived on time. Except for Tang Mi. Now, I’d like everyone to spread out one arm’s length.”

The students all raised their arms at his command, without hesitation, and spread out to give each other room.

“Arms down.”

They complied.

Tang Mi was beginning to sense doubt snaking its way within her. What was this Drillmaster doing, asking her to stand in front?

Lan Jue went on. "Spread your legs, and drop in to horse stance. I want your thighs level with the ground."

Horse stance? Everyone could do this. They did as instructed.

Lan Jue then turned to regard Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun. "I'd like our two assistants to serve as examples in the front."

Tan Lingyun blinked behind her mask. He was going to have her do the horse stance as well? Was this his 'training'?

Despite her misgivings, she moved to the front and dropped in to the stance. Wang Hongyuan did so without any hesitation or internal grumbling – his hope was to truly improve.

With the two assistants as examples, Lan Jue stood between them and went on. "Horse stance is your foundation. I hope you all can hold it, otherwise – like a poorly built house – your foundation crumbles. If you can't, you'll join Tang Mi in her punishment."

"Yesterday, you all felt the catalysis of the electric strike. Afterwards I put my mind to it, and I came up with an even better way to instigate your Discipline. In the next two months, I'm certain every one of you will enjoy this process. But today, Tang Mi will be... awarded... the first demonstration."

Tang Mi stood before the gathered assembly, fearlessly staring at the others. What was he going to do, shock her again? She lived through it once, what was there to fear? She was sure she could handle it.

Unfortunately, her back was to Lan Jue. She couldn't see what was occurring behind her. But the students in front of her could, and every one of them was staring in abject horror.

What are they looking at?

A silver light shimmered in Lan Jue hand and then, without pretext, a

long steel needle appeared. It twinkled with a strange, surreal light, and was about the length of Lan Jue's forearm. The unnatural light caused no small number of students to shiver uncomfortably.

Tang Xiao's mouth was wide open, literally slack-jawed. He wanted to call out, but Lan Jue's harsh glare stopped the words from coming.

The Prince of Devils approached Tang Mi until he stood at her back. He spoke softly. "Bioelectricity had a profound effect on the human body, even down to the molecular level. Student Tang Mi, what is your Discipline?"

"Metal domination," she said curtly.

Her own Discipline was different from Tang Xiao's metalmorphosis, but were in the same vein. Tang Xiao's was slightly better, for it involved both attack and defense. Tang Mi's own powers were more suited for attack, as her own body couldn't become metal. As a result, she was slightly behind her brother. A sixth-ranked adept.

Lan Jue nodded. "Very good! Metal dominion, somewhat similar to a Mental Discipline. It relies on the strength and will of metal. In today's world we encounter metal everywhere. It's a good Discipline. So, if we want to improve your Discipline there are two locations that are best suited for the task. The first is your Core, and the second your brain. Judging by the waves of power from your aura, your core isn't located in your brain. If it were, your Talent – and thus your metal domination – would be better. In my estimation, your core is located in your chest. Is that right?"

Hearing this, Tang Mi couldn't help but be both confused and surprised. Lan Jue was precisely correct with his determination. Her core was indeed in her chest.

"That's right," she said.

1. The Chinese reads as 'anger not coming from one place'. In Traditional Chinese medicine, the emotion of anger is said to come from the liver. This expression notes that the anger is coming from many places, so it's more than just normal anger. It's pissed the f*** off.

Chapter 241: We'll Go All Out!

“Very well,” Lan Jue said in his dispassionate voice. “Let’s get started.” He wasted no time, for as the students looked on in surprise and horror their Drillmaster shoved the giant needle through Tang Mi’s back.

Her whole body went rigid, as though she had been immobilized by some unseen force.

“Xiao Mi!” Tang Xiao and Zhou Qianlin called out in one voice, and Tang Xiao immediately rushed forward to attend to her. He had only the one sister and, even though he knew his Master wasn’t going to hurt her, it went beyond all his instincts not to do something.

There was a flash, and suddenly Lan Jue was holding another, frighteningly long needle. Tang Xiao ran directly in to it in his head-long rush, burying the needle in his own chest. He, too, was frozen in place.

“Did I ask you to break rank? You wanted to protect her from some perceived injustice, and now you’re here right along side her. Anyone else?” Lan Jue glared at the others.

Silence.

The needles were almost two feet long! And nine-tenths of them were buried in the brother and sister.

Tan Lingyun looked down, grinding her teeth. Logically, she understood that this Drillmaster must have a reason for his actions. However, these were students he was hurting. She only just barely managed to control herself.

“Me!” A powerful, moving and steadfast voice rang through the training grounds.

“Xiao Mi is my friend,” the voice assured, as an alluring figure rose from amidst the others. With deliberate steps, the sleek silhouette walked towards the Drillmaster. “If she has to suffer your punishments, then I will too. Go on then.”

Zhou Qianlin stood a small distance apart, challenging Lan Jue with her

stare.

Lan Jue was surprised to see such firmness on her beautiful face. None of the other male students had the courage to suffer the needle's stick, but here she was asking for it. She might have known who this Drillmaster was, that he would do nothing to harm them. However, just the fact that she was so willing to face whatever it was he was doing with the spike, displayed her bravery.

"As you wish." He relinquished one needle and, with the flick of a wrist summoned another. In the blink of an eye, he buried it in her chest. She stumbled around, frozen solid, but facing the others dropped in horse stance. As they watched Qianlin's flush and ruddy face blanched until it was white as a sheet. Her face was frozen in an expression of pain.

And the pain was intense. In truth they did not feel the stabbing sensation of the needle. Instead it was an all-encompassing numbness. At least on the outside. Within their tortured bodies it felt like every organ was twisted, jerking and locked in spasm. Blood rushed through their veins at intense speed, making them feel bloated and swollen. But they couldn't move a finger.

"Enough! How could you do this?!" Tan Lingyun could finally take no more. She faced Lan Jue, her voice thick with anger and incredulity.

Flash. Suddenly Lan Jue was standing before the Savage Goddess, but before she could react he thrust a needle in to her throat. She froze.

An overwhelming sensation of anger hung over the area like an encroaching tempest. The pressure made it hard to breathe.

When Lan Jue spoke again, his voice was as detached and dismissive as it was from the onset. "I had told you all yesterday, that once we got started you wouldn't be able to back out. You had your chance to leave. Now you're here, and this is my domain. I am your master here, and unless you can take me on... unless you can beat me, then you're going to do everything I say. You're going to suffer every punishment I levy. And every transgression, will be dealt with harshly."

His eyes swept across the crouching pilots. "You probably think I'm

crazy. Even my assistants are displeased, and now punished. And you're right... I am crazy. And since this is my domain anyone who irritates me – staff included – will be treated as harshly as you will be.”

As he spoke he made his way to Wang Hongyuan. His second assistant made no effort to evade as Lan Jue plunged a needle in to him.

“So courageous, you young men and women! You witness the cruel treatment of your colleagues, your teachers. You stay where you are. All... but two women. Very nice. If this is the strength of character I can expect from NEU students, I'd hate to encounter a coward.”

“We are not cowards!” Geng Yang, situated near the front, shot to a standing position. He glared hatefully at Lan Jue. “Fellow students, we don't have to take this! Here's here to hurt us! How can we sit here and let him treat Zhou Qianlin and Tang Mi this way? If you're men, then advance!” With that, he charged forward with a rallying cry. Behind him, a golden aura bloomed in to existence much like a small sun. A dozen golden orbs launched out from it towards Lan Jue.

The fiery, metallic orbs raced ahead with malicious intent. However, as they approached the Drillmaster, each other exploded in a shower of golden light.

“Metamorphosis?” Lan Jue watched him approach with interest, but his reaction time did not suffer. Almost unconsciously he weaved a net of interlacing electric bolts – a net of crackling electricity. As the orbs interacted and collided with it, they subsequently exploded in to nothingness.

Geng Yang's call to arms ignited the fiery passions of several young men. They rushed at the Drillmaster, eyes red with rage.

They knew they stood no chance, but how could they not be incited to action after what they'd seen and heard? Were they not men? The women they admired and desired had stood up in defiance, it was unthinkable for them to cower like children.

The sky lit up as Disciplines of a dozen different colors flared. They charged at their Drillmaster from all directions.

“Do any of you believe you stand a chance, in the face of my power?” He shot out a leg and viciously kicked Geng Yang away. Lan Jue vanished, only the briefest glimpses of him visible as one student after another was viciously thrown from the crowd. They tumbled to the ground, with needles jabbed in various angles within them. They then lay on the floor, their bodies frozen in the instant they were stabbed.

Chu Cheng and Hua Li stood in the distance, watching the students revolt. Chu Cheng leaned towards Hua Li, and spoke softly. “Look at this punk. Why does he get to have all the fun?”

Hua Li responded with a lilting sigh. “But... he also never told us not to get involved. Onward!” Hua Li dissolved in to a beam of pale blue light, and was on the move.

Chu Cheng, naturally, could not refuse the promise of entertainment and himself raced off in the other direction. The two insidious young men launched themselves in to the fray of angry youth and wild discipline. Neither employed their own powers – they didn’t have to. As they danced among the rioting students, they would grab one, then throw them towards Lan Jue.

Lan Jue’s response to their assault was relaxed. He handled them easily as they came. With the addition of his two companions, the revolt was quickly settled. In no time at all every student was motionless, sporting a two-foot long syringe jabbed somewhere or another.

“At least your response proves you still have some measure of courage. But you’re weak, pathetic, and rash. For that, you shall pay the price.” Lan Jue’s derisive voice hung in the quiet air.

The Prince of Devils raised his right hand, and within a crackling blue light was revealed. Slowly, the orb of electric light grew and changed, until it was an undulating ball of golden power. They couldn’t move, couldn’t react, but each one of the students stared in terror as their Drillmaster prepared their next punishment.

He wants to kill us, they thought. He’s going to kill us!

They barely had time to fear for their lives, before the orb shot up in to

the air and exploded a few feet overhead. The syringes jutting from each student acted like a lightning rod, guiding the golden bolts right to them.

Before long, a dim golden aura hung over every frozen figure. Every one of them were frozen in twisted positions. Their mouths were open, but despite their pain, fury and fear, not a sound would come out.

It was difficult to imagine what they were going through! Just the initial jab from the needle alone was difficult to bear, however now it felt like they were being ripped apart. And then compressed, and then torn to ribbons. This wasn't pain, to them – this was obliteration.

It wasn't simply a physical pain they experienced, but a horrible affliction that scarred their souls. No adept, no matter how strong their Discipline, could mitigate how monstrous this pain felt. In fact, it was like their Talent had been sealed away.

As Chu Cheng and Hua Li looked at their handy-work, they spied no end of twitching students. Some just showed the whites of their eyes – their pupils had rolled back in to their skulls.

Lan Jue walked among them, stopping occasionally to slap them.

As he did, the golden aura blanketing some of the students would react by weakening visibly. Others would grow stronger. Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun, for instance, shown with brilliant golden light.

It took several minutes for the release of power to be modulated in this way. Once he'd finished, Lan Jue returned to his original position.

He stood before Tang Mi. Gently, he turned her around so she could see the destruction he'd wrought. He spoke to her softly, calmly. "The suffering they are experience, is directly as a result of your actions. They endure this torture, because you were too stubborn to follow orders. If this were a battlefield, your fellow soldiers would all be dead – because you had to make your point. You could die a thousand times and never make up for a mistake of that magnitude. When the moment comes that lives rely on you, remember that you are not one person. You are part of a team. You are all part of a unit. The next time you decide to act, think first about how this will affect your companions."

Tang Mi had no way to respond to the Drillmaster's instruction, by word or deed. Her eyes were dim, and she could barely hear what he was saying. She only wanted to die... she so badly wanted to die.

Lan Jue took a step back, and looked at Hua Li. "You may begin."

Chapter 242: Spastic Pain

Hua Li nodded in acknowledgement, then lifting both his hands, pressed them toward the sky. Under a beam of gentle blue light, waves of power rippled from him. The cyan-colored emulsions intertwined with Lan Jue's sparks of electric power. As the undulating waves spread outward, they covered all of the students and teachers.

As the power blanketed them, the students and assistants could feel tendrils of it worming its way in to them. It felt like being splashed with scalding water, but somehow eased the spasms caused by Lan Jue's bio-electric strikes. Each of the afflicted began to feel pulses of their Discipline trying to break out.

The throbbing waves of their Discipline coincided with the ripples of Hua Li's energy as they washed over the students. They were still writhing from the electricity, but strangely, the twitches became rather rhythmic.

Gradually, the tearing pain was reduced to more manageable levels.

Lan Jue remained standing before them, motionless, however his eyes stared fixedly at each of his charges in turn. His psychic sight carefully assessed the condition of all of them.

They had only two months to incite a qualitative change in each of these aspiring pilots. It wasn't going to be easy, for anyone. Extraordinary measures would be required.

Everything they experienced today, was just the beginning.

Lan Jue paid special attention to the changes Qianlin's body was undergoing. Although her cultivation speed was impressive, her overall Discipline power was still weak. Compared to the others involved in the program, she was the furthest behind. It was for this reason he'd used significantly less electric power on her.

Of course, in only a very short time Qianlin had brought him no end of surprise. This girl, who looked so soft and gentle, was tougher than all the guys in this training field, suffering the bolts of electricity without

hesitation and recovering quickly. It had apparently served to incite her Discipline as intended, but the effect on her physically was minimal. Her muscles, meridians, organs... all of them were exceptionally hardy. She had handled it better than any of the others, and of them all looked the least in pain.

This was greatly surprising to Lan Jue. He'd carefully regulated the first strike against her, but she drank it like a sponge. Her power absorbed the undulating energy from Hua Li as well.

He adjusted the shock so that it was more in line with the other students. Instantly her relaxed face twisted in a pained scowl. He carefully watched as her body adjusted, and despite her expression he saw that she was sustaining against the increased pressure well. Where she stronger in Talent, he thought to himself, she would be able to sustain several times more punishment than any of the others.

The golden electric light filled the training area, bathed it in shimmering light. Workers in the distance looked on, stunned. They'd never witnessed any sort of training like this, and naturally since they weren't the ones being stabbed in the chest and repeated blasted by lightning bolts, they relished the entertainment.

Chu Cheng's eyes twinkled as he looked on. He was filled with an intense sense of satisfaction. The scene confirmed once more to him the fact he always knew – Lan Qing and Lan Jue's up-bringing must have been something terrible. These kids, they were lucky.

Heh.

The seconds ticked by. Each one felt like a lifetime, at least to the students who remained jerking like epileptics. It was certainly only by virtue of Hua Li's healing aura that they were able to continue suffering the torture.

The first student to begin foaming at the mouth was a younger student, smaller than the others. Only then was his body spared further shock, and he slipped in to a coma.

A moment later, a second student follows suit.

Eventually the golden bolts subsided, one by one. As they did, the student it was attached to collapsed and lost consciousness.

This was as good a metric as any to compare these pilot's sustaining ability. The stronger they were, the longer they could hold out. The opposite was just as true.

The first student to pass out had lasted thirty minutes.

Lan Jue left them where they fell. There was no more electricity, but Hua Li's healing waves remained. By the time the clock ticked the final second of an hour, most of the students were dead to the world. Only a few rare holdouts remained.

Among them were Tang Xiao, and Tang Mi, along with the mecha piloting star Geng Yang. Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun were also still standing. But most impressive, was Zhou Qianlin!

Qianlin remained, teeth gritted and valiantly suffering past the point of many of her stronger classmates. The trauma was still within her means to withstand. Lan Jue considered increasing the power of the electricity coursing through her even higher. However, he decided against it, fearing that her weak Discipline wouldn't be able to protect her against serious injury. He left her as she was.

Another ten minutes passed before Geng Yang had enough. Tang Mi was next, then Tang Xiao. They fell one after the others, like dominos. By the time Tang Xiao passed out, he'd lasted five minutes longer than the school's previously favorite pilot.

They were getting in to dangerous territory, now. The longer a body was locked in electric spasm, the more fragile it became.

Three persisted; Wang Hongyuan, Tan Lingyun, and Zhou Qianlin.

Lan Jue watched, speechless. Qianlin stared right back at him. Her body was wracked in convulsions, but her conscious remained firm as iron.

Her willpower was unbreakable, a fact Lan Jue was shocked to discover. She had surprised all of her classmates, even his own chubby disciple. It was incredible!

Eighty minutes.

Qianlin's whole body was red, like she'd been burned. The tics and twitches were more violent than ever. Still, she grit her teeth and willed her body to hold.

No, it was too much. This was her first time suffering something like this, and too much could cause irreparable damage.

He approached his young charge, until he stood directly before her.

Zhou Qianlin stared at him.

Lan Jue lifted a hand, intending to relieve her of the electric current. Before he could, however, a weak but obstinate voice filled his mind.

I've got it!

You... There was hesitation in his answer.

Chu Cheng and Hua Li had by now understood what was happening. Both of them were equivalent in power to Lan Jue, at least comparatively. Both of them could certainly maintain themselves under Lan Jue's electric prison. However, they understood what it took to do so, so they watched Qianlin with deep interest, to see how far she could go.

'Endurance' wasn't enough. You needed an iron force of will – something she evidently possessed. All of this, and she was just a young girl.

Lan Jue took a deep breath, and suppressed the urge to ease her suffering. He bit back on the anxious lump in his throat. He nodded to her, ever so slightly, then went back to his position in the middle of them all.

He respected her decision, and to a degree understood why she made it. He had no reason to make it stop – if she wanted to go on, that was her right.

Erratic lights still flashed through the arena. The atmosphere was thick, and the air began to warp around the holdouts.

One hour and twenty-five minutes in, Wang Hongyuan let out a sigh then collapsed. Only Tan Lingyun and Zhou Qianlin remained standing.

Tan Lingyun never took her eyes from Lan Jue. Like Qianlin, her eyes were bright and stubborn. What's more, by now she had a faint understanding of Lan Jue's purpose.

She was the strongest of those who'd been caught in this electric trap. An eighth-ranked Discipline was nothing to scoff at, and subsequently her voltage was highest. At this point, it was about five times more powerful than what the students had encountered.

Under the intense stimulation, Tan Lingyun could feel her core furiously at work. With each pulse of power, and each shock of energy, she felt not only her perception of the outside world growing but also her energy itself.

The experience was hellish, but she faced it with excitement.

The students couldn't feel the slight changes in their Discipline, even if they were awake. It was different for the Savage Goddess. And it wasn't just her energy or power – her body, too, was becoming stronger.

Any doubts Tan Lingyun had at the outside had been quieted, now. She could feel through the waves of elemental power, that the golden-masked newcomer was at least a ninth-level Talent. It was confirmed by the ac that it would require at least that much power to sustain this release of energy for so long.

If Lan Jue was the Prince of Devils, then this man must be his counterpart, a guardian angel.

I... must... endure! Over and over, Tan Lingyun snarled the words to herself.

Suddenly, Lan Jue was standing before her.

"We'll finish here."

The golden bolts of electricity vanished. Tan Lingyun and Zhou Qianlin were freed from their torment.

Qianlin swayed on her feet for a moment and then, with a defeated sigh, slumped to the ground. However, she did not lose consciousness. She lay crumpled in a heap, breathing heavily. Residual tremors periodically swept

through her.

Tan Lingyun was in much better condition. She had dropped to one knee, and was panting headily like her younger student. Her flight suit was soaked through with sweat, and her whole body shook.

“Wh-y... di-.... did you... stop?” she said between shuddering gasps.

“I only have the one female assistant,” he replied dispassionately.

“If you were to pass out, who’d look after our female students?”

He regarded her for a moment longer. Then, with nothing more to say, he motioned the distant workers to approach.

Chapter 243: Boiled and Eaten?

A contingent of workers Lan Jue had had Director Wu prepare beforehand came rushing onto the field. Three levitating medical vehicles came with them.

The paralyzed students were loaded on to the cars and removed from the area.

The flashing green aura around Tan Lingyun shimmered and dissipated. She had recovered from Lan Jue's assault, requiring a few minutes' rest before she was able to rise to her feet.

Zhou Qianlin was still gasping for breath a short distance away. She was in and out of consciousness, lying on the floor.

"What else are you planning?" Tan Lingyun stared at Lan Jue with glassy eyes.

"Come with me," he replied. With that Lan Jue, Hua Li, Chu Cheng and Tan Lingyun followed one of the workers as he led them from the training grounds.

Tan Lingyun, her teeth clenched, walked behind them best she can. Her gait would sometimes suffer from a stagger, and her knees threatened to give, but she continued on. Pride alone pushed her to keep up.

They followed the worker in to the training base.

Under Lan Jue's instruction, the flat-bed cars bearing the unconscious students were separated according to gender. The boys were placed in one big room, and the girls in another. The center of each of these rooms was dominated by a boiling pond.

"W-what's going on?" Tan Lingyun asked again, peering at Lan Jue in curiosity.

Lan Jue's response was quiet. "Boil them. Get everyone in the water and watch them. No one is permitted to leave until an hour has passed. You are to join them. Understand?"

“Boil...” The Savage Goddess looked at him with wide eyes. She was slowly becoming convinced the man in front of her truly was a devil in disguise.

“But... why?” She asked dumbly.

“I’m going to eat them,” Lan Jue replied.

“Ah!” Chu Cheng and Hua Li couldn’t help but snicker at Tan Lingyun’s reaction.

The students were efficiently set up in their respective rooms. Lan Jue had several of the female staff accompany Tan Lingyun to the female section.

“Remember, no one gets out till time’s up, yourself included! Disobey at your own risk.” She could hear Lan Jue call after her as she left.

The two rooms were entirely segregated for privacy. Hua Li left with Tan Lingyun, while Lan Jue began dropping pouches of some unknown material in to the pool.

As the contents of the bags boiled in the intense heat, the pool’s waters changed to many different colors. Eventually the colors combined, and the water adopted a dark brown tinge, almost like a coffee.

Lan Jue infused the water with a jolt of electricity to keep the contents churning.

Lan Jue stepped back, and with an indication of his hand the workers began to strip the male students of their flight suits. One by one they were placed in the pool with only their heads above water.

Chu Cheng watched from Lan Jue’s side. “You know, I really should be on the female side. I’m positive I could do a better job than Hua Li.”

“You?” Lan Jue said, his irritated tone clearly delineating his opinion on the matter. “If you went it’d be for the sole purpose of getting us all arrested. So long as you’re in my sight I can relax. But if any of the young men catch your fancy far be it from me to interfere.”

Chu Cheng’s middle finger relayed the fiery young man’s response.

The boiling pool was now a boiling potion of herbs and medicines. Once everyone was in, it was clear Lan Jue had not been exaggerating. They were all to be boiled alive.

On the other side of the partition, Hua Li was filling the relatively smaller female pool with medicine. Once he was finished, he left and returned to Lan Jue.

Soon the girls were also submerged in the mixture. Tan Lingyun was the only one conscious, and hesitation was clear in her posture as she looked upon the furiously boiling waters.

Could a person even handle it, she thought? She watched as the young women's fair complexion quickly became beat red from the heat. Still they remained asleep.

With a determined snarl, Tan Lingyun removed her clothes and jumped in.

She didn't ease her way in – to her, a short spell of suffering beat long and drawn-out any day. It was only hot water, she told herself. It couldn't do anything to her she hadn't already suffered.

It was only a few moments later that she started screaming. She was just about to leap out when a strange began to gush forth and diffuse some of the scalding heat.

Ey? This power...

It wasn't long before she found the heart of the issue. This energy wasn't her own. In fact, it was a property in the water, brought about by the Drillmaster's electric stimulation.

The energy somehow regulated the heat, and though 'anguish' was a suitable description for how she felt, it was still just within the realm of bearable. Her mind went to the pouches of medicine floating along the water's surface. She sunk in to the water, jaw clenched.

They were in fact being boiled alive!

Surely, any outsider who could see this would be horrified. Even the

workers looked on with pale faces and doubt in their eyes. They had been commanded to prepare the water earlier, so they knew precisely how hot it was! They were convinced putting the students in there was a danger to their health.

Like were like fleshy hard-boiled eggs.

However, their misgivings were squelched. The school had made it very clear the Drillmaster was to get whatever he wanted. Every order, no matter how strange or unpalatable, was to be carried out to the letter. The school treated them well here, and none of the workers were keen on looking for other work. They comforted themselves with the assurance that the NEU wouldn't do anything to really hurt their students.

Ten minutes later

A scream rang out.

"Aaaaahhh!" The noise was shrill, forlorn, as though someone were being murdered. Like a ding swine.

A large and fleshy figure leaped out from the water, throwing boiling droplets in every which direction. His whole body was bright pink like a boiled shrimp's.

Before the bulky silhouette could entirely escape from the hellish waters, a bolt of electricity struck them right back down.

Splash. The stout body belly-flopped back in to the scalding water. Their pitiful cries abruptly fell silent.

A few seconds later, like a cresting wale, the fat body returned to the surface screaming bloody murder. Another blast, and again he was submerged.

"Ahhh! I'm boiling to death!" The screams were given words, this time, but they were no less tragic. The fat student made no further attempts to extricate themselves from the pool, but writhed pitifully beneath the roiling waters.

Tang Xiao's fat head bobbed on the surface, contorted in pain.

Tang Xiao wasn't the strongest of those who were electrocuted and injected today. Wang Hongyuan, the seventh-ranked adept that he was, took that title. What he did possess, however, was better endurance than the rest of them, and a faster recovery speed.

Part of this was due to his metalmorphosis Discipline, certainly. But more than that, his resistance was a result of the terrible beatings he was receiving daily from Mika.

He'd been knocked out a few dozen times at least by this point, so he was the first to pop out of it today.

Of course Tang Xiao desperately wished that wasn't the case. If he were unconscious, he at least couldn't feel this excruciating pain.

The scalding waters caused him to scream over and over. His small, pitiful-looking eyes glistened with tears. He glared through the burning drops at the stoic, golden-masked Lan Jue.

Steam filled the room, making it difficult to see anything clearly. Lan Jue's lithe figure seemed to undulate in the mist, disappearing and reappearing through the cloud of pain like a true demon.

"Teacher... save me please! Why are you doing this?" Tang Xiao howled, gasping desperately for breath through the screams and choking steam.

Chu Cheng's gloating voice was the one that responded. "He's the one that put your fat ass in there. You think he's going to save you? It's best to suck it up and learn to live in there, pig-boy. It'd be better for you."

"Ahh! It's too much, I'm dying!" The poor child whined and writhes incessantly, but Lan Jue made no move to save him. He had no desire to make it stop just yet.

"It's too much," Tang Xiao whined at his Master. "Professor, I can't handle it!"

Finally, Lan Jue responded, though his voice was chilly and dismissive. "If you can't handle this slight discomfort, how are you going to survive through the rest of the training? Keep shouting, but it'll only waste energy. Where I you, I'd be focusing on the changes in my body instead of

complaining. Pain is the best way to temper oneself. Enjoy it.”

Tang Xiao said nothing further, after all he understood his Master on some level. He knew the type of person that he was. If there was one thing he knew absolutely, it was that nothing he could say would make this situation better. Behave, and endure. That’s all he could do.

With his determination made, Tang Xiao quit his woeful cries, grit his teeth, and focused on the pain. What he discovered was that, somehow, the needle his teacher had inserted within him was somehow sealing away his Discipline. No matter how he tried to pull it forth, to protect him from the terrible waters, no power would answer. He truly had no choice but to bear it on his own.

Lan Jue’s voice rang in his ears, over and over. This is your last chance. You can’t back out. Last chance. Tang Xiao understood, now, why he’d said it so many times.

The needles and lightning were just the beginning, and now the hot pool. This was the training! They were there for one purpose – to experience the torment of all eighteen levels of hell.

But despite the terrible situation he found himself in, Tang Xiao would do it again. If given the opportunity to change his mind, he wouldn’t. That didn’t mean, though, that he wouldn’t hesitate.

One phrase from his master rolled in his mind over and over again. If you decide to come, don’t even dream of leaving. Once this two-month training starts, there’s no going back.

The thoughts helped solidify Tang Xiao’s resolve. He knew there was nothing he could do. He wasn’t alone, there were others at his side suffering the same fate. He had to change his attitude. He narrowed his eyes, and learned to love the pain.

Another piercing scream filled the thick air. This time, it was from Wang Hongyuan. The dance teacher, like Tang Xiao before him, instinctively pounced from the water to try and distance himself from the agony. Like Tang Xiao, a blast of lightning sent him tumbling back in.

The silver mask hid his face, though his figure gave him away.

“Lan-“

CRACK!

This second blast was terrifically more powerful than the last, and before Wang Hongyuan could inadvertently scream the Price of Devil's name, he was frozen solid.

Chapter 244: Boiled Alive

“Shut up, and take it like a man.” Lan Jue’s cold voice was sharply contrasted by the scalding hot water.

Wang Hongyuan had had enough time, now, to react to the water. His Discipline wasn’t much stronger than Tang Xiao’s, though his cultivation was further along. However, the heat was proving particularly difficult to bear in contrast to Tang Xiao – largely because he didn’t have several centimeters of fat protecting him!

“Drillmaster, what is this? Why am I in here?! This water is boiling!” Wang Hongyuan realized his folly, and kept Lan Jue’s name out of the conversation. But that didn’t stop his screams from being any less shrill. He screamed and writhed, but dared not attempt to leave the water.

“Nothing. Behave, endure.” Lan Jue’s voice was calm and easy.

The intense heat worked as a stimulus for a person’s mental fortitude. Fortunately, Wang Hongyuan was a smart cookie. It took him no time at all to understand this was part of the training. So he shut his mouth, scowled through the pain and suffered in silence.

Tang Xiao and Wang Hongyuan were able to get this far largely due to their understanding of their teacher. The others students, however, didn’t have that benefit. One after the other they awoke to the heat and pain, and didn’t know why.

As one screaming voice arose another would join it. Then they would fall silent and another would take its place. The pained screams of men and women filled the pools. It was like a song of suffering.

Blasts of thunder would punctuate the cries. Whether screams or curses, Lan Jue didn’t hesitate to drop bolts of lightning upon his students. Under his brutal ministrations, not a soul could escape the boiling pools. This formerly relaxing room was now a living hell, filled the ear-piercing screams of its victims.

The female side was less soul-crushingly harsh, though screams were

still heard. Likely because there were fewer of them.

In general, there were fewer women who were interested in becoming career mecha combat pilots. Other than Zhou Qianlin and Tang Mi, there were only two other female students in the class of fifty. Adding Tan Lingyun, their group had only five girls.

Tan Lingyun had had the longest opportunity to adapt, and her higher level of cultivation helped tremendously. She couldn't employ her Discipline, but she could sense – little by little – the medicines in the water permeating through her. It was raising her own body temper to match the pool. As time went on, not only did she feel capable of bearing more punishment, contrarily she felt a sense of comfort spreading from within her.

The stiffness from the Drillmaster's lightning attacks was beginning to wear off, along with the numbness. The catalytic properties were beginning to wane as well, but she could feel the results even in the suppleness of her movements.

Indeed, her Discipline seemed sealed, but there was more energy flowing through her veins with her blood. It brought the power to all of her muscles and meridians. She felt like something had taken root, and was growing.

Although Tan Lingyun couldn't yet understand what benefit this treatment would have on her, she had to admit that she hadn't felt her Discipline like this in a very long time. Not since it first Awoke.

The manifestation of an Adept's Discipline was energy, but it was an energy that intermingled seamlessly with the body. Thus, as the Adept grew so too did their power, but it simply felt like the normal growth process. Like one's own skeleton and organs, they grew as time progressed but their changes went unnoticed.

And what was this medicine in the water?

Admittedly Tan Lingyun had been too busy focusing on the pain to consider these sorts of things. Now she was able to start considering her surroundings, and as she did surprise filled her pretty eyes.

She was certainly no expert in medicine, but she'd used medicines to promote body and Discipline growth once before, when testing her Talent. She remembered the smell of it, and it smelled very similar to what she was immersed in.

Golden mugwort, that's what was in the water. And what else? It was used to clear the collaterals and bring nutritive energies to the five organs. She couldn't recall the name. [1]

How much medicine did they need to fill up this whole pool?! The anger and indignation in her heart subsided, replaced by surprise.

Is this some sort of unorthodox teaching method?

At present Tan Lingyun was the only one to puzzle it out. Her body was strong enough to withstand the heat, leaving her mind free to consider other things.

The other students, Wang Hongyuan among them, were too lost in their abyss of suffering.

Just think; the smell of boiling students, so nice.

"Save me! I don't want to train. Let me go. Let me out!"

"Drillmaster, I'm sorry. Forgive me! Forgive me please, I was wrong. I don't want to be boiled alive!"

"Mother..."

Cries of all sorts, curses of all styles, rang through West Hill. The training grounds had become purgatory for these poor souls. Cries rang out, rising and falling in a terrible crescendo, as dozens of bodies writhed and screamed themselves hoarse.

Not all present were screaming, however. The first to awaken – Tang Xiao, was huddled in a corner, taking long deep breaths. He was trying his best to avoid the other students.

Wang Hongyuan was not far away, similarly cowering in the waters. The both of them knew screaming would serve no purpose. Lan Jue would not allow them to escape. Though their understanding didn't go as far as Tan

Lingyun's, as they fought for calm the scent of medicine filled their nostrils.

It shouldn't be harmful... in fact, it mustn't be harmful! Once they came to this realization, they simply shut their mouths and took it.

Where any normal person put in to this water, they'd have been cooked through in short order, but Adepts were a different breed. From the day their Discipline awakens, an Adept's energy flows through them, nourishing and strengthening their bodies. It was also the reason why Adepts made the best mecha pilots – they could handle more than an average man.

The students were horrified and surprised to discover that the steel needles their Drillmaster had used somehow sealed their Discipline away. Still their energy persisted, and in fact had no problem protecting them from the more harmful effects of the water. None of them knew, also, that Hua Li had infused them with the water element to protect them.

With all that in mind, despite how cruel and terrible the situation looked there was no real risk.

The peels of thunder and blasts of lightning grew steadily fewer and farther between. Only a few hold-outs still had strength enough to struggle against the pain.

The seconds ticked by. After what felt like an age, Hua Li stepped close to Lan Jue and spoke in to his ear. "That's enough, I think."

Lan Jue gave him a slight nod.

He knew very well that going too far was just as bad as not doing enough. But today was the first day, so he had to make a show of being harsh. He had to teach them a lesson, so that they understood they will need to follow orders during the training. On top of that, there was a saying in former era China: First time taking the medicine, double the dose.

As for mental and nervous breakdowns, there was no chance of that happening. Part of the injection he'd given them was to prevent that from

happening. If any of them were on the verge of having a mental break, the medicine would put them in to a medically induced coma.

This was designed to prove to them, unequivocally, that they were capable of suffering far more than they realized. Until now, not a single student had fallen unconscious. They sat in the water, still struggling against the pain with vitality.

Five minutes passed, and those in the water began to feel a drowsiness hang over them. Their struggles lessened, and that was the clue Lan Jue needed. The workers began feeding rails in to the water.

“You’ve got three minutes to climb these rails and get out. If after three minutes you’re unable to climb out, you’ll stay in another half an hour.” He delivered the instructions, then left.

The students looked at each other in surprise and uncertainty. Silence prevailed, until a fat body churned the already tumultuous body in his rush to clamber up the railing. It was a very clear display of the phrase ‘fighting for your life.’ He was out of the terrible water much faster than his girth would have to believe. Escaping the torture, he collapsed belly first on the floor like a puddle of flesh. He took large, heaving breaths as he lay inert, unable to move a finger.

The second to exit the pool did so with impressive grace. Like a swallow, he was up the pool and out on to the ground with pretty and dramatic movements. Obviously, it was the masked Wang Hongyuan.

With their example, the other students rushed towards the poles like a swarm of hornets. Their speed was impressive.

“It’s pretty hot,” Lan Jue commented in a leisurely tone, wiping sweat from his brow. He seemed decidedly less murderous than usual.

“Why do I get the sense hurting these poor kids is satisfying some dark craving in you.” Chu Cheng watched the exchange from behind Lan Jue, hands behind his head and fingers laced together.

“Because you have mental problems.” Hua Li’s voice interrupted his friend’s thoughts, as he approached from behind with his hands stuck in

his pockets.

“You’re the one with mental problems. Damn near psychotic,” Chu Cheng muttered in irritation.

Hua Li looked over the students. “Suitably intense, but this required quite a lot of medicine. Next I guess we’ll see how they react.”

Lan Jue chuckle behind the mask. “That’s enough for this morning. We’ll pick it up after lunch.”

From the moment they arrived to now, with the students steaming pitifully on the floor, only two hours or so had passed. To the kids, however, it felt like a lifetime of wading through hell.

“Meet me in the training field in half an hour. If anyone’s late, you’ll try for round two of this treatment. Lan Jue’s icy-cold voice was like a blast of thunder to their eardrums. They lay panting on the floor, beat-red like well-cooked meat.

Half an hour!

Tang Xiao was the first to react, urging his body to turn just enough for him to confirm the time with the clock hanging on the wall. It was an act quickly mirrored by all the rest of the students.

With the lessons derived from Tang Mi’s tardy arrival, who would dare challenge the Drillmaster?

The situation wasn’t much better on the female side of the pool.

In order to save face in front of the others, and retain the dignity of an instructor, Tan Lingyun had found the willpower to sit up once out of the pool. Zhou Qianlin had tried several times to follow, but her body wouldn’t let her move. Tang Mi, one long leg splayed over Qianlin’s lower back, panted pitifully against the floor. It was quite the display, but even if the men next door were given an opportunity to take a peek, they were all too weak and beaten to appreciate the views.

1. Chinese herbal medicine, as part of the TCM system, performs functions based on their various properties in accordance to the 'Five Phases' – that is, their elemental properties. Those are Fire -> Metal -> Wood -> Earth -> Water. Ai Jiu, or Chinese mugwort, is used most often for moxibustion and aromatherapy, where it has properties of cooling and clearing. In addition, Chinese medical theory posits that our organs are separated in to Yin and Yang organs. The Yin organs are considered the more important because they provide essential energies for growth-reproduction-health. These are the Lungs, Liver, Kidney, Spleen and Heart. Technically the Pericardium is also a yin organ, but ancient texts bundled it in with the Heart, to call them collective 'the Five Zang Organs'. In TCM, you'll often want to support and/or brings nutritive energies to the Yin organs to help give them the power they need to fight illness.

Chapter 245: Afternoon Delight

It took about twenty minutes in total for the students to pull themselves out of the water, throw on some clothes, and gather in the training yard.

It was a slightly easier time for the women. There were only five of them, so it was easier to distinguish their clothes from the pile and get organized. While their hair was messy, they were at least fully clothed, if somewhat uncomfortable.

The young men bustled among themselves.

For a dozen or so of them, their clothes had been cast in a pile. In the midst of their pain – and the fear of being late – they chaotically rummaged through the fabric in a desperate search for their own gear. In fact, those who got themselves together in a reasonable time frame were the exceptions.

Tang Xiao, for instance, had simply wrapped himself in two pieces of clothing; one on top, and one on bottom.

Flight suits were form fitting, and sadly Tang Xiao had been unable to find his own. They were composed of an elastic fabric, but he was simply too large to grab any suit. So he had to improvise, using the two separate ones he'd grabbed for a shirt and pants. The middle was left bare, and his expansive stomach wobbled in protest as he bounded around.

But as comical and pitiful as he appeared, the other students weren't any better off. Those with average builds were lucky, and they just grabbed whatever was lying around to cover themselves appropriately. Some of the slower students, they were dismayed to discover, ended up with no clothes at all. They had to settle with picking up whoever's underwear they could muster and running out to the field.

They were a pathetic sight, as they stumbled out on to the field. A number of students were still groaning. Residual tics and jerks still plagued a few.

Hua Li, Lan Jue and Chu Cheng were waiting in their golden masks.

They stood in the center of the field, silent as the students desperately gathered.

Seeing them in such dire circumstances, it took everything Lan Jue had to keep his severe countenance in place and not burst in to laughter.

Tan Lingyun lead the girls in to position, all the way glaring daggers at Lan Jue. She snapped to attention. “Drillmaster. Assistant Instructor Tan Lingyun, reporting all our female students in attendance.”

“Line up,” was all Lan Jue would say.

The male students came in bits and pieces, led presumably by Wang Hongyuan. His figure was one of the lucky few where he was able to simply grab a flight suit that served its purpose. When he reported in, his tone was gruff and embarrassed. He stood to one side, his head hung and staring at the ground. The silver mask, however, retained its stoic expression.

It was an impressive feat, all things considered. They were all here, not one tardy student.

Lan Jue’s soft voice greeted them. “Smells good, doesn’t it – the smell of boiling people.”

Silence greeted his words. Even the groaning stopped. Who would dare single themselves out before this mad man? Who knew what other terrible things this monster had in store.

Now they were truly beginning to understand why the Drillmaster had chosen to call himself the Prince of Devils. It was a nickname that probably didn’t go far enough. Ever since becoming adepts, none of the students could imagine they would have to suffer such torment. And that’s precisely what it was – torment. How was this training?!

“Do you see yourselves? Like a routed army. As you are now, if you were really in a fight you’d drop everything and run like cowards.” Lan Jue addressed them, his voice both derogatory and disappointed.

“Director Wu assured me you were the best the NEU had. The university’s strongest and most skilled mecha pilots. Not according to

what I'm seeing. I'm already doubtful there's a decent pilot in the lot of you. Today's class is going to teach you two things: First, I require absolute obedience in all things. Anyone who dares violate this rule, I have methods that'll push the limits of what humans can endure. Second, you all are a team. As a team you will suffer as your team mates suffer. You will face the same trials and difficulties. These people around you, they're your compatriots. Brothers and sisters in arms. Remember this when you make a decision, for it affects every person here. I don't care who make a mistake, everyone – including our two assistants – will suffer the consequences.”

“This morning's class will end here. You have an hour to get yourselves tidied up, shower, eat and rest. Meet back here when your hour's up. You can be late... honestly.” The last few words were delivered with sincerity, the Prince of Devil's intonation free and easy. But the gathered students weren't fooled. They felt that chill running up their spine, heard the ominous wind at their backs. No one said a word.

“I'll finish with a reminder,” Lan Jue went on. “Those needles are to be left where they are. Anyone who removed theirs, will be stabbed twice. Dismissed.”

He left, without saying anything further.

Once the three demon drillmasters were out of sight, the students were finally able to relax. Some left, a few immediately fell to the ground. Those of weaker mental constitution openly wept.

Very vocal complaints filled the air from all directions.

Lan Jue couldn't care less how the students were reacting. Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan would at least keep them from deserting. If they chose not to eat, and instead complain for an hour, Lan Jue didn't mind. The afternoon class would be the same – largely because he hadn't planned further than that.

Tang Xiao didn't complain, didn't belly-ache. He felt like his actions were correct, and didn't waste time bemoaning his fate. He saved his energy for what was to come.

He fought against his tired and beaten body to find the one who had grabbed his clothes. Giving no consideration to the women in the audience, he quickly disrobed and switched clothing. Thankfully he had underwear to preserve some semblance of dignity. Once changed, he teetered away.

“Girls, with me!” Tan Lingyun’s commanding voice rang out over the field. Her own needle glinted in the light, still sticking out of her chest. It prevented her from using her Discipline, but the Savage Goddess’ physical fitness was already far and away better than most. She supported a couple of the girls as they limped off the field.

Tang Mi was silent, her face gloomy. The exhaustion, the discomfort she felt didn’t bother her. What did, was the fact that she had been propped up as an example of what not to be. Though none of the other students said anything, the look in their eyes was clear enough as they stared at her.

She pondered just how poorly this would have ended up, had she been a boy. Whether or not it was that loathsome drillmaster’s intention, the implication had been the morning’s torture lay squarely on her shoulders.

Tang Mi was not a spoiled girl, but she had always been talented even when she was young. She was no ordinary girl, as was evident by the fact she was the most skillful female student the NEU had. Never before had she encountered such treatment in her short, blessed life.

The pain she felt, both physically and emotionally, fundamentally altered her view of the world.

“Little Mi, don’t think too much about it. Let’s go eat.” Qianlin wrapped an arm around Tang Mi’s, and spoke gently to her friend.

Tang Mi nibbled absent-mindedly on her lower lip. She looked at Qianlin with red-rimmed eyes.

Qianlin responded by wrapping her in a hug. “Don’t think about it. We’re all in the same boat. What happened was a result of you being late, this was the Drillmaster’s plan all along. After all, why else would he prepare so many needles?” When she spoke, her voice was purposefully

louder, so that the students around them couldn't help but hear.

Tang Mi nodded her head, ever so slightly.

"Let's go," Tan Lingyun called to them. "We've only got an hour."

Her jaw set, Tang Mi followed Qianlin towards Tan Lingyun and the exit. The other two girls were close behind.

The students rinsed themselves off and, with no time to change clothes, followed the worker's instructions to the cantina. Upon smelling that full-bodied aroma, and seeing those steaming plates of food, the students were finally beginning to feel like they'd escaped the depths of hell.

They had an expansive spread to choose from, with at least ten different meals to choose from. Nine of them were meat dishes, and the tenth being a vegetable soup.

The students stumbled around, preparing to eat. The residual effects of their morning 'training' remained, and there wasn't a soul present who wasn't limping from the trauma.

The cafeteria was a bustle of activity.

Tang Xiao took to the food with a vengeance. It wasn't so much eating as it was viciously throwing food at his stomach. At one point he'd managed to cram an entire drumstick in his mouth, extricating only the bone. He chewed just enough so as not to choke and swallowed it down.

They ate like ravenous animals, and to a man each student felt like their stomachs were bottomless pits. No matter what or how much they ate, it was never enough. The women were no exception. No one was concerned with appearances at this point.

An hour was all they had, and it was hardly enough. Every one of them ate while staring fixedly at the clock. At this moment being late was their primary fear – after all, that hellish drillmaster had told them it was all for one. A single student could ruin it for everybody. No one was interested in suffering the murderous stares of their peers. Tang Mi might have been uncertain how they would react, but they understood quite clearly.

An hour later, every student was standing at attention in the training field. A few of them burped, still working through their lunch.

The three drillmasters were punctual, already waiting when the students arrived. In their golden masks, they really were like demons.

It couldn't be said that the students' clothes were tidy at this point, but they were at least in far better straights than earlier. The girls had showered and put their clothes right, but their hair remained a mess. They'd had no time to comb their hair.

Lan Jue regarded them calmly. Eventually, he spoke. "I trust you enjoyed your lunch. Our training is nothing if not humane, so you'll find this afternoon's class to be gentler. You just ate, after all. So we'll keep the physical exhaustion to a minimum."

Humane? Do you even know what that word means? The flabbergasted sentiment rang in the heads of every student. Of course no one had the gall to say it out loud. They still had the desire to survive this 'training.'

Lan Jue waved at a group of workers standing nearby. They approached the students, bearing trays.

"Four for each of you. Rest them in the palms of your hands." Lan Jue commanded.

As the trays arrived before the students, they noticed they were filled with razor blades. No, they were scalpel heads, like those used for operations. They were about an inch long, and half an inch wide – and exceptionally sharp.

Chapter 246: Dancing Blades

The trays were heavy with surgical razors!

But no, that wasn't right. Scalpel blades were only sharp on one end. These looked painfully sharp on both sides.

Each student very carefully plucked four from the trays as the workers wandered by, then placed them in their palms. They didn't know what the Drillmaster had planned, but their hearts were full of foreboding.

Before long, every palm bore a set of razor blades. A worker with surplus blades approached Lan Jue.

The masked jewelry master snapped up two blades, pinching them between his thumbs and forefingers. He approached the students, hands high. "Two more each for Emperor pilots, and six more for Sovereigns."

Tang Mi, Tang Xiao and Geng Yang were given two more blades each, while Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan were given six more.

Lan Jue kept just the two.

"Watch carefully," he instructed, as his hands began to move.

Under the student's scrutiny, the razor blade began to dance along the back of Lan Jue's finger, flipping over and between them back and forth. The sharp inch of steel tumbled back and forth over his finger joints like it had a life of its own.

The sun was high over the outdoor field. With the sun high overhead, shining directly upon Lan Jue and his razor blades, it gave the onlookers a strange sense of beauty. They felt like they were watching a man playing with a friendly spirit, as the blade flashed occasionally catching the sun's rays.

However, no one was excited to watch. By now they expected nothing but terrible things from their demon Drillmaster.

Lan Jue meandered among the lines of students, still coaxing the razor blade along his fingers. His trek was slow and deliberate, giving everyone

ample time to see what he was doing.

His finger speed was fast, but very rhythmic. Despite the sharpness of the blade, no damage was done to Lan Jue's hands. The rise and fall of his fingers, and the flash of steel as it tumbled along them, was almost hypnotic.

"For the next hour, you will learn to control this blade as it runs over and between your fingers. The other drillmasters and I will be responsible for supervising you. Should anyone stop, or deviate from the method shown, you'll all be treated to a wonderful surprise. Begin."

Lan Jue returned to the front of the class. The razor blades were gone, and now an orb of roiling lightning crackled in his palm.

The sizzling sound it produced filled the air. It's cobalt blue, electric light cast stark shadows on the faces of the nearest students.

With the 'wonderful surprise' of this morning still fresh in their minds, the students didn't dare hesitate. They took a final, dismal look at the razors, then started.

Lan Jue never told them any tricks, never related any techniques. He'd just showed them the example.

These young pilots had all done similar finger exercises before, however their training methods had involved either crystal balls or small iron rods – never razor blades. Who used razor blades?

They proceeded carefully, with ginger and jittery movements.

Hua Li and Chu Cheng made a tour of the student lines, heading off in different directions. Chu Cheng wandered among them with his hand raised, a roiling ball of fire swirling within. The orb was alive with licking flames of red and orange, but the core of it was black as night. Looking at it too long, it felt like your soul was being drawn inside. Most unsettling of all, however, was the heat – or rather, the lack thereof. Instead of heat, the orb released a palpable, ominous chill.

None of the students knew what it was, or what it did, but the feeling it released was enough to frighten them. No one was willing to discover the

properties of this devil's fiery orb.

The morning's lesson was clear; the Prince of Devils demanded obedience, and none dare challenge that. Not after Tang Mi.

It took very little time for the first student to cut their hand. He picked it up where it fell, and continued.

Of course anyone who let their cadence slip, or who slowed even a little, was met with a streak of lightning, a lick of flame, or a blast of water.

It was a mistake to assume the water was the least terrible of the options. The moment that water touched them, it felt like their skin was simultaneous numb and itchy. It made controlling the blades harder, and thus made them more likely to suffer other punishments.

Fresh drops of blood began to trickle on to the dirt of the training ground. Fresh cuts and slices appeared with every passing second, whether boy or girls, making their hands slick with blood.

Still the grounds were silent as a grave. No one dared cry out, and no one dared stop. Tight-lipped, they trained.

Lan Jue made his way to Tan Lingyun, and stopped. He waved Wang Hongyuan over to join them.

The two of them were also sporting cuts, mostly due to the extra number of razor blades they bore. With five in each hand, it made the motions chaotic and uncoordinated.

"Watch carefully," he told them. He grabbed the ten razors from Tan Lingyun. Under his ministrations, the blades rolled harmlessly along his fingertips.

Tan Lingyun watched, the surprise on her face hidden by the mask, as the sharp bits of metal undulated in his hands. They flashed as they moved unceasingly along his fingers, over and under, over and under.

This time, as he demonstrated what he wanted, he lectured them on the proper techniques. They were responsible for ten razors, so their basic knowledge of the exercise wasn't going to be sufficient.

Tan Lingyun listened intently. It didn't appear as though the several cuts she'd suffered troubled her in the least. How much blood could the fingers have, anyway? This pain meant nothing. Nothing was more important than achieving God-ranked status.

The afternoon's lesson, despite the bloodshed, was significantly less terrifying than the morning. Relaxed wasn't the word, but something akin to it. But oh how the fingers suffered. Several of the students were struggling to control the blades, since their hands were coated in blood. They couldn't help but stop to wipe the blood on their flight suits, and continue.

An hour later, Lan Jue called for them to stop.

By the time the razors were collected, blood sloshed along the inside of the worker's trays. Another set of workers rushed ahead with prepared bandages to wrap up the students' hands.

Each of them had performed admirably, working hard and not trying to shirk the training. Their Disciplines were sealed, and they'd only get them back once the training was complete.

They were unpleasantly surprised to discover that the bandages were coated in some sort of medicine that made their wounds burn, but they suffered in silence until the discomfort was pushed to the background.

Several of the students took deep breaths of relief. It wasn't as bad as the morning routine, they told themselves. That satisfaction was short lived.

"Good, it looks like you've had enough time to digest. It's time to begin the afternoon class. Horse-stance, begin!"

Horse-stance began easy enough, but where it became a problem was as time stretched on. Things changed the longer you held the stance, and they couldn't even use their Discipline to help dispel the pain.

Their legs went from sore, to pained, to numb.

Five minutes later sweat was pouring from their foreheads. Soon the pain in their fingers was utterly forgotten.

Ten minutes later, and a few of the students were threatening to collapse.

They desperately wanted a break, to rest and give their tortured legs some respite. But before them stood Lan Jue, idly twirling a steel needle they were all so familiar with. There was no mistaking what would happen if they couldn't hold the stance.

Chapter 247: Extreme Excitation

After fifteen minutes, their bodies hardly knew how to handle the sensation. Once a person's limitations were reached, they had no more control over how it reacted.

People started to collapse.

The moment someone fell, a second steel needle was quickly jabbed in to their thorax. They would subsequently be thrown to the side, and blasted with an arc of electricity that caused them to seize up.

It was a stark visual that helped keep the others in place – none dared break rank, as they didn't want to be the next pin-cushion. There was a sense of hard determination hanging over the training field.

Eventually it was Tan Lingyun who was the last to fall. As before, she was not exempt from the punishment. Another steel rod jutted from her, as she twitched and jerked.

Errant arcs of golden electricity danced every which direction. The students didn't even have enough energy to scream or protest their treatment.

One after another the students came to. Up to their neck in boiling water...

It was almost an exact copy of their morning routine, but for the fact that lunch was replaced with dinner.

It was assumed, for the most part, that after dinner they would be given some respite. It was a false assumption, though, as after eating they simply went right back to the field and practiced with the razors again. Followed by horse stance. Which inevitably concluded with steel needles, lightning strikes and boiling water.

This time they didn't snap out of it. One by one they were plucked from the water like corpses and deposited in their beds. By the time their unconscious forms were finally given quarter, it was late in to the night.

Lan Jue, too, rested upon his bed in exhaustion. Hua Li stood at his back.

Soothing waves of power infused Lan Jue through Hua Li's hands, which were lightly pressed against his shoulders. The water element coursed through him like a cleansing rain.

Lan Jue had used about eighty percent of his energy reserves today, and that was after relying on the phylactery stone to help him recover. More than his power, though, he felt as though the vitality had been drained out of him.

From the outside it might have appeared easy – stab a kid, shock a kid and so forth – but in fact he had had to pay very close attention to every one of the students through the entire process. He was responsible for their well-being, and had to ensure the motivation they were using to improve their Disciplines didn't cause any permanent damage. He had to be ready – at a moment's notice – to spring in to action and protect them.

By the end of the day, he was physically and mentally exhausted.

Chu Cheng sat at his side, idly sipping a glass of brandy.

"I'm pretty sure every one of these kids are having very pleasant dreams of murdering you," he said. "Today was just as bad as what we experienced all those years ago. Heh, I'd love to see their faces if they knew just the medicines cost as much as an a-ranked power gem. I was impressed with them today, really. Good quality students. With sufficient time I think every one of them could be Sovereigns. A few of them even have a chance at God-ranked."

Hua Li chimed in. "A-Jue took a beating today as well. It aint so easy being the bad guy! It'd certainly be a surprise how much these methods take out of every body. But unfortunately they'll never know – it'd affect their improvement."

Chu Cheng nodded. "And for the next three days, the most important thing is that they stick to it. We'll see what happens then."

Hua Li smirked at his friend. "Without me here, you'd probably already have a few who couldn't hash it. Don't worry about them, with me here there won't be a problem."

Lan Jue opened his eyes, but didn't look at either of his companions. "Yeah, with A-Li here it's a big help. The stimulation we're giving here may not be as beneficial as the Fantascia Genetica decoction, but between A-Li and I the difference isn't that large."

With a shrug, Chu Cheng took another sip of brandy. "Suddenly I'm feeling like helping you isn't in our best interest. I'm from the North, and Hua Li's a Westerner!"

"Don't give me that," Lan Jue muttered, shooting his friend a disdainful glance. "You think I don't know you're trying to be all sneaky and steal my training regimen?"

Chu Cheng laughed. "What would be the point? I don't have your bioelectric Discipline, so the results would be sub-par. It'd have to be replaced with the North's specialty – merging man with machine."

Lan Jue shook his head. "I figured you had a plan, from the beginning. The East, the North, the West... in the end these internal disputes they bicker over don't mean a thing. I have no interest in any of that. My concern is the future, when we inevitably run in to things we never even knew we had to protect ourselves from. The survival of the human race is the only goal."

Chu Cheng's rarely encountered serious face met Lan Jue's assertions. "You're absolutely right. I verified it with the family last night. The second reconnaissance fleet we sent has vanished, and likely has encountered some trouble. We're assembling a third party now – this time a large scale sweep and clear, I'm told. We've even repositioned two bastions to face the last known location of the monster planets. We're ready, on emergency alert. We've also let the other two Alliances know."

Hua Li was in agreement. "I've also been monitoring the Poseidon group intelligence reports, and they confirm it as well. Everything's calm on the surface, but there's a lot happening under wraps. Arms production has ramped up, and the scuffles between the North and the East have died down. Now it's come down to the wire, and the decision-makers have finally decided to work together. Truth be told I'm taking notes

throughout this process as well, and plan to use them for my own family once this is done. Sorry A-Jue.”

Lan Jue simply shook his head. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. This whole process is the brainchild of the three of us, anyway. Besides, I’m only too anxious to spread this, and improve humanity’s chances as much as possible.”

“How long do you plan to continue at this pace,” Hua Li asked.

“Three days,” Lan Jue replied. “That should be about the limit to what they can bear. Any longer than that and I’m afraid there might be – unpredictable consequences.”

“You’re actually doing three days, eh?” Chu Cheng shivered. They’d originally only planned for one day of this sort of treatment.

Lan Jue explained. “I made the determination after watching them today. Their endurance is a lot better than I’d originally expected. Such being the case, we need to make sure they reach their limit. Now I say three days, but not everyone’s going to make it that far. We’ll need to watch every one of them very carefully, pay attention to their physical state. If we can break them all the way down, they’ll rise up that much quicker.”

Hua Li nodded. “It’ll certainly show us their willpower and potential. Those are the two basis for a person’s strength.”

Just then, Lan Jue’s communicator rang.

“Boss, Jin Tao’s up.”

“Good,” he replied, “send him here tomorrow morning. We’ll see how much of the decoction he managed to absorb, and what effect it’s had.”

Hua Li’s eyes flashed. “I’m very curious myself. Fantascia Genetica, your Eastern medicines, and our power combined on one subject. It’ll be very interesting to see where he ultimately ends up, and how quickly.”

The thought brought a grin to Lan Jue’s face. “I’m anxious as well. Anxious to see how this little psychopath reacts. Looks like we’ve got fifty-one students, now.”

Chapter 248: Enter Jin Tao

Jin Tao sat within the verti-car, looking out of place. It wasn't that he was unused to the car, of course. He was uncomfortable in his own skin.

For the last month he'd been tossing and turning, coming in and out of consciousness until finally waking up the night before. He still hadn't been able to shake that feeling, the sense of being somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

Everything that had happened since entering the Avenue has felt like a dream, every day stretching by like a year. It had been an eternity of pain, where his body struggled to absorb and persist against the poison of the Fantascia Genetica. He'd been ripped apart, and put back together.

He'd survived it mainly by virtue of his dogged willpower. He'd refused to let his body get the better of him. That wasn't to say the painful experience hadn't permanently burned itself in to his memory. When he finally came around, he understood that it hadn't been a nightmare.

Now it seemed the obvious, caught as he was in this fugue state it felt like time was flying by. The pain in his body was subsiding, replaced by strange sensations. He'd have flashes of cold, then searing heat. Sometimes his whole body would itch, and then that excruciating pain would come back. They would come in short-lived waves that tumbled over one another. It was like he was living in some strange illusion. He didn't feel at all like himself.

At last, when he'd been let out of the life support pod and his feet touched the ground again, he could almost feel the earth's vitality coursing up through his limbs. It was a sensation that was difficult to explain.

There were several things that were difficult to explain.

Not the least of these were the changes in his body. For starters, he was a good deal taller than he had been before taking the decoction. In the space of a month he seemed to have stretched at least two inches. His skinny frame had filled out. His muscles hadn't grown larger, necessarily,

but there was certainly more definition. He felt more... elastic, more malleable.

More than his looks, his personality had also undergone some changes – a normal reaction to the experiences and environment he'd been in for the last month. He'd grown up.

He unconsciously clenched his hands in to fists. His body, suddenly and ferociously, filled with wild power. It rose up from within him until it threatened to spill free, like a tsunami – a landslide, especially when compared with how limited his energy had been before. As his Discipline flooded him, threads of thin golden hair sprouted from his skin, and he stretched to over two meters. The dumb mutt from before released an aura of majesty.

Are these arms even mine? This power...

He allowed his newfound power to course through him for a good few minutes, before gradually allowing it to abate.

After awakening, he'd been subjected to a number of tests from Mika and Lin Guoguo. Though he'd been kept up most of the night from them, he didn't feel tired. But that discomfort persisted, from last night until this very moment. There was still so much he didn't understand.

Mika had told him all of this was normal. Any acquisition of power, especially so quickly, took time to get used to. He was told next he would be delivered to the Master, who would help him adapt to the changes and continue his training.

So it was that he found himself in the expensive verti-car, barreling through the skies towards who knows where. He had time to reflect upon his situation, and he was overjoyed.

He was ecstatic with his decision, one he knew to be right without question. Had it not been for the Professor, and his own hard work, he'd be nothing – just as he was before.

Now, though... now things were different. He had more power. He might need some time to feel comfortable in his own skin again, but the strength

that filled him was a beautiful sensation in and of itself.

By the time he reached the training field, it was early morning. At some point during the journey – Jin Tao couldn't remember – Mika and Lin Guoguo had donned a pair of silver masks. They walked with Jin Tao in to the training facility.

Someone was already there when they entered, and looked to have been waiting for some time. He led them from that point without any superfluous discussion.

The guide brought him to a group of familiar faces.

And of course he did. Wasn't that the hateful pig-boy, Tang Xiao? And his sister beside him. He really couldn't figure out how he could be so fat, while his little sister might as well have been a model.

There was also Zhou Qianlin, the school beauty, patron goddess of the broken hearted. Gu Yingying and Yan Ningya, talented female students in the mecha combat department, were also among them. Behind them, wasn't that her brother Yan Zhanchen? He and his sister – along with Tang Xiao and his sister, Tang Mi – were praised as the strongest fighting duo in the NEU. Any time they teamed up in DreamNet, they racked up impressive scores.

Gathered around were others, and all of them were equally talented members of his school's mecha combat division. Familiar figured, familiar names... they ran through his head as he looked them over.

It was strange though, he thought. Why did they all look so miserable?

Nearly every one of them was pale, with their faces pained and drawn. Some had black eyes, others looked like they'd been nearly drowned. A good number of them appeared to twitch uncontrollably, like they had the jitters.

What's wrong with all these blessed ones? He thought. They look like mashed potatoes.

He managed, eventually, to draw his eyes away from the pathetic looking bunch. He spied five more people, situated in front of them. Three of them

had golden masks, and two others hid behind silver, like Mika and Lin Guoguo.

Though they all wore masks, his eyes were instantly drawn to the man in the center. A nagging, familiar feeling tickled at the back of his mind.

They stopped a few feet away from Lan Jue. “Boss,” Mika said, “we’ve brought him for you.”

Lan Jue nodded, though when he spoke he addressed Jin Tao. “Fall in. First line, farthest to the left.”

The left flank... whether students or soldiers, he knew what that meant. Only the exemplary members got that spot. Right now that spot was occupied by Tang Xiao.

“As you command,” Jin Tao answered without hesitation, then trotted over. His heavy steps thudded loudly as he did so.

Lan Jue then turned his attention to the two girls. He spoke with Mika first. “You go ahead. Guoguo stays here.”

“Very well.” Mika’s answer was quick, but there was a hint of surprise. It was the first time seeing her boss this way, so cold and no-nonsense. But so manly! She desperately wanted to stay and see what was happening, but had no recourse but to obey.

Lin Guoguo veritably jumped in to action. Filled with excitement, she took up position behind him like the other silver-masked assistants.

Lan Jue faced the gathered students, and spoke to them next.

“I’m sure you all know our newest addition, Jin Tao. You know his reputation. However, starting today, he is one of you. Part of the team. He will train alongside you.”

Tang Xiao shot Jin Tao a sidelong glance. He wasn’t the least bit upset with the fact that the dumb-mutt had taken his position. Instead, his small, dark eyes were alive with sadistic glee over what his fellow Disciple was to experience.

Jin Tao was suddenly filled with a palpable sense of foreboding. He knew

the look in that fat fox's eye meant something nasty was on its way.

Lan Jue went on. "Now that we're all here, pushups. Begin. No one stops till I say so."

No one made a sound, no one dared complain. They fall to the ground and started their pushups as fast as they could.

After yesterday's torment, the students had only been given four hours of sleep before they were woken up. Whether physical or mental, they were all beat. In fact, they felt like they were on the verge of collapse. In the end, though, they persisted.

The most common style of pushups helped define and strengthen the muscles of the shoulders, chest and triceps, with some work being done to the upper back. It was a fine exercise for full-body training.

For these kids, with their Talent and physical fitness, three to five hundred was just getting started. The problem – or, rather, problems – were the needles jutting out of them from various directions. Everyone had at least three, and they locked their Discipline away. That, in addition to the exhaustion they felt from the harsh treatment of the training, meant they were on their last legs. Some started to struggle after only thirty-five.

Lan Jue's hand gripped a steel needle.

Again?! Is he kidding?!

The stabbing itself was a strangely stimulating. Not physically, but for the sense organs. But could this devil really be considering a fourth?

The pushups continued.

The only one taking it in stride was Jin Tao. He was in better shape than he'd ever had been in his entire life. He was a blur, and by the one-minute mark he was approaching two-hundred without being out of breath. Only now was he beginning to feel a little flush from the exertion. His power flooded him, gave him power, so much so that he was afraid he couldn't adequately control it.

Suddenly, there was a flash. Three quick bursts of... something. Jin Tao felt his body seize. Three shiny new needles sprouted from his back.

He remained there, at the high point of a push, frozen and flabbergasted. An Jue's voice wafted towards him from behind. "Jin Tao is late, by an entire day. What you all experienced yesterday, he must endure today – and more, so that he can catch up." As he spoke, a golden bolt of electricity struck Jin Tao. The young man had been in the process of rising to his feet, having shaken off the initial jabs. Now he remained still as a sculpture.

People are all the same; they want others to experience their pain, to exceed it. There was a sick, shadenfreude sense of comfort in it.

Seeing Jin Tao a victim of the devil's lightning, and seeing him suffer the three needles as they had, immediately brought some solace to the beleaguered students. Suddenly the pushups didn't seem so bad.

Though they were operating on four hours of sleep, they didn't feel weakened from it. They picked up speed, but none seemed to realize an important fact; no one cared how many they did. It wouldn't make their future troubles any less terrifying.

It wasn't long before the fourth needle was added to the third, and the boiling medicine water was reintroduced, for everyone. Jin Tao suffered the same fate, but no matter what Lan Jue threw at him, he endured.

That's why one of the golden-masked monsters interrupted his steam bath with a fireball to the face.

Chapter 249: Withdrawn

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. Well, For Lan Jue, Chu Cheng and Hua Li at least. For the talented students of the NEU, it may as well have been three years. They had no words for the torment they'd endured, and the only thing stopping them from collapsing in to a broken heap was the last vestiges of their spirit.

Their spirit was never exhausted. This was not entirely of their own making, however. Every time they'd see the new assistant teacher – the one in the silver mask, surrounded by golden light – they would feel soothed and emotionally renewed by her presence. Her golden light was like an infusion of courage and power, giving them the will to push on.

There were drawbacks, though, for while the new woman's powers empowered them, it also heightened their sense. It made everything they went through during the training that much more excruciating.

The students learned that the only way to avoid punishment and pain, was to never allow their willpower to flag. Otherwise, it a vicious cycle of emotional torment awaited them. Having their spirit refreshed inevitably meant their future tribulations became a hundred percent more tragic.

So for them, the sentiment was different; At long last, three days limped passed.

Each one of the students were the not-so-proud owners of several more needles, some with as many as nine. They were beginning to look like they had some sort of genetic similarity with hedgehogs.

'On the brink' was certainly the best way to describe these poor souls. Even though the bulk of their torturous experience had been psychological, they were still on their last legs. Breathing came difficult, and long ago the numbness in their bodies had them wondering if they were even still alive.

Early morning on the fourth day, they gathered in the training grounds, arranged in lines before the Prince of Devils. They were so beaten, so broken that they hadn't even had the energy for food.

Luckily, due to the careful ministrations of the masked teachers, no one had encountered any long-lasting problems or injuries.

In Lan Jue's hand was a tablet, with the names of every student and how often they'd had to be healed by Lin Guoguo's psychic mending. There was also detailed reports on their physical and psychological well-being. Some of them, he noted, had never needed Guoguo's attention.

There were certainly some exemplary examples among them. Many of the female participants really displayed the toughness of their Talent.

First among them was Tan Lingyun, though the light of stubborn indignation in her eyes – the fire of her spirit – was exhausted. Still, she stood straight and tall.

Zhou Qianlin, Tang Mi, Gu Yingying and Yan Ningya where the four others. None of them had required Guoguo's services. Though they were all bone-tired, each of them bore an iron will.

Qianlin's expression was hard, tough, though her eyes were calm. Tang Mi's face was obstinate, almost arrogant. Gu Yingying had threatened to give out several times, however each time she approached the red line she'd somehow manage to pull through. Yan Ningya appeared similar to Tang Mi. The furtive glances she shot towards the long-legged beauty spoke to a hidden rivalry.

Yan Ningya wasn't part of the illustrious 'school beauty' sect, but was nonetheless a recognized hottie in the eyes of NEU's gentlemen students. Her problem came when she and her brother had entered school. Ever since then, the two were ever in competition with the 'great fighting duo' of Tang Xiao and Tang Mi. It was a seething rivalry, that never gave them any rest.

One's looks were determined by their parents, and was not something so easily changed without the help of plastic surgery. There was too much pride in Yan Ningya for that, so if she couldn't compete with Tang Mi in looks, it would have to be through ability. She harbored a desperate desire to surpass Tang Mi, and it was this goal that had given her the strength to push on.

Her brother, Yan Zhanchen, lacked the mental fortitude of his sister, but his heroic appearance ensured he was enshrined as top three of the most desired male students. It had imbued him with a rather serious superiority complex – at least, until Tang Xiao had so handily showed everyone up during the Lir competition. Since then his arrogance had diminished, somewhat. Strength was what a pilot relied on, he realized, not looks.

If Tang Xiao could endure against this inhuman treatment, he thought, why then couldn't he? The determination drove him.

But surviving was about all they could manage. There was one more who not only managed to maintain, but thrive – like they enjoyed it.

Ever since the very onset, when he'd been stabbed with the needle and struck by lightning, Jin Tao was in heaven. The discomfort he'd originally felt in his body was beginning to subside. With every needle that stunted his Discipline, he could feel his body reacting. Nothing, however, compared to what he'd gone through with the Genetica.

Part of that was due to the fact that he'd experienced it before, he knew what to expect. He survived once, what could any of this do to him? He was also keenly aware that whether it was the drugs, the lightning or something else, all of it was having a direct and positive effect on his body. One's strength was contingent on familiarity, and adapting to one's own power. There was certainly pain and discomfort, but it was all taken with joy since it meant the result would be improvement. It got to the point where Lan Jue even had to treat him harsher than the others.

The secret etiquette teacher swept his eyes across the gathered pilots. As he made eye contact with them, each unconsciously let their eyes drop to the floor. All but Jin Tao, whose eyes were alive with a manic enthusiasm that would frighten a normal man, and Tan Lingyun who's stubborn refusal to back down matched the young mutt's.

Wang Hongyuan seemed discombobulated. He certainly wanted to improve his strength, but he didn't have the strength of spirit Tan Lingyun possessed. What spurred him on was his position as an Assistant teacher. It kept him from needing Guoguo's healing aura.

Lan Jue walked slowly to stand before the Savage Goddess. “Very good!” The words were soft, but surprised Tan Lingyun like a slap to the face. The masked drillmaster even extended a hand and patted her shoulder. When he drew back, he’d taken a needle from her shoulder with him. He placed it in her hand, and she was surprised to discover not a drop of blood on it.

She grunted, which from her invariably sounded like a disgruntled snort. Her body trembled, and for the space of an instant she felt a though she might fall over. But she didn’t, and instead a comforting warmth spread from her shoulder until it felt like it filled her up. She felt as though every single cell in her body was injected with vitality, and it was a sensation she couldn’t put in to words. All the pain and exhaustion she felt melted away.

Next was Wang Hongyuan, then the students. Each one of them felt something similar to the Savage Goddess, and it nearly put them in a stupor.

For the last three days they’d existed in a living hell. All they’d known was pain and torment, and had forgotten that such a pleasing sensation even existed. At first they suspected it was some trick or illusion, but gradually came around to the idea that life wasn’t an abyss of suffering. Their bodies were instantly refreshed, renewed, and even their mental state was beginning to return to normal – simply with the removal of these needles. It was a sensation that defied explanation. A few of the students openly wept.

By the time Lan Jue’s circuit was finished, they were all sporting one less needle.

“Everyone, drop and give me push-ups. Five hundred. Then we’re running three thousand meters around the training field. This’ll be this morning’s warm-up.” Lan Jue delivered his instructions, then turned and left. Today he would be returning to school, since he had his etiquette classes to take care of. He also needed to visit Skyfire Avenue, so that he could help prepare for the Pontiff and Satan’s upcoming visit.

The five-finger push-ups were designed so that only the five fingers of each hand supported the weight of the entire body. It was excellent for

hand and arm strength. Before the needle had been removed, each of them probably would have fainted at the prospect of push-ups and running. Now, though, their body's energies were a torrent, and they felt the need to let it all out.

Lan Jue left, taking Lin Guoguo with him and leaving Hua Li and Chu Cheng behind to handle the pilot's training. He didn't want them to get too comfortable – this type of physical training had to be maintained.

“Hey boss, is everything alright?” Lin Guoguo shot a glance towards Lan Jue as she drove the verti-car. He was planted in the passenger's side, rubbing his face.

“I'm fine,” he answered. “My face just feels a little stiff, hiding behind that mask for days. I need a little bit of rest.”

Guoguo's pretty figure trembled. “Too scary, boss. How did you even come up with a training regimen this inhuman? While I was giving them healing, some of them looked like they'd been dredged up from the bottom of hell.”

Lan Jue chuckled darkly. “You think this is the bottom of hell? In my younger days I suffered through ten times worse. More than a human should ever have to endure. But, if you want power, how can there be no suffering? Besides, they've only just begun. This whole thing has been to give them a solid enough foundation to continue. They've still got nightmares yet to face.”

Guoguo shook her head. “More! I'll tell you boss, I'm ecstatic I'm not part of this training course. Never in a million years.”

Lan Jue smirked at her trepidation. “How could I ever make my Guoguo suffer such things. Your Talent is already at the ninth rank, so this sort of stimulation wouldn't have any benefit. It really only works for those of lesser rank, so unfortunately your future improvement is entirely dependent on your own cultivation and knowledge.”

Lin Guoguo let out an audible sigh of relief, then chortled goofily. “I got me a good boss.”

Lan Jue made Skyfire Avenue his first stop, going directly to the Jewelry store on the Avenue's surface. There, Xiuxiu and Ke'er were waiting. When they saw their boss, they were both quite pleased.

Lan Jue settled on the stool situated behind the counter, and took a sip of the warm water Xiuxiu had handed him. The Jewelry Master let out a long, tired sigh.

Chapter 250: Candidates

“One’s own home is always the most comfortable! Minding my own business when that old fox, Wu Junyi, snaps me up for this training. Just absolutely screwing with me.” The stream of complaints tumbled from Lan Jue in groans. Ke’er and Xiuxiu were surprised by the vocal displeasure. It was the first time they’d seen him like this.

Lin Guoguo humphed at him. “It looked to me like you were enjoying yourself out there, boss! It’s not as bad as you say.”

“It’s so dull,” he whined. “It’s so much nicer here with you girls. A leisurely life is a comfortable life. Anyway, has there been any more news about the castles?”

Xiuxiu shook her head. “Nothing. The date they’re arriving hasn’t changed, but the Barber did come by looking for you. He said he had something he wanted to discuss. The Driver came by as well, looking for a drinking partner. Strangely, we haven’t heard from either the Wine Master or the Gourmet in some time.”

“Got it. Do me a favor and set a time for tonight with the Driver. Then get in contact with the Barber and see if he’s in his shop. If he is, I’ll head over and see what he has to say. Ahh, I really am the absentee councilman aren’t I. Responsible for all this welcome party business and haven’t once gotten involved.”

Ke’er stuck out her bottom lip. “You’ve always been absent, boss, you know that.”

“Ehm...” Lan Jue’s easy smile froze on his face. After a quick moment, he recovered and snickered sheepishly. “You guys are too good at your jobs, that’s why. With you all so good at your jobs, there’s no opportunity for me to boss anybody around. So what’s the point of having me here?”

Xiuxiu quickly made contact with the gentlemen her boss had inquired over. “Boss, the Driver will come by and meet you tonight. He said he’d like to take you to dinner. As for the Barber, he says he’s in his shop. You can go find him there.”

“Good.”

Leaving Zeus’ Jewelry Shop, Lan Jue’s heart was full of helplessness. When did my life get so fast paced, he complained to himself. Never enough hours in the day.

Lan Jue shook his head, and laughed at himself as he made his way to the Barber’s shop.

ζ

Redbud Sculptury!

The white storefront was attractive, with purple letters on the top to display its name.

This was the Barber’s shop, where he not only did hairdressing but also make-up. Lan Jue faintly recalled that many famed and important people would come to the high-priced Barber for a ‘treatment.’ Unfortunately, they were not members of the Avenue, and so were turned away.

The Barber was busy with a client when the Jewelry Master arrived. Much to Lan Jue’s surprise, his client was none other than the Beautician.

The Beautician’s eyes followed Lan Jue as she followed his entrance in the mirror situated before her. She flashed him a sweet smile. Presumably, she’d forgotten about the rage-inducing beating she and her colleague had received so long ago.

Lan Jue waved at her in greeting. He didn’t trouble the Barber while he was working, and instead took up position upon a nearby sofa. Of course, the Barber was aware of his arrival.

“The busy bee deigns to make an appearance. Such a rarity to see you out and about! So how can I help you today; a little cut and blow, perm, make-up?”

Lan Jue’s answer was delivered through a chuckle. “Unfortunately I don’t have the time. I have something in the afternoon that needs attending. What is being prepared for the big visit? Is there anything I can do to help?”

At first he didn't answer. The snip snip snip of his scissors filled the air as he finished off his work on the Beautician. Once the errant hairs and split ends were dealt with, he turned to Lan Jue.

"We're all aware of why the two castles are coming all the way out here. When they come, it won't only be the Wine Master but also the Clairvoyant who greets them. I'm aware of the history between the Pontiff and yourself... this is a matter that affects the whole of Skyfire Avenue. You mustn't be impetuous."

Lan Jue nodded indifferently. "Alright."

The Barber went on. "I've already done most of the preparation work. The actual reception is being handled by authorities with the Eastern Alliance. We need only wait here for them to arrive. The representatives of the Castle and Tower have been given lodgings in either the Skyfire Museum, or the Gothic Winery. We're asking that you remain in the Museum during this time.

Excitement flashed through Lan Jue's eyes. "Is that where Satan's party will be staying?"

The Barber nodded.

"Very well," Lan Jue said without pausing for thought.

"We'll need to make sure we put this opportunity to good use," the Barber instructed. "We have to face what comes, confront it. And we have their high technology to contend with. So far, the plan is to have five sparring competitions. Four will be one-on-one, and the final fight will be two groups of five. We need you to participate in at least two. Is this agreeable?"

Lan Jue nodded. "Sign me up for the one-on-one, and the group fight. So other than us here, who else is participating?"

"The Driver is back, and he took the initiative to join the group battle." The Barber watched Lan Jue closely as he spoke. "We haven't decided on the final one, yet. As for the one-on-ones, we're also short-staffed. The Beautician and I won't be participating in that exchange."

Lan Jue nodded. He knew their combat abilities clearly, from the sparring exchange they had had. The Beautician was an expert in battlefield control, while the Barber was specialized in precise strikes. Together, they were a frightening team, but individually they weren't up to snuff. As ninth-ranked first degree and second degree respectfully, fighting alone against the best the West had to offer was a gamble.

Of course the attending and resident Paragons would not be participating. With both Satan and the Pontiff in attendance, the entire exchange would have to be handled with special considerations. The Fallen Angel Lucifer, and the Archangel Metatron would be here, terrifying and contentious rivals.

"You're telling me I'm the only one who's signed up for the one-on-one fights?" Lan Jue balked.

"It's not that bad," the Barber assured. "The Driver said he'd also double-up. We're still missing three."

Lan Jue looked at him helplessly. "Do you think we'd be able to convince the Wine Master to participate?"

"And appear that incompetent? I have faith you'll find an answer," the Barber replied.

The Jewelry Master sighed at the prospect. "Alright, I'll think on it. I'll find some people for the job once I've come up with something." Already, a few faces were swimming through his mind.

The Driver's abilities were without question. Lan Jue was very familiar with his Talent. He shouldn't have any trouble participating in two fights.

The missing member of their five-man team would also be a problem. With the Barber and Beautician among them, they'd need someone with pretty significant power to join in.

As for the individual battles, he'd also need a powerful candidate.

"Leave the selection process up to me," he said. "And the rest will be your responsibility." As Lan Jue made his determination, he rose to his feet.

They watched him leave. The Beautician – up until now silent as a mouse – suddenly let out a gentle laugh. “You’re so lazy. Guess, though... who do you think he’ll choose?”

The Barber chortled. “How can I know? The Avenue is too loosely organized. We’re not even sure of how powerful our own council members are, much less anyone else. Let the Jewelry Master handle this. After all, he’s had significant contact with almost all of the councilors, so he might know. Maybe he’ll surprise us.”

This caused the Beautician to shrug a lithe shoulder. “I’m not so sure. He knows a few, perhaps, but only them. The Gourmet, the Seamstress, the Coffee Master, the Wine Master... who else?”

“At least the Mechanist and Accountant,” he responded.

The Beautician frowned prettily. “The Mechanist, that meat-head, he hardly counts. The Accountant is worse still. None of them are council members. As for the Gourmet, I heard he’s never lifted a finger in violence, the whole time he’s been part of the Avenue. How he even got a spot on the council, I can’t imagine. Other than cooking food, he doesn’t seem to be involved in anything else. He does have an excellent relationship with the Wine Master, but who knows his strength.”

“Well, it’s no longer any concern of ours,” the Barber assured. “The Wine Master has said that it’ll be fine leaving it in the hands of the Jewelry Master. A pleasant surprise, I thought.”

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Leaving the Redbud Sculptury, Lan Jue stood on the side of the Avenue proper. He appeared to be lost in thought, but after a moment began walking.

He had a habit; when there were things to do, it was best to handle them quickly. There was no point in dragging one’s heels. Since he’d agreed to handle it, what better time was there than the present?

ζ

The Gourmet’s Cabin.

“I’m hungry.” Lan Jue plopped himself before the Gourmet’s prized table and threw his feet on to it. He regarded the Gourmet with a lopsided smile.

If his students could see him now, their Prince of Devils so relaxed and accessible, it’d probably blow their minds.

The gourmet, sitting opposite him, stared blankly for a moment. He reached out, and shoved a plate of soda crackers towards his guest.

“I had no plans to cook this afternoon.”

Lan Jue sighed. “So I see. How about I cook you a meal, then?”

“You. Cook. For me?” The Gourmet just looked at him in shock.

Lan Jue nodded emphatically. Without any further argument, he stood and made his way towards the kitchen situated in the back of the Gourmet’s small shop.

The Gourmet looked as though he wanted to protest, but ultimately kept his mouth shut.

Before long, a hissing sound emerged from the kitchen. It was followed by a gust of aromatic steam, as though the ventilation system in the kitchen simply couldn’t contain it all.

There was a fresh, pleasant scent that followed. The steam caused him to sneeze, but his eyes lit up all the same. He replaced the soda biscuit in his hand upon the small tray before him. He leaned back against the back of his chair and waited, a small smile on his face.

Soon Lan Jue reappeared. He set the table with a trivet and a bowl of chili sauce. Then he placed the bowl before his friend.

The noodles within the steaming pot swam in boiled water and bean sprouts, with a dollop of chili sauce on top. The pungent scent quickly filled the whole room.

Lan Jue handed a pair of chopsticks to the Gourmet. He kept a pair for himself and, without any further courtesy, began stuffing his face.

Chapter 251: The Pauper

“You know my problem,” the Gourmet said. “If it isn’t delicious, I won’t eat it. I’d rather starve.”

“Oh I know,” Lan Jue answered indifferently. “But I also know, that noodles are your favorite. It’s something we have in common. Go on, give it a try.”

The Gourmet chuckled, then in order to appease his guest began to eat. He recognized all the ingredients, especially the spices which were his favorites. He nodded in appreciation, then ate some more.

It was a mistake to assume cooking chili oil was an easy process. In reality, the degree and duration of heat employed while preparing it was integral. It had to be precise, but it appeared Lan Jue had a natural talent for it.

The dish was a smattering of oil over noodles, drenched in vinegar. It was simple, direct, and unparalleled.

After a few minutes of hearty slurps, the contents of the two large bowls was gone. Lan Jue heaved a contented sigh, wiped his mouth, and sunk further in to his chair.

“As ever, your spices make the dish. So what do you think, my craftsmanship isn’t bad, eh?”

The Gourmet curled his lips. “You managed, after a fashion. But I have this young guy here who shows up out of the blue, and offers to make me a meal. It isn’t impossible to imagine you have some ulterior motive. Speak, what do you need.”

Lan Jue chuckled at the crotchety old man. “As I’m sure you’re aware, soon the Pontiff’s Castle and the Dark Tower will be visiting Skyfire Avenue. There will be talks and spars and group battles. Unfortunately, we’re missing a few participants; one for the five on five group fight, and three for the one-on-one battles. Which would you like to participate in?”

The Gourmet looked at him, stupefied. He spoke softly in response. “My

reward is a bowl of noodles?”

Lan Jue shrugged. “What else do you want?”

He thought for a moment, then said, “I recall the Wine Master mentioning once a bottle in his possession. A vintage from the great wine masters from the Former Era, called Richebourg.”

Lan Jue’s eyes nearly popped from his skull. “My dear Gourmet, you’re asking for my life here. That’s more precious to the Wine Master than his own eyes.”

The Gourmet shrugged. “I guess you don’t want to try it.”

“Not too hasty,” Lan Jue said with a wry smile. “How could I not?”

“When pairing for a meal, go all out,” the Gourmet said sagely. “As for wines, have you had anything that could be its equal? I’m fairly certain even the Wine Master hasn’t tried it. I reckon that means we have a chance.”

Lan Jue’s face twitched. “You aren’t going to ask me to steal it, are you?”

The Gourmet chortled. “Of course not. We’re cultured, distinguished gentlemen. Just wait for me to puzzle out a solution, and help me execute the plan when it’s ready. I swear it won’t end with the Wine Master beating you to death.”

“Yeah... never mind, I’ll find someone else.” Lan Jue vehemently shook his head.

Taking from the Cosmagus was like snatching food from the mouth of a tiger – he wasn’t that stupid. What the Gourmet was asking was a death wish!

Suddenly, Lan Jue felt his whole body go cold. The Gourmet’s small cabin became dark as oil, and a chilling aura permeated from every direction. It was like they were suddenly transported to another world.

Lan Jue backed away a step.

Everything around them had gone black. Only the Gourmet remained, seated calmly on the other end of the table. However, the jovial man he’d

known for so long was gone – his mood had changed drastically.

“When?” Lan Jue asked, almost without thinking.

“When you get back,” the Gourmet answered, his voice soft and pleasant.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh, then shot his compatriot a thumbs-up. “Alright, I’ll do it.”

Everything around them turned to normal. The Gourmet was seated opposite the table like nothing had happened, his empty bowl situated in front. The scent of spice still hung in the air. But even though the surroundings were back to normal, Lan Jue could see something had changed in the Gourmet’s eyes.

“I’m off,” the Jewelry Master said, rising to his feet.

“I’ll join your five-man team,” the Gourmet said, quietly. “Find someone else for the singles.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Any recommendations?”

The Gourmet nodded. “The Pauper, and the Pharmacist. The rest are up to you.”

“Got it.” Lan Jue nodded his farewells, then left the Gourmet’s small home.

Once outside, he wandered down the street with an excited sparkle to his eyes and a knowing smile on his lips.

The two castles... bring it on!

The group battle was already finished, and the single fights were short only two.

The Pauper... is it that guy? He isn’t a committee member...

After taking the elevator to the Underground, Lan Jue let his intuition guide him down the street. After a few minutes of walking, he found his target.

It was difficult to determine his age, due to the dirt and grime. Tendrils

of oily and disheveled hair hung over a dirty face. He was covered by an overcoat so filthy, the last time it was washed must have been the former era. It was only an overcoat by generous description, anyway, as it appeared to be mostly patches covered by more patches. The Pauper rested lazily against the corner of a wall, looking half asleep.

Were it not for the Gourmet's recommendation, Lan Jue would never have considered this man. He approached the poor man and stopped a short distance apart.

The Pauper's eyes were closed, but as Lan Jue approached his hand flashed out. Lan Jue reacted by snatching it out of the air.

It was a tarnished metal plate. Words were scrawled across it: Permit to Panhandle. Underneath was the seal of the Skyfire Avenue standing committee.

The Pauper waved a hand at Lan Jue, as though shooing away a fly.

Lan Jue answered with a soft smile. "I'm not with the enforcement team," he said, "you don't need to show this to me." He threw the plate back.

The Pauper caught it effortlessly, then opened his eyes.

His eyes bore the same lackadaisical sense as the rest of him, to where his dark eyes almost seemed dim. He sized the young Jewelry Master up once or twice, then shut his eyes again.

"The Gourmet said I should come find you. There's something I was hoping to get your help with." Lan Jue said.

At mention of the Gourmet, the Pauper opened his eyes once again. This time, though, they were clear as day.

He swallowed a mouthful of saliva. "Is he inviting me to eat?" The Pauper's voice was exceedingly pleasing to the ear; deep, sincere, masculine.

"Whether or not he plans to, I can't say." Lan Jue shrugged. "But he did ask me to find you, so I'm sure he has his reasons."

The Pauper's mouth curled in to a frown. "What reason could that be, hm? To bother me, whatever it is. I'm not going. No food, no drink, no Pauper. Three years the beggar, not once the king – heard the expression? I need sleep, so leave me in peace. Stop bothering me."

"The Gourmet told me the Wine Master has a particularly excellent vintage on offer – a Richebourg," Lan Jue mentioned off-hand.

This time the Pauper's eyes glittered, like sunlight on a snowy bank. "Really? That stingy old goat has one squirreled away? How come I've never heard this?"

"If I'd have let know, I imagine the ensuing chaos could be heard from Planet Luo. His whole cellar is theft-proof." The soft voice came from behind Lan Jue, and he didn't have to turn his head to know the Gourmet had made a personal appearance.

"Can you give us a bit? Just a sip? With that penny-pincher, who knows how long he's had this fine wine locked away." The Pauper complained.

The Gourmet responded in placating tones. "If I distract him, would you be able to find a way?"

The Pauper's eyes twinkled. "If I had an hour. Could you manage that?"

The Gourmet nodded. "Done."

The Pauper replied with a hungry grin. "What are we having with it?"

"Snowflake beef and white truffles," the gourmet answered. "Along with pan-seared blue lobster."

The Pauper swallowed once again. "It's a deal. When is it happening?"

"When you've finished your other responsibilities," the Gourmet said. He looked pointedly at Lan Jue.

Lan Jue took his cue and explained. "The Pontiff's Castle and Satan's Fortress are coming for a sort of exchange. We're missing some people for the one-on-one battles, and we were hoping to getting you involved."

The Pauper's brow furrowed, but he answered positively. "Fine."

Lan Jue nodded with a smile, and the Gourmet simply left with the business complete.

The Pauper watched him go with a piteous expression on his grimy face. “Can we throw in another boiled lobster? It’s been so long since I’ve eaten anything with a decent flavor...”

“Clean yourself up and I’ll boil a second,” he said, without looking back.

The Pauper nodded. “Alright,” he said with sincerity. “Wait for my news.”

Lan Jue caught up to the Gourmet. “I’ve never heard of this Pauper before.”

The Gourmet laughed softly. “He’s an interesting character. He used to be an incredible talent, then one day something happened that altered his mind. Some sort of stimulus. He’s been a beggar here ever since, for twenty years. He was here even before I. Other than food and drink, he is interested in nothing.”

“I tried to figure out his abilities, but I couldn’t find a way to ascertain how powerful eh is,” Lan Jue said.

At this, the Gourmet smiled. “If the Archangel Metatron should make an appearance, it would be a good idea to send the Pauper out to greet him.”

“Alright.” Lan Jue was shocked at the revelation. Metatron was on the very cusp of being a Paragon – and the Gourmet was telling him the Pauper was his match?

“Some things defy logical explanation,” the Gourmet said with a grin.

“I guess the Pharmacist is next on my list,” Lan Jue said.

The Gourmet replied. “This time I won’t go with you. Whatever price you offer him, I’m sure the council will pay.”

“Alright.”

The Gourmet went off on his own, leaving Lan Jue behind in the Underground. He walked down the Avenue until arriving before a particularly antiquated building.

It was built in the ancient Chinese style, simple and pleasing to the eye, but with a classical atmosphere. A horizontal, inscribed board bore the name in golden print: Hall of Supreme Harmony [1]

In all the Avenue, this store ranked fifth among the area's impressive architectural achievements. It was almost as large as the Skyfire Museum.

People walked in and out of the hall in an endless stream. Even though the overall tourism to the Avenue had slowed recently, it didn't appear to have any negative effect on the hall's patronage.

No sooner had Lan Jue entered the shop, then a young man in clerk attire approached. He greeted him respectfully. "Jewelry Master, you're here? Please, come in." As he spoke, the clerk stepped aside and motioned for Lan Jue to enter with a sweep of his arm.

Lan Jue nodded and moved further in.

The interior of the hall was even more in tune with the classical style than its façade. It was all red wood, cool stone and antique ornaments gathered together to create a truly unique atmosphere. Walking through the store was like being transported back to ancient China.

*

1. Named after the largest hall in the Forbidden City.

Chapter 252: The Pharmacist

With the young associate's guidance, Lan Jue crossed a cross over a small lake and traversed a lengthy corridor.

Each step of the way was accompanied by the quiet, peaceful sounds of a guqin [1]. The hallway itself ended in an octagonal pavilion, which was host to a woman. She sat behind a square table, upon which rested the ancient Chinese instrument he'd heard while approaching. She played it slowly, her long and delicate fingers dancing over the silken strings like flowing water. [2]

One corner of the table bore a censer, with a single joss stick poking free. Its pleasing aroma filled the area, as tendrils of fragrant smoke curled through the air.

The woman looked to be in her twenties, garbed in a long purple dress. Her dark hair was held up in a bun by a jade hairpin, keeping it up and away from her bright and pale face. She was pretty as a picture, an image of ancient Chinese culture and refinement. The music, the smell, the outfit... it certainly made an impression.

Once they reached the pavilion, the assistant stopped in his tracks. He turned, and once more indicated for Lan Jue to enter. The Jewelry Master did so, and waited with a look of silent appreciation as he listened to the young woman continue her song.

When she eventually did finish, the final pleasing notes hung in the air like a memory. Resting her delicate hands on the strings, she looked up to regard Lan Jue. With a small, gentle smile, she spoke. "It's been quite a while, Jewelry Master. How have tings been? Is there a problem with my medicines you've come to discuss?"

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly. "A joke, certainly. If our Pharmacist's medicines are problematic, then there are no decent pharmaceuticals in the whole of the Eastern Alliance. Expensive, perhaps, but nothing can be said with regards to quality."

The Pharmacist watched him carefully. "I'll admit, I am curious as to

why you might require so much high-class medicine. Are we training an army?”

“Lan Jue offered a lopsided smirk. “It’s a secret.”

The Pharmacist indicated the stone stool by the table. Lan Jue approached, and sat. She placed an elbow on the table, and supported her head in her palm.

“You didn’t bring your contingent of girls this time? A solo visit today – it makes me think you aren’t here for pleasant conversation.”

Their exchange was temporarily halted as a young girl – dressed similarly in old-style garments – arrived with a couple glasses of tea. The contents were a thin green tea, and as they each took a sip of the refreshing brew it was like a cleansing wash.

Lan Jue took a second tentative sip. “Excellent tea. You certainly know how to enjoy life.”

The Pharmacist smiled prettily. “Do I? You are daily surrounded by four grand beauties.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “They’re friends... more like sisters.”

The Pharmacist’s lips curled in to a pout. “Men. Such duplicitous creatures. You think I don’t notice the look in their eyes when these young women speak about you? I know what I see.”

Lan Jue’s face twitched ever so slightly. He wanted to say something to the contrary, but chose instead to refrain.

“What do you want, no more beating around the bush.” The Pharmacist set her teacup upon the small table and stared at Lan Jue.

He complied. “The West’s two great Adept organizations are coming, and we’re going to celebrate their arrival with a friendly competition. A team battle, and four single combat bouts. We’re still missing a single challenger for the one-on-one fights.”

The Pharmacist’s laugh was as pleasing to the ear as her guqin. “Alright. Things have been feeling stuffy as of late. Let’s say... an s-ranked

gemstone, and I'll throw my hat in the literal ring."

Lan Jue snorted with bitter mirth. "Of all those on Skyfire Avenue, you're probably the wealthiest. What do you need all of this for?"

"To enjoy life!" she said, matter-of-factly. "No one to cause me pain, no one to live me, just me and my work. Hoarding for my funeral, one does suppose. If the mighty Skyfire council should agree with my payment, I'll participate. Otherwise I suppose there's nothing to be done for it – you can find someone more qualified." The pleasant smile on her face was gone, replaced with a frigid expression and an equally chilly tone.

This woman, he thought – he was a visitor sharing tea, and she so suddenly had become hostile. "Fine. I'll find someone else." A loose organization like theirs, even if they had those kinds of resources, wouldn't pay so rich a price.

"Stop." The Pharmacist called out as Lan Jue rose.

"Hm?" The Jewelry Master just looked at her.

"If you won't give an s-ranked gemstone, that's fine," she began. "You can do me a favor instead."

Lan Jue regarded her, surprise evident on his face. "You have money, you have power... what else is there that you can't handle on your own? Much less that I can deal with."

At this, the Pharmacist expression grew... strange. It changed quickly from one of harshness and displeasure, to soft and inviting.

"Only a man can do what I need. I can't do it alone."

Lan Jue's eyes widened as he took a tentative step backwards. "I'm afraid I'm not for sale for your entertainment!"

"Idiot!" A malicious lit flashed through the Pharmacist's pretty eyes. She picked up the tea cup she'd relinquished, only to viciously throw it at Lan Jue's head.

Lan Jue, out of breath, laughed sheepishly. His hand shot out and grabbed the cup from midair. Not a drop was spilled.

“What then, speak.” He said.

Suddenly, there was a hesitation in the way the Pharmacist held herself. She rose to her feet as she continued. “Come with me.”

She lead the Jewelry Master along the corridor, the opposite way from which he’d approached. A building loomed at the end of their trek.

Lan Jue watched her incredible figure as they walked. Narrow hips swelled in to a pert and firm backside that swayed from side to side. By any metric, she was quite the woman. And yet Lan Jue was not drawn in by her allure. He stared calmly ahead, and appeared to have no urge to look her over. He didn’t want to be indecent!

Further, the words of the Wine Master rang through his mind. They were warnings and things of note, that were revealed to him when he’d first arrived at the Avenue and was undergoing his tests. Among those important bits of information was one concerning this very Pharmacist.

Even in a loose organization like the Avenue, the Pharmacist was a special case. She was not a council member, but held more authority than any junior member.

Do not provoke her, the Wine Master had warned. If he did, no one would be able to help him.

Lan Jue only knew that she was more powerful than him – maybe ninth-ranked eighth-degree... maybe ninth-degree, he couldn’t say. Whatever the case, she was strong.

Certainly, this was the reason the Gourmet had suggested the Pharmacist in the first place. She was definitely a powerful enough Adept for what they needed.

The Pharmacist led him to the building, and inside. They passed through a courtyard, then entered a second. She stopped when they faced the entrance to a room.

The room – and in fact the entire building – closely adhered to the architectural principles of the pharmacy, all very ancient Chinese. The wooden doors and window frames were exquisitely designed, and the

windows themselves were composed of rice paper.

Once more, the Pharmacist looked hesitant to proceed. She turned to face Lan Jue.

“Unless I’m mistaken, you come from a Former Era Chinese Bloodline, Jewelry Master. Is that correct?”

Lan Jue nodded.

“What I need,” she said, “is for you to pretend to be my husband, for a little while.”

“Huh?” Lan Jue’s gigolo comment had been a joke. He had no idea she was actually asking to purchase him.

The Pharmacist shot him a look so cold it nearly froze him in place. “Put it out of your mind this instant. The whole thing would be a farce. More than a husband, I need you to pretend to be a father – my child’s father.”

Lan Jue stared at her in silence. She had no idea the Pharmacist had a husband, much less a child. It was big news!

“Your child doesn’t know their own father?” he asked.

The Pharmacist shook her head, sending the long silken tresses trembling. Her face was a mask of bitter resentment. “Her father died while she was still in the womb. Because of my sorrow, the poor child was affected, and she was born blind. I’ve thought for years, searching for any way to return her sight, to no avail. All I can do is keep her close. Lately, though I don’t know why, she’s been calling for her father. But where am I supposed to find her a father? I was hoping this is where you could help me.”

Lan Jue looked at her doubtfully. “Why me?”

“Because of your power,” she said, “and your pure Chinese bloodline. My daughter may be blind, but she possesses senses no ordinary person could understand. I couldn’t just randomly select someone for the position, otherwise she’d know. This is ‘why you.’”

“Then, what do you need me to do?” he asked.

The Pharmacist went on. “Just spend time with her, every now and again. If you do this, I won’t just help the Avenue this once. If in the future there is anything you need from me, I’ll happily oblige. On top of that, I’m willing to offer you a special medicine. You’re probably aware that my cultivation came as a result of the ancient Chinese Taoist alchemical arts. There is no cultivation method better for reaching the pinnacle of human capacity. The first among these methods, is the Pill of Immortality.”

Lan Jue considered this for a moment. “How long would I be helping you with this?”

The Pharmacist laughed bitterly. “I can’t tell you. Until she figured it out, or is old enough to understand...”

“This is a very difficult thing you ask of me,” he said, a helpless tone to his words. “especially with no deadline. I can’t make this promise.”

The Pharmacist stood in silence for a moment. When she looked at him again, two glistening tears were rolling down her porcelain cheeks. “Help a pitiful mother, won’t you? I won’t impose any limits, there will be no requirements. All I beg is that sometimes you come to give my little one a father. Just... so that she knows a little bit what it’s like. A child needs their father, and hopefully with your help she can grow up healthy. I no longer harbor hopes to return her sight, but... but I hope at least you can make sure she doesn’t grow up with a broken heart.”

Hearing her quavering voice, seeing her tears, Lan Jue was nodding even before he could stop himself. “Very well. I can’t promise a result, but I will help the best I can. As for remuneration, don’t worry about it – just help out the Avenue in the upcoming exchange. After all, we are family here.”

“Yes.” The Pharmacist nodded her head, ever so slightly. “Thank you. No matter what comes, I will always remember your kindness.”

*

1. As performed on a very popular Chinese television show.
2. This may also be a reference by the author to guqin music, where

Flowing Water is one of the most popular songs from the instrument, and is incidentally the song being played in the video linked above.

Chapter 253: The Mystic Maiden

The Pharmacist wiped her eyes, and set about the business of composing herself. After a few moments, she returned to the doorway and softly knocked.

“Mama, come in.” A silvery voice called out to her from within. A young girl’s voice.

A small smile was on the Pharmacist’s face as she pushed the door opened and entered. “Hello darling.”

Lan Jue entered right behind her.

Though he’d guessed it earlier, what he saw proved that the Pharmacist’s actual age was much different from her appearance. This young girl was older than he’d anticipated.

She was perhaps seven or eight, and so adorable it made one want to just smother her in affection. She wore a small white Chinese-style dress, embroidered with a plum blossom pattern. Her shoulder-length hair had been bundled up on the top of her head like her mother. It made her look even more a tiny classical beauty. There was a purity about her as well, the purity of youth.

She had two large and beautiful eyes, with long eyelashes. The eyes were bright and clear, though the pupils were slightly larger than they should have been, and lacked any vivacity.

Although it was only the first time he’d met her, already Lan Jue’s heart was full of pity for the young girl. She was adorable, and gorgeous – perhaps her blindness was a result of heaven’s jealousy.

“Jun’er,” the Pharmacist cooed pleasantly.

The little darling’s face lit up with a smile, and she tentatively picked her way towards her mother’s voice. She took a few steps, then paused in uncertainty. “Mama, is the guest here?”

She had excellent perception! At Lan Jue’s level of cultivation, he was constantly and automatically hiding his aura from others. For most, if he

wasn't directly in their line of sight, then no one would know he was around.

"No, darling. Not a guest. Mother has answered you sweet heart. Do you remember your seventh birthday, the wish you wanted?" The Pharmacist covered the distance to her young one, knelt down, and wrapped her in a hug.

The little girl's whole body shook ever so slightly, as she turned her face towards Lan Jue. "Mama, mama... you, you brought daddy back?"

Tears flowed freely from the young medicine woman's eyes, but she nodded emphatically all the same and choked with sobs.

Lan Jue was at a loss for words. He'd originally suspected this role would be an easy one to play, however now that he was face to face with her, he was finding it very difficult to present any deception.

He took a few steps forward until he was beside the Pharmacist, then knelt as well. He gently took up one of Jun'er's tiny hands. "Jun'er."

The little thing nervously shifted from one foot to another. Her dim eyes lit up, and her tiny voice was hopeful. "Daddy?"

Lan Jue was silent. The Pharmacist looked at him – not with intimidation, or command... just hope. Tears glittered in her eyes.

"Yeah," he said.

Pretty laughter bubbled up from within the child. "Daddy! Daddy why'd you go for so long? Mommy is always telling me stories about you. Can I touch your face?"

"Of course," he answered. Lan Jue lifted her tiny hand and placed it on his cheek. The Pharmacist relinquished the young girl from her embrace.

Jun'er's second little hand lifted, and gently began exploring the contours of the Jewelry Master's face.

Her hands were cold, but tender and delicate. The smile on her face was sweet, wide. "Daddy's very handsome. The bridge of your nose is very straight, you must be very handsome. And now that you're back, mommy

won't be so tired all the time. You should be nicer to mommy, she missed you a lot too. I hear her crying at night sometimes when she thinks no one is listening."

Lan Jue took her in to his arms. "I guess I've made things hard for you and your mother these last few years."

To this, Jun'er quickly shook her head. "Jun'er's been good. I've gotten big! See, I'm not crying. Daddy, can you tell me a story about your time in the army? Mommy says you're a hero, that you left us because you were out saving people. You were too busy fighting the enemy, so you couldn't come back."

Lan Jue blinked. Jun'er's father was a soldier? Surely, he mustn't have been any ordinary man to marry a woman like the Pharmacist.

"Alright... how about I tell you the time I fought off a bunch of monsters!" He lifted her up, and they both took a seat on a nearby sofa.

"Yay!"

"Not long ago," he began, "your father visited another planet. It was a beautiful planet, with lots of pretty trees and oceans. People called it a holiday paradise. But then came the monsters..."

Lan Jue told the story of his time on Tai Hua. He embellished parts of the story, and through his artful recounting Jun'er was hooked.

The Pharmacist sat at one side, watching silently. Her tears had once more stopped, replaced with a smile.

As Lan Jue continued with the lengthy story, Jun'er had cuddled up beside him to listen. By the time he finished, she was fast asleep. He and the Pharmacist brought her to bed and tucked her in. He watched her for a moment, an expression of disappointment on his face, before the Pharmacist beckoned him over with a wave of her hand. They left together, quietly shutting the door behind them.

"Thank you," the Pharmacist said, quiet and genuine.

Lan Jue shook his head. "She a brilliant little girl. Her father..."

A pained smile spread over the Pharmacist's face. "He went missing, during a military expedition. Out in the cosmos, a fight... there are a lot of unknowns. I had thought, strong as he was, that he wouldn't have any problems. Who'd have thought he'd never return. I was pregnant with Jun'er at the time. His name was Mo Liansheng."

"Was there any attempt to find him?" Lan Jue asked.

Once again, she shook her head. "We tried everything," the Pharmacist responded, "but the only information we had were his coordinates before he disappeared. It was out in the middle of space, nowhere near a planet. I was pregnant, and though he left no trace I hired a spacecraft to take me out and search for him. The result was that the background cosmic radiation... now Jun'er can't see."

Lan Jue sniffed. "So he could still be alive. Our universe is not lacking in miracles."

The Pharmacist gave a dismissive laugh. "I've given up on that possibility years ago. I'm fine, but thank you for your comfort."

"Alright, well I'll head out," Lan Jue said.

The Pharmacist called after him. "Will you be coming back?"

Lan Jue nodded. "To the best of my ability. I'll spend time with her whenever I have spare time. My Discipline is lightning, so perhaps I can also help her train with bioelectricity. And who knows, maybe it can help her eyes."

This clearly pleased the Pharmacist. "Really? That's excellent. Thank you." As she spoke, a small porcelain bottle inexplicably appeared in her hands. She handed it to Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master answered by gently pushing her hand away. "I help you, because we're both part of Skyfire Avenue. And because I respect your husband. He must have been a first-rate soldier. My brother is a soldier, too. If I accepted any sort of payment from you, it wouldn't be a favor I'm doing – it's be a transaction. If we did that, there would be no way for me to face Jun'er. Do you understand?"

The Pharmacist was stunned. However, she gently nodded her head.
“Again, thank you.”

Lan Jue’s heart was heavy as he left the Hall of Supreme Harmony. The Pharmacist and her daughter were not the only family this had happened to. The East employed many soldiers. He still remembered the young man he spoke with on Tai Hua.

A soldier’s honor and responsibility... but if something should happen to them, it’s their families that bear the pain. It wasn’t just the soldiers themselves that were deserving of respect, but their families as well.

Lan Jue went back to the surface and got on his bicycle, then left the Avenue behind. He pedaled easily towards the NEU, all the while thinking about his class. He would discuss soldiers today, he thought, and though it was a difficult subject to broach he imagined it would draw a good number of students.

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There were quite a few students today, as he anticipated. Perhaps it was the residual memories of the Ma La Tang he’d taught them of last time, but whatever the reason two thirds of his classroom was full.

He started the class by assuring them there wouldn’t be any fine cuisine today, no etiquette instruction. He just wanted to share a story. It was about a man, a soldier for the East who left on a mission out in to the reaches of deep space. When he vanished, his wife went looking and their daughter ended up blind. It was a story about pain, and about facing the bitterness that life can sometimes provide. None of the students spoke during the story, and only sat in rapt silence as the information was delivered. When the bell finally rang and the students filed out, their eyes were wet with tears.

After class, Lan Jue made his way to Grace hospital. Zhou Qianlin would be busy with her training for the next little while, so he had decided long ago that he would stand in for her in the interim. It would be a way to cleanse his own soul as well.

There were many in the universe that needed help, he thought, and

though he couldn't do much it was his responsibility to help who he could.

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Grace Hospital was quiet, peaceful.

It was the afternoon, and at this point many of the hospital's denizens were lazily enjoying the sunlight.

"Ey? Little Lan's here. Where's Qianlin? It's been a few days since we've seen her. We miss her!" An elderly women smiled happily at Lan Jue as she greeted him.

Lan Jue smiled amicably at her. "Hello Granny Meng. Qianlin has enrolled in a training program, so she'll be out for about two months. It's a closed training, so they won't let her leave. She asked me to come in her place for the time being, and help where I can. I'm all thumbs, so if there's something I get wrong please let me know!"

"Nonsense, nonsense. Ahh, two months without Qianlin! We'll miss her, but you Little Lan – don't tire yourself out. Here, I brought you an orange, have a taste."

Enthusiastic patrons of the hospital surrounded Lan Jue. He gracefully accepted their kindnesses, then set about helping; cleaning clothes, cleaning robes, cutting hair, cutting nails...

Chapter 254: Give Me a Chance

Lan Jue had come several times to Grace Hospital with Zhou Qianlin, so he had become proficient in most of the tasks they usually perform. However, even with his training and Discipline, the process was still a slow one. It was night by the time he'd seen to most of the hospital's tenants.

As he was preparing to leave for the night, he suddenly remembered one denizen he hadn't seen yet – that old woman who had left him with such a strong impression the last time.

He climbed the stairs and walked down the hallway to the final doorway before the end. Sopping before the knock, he quietly knocked.

"Come in." The quiet, quavering voice called out to him. To him, the voice sounded unhappy.

Pushing the door open, he entered.

"Granny Bess. Hello." Lan Jue smiled pleasantly towards the old woman, who was seated in her favorite spot by the window.

As ever, Granny Bess was dressed meticulously. She stared out of the window, but Lan Jue didn't know if she were watching the skies or the roads.

She turned her head to regard the young man, with eyes of uncommon clarity. They were gorgeous eyes, that made the viewer think Granny Bess must have been exceptionally pretty in her youth.

Lan Jue nodded amicably. "I'm here to help clean up your room, and clean your clothes."

"Mh." Granny Bess nodded her head.

Without any further discussion, Lan Jue set about his tasks. He performed them as he'd seen Zhou Qianlin do, first cleaning the clothes then returning to tidy up the room. By the time he'd finished sweeping, her clothes were ready.

These were all things he preferred, and was very particular about doing properly. He was a bachelor, so he knew how all of this had to be done. When he finished, he approached Granny Bess.

“Hey there, your fingernails look a little long. Would you like me to help you clip them?” Lan Jue asked.

She shook her head, lifting her eyes to stare at him.

He answered by dropping to his haunches. This meant Granny Bess wouldn't need to crane her neck to look at him.

This was the closest he'd ever been to this old woman, and though he couldn't understand why, there was something very familiar about her. He was inexplicably fond of her.

“The moon will be out. We had fine weather today.” Darkness had blanketed the world outside, but the clear skies were alive with dots of distant starlight.

“The moonlight is beautiful. Granny Bess, you should have some food.” Lan Jue said with a smile.

Once again the elderly woman shook her head. “The moonlight is enough. When the moon comes out, that's when I'm needed. You can go.”

Lan Jue's heart was heavy, worries that Granny Bess was beset by no small number of weights on her shoulders. Her eyes regarded him, clear and bright, but there was something strange alive in their depths. There was a story in there, somewhere.

Lan Jue nodded, and rose to his feet. He opened the door but, with one foot out the door, he heard Granny Bess' voice calling towards him from behind.

“Be good to her.”

Lan Jue stopped in his tracks, and turned to regard her.

Her eyes were already staring back out of the window. She spoke again, quietly though and mostly to herself. “Don't let appearances cloud your eyes. Don't let suffering blot out the moonlight.”

Lan Jue just looked at her, not understanding. But there was substance there, he knew. He bid her farewell once more, then left the hospital.

Granny Bess' words followed him on the road home. Though he didn't understand what she'd said, he felt it held some profound significance for him.

By the time he got back to the jewelry shop, his guest was already waiting for him.

"Did you go looking for me?" The Driver stood as Lan Jue entered. He wore a dark grey suit with white stripes, a shimmering vest within, and a dark blue tie. His short-cut hair and impressive figure completely the manly representation.

Still, even so handsomely dressed, there was still an air of rogue-like charm that surrounded him. The chilly flash in his eyes didn't help.

"Yeah, lemme just change my clothes." Lan Jue waved to him, indicating that he sit. He exited to his apartments in the back to change.

When drinking, one's environment and atmosphere were important. He'd been comfortably dressed and busy all afternoon, but now that the Driver had arrived dressed so formally, he had to match him.

When he re-appeared, he was clad in a French grey three-piece suit with dark blue stripes. The cobalt blue tie held the whole ensemble together, and pared well with both the color and style.

A gentleman's clothes shouldn't exceed three colors, otherwise it looked messy and fickle.

When the Driver saw him, he smiled. His suit was a product of Wendy's, and wearing it was a sign of respect and appreciation.

The two gentlemen left the jewelry shop, with the Driver in front and Lan Jue just behind. They walked leisurely towards Wendy's shop.

The posh interior of the seamstress' shop was already prepared for their arrival. The sign outside expressed their current disinterest in visitors. Inside, a simple table had been stocked with an ash tray, some dried fruit

and a fruit bowl. Beside that was another table, this one over a meter long and more than thirty centimeters wide. Upon it were set a host of various whiskies.

“You sure are a fan of single-malt!” Lan Jue said through a laugh.

The Driver had already snatched up the first whisky in line. Wendy appeared from somewhere in the back, bearing two crystal glasses which she placed on the table for them. She, too, laughed. “Not just him. I thought you also favored the taste. Even me, after smelling your cigar smoke and the scent of whisky I’m starting to enjoy it myself.”

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly at her. “So why did you only bring two glasses? It’s always more fun to drink together.”

Wendy shook her head. “No thank you. I’ll be fine watching you two enjoy yourself, I don’t drink much anyway. If a woman always drinks and becomes a drunkard, how will she ever get married?”

The smile on Lan Jue’s face spread wider. “If word of that ever got out, there’d be a line spanning across the Avenue of gentlemen looking to propose to Miss Wendy Wang.”

The Seamstress responded with a snort, and a despondent look.

“Alright,” the Driver interjected, “don’t pay any mind to this heartless young man. I don’t know why you like that crazy guy anyway.”

“Am I crazy?” The voice startled them, especially since it came from the door they’d locked. A man had somehow found his way inside.

His normally scruffy hair had been slicked back and fondly managed today. He was dressed in a fine, wine-red suit. His beard had been cut and cleaned up, making him appear ten years younger.

He bore a bottle in one hand, and an arrangement of flowers in the other. They were white as the driven snow, and looked like beautiful crystals in full bloom. Strangely, they emitted a strange blue mist which formed floral patterns of its own. Wendy stared at him in shock, an expression mirrored by both the Driver and Lan Jue.

The Driver was worse, with a scowl that turned his craggy face. He nearly dropped the whisky bottle in his hand.

The man approached the table and placed the bottle upon it. A silver stag head glinted in the light. Written on the label: 46 year. It was a famous bottle of former era whisky – Dalmore 46. Even in the former era, it was an exceedingly rare find.

The man didn't stop once he'd placed the whisky on the table. He moved around until he was facing Wendy, and stretched out his hand bearing the bundle of flowers he'd brought with him. "I'm sorry, for making you wait so many years. He's right, actually – I must be crazy. The obsession in my heart clouded my mind. I haven't been able to move past what happened all those years ago. But I woke up... and although there will always be things that will never be fixed, those things are gone now. The living must always look forward. I'm sorry you had to wait for me. I just hope, if it isn't too late, that you could give me another chance? I will do everything in my power to make up for it."

Wendy's eyes were wet with tears, and she instinctively took a step backward. She stared at the man before her, and though her eyes were moist no tears would fall for they were also filled with stubbornness, even anger. But even as they watched the hard light in her eyes gradually receded. In the face of everything, that burning anger eased.

She stomped forward and began beating her tiny fists against his shoulders.

He said nothing, did not attempt to dodge or retreat. Instead he smiled and wrapped her in to his arms.

The Driver and Jewelry Master exchanged a wordless glance. Suddenly, the two of them felt it was no longer appropriate to be here.

Lan Jue gave the Driver a telling look before rising to his feet. It was a beautiful moment he didn't want to tarnish.

The Driver also stood, though his expression was somewhat gloomy, and helpless. But more than that, there was joy.

“Where are you going? Such a happy occasion, and we have no friends to celebrate with?” Wendy, her arms wrapped around the man’s waist, smiled happily towards Lan Jue and the Driver.

“You know, I am really fighting the urge to lay my hands on you.” The Driver growled. “No... it’s more accurate to say I’ve been fighting the urge for years. I’m warning you right now that Wendy isn’t just my business partner. In my heart, she’s my sister. If I hear you hurt her again, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

Lan Jue reached out an arm and patted the Driver’s shoulder. “You know you’re threatening a Paragon.”

The Driver’s response was thick with contempt. “I don’t care, he –“ He stopped suddenly, eyes wide, and stared from the man to Lan Jue and back again.

Lan Jue shrugged at him, mirth dancing in his eyes.

Wendy lifted her head to look in to the man’s eyes. “You did it?”

The man nodded. “I have. Not because of any power, but because my experiences finally opened my heart, and allowed me to see clearly what I should have learned so many years ago. That was the only way I could discover what was truly important to me. Power, was not what I needed. You are what makes me happy, and I’m sorry it took so long for me to realize it. I will use all the rest of my days making up for this debt. I will love you completely, and with the same zeal as one cooks food.”

The Seamstress laughed.

Comparing endless love to cooking food... surely there was only one person in the cosmos who could make such a metaphor. The Gourmet smiled back at his Seamstress.

Chapter 255: The Visit

Drinking excessively invariably lead to hang-overs. So it was, when Lan Jue finally regained consciousness in the early morning, he felt like his head was ready to split open.

He didn't remember how much he'd ultimately had to drink. The night passed in a blur of joy and good tidings. The others were likely suffering as he was.

The first to fall to the alcohol's charms was the Gourmet himself. Be you a normal man or a paragon, once you let yourself go no amount of special energy was going to neutralize alcohol. He drink's numbing peace overcame him. But oh had he laughed – real laughter, as though he were trying to make up for so much lost time.

The Driver had also had entirely too much. Once discovering that the Gourmet had reached such heights of power, he knew his threats were nonsense. Pointless nonsense. He decided, then to show his strength and menace through the consumption of liquor. His ferocious coaxing of the Gourmet had ultimately lead to the Paragon's downfall.

The chef accepted it all, and drank until he was full with mirth and happiness. The Driver was not far behind.

Lan Jue kept them company, and drank as they did. At his level of drinking proficiency he was able to handle the volume – so long as he poured for himself. But he didn't.

Once the Gourmet was done, the Driver then turned his attention to Lan Jue. It wasn't long after that the both of them were well sloshed.

He faintly remembered talking a lot with Wendy. She carefully tended to the Driver and the Gourmet, all the while talking through tears and laughter. She'd carefully placed the flowers the Gourmet had given her in a vase, and tended to them like a priceless treasure. She would return to gently stroke the silken petals throughout the night.

Most of their conversation was lost to the drunken haze, but Lan Jue did

remember one thing. She said she couldn't drink, not even one drop. She feared that if she drank and fell asleep, she'd wake up to find it had all been a dream. She wanted to feel, to remember everything. And when her man awoke, not to let him have any regrets.

Lan Jue had called Ke'er and Xiuxiu to come help him home – the first time he'd needed it since coming to the Avenue. He vaguely recalled seeing the gourmet pulling Wendy to the back as he left. As for the Driver, presumably he ended up in his car.

It had indeed been one crazy night! He stumbled from bed and poured himself a glass of water, and although his head was pounding he was in high spirits.

Driving while under the influence was an irresponsible and reckless habit, so he didn't. Xiuxiu ended up being the one to drive him back to the NEU campus' West Hill.

As he fitted the golden mask on his face once again, he pondered on whether he could keep a solemn exterior. The happiness he felt had spread to every cell in his body.

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The students knew the moment they saw him that something was different.

What's going on? They thought. The Prince of Devils is almost warm today.

“Were you drinking, boss?” Lin Guoguo asked quietly.

“Mnh.” He answered. He then turned his eyes towards the rows of students.

Today the students were vibrant and full of energy. They'd practiced all day the day before, and though they spent the night tossing and turning, they awoke excited to continue. They were dedicated to the far beyond ordinary training by this point. Further, waking in the morning and having a needle removed flooded them with that wondrous, warm sensation from before. Though they still didn't have access to their powers, the sensation

and power they obtained from the needle's removal was beyond description. It was like they could feel themselves growing.

Finally, they felt like this was a serious training, not just torture.

As Lan Jue walked from student to student, pulling needles free, the students eyes lit up as they experienced that sense of release once again. Paired with the strange change in their drillmaster's aura, they were starting to believe this Prince of Devils may not be so bad after all.

Unfortunately, they were wrong.

"We're adding fifty percent to the training you did yesterday. If you can't complete it, you won't be sleeping."

Their hell would begin anew. Sweat fell like rain, as the bitter exercises commenced. Now, though, the students were different from when they'd started. They had changed.

They had had their second needle removed. Eventually the third would come out, then all of them. They were like seals locking away parts of their bodies, their spirits. Once they were all gone, what awaited them? What would they find?

Expectation was alive in their hearts, and it was pushing back against excruciating pain of training.

"You go drinking yesterday and don't invite us!" Chu Cheng viciously gripped Lan Jue by the neck.

Lan Jue, in response, rolled his eyes at his friend. "Let me go, I have something to tell you."

Chu Cheng huffed. "Hell no. Not unless you bring me some of the stuff you had yesterday."

"Want me to puke it out for you?" Lan Jue asked.

Chu Cheng hurriedly let his friend go. "A-Jue. When did you get so nasty?"

The masked Jewelry Master chortled. "I learned from you!"

“Sod off!”

Hua Li snickered. “You do look pretty happy today, A-Jue. What’s going?”

“His uncle’s found himself a wife,” Lan Jue said.

“Eh?” Chu Cheng looked at him in confusion, but eventually his confusion made way for something else. “You’re saying my uncle has a wife? That woman from before didn’t die?”

Lan Jue gave him a lopsided smirk. “No, not that woman – that’s certain. He fell in love with someone else, the Seamstress from Skyfire Avenue. Wendy’s loved him for a long, long time, but the Gourmet has never given her the time of day. That was until last night, when he chose her. Those two have found each other, so I’m happy. Very happy for them.”

Chu Cheng was struck dumb by the revelation. “You’re saying my uncle’s fallen in love with another woman? So... he’s gotten over his depression? Recovered?”

Lan Jue nodded. “That’s what I’m saying.”

Chu Cheng let out a long breath, he didn’t know how to react. Everything that had happened all those years ago had been a massive blow against his family. The worst of it had been his uncle’s disappearance. Were it not for the fact that Chu Cheng was also strong with Hades’ blood, their house would certainly have fallen in to decline.

“And what else? Did he find out who it was that killed her?” Chu Cheng asked.

“This I don’t know,” Lan Jue said. “I think you could probably go ask him yourself, if you liked. His mood is very different than it was before. Go to him, perhaps he’ll tell you everything. Maybe he’ll even go back with you... but who knows.”

“I’m going right now!” Chu Cheng was gone, barreling across the training field to find his uncle.

Hua Li ambled to Lan Jue’s side, watching Chu Cheng’s figure

disappear.” This is very good news. No wonder you look so happy. If it were me, I’d do the same. In fact, more and more I’m enjoying life here on the Avenue. There’s so little back-biting and trickery. The atmosphere is loose, no one tells you what to do, but it’s... kind. In the West we have that bitter stalemate between the two castles. Even the Conclave in the North has got terrible internal strife. Skyfire Avenue really is an Adept’s Paradise.”

Lan Jue smiled at his friend’s description. “If you like it then why not stay here. No one will make you leave. The precondition is you couldn’t bring Mo Xiao with you – that’d be more than we could bear!”

Hua Li sighed. “If it were that easy, then I’d definitely stay here. Unfortunately, there are still some things that need doing. I lack a sufficient excuse to abandon them. So, yesterday we kept an eye on them – today it’s back to you. Go ahead and see where your students are at – their progress has been good. You should use the medicine again today. I’ll get everything ready.”

“Alright.”

So it was, today they’d once again turn them all in to boiled eggs.

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Skyfire Avenue had changed, adopting an imposing aura as the adept exchange approached. Everyone knew the West was coming for a visit. It was certainly big news for the Avenue.

Of the eighteen council members, fifteen were present. Three were unable to quickly make their way back. The remainder prepared to greet the West after their journey.

Chu Cheng’s trip to the Avenue had been quick, seeking out the Gourmet then leaving right away. He left a message for Lan Jue stating that he needed to go home for some family business. When it came time for the God-team battles, he’d meet them in DreamNet.

The words exchanged between nephew and uncle, Lan Jue was not privy to. It was telling, though, that Chu Cheng had left, but the Gourmet

remained behind.

Today, in the early morning, Lan Jue made his way to the Gothic Winery clad in a fine blue suit.

The Wine Master was also dressed meticulously, in a wig and courtly raiment. His face was calm and stoic.

Besides the two of them, several others were in attendance; the Barber, Coffee Master, Doctor, Driver, Seamstress, Gourmet, Beautician, and Mechanic to name them. Ten councilors in all.

Several others not of the council were also in attendance. Among them were the Accountant, and the Pharmacist. The Pauper was also skulking about.

The Pauper stuck mostly to a distant corner, while the Account was at Lan Jue's side. The Pharmacist stood a good distance from the crowd, clad in a gorgeous ancient-style qipao. She glowered dubiously at everyone and everything, like they owed her money.

The surface area of Skyfire Avenue had been closed to all traffic today. The streets were entirely deserted but for the welcome party. The Wine Master took a moment to regard everyone in attendance.

"The two Citadels will be arriving shortly," he began. "Let's go say hello."

With that said, the Cosmagus lead them towards the far end of the Avenue, scepter in hand. The others fanned out behind them as they left the Gothic Winery behind.

Chapter 256: Paragon Status

All the stores along Skyfire Avenue were open. They're doors were open wide, and their wares on display for all to see as proprietors stood by. They nodded and gave their regards as the welcoming party passed. Still, there was a solemnity that hung heavy the air.

As the councilors reached the end of the Avenue, dots appeared on the horizon. A motorcade of vert-cars approached.

They were separated in to two processions; one set of gold vehicles, and one set of black. They flew in tight formation as they closed upon Skyfire Avenue.

Their approach was slow, and when they finally drew within fifty meters of the Avenue they descended, and came to a stop.

The luxurious vehicles settled, and their doors opens. Several figures exited.

The Wine Master stood at the head of the procession, watching with calm expression. He made no move to greet them.

Lan Jue was not far behind. His eyes were hard, and a cold light shone in their depths as he saw the golden cars open and their passengers emerge.

There were a few familiar faces from the procession. Rafael, their Archangel of Healing, was among them. The Cherub Uriel was also present, along with the Messenger of Death Gabriel. Three of the Pontiff's six Archangels spread out as they exited their vehicles, and waited.

From the middle of the motorcade, a middle-aged man emerged. He was tall, and muscular, with a handsome bearing. He was surrounded by an aura of shimmering golden light.

As he exited the car, this dazzling man, too, stepped to one side. Another figure made its presence known, this one considerably older and more fragile.

He was clad in a magnificent white robe, embroidered with golden thread. A crown rested on his head, and his frail hand gripped a dazzling

scepter. Once he was free of the car, every member of the Pontiff's clergy bowed deep in respect.

The elderly man looked like any normal gentleman – just a man in the winter of his life. However, the look in his eyes was anything but average. His sight was clear, and cutting, as though he saw and knew all. He was followed by an indistinct choir of angelic voices, just barely audible. The area around his head appeared brighter than its surroundings.

Opposite the golden motorcade was its mirror, black as pitch. The dark cars also parked, and from within exited a series of equally inky figures.

Their clothing was a motley array of blacks and crimsons and moss greens. The aura that surrounded them filled the area with a sense of darkness, in direct contrast with the bright light of the Pontiff's entourage.

The first to make their presence known was an enormous and powerful man with silvery-grey hair. His eyes were a bright, sickly yellow with vertical pupils. His black clothing was stretched taught over his intensely muscular frame, and looked as though it might split at the seams any moment.

Immediately after his appearance, another figure exited from the car. This one was a woman, with an alluring and enchanting figure. She wore a pine green gown, and a flowing cloak that hid her face from view. She was voluptuous and tall, perhaps even reaching two meters. She, too, bore a scepter in her delicate hand.

It was a curious object in and of itself, fashioned in the likeness of a serpent. A forked tongue stretched from its carved face, while two eyes of crushed emeralds twinkled in the dim light. Compared to untamed menace of the large man who'd come before her, she seemed far more sinister.

The next to exit the dark vehicles was a tall, thin man. He was exquisitely dressed in a fine tuxedo, blood red, with a black tie and white shirt. His dark hair was slicked back and oiled so that the light reflected off of it, contrasting against a pale white face. His eyes were a pale red, but despite their appearance were handsome and gentlemanly.

Like their golden counterparts, these three also moved to one side and waited silent as the grave. The next to exit did so from the motorcades middle car.

He was an attractive man, easily a match for the one who'd come second to last on the Pontiff's side. Flowing robes, black as the depths of night, covered him. Dark crimson lines were threaded to it, swirling around each other to form numerous patterns.

Strangest was the fact that his eyes were entirely black; two orbs of darkness in a pale face. Peering in to them was like staring in to abyss, like losing your soul.

After exiting the car he, too, took two steps to the side. The car's final occupant stepped out.

He was young, and of average build. Compared to the others who appeared before him, the man was largely inconspicuous. He wore a gown the color of tarnished brass, and appeared largely normal in comparison to the others. Red hair, normal eyes clearly separated in black and white... but if you looked closely, his pupils were the same unsettling black as the other man's.

As he exited the vehicle, the world around him was visibly darker. The sun seemed dimmer, and the air dropped several degrees.

The young man in black, and the old man in white, exchanged a long look. One was warm, the other ice cold.

Neither spoke and, surrounded by their soldiers, approached Skyfire Avenue. Their gait was easy, their pace almost practiced, and the others fell in behind like it had been one a million times – in utter silence.

Finally, the Wine Master took a few steps forward until he reached the border of the Avenue. His eyes remained calm, impassive. Once the two contrasting groups drew near, they stopped.

"It's been quite a long time," the Wine Master greeted them.

The black eyes youth was first to speak. Strangely, his voice sounded much older than he appeared. "Indeed it has... Ages. And yet only you

come to greet us. It's surprising that the presence of myself and this old zealot still isn't enough to inspire all three of you old fellows to come say hello."

The Wine Master didn't react to the younger man's complaint. He replied in soft, even tones. "The Clairvoyant waits for both of our illustrious guests in the Museum."

The older man smiled pleasantly. "Thank you for taking the trouble."

The Wine Master retreated one step to the side, and motioned them towards the avenue with a sweeping gesture. "Please." He refused to address them by name, as he knew their contentious nature.

Undoubtedly, the older man was the Pontiff himself. That would make the second man, the one with the younger face, the master of the Dark Citadel – Satan.

The two citadels had never known an era of peace. Each was the others' greatest threat. However, they both were still part of the same Western Alliance.

Lan Jue stood now beside the Cosmagus, and sure enough every one of the Pontiff's Archangels had their eyes on him. None of them looked pleased.

The Archangel Michael's absence didn't go unnoticed, and spoke to the poor state of his health. Lan Jue acted as though nothing were amiss, under their intense stares. How could this not rankle them?

The resplendent and handsome gentlemen stood at the forefront of the Archangels. This one had to be second in command of the Pontiff's forces – The Lord of Archangels, Metatron.

He shot Lan Jue a look, his eyes full of interest, sizing him up. With a small smile on his face, he nodded politely to the Jewelry Master.

Lan Jue, courteous as ever, returned the smile.

As they slowly made their way down the Avenue, the Pontiff idly spoke through a smile. "Ah, it's been a very long time since last I visited. Wine

Master... that's how I am to refer to you, yes?"

The Paragon nodded. "One of several ways to describe me, I suppose."

"This is true," Satan responded in a chilly voice. "I call this one the old zealot. The two of us have been trying to murder one another for years innumerable, but couldn't help but visit together his time. I heard the Arcane Magnate recently made a visit to your Citadel, Pontiff. I'm honestly surprised he didn't reduce it to rubble."

His words caused a cascade of angry glances from the Pontiff's followers. Satan's own coterie glared right back.

The Pontiff simply raised his scepter, ever so slightly. His angels fell in line.

"Let's leave our problems in the Western Alliance, Satan. We shouldn't burden our hosts with it," the Pontiff sagely instructed.

Satan responded with a hearty laugh. "Zealot seems inappropriate these days, yes? I should call you general."

The Wine Master walked slowly on the Pontiff's other side. He never spoke a word as the two powerful men bickered, knowing that their barbs were very unlikely to result in a showdown just this moment. Where that a risk, the two wouldn't have come together to Skyfire Avenue.

The giant doors of Skyfire Museum were open wide to receive its guests. Eight young people in spotless white robes stood at either side. Standing in the center of the portal, was the Clairvoyant himself clad in all his regalia. His own white robes shone brilliantly with every errant beam of light, as they danced and refracted off of the multitude of gems sewn upon it. His face bore an easy smile.

Upon seeing him before them, both the Pontiff and Satan couldn't hide the awe and respect they held for the man.

There were seven Paragons in all the Three Alliances. Among all seven, the greatest of their number stood before them now.

The Paragons all had titles by which they were known; the Cosmagus,

Arcane Magistrate, and so forth. The Clairvoyant was no exception. Among the greatest adepts in the world, he was known as the Eye of Tomorrow.

In truth they were ten Paragons that were known, though who the top two were often discounted. The Eye of Tomorrow was third of all the cosmos' Paragons.

The fourth and fifth of their rank were denizens of the Northern Alliance. They, too, were masters of the Adept organization there – the Great Conclave.

The Pontiff was sixth in line. He was called the Hand of God.

Satan was seventh, and people called him the King of the Abyss.

The Arcane Magistrate was eighth, known to the residents of Skyfire as the Keeper.

The Wine Master – the Cosmagus – was ninth.

At last there was the tenth Paragon. He had also made his presence known on the Avenue once, when he attempted to assassinate Lan Qing. The Astral Phantom. He bore no alliance but to himself, and was lauded – and feared – as the greatest living assassin.

Each of the Paragons were master of their sphere of influence, and each was different. However, the rankings were universally accepted and adhered to.

Both the Pontiff and Satan, therefore, knew very well that the ancient man before them had power enough to obliterate both of them. He was among the greatest Adepts ever to have lived.

“It’s been a very long time, my old friends,” the Clairvoyant said.

The Pontiff offered a rare display of respect, and nodded. “It has indeed, Your Majesty.”

Satan nodded also, his face a frigid and haughty mask. But something else was hidden in the depths of those unsettling eyes.

“Please, enter.” The Clairvoyant turned his back, and stepped through

the doorway in to the Museum. The Pontiff, Satan, and Cosmagus were directly behind. Everyone else lined up to follow.

Chapter 257: The Clairvoyant's Farewell

Half of the strongest Adepts known to man, gathered in one place. Under such circumstances, even a meeting of the Eastern parliament wouldn't register as important. The fact was, that even the parliament wouldn't be privy to what was to be discussed among the great Paragons – they would be reduced to begging for scraps of news. This was the world of the Adepts, and normal man held no power here.

The Clairvoyant walked slowly down the vaulted hallways of the Museum, and even the impetuous Satan didn't dare rush him. The young-looking king of devils never once let his eyes stray from the fortune teller's back.

A long table had been set up in the main hall, with enough space for fifty to sit in council. The Clairvoyant, naturally, took his position at the head. The Pontiff and Satan sat to his left and right respectively. The Wine Master sat at the next position down from the Pontiff, and the gourmet beside Satan.

As the Gourmet was taking his seat, Satan eyed him in curiosity. His look curdled, fixing upon the Gourmet with a dangerous light. The perennial chef didn't appear to notice, or chose not to pay any mind. It was as though everything occurring around him had no interest with him. Uncertainty and violence roiled in the depths of Satan's eyes, but it was short lived. A moment later, and it was as though nothing had happened.

The other gathered Adepts separated and sat according to their camp and designation. Metatron sat beside the Wine Master, while the imposing man with pure black eyes took up post beside the Gourmet.

Lan Jue sat nearer to the rear of the large table. He watched the others, paying especially close attention to the black-eyed man. He knew that he must be the Dark Citadel's second-in-command – the Fallen Angel, Lucifer. The rumors held that, as his name suggests, Lucifer was once a member of the Pontiff's coterie. The hatred the Pontiff's men held for Lucifer, especially the Archangels, surpassed even their loathing for Satan

himself.

Once everyone was settled, the Clairvoyant addressed them with a smile. “Skyfire Avenue is honored by the presence of the two great Citadels, who have come together to call upon us. It brings me great joy to see you both again, as I near the end of my days. This will be our opportunity to bid each other farewell.”

Everyone – be they from the Citadels or Skyfire Avenue – sat in stunned silence as the Clairvoyant’s words hung in the air.

Even though it had been the goal of the two Western powers to determine how the Clairvoyant and Keeper were maintaining, it was still a surprise to hear it from the lips of the man himself. It had been completely unexpected.

A solemn silence hung over the table. The death of a Paragon was no matter to be taken lightly, nothing to be joked about. This was especially true for this grand Prophet, the Eye of Tomorrow.

The Pontiff was first to break the silence with a sigh. “This is certain?”

This caused the Clairvoyant to chuckle. “At my age, how much more certain can we be? As the both of you are I’m sure aware, death may not be the end for us. Perhaps it is a new beginning, we cannot say. It is the natural way of things; I rose to prominence before the two of you, it is just that I should succumb first to exhaustion.”

Not everyone could understand what the Clairvoyant was expressing. He was actually a generation older than the most recent manifestations of the Pontiff and Satan – and half a generation older than the Keeper. A hundred and fifty years before humanity took to the stars, he was already a Paragon.

His predictions and assistance saved humanity from innumerable loses during their first years traveling through the cosmos. Henceforth he was considered a priceless treasure to all three Alliances. Years later, at the height of his career in office, the Clairvoyant retired and established the Avenue. He was the founder of the great Adept’s Paradise many of the people at the table called home, and everyone present respected. No other

Paragon living or dead, had contributed as much to humanity as the man who sat at the head of this table.

Claiming death was not the end was something only a Paragon could truly grasp. Exhaustion was also not a term thrown around lightly. As old as the Clairvoyant was, he should have left the worlds of man long ago. Moreover, the things he learned and secrets he revealed took a great toll on his body. He relied on his own powers and several special methods to extend his life to this point, but how could a life like this be enjoyable?

Though the Pontiff and Satan both ached for a Skyfire Avenue without the Eye of Tomorrow – the loss to the autonomous Adept organization would be immeasurable – they took the news with heavy hearts. His death would be a loss for humanity as a whole.

Satan's deep voice interjected. "If His Majesty were to come back to the Dark Citadel with us, I'm sure we can employ some of our own life extending techniques to help."

The Clairvoyant met the suggestion with a smile, his drawn face becoming an endless array of wrinkles. "I thank you. The fact that my situation has inspired Satan himself to extend the offer is something to be proud of. However, the fact of the matter is nothing can be done for it. It is not just my life that draws to a close, but my soul as well. But it is nothing to fear. I imagine both of you are curious as to how much longer I will draw breath. Today, with my two old friends here with me, I will reveal that secret. Once you leave here after our exchange, I will be gone within three months. The title of Chairman of the Skyfire Avenue council, will fall to our Wine Master."

The Pontiff didn't utter a sound, but hung his head in solemn consideration. Satan looked on, his brows furrowed. Denizens of the Avenue were openly sorrowful at the revelation.

The Clairvoyant's smile never wavered. "I would also like to express to all the people of Skyfire Avenue, my most heartfelt thanks for their support of our home. Do not grieve for my passing, and know that Skyfire Avenue will only prosper after I am gone."

The Pontiff sighed once more. “We should not have come. Please accept my apologies Your Majesty.”

The Eye of Tomorrow shook his head. “On the contrary, you both arrived right as you were meant to. There are things we shall need to discuss. If the two grand masters would attend me.” Once more the Clairvoyant stood, and headed towards the far end of the hall.

Satan and the Pontiff exchanged a glance, then stood. Their eyes did not bear animosity or disdain, but fear.

Had they not known that the Clairvoyant was nearing the end of his days, perhaps Satan and the Pontiff would not have reacted as such. However, here was a paragon in the twilight of his life – it was not inconceivable that he might employ the last vestiges of his power to deal with them. It was a mortal threat they couldn’t ignore.

As though sensing the fear in their hearts, the Clairvoyant stopped and turned back to face them. He chuckled. “You mustn’t worry, friends. The future needs both of you. I have no interest in bringing ruin upon either of you. Please, come with me.”

It was as though he’d read their mind, for after the Clairvoyant’s assurances, both the Pontiff and Satan were visibly relieved. It was somewhat of a surprise to both that they would harbor such fear, being Paragons themselves. Neither had expected it.

The three mighty Paragons disappeared through a small door near the back of the hall. The remaining adepts remained where they were, watching in silent curiosity. None could guess what the Eye of Tomorrow had to say to his two contemporaries.

Their silence was interrupted when the Lord of Archangels, Metatron, rose to his feet. All eyes fell on him.

But Metatron’s eyes, they went immediately to Lan Jue. He offered a nod. “Zeus. I speak for the Pontiff’s Citadel, and would like to extend His Holiness’ personal apology for... recent events. We humbly ask you forgive our transgressions. We are committed to ensuring no further issue remains between our organization and yourself.”

Metatron, second only to the Pontiff in command of the great Citadel, punctuated the sentiment by bowing low at the waist to the Jewelry Master.

Lan Jue did not rise, and when he spoke he did so with furrowed brow and chilly tone. “Your organization should be relieved no harm came to my people. The Citadel paid it’s price, consider the matter settled.”

Not everyone knew Lan Jue, but there wasn’t a soul present who wasn’t familiar with the name Zeus. In fact, the majority of the Avenue’s denizens weren’t aware of Lan Jue’s history before he arrived. Upon hearing Metatron address him as Zeus, there were no small number of surprised stares. The one King of the Mercenaries was their very own Jewelry Master!

There was also the news of the God-team battle, which had been spread far and wide, and here sat one of their protagonists. Zeus the Lord of Lightning, one of the Four Divine Monarchs.

Metatron smiled and nodded, but said nothing further. He returned to his seat.

“You’re Zeus?” A second voice called out, deep and strange. It almost seemed to reverberate through the area.

Lan Jue’s eyes swept towards the origin of the voice. “That’s right, I am.”

The question had come from the man who sat besides the Gourmet, known as the Fallen Angel Lucifer. The intimidating man stared at Lan Jue with hard eyes. “Finding you was one of our reason for coming here. I trust the Princess is in good health?”

Princess?

The Gourmet’s eyes shot immediately to Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master gave an indifferent smirk. “Mika’s very well. But if you’re here to bring her back with you, there’s no point in discussing the nonsense.”

The exceptionally burly man who had accompanied the others of the

Dark Citadel's forces glared murder at him, and suddenly an overbearing sensation filled the air. Those yellow eyes filled with a crimson red light. Meanwhile the woman in the pine green dress watched Lan Jue as though admiring a work of art, while the tuxedo-clad man only smiled and scratched his face with a pallid hand.

"Excellent," Lucifer said, and left it at that.

As they waited, several rounds of drinks, fruit and snacks were offered by a host of white-clad servants. The Wine Master lifted a cup of water.

"Welcome one and all. Forgive my lapse as host."

Metatron smiled pleasantly. "There is no need to stand on ceremony, Honored Cosmagus. We are honored to come visit the stories Skyfire Avenue. It is our sincerest hope that this exchange will strengthen the ties between our two great organizations."

"Such hypocrisy from the Pontiff's lackeys," the large yellow-eyed man rumbled. He snatched up an apple from on the table and, with a quick squeeze, broke it in to pieces. As juice and pulp flew every which way, he slowly licked his fingers clean. Those dark eyes never left Metatron.

Chapter 258: Constantine

“You dare provoke us at this table, Wolf King?” growled the Angel of Death, Gabriel.

The burly man flicked his wrist, casting bits of apple towards the opposite end of the table. “What are you going to do about it? All of you, Pontiff’s boy toys... you’re disgusting to look upon.”

Raphael lifted a finger, and with a flash the apple residue was cast aside before it could offend him and those beside him.

“Ahem.” The man in the tuxedo interrupted with the quiet sound.

The Wolf King turned his head towards the man. “What are you coughing about. You’re just as despicable.”

Meanwhile the Barber chortled at the exchange. His voice was thick with disdain. “I can’t tell if he’s supposed to be a wolf or a mutt. He’ll nip at whoever crosses his path.”

“You looking to die, kid?” The Wolf King shot to his feet.

“Sit.”

The voice was calm, but commanding. The Wolf King shuddered at the sound, as though struck by lightning, and sat back down with no further complaint. As the words filled his ears, he had suddenly been afflicted with a terrible, suffocating sensation of terror wash over him. He knew that if he didn’t immediately comply, he’d have been erased from existence.

The Wolf King’s eyes were dual pools of indignation and embarrassment. He was rude, certainly, but he was no fool. He simply looked at the Wine Master, proverbial tail between his legs.

Lucifer looked calmly towards the Paragon. “Please excuse my companion, Honored Cosmagus. The Wolf King has a hard time controlling his outbursts.”

“This is Skyfire Avenue.” The Wine Master’s response was simple, and

straightforward.

Though his words were delivered quietly, they had a terrific and shuddering effect on those who listened. It was like gunpowder, and the slightest provocation would set things off. Both Metatron and Lucifer narrowed their eyes.

“We aren’t sure when the three Masters will be coming back,” the Gourmet chimed in. “Since everyone’s so impatient for a fight, why not begin the Reaper Arena contests slightly ahead of schedule. This will help us avoid trouble with anyone a little too eager to get started.”

Metatron’s handsome face split in a small smile. “Alright,” he said with a nod.

Lucifer similarly agreed. “Fine.”

The Gourmet and Wine Master exchanged a look, then the newly minted Paragon nodded.

The largest battlefield in the Reaper Arena had already been prepared. With the Wine Master himself present, there was no danger that the copious levels of power the combatants possessed would cause any damage to the structure.

“In accordance with earlier determinations, there will be four individual battles, and one group battle of five on five. Who will be competing in the first fight?”

Metatron shot his eyes towards Lucifer. They had already come to a consensus, and the previous animosity between them was put aside.

A man, tall of stature, separated himself from the group, on the Pontiff’s side. “I will be first.”

Lan Jue, standing behind the Gourmet, took measure of the man. He couldn’t help but reveal his surprise, for he had no idea who this gentleman was. He certainly wasn’t an Archangel.

In a contest like this between two great Adept alliances, tactics were very important. There were things like antagonistic Disciplines to consider. If a

combatant didn't know the strengths and weaknesses of their enemy, they were at a severe disadvantage.

The Wine Master watched Lan Jue, curiosity in his eyes. The Gourmet, meanwhile, waved towards the Pauper, who was squatting in a nearby corner.

The beggar unfurled and rose to his feet, revealing his height to be no less impressive than the unknown challenger. He hadn't bothered to change from his rags for this important meeting. He certainly stuck out.

"The Pauper will be your opponent," the Gourmet revealed.

"Ah." The transient walked towards the Wine Master, and stood at his back.

There was a flicker of doubt in the old master's eyes as the Pauper approached, to which the Pauper responded with a yellow-toothed grin.

"Hah! Is the Avenue running out of people? You're sending a panhandler after us. At least give the man some food before you send him out to get beat on," the Wolf King growled mirthfully.

It was a sentiment largely shared by the denizens of Skyfire Avenue, who couldn't understand why their resident beggar was called on for this task. However, the Gourmet was sat opposite the Wine Master, revealing his status in the Avenue – no one dare contest his decision.

"I'm curious to see when it's your turn." The frigid voice cut through the banter.

The Wolf King turned to find the source of the challenge, revealed to be a beautiful woman clad in an ancient-style qipao. Her eyes were hard and unforgiving, trained on him.

"What?" he began, "You want to play with me pretty girl? You and me can find a quiet place to... spar. Aware from prying eyes. What do you think?" His words were full of malice and lasciviousness.

However, the sentiment was ignored, as the Gourmet and Lan Jue both raised their brows. The message they deduced from his response was that

the Wolf King would not be participating.

A few moments later, the two challengers were waiting in the Reaper's Arena to begin. The Wine Master would be the judge. No one complained, for they knew a Paragon was above such petty things as favoritism and cheating.

The Pauper shambled off to one corner, and very carefully placed his patched cotton comforter upon the floor. He ambled back to the center of the arena, clad in his patchwork monk's robes, grinning broadly at his opponent from the Pontiff's Citadel.

The tall man, by contrast, wrinkled his nose as though he smelled something particularly unsavory.

"The purpose of this fight is mutual education. We will not tolerate attempts to injure, or kill. If any such attempts are made, we will cease combat immediately." The Wine Master's imperatorial voice boomed from all directions.

"Begin!"

These battles were not for show, they were real competitions. No prologues or redundant ceremonies were required here. They got right down to business.

The rules governing power during competitions were largely unwritten commandments in the world of Adepts. Skyfire Avenue was hailed as the strongest gathering of Adepts because of its total aggregate strength. And how was this determined? By the very activities they were engaged in now.

"I am called Constantine," the tall man offered.

"Constantine? I'm the Pauper." The dirty man answered through his grin.

A thick golden light suddenly burst outward, surrounding the Pontiff's soldier. In the blink of an eye, he was like a golden torch.

Not all powerful men of the Pontiff's Castle had wings. The aura released by this one, insured his lack thereof wasn't construed as

weakness. Thanks to the power of the Wine Master, even those observing from outside of the arena were able to feel it.

Constantine? The name was foreign to the denizens of Skyfire Avenue, but his presence here meant he must be at least equivalent to the Archangels.

As the oppressive energies soared, the first one to attack was – unexpectedly – the Pauper.

He bore no impressive aura, like Constantine, and while his advance was met with a golden halo of his own it was thin and hazy. It was like looking through threads of fine silk, or a cloud of dust. Remarkably unremarkable, just like him.

The Pauper was on the move, traversing the distance between him and Constantine in a flash. His right hand lashed out, dark and skinny as a bird's.

Constantine huffed dismissively, his right fist exploding forward. As he did, the clear and loud cries of a holy chorus sprang up around them. Layers of what looked like pristine white mountain ranges appeared behind him like a mirage.

This was the development of his Discipline? What he displayed was available only to Adepts who were ninth ranked, seventh-degree at the least. The dense aura of his energy washed over the crowd of onlookers.

An unknown player with such power, who would not be surprised by the development?

Both the Barber and Beautician sat with sour expressions. They were not participating in the one-on-one fights, but they were part of the team battle. They hadn't expected the two Citadels would bring so many who were more than halfway to paragon status. This one alone could contend with the both of them.

Constantine's empowered attack met the Pauper's incoming grapple.

Boom!

The Pauper was swallowed whole in to the undulating golden light, and as he did a golden blanket of light covered everything. The resulting wave of power felt strong enough to rival a blast from a battleship's cannon.

Metatron's face bore a tiny, self-satisfied smile.

Constantine. The Pontiff's secret weapon. It was in part because of his furtive existence that the Citadel agreed to this.

He was a demon hunter, infamous in the Western underground. His purpose, his specialty was to destroy evil. Be they Satan's men or even the Pontiff's, once Constantine had proof they were sinister he did not hesitate to deal with them. He was evil's bane.

Constantine wasn't here to represent the Pontiff's Citadel, but to represent the Western Alliance. Even Metatron wasn't sure what his true purpose in agreeing to this was. However, his sense of justice was without question, and that was enough.

Gradually, the blinding golden light receded. The arena slowly came back in to focus.

The Pauper was standing where he had been, unmoved. Constantine, however, was about ten meters removed from where he'd been before the blast. Upon his arm had appeared a shield; shimmering gold, and alive with raging fire. His previously calm façade was replaced with unbridled surprise.

No advantage? The Demon Hunter Constantine, didn't have the upper hand? Metatron's eyes narrowed at the unpleasant revelation.

Constantine's power relied on his all-consuming sense of mercy and justice. It was where his strength, and thus reputation, derived. The Pontiff's Citadel hailed him as God's will on earth. He was, in fact, a ninth ranked eighth-degree Talent, who once battled with Michael. He managed to hold his own for thirty minutes, and even Metatron was amazed by his breadth of divine empowerment.

And yet facing this unknown, unwashed beggar, he came out of their first collision the underdog.

Just as Skyfire Avenue was well familiar with the big names in both Citadels, they too were versed in the skills of Skyfire Avenue's councilmen. Metatron knew, therefore, that this Pauper was not a councilman.

So who in God's name was he?

Chapter 259: Cattail Fan vs Spear of Destiny

The Pauper chuckled, and rubbed his nose with a dirty hand. When he pulled his hand away, he curled it in to a fist. “If you keep dispersing your power like that, I won’t be so easy on you next time.”

As his words hung in the air, the beggar took a single step forward. The motion launched him forward with an intense blast of power, that screeched like an angry bird as he barreled toward Constantine.

The Demon Hunter’s eyes were wide with amazement, and he raised the shield in his left hand just in time. The golden aura spread out around him coalesced, shrunk, until he looked like he was a statue made of gold. The stifling sensation that had come along with it also vanished.

“Boom—!”

Onlookers clearly saw the impact this time, free from any blinding golden light.

The Pauper’s fist connected with the shield. Constantine was forced back a step, and his aura shuddered from the blow. Grinning madly, he smashed his fist in to the shield once more, and again Constantine was pushed back.

Seven times this happened, and seven times Constantine survived solely by virtue of his massive golden shield. To the untrained eye they looked like simply exchanges, but a discerning viewer would note the changes in the golden aura of the defender.

Where those seven strikes really all the same? In fact, they were not – there was a distinct and unique power behind every one.

Constantine blocked each with his shield, but used different defensive maneuvers each time. Still he was being pushed back.

As they looked on, suddenly the beggar’s form shimmered and grew opaque – like an illusion. Where moments before there had been a

deafening chorus of angels, now their heads buzzed with the sound of Buddhist chants. Where a vision of majestic mountains had appeared behind Constantine, a resplendent Buddha shimmered at the Pauper's back.

The image radiated a sense of solemn grandeur, and rays of golden light shot out from him in every direction. The impish smile on the homeless Adept's face was gone, replaced by a look of pious devotion. His fist unfurled, and using just his palm he began to slap at Constantine's shield. Each one struck with the force of an explosion, and rang against the golden shield like as though he'd struck a great bell.

The shield managed to deflect each attack as they came, shuddering as one after the other the staggering palm strike were pushed aside. But each time, he was forced to retreat.

It was the first fight, and each side had dispatched an unknown soldier to represent them. The resulting power of their match-up shocked everyone looking on. And more surprising still, was the fact this dirty man was a stronger Adept than the Demon Hunter.

Bang! Another strike from the Pauper. As they disengaged, he pressed his hands together in a devout display, and a pious aura flooded the arena. The radiant Buddha at his back also changed, with his calm face suddenly revealing a peaceful smile.

The Pharmacist, watching with hard eyes, muttered as the sensations washed over them. "Arhat of the Descending Dragon."

"Arhat of the what?" Lan Jue shot her a curious look. "What in the world is this guy's Discipline?"

"The Western transfer and reception of the Western religious powers are done through medicines and other procedures," the Pharmacist explained. "As it turns out, our own Alliance possesses similar Disciplines, but are hereditary. The Pauper appears to have the Arhat of the Descending Dragon bloodline. It's one I'm familiar with. All of this happiness and posturing between the three alliances seems harmless, and the spread of Disciplines and ability seems fair, but it isn't. I had no idea that the Pauper

had such ability, and that he was here in Skyfire Avenue. You see, the Arhat's powers are derived from the Buddhist faith. The Pontiff's Citadel, meanwhile, has its roots in old world Christianity. You could say this fight is really a battle of two faiths. The difference is the Pauper's powers are entirely obtained from congenital ability. Constantine's, however, was gained from hard work, training, and pharmaceuticals. Acquired – as opposed to Natural – Talent grows quickly, but has its limitations.”

“Boom!”

The Pauper's body swayed, and he staggered away from his opponent. After retreating more than a dozen steps, Constantine finally found solid footing. Spider-webbed cracks and scores of dents dotted his shield.

The Pauper spreads his arms wide. “Should we keep this going?”

Constantine hadn't yet given up, despite his inferior position. On the contrary, his eyes burned with determination. His golden shield flashed with light, then disappeared. Lifting his right hand above his head, the Demon Hunter curled it in to a fist.

In a flash, a spear appeared in his grip. The massive weapon stretched over seven meters ¹. With its appearance, the whole of the Arena was bathed in a strange glow. It was like the special pocket the Arena was built in was struggling to sustain the manifestation of power.

“Oh,” the Pauper said, lifting a brow. “So the Pontiff's Castle has given you the Spear of Destiny ². So generous! It's no wonder you refuse to give in. Very well then, we'll continue.”

As he spoke, the Pauper waved a hand through the air. There was a flash of golden light, and suddenly he, too, bore a weapon.

It was a cattail leaf fan, patched and torn. By the look of it, flapping it through the air would be enough to reduce it to splinters. ³

The Pauper laughed gently, and with an almost dismissive gesture waved the fan toward Constantine.

As the fan materialized, something strange occurred. The reality they existed within, having been destabilized by the Spear's appearance, settled

down and returned to normal. The Pauper swayed on his feet like a drunk man, and suddenly there were six more of him. Amidst the sounds of guttural chanting, the figures raced forward, dashing in zig-zag patterns at their target. They surrounded Constantine.

The Pontiff's secret weapon stood, unmoving, with spear in hand as the Paupers approached. Once they had, he lashed out with the spear – but his objective wasn't the seven grimy beggars.

Where the tip of the spear ended, a small black dot appeared in the air. As Constantine retracted the weapon, the dot became an infinitely black hole, which immediately began to draw everything toward.

However, in the same moment a hundred thousand dots of golden light appeared all around them. The Pauper's mirror images vanished, and in their place appeared a giant hand reaching forth from the void. The spectral appendage grasped at the head of the spear. The raggedy fan, appearing without foundation from nowhere, waved once again. The power it released sent Constantine flying.

“Bang!” Constantine's body slammed against the far wall with enough force to break bone.

The massive spectral hand vanished, and the Pauper once again revealed himself. He stood calmly, gently waving the fan back and forth in front of his face. The Spear of Destiny was suspended in midair between them.

“You've lost.” The Pauper smiled amicably toward his distant opponent, turned, and walked toward the Arena's exit.

Constantine clambered to his feet. He was by no means dispirited from the loss, however. With an indication of his hand, the spear flew back toward him. With the massive weapon in hand, he too left the Arena.

Metatron's face was the very picture of astonishment. Evidently, he'd not expected to lose this round.

“Constantine,” he called.

The Demon Hunter simply shook his head. “I can't match him.”

The Pauper left the Arena, and just kept walking. He left without a word, addressing no one. What they did not see as his figure disappeared from the Reaper Arena, was his hand which had been burned black. His victory had not come as easily as it had appeared.

The Wine Master's voice thundered through the air. "Second round."

The Pontiff's Castle had chosen first in the last fight. This time, Skyfire Avenue would begin the proceedings.

No words were required, however, for the decision had already been made. The Pharmacist shot a sidelong glance at the Wolf King, then with graceful motions rose to her feet and made for the arena.

The burly man watched her go, brows furrowed. She's actually going in to represent the Avenue? He thought. Direct as he was in interaction, he made no effort to hide his dour expression.

Lucifer, Fallen Angel of the Dark Citadel, waved a hand as the Pharmacist left. A dark shadow separated itself from him, like a piece of him was torn away and given form. The dark image vanished, appearing in the Arena moments later.

Lan Jue turned his face to the Gourmet, who stood at his shoulder. "Will the Pauper be alright?"

The Gourmet responded with a shake of his head. "It isn't serious. He's a very competitive man, our beggar. In truth both the weapons they employed had protogenic powers, but his mastery over it was more profound than Constantine's. He's also at a higher level of cultivation. The further down the Disciples' path an Adept treks, the greater advantage a congenital Adept obtains. Simply the result of accumulation."

The Pharmacist stood facing a figure encased in darkness. Nothing was clear, and even its aura was difficult to perceive.

"I am called the Pharmacist," she softly proclaimed. Be they Citadelians or denizens of the Avenue, all onlookers were surprised to see this beautiful woman in a fine dress approaching for a fight. At the very least her fine clothing would make it difficult to move!

“I... am... Judas.”

The voice that rasped from the shadow was coarse and thick, like a snake slithering through sand.

As the name whispered through the Arena, every one of the Pontiff's men sucked in a breath of surprise. Even Metatron, who was usually calm and composed, had his anger and surprised revealed as his aura took on a fierce undertone. His eyes, bright and haunting, slowly moved to regard Lucifer who stood a short distance away.

Jehova was the name of the man who'd created the Pontiff's Citadel. The man had not been a Pontiff, and was instead reverently called the Father. During his reign, he had twelve disciples. The first among them had been named Judas, a man who betrayed his master for the promise of wealth. It was this treachery that led to the capture, and eventual murder of Jehova 4. The act completely transformed Judas, and left a permanent, painful scar on the soul of the Pontiffs Citadel.

Not long after Judas' betrayal, he hung himself from a tree. So of course, the creature they spied now couldn't be the real Judas. But for him to simply use the name, was an unbearable provocation to the Pontiff's men.

Lucifer did not react to Metatron's dark glare. He spoke quietly, nonplussed. “He only possesses the image of Judas. Don't forget why we came here.”

Metatron raised his hand, and little by little the others of his party restrained themselves. That didn't stop them, though, from hiding the murderous intent in their scowls.

The tense exchange was interrupted by the sound of footsteps from behind.

“Your Holiness.”

“Unholy Father.”

Both groups offered their salutes as the Hand of God and King of Demons re-emerged.

Both their faces bore dejected expressions. Without addressing their followers, both walked to the end of the viewing platform to watch the exchange within the arena.

The fight had already begun.

It had started with the one called Judas, who'd dark form shimmered then raced forward. Like a putrid black fog, like a black storm it rolled toward the Pharmacist until it enveloped her.

The Avenue's representative did not move or attempt to flee. She stood her ground, with that cutting glare in her eye. She gently waved her hand, and the motion birthed several rays of dazzling yellow light. There was a rumbling, like the stirring of some great beast, before a crackling bolt of lightning crashed down from on high directly in to the heart of the fog.

Lightning? This was her Discipline?

The dark figure, largely concealed by the fog, paused as the Pharmacist waved her hand. In the same instant a strange wave of power shuddered through the arena, bringing with it a silvery light that glimmered in front of Judas. It deflected the lightning strike, leaving the shadow unharmed.

After splitting the lightning and forcing it away, the silvery light rapidly expanded. It grew until it was clear – a silver coin.

Every one of the Pontiff's men snarled in unison.

*

1. That's twenty-three feet long, for our American audience
2. Note: the translation describes this as the 'Spear of Judgement,' however it's appearance, description and prestige rings true to a purportedly 'real' religious relic. This author's done a great deal of research, since The Lance of Longinus – which I believe this spear is based on – is a pretty obscure thing, even among Westerners. I've elected to keep the Western name instead of the translation, due to these facts.

3. I was unable to find any reference to a particular relic in Buddhist mythology, but here is a small article detailing the role of fans in Buddhism.
4. You'll recognize this as the story of Jesus, but TJSS specifically wrote Jehova, gave him the name Father, and set him as the creator of the future Christian faith. It is likely fair to assume, then, that this is some sort of agglomeration of God and Jesus. One could argue that Jesus is God, the Father, and so Jehova is actually Jesus and vice versa... but that's a religious discussion for another time. We're sticking to Jehova.

Chapter 260: Sage of the Heavenly Way

Thirty pieces of silver. That was the bribe Judas took to betray Jehova. This one who called himself Judas, used the blood money in his defense. More than anything, this was an affront to the followers of their fallen leader.

Even the Pontiff's face grew dark. "Explain yourself, King of Devils."

"We both see this as heresy," Satan returned, his voice cold and sinister. "What is there to explain?"

After deflecting the lightning attack, Judas advanced until he was very near the Pharmacist. But as he approached the beautiful young woman opened her mouth and a beam of brilliant light shot forth. It expanded and warped until it was a massive blade of light, then swiped viciously at the living shadow.

Lightning wasn't her discipline? What was this light sword?

Judas launched backward in retreat, distancing itself from the blade. Not before the weapon had landed a blow, and where the impossibly sharp sword pierced the darkness that was Judas parted like melting ice.

The Pharmacist swept out her right hand, and the blade swelled larger still. Now, roughly the same size as Judas, the dancing blade raced forward anew.

Lucifer's brows furrowed as he watched the exchange. He muttered, almost to himself, "Orient Discipline? Sword of the Emperor... a powerful ability from Former Era China. Is she somehow related to the Sage of the Heavenly way? No... there's something strange. The light has a high-technology feel... waves of high-frequency oscillation. Very strange indeed."

Venerated as second among all the great Paragons was the Sage of the Heavenly Way. The Sage was a powerful being that was intensely secretive in their doings and whereabouts, and hadn't been seen in an age. It was said that the Sage was also the oldest among the Paragons, much older

even than the Clairvoyant.

It had in fact been more than ninety years since the Sage of the Heavenly Way's last sighting. But despite their long absence, the Sage's reputation was still illustrious and far-flung. The story goes the man who would become Sage did so through the ancient cultivation practices of old China, and attained immortality as a result. His existence was legendary, and was as hotly debated as the existence of God or the Devil. However, his abilities had persisted, passed down among his disciples – the most famous being the Imperial Sword.

“That’s enough, both of you, stay your hand.” Satan’s voice boomed across the Arena.

Both the Pharmacist and Judas, who had been retreating under assault from the blade, stopped combat. There was a flash of light, and suddenly the Wine Master stood within the center of the combat ring.

All eyes turned to Satan.

The strangely geriatric sound of Satan’s voice was heavy with irritation. “All of this fighting nonsense. Cosmagus, deliver us to our lodgings – all subordinates of the Dark Citadel, any who dare to cause issue during our stay will face mummification by my own hand.” With his edict delivered, Satan turned to leave.

“Wait a moment,” a deep voice interrupted.

“Hm?” Satan stopped in his tracks, and shot a glance over his shoulder toward the one who’d dared to address him.

“We are in Skyfire Avenue,” the Gourmet said, staring at his family’s nemesis. “And this exchange was proposed by your organization. You feel you can just come and go as you please?”

Satan’s face grew dark as a thunderhead, and his eyes bore the threat of violence. He slowly turned back to face the Gourmet. “What are you going to do about it?”

The Gourmet didn’t back down. He met the great Paragon’s gaze with his own.

“I’m going to fight you.”

Five simple words tore through the gathered Adepts like a thunderbolt.

A challenge? Against Satan? This was the King of Devils, uncontested Lord of the Dark Citadel!

A laugh bubbled out from the dark Paragon, full of scorn and dismissal. “You think you – having just broken through to Paragon – have what it takes to challenge me?”

Paragon?! This was their second shock.

No wonder... no wonder he had sat across from the Cosmagus to represent Skyfire Avenue. No wonder he had dared to challenge Satan. He was a Paragon – Skyfire Avenue’s fourth.

The Coffee Master spat out the lollipop that had been in his mouth upon hearing the news.

The Driver scowled, and made to leave. He pulled the Seamstress after him.

The Gourmet’s face, by contrast, was calm as he met Satan’s stare. “I do. I believe I have the right.” The air around them was thick and gloomy. A deathly stillness radiated out from within him, and the entire area looked as though it were consumed in a pale mist, like color had drained from the world. It reflected the sensation in everyone’s heart.

Rivers of strange, brackish water trickled up beneath everyone’s feet, and where it touched them they felt a stifling depression fill them to their bones. They felt like they would simply sink in to the depths of these waters and drown.

“Trickling death... Styx! This is power derived from Hades.” The Pontiff muttered.

Satan’s eyes lit up with a dark hunger, and though he didn’t appear to do anything the turbid waters at his feet became a crimson red. It glowed like magma, and stretched out in all directions.

Whether it was the water of the river Styx or the magma flows of hell,

both were manifestations of protogenic power.

“If you’re to fight, you will NOT do it here!” A beam of silver light shot down from on high, parting the opposing powers of grey and black. The threatening contestation of their powers were unceremoniously severed.

The silver beam stretched and became a portal, from which the Wine Master emerged. He stood directly between the two men.

“Hades... excellent!” Satan chuckled darkly. He said nothing further, then turned once more and left.

The Gourmet patted Lan Jue upon the shoulder. “Come. We’ll need a witness.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Let’s go.”

“And a judge,” the Gourmet continued, this time turning his head to the Cosmagus.

The Wine Master regarded his friend in silence for a moment. “Is this really what you want?”

The chef nodded, determination bright in his eyes. He followed Satan’s footsteps with eager strides.

Lan Jue followed, until they reached the elevator to the surface.

Satan had already walked inside, and was holding the door for the other two. They stepped in as well.

The doors closed, and they slowly rose to the upper Avenue.

Satan’s eyes flit between the Gourmet and Satan, and that small smile never left his face. There was a sinister enjoyment in it, but also a biting chill.

“Was it you who took my daughter?” Satan asked.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Lan Jue and the Gourmet spoke in the same moment.

Satan blinked at the two of them. “Who are we talking about?”

“Mika is with me,” Lan Jue said, calm and collected.

“Mina was my lover,” the Gourmet followed.

Suddenly, the temperature in the elevator plummeted. All light was extinguished, and everything was plunged in to unnatural darkness.

“What... did... you...say?”

BOOOOM!

The whole of Skyfire Avenue shook, and a thunderous roar filled every corner. An elevator rocketed from its shaft, exploding in to the skies over the surface Avenue. Two flash followed, one black, and one grey.

As the elevator crashed to the ground, a figure pulled itself out of the elevator shaft, coughing and covered in grey ash.

“Hack! Cough! Is this retribution for those kids I tormented? Damn it... everyone I meet, I offend. Why am I always in the middle of this shit?”

Lan Jue sat upon the ground, covered in dirt and grime. He heaved a sigh.

The skies over Skyfire were dark and gloomy already. Without any indication or warning, the whole of the planet darkened. Dark clouds roiled overhead, swirling and congealing in to a massive, terrifying cortex.

The black skies and frightening winds threatened to tear the whole of Skyfire City asunder. Flashes of red shot out from the center of the vortex periodically, but in the very center of it all was a single point of grey ever expanding outward.

Without warning, a single massive column of blinding light exploded toward the heavens, originating from Skyfire Museum. About five hundred meters in to the air the column burst in to bloom, and created a photoshield that fell to envelope the whole of Skyfire City.

“What the hell happened?” The Wine Master appeared standing beside Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master simply smirked. “The Gourmet’s former lover was Satan’s daughter.”

The Wine Master blinked, surprised by the revelation. As a Paragon, he was well aware of humanity’s trend toward resentment and grudges, and especially the history of it when it came to Adepts. At one point the houses of Satan and Hades has been mortal enemies, bent on the destruction of the other as they battle for supremacy in the world of darkness. It continued that way for generations, with its ups and downs, but neither house emerging victorious.

That is until modern times, where Satan occupied the higher position. Now he controlled the Dark Citadel, and because of this and their history Satan considered Hades his foremost threat. Even more so than the Pontiff.

Even if the Pontiff chose to attack the Dark Citadel directly, it would only unify the dark powers against it. But if it were the house of Hades that were to rise up, that was a different matter. Darkness only respected power, and if Hades could overcome Satan, allegiances would change in a blink.

So it was that the two bloodlines were ever in conflict. The Hades bloodline eventually fled to the North for protection, lest the Dark Citadel wipe them out entirely.

Therefore, for Satan’s daughter to fall in love with the enemy, one can imagine the fallout. What’s more, this descendant of Hades had achieved Paragon status. The Gourmet’s challenge against Satan made much more sense in this context, as did Satan’s fury. This wasn’t just a battle over control of the Adept underworld, but the result of generations of hatred.

“Let’s go.” The Wine Master grabbed Lan Jue’s arm, and the two vanished in a flash of light. A moment later, they were suspended in the inky blackness over Skyfire City.

As they did, Lan Jue took stock of his situation. The first thing he noticed were the six dimensional folds that surrounded them, keeping the terrible waves of energy that tore through the heavens from obliterating them.

But even with that protection Lan Jue could feel the terrible power of their protogenic energies wreaking havoc. Wave after wave of maddening power washed over them, threatening to tear them asunder. Pain, fear, death... all of the darkest parts of humanity swirled around them as the two Lords of Darkness fought for their lives.

Chapter 261: Satan and Hades

This was the power of Paragons! Lan Jue was secretly awed by what he witnessed. No wonder mechas were useless once Paragon status was achieved – at this precipice of power, their bodies and abilities far surpassed anything mecha suits were capable of.

Lan Jue thought back to his time in school, and one of the great professors he studied under. He'd said that the most awesome, most terrifying power in the world of man was a Paragon flying a Bastion ship. Only a Paragon was able to employ such a destructive weapon of man to its fullest potential.

Horrific waves of power wreaked havoc over Skyfire City. The Wine Master hovered beside Lan Jue, watching the battle unfold with unblinking eyes. There was much hidden from Lan Jue amidst the dark clouds, that the Cosmagus had no trouble spying.

This was a scarce opportunity, Lan Jue thought as he fought to see what he could. If he had hopes of ever breaking through to their level of mastery, he had to feel the fluctuations of protogenic power as they were used in combat.

The heart of this unnatural darkness looked like another world entirely. It was comprised of black mountains, scorched earth, lava flows, and stygian rivers.

It was a world constructed by the unbridled protogenic force of these two powerhouses. They were its creators, and its destroyers.

At Lan Jue's level of power, he was able to touch upon these powers that underpinned reality, but only just barely and for a short time. It was what powered his Ascension, but it was nothing compared to what was happening before his eyes. This was Paragon territory – literally, as this level of power could allow a Paragon to create a world all their own.

Or destroy one.

To describe a Paragon's power in relation to other adepts, was like

comparing a God-ranked pilot to a Sovereign. The difference was enormous. As a result, even Adepts at the peak of ninth rank were irritating gnats before a Paragon. Resistance to their whims was futile.

Columns of nightmarish flame, larger than the avenue itself swirls like hungry dragons through the heavens. The gourmet let the fires wash over him, but was not harmed. The fires were his, and were birthed from strange, still, grey fires that surrounded him.

The King of Devils, too, cast out vicious tendrils of dark red fire. However where his opponent was wreathed in grey, he stood in a corona of purple fire – deep, and regal.

The difference between them could be condensed to one simple differentiation; the Blood of Hades derived its power from the souls of the dead. Satan's was demonic in nature. The manifestations of their abilities may look similar, but their origins were anything but.

Clearly the magma flows were dominating in this terrifying hellscape, taking up more than seventy percent of the overall area. At this level of power, it was indicative of absolute dominance. Satan was right; the Gourmet may have been a Paragon, but only just, and had yet to fully realize the power of the Paragons. He didn't even have an Astrum, yet.

The end result was a clear advantage for the master of the Dark Citadel. For at least fifty years he'd been learning the scope of his reality-altering powers, equivalent to the Pontiff.

The blood-red eyes of the King of Devils glared with hatred and the promise of violence. The Gourmet's own eyes were grey and dim like the eyes of a corpse, seeing far beyond in to the abyss.

"It was you who brought Mina's corpse back?" Satan's voice boomed through the world they'd created.

For the briefest instant, the Gourmet's face looked pained, as though recalling a terrible memory. "It was."

"Then you killed her, to show us your intent. To Weaken the Dark Citadel." His voice had risen as Satan's anger flared. Around them, the

rivers of molten stone erupted high in to the air. Impossibly hot sprays of lava fell to earth like hundreds of thousands of falling stars.

“I was going to make the same accusation against you,” the Gourmet growled. “If I had, why would I still be searching for the person who killed her. Ten years later, and I still can’t let it lie. I suspected my family, suspected her death was them flexing their power – to make me hate you. But I’ve recently come to the conclusion that it wasn’t them. I Loved Mina... it didn’t matter where she came from, or who her family was. She was mine, more important to me than anything. It’s time to stop the lies, Satan. Don’t pretend you didn’t know about she and I – she told me, you sent her after me. She was your temptress.”

Satan screamed at him, the roar bestial and untamed. He reached out with his right hand, fingers curled like claws, and a beam of caustic purple light tore through the at the Gourmet.

He reacted by lifting his arms in defense, and a vortex appeared before him, born of a spectral grey light. As the beam of demonic energy collided with it, the vortex adopted the purple hue.

There was no sound, not even a whisper, but the collision of the two powers was cataclysmic.

The craggy mountains and lava flows, the flood of life-stealing water and the acres of dead land were a result of the two Paragons and their battle. It was a world created from, and reflecting their decades-long conflict.

Already occupying most of the surrounding power, the manifestations of the King of Devil’s mastery expanded even farther. The Gourmet’s eyes changed as well, their color deeper and more clouded.

“Bastard! You think I’d kill my own daughter over you?! Mina was my successor! My child! The most talented of us all. She had the capability of awakening the full potential of our Bloodline. Even a vicious tiger will not eat its own cubs. We live in a world of darkness, but we are not savages. How could you not understand this?!” Satan bellowed at his ancestral enemy over the calamitous din.

For a moment, the Gourmet said nothing. A few seconds passed before

he spoke again. "Mina's death ruined me, for ten years I wallowed in self-pity. During that time I thought a lot, I went over every scenario and possibility. I even sought retribution. I found nothing – no clues, no trace. Even the slightest chance, I took. The smallest lead, followed. Nothing. Then I brought her body home to you. Tell me, have you tried to find her murderer?"

"Search?" Satan responded incredulously. "Why? You were her killer! I searched for YOU for over ten years. I hadn't suspected you'd flee to the Avenue, and if I had you'd be long dead. What you do now just proves it: my daughter is dead because of you. YOU are my Mina's killer, and I will end you to bring her spirit rest!"

The mountains erupted in fiery explosions, spewing columns of lava hundreds of meters in to the air. The rivers of molten stone below overflowed their banks and bubbled furiously as Satan's fury blazed. The deadly flows became purple, as did the King of Demon's eyes, and the overpowering waves of his power overtook everything around them. The skies split, the mountains crumbled, and the world came apart around them as corrupted permeated everything.

"Satan." A craggy old voice interrupted the dramatic display.

Everything froze. Crimson, black, purple and grey – all were covered in a dim golden light that brought a momentary respite to the chaos.

Sunlight, like the rays of a new day pierced the inky veil that covered the sky. Dots of starlight blazed like gemstones, and where their light touched the world was remade. The tempestuous terrain was made still and beautiful. The maddening auras that threatened to undo the planet settled and disappeared.

As the great columns of molten fire descended and vanished, the unnatural purple light in Satan's eyes slowly disappeared.

"Do you not see that he has yet to fight back? How do you think you've gained the upper hand so quickly?" As the words filled the heavens, a giant wrinkled face was projected against the starry backdrop.

A nigh imperceptible change overcame Satan's angry features. A

paragon was at their strongest just before their death, and if this was a display of the Eye of Tomorrow's powers, it was as frightening as it was awe-inspiring.

The Avenue's founder and protector faced two of the deadliest Bloodlines, steeped in the highest demonstration of their power, and stopped both dead in their tracks.

"What is the meaning of this interference, Clairvoyant?" Satan hissed.

The old man's disdainful huff rushed past them like a gale. "I had no interest in your squabbles, but what I have just learned concerns the both of you, and your conflict."

"This man did not kill your daughter. Nor was she killed by his hand, Gourmet. Unfortunately, this is all I can see. The visions are... complicated. Even in my last moments I cannot see the answers to this mystery. Things are clearer, as I prepare to leave this world, but not enough."

The murderous intent fled from Satan's eyes as the Clairvoyant revealed his vision. He glared at the Gourmet. "Even that being the case, he is not without blame! Were it not for him, Mina never would have- "

"You speak of blame, King of Devils," the Clairvoyant interrupted. "Are you not her father?"

Satan visibly shook, and lapsed in to silence. An array of emotions tormented his features.

The ensuing silence hung between them, and as the Clairvoyant's starlight projection slowly faded, the world around them was back to normal.

Satan recovered enough to star at the Gourmet, that hard light never leaving his eyes. "We're just getting started – don't think this is over. The truth will come out, and if I find that you were at all responsible for her death, no one will stop me from getting retribution."

Grey and black separated, and the darkness that hung over Skyfire finally abated. As azure blue took the place of inky black, the two

Paragons became clearly outlined in the air.

There was Confusion in the depths of the gourmet's eyes, but more than that there was pain. All the fear and pain and hatred in those old memories had bubbled to the surface, as had the longing that had lived in his heart for so many years. But as the vestiges of Satan's power receded, the gourmet came to his senses. In his mind's eye a beautiful face emerged, that filled his heart with hope for a better life.

The Wine Master slowly allowed his arm to drop, and his white-knuckle grip on his scepter to loosen. Had the Clairvoyant not intervened in that moment, he'd have had to get involved himself. The gourmet was a member of the Avenue, and more than that one of their Paragons now. No matter the circumstances, family had to be protected.

Satan's eyes slowly swept to Lan Jue, floating by the Wine Master's side. "My quarrel with him is done, for now. What, then, shall I do about you? Where is Mika."

Lan Jue met the Citadel's master with a calm stare. Though he had just witnessed the extend of Satan's power, he faced the man fearlessly.

"Mika has chosen another path for herself. She had chosen to forsake your blood, and the conflicts of your world of darkness. If you truly love your daughter, as you claim, you will respect her decision."

Chapter 262: Satan's Rage

Satan burst in to a fit of uproarious laughter. "She is my daughter. From the moment she was born, her life belonged to me – to the Satan bloodline. She has no choice, she can only obey. One day, she will be the next Satan, and when that time comes she will dominate the world of darkness. You, who mean nothing in the scale of things, what makes you think you can help her at all?"

The Paragon then turned his attention unto the Wine Master. "Bring my daughter to me, Cosmagus. Me and my people are leaving. I will forget what's occurred between our two organizations, but Mika is my sole successor. She is the last of my bloodline, and is destined to carry it on. She must come with me, there is no other way this plays out. If my demands are not met, I will have no choice but to take her by force, without hesitation."

Satan's arrogant, domineering voice rumbled through the skies. His oppressing aura was so strong that the color drained from Lan Jue's face.

Satan had only two daughters. This wasn't from lack of interest, but his Bloodline diluted with each subsequent generation. The trials of the Satan Bloodline where in the methods used to purify the blood, and subsequently how they've managed to remain in conflict with the Hades Bloodline for so long while maintaining dominance.

Lan Jue's face was hard, and his voice came cold and threatening. "You'll be stepping over my corpse to get her."

Satan snorted disdainfully. "That's your decision?"

"Your conflict wouldn't be with him alone, Satan." The Wine Master remained poised, calm, but firm as he stared at the Dark Citadel's master. "Do you really want Skyfire Avenue as your enemy?"

Tendrils of purple crept in to the King of Devil's eyes once more, until it consumed them, turned them in to dual vortexes of madness. "And? What of it, if the Avenue should become my enemy? Do you think you can fight me off? Your prophet is gone and dead, his final prophecies concerning

mankind and not the continuance of your pitiful street. That leaves... you, and him? Maybe the Magnate. Even if you manage to harm me, your precious Avenue will be reduced to ash and rubble. Is this a price you're willing to pay?"

A dangerous light crept in to the Cosmagus' eyes. "You would create an enduring hatred, that could only end in death."

"What does some feud mean in the face of my Bloodline's extinction?" Satan replied. "The Hades Bloodline now has a Paragon, and if I lose a second successor, the Dark Citadel will change hand within a hundred years. I am shocked I have to explain the importance of this to you."

The imposing atmosphere thickened, for below the warriors of the Pontiff's citadel stood in vigil. From the Archangels to their holy knights, they watched the exchange. In their eyes, a war between the Avenue and the Dark Citadel would be quite a boon.

A voice called up from below. "I'll go with you."

The voice was quiet, calm, but firm.

Lan Jue felt his heart leap in to his throat, and even before his eyes cast downward he knew that voice. Mika was flying towards them, a fiery red contrail in her wake.

She was clad in the uniform the women wore for the jewelry shop. Her red hair was not tied in to a bun, as was her preference, but flowed freely and fluttered in the wind. Her glasses were gone, leaving nothing to hinder the view of her pretty face and moving eyes.

"Mika, what are you doing here?" Knowing that the Dark Citadel was coming, Lan Jue had had her transferred to West Hill by the NEU. Her appearance here was an unpleasant surprise.

Mika gave her long-time protector a sad smile. "I can't be so selfish, boss. You've undergone too much for me already, and all I've brought you is trouble. Let me go. I promise nothing will happen to me. I'll always be your Amazon."

Upon seeing his daughter, the madness in Satan's eyes immediately

abated. He didn't utter a sound and, folding his hands behind his back, simply watched and waited.

“What is this bullshit?!” Lan Jue shot back, his anger and frustration bubbling to the surface. “When you left with me back in the beginning I swore to always protect you. No matter what or who or why, no one would ever steal your freedom again. You’ve made your choice, all you have to do is follow it. No matter what you say, I will not allow you to leave with him.”

“And what of you, Cosmagus?” Satan called over.

The Wine Master's answer was quick and decisive. “If we were to sacrifice a woman to protect the Avenue, that wouldn't be a Skyfire Avenue worth saving. Satan, you will not – not now, nor ever – take one of my people from this place. Like our Jewelry Master, my body will have to be your threshold.”

As he spoke a dazzling light flared in to existence around his scepter. With terrifying speed, reality around the Wine Master appeared to fracture like a broken mirror, leaving cracks in space-time radiating out around him.

The Gourmet appeared beside him in a flash of light, once more surrounded by the grey eminence of his Bloodline. The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking Mika from Satan.

Indecision was clear on the King of Devil's face. Had he a choice, he would never dare openly offend the Avenue in this way. Especially after his private discussion with the Clairvoyant.

But now there was a Paragon for the Hades Bloodline, and the threat was far too large to ignore. Satan's own Bloodline was jeopardized, and the last best hope for him pumped through this girl's veins. He had no choice. As he'd said, without her the Dark Citadel would be lost.

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Skyfire Avenue, street side.

Metatron leaned closer to the Pontiff, speaking in furtive whispers.

“What should we do, Your Holiness?”

“Wait, and watch,” the Paragon responded in calm tones. “This conflict is their own. We have no cause to interfere.”

Metatron nodded and said nothing further. As for the Dark Citadel’s representatives, they were already airborne and arrived at Satan’s back as he faced off with the two Skyfire Paragons.

All of those who’d arrived with Satan stood by, roughly ten of his number. However, despite their small numbers these were the elite of the Dark Citadel. Not a one was below ninth ranked, which was power enough to fly for those without a Discipline permitting it. It was three on a dozen.

But that would change.

Much to the surprise of Satan’s henchmen, many others began to appear around them, encircling the small group. One after the other faces appeared, hard, angry and ready for conflict. The Barber, the Beautician, the Seamstress... every Council member – nay, every shop owner of the Avenue appeared and surrounded them. They circled like sharks preparing to strike.

All told, a hundred Adepts now hung in the skies over their Avenue.

By now, it wasn’t just Satan’s men who were rethinking their choices, but the Pontiff’s as well.

They were the two leaders of all the West’s Adepts. The Pontiff, and Satan, were the pinnacle of Western Discipline, and with them had come their strongest soldiers. One of their reasons for coming had been to put pressure on the Avenue, and to uncover information about the Magnate and Clairvoyant.

Once Skyfire Avenue had achieved the status of being the greatest Adept haven, there was no shortage of Talent that flocked to them. The display now was the reason this place was feared. They held the advantage in their number of Paragons as well. If this trend were to continue, how long would the Northern and Western Alliances be able to claim dominance over the East?

An Alliance's strength or weakness when it came to their Adepts was reflected in their military. The inevitable march of human progress meant humanity and technology were inseparable at this point. But as their weapons became more and more fatal, they required stronger and stronger men to bear them. As it had been for so long, and will continue to be, a weapon was only as mighty as the one who used it.

The West and North had always focused on finding ways to make normal men capable of bearing these weapons. Through research and experimentation, they've molded humanity to their whim. But their unnatural methods always came with a ceiling, for an average human's body didn't have the physical requirements necessary to sustain this power. This was true from control of the simplest mecha suit to piloting the strongest battleship.

Put simply, a powerful Adept, piloting a battleship, could increase its combat effectiveness by three to five times. An Adept's will and fortitude meant fewer people would be needed to pilot it effectively. The fewer people needed to perform a task, the more efficient it became. It was a marriage of power and cooperation.

It was the same for mechas. Normal men and women could pilot one, but an Adept could turn it in to a force to rival an armada. From power to energy utility, a normal human was inferior.

And so, there was a saying that was used through all the Alliances to reflect this simple truth: Gain Adepts, and you gain the universe.

The East was inferior to its Western and Northern counterparts when it came to science and technology – this was a widely known fact. But for strength of the individual soldier, the East reigned supreme.

Anlun was a fine example. With Prometheus at the head of the Anlun army, they were an outstanding force to be reckoned with. This was proven when they beat back the North's assault, outnumbered seven to one.

As a result, both the North and the West had spent an inordinate amount of time and money in the hopes they could attract more Adepts.

The average for normal humans and Adepts was about ten to one. Middle-range Adepts – from about fourth ranked to sixth – was about a hundred to one. That number became thousands when you reached the higher echelons of Discipline control.

The East, by comparison, had been spending the last few years on their own research and development programs. Due to the Avenue's appeal they had had no trouble in recruiting Talents to help them with their technology. With the government's concerns in regards to Adepts settled, their technological development has improved quickly.

This constituted a crisis for the other two Alliances. They would have to respond or risk losing supremacy.

But in this moment they knew, even if Satan and the Pontiff joined together, they faced a threat they may not be able to overcome. The hundred or so faces watching their every move confirmed that.

Chapter 263: The Power of the Avenue

What did this mean? That – aside from those with flying Disciplines – all of them who floated in the air were at minimum a ninth-ranked Talent.

There were thirty-nine ninth ranked Adepts in the West according to their records, counting both Citadels. Specifically, twenty-one in the Dark Citadel, and eighteen among the Pontiff's number.

According to their former intelligence, Skyfire Avenue should have had about thirty of these powerful Talents, and then the three Paragons. The Avenue's power was formidable, but they had thought if they joined forces it would be enough to frighten the Avenue in to capitulation.

In this moment, it was clear their assumptions were wrong.

There were perhaps seventy or more Adepts here who were obviously at that level of mastery or higher! Moreover, these were genetic Talents, not man-made.

Satan wasn't blind to the circumstances. The Avenue's power was far beyond what he'd anticipated. Now he figured, if he tried to openly steal Mika away, there he'd do it with most of his forces obliterated. But he was Satan, master of the Dark Citadel, lord of the world of darkness where only strength is respected. How could he just tuck his tail and flee?

Their stand-off was interrupted when a wave of strange power rushed past them, originating from the Avenue below. An odd voice followed.

"A mountain of books has many pathways to the summit, and the sea of knowledge is boundless."

They were simple, if strange words. However, as the moving voice delivered them, the whole of Skyfire Avenue was embraced by a dim light, a hazy luminescence that hung over everything.

It had a milky quality, the light, with threads of inky blackness that meandered throughout. As the waves of power emanated outward they brought with them a refreshing fragrance, that filled them with a sense of scholarly integrity.

A column of white light beamed in to the heavens.

Satan, the Wine Master, and the Gourmet were the most affected by the interrupted, as their faces revealed. Satan's features bore an even nastier scowl. Manifestations of surprise and relief were clear on the Wine Master and Gourmet's faces.

But their differences in expression hid the exact same internal reaction. A single thought rang through their minds.

This is...

On the Avenue, the Pontiff was most affected. "How could this be?!" he cried in alarm. For the first time since showing himself here, the Pontiff couldn't control his reaction.

The Gourmet reaching Paragon status was still within their scope of acceptance. After all, the Clairvoyant was no longer a threat, and he was more powerful than any of them. But this voice, this light, was a surprise.

This rich, scholarly aura could be nothing but pure protogenic power. And this abundant, overbearing energy could only come from one source. The birth of a Paragon!

Indeed, another was about to join the illustrious ranks of the Paragons.

Every Adept was different, and this was equally true for the demonstration of protogenic power that was released when one became Paragon. Some were even able to affect the whole of a planet's aura. Others achieved it without any fanfare or dramatic revelation. How a Talent broke in to the Paragon level was dependent on their Discipline.

The Gourmet earned Paragon status when we ultimately and completely immersed himself in the territory his power was derived from, the Underworld. As this was a world of his making, no one else was made aware of the breakthrough. This new Paragon, having broken through right here on the Avenue, made his ascension remarkably obvious.

The gentle white light was pure and gentle, harmonizing with the energies of the world around it. The core of it was even restrained. Even the Pontiff wondered if he were capable of producing such a calming,

peaceful aura.

Most younger Paragons weren't ready for the awesome power a Paragon possessed, and required a period of adaptation so that they could train themselves to become conduits of this might. The older Adepts had had time enough to cultivate themselves to the required level, and their understanding was far more profound. The drawback was that the older Adepts had a much more difficult time advancing to higher levels of mastery. It was an unfortunate double-edged sword.

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The whole of the heavens overhead adopted the milky-white light, and every student on Skyfire Avenue lifted their head as a wave of harmony and intellect inexplicably washed over them. Whatever problem they were working through instantly became clear – a universal eureka moment.

Even the embattled students of the NEU, struggling on West Hill looked to the skies in curiosity, unable to stop themselves. They were training under Hua Li's direction, and though their Disciplines were still sealed the wave of unstoppable vigor forced their powers to the surface.

The arena filled with the sounds of clattering steel as the needles within them fell free of their own accord. They felt renewed, awakened as their power was restored.

Hua Li's eyes widened as he spied the heavens, and without hesitation shouted out to his charges. "Cross your legs and sit up straight. Meditate on this changes in the atmosphere, let it wash through you."

He took his own advice, dropped in to a meditative position with his chakras aligned, and closed his eyes to more clearly feel the sensations.

To be able to absorb and experience the radiant power of a Paragon breaking through was an exceedingly rare opportunity! The more profound an Adept's understanding of their abilities, the more deeply they felt such expressions of power, but it helped all who experienced it with their future growth.

This was why Hua Li had remained for so long. These sorts of good

happenings were so rare in the history of humanity, that it would be a tragedy to miss.

This is especially true when considering that this sort of protogenic expression wasn't always this beneficial. If the adept had less than sublime control over its exuberance, disasters could easily follow. Especially for the common man.

Moreover, not every Paragon opened themselves up in this way for the benefit of others. At the very least this revealed their power to everyone, tipped their hand so to speak. The result was that this sort of thing had only publicly occurred four or five times in the history of humanity. But each time it did, everyone who experienced it became better as a result.

Though there was no way for Hua Li to know which Adept specifically had attained Paragon status, he was able to determine comprehension was the crux of the Discipline. It was something every living thing could benefit from, so how could he let the opportunity go to waste?

For the students involved in training, the benefits were immediate and intense. They, too, didn't dare waste a moment. Over the last few days of needles and boiling water they barely felt human, but in this instant they felt renewed. Their eyes blazed with excitement and comprehension.

After Lan Jue had removed their second needle, he'd left the rest in for a protracted period, largely because their bodies needed time to adapt to their newfound strength. The third needle was removed by the seventh day, and the fourth needle just the day before. Before now, they all still had five needles to go.

Now, all five tumbled to the ground of their own accord. Every student was stunned, nearly floored, by the tremendous power that welled up inside of them.

Everyone sat in contemplative silence; Wang Hongyuan, Tan Lingyun, Lin Guoguo... everyone. A quiet tranquility hung over the training grounds.

Skyfire Avenue.

Lan Jue immediately shut his eyes when the power came. Hua Li felt it, and so could he. Everyone hovering in the skies above the Avenue felt it clear as day.

This included the denizens of the two Citadels. After their surprise subsided, they quickly shut their eyes in attempts to capitalize on the opportunity themselves. However, despite their efforts, they felt nothing. Helplessly they opened themselves to the power, only to be denied.

A craggy, ancient voice reverberated all around them. "I seek benevolence, to share my gifts. Unfortunately, our guests came with evil intent. Satan, do you still see opportunity for retreat in the face of your transgressions?"

A point of light appeared amidst the gathered paragons, and grew in size until it was the dimensions of a man. The blinding light eventually receded, revealing the Keeper.

He was clad in a simple robe, giving the onlookers a sense of scholastic integrity, of knowledge and culture. He looked precisely like what his title implied, a Keeper of Knowledge. But strangest of all was his face, for while his voice was cracked and old, he appeared much younger than he had just a day before. His yellowed eyes were now bright and piercing, and now his youthful vigor was greater even than Satan's unnatural youth.

The gentle white light dimmed and eventually vanished, though the skies above remained bright. The childish voice returned, though where at first it had been one, now it was a chorus of youthful cries.

"All men are righteous at birth, and close to their nature. They grow and change, their habits mold them. But through knowledge, through learning, that goodness is retained."

There was another explosion of white light, and an image appeared before them that stretched hundreds of thousands of meters. It was the image of a Confucian scholar, with one hand behind his back and the other clutching a tome. His eyes were shut, and as the young voices spoke he nodded sagely. The very picture of leisure and contentment. 1

“Thrice Mencius’ mother moved, to provide for him a place of learning, but played truant, so his mother cut cloth from the loom. Dou of the Yan Mountains, trained his five children, and through their learning grew famed and knowledgeable, passing the imperial exams. 2

The young voices rose to a crescendo, and smaller figures appeared in the air before the massive scholar as they read the Three Character Classic.

“Uneducated children are a failing of the father, unindustrious students are borne of negligent teachers. Learning without passion is pointless, and forsaking knowledge in youth, how can one be successful in old age?”

The towering scholar opened his eyes. The light in those eyes became stern and commanding, much like a teacher instructing his pupils.

“An unpolished jade sculpture cannot be called a work of art; Men who do not study cannot comprehend the moral path, and will not become great men.”

A single small figure stood out, standing directly before the scholar. As the instruction continued, he grew.

“All children should show deference to their parents, it is the basis of humanity. Understanding the weal and woe of our ancestors shows piety, and cultivates a hardworking nature. When Kong Rong was four, he gave up his pear to his elder brother, this filial respect and admiration is something that should be taught from birth. Respect is the first and foremost measure of a man, fraternity the guiding principle, only then can we learn the ways of life; of numbers, words and wisdom.”

The scene changed again. Images of the stories they heard, of the lessons that were taught, hung in the air around them. The charm and wisdom of the ancient Chinese philosophies filled the hearts of every onlooker.

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1. The old Chinese Confucian system of learning was to have children

recite these 'pearls of wisdom' endlessly, over and over and over again until they were ingrained within them. This practice still goes on in every Chinese class – in essence, they have a textbook with quotes, which they read while the teacher listens and corrects. Today, this is used for pronunciation and grammar purposes, though they still pick many Confucian documents and phrases to do so, for cultural reinforcement (or indoctrination, however you want to look at it). This quote above, all the several following, are all real lines recited in classrooms to this day.

2. Which were basically the prerequisite to becoming a government Bureaucrat and setting your family up for life.

Chapter 264: The Karmic Scholar

“Ones, tens, hundreds, thousands. The three forces; Heaven, Earth, Man – the Three Luminaries; the Sun, Moon and Stars. So, too, are there Three bonds: The First – Obligation of Sovereign to Subject. The Second – The Love between Father and Child. The Third – Harmony between Husband and Wife.”

Dozens of twinkling white lights appeared around the massive scholar. Each one was a small child enveloped in light, hunched down and diligently reading from books in their tiny hands. They revolved around the scholar as though in orbit, reciting from the text.

The Confucian wise man smiled, a smile full of satisfaction, then clapped his hands together. The dots of light rose in to the heavens and vanished.

Overhead white light still spread out over the horizon, as though the universe were made of white gold. A single ray of errant light descended from on high to illuminate the book opened within the scholar's hand. A single word appeared within the tome, large and blazing on the parchment.

“Karma”

The Keeper cackled merrily. “Hah! A fine display. A hundred years of penance, and the reward is immortality. As Paragon, you will need a new name; I name you, the Karmic Scholar.”

“Hahahaha!” The ringing laughter came from everywhere, and the massive spectral scholar dissolved in to a massive column of light. It condensed, shrunk, until a figure appeared within it rising from Skyfire Avenue.

As the light dimmed, it revealed an elderly man clad in the white robes of an academician.

Despite his age the old man was alive with a vibrant aura, his face pink and cheeks ruddy. His eyes twinkled with a lively spirit that reflected the

pure light of knowledge that encompassed everything. He gripped a book in his hands, one identical to the one the massive Confucian scholar had held.

It's him!

Though Lan Jue had his suspicions, he was still surprised when the figure was finally revealed.

The one who'd broken through to Paragon status, the one who'd shocked both the Western Citadels, was none other than the cantankerous man he'd brought back from planet Lyr; the Bookworm.

Compared to when they'd met, he seemed much more pleasant. He seemed so much younger for it, full of life and positivity. And not only him, but the Keeper seemed to have changed similarly. It was as though they were ten years younger over night.

The Bookworm took a step forward, and a wake of white light fanned out behind him. With a flash, he appeared beside the Keeper.

"A fine name... I shall be known as the Karmic Scholar." His face was brightened by a smile, and he nodded in satisfaction. He didn't seem to pay any mind to Satan, he scowled dangerously at them.

"Congratulations, Honorable Karmic Scholar." The Pontiff's deep voice called out to the newly anointed Paragon. By now he was also aloft with the others, but not with intention to fight. This fight would be one they lost, he knew. The Avenue's strength was far and beyond what they'd anticipated. Without even considering the many powerful Adepts that surrounded them, there were now five Paragons. Four, with the passing of the Clairvoyant.

The Gourmet may have been on the weaker side of the scale, but the Karmic Scholar's aura was startling to say the least. He didn't seem at all weaker than these established leaders who stood before. And as far as the Pontiff could remember, he had absolutely no information on this man. And the vigor he and the Keeper emitted certainly didn't seem like a couple of old men nearing their final days.

Once again Skyfire Avenue proved its superiority in force. Even without the presence of the Clairvoyant, their pillar, the Avenue still had enough paragons to match the West and North together!

The Karmic Scholar, Bookworm of the Avenue, snorted derisively. “Enough, do not try to curry favor here. You mean just as little as this uncouth visitor. If you have no other business, you all are free to leave. Skyfire Avenue does not tolerate impolite guests.”

Neither he nor the Keeper appeared to be in a very forgiving mood. In fact, it was the Keeper’s famously poor temper that had kept the Pontiff from enraging him further when he visited the Citadel. Both of these elderly men gained Paragon status through knowledge and scientific discovery, and though their actual combat prowess was difficult to discern at least the Keeper’s pure destructive power was fabled. No one wanted to have this sort of man as their enemy.

The Wine Master fixed Satan with a hard glare. “What say you, King of Devils?”

Satan’s eyes swept toward Mika. “Why... why do you want to leave? Why do you refer to return home with me? Is being the master of the underworld really such a terrible destiny? You are the last of my bloodline – your sister, dead in a foreign land. Would you leave me with nothing but corpses as family? An elder should never have to see their children’s funerals.”

Satan’s remark was met with the surprised stares of all the gathered Adepts. This was the man who feared nothing, who could tear a hole in the heavens and will the earth to his bidding. This was the true Satan?

He was a supremely arrogant man, and as lethal as he was self-absorbed. But he, like the other adepts of the Dark Citadel, were tools of the West and were bound by the Alliance’s support. This contemporary Satan had earned a particularly close relationship with the politicians of his home. As a result, despite his iron-fisted control over the dark underbelly of humanity, he never had his people lift a hand against the common man. It was the only fact keeping them from the hangman’s noose. Further, it

gave them enough wiggle-room to grow in strength. Currently, they were on track to surpass the Pontiff's Citadel.

Mika regarded her father with a calm expression. "I wanted to leave because I don't want to lose myself to this power. The blood of the King of Devils changes you, corrupts your spirit. Do you still remember, father? Do you remember what you were like when I was young? You were fair, merciful, peace-loving. I loved you more than anything. You were the pride of me and my sister, and our role-model. You were our idol, the greatest man we'd ever known. Do you remember what you told us, then? You said you would become master of the darkness so that we wouldn't have to grow up in that world. You had more control than any Satan who had ever lived, you had the ability and it only strengthened after becoming a Paragon."

"Then it all changed one day. We saw it, the madness that overcame you when you murdered our mother. That's when we knew, in the end you lost your soul to the darkness. You could only suppress it for so long, and even with all your power the blood won out. What did my sister and I have to live up to then? From then on you were more frightening, strange and monstrous. More like the Satans of old. The Dark Citadel rejoiced at your submission, but your children wept. We didn't want that. We didn't want you! So my sister left. She chose exile, but she told me before she left, that she would return with someone who could bring you back to the man you were."

"We never blamed you for mother. We understood that you weren't yourself. All we ever wanted was our father back! I used to pray every day that she'd come back soon, and then we could be a whole family again. I longed for that loving father we'd lost. He would hug me like he did when I was small, kiss my cheeks, tell me he loved me more than anyone else in the whole universe. I waited, and waited."

"Then one day my sister did come back. She came back in a box. Her body was so cold, and I could see the pain on her face she must have felt before she died. The marks of your power were all over her, and I trembled as I realized that it had been you. You killed your daughter. You killed my

sister. It's true, isn't it? It's true! Why would you want to kill her, when all she wanted was our father back!?"

"All that was left after that was me. I didn't want to become like you, to have my children crying for the return of their mother – only to die at their mother's hand. I had to leave, to escape from the Dark Citadel and the poison that coursed through it. So I ran, fled far away. I didn't care about power – the only power I needed was control over this curse within me. That's all, was that too much to ask? Dad... if there is any part of you the darkness hasn't touched, if there's any love for me and my sister left then I'm begging you... please, let me go."

Mika's voice was choked with sobs. One hundred adepts from Skyfire Avenue and the two Citadels looked on in silence.

The Pontiff's eyes were closed, and he pressed a fingertip to his forehead. A shimmering cross glimmered to life, stretching across his chest and arms. His lips moved in silent prayer.

Satan stared at his young daughter, stunned and without words. His eyes betrayed internal struggle.

The Gourmet's hands had unconsciously curled in to white-knuckled fists. His own eyes bore the threat of revenge, and he watched in deathly silence.

The power of death was what Hades offered to his descendants. It was a power that did not erode the bearer's soul. This was in contrast to Satans, whose demonic powers were a constant threat. The price of such power was selling your soul to the darkness. It was the doom of every King of Devils, and in his own heart Satan had already become a monster.

It was him, he was revealed as Mina's killer! Murderous intent roiled like a volcano within the Gourmet, threatening to burst free.

"No, it wasn't me." Satan gently shook his head. There was no rage, no explosion, no fit... there was only a bone-deep sadness, as he stared with pained expression at his daughter.

"Mika. The father you loved is gone, and yes my soul has been lost to the

corrupted. I even killed your mother, I can't deny that. But never... never would I harm Mina. It doesn't matter if you believe me, but what happened to your mother woke me up from the madness. It took me twenty years from that day to control it again, and master the power. It is still a dark power, but it is not invincible. I am the King of Devils, and all darkness falls under my purview. Mina did not die by my hand, this I swear. I'm... I'm so sorry. Your father owes you and your sister so much. Hearing you now, though, and listening to what you have to say makes me happy. Now, I finally understand what pushed you two away. It wasn't that you didn't love me – it's because you loved me so much. I apologize for what I've done. I beg forgiveness, from you and from Mina.”

Chapter 265: Returning to Base

“Very well... I will respect your decision. If you truly have no desire to return, then you may stay. On your own.” As he spoke, Satan gently nodded his head toward Mika. His dark eyes once more fell upon Lan Jue, who stood at her side. “Look after her well.” Their conversation concluded, he turned and dissolved in to a streak of black light. Without a word to anyone else, he disappeared in to the distance.

The elite of the Dark Citadel were close behind their master. Soon, all of them were small dots on the horizon.

Once more, the Pontiff sighed in a show of pity. “Kindness lives even in the heart of darkness. I only hope that these sentiments were real.” The Pontiff turned and nodded to his coterie, and then with them in tow descended back to Skyfire Avenue. It didn’t appear as though they intended to leave.

As they left, Mika buried herself in Lan Jue’s chest and began to sob. The Jewelry Master returned her embrace, running his hand gently through her fiery red hair. He comforted her quietly, as she shook against him.

The Gourmet let his clenched fists relax. Could Satan be believed? He was the Father of Lies! But the claims he never hurt Mina...

The Gourmet wasn’t sure how to process this information. But his ruminations were cut short when a soft hand took his own. He turned, and saw the Seamstress looking up at him with a small smile on her face.

She nodded, and spoke to him softly. “Come... let’s go home.”

He responded with a bitter smirk, then resolutely nodded his head.

“By the way,” the Wine Master interrupted, “you’re a Paragon yourself, now. What will be your title? Hades?”

The Gourmet shook his head at the suggestion. “I refuse to take that name. Even if I took it, it wouldn’t bring Mina back. No, I will be called the Infernal Vanguard, ever watching the darkness for her soul to appear. Maybe one day I’ll be able to bring her back.”

The Infernal Vanguard! So the universe would come to know the Gourmet – as the Eleventh Paragon – followed immediately by the Karmic Scholar, Skyfire’s Bookworm as the twelfth.

For the next several days the Pontiff would sit in conference with his fellow Paragons. The Wine Master, Gourmet, Bookworm, Keeper and Pontiff would all be locked away as they spoke on things no one else was privy to.

Lan Jue did not participate. There had been a great deal of misfortune surrounding the Citadelians’ visit, but his responsibilities had finished with the reception. There was still much he had to prepare for, at any rate. For protection’s sake, Lan Jue decided to bring Mika, Xiuxiu and Ke’er to West Hill. He would carry on training the young men and women, with their help.

They arrived the same time, and when they showed up at the base Lan Jue was surprised at what he saw.

The star-lit training field was full of students, seated in orderly rows as they meditated. Their needles lay on the ground, twinkling in the dim light.

“You’re back?” Hua Li’s distinct voice encroached.

Lan Jue looked at the golden-masked instructor with surprise evident in his face. He approached quickly, and spoke in hushed tones. “What’s going on?”

Hua Li laughed. “I should ask you! Skyfire Avenue must be the proud poppa of a brand new Paragon. He released the whole of his protogenic expulsion, so that the entirety of Skyfire must have felt it. How could we pass up such a rare and awesome opportunity? I won’t lie, I profited quite a bit from it myself. It must be tenfold for these young pilots. What’s more, with all the work and medicines we’ve been doing, it appears to have had a wonderful affect when paired with the protogenic powers. They’ve been meditating since this morning, with no evidence of difficulty or desire to stop. All of their needles popped right out, too, entirely of their own accord. You can feel it – their internal energies are much more

powerful than they were, and are joining well with their biology. As far as I can tell, our first month's attempts at tempering these guys are complete."

Lan Jue was quiet for a moment as he thought. Eventually a small smile crept across his face. "Luck is absolutely an aspect of power. I guess how much they absorb is up to them."

Lan Jue found a place for Mika and the other girls before joining Hua Li in their dorm. He spent the next several minutes telling him what had happened on the Avenue.

"Two new Paragons?" Hua Li's eyes were like saucers, and his expression was hard to describe. "So there are now five Paragons residing n the Avenue. That kind of power can shake the pillars of heaven!"

Lan Jue sighed at his comrade. "Unfortunately, the Clairvoyant has closed his eyes for the last time. He's performed his final prediction, and now without his guidance we'll definitely be seeing a change in the Avenue. The presence of the Eye of the Tomorrow was mostly what kept the West and North at bay."

Hua Li chuckled. "After being surrounded by Paragons all day, you must be thinking you're pretty garbage huh."

"You're garbage," Lan Jue grumbled. "Only thing I felt was crisis."

"How's that," Hua Li asked.

"If the Clairvoyant was any indication," he began, "then all of the older generation Paragons are nearing their inevitable end. The Bookworm and Keeper may have found a way to extend their lives, but for how long? The Pontiff and Satan aren't necessarily spring chickens, and we can probably safely assume the same for the North's two Paragons. These men are the anchors of humanity, and they're dying."

Hua Li nodded. "It looks like you're still worrying over that alien species."

Lan Jue nodded in confirmation. "The Clairvoyant spoke with the Pontiff and Satan separately today. I don't know what they spoke about, but when the two Citadel leaders returned they were certainly brooding. At the very

least there was less hostility between them and us afterward. I imagine it was the addition of this foreign enemy. Sometimes rivals must band together to face a violent outsider 1. My guess is the Clairvoyant's final prediction had to do with this problem."

Hua Li shook his head. "Alright, well there's no use worrying over all of it now. What we're doing now is in service to humanity as well, right? Truth be told I'm a little jealous of you. Such a lucky bastard! Where it I training these young men and women, I doubt they'd enjoy such marvelous results."

Lan Jue snickered. "I'm just a better quality of person! Better character means I'm better at everything. You go ahead and take an early rest, I'm going to meditate as well. There are still some residual protogenic powers left to absorb."

It wasn't just the Bookworm's powers they all felt. The result of Satan and the gourmet's encounter was also thick in the air. He'd been immersed in it while under the Wine Master's protection. It was a rare occurrence indeed, and the benefits even to his own Discipline were not to be ignored.

The students continued their silent cultivation. In the end, much to Lan Jue and Hua Li's surprise, they remained that way for three days and three nights. At least in general, for some would wake earlier than others.

Zhou Qianlin was the first to finish. Lan Jue was absolutely stunned to discover that the entire process of their training had lifted her Discipline from second rank to fourth – in a matter of days! The speed that she was improving was unprecedented! Even Lan Qing, who had improved at a staggering rate, wasn't this fast. Part of it was due to her low rank, but even that couldn't explain away the extraordinary situation. Strangest of all, however, was the fact that he still couldn't tell what her Discipline was, even now. All he could determine was that her internal energies were very gentle and... familiar.

Qianlin had awoken on the morning of the second day. The Savage Goddess was second. The moment Tan Lingyun opened her eyes, everyone

could feel themselves flooded with a sense of vigor and vitality. She wasn't quite ninth ranked yet, but even she knew she was at the very peak of eighth-rank, and it would only be a matter of time. She left for her room to continue meditating.

Next was Wang Hongyuan, who was nearing eighth rank. Like Lingyun, he left for his dorm room to continue on his own.

The other students eventually came to, awakening mostly in order of prowess. By the end of the third day, almost all had opened their eyes. Each one of them felt the tremendous changes within themselves immediately. Their Discipline was stronger, as was their bodies.

Their muscles felt strong, elastic, and they felt their powers fusing seamlessly with their physical forms – much stronger and more potent than they'd experienced before. Some of the weaker students found themselves improved by an entire rank. All in all, they felt remade.

While their Demon Drillmaster was as cold and as hard as ever, the students felt no fear. There was only respect. All of them were the pride of the NEU, and if they couldn't recognize the effort their Drillmaster had put in to them, they certainly weren't worthy of the distinction. Originally there had been a great deal of skepticism with their teachers' assurances this class would improve their piloting ranking by a whole class. Now there was no doubt.

Not everyone had risen a full rank during their training as of yet. However, the vast majority had seen incredible improvement. Improving one's Discipline rank was much harder than improving a piloting class, and what's more it was common knowledge that improvement of one's Talent almost inevitable lead to improvement of their piloting ability. As the body improved, their strength and control did as well – qualities integral to mecha piloting.

Three days and three nights had seen stupendous improvement, and yet there were two students who had yet to awaken. Lan Jue's two disciples remained immersed in self-reflection.

Jin Tao sat still, with his shock of red hair poking out in all directions.

He drew long, calm breaths that were drawn in and exhaled over the span of a minute. However, underneath the calm exterior, the waves of his power held an explosive quality.

Over the course of the week's training, he'd come to understand his own body again. He was faster to do so than any of the other students. The Genetica's influence was evident in this way.

Tang Xiao's situation was the polar opposite of his rival's. He was much thinner than he had been at the training's outset. He sat, completely motionless, even appearing not to breathe. It was like he was made of stone.

Tang Mi had awakened on the second day, but never moved from his side. She kept watch, anxiously waiting for her big brother to come to. The others had all awakened, with the more powerful opening their eyes first. So why hasn't her brother?

*

1. This is a common trope everywhere, but also in China with historical undertones, especially when fighting against the Japanese. While that isn't the case here, the implication is 'protect the home and family against outsiders'. Historically this has a relationship with the tentative peace enjoyed by the Communists and the Guomin Dang/Nationalist Party when fending off the Japanese invasion of China circa 1937.

Chapter 266: Keeping Watch Over Brother

The two had a very close relationship, as brother and sister. Ever since they were small Tang Mi had bullied her brother, despite being younger. However, regardless of the abuse the cunning Tang Xiao would always be right where she needed him if everything were to happen. He was her protector. He was a large man, but in Tang Mi's heart he was heroic.

She had quite a mischievous streak in her younger years, and Tang Xiao couldn't recall how many times he'd warded her from danger with his own expansive girth. Now, here he was silent as the grave and gaunt as a corpse. How could she not be worried? How could she not feel for her brother?

"Drillmaster, is my brother alright?" Tang Mi saw Lan Jue approaching from her position beside Tang Xiao. She shot to her feet and trotted over when he drew near.

Lan Jue answered by moving in front of his disciple. He did not touch him, but stood in silence and looked over his situation. Eventually, a smile split his face and a twinkle lit his eyes. "Don't worry," he assured her, "he needs just a little more time, then he'll wake up. There won't be any problem."

Tang Mi still struggled with her anxiety. "But all the others are up already. Why not him? My brother's a seventh-rank Talent! He should have come to earlier than me, at the least."

"When I say no problem, that means he's in good shape," Lan Jue replied. "Don't mess with him – you should go back and rest. Tomorrow the training continues."

Tang Mi, still unsatisfied, opened her mouth to protest. However, Lan Jue had already turned and was making his way from the training field. It wasn't that she didn't trust the Drillmaster's determination, only this was her brother they were talking about. Simply relaxing was easier said than done.

And so, she did return to her dorm, but only long enough to grab a comforter and return to her brother's side. When she grew tired she would

sleep for a little while, but otherwise she remained at Tang Xiao's side, keeping vigil. No matter the goings-on around her, she refused to move. Zhou Qianlin had to bring her dinner.

7

Terrifying waves of power raced through Jin Tao's meridians, to the point where he genuinely feared for his safety. However, as he meditated, growing accustomed to the changes, he found the power to be easily controllable. Each precarious situation was surpassed, and the dangers navigated. Each time he did, he adopted a new perspective. Each step forward came with an epiphany. Of course each breakthrough was underpinned with pain and struggle, but he was used to it. Pain was a comfort to him at this point.

Eventually even the most impetuous river meets with the sea. The tumultuous waves of energy within him eased to a glassy calm, then were absorbed by crackling bones and numbed muscle.

Finally he moved, stretching his arms and arcing his back. The gratifying sensation of taught muscles washed over him. It felt like growing pains.

He wasn't far off in the assumption. He had never had an Adonis-like physique, but ever since imbibing the Fantascia Genetica decoction his body had been undergoing physical changes. His physical capabilities were heightened, he felt stronger, and after a month of dreaming he came to with his dream figure.

It was, in a word, wonderful. And just as Lan Jue had anticipated, the more physically capable he got, the crazier he became. He found joy in the most bitter of hardships, something the Genetica had strengthened in him. Compared to the unnatural, cell-fracturing torture of the Fantascia Genetica, this training was like a weekend on the beach. It was helping tremendously in his effort to understand his own body again.

Through the course of his meditations, Jin Tao was able to profoundly feel every change he'd undergone. He could see how large a leap he'd taken. He could feel the latent strength in his bones and muscles, strength that had yet to wane.

After a good long stretch, he finally opened his eyes.

The blanket of night hung heavy in the sky, smothering the training field in darkness. However, Jin Tao was surprised to discover that he could see everything as clearly as though it were midday. He was on his feet with what felt like negligible effort.

“Shh!” Suddenly, a quiet but determined sound accosted him from nearby. Jin Tao’s eyes sought the source. When he caught the sight, his gaze seemed to last an eternity.

Tang Xiao sat nearby like a fleshy mountain. Judging by his posture, he was still meditating. A blanket had been laid out in front of him, and a bedraggled head popped out from within. Tang Mi was staring back at him, with one finger pressed to her lips, imploring silence.

Under the gathering darkness, Tang Mi was even more beautiful than usual. The hard exterior she worked so hard to cultivate was missing, and beneath the blanket she looked as gentle as a kitten.

“What’s going on,” Jin Tao asked quietly.

Tang Mi pointed to her brother. “You were all meditating. He hasn’t woken up yet. I’ve been worried, so I’m looking after him.”

Jin Tao looked from one Tang to the other. Envy was bright in the depths of his eyes. “I wish I had a younger sister like you.”

“Shut up,” Tang Mi grumbled in irritation. “Your sister isn’t good enough to you? It isn’t their fault you never live up to their expectations.”

Jin Tao answered with a bitter smirk. “True. I’ve let them down. That’s why my sister doesn’t treat me like you treat your brother. She’s tired of me and my weakness. My whole family is disappointed in my failure. They hide away, embarrassed. I’m a burden to them, to her especially. I know she loves me, but I can’t bear that look in her eyes. To them I’m a waste. Perhaps they aren’t wrong.”

Tang Mi had no relationship with Jin Tao, knowing him only through reputation as a troublemaker. The most unbearable student the NEU had. However, it had to be said that his performance during this training was

out of character.

Was this really the same obnoxious boy from before? The best of the NEU were gathered here, and as they screamed and cried and nearly went mad, requiring the intervention of the psychic lady, Jin Tao persisted. He never complained, never once screamed. He did as he was told with calm indifference, and suffered the slings and arrows with stoic silence. Sometimes there would be a look in his eyes, but it wasn't pain or regret – it was excitement! She was sure of it.

In this hellish experience dressed up like a training course, he was having fun. Either he was totally insane, or he was much stronger than his classmates thought.

“You’re performing so well during the training, this proves you’ve got it. But why haven’t we seen this earlier?” Tang Mi asked in curiosity.

Jin Tao took a seat beside Tang Xiao, and took a good long look at his rival. “Because of our master. He changed my destiny. I still remember the day I pledged myself as his student, what it was like. At first Master wasn’t interested in teaching your brother and I – he made it pretty obvious. I guess he was in a sour mood or something, so he beat us both to within an inch of our lives. As powerful as he is, it was quick work. But afterwards he used his own abilities to stimulate our Discipline. Those strikes of lightning we’ve been getting, they’re the same thing we experienced. At first, you know, I thought I’d been fooled. I’d attached myself to some garbage sadist. But soon after that, I learned this was the greatest opportunity I would ever encounter, in my entire life.”

Chapter 267: The Same Spirit

“Your brother and I were beat pretty badly, but once we’d recovered we found our power had increased quite a bit. Me especially. My Discipline rank was very low, and the effects were stronger on me. I thought maybe I was wrong, and this was the best thing that could happen to me. And so I show up day after day, hoping he’ll beat on me some more.”

“Later, when your brother and I were formally accepted as his Disciples, the Master asked if we were willing to tear everything down and start anew. I said I was. That was when he gave me a very sobering opportunity, one that at the very least endowed me with the belief that I can accomplish my goals. I want to be strong... to be able to protect my sister, and my family. I want to make them see that I, Jin Tao, am not garbage. All I ever need is an opportunity.”

Excitement was alive in his eyes. Already he was like a different man, bucking the expectations and assumptions of his classmates.

“Your Master is also the Drillmaster,” Tang Mi asked. “You also study under Nooblet?”

Jin Tao nodded emphatically. “I do! This is him. At first your brother wasn’t sure why he was being beat, and thought the teacher was just cruel. Later he also saw the chance we were given.”

Tang Mi wasn’t sure how to react to the news. She was sure it was she who gave her brother this opportunity to get involved. And yet, if what Jin Tao was saying was true, why didn’t Tang Xiao warn her, or at least let her know?

However, she wasn’t sure she would have wanted to know. If she had had even an inkling what this Demon Drillmaster was capable of, Tang Mi was afraid she’d never have agreed to join this training.

She trembled remembering everything they’d been through over the last ten days. For the rest of her life she’d remember the feeling of that needle as it pierced her. Nine of them! She could still remember the feeling, like she was going to explode.

“Now that you’re done meditating you should go rest,” Tang Mi said in her traditionally commanding fashion. “The Drillmaster said we’d be continuing with the training tomorrow.”

Jin Tao shook his head. “No need. I still feel like I have a bunch of pent-up energy. I’ll wait here with you for a while. So you won’t be lonely.”

Tang Mi burst in to a fit of tittering laughter. “Are you flirting with me?”
1

“Eh...” Jin Tao winced, and gulped hard. When he spoke, it was delivered sheepishly. “No, no. Of course not, I swear. Never in my wildest dreams. We’re from two completely different worlds. How could you ever like me? I’m self-aware enough to know that much. Tang Xiao is my fellow apprentice. But if I’m bothering you, I’ll leave.”

Tang Mi looked at him, saw his discomfort. “What are you doing?”

She dropped her eyes and smirked. “Still so self-conscious. Just now you spoke so strongly, and then suddenly again with the personal abuse. That’s a terrible thing for your confidence and psychology. Even if you become a powerful man, you’ll still have problems if this doesn’t get fixed. You’ll get vindictive. In this world life really is unfair. There is no balance among people. Some people are born privileged, rich, comfortable. Some are born with innately powerful Disciplines. But everyone’s soul... that’s the same. At birth everyone is born with the same pure spirit, unsullied and untarnished. It’s the things we experience during life that changes it. Souls aren’t inherently noble or humble, so you mustn’t look down on yourself. You do you. It’s not about being better, or being the winner. You don’t even need to prove anything to yourself. You just need to be better, every day. That is success. You need confidence, handsome guy.”

Tang Mi snuggled deeper in to her blanket as her words hung in the air. The night was a little cold. Where it not for Lan Jue’s strict instruction not to touch him, she’d have fetched a blanket for her brother long ago.

Jin Tao sat still and silent, Tang Mi’s words running round and round in his skull. She was one of the school’s beauties! Even just their brief exchange was more than he could have fantasized about. She was a

woman far beyond his level, and here they were talking. Calmly, amicably – it was more touching than he could describe.

He sat in silence for a moment, thinking. Eventually his eyes hardened. I am different, he thought. After everything that's happened, it's like I've entered another world. I'm another Jin Tao, now.

Lan Jue and Hua Li stood in the darkness a distance away, hidden behind their golden masks. They'd arrived once Jin Tao woke from his meditation. After all, these two were his personal disciples, how could not pay them special attention?

Lan Jue had planned to tell Jin Tao the very same lesson Tang Mi had. In the end it was better she did it, he thought. It seems to have been more effective coming from her.

"That's a good kid, there. A fine girl." Hua Li mused.

Lan Jue smiled behind his golden mask. "What, are we smitten?"

Hua Li shook his head. "I told you, didn't I? I already have someone."

The Demon Drillmaster turned his face toward Hua Li. "Why won't you tell me about her? How can we have secrets between brothers?"

Hua Li chuckled in response. "I course I can't you," he said, his tone mysterious and playful. "I haven't succeeded in winning her over, yet. If, someday, she agrees to be with me then you'll be the first to know. You can share in my happiness."

Lan Jue's face was hidden, but his body language clearly displayed surprise. "You mean there's a woman in this universe who isn't already madly in love with you?"

To this, the singer snorted. "Perhaps that's why I want her so badly. We always want what we can't have. Sometimes I know it won't happen, but there's always hope. I don't have very many extravagant wishes, and anyway I'm still young. There's still time. Hell, next to you I'm young and vibrant."

Lan Jue's tone took on a gruff displeasure. "You're a year younger than

me. Go on then, tell me about this girl. Is she so beautiful that she can ignore the advances of our illustrious Poseidon?”

Hua Li shrugged. “You’re wrong you know. It isn’t about looks. I’m interested in her heart. She has a huge and righteous heart, who sacrifices herself for the benefit of others. She would give up everything to protect those dear to her. She is brave, and empathetic, and she reaffirms the strength in everyone she comes across. To me, she is perfect.”

For a moment Lan Jue just stared at his friend in stunned silence. “I find it hard to believe there’s someone fitting that description around here somewhere.”

Hua Li turned his face towards Lan Jue, and that’s when Zeus spotted the mirth in Hua Li’s eyes.

“There isn’t, I made her up.”

It took Lan Jue a moment to recover. When he finally did, he responded by lunging at Hua Li’s neck and wringing it. “Are you messin’ with me?!”

Hua Li cackled as he fought for breath, allowing Lan Jue to shake him around.

Lan Jue eventually let Hua Li go. He rubbed his forehead. “It sounded real. Hell, the look in your eyes was spot on. So what about Mo Xiang, then? Have you told her?”

Hua Li nodded. “Yup.”

“What was her reaction?”

A bitter laugh, muffled and short, came from behind Hua Li’s mask. “She didn’t react. At the time she wanted to murder me, and we haven’t said anything about it since.”

Lan Jue sighed, and shot his friend a sidelong glance.

“I kinda wish she had murdered you.”

1. Researching the phrase lead me to an interesting work called 'The Thirty Six Stratagems on Chasing Women'. It is, apparently, a more, er, specialized version of 'The Thirty Six Stratagems,' an old book on how to trick your way in to success. Maybe one day I'll translate them. Here's a quick search on the Thirty Six Stratagems if you're interested.

Chapter 268: The Poseidon Program

Early morning.

Silence hung over the valley. The mountains hugged one another, bathed in the golden light of a rising sun. A new day begins.

The National Eastern University's West Hill was also stirring, preparing. Fifty students stood in five orderly lines, buzzing with vitality, eager to begin. There was a hunger in them this morning. They were eager to continue their training.

The last ten days had been like a nightmare to them, but more than that it had been transformative. Just the memories of the training so far were painful to recall, but not one of them would ever forget. The torment of twenty years of harsh training had been condensed to two short weeks, but the results were clear as day.

Now that the seals were gone, everything was different. Every student could feel differences, some of them profound. Ten days! Though the suffering was beyond compare, it was a brief hell. The past was the past.

They rejoiced, not just for the passage and result of the last ten days, but because they were lucky enough to suffer the lash of their Drillmaster.

One sixth of their two-month journey was complete. What did the next fifty hold? What heights could they reach? Even if the future held suffering like the first ten days, the rewards were clear. Improvement was born of suffering, and they were ready.

Fifty students waited. The fifty first, though, didn't join his comrades – he was still meditating. Tang Xiao's body was covered in dust and dew, and he sat with the spiritual detachment for a monk.

Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun stood before the students as assistant instructors, watching them gather. The emotional and qualitative changes they had undergone was no less than the students they proctored, perhaps even greater. The questions and misgivings they may have felt in the beginning towards the Demon Drillmaster had given way to respect,

largely because his methods had seen results. Both of them could see how difficult this process was, and how much it drained him.

“You were all very lucky. Experiencing the birth of a Paragon is something that happens maybe once in a hundred years. Remember the power you felt – it will guide you for the rest of your life.”

Lan Jue stood at the center of the students’ attention, an intimidating figure in his golden mask. However, his abrasive demeanor seemed softer today.

“But it’s important to remember, this is just the beginning. The last ten days have been an awakening, tempering you so that you’ll be ready for what’s to come. The last several years you all have been like canaries raised in a cage. Now that I know you can take it, we’re going to spend the rest of our time here turning these canaries in to warriors. For the following twenty days, our focus will be technique. Your only job is to obey, and work hard. I promise you that once we get passed it, that final month will be an experience you’ll never forget. Completing my training over the next twenty days is the prerequisite, survive and you’ll have earned the second month’s experience.”

“Next we’ll be moving to our sim pods. You will not leave these pods unless you’re shitting, sleeping or snacking. It only ends when I say it does, so that sleeping I talked about, that’s not happening ‘till you’re where you need to be. Our pods have been specially adjusted for our purposes here, with electric shock devices installed in every one. If your heart-rate drops below a predetermined value, try to count the voltage coursing through you and get your heartbeat to that number. And this isn’t bio-electricity, which you’re familiar with. This is just your run-of-the-mill, high-voltage pain. Presumably your pain tolerance is better now, after so many days. Maybe. Now get in your pods.”

Five minutes later, the students had all found and entered their sim pods.

When Lan Jue told them the next section of their training would be in the sim pods, the students collective heaved a sigh of relief. Whatever the

demon drillmaster had planned, it couldn't be worse than the personal physical torture they'd endured. Sitting in the tiny make-shift cockpit was a far sight more comfortable than being stabbed, beaten or broiled.

None of them could see the impish grin behind Lan Jue's golden mask.

Now we can get this training started.

Jin Tao ran his hands over the familiar equipment inside the pod. He saw it all with new eyes. I am a new man, he thought, no longer the piece of trash I was. I'll make sure you see it, Professor. I won't let you down.

The pod hummed as it started, but the occupants weren't cast in to DreamNet as usual. The routines it ran were different.

"Training course commencing. Section One: Advancing, retreating, and strafing. The fundamentals of movement. Perform each action one hundred thousand times. Begin."

Ten thousand times?

Jin Tao blinked. For real? That many times?

His surprise was interrupted when the screen flashed. A series of floating arrows hung in the air, pointing forward. Instinctively, he coaxed his simulated mecha in to motion. As his suit stepped forward, the arrow changed, pointing left. He moved left.

The arrows changed with each command, and he continued as instructed. With each correct movement, the arrows changed quicker. Jin Tao narrowed his eyes in concentration.

It was easy in the beginning, as the commands came slow. He felt his hands relax from the warm-up. However, as the sim program continued and the arrows sped up, Jin Tao began to find it difficult keeping up.

Too fast... this is too fast, right? Jin Tao's brows furrowed as he struggled against the program.

However, he still wasn't being overwhelmed. Much to his surprise, he discovered that – though difficult – he was hanging in there. The arrows popped in to existence, and almost automatically his hands were in

motion. There wasn't any means to test it currently, but Jin Tao was sure his hand speed was much faster than it had been. Maybe it was a result of the training.

Front, back, left, right. These were the basic commands for moving a suit. Even a child could do it. But the randomly generated commands were coming faster, and that's where the students encountered their limitations. Moreover, it was boring! Four hundred thousand commands, he was asking. They weren't considered crack students for no reason, so it took them little time to understand this was to teach them about driver fatigue.

An hour passed. Fingers, wrists and arms felt sore and heavy. Their bodies were already fatigued. Fortunately, their Disciplines were no longer sealed. Finally they could modulate their body's output with their powers. This ended up being a curse more than a blessing, though, and they reluctantly continued.

Outside of the pods, Lan Jue watched his students from diagnostic screens. From here he was able to monitor the situation in each cockpit. He shot Hua Li a thumbs-up.

"Yup, I'd say this is mean enough. There's some weird sadomasochistic thing going on with the Poseidon Group, isn't there." One hundred thousand times. Forget the students, just looking at the number was giving him a headache.

Hua Li answered with a shrug. "Guess you should ask my dad that question. I had to go through the same cruelty. My father holds the record for fastest to complete the segment. Eleven days and thirteen hours. I finished it in a little over twelve days. All I remember is crawling out of that damn pod, about half my original body-weight, seeing double. Not the most pleasant experience."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I'm pretty sure this is classified as psychological torture. It's a pity it won't have much of an effect for me, otherwise I'd be tempted to give it a shot."

"Yeah, forget about it," Hua Li said. "We have the god-battle soon at any

rate. We have our own pair training to consider, keep our bodies in shape.”

“Yeah,” Lan Jue agreed. “Speaking of, I wonder if Chu Cheng knows his uncle is a Paragon. More importantly, the Gourmet never accepted the mantle of Hades, likely leaving it for his nephew. It doesn’t look like our newly-minted Infernal Vanguard has any plans to return to his former family.”

Hua Li chuckled. “If I were in his position, I wouldn’t go back either. Life on the Avenue is slow, laid-back. Hardly any responsibility. I can bet the Gourmet has grown quite attached to the lifestyle. It sure is a surprise to discover Skyfire Avenue has so many titans of the Adept world though, I’ll tell you.”

This brought a bitter smirk to Lan Jue’s face. “You and me both, brother. I had no idea just how strong the Avenue really was until recently. It was like the two Western Citadels came crashing it and hit an iron curtain. But the Clairvoyant...” The memory of the respected, elderly leader of the Avenue filled him with a gloomy depression.

Of the Avenue’s Paragons, Lan Jue had the most contact with the Wine Master. After him was the Keeper. He only met the Clairvoyant a couple of times, but that didn’t diminish his estimation of the man in the least. In some ways, he was far and away superior to his two counterparts.

Lan Jue would forever remember the Clairvoyant’s eyes, orbs that seemed capable of piercing reality. He could see the universe in a way no one else could.

Hua Li sighed. “It doesn’t matter how strong you are. In the end all humanity must bend to natural law. The Clairvoyant’s help and accomplishments will never be forgotten, so long as humans exist. He will be remembered in the annals of history. He might not have been the strongest Paragon, but if you wanted me to pick one person who was widely beloved and respected, it’d be him.”

Lan Jue agreed. “You’re right in that. Now all we can do is swear to protect and maintain the organization he spent his life building.”

Hua Li's answer was a determined nod. "Let's go. We have some training of our own to conduct. I won't go easy on you this time, I'm warning you. I've been enlightened by all of this myself. Today, you'll know the extent of my power."

Lan Jue looked at his friend.

"Pff-ha ha ha!"

Chapter 269: Hand Cramps

It is said there are many levels of hell, and to these students the sim pods were certainly one of them.

After the first day, their eyes were bloodshot. After hours of careful piloting their breathing was ragged and their hands shaky.

The computer program which ran the sim was designed to base it's pacing on the pilot's physical condition. The speed rose and fell, adjusting to be only slightly less than their highest capability. The better a pilot was, the faster the program delivered commands. Naturally it also meant they could finish their task sooner.

Moving mecha suits wasn't just shoving a joystick. It took more than a single button-press to perform an action. All of the commands had to be performed smoothly, harmoniously – because even the slightest error could mean your enemy's victory.

Four hundred thousand movements, and this was just the first go 'round!

The first lunch, many ate quite a lot of food, of course due to the amount of exercise they'd endured. Those unfortunate souls vomited it out by the end of the day. Working for so long in the sim pod was torturous, with the spins dizzying and the shocks nauseating. It was quite a physical trial.

What the students didn't know, was that these pods were designed for adepts for seventh ranked or higher. Several of them would likely be unable to finish the program.

The deadline was twenty days. The Poseidon group designed it that way, with a final evaluation when the program was complete. Anyone who was capable of finishing could certainly be considered an ace pilot. Sovereign-rank was their destiny.

If Lan Jue had wanted to perform this test at the beginning of the training, he suspected less than one fifth would be able to pass. Now, however...

Tang Xiao finally awoke from his meditations the day the sim pod

training began. He opened his eyes, revealing pupil-less orbs of white. His eyes rolled back to normal, but then his whole body began to react.

His large form grew thinner, almost like a new person. By the time the shift was finished, he looked like a far more toned – and, strangely, handsome – version of himself. He looked more like his sister as well.

Looking down at himself, Tang Xiao's face showed satisfaction. He found it difficult to contain his excitement, and it flashed in his eyes.

"You're ok?" a moving voice intruded, from not far away.

He turned his head, and his eyes met a silver-masked woman who waited nearby. He knew it was – hers was a voice he knew well. His face twitched instinctively. "Hey Mika," he said through a nervous laugh.

Mika nodded her head in satisfaction. "The boss was right. Under all this pressure, your Discipline has had a second awakening. It looks like you've broken through to eighth rank. With your genetic talent, you've probably already surpassed Wang Hongyuan. What he needs is to accumulate more energy, then he'll break through as well."

Tang Xiao smiled. "What's the next exercise?"

"The complete the routine in the sim pods." Under Mika's instruction, Tang Xiao quickly gathered himself and entered the program.

The first to finish the initial leg was Tan Lingyun. She completed the simulation in one day and four hours. Four thousand high-speed commands – she felt like she needed to puke.

Then the second leg started.

"Complete in sequence: eight-directional movement commands. If you fail, the exercise starts over."

The four commands from earlier became eight. There were no specifications on how many times this would be needed, only that missing one would start the whole thing over.

Of course, when the arrows appeared they did so significantly faster.

The program AI was constructed to modulate speed, determined by how

well they did in the first section. Tan Lingyun, therefore, had to perform at her peak capabilities from the very beginning.

In total, the sim lessons numbered eight, and all of them were concerned with fundamentals. That did not mean, though, that they would be easy.

Hua LI had only given Lan Jue and Chu Cheng a basic overview of the training method. Even with just the cursory information, they were excited. With every success, they were met with an even meaner procedure to overcome.

Once their bodies were beaten down, it was time to torture the mind.

Some of the students tried to ease off during training, and sneak in a rest. However, if they failed to react within three seconds, ear-piercing sirens would sound and their laziness would be broadcast to every pod. “Lightning to keep you awake! You want to be lazy? Hah!”

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A week passed. The students were revealed for lunch every day, and every day they looked paler. They could barely keep their eyes open. However as much as they burned for rest, Zeus’ Amazons wouldn’t allow it. Under the beautiful women’s supervision, as soon as their meals were done the students were right back in the pods. Hua Li and Lan Jue, meanwhile, were nowhere to be seen.

Other than his responsibilities in etiquette class, and his weekly visits to Grace hospital, Lan Jue spent the majority of his time in DreamNet training with Hua Li.

The results were clear and pronounced. He felt as though he was returned to his peak, three years ago. He was pushing himself hard, and there were no small numbers of reminders as to why. The last few days, advertisements for the Dreamburg god battle were being blasted to every corner of the Three Alliances. It was shaping up to be a widely-viewed event, to say the least.

DreamNet was preparing for the intense load, and had a lot to do in preparation. Advertisements were everywhere, for anyone who logged in.

Highlights from the previous god-battles were on a constant loop. Their opponents were left a mystery, revealed only as 'Unknown' to the curious.

Four versus five, so far that was the only news they had on the fight. The Four Divine Monarchs, against five enigmatic challengers. Who would emerge victorious? There was no shortage of opinion on the matter, and a vote was arranged.

The Monarchs held an overwhelming majority. Eighty percent.

Over the last several years, no one had really heard anything from the Divine Monarchs. However, their names still remained top of the lists in Sanctuary. Any and all news about them was still immediately disseminated – they were superstars.

Lan Jue sat cross-legged within his Avenue warehouse, meditating peacefully. Likewise lost in introspection was Hua Li, sat beside him in a black flight suit.

In his tight-fitting clothes, with his handsome face and pretty hair, it was a blessing no fans were nearby. Surely they wouldn't be able to contain themselves if they saw their idol in such daring garb. Poseidon truly was something.

"It's time," Hua Li said, opening his eyes and looking toward Lan Jue.

Lan Jue nodded. Indeed he was right, it was time. The god-battle was here.

The two young men rose as one, and walked across the warehouse in silence. Wordlessly, they entered their sim pods, and booted in to DreamNet. There was a flash of light, and their monitors revealed Dreamburg. They were already in Sanctuary.

Almost immediately they felt the weight of a million viewers on them. It hung thick in the air like a mist. In Sanctuary alone, there were over a hundred mecha pilots of all styles, watching with bated breath.

Lan Jue and his companion shared a glance. This was quite the scene to be greeted with.

Everyone one of the spectators in Dreamburg were god-class pilots! In all the Alliances added together, there were perhaps three hundred god-ranked pilots on record. About half were here now.

The Divine Monarchs would have been familiar with several of them, having been former competitors. Others were unknown. More than a few glared with open hostility.

“Zeus. Poseidon. You finally decide to join us. This is quite the spectacle we have today! They say the victor gets an s-ranked power gem. Are you thinking of selling it?” The offer came from a man with a strange, jocular voice.

Lan Jue spied the voice’s origin, coming from a small and frail individual. The man stood before them, with abnormally long arms folded across his chest. His face was hidden behind a clown mask. The fingers resting on his biceps twitched and jerked restlessly.

“Knave. It’s been a long time.” Lan Jue called back amicably.

“Indeed it has,” the tiny man responded. “What has kept you so busy these last few years? Why haven’t we seen you? You know I’ve been waiting for a rematch since forever. We really should, losing is not something I’m comfortable with.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “When we get a chance maybe. Unless you’re one of our opponents today.”

“Take a guess,” the clown chortled mirthfully.

“I think not,” Lan Jue said. “Truth be told I hope you aren’t!”

The Knave shrugged. “Unfortunately, your wish is not granted. I won’t go easy on you, later.”

“You’re really participating?” Both Lan Jue and Hua Li asked simultaneously. Both of their faces adopted a distinct shade of displeasure at the revelation. Thankfully, their masks hid it.

He was a strange looking man, and yet not. He even had a name, simple and yet not. In reality he was one of Dreamburg’s strongest denizens.

And, the fastest hand-speed on record. The Knave liked to boast that no one knew how fast his hands actually were.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, was fourth on the leader boards with eighty-seven commands per second. And the clown? One hundred and three. There really was nothing – man or otherwise – with faster hands than he.

He and the Knave had indeed fought once, here in DreamNet. It had been one of his most trying ordeals. He could still remember struggling to keep up, but more important the Knave was the only person he'd ever seen who could properly employ three dopplegangers.

There were disadvantages to having too fast a speed, though. He sometimes had difficulty controlling his hands as they worked at higher speeds. Lan Jue had won their exchange by analyzing the Knave's habitual movements. He'd gambled on it, and the gamble had paid off.

In the end, the Knave occupied number ten on the lists of Sanctuary's strongest pilots.

At this point, Lan Jue's hand speed had increased substantially, but no matter the change it was still a far cry from what this clown was capable of.

Although single battles were different from team fights, having the Knave on your enemy's team was a nightmare the Divine Monarchs would have to face.

Chapter 270: Prelude

So it was, upon learning of the Knave's presence on the opposing teams, both Lan Jue and Hua Li's expressions darkened.

The Divine Horsemen numbered four, remember. But they wouldn't be facing an even competitor – the challenging team had five. If the Knave was any indication, the others on his team were likely to be just as frightening.

“Other than you, who else can we expect?” Lan Jue inquired.

“It's a secret.” The Knave cackled at them. “I can't tell you! But don't worry, you'll find out soon. Anyway, they're all old friends. You have nothing to worry about. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go warm up my fingers.”

Old friends? It was the last thing Lan Jue and Hua Li wanted to hear. At the very least, ‘old friends’ meant they were just as strong – if not stronger – than that smug clown. The battle was looking to be more difficult than they anticipated.

“A-Jue... it looks like maybe that DreamNet Guardian is determined to have us lose.” Hua Li muttered quietly.

Lan Jue had already recovered from the unpleasant shock of the Knave's revelation. He addressed his friend calmly. “Don't think too much. We have to face the situation objectively, and tactfully. The Knave's appearance was a game. They're trying to get in our heads, so no matter what we encounter we must keep our composure. Come on, with the big guy on our side, what do we have to be anxious about?”

“Ngh.” Hua Li nodded once, and said nothing more.

There was a flash of red, then, and a silhouette appeared directly before them. It was Chu Cheng, garbed in the regalia of his avatar – Hades.

“Here.” Hua Li instructed.

Chu Cheng turned to pinpoint his friend's voice, then approached. “What's up?” he asked. “Are you guys all set? I'm here to whoop some ass.”

So you guys back me up, right. I'm looking for a pentakill. Solid?"

Hua Li gave him a flat look. "The Knave is one of the challengers. How's that pentakill looking now?"

Chu Cheng stared at Hua Li for a moment, stunned. "The Knave? I thought he was gone from Dreamburg ages ago. He was always on about 'Oh my name will be legendary – that's enough for me!'"

Lan Jue reiterated his assurances. "It doesn't matter who we're facing. Our power as a group is oppressive. The stronger our enemies, the harder we're going to fight."

Chu Cheng chortled with sinister mirth. "No doubt. If the sky were falling, the big guy would be there to hold it up, amiright? Speaking of, where is the guy? You think he forgot?"

"You're confusing me with yourself." The deep, somewhat terrifying voice came from behind Chu Cheng.

Hades' face froze. He slowly, slowly turned around. Clad in a jasper flight suit, hidden behind a cyan mask, was Prometheus.

He approached the other Divine Monarchs. Hades, Zeus, Poseidon and Prometheus stood in a circle, facing one another. Prometheus waved his right hand, and they were cut off from the outside world by an orb of cyan light.

"It's time to discuss tactics." There was no greeting, no small talk. Strategy was first and foremost – such was the Military temperament.

Lan Jue and the others were accustomed to it. In fact, they'd be worried if he'd said hello.

The number of spectators in Dreamburg's Sanctuary was growing by the second. By now there must have been close to two hundred.

It was true that the fight was due to be broadcast to every household in the Three Alliances, but what could be better than watching this 'in person'? However, only god-level pilots with exceptionally deep pockets were going to have the option.

These were some of the most illustrious mecha pilots in all the known universe competing in DreamNet. This moment was the culmination of a month's excitement, and the realization of many mecha combat fans' dreams.

The pre-show was already underway. A series of one-on-one battles were conducted to rev the crowd up for the main event. They, too, were god-ranked pilots. DreamNet had spared no effort or expense on making this a visual spectacle.

The majority of those present, however, deigned not to observe the pre-show. They were only here for one thing.

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NEU, West Hill.

The training proceeded, like an unstoppable raging inferno. The students had long forgotten how long they'd been locked in these damn pods. They'd forgotten how much they wanted to join this training... before they knew what it would entail.

Zeus' Four Amazons were also in the simulation, though they were there to witness the games. They had recording equipment ready, and planned to share it with the students when all was said and done. They had to focus on finishing their tasks, first.

The pre-show was something to behold. There were two mecha pilots currently battling, both god-ranked, and masterful in their control of their suits. Each expertly-executed maneuver set the crowd to cheering. They were really showing off what it meant to be a god-ranked pilot.

However, from what the Amazons could tell they didn't really have their hearts in it. They waited in silence for their boss to reveal himself.

In regards to the Amazons' relative power levels, Mika was the strongest. Next was Lin Guoguo, and the two of them were both ninth level. Ke'er and Xiuxiu were more or less even, though the blue-haired Northern beauty was perhaps slightly further along. After all she, like Lan Jue, was a dual-Disciplined Adept. Xiuxiu's strongest manifestation was as

the Ashura godblade, Zeus' weapon. Once she changed, she had no control over how her power was employed.

So essentially, this meant Xiuxiu was the weakest of the four.

But that was with regards to Talent. Mecha piloting was another matter. The order was turned on its head when the suits were involved. Having grown up in the Dark Citadel, forced to train for ascension to take over as Satan, Mika started late. She was a Sovereign-class pilot at present.

Lin Guoguo and Ke'er were similarly situated here. Since their Disciplines were unique, they were also late to the piloting game. They were also Sovereign pilots. There was only one god-ranked pilot in Lan Jue's coterie, and that was Xiuxiu.

Xiuxiu and her mecha Ashura were like a natural fit, a force to reckoned with. Though it was not as fine as Thor, it was like its appendage. Anyone who knew him understood one important fact; with the Ashura Blade-Maiden at his side, Zeus was a terrifying opponent.

Xiuxiu had spent her life with Lan Jue, growing alongside him, training as he did. In fact, for mecha combat she actually trained with him together. She eventually slowed in comparison, largely because she was genetically inferior. Her status as a god-ranked pilot, though, was well deserved.

At present, all four of Zeus' special ladies watched nervously in the darkness of their sim pods.

Over the last month, there had been no way to escape the prominent advertisements for the god battle. Though it never seemed to trouble Lan Jue, the same couldn't be said for his Amazons.

At least half of the two-hundred billion residents of the Three Alliances had their eyes glued to their screens. This wasn't going to be easily-won glory. For the Divine Monarchs, the significance of this event was enormous. How could these four girls, so invested in their employer, not be nervous?

Who on earth would be Zeus' opponents? They had been spending a

great deal of time ruminating on the question.

“Why aren’t they starting yet? There have been three pre-show fights already, so I guess it should be soon.” Ke’er whined through the closed-circuit connection the four women shared.

Lin Guoguo’s voice crackled through her speakers. “Soon. Have you seen the viewer numbers? Over one hundred billion people are logged in to DreamNet’s feed. It’s crazy! One billion have paid the fee for a VIP connection. This has got to be a record, right?”

The VIP feed was available to anyone with the money to pay. It allowed them multi-angle viewing of the action as it happened, including focus on the competitor of their choice. For fans of the Divine Monarchs, this was a dream come true. DreamNet knew this, and the cost for such a privilege was nothing sort of astronomical.

Mika snorted. “Don’t be in such a rush. Should be any minute. When they organized it, DreamNet’s people said it was to encourage interest in mecha piloting. It’s no surprise they’ll hype it up even further by dragging it out. According to the paperwork, this fight should be the best of five. It’s sure to satiate the viewers. I really hope the boss and them go three and out – really rub it in their faces!”

Xiuxiu’s voice was anxious. “It’ll be hard. When you got to their level of proficiency, even in five-on-five fights victory can be decided by the slightest mistake. The most important information right now is who is fighting who, and in that their enemies have an advantage. They know the Divine Monarchs very well, but boss and the others have no idea. They’re also DreamNet guardians, so they know every detail about the Monarchs and their tactics. Their strategies will absolutely take that in to account, and will be tailored specifically to tear them down. This isn’t even considering their numbers advantage. This will probably be very difficult. Without a chance at victory, the DreamNet guardians would never have set this whole thing up.”

“Xiuxiu’s right,” Mika replied. “But we should have faith in the boss. If there’s one thing he excels at, it’s pulling off the impossible. He’s like a

geyser: the more pressure he's under, the greater he'll burst out in the end."

Mika's words were followed immediately by Ke's excited yelp. "They're starting!"

Sure enough, the third and final pre-fight was finished. A purple mecha had completely routed its enemy for the victory. The entire arena was suddenly bathed in a soothing, golden light.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Hello, and welcome... to DreamNet." The alluring female voice arose from all directions. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen.

The voice was clear as a bell, and had a very noble quality. It was a voice that was hard to forget. Even if you listened carefully, it was impossible to find a flaw. It was the voice of every young man's dreams.

Just then, a column of light descended from the skies. A figure slowly descended from within.

She was a woman, pale and stunningly beautiful. A flowing, aqua blue dress covered her alluring figure. Her long dark hair flowed freely.

Her face bore no expression, even though the attention of billions of people were directed her way. Her hands were held lightly, crossed before her waist in genteel fashion. Every portion, every movement was the very definition of refinement.

"I, am Mo Xiao. It has been a long time." She offered a dainty curtsy, and her face adopted the faintest ghost of a smile. The sheer aesthetic beauty of it was reflected in the doe-eyes of every young man in attendance.

"It's her!" Xiuxiu exclaimed.

Chapter 271: Host Mo Xiao

Xiuxiu spent more time with Lan Jue than all the other Amazons combined, so certainly she knew who Mo Xiao was. President of the Gobi Entertainment Group, and Poseidon's agent.

Upon seeing her here, she was also reminded of the fact that Mo Xiao was the most famous host personality in the West, renowned throughout all the Alliances.

In fact, choosing to manage Poseidon was effectively retirement. She bowed out at the height of her career to preside of someone else's.

At the age of fifteen she was lauded as the best Holographic Presenter in the Western Alliance. Relying on her stunning appearance, moving voice and aloof persona, in a year she was a household name. She was often the host of DreamNet competitions since then, especially considering she was a god-ranked pilot herself. Her poignant commentary during the fights was enough to convince all skeptics. All of this culminated to make her the pre-eminent emcee to approach for this job.

In all of humanity, there was no shortage of beautiful women. But finding one who was strong, capable, intelligent and wife? That was as rare a find as an s-ranked gem stone.

Mo Xiao's reputation never waned, even after leaving the world of television personalities. On the contrary, it only increased. When the news of her taking over the Gobi Group hit the media, it spread like wildfire. Beforehand the decision had been kept very secret, which was surprising considering Gobi Group – or, as it was sometimes called, the Poseidon Group – was the largest and most successful media group in history. When the announcement was released that she would be taking over Gobi, it also revealed that she would be acting as Poseidon's manager, much to the crazed cheers of her fans.

Soon after, the news generated quite a lot of controversy. All of her male fans couldn't accept the revelation, but there was nothing they could do. After all, no matter who they were or how they looked, there was no way

they could match up to Poseidon. Poseidon's female fans were likewise distressed, for after torturous self-examination none could claim to be a match for Mo Xiao.

They were helpless witnesses to the natural pairing of the universes two most beautiful people, before their very eyes. With the two of them as a team, it was inevitable that they should take the entertainment world by storm.

Hua Li's earlier assurance were true; he was the biggest star humanity possessed. However, it was only after Mo Xiao's involvement that his reputation began to truly skyrocket, much higher than he'd ever have been able to achieve on his own. Mo Xiao's change from the front of the stage to behind, hiding herself from public view, actually earned her a great deal of support and adulation as well. Even Poseidon's female fans had to admire this competitor for the singer's heart.

Mo Xiao's appearance in this moment was an uproarious surprise, sending nearly all visitors to Dreamburg in to a tizzy. Viewer ratings nearly doubled, instantaneously.

Fortunately, DreamNet organizers anticipated this so their upgraded servers were able to handle the load. Mo Xiao, meanwhile, stood silent and regal within the column of light. With a small smile, she continued her introduction.

"It has been quite some time since I've stood on a stage, and this doubly true for DreamNet. Frankly speaking, I feel like a fish out of water. I promised myself when I acquired Gobi, that it would be my focus. This life was done."

"The Gobi Group has been my life now for years. But today, I break that oath. Today, because of you, I've returned home."

Cheers erupted in the area. Digital flowers rained upon Mo Xiao; gifts from loyal fans. It meant more knowing these transient gifts were more costly than anyone would care to admit.

Smiling, Mo Xiao continued. "When the DreamNet organizers approached me, they told me about this event. I knew that if I let this

opportunity pass, I would regret it for the rest of my life.”

“It is well known, that the DreamNet god battles are among the most splendid spectacles in all the Alliances. These battles see only the greatest pilots competing for glory, and prestige. Since the inception of Dreamburg, none of these magnificent clashes have been broadcast to the general public. In the world of mecha combat knowledge is key, therefore it was a legitimate concern to these pilots that showing off their abilities would ultimately bring them misfortune. With their tactics, strategies and habits laid bare, they ran the risk of inviting stiffer competition – maybe even the threat of harm. So it was that these battles were conducted in secret. Moreover, they have grown rarer. After all, rounding up ten god-ranked pilots for a friendly spar isn’t an easy task.”

At this point in her introduction, the faintest whisper of bitterness invaded her placid features. “To speak candidly, in my heart I did not wish for this competition to proceed. As you well know, Poseidon is among the competitors tonight. To me, he is the greatest pilot to have ever lived, and I do not wish anything to threaten that.”

Her apprehension resonated with Poseidon’s many fans. Beyond a doubt, the performer’s popularity outshone everyone else’s.

Mo Xiao paused, as though in thought. After a moment she went on. “But despite my concerns, Poseidon agreed. His brothers in arms, agreed. He even fled from me, his manager, so he could participate. In fact, I haven’t seen him since the recent Sounds of Nature concert. I guess I’m here mostly to make sure he doesn’t run off again.”

The faintest hint of underlying fury showed she wasn’t saying this in jest.

When Mo Xiao arrived, the massive screens arrayed around Dreamburg flashed to life. Her image was displayed in every corner. Hua Li, too, was surprised to see her appear. He had no idea she would be in attendance.

With her final assurances that there would be no escape, Hua Li’s face dropped in helplessness. It would likely be a while before he was able to leave her side.

“Poseidon, I know you can hear me. You better not try to run when this is finished. We still have a tour to perform. If you don’t, I’m pretty sure your fans will come after Gobi.”

It was a naked threat! Hua Li unconsciously tightened his hands in to fists.

Chu Cheng snickered at his friend’s side. “She gets crueler every time I see her. Bold, threatening you in front of hundreds of millions of people – and yet, awesome publicity. She really is something else! Why don’t I have such a talented secretary, huh? I tell you what A-Li, I think you should run. Go, be free. I’ll, uh... I’ll handle Mo Xiao.”

Hua Li shot the lascivious young man a glare. “How about you not give my dad a heart-attack. Try to be decent. Just, give it a try. Might feel good.”

Meanwhile, Mo Xiao continued. “I’m sure by now everyone is very curious who the Four Divine Monarchs will be facing in the arena today. I’m happy to share them with you. I could have secretly told Poseidon to help prepare him – but I did not. But alas, when he fled, Poseidon blocked my communicator number. I’ve been monitoring DreamNet since I received the news. So I ask you, ladies and gentlemen: do you want to know who has been chosen, and given a chance to route the mighty Divine Monarchs?”

“I’m sure you do, but before I introduce our challengers, allow me to share some background. Then perhaps you can guess their identities.”

“First, it must be mentioned that this magnificent display is hosted by DreamNet. They have spared no expense in making this the greatest celebration of mecha piloting in its history. With such high monetary stakes on the line, it must follow that the challengers have sufficient ability to challenge our heavily favored Monarchs. Where this not the case, what fun would it be to watch?”

“You know, the very first time I got my hands on the challenger list, my first instinct was to let out a slew of expletives. Fortunately, I was able to control myself. Such awful things aren’t in my vocabulary, and even if they were I wouldn’t dare use them today. Though I did not accept any

payment to host this event, business ethics come first and foremost.”

Here, Mo Xiao heaved a sigh. “I’m certain that by this point there has been no small amount of gambling surrounding today’s fight. Allow me to share my thoughts with you, before the bookies close up shop. If afterwards you want to change your bet, you should still have the opportunity.”

“Speaking emotionally, of course it is my hope that the Divine Monarchs prove victorious. Our beloved Poseidon is among them, so how could I not? How could they possibly lose? But upon seeing their competitors, I am not so sure. According to my own estimations, the Divine Monarchs have no more than a thirty-percent chance at victory. That’s a... hopeful estimate.”

All three Alliances exploded in a storm of shocked commotion.

The Four Divine Monarchs had dominated the DreamNet ranking for many years, and yet Mo Xiao appeared before them to give a generous estimate of thirty-percent! It was practically unthinkable. If she didn’t explain herself, even her reputation wouldn’t be enough to save her from being drowned in the spit of their angry fans.

Mo Xiao’s face bore a small grin. “Alright, let’s dispense with the suspenseful talk, shall we? You’ve heard my determination, so now you understand why I reacted the way I did. Now let’s meet today’s challengers!”

“The team our Divine Monarchs will be facing today, have given their team the name Star Alliance 1. They are composed of five members. Let’s welcome the first!”

At this time, a beam of shimmering light appeared at her back. It was a dazzling golden color that pierced the eyes of the viewers, and within it hung an indistinct silhouette.

“This challenger is ranked first in Dreamburg in the area of hand speed, with a staggering recorded speed of one hundred and three CPS! Single-handedly responsible for more hand cramps than anyone, it’s our own Phantom Knave of the Stars!”

The audience erupted. By now more than eleven billion people were tuned in, more than any other time in the history of DreamNet.

The Knave! This simple and humorous name rang like a thunderclap.

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1. Full credit for the English name goes to viole1369. Today we're a translator team!

Chapter 272: Oppressive Opponents

Mo Xiao took a deep breath, her expression solemn and serious. When she spoke again, her voice was grave. “Any true fan of mecha combat will know the Knave, at the very least by name. Often imitated, but never surpassed, his reputation is hard to beat. But lest we forget, he isn’t just the owner of the universes’ fastest hands. He is also tenth in total power level out of all Dreamburg’s illustrious god-ranked pilots, and the only known pilot to successfully use THREE dopplegangers in combat simultaneously. One hundred and three commands per second, ladies and gentlemen! If it were me, my hands would break before I could ever get close. This is not something the Knave need fear.”

“I can still recall when I first heard about him. He was so fast, he damaged DreamNet’s hardware – something that cost them dearly, I can assure you. It’s that much more surprising, then, that he came forward to represent DreamNet in this battle. Perhaps he paid them back. Now here he is, the fastest known pilot in the universe, a man whose reputation was built on skill.”

Little by little, the figure bathed in golden light became clearer. The same man who’d approached Lan Jue and Hua Li earlier reappeared.

Mo Xiao slowly turned, and made her way to the Knave’s side. “Greetings, Knave. Unless I’m mistaken, you once said your greatest wish is to become a legend. Is that why you decided to participate in today’s event?”

The Knave answered with a chuckle. “I had no choice! I have a family to support! But truly, I have returned because I am unwilling to admit defeat.”

Mo Xiao’s expression changed to one of surprise. “You’re saying there’s someone out there you feel is better than you? Someone with a better speed of hand?”

He shrugged. “Of course not, isn’t that just what you were saying? There were many who attempted, but none have come close. My legend is

solidified. But the reason I've been absent from Sanctuary wasn't due to any of that. No, it was because I lost a competition. None of the audience would have seen it, but a glance at the rankings would probably help you guess who bested me."

"But to spare you the suspense, Zeus was my better. That loss dropped me to tenth on the list of most powerful pilots. He rose to ninth. His hand speed was no threat, and his victory was only won by inches. I'm still not pleased with the result, and I don't believe it was a true indication of my power. For these last few years, I've trained hard. There's been progress. Now I have this opportunity to meet our King of Gods on the field of battle. I hope we get a chance to face each other directly out there."

"It sounds like you're holding on to a lot of resentment."

The Knave grinned back at Mo Xiao. "I'm far from resentful. I just want to recapture my old position, so that people know my real strength. Even you vastly underestimate what we're capable of. I'm going to give my own guess, that the Four Divine Monarchs have less than a ten percent chance to walk out of here the victors."

Mo Xiao's voice raised in wonder. "Isn't this a little over-confident?"

"Arrogance comes from power," the Knave haughtily replied.

Mo Xiao regarded him with helpless expression. "I'll have to admit you have a point. After seeing the line-up power is definitely something the Star Alliance has. Next, we have our second competitor, the Knave's compatriot."

Another column of light burst to life, illuminating the space beside the clown pilot.

"Among the god-ranked pilots," Mo Xiao quietly began, "there is a story. There are tales of one called the Paragon of the Sky, Singer of the Song of Ice and Fire 1, the Tyrant Shifter... you tell me, dear viewers, who is he?"

The communication platform, wherein the words and thoughts of distant viewers were streamed, was instantly flooded with a single name.

"That's right, you speak true: the Demon Dragon of Ice and Flame.

Fourteenth on the list of aggregate combat prowess. The Beastly UAV, Hong Hu. Interestingly, that's his real name, Yu Honghu. Honghu is a man of high aspirations – to dominate the heavens. So obsessed that it's become his catchphrase, Yu Honghu may not be in the top ten of powerful pilots but is unbeatable in competition of piloting ability. If there were a list of anthropomorphic pilots, he would dominate the listings. With his critical thinking and battlefield domination, he is any challenger's nightmare."

"I may also be able to reveal a small secret to my beloved audience. I once asked Poseidon; you four Monarchs are down a man, which means you're immediately the underdogs! If you had to pick a fifth member for your crew... a fifth Divine Monarch, who would you choose? He answered without hesitation – the Demon Dragon of Ice and Fire."

"I asked him why Yu Honghu? If you adhered to the rankings of the Sanctuary Lists, isn't he a less optimum choice than other, more powerful god-ranked pilots?"

"Honghu is like a chain of souls' Poseidon said. He explained that he linked everyone together, making them all stronger as a result like an architect. Unfortunately for Poseidon, his pick faces him now in combat."

Yu Honghu was an incredibly popular name among DreamNet fans. Mo Xiao's introduction was short, but highlighted just why that was.

Flight-heavy pilots were exceptionally commanding when it came to adaptability and air support. He was also a master tactician, and knew how to control the battlefield to his advantage.

Like the Knave before him, Yu Hongyuan slowly revealed himself to be a man of average build when the light receded. The most striking aspect of this man was his hair. Half was red, and half was blue. The rest of his ensemble – the mask and flight suit – were similarly colored to fit the scheme. He was hard to forget.

"How are we doing today, Honghu?" Mo Xiao smiled ever so slightly as she turned to the Demon Dragon.

Yu Honghu snorted derisively. "I was fine, but after your introduction

that's no longer the case. You should have told me earlier the Monarchs were interested. I'm a fan of Poseidon's!"

Mo Xiao's eyes lit up like dual crystal gemstones. "So you should show mercy in the coming competition!"

Yu Honghu crossed his arms. "The greatest respect I could show Poseidon, is to beat him on the field."

Mo Xiao pouted prettily at him. "What kind of fan is this! You better watch yourself when you get out there!"

The Knave couldn't restrain himself, and burst in to raucous laughter.

Mo Xiao turned back to the cameras, and gave her own dismissive sniff. "I believe it's clear from the first two members of the Star Alliance, that the team was composed with a single purpose in mind. With Yu Honghu's strategy and the Knave's speed, they are a terrifying team! But we're not finished. Let's introduce our third opponent, and tell me if you don't see the careful thought the organizers put in to their decisions."

"Among the Divine Monarchs there is one; their leader, their strongest. Prometheus, the Wise. Wind is his specialty, and our third competitor is similarly equipped. They call him the Master of Air 2, and his specialty in mecha piloting is aerodynamics. He turns his suit in to a mobile weapon, combining his knowledge with his control over the elemental force of air. I think it's clear, this man was chosen specifically to counter Prometheus. I'm sure you know who I'm speaking of; the Master of Air, twelfth on the list of most powerful pilots, riding Skyshade, please welcome the Windbreaker! Monarchs, you best be careful!"

The third column of light burst to life. The figure within wore a long, black robe and a mask of pearl white. He was a lithe and tall man, who had a calm poise that permeated the stage. A glance was enough to determine that he was an even-keeled gentleman.

"Salutations, Windbreaker. Or would you prefer I call you the Master of Air, or perhaps Sky Demon?" Mo Xiao engaged him with a small smile.

"Whatever you like," the man answered placidly.

Mo Xiao went on. "So am I right in assuming that your presence in this team was specifically designed to counteract Prometheus?"

"You are," he returned.

Mo Xiao chuckled prettily. "A man of few words, aren't you? Are you confident of your success? After all, Prometheus is ranked number one on the aggregate power list."

The Windbreaker shook his head. "There are no guarantees."

"Um, alright." Mo Xiao helplessly responded. "Very well, no more questions. You're like a tube of toothpaste; squeeze and squeeze until you get a little something. Let's move on to our fourth competitor, shall we? Like the Windbreaker, he was chosen as a block for another one of our intrepid heroes. Among the Divine Monarchs there is one whose explosive power is storied. His balanced abilities have catapulted him to the top ten of every one of Sanctuary's lists. I speak of course, of Zeus and his mighty mecha Thor. I am sure there is no one watching who isn't familiar with the sapphire nightmare and its pilot. A legend in the mercenary world, his counter will have to be someone special. And they are, for similar to his enemy our fourth competitor's Discipline, is Thunderbolt! The perfect joining of lightning and thunder."

"Frankly speaking, I'm not sure of the difference between his Discipline and Zeus', but I am certain his presence means trouble for our God of Lightning. It is without question that he will fight to contain Zeus, perhaps even suppress him entirely. Number seven on the power lists, the one known as the Voltaic Wraith, Thunderclap! He pilots his mecha of the same name. As I'm sure many of you know, Zeus is actually ninth on the total power list. He and Thunderclap are the only two lightning Adepts to rise so high."

The fourth column, and the fourth figure come in to view. Thunderclap wasn't as tall as Windbreaker, who stood next to him, but he was exceedingly burly. His face was hidden behind a blue mask, which glittered with flecks of gold. Of all those revealed for Star Alliance thus far, he was highest on the power list.

“Hello, Thunderclap. A moment ago the Knave expressed his desire to face Zeus on the field, one on one. What about you? With Disciplines so similar, are you going to seek him out for a test of strength and superiority?” Mo Xiao asked.

“There’s no comparison,” Thunderclap growled. “Our Disciplines are not the same. I’ll prove this to you all during the fight. Zeus and I have any interacted, but I’ve seen him fight. In the real world I’d likely be little competition for him. But in the virtual world he’s going to have a hell of a time against me.”

“Why is that?” Mo Xiao asked in curiosity.

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1. Yes, the title of Gorge R. R. Martin’s series. I triple checked so there’s no mistaking, and now I’m curious why he’s called this.
2. Note that they make the distinction here between wind (风) and air (气). I’m sure this will be more clearly revealed in the future.

Chapter 273: Starlord.

Thunderclap's explanation was delivered with cool indifference. "His Discipline is too balanced, too calm. Mine, though, has been specialized."

Mo Xiao looked interested. "I see. You're called the Voltaic Wraith because of your unpredictability. You sure seem to have faith in your abilities!"

The one called Thunderclap didn't answer.

Mo Xiao turned away from him, and walked the short distance to the front of the stage. "Are we feeling anxious for the Four Divine Monarchs yet? With these four challengers, how could we not? Already their total power isn't far below our defending champions. Not to mention, they've been specifically chosen as counters. Even then, though, I feel it would be very difficult for the Star Alliance to achieve victory. At least, that would be the case if there were only four of them. After all, the Divine Monarchs have been friends and brothers-in-arms for years. They know each others' tactics, and have become a finely tuned combat machine. Group battles are very different from solo challenges you know – cooperation is everything. Here the Star Alliance is at a disadvantage, since they don't have the same symbiotic relationship."

"But lest we forget, the Star Alliance is not a four-man team. Five members will enter the arena to face off against the Monarchs. We have one still to introduce, and it just so happens to be their leader. When I tell you who it is, you'll understand why I have such dismal hopes for Poseidon and his friends!"

A final, enormous column of dazzling golden light shot down from overhead. It was easily twice the diameter of the other spotlights. The other pilots, despite their fame and arrogant personal, retreated from the column and allowed it to take center position upon the stage.

The shadow of a tall man appeared within, partially hidden. Then something strange occurred, for as they watched the golden light was infiltrated by twinkling dots of starlight. On the outset the twinkling spots

were golden, like the light they inhabited. However gradually they became an alluring silver. They grew in number and luminescence until it seemed the whole world, much less the stage, was a sea of starlight.

Mo Xiao's form disappeared in the blaze of silver, but her gentle voice still cooed in the ears of the billions of audience members.

"In the world of mecha pilots there is a special group of men, who they call Gods. They are living legends, who have abilities that transcend mere mortality, who ride in on machines that are like gods themselves. They stand at the peak of humanity, visions of perfection who command terrible power. Among these elite few, there is one; a legend among legends."

"There is one who has never been defeated in combat. Whenever he appears, a madness consumes DreamNet. Once, in full view of the public, he defeated five terrifying challengers all alone. Before the rise of the Monarchs, he dominated the listings. Even with the arrogance to face a team on his own, he has never lost a fight."

"That is until ten years ago, when he mysteriously disappeared without a trace. According to the rules of Sanctuary, a pilot who is absent for more than five years has his rankings removed. Any information we have is ancient history. As the Monarchs rose to prominence, they took over as the top God Team... because the top spot was suddenly left open. But there was one list no one dare tamper with. In fact, the keepers of DreamNet came together to decree, that his name will forever live at the top of this one, special list. It's a list he still dominates to this day, a list that all of DreamNet, Dreamburg, Sanctuary, even real-world pilots agree is the only list that really matters. Total Combat Prowess."

Already there were many in the crowd who had begun cheering raucously. In their hearts, and especially in the hearts of the older generation of pilots, one name was written.

Lan Jue, Hua Li and Chu Cheng spoke, all in unison.

"It can't be..."

Even Lan Qing, a man who routinely stared down armies with the calm

of a Buddha, clenched his fists.

Mo Xiao's voice rose in a crescendo of emotion. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the powerhouse of the Star Alliance. The invincible warrior of DreamNet. First under Heaven 1, the Starlord Deimos 2!"

The Starlord! A simple name that raced through the crowd like a nuclear weapon. The audience erupted in to insanity.

The name had already surpassed legendary status. In the world of mecha piloting the Starlord was practically inhuman, no less storied and respected than the greatest Paragons. Perhaps even more so.

Since the creation of the first mecha suit to now, no one has ever come close to his level of power and mastery.

Deimos. The name was an intrinsic part of the cultural zeitgeist. No one knew who he actually was, which only lent an element of mystery to his domineering story. There had never been any sightings in the real world, either. His mecha, also called Starlord, was as famous as he was.

There were countless pilots who complained that he was a glitch in the system, when he first appeared. Recordings of his fights were worth more than one's own life. For most in the world of mecha piloting, this was their idol.

Never once since he achieved it had Starlord's position as most powerful pilot ever been usurped. It has been twenty years, but the name remains.

This was the leader of the Star alliance, and their opponent: The Invincible Starlord.

His figure slowly came in to view. He wore a white robe which reflected the light from a host of multi-colored stars that followed him. His face was concealed by an unadorned mask, white as driven snow.

With his appearance, the DreamNet server array was immediately in danger of overheating from the strain. Their backups kicked in to mitigate some of the insane response DreamNet users were throwing their way.

Could they be blamed? Who could have imagined the Four Divine

Monarchs would be facing the uncontested master of mecha pilots, a man who had vanished for a decade?

Now their true enemy was revealed. Starlord, God among gods.

Now the truth was revealed, with the Monarchs facing five exceptional God-ranked pilots, led by a living legend. Mo Xiao's determination made far more sense now. Even a thirty percent chance of victory seemed generous.

Not even thirty percent! The Knave's pompous threats were disregarded by many in the audience, but their hearts sank with the appearance of Deimos. Few doubted the clown now. Now, ten percent seemed like a fair estimate.

Still others had suspected this fight would be dull. While the Star Alliance was good, the Monarchs were an unstoppable force to be reckoned with. The challengers weren't strong enough to compete. But with their leader revealed, no one could underestimate the Star Alliance. They were terrifying.

Anyone who was capable of landing their name on Sanctuary's combat prowess top ten lists was a hero for mecha pilots. Reality was a different matter, considering the addition of Disciplines, but here they stood on the shoulders of humanity, elevated as celebrities.

Those who achieved such high status were rarely encountered in DreamNet. Any news of one of them appearing was a source of great excitement and gossip among fans. This was taken to insane degrees with Deimos, who no one had heard hide nor tail of for ten years.

The Star Alliance had chosen their name well. Indeed, this was a team of superstars, where only the greatest were summoned. All five of them boasted a top twenty ranking on the charts.

Of the Monarchs, Prometheus was third. Zeus was ninth, Hades seventeenth, and Poseidon nineteenth. However, as a team their totals were far less impressive, not to mention they were short a man.

Until this moment, no one has been able to upset Deimos's one on five

record. As the Knave might say, legends are legends. For those in the audience, the Starlord's appearance was already worth the price of admission.

Once again the number of subscribed users surged. The number jumped to five hundred million in no time at all 4

Lan Jue turned his head to face Hua Li and Chu Cheng. The look in their eyes said more than words could ever express. Never in a million years had they anticipated facing Deimos.

"Mr. Deimos, thank you very much for agreeing to participate." Mo Xiao stood at the man's side. Her voice was full of respectful deference. Even though she herself was a god-ranked pilot, this man was the best of his generation, possibly the best to ever have lived. The Starlord was an idol to innumerable pilots, and deserved the respect that entailed.

Deimos responded with a laugh. His warm, magnetic voice flowed from the mask. "And a very hearty thank you to our beautiful hostess."

As Mo Xiao spoke, her hand pressed against the swell of her chest. "You know, my heart is racing. When I was little you were my hero. If you would have asked me then, I would never have believed one day I'd be sharing the stage with you in DreamNet."

This earned another chuckle from the man. "Indeed! I'm quite old now, and this will probably be my last appearance in DreamNet as a combatant. After today, I will be announcing my retirement. The future of Sanctuary will be absent the Starlord. I will be submitting my demands that my name be stricken from the records so that the younger generation can have their shot."

"You're retiring?" she asked in surprise. "Why did you choose to return for this fight, and as their leader? Unless I'm mistaken, this should be your first time in this position."

Deimos huffed. "No one is strong forever. Just as life wanes as we near the winter of our days, the same is said of mecha pilots."

Mo Xiao nodded. "I really must know, why did you choose this fight to

come back after such a long hiatus, especially as team leader? Unless I'm mistaken, this is your first time taking on the role."

"When I chose to fade out ten years ago, it was because I felt that DreamNet had no further need for me." Deimos began. "I was also too old to represent it like I had. As everyone knows, controlling a mecha sets quite a strain on the body. This is just as true for the simulations as it is for the real thing. As I am now, I'm perhaps only a third or fourth of where I was during my peak. Already I find it difficult to remain in DreamNet for very long. As for why I'm here, there are two reasons. The first is to bid farewell to my fans and friends. The second, is so that I can see what constitutes excellence in today's world. I'm here to see just how powerful the new generation is."

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1. A phrase used for ancient emperors.
2. Naming note: The name TJSS has given him is 月空, literally translated as 'Moon Void'. Interesting as that is, it doesn't fit the epicness of this guy. Unable to find a closer equivalent, I decided to name him after one of the many moons that dot our solar system. I settled on Deimos, which is the name of both the Greek God of Terror (due to his terrifying prestige on the battlefield, and keeping with the Greek naming theme) and a moon for Mars.
3. In the previous chapter they claimed he was first. After double checking, the list names were the same, so it was likely just a mistake by the author. This number should be his actual ranking.
4. Potentially confusing. Chinese numbers are weird in and of themselves – to the point where my assistant teachers and I would have to argue and write out any numbers we were trying to teach kids. The reason for this is because they don't go in to the 'ten-' whatever, like ten thousand. Instead they call that 一万, or 'one ten thousands'. So one hundred thousand would be 'ten ten thousands'. One billion, you can imagine, gets tougher. To compound the issue there are VIP fees you can pay to get a special video feed, which he'll occasionally

delineate separate from total viewership. So for clarities' sake, there are one hundred billion people from all the alliances watching the show. Five hundred million of them are payed in to the VIP stream. I think. It did say more than that before, so who knows really. A lot, is what we're trying to get at.

Chapter 274: Wheel of Fortune

Mo Xiao let out a sigh. “Only a fourth! I must admit, this eases my mind greatly. I’m sorry, Starlord – I must watch what I say, but you must understand that this involves our beloved Poseidon.”

Though you could not see his face, Deimos’ voice sounded as though it were coming from around a smile. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. But you know, I was quite handsome myself, in my younger years.”

Mo Xiao giggled flirtatiously. “If we were born in the same generation I’d be very interested! But despite your humble assurances you’re not at your peak, I do believe any team with you in it is unlikely to fail. Even though I want to stand by Poseidon, I can’t see how he and his team have any chance at victory.”

Deimos shook his head. “Not so, of course they have a chance. Combat isn’t as simple as a contest of pure might. How your power is used, what tactics you employ, those are more important. Prometheus is a young pilot I respect greatly, and I hope he surprises me today. I greatly look forward to losing to his team.”

It was a strange sentiment, and one that would likely be considered arrogant if it had come from anyone else’s mouth. Coming from Deimos, however, it was simply fact.

Mo Xiao responded by offering Deimos a low, respectful bow. She then returned to the front of the stage.

“Very well. Now, all of today’s challengers have been revealed. But where there are challengers, there are protagonists! And our heroes for today have dominated the Sanctuary top lists for years. I’m sure we’re all very familiar with who they are, so I’ll waste no further time with introductions. Please welcome your Divine Monarchs!”

“The God of Wisdom, Prometheus and his mecha, Coeus! He is our Monarchs’ commander and strategist.”

“The Lord of Hell, Hades, riding his mecha Cerberus. His explosive

power is as frightening as his Discipline!”

“Lord of Lightning, Zeus, the legendary King of Mercenaries. Mecha: Thor. The perfect combination of speed and power, with a head as cool as a veteran commander. He is the only Monarch who is in the top ten of three lists; combat prowess, god-team battles, and hand speed.”

“Saving the best for last, our final hero is a man I love as much as I hate. Poseidon, if you don’t come home after this competition, I will announce to the world precisely where you’re hiding. You will drown in a flood of frenzied fans!” Mo Xiao’s pretty voice had adopted a decided vicious undertone.

“Poseidon. Mecha: Triton. His specialty is control and defense. Ghost of the battlefield, and your God of the Seas!”

Four identical columns of golden light descended from the heavens. Four figures appeared as dark silhouettes in the blazing light, eventually revealed to the masses. Prometheus, with his black and green mask; Hades, in red; Zeus in gold; and Poseidon, in a mask of sea blue.

The four men were all of approximate stature, tall and imposing. Though they were hidden behind masks, their appearance nonetheless set the crowd to roaring.

Mo Xiao’s voice rose to overcome the din. “Ladies and gentlemen, this much-anticipated fight is about to begin. Pilots will be given ten minutes to warm up and prepare. Then, let us witness what promises to be one incredible fight – what DreamNet has dubbed the Miracle Battle! The Star alliance – lead by their terrifying and powerful commander – facing off against the legendary Divine Monarchs. This is the wonderful spectacle we have in store! Beyond any doubt, this battle will forever be burned in your memories. It will go down in history as the greatest DreamNet battle ever recorded.”

Suddenly the world around them shimmered, and everything became illusory, like a dream. A few moments later, and the simulated world was clear once again.

Dark green, crimson, violet and sky-blue, the Monarchs dashed across

the screens in their mechas. The various sim enemies around them violently exploded under their assault. Their earthshaking power was magnificent to watch.

Such was the performance whenever the Divine Monarchs competed. They were once the perfect team, a powerful force of destruction. Despite the fact that they were always a man down, they dominated every obstacle in their path. Their fighting style was elusive and confounding, with tactics as dissimilar as their Disciplines.

Swift as the wind, static as a forest. Simple, but masterful.

God-ranked battles like this were never broadcast, available only to those who could enter Sanctuary and afford to pay the fees. It was only due to the organizers' special approval that this holographic video was made available. The battle hadn't even begun, but already the emotions of the crowd were high. Countless figures in countless sim pods waited with baited breath. The whole of DreamNet seemed to buzz with excitement.

Practice only lasted ten minutes, but every second was a wonder. As the Monarchs dispatched of their final opponent, the screens blazed with light and then went dark.

"With the warm-ups concluded, the Miracle Battle will begin shortly. This historic battle of the titans will be the best of five. The first team to reach three victories is catapulted to the top of the charts. To maintain the integrity of the games and their reputation, DreamNet has ensured that none of the contestants are aware of the arena map beforehand. However, they are certainly all familiar with each of the potential maps. All of them are classic maps employed daily in the simulation, with their own special characteristics in play. Combatants will need to adjust if they wish to most effectively employ their abilities. Five maps have been arranged, carefully selected for advantage and disadvantage."

Without further adieu, the first Miracle Battle combat map will be... " Mo Xiao let the suspense hang for a moment as she looked over the crowd.

"The Wheel of Fortune!"

The world of gloomy darkness flashed, and filled with light. The terrain that was revealed expanded farther than the eye could see in all directions.

Group battles were different from one-on-one fights. Pure combat arenas weren't suitable. After all, with the combatants being god-ranked pilots an empty arena couldn't play to their respective strengths. It'd be over in a matter of seconds, and what enjoyment would be found in that?

For this reason, all god-battles were performed in a variety of complicated environments. Every pilot would, therefore, have to adapt to ensure maximum cooperation and capability.

The Wheel of Fortune was one of DreamNet's oldest and most widely used arenas.

The maps' topography consisted largely of rocky terrain. Looking at it from above, the world looked like a hilly landscape with strange discrepancies.

There were eight spawn points here. What that meant was, for two teams of five there would be a pair that spawned together. Whether you spawned with a friend or an enemy was luck of the draw. Everything was determined randomly by the program.

Further, defeating your enemies wasn't the only point of this map. The real prerequisite for victory was maintaining control of the area in the map's center: The Wheel of Fortune.

The Wheel was a concrete, gear-shaped structure – the only such building in the simulation. In the center of the wheel was a depression, wherein pilots could inject energy from their mechas.

Whichever side saw themselves in control of the wheel had their entire team's capabilities increased by thirty percent. Of course, the pilot who was responsible for controlling the wheel couldn't participate in the fighting.

The team that holds the wheel for a total of five minutes, wins the match. Contending for control of the Wheel was, therefore, paramount to success, and the focus of most of the fights.

The map was circular, like a massive verdant wheel. The spawn points were evenly distributed along its edges.

“Preparations for the battle are complete, and we’re nearly under way! We wish luck to both sides – because as we know, luck plays a big part in the Wheel of Fortune!”

“All combatants are present, and have entered the map. Ladies and gentlemen, let the first round of our Miracle Battle commence!”

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One!” The computerized voice counted down, and punctuated by the cries of a billion spectators, the fight began.

The Wheel of Fortune appeared on the screens. The spawn points were displayed in a separate area. Those same spawn points were suddenly illuminated, revealing the competitors from both teams.

“The fight has begun. Let’s see how they decide to approach.” Mo Xiao’s voice was faster, higher, more excited than before. Her voice, however, was still as clear as a bell.

“Well, how interesting! Both teams are scattered. The only exception is Skyshade and Thunderclap, who luckily spawned together. Their specialties are air control and speed, respectively. They aren’t moving for the wheel, though – they’re headed for the map border.”

“Remember, viewers, there are no specific starting points. They’re generated randomly so, no one knows where they are. They also have no idea where their enemies are. Their tactics are very smart: with the two of them, they’re prepared for whatever they encounter. If it’s an enemy, they have the numbers to succeed. If they find a friendly, there are then three on the hunt. Let’s see how they run in to!”

“Ah! It’s Hades, one of the Four Divine Monarchs! But what is he doing? He hasn’t moved from the spawn point.”

It was indeed as Mo Xiao noted. Hades’ Cerberus hadn’t moved an inch from where he spawned in to find friend or foe. On the contrary, he looked to be hiding behind a nearby rock. All of Cerberus’ systems appeared to be shut down.

It wasn't just him. The golden dots on the overhead map indicating the Divine Monarchs all showed the same. None of them had moved, or even turned on their mechas.

Chapter 275: Ingenious Tactics

Thunderclap and Windbreaker were very familiar with this particular map. As a result, they knew the best way to approach the wheel. I no enemies were encountered, the next stop were spawn points.

Hades, meanwhile, was expertly hidden from view. In god-battles such as these, timing was everything. Thunderclap and Skyshade swept by with their scanners and, finding nothing, left just as quickly. They were heading for the Wheel of Fortune.

The other members of Star Alliance had gone for the wheel directly, without stopping to search other spawn points. Their primary objective was to hold the structure.

Mo Xiao narrated the scene. "From what we're seeing now, Star Alliance's tactics are simple. Because they had five people, their chances of two spawning together were higher. With their numbers advantage, they sought to take out an enemy quickly. The job done, or failing to find any enemies, it looks like they were instructed to join their companions at the Wheel. It's a simple strategy, but effective, especially when it's five on four."

"What's strange is the Divine Monarchs' decision. It's the first time I've ever seen them hide like this. Let's see how their tactics develop as the fight continues."

Roughly ten seconds later, the first Monarch to move was Prometheus. The dark green Coeus sprang to life, quickly launching clockwise to the next spawn point. It didn't take him long to connect with Poseidon. As they joined up, they quickly continued along the map's border to the next spot. When their circle was complete, all four Monarchs were together.

Four imposing mechas turned in mid-air. Their next target was clearly the Wheel of Fate.

"Well, what an interesting gambit! They hid themselves in the beginning so they could join us when the coast was clear. The trade-off is they give up early control of the wheel for more power as a unit. They have a great

deal of faith in their capabilities as a team... Ah! I understand. They're taking advantage of the time delay. As I'm sure our viewers know, you must inject energy in to the Wheel for two minutes before you gain control. From what we're seeing, it'll take the Divine Monarchs around forty seconds to reach the Star Alliance's location. Three of the Star Alliance's members have already arrived at the map's center, with two still missing. They've already started injecting energy."

"This is a very common situation we experience with the Wheel of Fortune. Since they aren't aware of their enemy's location, the Star Alliance chose to wait and watch. If the Monarchs were to execute a sneak attack while they were taking the Wheel, the loses would certainly outweigh the gains. The Monarchs, meanwhile, anticipated this and are positioning to turn it to their advantage. By the time they arrive, they'll have more than a minute to wrest control, likely facing off four-on-four 1. Consider who their fighting, it's an ingenious tactic. It must have been Prometheus' call, a man worthy of being called the master tactician!"

Mo Xiao's explanations were thankfully received by many viewers. Prometheus' plans were subtle, and her ability to figure it out so quickly was no easy task.

During their ten-minute warm-up, both teams were told the maps they would be using. Those ten minutes were integral to allow them time to hammer out a plan of attack for each confrontation. What they did not know, though, was the order in which these maps would be employed.

So it was that the moment the simulation changed to the Wheel of Fortune, Prometheus was calling out orders. Hide! Advance clockwise, and regroup.

So far it's worked well in their favor.

After the Four Divine Monarchs had joined up, they raced ahead with Thor at the forefront. Coeus, Hades and Poseidon followed. The Wheel of Fate came in to view.

Four members of the Star Alliance had taken up positions on the edges of the hovering cog. They peered in to the distance, vigilant for their

opponents.

The wheel was itself one hundred and fifty meters in diameter. A single high-speed dash was enough to reach the center.

Zeus and his allies could see the defenders from a distance. Starlord, Thunderclap, Phantom 2 and Skyshade stood watch whilst Yu Honghu's Bahamut took control of the Wheel.

Opportunity and risk often manifests side by side. Prometheus' plans were successful, getting them the upper hand by diminishing their opponent's numbers. But the risks were high: if the Star Alliance should succeed in gaining control of the Wheel, their thirty percent power increase would mean a Monarch victory was highly unlikely.

Mo Xiao continued to analyze the fight while switching between camera feeds of the two teams. Before long the Monarchs were nearly at the Wheel. Any closer and their figures would be visible to the enemy. The Wheel of Fate hung suspended in the air, hovering over the ground below. It's position in the high-ground made a concealed approach impossible.

Coeus, Triton and Cerberus broke off, launching out in different directions while Thor pressed onward. They hid themselves behind rocks and other terrain.

Zeus' sapphire mecha never slowed, instead gaining speed as he dashed forward. He was completely exposed.

The Wheel of Fortune was in constant motion, spinning on its central axis like a clock. The four members of the Star Alliance, perched on the edges of the structure, spun with it. The first one to spot Thor's approach was the man who shared his Talent – Thunderclap.

"Thor. We've got Zeus' Thor on the horizon!" Thunderclap cried over the coms to his compatriots.

"Hold your ground. Don't initiate combat." Deimos' charismatic voice replied.

They did as commanded, not simply because he was their team leader, but because it was as Mo Xiao had said: Any pilot from this generation

venerated Deimos like an idol. Regardless of the fight's outcome, they get to fight alongside this respected veteran of their trade. That was enough.

Beyond that, none of these pilots were new to the game. They had an intimate understanding of the map, and knew the appropriate strategies to use.

It had only been a scant few minutes since the match had begun. Why was it Thor was by himself, they wondered? It stank like a trap.

But Thunderclap was itchy. After all, he was here specifically to deal with Zeus. One was seventh on the aggregate power boards, the other ninth. Both their Disciplines dealt with the lightning element. He sat within his sim pod, eyes flashing with the excitement of battle. He was looking forward to this battle, a fight he'd been anticipating for a long time. Their clash would determine who would become DreamNet's master of lightning.

Thor's advance wasn't exceedingly fast. By Thunderclap's estimate, he was still about five hundred meters out.

Thunderclap stood in a cloud of bluish-black light, a strange corona of energy that matched the mecha's painted surface. Clearly, the power that crackled around him was like Thor's own, but there were differences.

As Thunderclap watched, fighting his desire to engage, Thor burst in to motion. In the space of an instant the dazzling blue mecha was racing forward at break-neck speeds, while simultaneously emitting blinding rays of powerful light. The purplish blast sprang out, and hung over Thunderclap like a net.

By the time the light dimmed enough for Thor to be visible he was practically on top of them, shimmering spear in hand.

Five hundred meters was crossed in the blink of an eye. Staggering waves of power barraged Zeus' competitor. Thunderclap wasn't taken aback by the blitzkrieg – on the contrary, he was disappointed. Such a brazen assault wasn't a demonstration of the powerful opponent he was anticipating!

The blue-black mecha stood steadfast. Its mechanical arms rose, and as its metal hands met, a gun barrel appeared from the machine's chest plate. Without ceremony it belched a shimmering bolt of electric blue light directly toward Thor. As it reached its target, and with a roar of thunder, the beam erupted in to a ball of explosive energy that stretched ten meters in diameter. A cry of surprise and alarm went through the crowd.

The eminence of violet light disappeared. The waves of energy dispersed. Only the blue-black orb surrounding Thunderclap remained.

And yet Thunderclap's eyes were sharp, and worried. For he knew that his strike didn't land.

There was a flash, and almost before he could react the blazing golden tip of Thor's electric spear was lunging for his chest.

Both of the pilots were masters of the lightning Discipline, with an emphasis on speed. Thunderclap's weapon – a sizzling electric halberd – helped facilitate his defense. He unconsciously coaxed his mecha in to action, and the halberd shot up to deflect the spear's attack. Then, with a flick of his wrist, Thunderclap caught Thor's spear in the opening between the blade and the haft.

In truth Thunderclap was surprised his block and grapple had been so successful. But he capitalized on the situation without hesitation. With Thor's spear caught against it, Thunderclap pulled his halberd close while simultaneously rushing forward to collide with Zeus' suit. As they met, a bloom of staggering electric energy exploded around them with Thunderclap at its heart.

The difference between Thor and Thunderclap was simple. Thunderclap's specialties lay in thunder and lightning. As in the real world, lightning preceded the sound. All of his weaponry centered around this.

Thor, meanwhile, was a more balanced machine. Although it was named after the god of thunder, it's use of electricity or thunder was limited. This was DreamNet, after all – Zeus couldn't empower those strikes with his

Discipline. A well-rounded approach was his preference.

Because of this, Thunderclap was sure his own mecha superior to Thor.

*

1. Since one person has to be continuously injecting energy in to the wheel. Prometheus chose to give up early control of the wheel to face a more even battlefield.
2. It wasn't explicitly stated in the raws, as far as I remember, but this is the Knave's mecha.

Chapter 276: Cloaks and Daggers

Thunderclap was ever in the pursuit of perfection in his field: speed and power. As a result, his explosive capacity was dominating. In the process, however, he had to give up defense and energy conservation. Landing an attack or gaining the upper-hand was followed by the rage of a thunderstorm.

Thor, his weapon locked and his movement constrained, was certainly caught in a disadvantageous position. With years of combat experience at play, Thunderclap was certain Thor had no recourse, no means of escape.

But just as Thor's defeat seemed inevitable, a gentle blue light appeared between them to ward off the blow. The shield of blue energy undulated as Thunderclap's strike crashed against it like a tidal wave. The electric power was harmlessly diffused in to the atmosphere around them, and brought the blue-black mecha to a shuddering halt.

Not good! That was the first thought to race through Thunderclap's mind. But even though he didn't have the time to determine what happened, his experience kicked in. Almost unconsciously he responded the best way he knew how.

A thruster flared to life, and once again a dazzling electric blue light blinded the eye. Instead of an explosive attack, however, Thunderclap launched himself backward in retreat.

But it was too late.

The previously brash and ineffectual Thor charged at its opponent, surrounded by erratic flashes of electric light. The mecha's advance was not a straight line, but instead descended in an elegant arc with Thunderclap as its target.

Even among god-ranked pilots, Thunderclap was exceedingly fast. But his retreat was not controlled. His thrusters sent him careening backward, unable to control speed or direction.

Thor had no such problem and as he raced forward, a beam of red light

birthed stark shadows across the whole of the Wheel. Where it landed, an intense and terrifying explosion erupted, directly in Thunderclap's path. He disappeared in the mushroom cloud.

Blinding blue and intense red mingled in the aftermath. Other members of the Star Alliance turned as the explosion drew their attention. By then, though, it was too late for them.

No opportunity for respite was granted, for as all eyes turned to the blast a ray of cyan light appeared. In the same instant, a darker blue beam intersected it in the air, forming an enormous X.

Thunderclap was caught between both. He perished amidst the sounds of his machine being blown apart. No more than fifteen seconds had passed since their collision, and just like that the Star Alliance was down a man.

ζ

Fifteen seconds earlier.

"Amazing. His plan was nothing short of brilliance." Mo Xiao quickly cried out in appreciation. "Look closely – Thor races forward, but he's wearing a cloaking gem. Unless I'm mistaken, even c-ranked gems are very expensive, and are able to create a stealth field ten meters in all directions. Wow, I wonder how wide his field is? Prometheus, Hades and Poseidon have them as well. They've turned off their main engines, so even the best radar can't pin them down. It's kept them hidden during their approach."

"Look there, just as Thor went in for his first attack, the cloak activates. Here's what happened. Thor's first advanced used a flashy but ultimately pointless strike, designed to get his opponent's attention. Thunderclap was fooled, and used his strongest attack. It was in that moment, following Thor's rush, that the other three Monarchs engaged in a surprise attack."

"Thunderclap never saw it coming. How could he not have anticipated this? He clearly underestimated Zeus. Ah, perhaps it's this... For Thunderclap, Zeus is his primary target, and the most important enemy. From two years ago the word was out that he wanted to challenge him.

Now fortune set the two against each other here. He was overcome by excitement, and impulse. He saw his long-desired victory at hand. Poor Thunderclap had no thought for the other Monarchs.”

“That’s it, they’re in close. Prometheus, Hades and Poseidon have reengaged their engines. Thunderclap is gone. He used the power of his namesake, but he never even suspected Poseidon’s marvelous intervention!”

“Thunderclap has been slain.”

Mo Xiao’s rapid-fire analysis and narration washed over the stunned spectators. Excitement buzzed in her voice.

It was a sudden and emotional change for those who suspected a quick Monarch loss. In the space of an instant, the seventh strongest mecha pilot in DreamNet was no more. They even still had time to beat the Star Alliance back for control of the Wheel.

What sort of unspoken, secret understanding did the Monarchs have with one another to allow them to fight so well? Under the concentrated force of all four of them, Thunderclap never stood a ghost of a chance.

None from the Star Alliance came to their companion’s rescue. The mini-map displayed Starlord, Phantom and Bahamut converging on the cog’s central location.

Thunderclap had managed to warn his friends after Poseidon blocked his charge. Almost immediately, Starlord was able to determine that Thunderclap was out of the fight. He commanded the remaining forces to vehemently defend the Wheel. Sending anyone to defend their fallen brethren would simply have been playing in to the Monarch’s hands.

As for the Monarchs, they wasted no time rushing the center after dealing with their first foe. They’d leapt from an inferior position to one of dominance. With Bahamut focused on activating the base, the battlefield was now four on three giving the Monarchs a numbers advantage. Less than one minute remained until the wheel bestowed its power unto the Star Alliance.

The entire exchange had lasted only a few moments, but the audience was electrified by it. They felt like they'd been dropped in the middle of a war-zone. They stared wide-eyed and with baited breath, afraid to miss a single moment.

The Four Divine Monarchs advanced, Zeus once more in the vanguard position. In contrast to before, though, Hades was right by his side. Prometheus and Poseidon took up the rear.

Both sides arrived at the Wheel's center almost on top of each other. Deimos' silver mecha was easy to spot, as its mirrored surface twinkled incessantly with starlight. It's dominating presence was compounded by the nasty looking sword it had in its hand. This weapon was his namesake. Deimos, Lord of the Starblade.

Phantom stood to his left, a purple shadow slender as a whip. Half-swords were clutched in each mechanical hand. The suit shuddered with a perpetual tremor, and never seemed to be still.

Anyone familiar with the Knave knew this was a sign, a subtle indication that his impossibly fast fingers were endlessly tapping at the suit's controls. He was like a coiled spring, ready to explode in deadly force at the drop of a hat.

Bahamut was white, and exuded a quiet calm despite the hectic backdrop. It bore no weapon, but both of its arms were unnaturally thick. This was especially true of its hands.

By this point Thor had retrieved its lightning spear. By the time both sides met, there was no hesitation – Zeus launched himself headlong towards the Knave's Phantom.

Hades broke off and tore vertically. His suit shimmered with a red-hot light, while his arm fractured in to a mess of golden slag. The disparate pieces of mecha reforged themselves instantly in to a mid-sized, maroon-hued cannon.

Spots of angry red light began to gather in the maw of Cerberus' heavy artillery.

Meanwhile Poseidon, positioned behind his fiery comrade focused his attentions on Skyshade. Coeus, dual moonblades in hand, was left to face the most powerful mecha pilot who ever lived – Starlord.

“Amazing! We have a duel between Prometheus and Deimos. I can barely breathe. The other pairings are just as dramatic; we have the fastest hands in DreamNet against the man who took his place on the power lists, fourth in speed and ninth in power, while on the other side we see the incomparable Poseidon versus Skyshade. Cerberus has already engaged his most powerful distance weapon, the Hellfire Cannon, and is charging a volley. While the Wheel is indestructible, Bahamut is stuck in the middle and will have to eat an attack. How will Deimos choose to deal with this situation? They’re down a man with the second focused on the Wheel. Can they find a way to ward off the Monarch’s advance?”

The first pair to clash were Phantom and Thor.

Phantom shimmered as they raced headlong toward one another, and there appeared a second purple mecha at its side. They broke apart, coming at Zeus from both flanks.

Doppelganger! You could count on one hand the number of people able to employ doppelgangers effectively in combat, and the Knave was among their finest.

Thor didn’t hesitate to respond, birthing a second sapphire image a few meters away. Two Thors and two Phantoms were poised for engagement.

Neither side were as of yet employing their most powerful energy attacks, relying instead on mecha maneuvers for the upper hand.

Thor’s spear shimmered like some ethereal thing, casting out a blanket of spectral copies toward the Phantom. It reacted with a cross-ward slice of its dual swords which sent shock waves of power spiraling outward. Spectral spears and shock waves collided in mid-air, and the resulting corona of energy was temporarily blotted out their encounter.

“Look at this amazing display of hand speed! It’s simply terrifying to behold. Zeus’ hand speed seemed remarkably improved over what we have recorded in Sanctuary. My guess is he’s broken ninety CPS. We all

know what the Phantom is capable of, and his hand-speed of one hundred and three is in full display right now. Neither of them are going all out, but already my eyes are having a hard time following. Let's see what's happening with the others!"

Triton gripped its famed trident tightly as it raced toward Skyshade. An orb of blue light surrounded the mecha, the gentle eminence creating a shield of protection. The lord of the seas swept its trident through the air, and a blade of sea-blue energy lashed out at his opponent.

Chapter 277: Strongest Under Heaven

Skyshade's thick, mechanical arms rose in to the air. A dazzling white light came to life between them, which caused the air between him and Poseidon to shimmer ominously. A deep, threatening roar of power filled their ears just as a blade made of blue light slashed outward.

Among his fans, Windbreaker was known to suppress powers of vacuity. He was a master of air, a quality his mecha shared. In reality, Windbreaker was stronger than both Thunderclap and the Knave. This was, of course, due to the addition of his own Discipline in conjunction with a mecha suit.

Poseidon wasn't aiming to face Skyshade directly, though. Triton's trident fired several bolts of blue energy that crashed down on to the enemy mecha from all directions. The strikes were designed to contain Skyshade, and limit his combat capabilities.

Poseidon saw the white light, and watched as the world warped. The beams of light that crashed around Skyshade deviated from their paths. Then the strange power extended further, threatening Triton's position.

The orb of gentle light around Triton rippled, as a vibrant but soft light exuded from its chest plate. Waves of energy undulated outward like crashing waves and eventually collided with Skyshade's warped air. The meeting of the two emulsions resulted in a staggering release of energy, that fired off every which way.

The world shook as battle raged on either edge of the Wheel. The most important fight, thought, was occurring in the center.

The God of Wisdom was facing off against the Starlord. The thirst and first most powerful pilots faced each other in full view of the Alliances and their people.

One was the undefeated, irreplaceable idol of DreamNet. The other, an indomitable rising star. As Prometheus and Deimos met on the field, it was as Mo Xiao said – everyone collectively held their breath.

Although the two other encounters nearby were wonderful spectacles to behold, this meeting of two living legends was far more important. It was a battle of the old guard versus the new generation, and spectators were anxious to see who would come out on top.

For some, there was little anxiety over who would emerge victorious. The Starlord's reputation was itself a force of nature, but by Deimos' own admission he was less than half the pilot he used to be. A strong case could be made for Prometheus' eventual success. He was, after all, the master of control, Supersoldier of An Lun, and hero of the Eastern Alliance. For many of the younger pilots, he was the supreme mecha pilot, and no crotchety old man was going to say otherwise.

Still others felt differently. They would wait, and believe what they saw more than what one's reputation would have them believe. This was a fight for the ages, and no one really knew what the outcome would be.

Prometheus' dark green mecha shone with a cyan light, that surrounded it like a shell. Its moonblades glinted in each metal hand. Coeus did not advance, but instead remained at a distance and stared – waiting for Starlord to make his move.

Starlord, too, was in no rush to engage. He stood steadfast, with Starblade's point pressed against the Wheel beneath its feet. He was a mountain, a statue – some insurmountable obstacle blocking Prometheus' path.

Both tacticians silently weighed the situation. Mechas weren't Adepts, so they could not sense the abilities of their opponent's suit. Still as they were, no indication of their abilities was made evident.

"Come on then, let's see what you really got." Deimos' voice echoed from Starlord, calm and without animosity. But while his address was tepid, everyone could hear the self-confidence thick in Deimos' tone.

Prometheus was on the move, as though accepting the old hero's invitation. Before Deimos even finished, Prometheus was closing the gap.

Within a few moments, only a few meters separated them. Without warning, Coeus' figure shimmered and vanished. Before anyone could

blink, it appeared once more, directly in front of Starlord. However, where before there was only one Coeus, now there were three. They lashed out from different directions.

“Three ghost images? My my, since when did Prometheus get so fast! These are new heights for our Supersoldier!”

Mo Xiao’s reaction wasn’t unlike Lan Jue, Hua Li and Chu Cheng’s after discovering ‘big boss’ improvement. Likely many in the audience felt the same.

Starlord was rooted in place; it didn’t run, it didn’t dodge. There was a flash, and then the Starblade was in motion. Twinkling pinpoints of light danced along the weapon’s length, as though it were itself composed of a million condensed stars. Where it went, a silvery afterglow remained.

Starlord exploded forward with a well-executed lunge and sweep that had its peculiar blade approach obliquely.

Lan Qing glowered at the screen, filled with an intense irritation. This weapon, while not exceedingly dangerous, was like a fish bone in one’s throat – it had to be dealt with, or it would be a nuisance.

The three figures were again reduced to one. Coeus hung in the air, slightly off balance. He seemed in a trajectory to fall directly on to Starlord’s blade.

Both of Coeus moonblades were drawn inward, whistling dangerously as they knocked Starlord’s attack away. With a twist, the Starblade was caught between the cutting edge of Coeus’ weapon and the hilt, locking it in place.

The cyan light surrounding Prometheus’ mecha expanded outward with sudden vigor, and thickened considerably. The suit’s movements grew erratic, elusive.

Starlord’s response was to finally move from its vigil. Deimos juked forward and to the left, twisting his suit. With an ear-piercing ring, the Starblade slipped free of the weapon bind. As the two jostled for superiority, flashes of energy raged around them.

Coeus shook and shimmered, then in a spectacular display erupted in a score of mirror images. They all rushed at Starlord in unison. Now that he'd gotten around Deimos' defense, there was no further need for caution. Starlord's form darkened as the shadows of its multiple enemies fell over it.

The twinkling starlight dotting Starlord's body burned ferociously, then without warning released countless beams of light in all directions like a hedgehog. The beams were thick and powerful, creating lines of condensed energy pulses.

Luminescence! The lost knowledge of Deimos, the thing that made him famous. It was also Starlord's most powerful focused attack.

Generally speaking, those attacks which were more focused, were also more devastating. Sharing energy among attacks over a larger scale obviously made each weaker. However, this was not true for the Starlord. This particular suit was designed with a powerful soul gem as its energy source, crushed up and distributed all throughout the frame. All of Starlord was a weapon, allowing it to strike out in all directions with the power of a focused strike.

When Lan Qing was just getting his start, Deimos was already effectively retired. He'd never had the opportunity to face this man, and so it was his first time experiencing Luminescence. One by one, faster than you could see, Coeus copies were obliterated. However, the pale blue-green light did not falter, instead growing more prosperous. It was as though it rose to challenge the blinding starlight, refusing to capitulate. Blades of energy lashed out from the undulating orb surrounding the god of wisdom, one after the other. Flashes of radiant light fluttered and flashed as they danced through the air.

Their encounter wasn't as fast-paced as the ones occurring on either side of them, but their unbridled release of power caused the others on both sides to flee the area as quickly as they could for fear they'd be swept up in it.

"Blocked? The God of Wisdom lives up to his name, folks! He's never

seen Luminescence, but he's managed to effectively ward it off!" It was Mo Xiao's first commentary on the team leader's encounter.

He did indeed block the terrible attack, however not without having to endure some of it himself.

In that instant a beam of light appeared, shimmering with stars like a vision of the Milky Way. It sliced through the heavens, parting the skies.

Hade's Hellfire cannon was charged to the fullest now, and as the weapon's depths came to life with red light an ominous sense crackled in the air. It erupted, releasing a condensed beam of energy sizzling with fatal promise. It tore through the air, heading straight for the Wheel of fortune's center.

Meanwhile the Starblade's power was sweeping skyward. Starlord saw the opportunity, and took it.

Charging and firing his laser required Cerberus to remain totally still. Where he to do so, not only would the strike be misaligned, Hades' mecha was likely to suffer some residual blow-back from the power output.

What was he to do? Chu Cheng was faced with a grim choice: either he could continue his attack, which would almost certainly destroy Bahamut but would leave himself open for destruction, or move and miss his opportunity – possible damaging his own mecha in the process.

Face the danger, or interrupt charging the Wheel?

Shit!

He made his decision. If both he and Bahamut were destroyed, it would bring the playing field back to three on three. It would, however, give his team more breathing room to take control of the Wheel. With Starlord's focus on him, it may open the field for the big guy. And all Lan Qing needed was one real chance, then the Star Alliance was doomed.

Cerberus did not move. It poured every ounce of energy it possessed in to the Hellfire cannon. Chu Cheng's face was dark as he watched Starlord's attack approach. Then his screen went dark.

Booooooommm – Booom!

The two violent explosions occurred almost on top of one another. The center of the Wheel was a hellscape of acrid smoke and fire, while simultaneously Cerberus was reduced to a molten ball of slag. Starlord's blade, which struck with the power of ten thousand suns, hit its mark perfectly. With such a strike, and no shields, Chu Cheng was right in his determination. He never stood a chance of getting out alive.

The Star Alliance was no longer pouring energy in to the Wheel. But be it Lan Qing, Lan Jue or Hua Li, the Monarchs' hearts were dark with anxiety.

Each of them were god-ranked pilots, the best of the best. Their battlefield awareness was meticulous. This high-stakes fight was no exception. True the Wheel's capture was interrupted, but they were almost certain the charging had stopped early.

It meant...

The unease they felt heightened as a two-toned figure appeared in the haze. Fires glinted off the red and blue metal as a suit rose from beneath the Wheel, and headed their way.

Bahamut!

Impossible! Chu Cheng, alone in his dark sim pod, stared incredulously at the screen. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Somehow, the dragon of ice and fire had not been destroyed by the full force of Chu Cheng's power.

Chapter 278: Prometheus Erupts

The Wheel's central area was small and narrow opening, which one had to occupy if they wished to inject it with energy. It was a dangerous gambit since flooding the Wheel left you exposed, and unable to employ any defensive counter-measures.

When Hades fired the Hellfire Cannon, Bahamut had still been in the center. At that point, it was too late to retreat and escape unscathed – Yu Honghu had taken too long.

So how did he survive?

Chu Cheng was now simply a spectator. He adjusted the cameras for full view, and focused it on the Wheel. The center could be entered from the bottom, so he panned his camera there. He was surprised to discover a blue and red figure dangling there.

Chu Cheng finally came to his senses. So crafty! he thought.

Bahamut was using a remote device to inject energy in to the Wheel.

The mecha itself never entered the small area, hiding instead on the outside. When Cerberus' attack was incoming, Bahamut quickly cut connection with the Wheel, took its device and hid behind the indestructible walls of the structure.

The whole thing had been a trap. The Star Alliance never expected to fully control the Wheel in the beginning. Now, they once again held the advantage.

However, Prometheus wasn't going to let that stand.

Coeus changed from a dark green to a resplendent jade before their eyes. It pulsed with vibrant energies that energized its surroundings. Once the release of energy seemed to reach a critical mass, Coeus shot forward and collided with Starlord.

The moment Prometheus saw Starlord shift focus to Chu Cheng, he puzzled out the Star Alliance's plan. Late, but as he well knew even the best laid plans often went awry. This was no exception, and they still had a

chance. The crux lay with Starlord himself. His attack on Hades, protecting Bahamut, reduced his energy reserves to perhaps half. If they could defeat him before Bahamut finished with the Wheel, victory was still within reach.

Coeus dashed forward like an emerald green beam of radiation, invisible to the naked eye but for the vibrant color. Like a terrible, living blade of wind, Coeus went for Starlord's throat.

Everything had happened so quickly: Starlord repelled Coeus, brought down Hades, then faced the opposing team leader once again. It all passed in the space of a thunder bolt. This time, though, Starlord was without his weapon. It was still returning from its attack on Hades.

It could be argued that there had been no obvious mistakes from either side as of yet. Hades had made a quick and decisive determination based on the information he had. Prometheus was just as quick to take advantage of the opening he saw. Hesitation meant death in fights such as these. Even after seeing the trap they'd lain for him, Chu Cheng had no regrets. At least he'd given Lan Qing a chance. He couldn't help but yelp excitedly when he saw Lan Qing finally go in for the kill.

"Get him!"

Win or lose, they fought with everything they had! If they really ended up losing to this powerful foe, at least they went down swinging.

Starlord was still unarmed. Though powerful and deadly, Starlord's drawback was his attacks needed time to refresh.

Deimos watched with narrowed eyes as Coeus pressed forward on the warpath. The twinkling starlight that emanated from his mecha flared brightly in response. Starlord's metallic figure dimmed considerably, like it was not real.

Slow-motion cameras were able to catch the scene. The reason his suit seemed so strange to look upon was because it was actually in a state of extremely fast motion. It would move back about a meter, and then leap forward the same, all in a fraction of a second. The elbow of its sword arm was extended like a battering ram.

Boooooooooom!

The two mecha collided with a frightening explosion. It's force and ferocity brought everything to a screeching halt. Time seemed to stop. Zeus, Poseidon, the Knave and Windbreaker – all of them turned their attention to the ballooning mushroom cloud.

Without question, Prometheus and Deimos had connected. The victor, however, was unclear. The other combatants watched with baited breath. Whoever stepped from the smoke would likely determine the end of this fight.

A white figure went soaring from the debris like a cannon ball. It tumbled through the air, but as it did the glittering swipes of the Starblade could be seen behind it, warding off Coeus' pursuit.

Repelled! Prometheus' strike hadn't finished the Starlord, but put the old master on the defensive.

Mo Xiao's voice rang clear in the ears of all onlookers. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is why Deimos is the best of the best. If he were at his peak, I guarantee that strike would have been easily avoided. Now you can see that he spoke true, he's a little slower with his response times and control. Even still his wisdom and combat understanding are unparalleled. It's obvious why he's touted as the best pilot alive."

Starlord's chest plate was badly damaged, and its left arm was missing after the collision. It was really in remarkable shape after facing down one of Coeus' most powerful strikes.

While Starlord was careening off in to the distance, Coeus was relatively still. It remained in the blast radius of their meeting, spinning rapidly. Between the smoke and speed at which it spun, no one was able to clearly see the damage Coeus had sustained.

Bahamut had managed to arrive at this point, and blocked Coeus' advance in order to give Starlord time to recover.

Bahamut was a fitting name for the mythical-looking mecha. It had two thick, powerful wings and dragon heads – one blue, and one red. At

present, both had their mouths open in nightmarish roars, belching dragonfire at Coeus.

In the same instant, two beams of green energy lanced outward from Coeus' location. They were faster than the eye could follow. Before anyone had time to react, the strikes had found their target.

The beams arced away from Starlord. They weren't even intended for Bahamut. Instead, the strikes parted and made for the enemies on either side: Skyshade, and Phantom.

The whole of the Wheel of Fortune turned a metallic, dazzling blue.

Everything looked like it was being seen through a film of electric energy. It was coming from Thor, whose body was releasing scores of serpentine lightning bolts. The erratic strikes fell around Phantom, pinning it in place.

Triton, meanwhile, thrust forward with its trident as soon as Coeus was visible. An impossible large reflection of the trident appeared, tearing through the air to obliterate Skyshade's defenses and run it through.

All three actions happened almost simultaneously, perfectly executed in tandem. Thor and Triton let their enemies have it, giving everything they got a half second after Lan Qing's intervention. Their foes had no choice but to face the full brunt of their power. Coeus' beams of light arrived.

Boom! BOOM!

The two explosions happened one after the other. The pincer attack was set up without telegraph, to the point where the Knave and Windbreaker only discovered their doom after it was too late.

If one blocks the front, they can't block the back. Prometheus' power and planning ended two of their opponents in one fell swoop.

The Knave had sought to employ his exceptional hand speed for defense, and split in to three mirror images. However, Thor never gave him a chance. Without concern for energy conservation, the arcing bolts of electricity were easily able to suppress all three dopplegangers. The Knave had nowhere to go, and no way to dodge.

All he could do before exploding in to a million warped bits of metal, was jam his mecha's two short swords in to Thor's shoulders.

A similar scene played out on the other side of the Wheel, where Triton and Skyshade were battling it out. Poseidon's machine may not have had the sheer power of Thor, but what it lacked in damage potential it more than made up for in battlefield control.

Skyshade protected himself with a shield of compressed air, called to reality when Triton summoned the massive trident. But as the two strikes found their mark, Yu Honghu was surprised and upset to discover that Poseidon's blow had been gentle, like a lapping wave.

Before he could response, Yu Honghu felt a shockwave shudder through his defenses. Skyshade was temporarily locked solid and unable to move. Coeus moonblade had no trouble slicing clean through the Winbreaker's shield, and burying itself deep inside Skyshade.

Only seconds had passed. From Cerberus destruction, to Starlord's retreat, to the death of two more Star Alliance members, the situation on the ground had changed radically.

Now, Bahamut's breath attack reached Coeus.

Prometheus was left open. His strike against Starlord, and the subsequent coup de grace on the other two, had drained all of his suit's energy reserves. None remained for defensive maneuvers.

Bahamut let everything he had go in the breath attack. His team was down three men, but removing the strongest Monarch from the occasion would be a game changer. Starlord was still in play, with Starblade ready to go. This wasn't over.

Boooooomm! As Bahamut planned, Coeus went up in flames. Without anything to mitigate it, Bahamut's attacks were difficult to ward off.

However, as the two-headed dragon opened its maws, a strange cyan gear quietly appeared and affixed itself between the dragon heads. Coeus' destruction was followed by a blinding release of light, and a blast of energy that blanketing the entire Wheel. Bahamut was so focused on the

inevitable kill it didn't notice the gear. It didn't notice the dim blue light that suddenly shone out from it. Yu Honghu did notice when his screen went black.

Boom!

From the beginning of the fight to now, with six mechas destroyed, only about a minute had passed. The action was so fast-paced, so unrelenting that the audience scant had time to breathe.

And at the heart of it all was Prometheus, a man quiet of demeanor but frighteningly strong.

It was he who fought back Starlord and opened up avenues for victory. It was he who facilitated the destruction of Phantom and Skyshade with the help of his two companions. And it was he, under the cover of his own destruction, who took out the demon dragon with him. They managed to take out the great tactician, but the price they paid was three of their own. Now it was two on one. The stage was set for a Monarch victory.

Chapter 279: Thor's Hammer

Finally, there was a lull in the action.

The Star Alliance had but one member remaining, the strongest under heaven – Deimos. The Monarchs still had the masters of water and Lightning, Poseidon and Zeus.

All three remained silent, and watched as the remnants of the previous collisions subsided. It was quite an awesome display. Even alien species would have been stunned by the incredible result. And all of it passed in less time than it took to gasp.

One of DreamNet's functions was called the Competition Analysis Tool, or CAT. For a fee, viewers could download a high-definition recording of the event, calibrated for close scrutiny. It allowed you to speed up and slow down the action, and view it from many different angles.

The set price tag for this session's video was ten times what spectators paid to be present in DreamNet. The reasoning, according to DreamNet's advertisers, was that they had to pay out a lot to entice God-ranked pilots to participate. This was a way to recoup losses.

It was due to the steep asking price that, when the battle started, only about a million digital copies of the five fights were pre-sold. If only three fights occurred and a winner chosen, some of the funds would be returned.

By now, however, those numbers had changed. One million had since swelled to over seven million. Further, about a hundred million people had purchased the video for this one fight. The sheer profit for DreamNet was a number too high to fathom.

The one-armed Starlord stood in silence, watching Poseidon and Zeus. Everything was quiet, and yet an all-consuming sense of anticipation filled the audience. It was like a powder keg, the blood in their veins turned to gasoline – they could erupt at any second.

Then, Thor was in motion!

Lan Jue was calm as the surface of a lake, but if anyone were able to peer in to the sim pod, they would see the bolts of electricity snaking across his eyes. An oppressive aura of power surrounded him.

What had started as four on five had changed dramatically with Prometheus' sacrifice. Now the monarchs had a real chance at victory. The remaining fighters were overflowing with battle fervor.

Thor rushed forward, in what to the untrained eye appeared to be a straight shot. However, closer inspection would reveal that the mecha swayed ever so slightly as it barreled through the air. But as Thor charged, the audience was surprised to discover that its electric spear was nowhere to be seen. Unarmed, when would Thor's powerful weapon reappear, they wondered?

As Thor moved, so too did Triton. The sea-blue mecha fell in behind his electric counterpart like a shadow. Where Thor went, Triton followed precisely. It was like they were the same person, the same mecha.

One, Poseidon and Zeus were touted as Dreamburg's greatest duo. There were two-person team battles, but they were rarely done once a pilot reached god-ranked. Still, despite their lack of presence in the arena lately, no one could deny their near-perfect cooperation.

Those who knew the Monarchs realized that it was no coincidence the two of them remained. This whole thing was by design! Prometheus' best laid plans coming to fruition.

Starlord did not stand idly by, and was moving as well. The Starblade lashed out to the side of him without warning, while the mecha itself once more adopted an illusory quality. The audience looked on as deafening blast of rolling thunder filled the arena.

The skies overhead suddenly burst in to bloom as an orb of writhing lightning came to be. The electric light was contained in a strange, warped corona of energy. Starlord's sudden movement had been to avoid this while the Starblade – blazing with dozens of twinkling stars – swiped it away.

"This is... Thor's Hammer!" Mo Xiao's voice cried in astonishment. "Thor

has made his move. Wow! This is the fabled Thor's Hammer!?"

Each high-level god mecha had its own special moves. Some were more passive, and it defined their explosive capabilities, energy reserves and more. Others were more dominant on the battlefield. Hades, for example, revealed his with the Hellfire Cannon.

Thor was no exception. Aside from his combat abilities from pilot maneuvers, Zeus still had powerful strikes up his sleeves. One such terrifying attack was Thor's Hammer.

Anyone who looked in to Thor on any level will have heard of Thor's Hammer. However, the number of people who've actually seen it and lived to relate the fact was very close to zero. After all, most of the opportunities where Thor would use it have been hidden behind the blanket spectator ban in Dreamburg. But even now that they see it, the move was hard to describe. All they knew was that after the explosions, the screens went dark.

Outside of specialized mecha analysts and engineers, Thor's Hammer was likely only used in DreamNet. Science hadn't caught up enough for a mecha suit to be manufactured in such a way as to make the attack possible. Not only was Thor's Hammer capable of devastating power, but it also served as an electro-magnetic pulse. The EMP fried any electrical systems it came in contact with, not the least of which being suit controls. No defensive or repair procedures could drain away the current in less than three seconds. It wasn't long, but in battles like this three seconds was enough to determine victory or defeat.

So it was that Thor finally used his hammer, before the eyes of billions of viewers. It had been intangible, indescribable, and more than any of them expected despite its prestige. But how in the world was Starlord able to foresee it?

Nearly the moment that Starlord cast out his blade again, Thor's body had begun to glow with a violet aura of energy. In a blink the God of Lightning was before Starlord, punctuating his arrival with an intensive release of explosive power. Three piercing rays of electric blue light fired

out like a pitchfork. They were pointed to the precise spot Starlord needed to go in order to avoid Thor's Hammer.

What Starlord didn't see was that it hadn't only been Thor who came in for the kill. Triton was right behind him.

Triton had stuck to Thor's back, attached like some Voltron-esque monstrosity. The metal construction of the two suits somehow fused during their rush, and now where Thor moved, Triton followed.

Starlord's reaction to the pining tactic was fast. The mecha's upper body swept around as it reeled, but Starblade's positioning was perfect. The three bolts of energy were knocked harmlessly aside.

But suddenly, it slowed. After deflecting the strike it was as though Starlord was suddenly stuck in a bog, making it sluggish.

Deimos was unperturbed. The mechanical wrist of its mecha trembled, and suddenly the Starblade erupted in to countless thousands of shards. They burst out in all directions, with enough force to rival Thor's Hammer.

But then something strange happened. The three beams of energy deflected by Deimos' Starblade congealed mid-flight, reducing from three beams to two. One was a peaceful blue, while the other was a deep purple with a coiling bolts of electricity surrounding it.

The blue beam expanded and stretched like a bubble, and rose with the impressive explosion of the Starblade. As the two waves of power met, Deimos' starburst attack was deflected to the side. The purple beam raced forward like a lance. It struck the hilt of the Starblade, and then proceeded directly in to the mecha that bore it.

Crack! Crash! The staggering sound of thunder and lightning deafened the onlookers. Starlord was instantly covered in snaking bolts of purple electricity. The suit went rigid.

In the same instant, dual threads of golden light exited from beneath Thor's armpits. They expanded until they were like two golden vipers, and lashed out at Starlord's chest plate. But Thor wasn't finished.

The sapphire mecha raised its arms high, and there appeared in its

hands a massive deep-blue war hammer. Resplendent contrails of light followed as Thor brought the weapon crashing down on Starlord's head.

The others who had been defeated – the Knave, Thunderclap, Yu Honghu and Windbreaker – couldn't help but be struck dumb by what they were witnessing.

At this level of competition, the first thought in a pilot's mind when encountering a strike like this was whether or not they could survive it. None of them could honestly say that they would.

Was this the power of Zeus and Poseidon?

Of course the frightening series of attacks drew exceedingly high energy costs. Of course, the odds of a god-ranked mecha suit being equipped with s-ranked energy power gems were high. Where that the case, they had nothing to worry about.

Starlord's chest plate began to glow, with a six-pointed star pattern etching itself therein. A misty golden aura sprang up around the assailed mecha.

Thor's descending blow was cast aside by the golden aura, and in the same instant the star pattern on its chest fractured and exploded outward. The golden aura ejected further outward, and filled the area with twinkling starlight. The glimmering dots of energy draw together until they were light a chain. It gripped fast to Thor's weapon and refused to let it move.

Boooooooooomm!

The entire arena was cast in to a gloomy darkness, but for the center where gold and purple joined in a spectacular display of chaotic energy. All three remaining mecha disappeared within it.

Mo Xiao, responsible for narrating the scene, gasped audibly. "Starlord really is far below where he was. If our living legend had been at his peak, he'd never have been caught in this reactionary situation. His reaction times, control and battlefield awareness all are not what they once were. He's still got his knowledge, but is that enough...?"

Before she could finish her thought, a digitized voice called over the

simulation.

“Star Alliance: Victory.”

Little by little, the roiling, angry ball of energy that filled the arena slowly faded. When it did, Thor and Triton were still visible.

Starlord was still caught in a prison of snaking electric tendrils, so damaged that its mechanical innards were visible. It's all-important Starblade was absent.

As the combat came to an end, the statistics were revealed on another screen. This included mecha damage. Deimos suit sat at eighty-seven percent damage, but was still standing after everything it had endured.

The local chat exploded in to vociferous cheers and vitriolic complaints. All the while, CAT sales soared.

Chapter 280: Chang'E's Domain

How could anyone understand what just happened in this battle without a recorded analysis? How could Deimos win after being in such a disadvantageous position?

Lan Jue sat within the dark sim pod, shock evident in his eyes. In that moment, he himself thought they'd won. In the end, though...

Everything that lead up to the explosion flashed through his mind.

In truth once Thor and Triton joined, the attacks hadn't just been Thor's hammer or spear. In the moment when Thor's Hammer burst against Starlord's protective shields, Triton's trident was also stretching out in preparation for Hua Li's strongest attack. He was just waiting for the right opportunity.

But Lan Jue knew he messed up the moment both sides collided.

Thor's Hammer was definitely strong enough to break through a mecha's shields. However, it needed time and positioning. Truth be told it was a short time needed, but enough for someone as talented as Deimos.

Thor and Triton's attacks were already alleviating by the time Starlord pushed its shields out further. That was when Lan Jue saw the real Starblade.

As they watched the sword transformed, seeming to reflect the vast expanse of the Milky Way galaxy in its depths. It exploded, sending out resplendent beams of energy in all directions. Distracted and blinded by the blast, Hua Li and Lan Jue didn't know it had impaled them until everything was already finished.

They lost!

Star Alliance had taken the first victory in their contest for the best of five. Consequently, the Four Divine Monarchs – the best God-ranked team according to polls – were the losers.

But what the audience did not know, was that this loss filled the Monarchs with confidence. Starlord's stunning upset had not been a result

of exceptional piloting, but of his mecha suit's installed components. Shields and swords are what won him that victory.

They were frighteningly effective, but in the end they were things that required triggers. If they could anticipate these things and plan for them, the next time it happens in a fight they'll be ready for it.

On the other side the Knave, Thunderclap, Windbreaker and Yu Honghu were anxious despite their victory.

The Four Divine Monarchs were much stronger than they'd imagined. It wasn't just their cooperation, but even their individual strength that the Star Alliance had failed to properly determine. And when it came to battlefield control, Prometheus was far and away superior to Starlord! Where they not already down a man, the Monarchs likely would have come out of that last fight victorious.

Yes indeed the Star Alliance ended up dominating, but their confidence at a route was shaken.

In the final moments Lan Jue shared his final analysis with Lan Qing.

"Very good. Let's keep it up." Those six words were all Lan Qing had to say.

With the completion of the first fight, a resting counter had begun to tick down. A complete 360 analysis of the fight wasn't yet available, but simple recorded playback was enough for them to recap what had happened.

Many of the audience were doing just that, with their eyes glued to a slow-motion playback of the action.

Mo Xiao had to take a moment to regain her composure before continuing her duties as host. "What you just witnessed you will likely only see once in your entire lifetime. I feel honored to have been able to watch, and will forever be remembered fondly as a cherished memory. Really something splendid!"

"If I hadn't seen it all with my own eyes, I'd never believe it. This fight wasn't just about power and mecha piloting – wisdom won the day. What

a treasure that I got to be a small part of it.”

No advertisements plagued the audience as the intermission stretched on. However, the large screens did have a highlights reel of the last fight on constant repeat. Ad revenue wasn't likely to be tremendous, but the number of people queueing up to buy CAT copies already had spent enough to feed a mid-sized planet.

The audience knew that it was a historic fight for DreamNet, but since they hadn't been able to see the conclusion clearly they were yet to feel the excitement. As before they were allured by the charm of the team members, so what was a few dollars to have a permanent record of your hero battling it out? This was especially true for mecha pilots, for having the opportunity to analyze such a high level fight would undoubtedly serve their skills well in the future.

“Our next map for the second fight: Chang'E's Domain!” Mo Xiao's silken, alluring voice called out the information.

The Domain had once been DreamNet's go-to arena, a classic choice. It was suitable for all manner of combat and competitors. It was a simple square map, with highlands in the four corners that doubled as spawn points. The sole decoration was an exquisite statue in the center, of a beautiful woman – Chang'E 1.

Moonlight hung over the statue and its surroundings like a blanket. Any mecha that the light should touch would be granted invisibility. That is to say, the first mecha to reach the center would have a significant advantage.

There have been any number of tactics and strategies developed for this map. The most popular was called the Moonlight Blitz. The idea was to have a team's most agile suit race for the center and wait in ambush, causing as much damage as possible on the unsuspecting enemy.

When the revelation of the next map was made, any pilot who'd been around for the last five years was filled with a pleasant nostalgia. In such a simple and straightforward map, what would the Monarchs and the Star Alliance show them next?

Four spawn points, nine pilots, and an objective just like the last time. To make matters even more exciting, one of those spawn points was going to be home to three pilots. This was a welcome leg-up for the numerically superior Star Alliance.

“Three. Two. One. Begin!”

The chat boxes became quiet as the match begun. All eyes were diligently locked to the screens. There was a flash, and then all four spawn points were occupied.

The recording cut to the bottom left corner. That was where the three intrepid mechas appeared.

Luck played a large role in this map, especially for god-ranked pilots. The identity of these three pilots usually determined the result of this fight before it even begun.

The three silhouettes, situated at the corners of the spawn point, became more defined. As they appeared they, like the audience, were desperate to quickly discover who shared the space.

They were Windbreaker, Yu Honghu’s Bahamut, and...

Thor!

In accordance with the rules for Chang’E’s Domain, any time the teams numbered greater than eight this sort of occurrence was likely to appear. So, with this corner revealed, it meant the other three were seeing one-on-one fights.

The Knave’s Skyshade was facing off against Prometheus and Coeus.

Thunderclap appeared with Cerberus.

And Starlord appeared opposite Triton.

Zeus flicked his eyes from one to the other. He would be responsible for at least fending off two of Star Alliance’s powerhouses. Although both challengers were lower than he on the aggregate power lists, that didn’t mean the differences were that spread.

Sitting calmly in the sim pod, Lan Jue was like a statue. However his

stoic exterior flashed incessantly with electric power, which congealed behind eyes fervent with bloodlust.

His opponent's strength was the catalyst for his combat desire, creating a stirring need in him to give his all. He had little regard for the conclusion, victory or defeat ultimately didn't matter. His interest lay in the process. It was a rare chance to face off against so many high-level pilots.

Boom-!

The first to launch an attack was Bahamut. The hydra-like suit launched itself in to the air, then belched its breath weapons towards Thor. Red and blue intertwined, bathing Thor in ominous light.

Windbreaker wasted no time, and the sounds of compression surrounded it. There was a sudden burst, and the force launched Windbreaker right at the beleaguered Thor. Compared to Bahamut, Windbreaker was much better suited for close-quarters combat. Though they didn't have a great deal of experience working together, at this level of piloting tacit cooperation was practically scarred on your soul. It took them no time at all to correctly determine the best attacks to use in conjunction.

This time it would be close combat suppression with long-distance assist.

Two on one, with a simple objective: Destroy Thor, then regroup with the others. More so than the last map, a numbers advantage would mean a lot here.

As for the Monarchs, they weren't pleased with the results, but it certainly wasn't a death knell. Had Thor been forced to meet Starlord first thing, then things would have been much different.

Thor reacted to the environment, but not by attempting to flee or dodge. Instead, it rose and charged straight in to Bahamut's elemental breath.

After the first fight concluded, each of their mechas had been returned to their default, one hundred percent condition. Although Lan Jue was just

using a simulator, he felt as though he were one with Thor.

Bahamut's blast of ice and fire had a diameter of about a meter. The elemental attack was different, and not simply composed of the hot and cold. It was the essence of it that the dragon released; rage, and permeation. The moment the strike hits, it first injects itself in to the enemy and spreads all throughout it. Then it unceremoniously detonates them. For Bahamut it was a normal attack, but widely considered among all pilots as one of the strongest non-specialized attacks there were.

The audience watched as Thor plowed headlong in to the stream of energy. Just in time for Windbreaker to catch up.

Just then, Thor's sapphire figure became somewhat cloudy, as though viewed through dirty water. It's large mechanical arms lashed outward, and became a massive hand crashing down from the skies. He released no electric energy, only that massive illusory palm bearing down on Bahamut and its breath weapon.

Much to Yu Honghu's surprise, Zeus' palm strike felt almost... gentle. Thor, famous for its terrifying explosive power, was suddenly soft as water. Breath and calm collided, but did not explode as one might expect. Instead it blocked it, deflecting the flow of energy away. In the same instant Thor split in to two, and the mirror images raced forward on either side of Bahamut's breath attack. What's more, now the ice and fire breath were being deflected backward towards its source.

Windbreaker had gotten within striking distance. Conventional thinking held that he already had his strike waiting and, the moment he collided with Thor and Bahamut's breath attack, his own strike will seal the deal. With the power of two god-ranked pilots crashing down on it like a wave, Thor would be obliterated.

*

1. Chang'E is a mythical Chinese woman who was sent to the moon with her Jade rabbit. She's roughly equivalent to the man on the moon in

the West, though her story is much more dramatic. They say now that Mid-Autumn festival is the only time Chang'E and her husband can be together, crossing over a river of stars.

Chapter 281: Doppelgangers

Windbreaker was struck dumb with surprise. He was ready, waiting to strike the killing blow on Thor. But when he arrived it wasn't Thor in front of him, nor any explosion from the collision of their two powers. Instead it was the deflected breath weapon of his own companion heading straight for him. Before he had time to react, the strike rammed against his own shield of compressed air. Thor, now separated in to two identical images, simply went around.

In short, both Thor and Bahamut were assaulting the beleaguered Windbreaker.

But that palm strike...

How was it that Bahamut's breath weapon could be so easily deflected? Controlled? It was the primary question running through Yu Honghu's mind as he helplessly watched the interaction.

Thor would not be answering his question. As for his strike, it already reached a target, just not the one he wanted.

However, Windbreaker was not your average pilot. Twentieth on the aggregate power lists, he was among some of the most talented pilots there were. That's why, in the face of such sudden and dangerous changes to the field of battle, he kept his cool. Suddenly, a white light erupted from the mecha and surrounded it, as the brunt of Bahamut's attack struck it head on. Wave upon wave of compressed air rushed out to meet it, and the resulting shockwave succeeded in deflecting the dangerous energy away.

Windbreaker's entire metal frame had, by this time, become a brilliant titanium white, blazing with the power of a small sun. The atmosphere around it warped and distorted uncomfortably.

This was a powerful skill unique to Windbreaker: Airburst. It was a maneuver that was simultaneously offensive and defensive in nature, with the capability of creating a powerful single-front shield and obliterating anyone too close to the blast radius. It was an effective martial tactic. He'd used it once in another god-ranked battle after grabbing his opponent. The

resulting, violent explosion left nothing remaining of his competitor. Considering the situation he faced now, Windbreaker undoubtedly made the right decision.

The most upsetting revelation was how quickly Thor turned the two of them against each other. It was two on one, but even a trade of Thor for one of theirs wasn't something they could afford.

But while he released the Airburst, Windbreaker's face changed sitting there in the darkness of his sim pod. Thor still hadn't attacked directly, coaxing the two mirror images around him like a stone in a river. He fused back in to one once he'd passed windbreaker's sphere of influence, and rushed directly toward Bahamut.

"Beautiful! A flawless deception against Windbreaker by Thor, giving him a chance to take on Bahamut one on one. Now he's got the path open for a charge." Mo Xiao cried her expert analysis rapidly over the scene.

Yu Honghu, upon seeing Thor revert back to one suit and charge his way, was understandably alarmed. It was all he could do before Thor arrived within melee range.

In no time at all, Thor had turned a two on one encounter around so he had the upper hand. No one had expected it to happen, especially so fast. Zeus; display wasn't just of power, but of experience, intent and control as well.

After the last fight, watching his brother's remarkable sacrifice, Zeus was ready to give it all he had. The experience coaxed him to reveal every bit of ability he possessed.

His hand speed soared to over ninety CPS. Creating doppelgangers as Thor just had looked easy, but it was impossible for anyone with a hand speed under eighty-five. On the lists of fasted hand speed, Zeus sat at number four. But that list didn't take in to account his most recent improvements.

Thor's lightning spear, appearing now in its hands, lashed out. The strike spawned countless shadow images, creating a forest of deadly strikes aimed right at Bahamut.

The dragon mecha's specialties lay in battlefield control and local support. Relying on his mobility and powerful standard attacks, Bahamut was an integral addition to support his allies.

However, one on one he wasn't so powerful. Of the four other members of his Star Alliance team, he was certainly weakest in this regard. Thor was right on top of him, so even with his speed advantage he didn't have the time to employ it. All he could do was face what was coming.

The two dragon's heads began to spurt plumes of energy. The red emulsion swept around the suit and congealed to form a light shield, in the hopes of deflecting Thor's melee onslaught. Bahamut's powerful strikes were long-ranged, and not calibrated for close-combat. Windbreaker's first priority had to be making sure Thor didn't get too close.

Thor appeared to grow denser as Windbreaker watched, and the myriad spear strikes all melted in to one. Zeus' massive mecha suddenly erupted with color of its own, disappearing in a golden orb and stretched cone-shaped as Thor launched itself forward. Like a golden comet, the towering mecha collided viciously with Bahamut's shield.

"Boltcutter!" Mo Xiao exclaimed.

Much like Thor's Hammer, Boltcutter was one of Zeus' unique abilities. Its purpose was to break through, like a hardened ballistic missile.

Bahamut's shield parted, offering little more protection than a shell of warm butter, like it was hardly there at all. The dragon mech wrenched itself to the side, and brought its long tail over like a hammer.

But Thor was ready, once again displaying his mastery of the craft. He anticipated Bahamut's defense, and his response dropped the jaws of every onlooker.

Once again, Thor split in to two. Instead of splitting left to right, however, this time it was above and below.

"Staggered doppelgangers! Wow!"

Creating the doppelganger illusion one on top of the other was

particularly difficult, even when compared with the traditional left-right formation. This was due to the powerful weightlessness the pilot felt while performing it. The physical cost and hand speed required were on a different level.

The masterfully performed maneuver allowed Thor to completely avoid Bahamut's tail. His lightning spear crackled as it swung through the air, and caught Bahamut's tail in its center.

As the spear connected, it immediately infused Bahamut with countless coiling bolts of golden lightning. Windbreaker, meanwhile, had just finished deflecting his friend's breath weapon with an Airburst. It turned to come to Bahamut's rescue.

Thor didn't look back. It thrust its left hand backward, and from the mechanical palm shot out an orb of roiling electric power. It tore through the air toward Windbreaker, and if one looked closely they could see an electric hammer simmering in the orb's heart.

"Empowered Thor's Hammer!"

Windbreaker froze. Before these fights had started, he and his companions had broken down the Four Monarch's abilities. He was particularly familiar with Thor's Hammer. Up until today, any opponent of Thor's who encountered the Hammer, never once pulled away to victory.

When the Hammer came, all you could do was run. It was a well-known fact in Dreamburg.

Windbreaker's form shimmered, and then it also fractured in to two doppelgangers in the hopes of avoiding Thor's Hammer. His hope was to do as Thor had – split, avoid, merge while keeping his speed up. But his hand speed simply wasn't fast enough...

He only had one choice. Dodge, and make a mad rush to save his friend.

The golden orb expanded, and eventually detonated in mid-air. Hundreds upon thousands of lightning bolts lashed out like furious snakes, while thunder rolled all around them. Windbreaker had no way to approach without getting struck.

Thor never turned to watch his rear flank, he didn't need to. The spear strikes had set Bahamut off balance, who tried to rise above the kill zone. Golden light enveloped the mecha.

As he did, the skies darkened. From on high, suddenly and with frightening power, a lightning bolt easily five times the size of an average mecha came crashing down. Seven times this occurred, all of them in the same spot.

Eventually, the chaotic burst that was Thor's Hammer subsided. From the ground below, another light flared to life, this one a deep violet. It took off for the skies.

Thor's Starfall! Bahamut was no more!

Only a few seconds had passed since the fight started, no longer than the time it took to settle in to one's seat. It had started two on one, but Thor already dispatched one of his enemies.

Although Thor had shown quite a powerful display in the first battle, he'd held back due to Prometheus' presence, and his battlefield control. Now, he was making a statement: It was I who climbed these Sanctuary Lists! See my power! His place on the power lists was no longer indicative of his real abilities.

Windbreaker stopped his headlong rush. Alone in his sim pod, the pilot scowled as an unprecedented sense of repression hung over him. Thor was a terrifying force to reckon with.

The remains of Bahamut fell to the ground in smoldering pieces, while Thor rose to the heavens. Sunlight glinted off of the polished sapphire frame, highlighting the lack of damage.

Thor didn't even stop to pause as its trajectory began to swing it back down. It's next target – Windbreaker.

The Calming Wind took a deep, long breath as though coaxing more air from his legs. He fought to adopt the emotional state of his moniker. The mecha's thick arms splayed out, and once again that white light shone outward as the atmosphere around it condensed.

The other three spawn points were also hot-spots of action, replete with explosions and waves of power as the god pilots clashed. For the first time, many of the audience members were beginning to understand the power a god-ranked pilot commanded. As they looked on, strikes powerful enough to obliterate space stations were exchanged with inhuman speed. Only fifteen seconds had passed since the start, but in that time three pilots had fallen.

The first had been Bahamut, but Poseidon and the Knave quickly followed.

Starlord had handled Poseidon masterfully, escaping the confrontation unscathed. Prometheus had dealt with Windshade, but it cost him one of his moonblades.

Only Thunderclap and Cerberus remained in stalemate.

The main screen remained trained on Thor and Windbreaker. By the time the audience had reacted to what was happening, the other two fights were already finished.

CAT sales continued to rise. After all, the audience barely had time to register what was happening with Thor. How could they see the others?

The victorious combatants, Prometheus and Starlord, both raced toward the map's center where Chang'E's statue awaited.

In the previous fight, teamwork had been integral. However, as most pilots knew, Chang'E's domain forced combatants to focus more on individual encounters. In this competition it was impractical for everyone to try and meet in the center for a team fight. It was in part due to this that Chang'E's Domain fell out of favor for competitive matches.

Starlord looked to have the advantage here, due to faster flight speeds. Prometheus was a fraction of a second behind. Both of them could have chosen to aid their respective allies, but they didn't. Taking charge of the map's center, to them, was the most important thing.

Chapter 282: Shrewd and Ruthless Starlord

Starlord was the first to reach Chang'E's statue. Under the dim moonlight, Deimos' mecha became an indistinct shape in the shadows, until it eventually vanished altogether.

Not a moment later, Prometheus found his way to the map's center as well. The area was blanketed in an ominous silence as the two competitors shut off their main engines to maintain stealth.

Neither Deimos nor Prometheus had seen each other since the fight's beginning. The audience, however, had a bird's eye view of everything. They could see every movement from the two team captains.

Each had taken position in a corner and, with their engines dark, looked very much like statues themselves. There they sat in silence, waiting... waiting for the others to come searching.

Hades and Thunderclap were still duking it out, with Cerberus' pilot facing an uphill battle. Aside from Starlord, Thunderclap was the strongest pilot in the Star Alliance. Some would say stronger even than his rival, Zeus.

But Hades was stronger than Thunderclap predicted. By the time Thunderclap claimed victory, half of its frame was destroyed beyond recognition. Cerberus' Hellfire Cannon had grazed him, and the result was a left leg and arm that were now puddles of molten metal. Thunderclap, while still motive, was essentially castrated after their clash.

More surprising was Thor and Windbreaker's fight, which had just concluded. Everyone's attention was on Coeus and Starlord, and so did not see the thrilling conclusion.

After finishing off Bahamut, Zeus turned the momentum toward Windbreaker, who had since recovered from his earlier hopelessness. The mecha's shell of compressed air surrounded a sizeable swath around it, and waves of it battered Thor from all directions. His head was clear, and

his tactics simple.

Windbreaker knew that Thor came out the other end of his conflict with Bahamut unscathed, however he must have expended a fair amount of energy by this point. And this was so. Sustaining against such powerful strikes couldn't be done indefinitely, and so Windbreaker was determined to keep up the pressure. He would rely on these strikes to keep up the pressure on Thor, eventually exhausting it.

The area within three hundred meters of Windbreaker warped nauseatingly, like the air was boiling. Zeus could feel the increased atmospheric pressure crushing Thor from all directions.

Zeus was restraining his suit's speed. He was finding it difficult to see Windbreaker through the undulating air. This was one of Windbreaker's specialties – Atmospheric Refraction! Not only did the compressed air apply pressure to the enemy, it also hid him as the thickening atmosphere refracted light. It was almost as effective as cloaking.

This ability meant Windbreaker had no need to rush for the statue. It could hide itself wherever it chose to.

Thor came to a halt in the air, the errant bolts of electricity that always surrounded him quieting down. Both hands clutched the shaft of its spear, as Zeus quietly searched for any indication of his enemy. Lan Jue empowered his shields, in anticipation of an attack as well as to help ward off the buffeted blasts of compressed air.

Windbreaker appeared suddenly at Thor's back, silent as the grave. He did not rush forward, but instead coaxed his mecha to approach from low altitude. Then, the mecha's thick mechanical arms reached out to grab Thor's legs.

It was a well-planned angle of attack. Hidden approach, hard to anticipate, and difficult to break out of.

Windbreaker was executing his plan. Honor would be recovered by succeeding in where he'd failed before. The moment he managed to grapple Thor, the rest of his plan went in to motion; increase the atmospheric pressure until one or both of them were crushed. Even if he

fell in the process, removing Thor from the equation was well worth it.

Thor didn't move. It looked as though Windbreaker caught him totally by surprise.

Windbreaker's silver hands grabbed Thor's ankles in a vice-like grip, then pulled violently. He didn't yet employ any real power, instead seeking to position his enemy. Thor came tumbling down.

As the sapphire mecha began to fall, Windbreaker went with him. They twisted around one another as they did so.

Something was wrong, and the moment Windbreaker sensed it he reacted. He immediately released the store of energy he'd been keeping, to release an Airburst that would end their trade. Once again, a powerful aura of white light sprang up around Windbreaker. The difference was, this time he was right in the center of the blast radius.

Thor's lightning spear crackled as it tore through the air. It swiped viciously at the space below as they fell. But then something surprising happened, that even the god-ranked pilots who wrote battle analyses would find impressive.

In this critical moment, at the crux of victory or defeat, Thor's spear strike was directed at his enemy. He swung his spear at himself.

The shielding for Thor's legs disappeared and then, with a flash of the crackling spear head, they were gone. In an all-out slash of its spear, Thor cut its own feet off at the ankles. The force of the strike knocked it up and away from Windbreaker.

Thor's enemy continued to fall, gripping impotently at the mangled feet. It was too late. The air around it erupted as Windbreaker's Airburst was released.

Thor's speed and maneuverability were hampered by the loss of its feet and the thrusters beneath them, but it was still enough for it to avoid Windbreaker's last gasp.

A violent, staggering explosion of violet energy burst in to bloom directly on top of the Star Alliance powerhouse. Thor's Hammer!

Boooom! The impact force stunned Windbreaker, making him unable to control his mecha. The audience gasped as they saw streamers of golden light spurt out from Thor's back. Its weapon glowed with a similarly potent aura, and fired it out at its foe.

In less than a second, Thor executed seven simultaneous thrusts. Each one found its target.

With a loud explosion, windbreaker was reduced to debris. Pieces of the defeated suit fell to earth in a fiery display. It was no longer a threat to the God of Lightning.

In the sim pod, Lan Jue's face bore an ice-cold and obstinate expression. He wasted no time, directing his mangled suit toward the moonlit statue at the map's center. Sparks flew incessantly from the mangled remains of its legs.

In a straight, one-on-one fight, there was a distinct disparity between Windbreaker and Thor. Trying to finish off Zeus in a short time was exceedingly difficult. Sometimes you have to lose some to win it all, and Zeus knew this. He might have lost his mecha's feet, but after his flagrant display he remained alive and ready to support his team.

His enemy could always have defended against his attacks, but Thor's feet couldn't. Who could have suspected that such a high-ranking mecha pilot would actually choose self-mutilation? The feet were an integral part of any mecha construction, after all.

Without the stability and thrusters, Thor's combat power dropped to perhaps sixty percent. It was simply the price he had to pay to keep going. But when it came to Chang'E's Domain, no one had more success. The proof was right in front of everyone's eyes. Two on one, and in the end Thor emerged victorious!

He also proved to the audience that the Four Divine Monarch's strength wasn't just in cooperation. They were nearly as strong apart as they were together.

The last three years had been rough on Lan Jue, but not crippling. After the events of Tai Hua, he returned changed – stronger, calmer, and more

detached. He had matured as a combatant.

Meanwhile, Thunderclap had managed to finally make it to Chang'E with some effort. Judging by the damage, however, it didn't look as though he would be a threat.

Two against two. The audience held their breath as they waited to see who would win this nail-biting exchange.

The tension was palpable. Zeus and Prometheus separately were demons on the field. Together, their fans were sure they could overcome anything. But that's what was said in the last fight, when Starlord turned the tables and took the win right out from under them. Could it happen again?

No one knew. But they were all anxious to see how this decisive battle would end.

Thor arrived sooner than Thunderclap, having sustained less damage. When the statue came in to Zeus' view, his communicator crackled to life. Lan Qing's calm voice outlined the next part of their strategy.

Just then, something caught Zeus' attention. There was something glinting on top of Chang'E's statue. He noticed that the light released by the statue was stronger. Originally its stealth field covered five hundred meters in any direction. Now it felt much farther.

This was...

No, it's not moonlight! He came to the realization just as an intense beam of energy came hurtling toward him. Thor flew headlong in to it.

Nearby, a figure went up in a blaze of light. Lan Qing's voice went silent on the other end of the communicator. Lan Jue watched as his screen went dark.

"Winner: Star Alliance!"

It was over? Skyfire Avenue's Jewelry Master sat in stunned silence. What had happened? How could he have been so handily defeated?

How could they have lost, a second time?

Even if they hadn't have had the upper hand, they should have at least

had a chance at victory!

Lan Jue's self-pitying reverie was cut short when his brother's voice came through the pod's communicator. "The fault wasn't with you. It was me. Starlord self-destructed, blowing all of the power gems in his suit. I underestimated the time it would take for him to initiate the meltdown. He didn't hesitate. What's more, it seems like his suit's energy matched perfectly with the moonlight from the statue. The primeval energy it was releasing covered the power from the statue, and we couldn't tell the difference."

Indeed, from what the audience could puzzle out, Starlord, Prometheus and Zeus were all destroyed simultaneously. In the end, only the half-destroyed Thunderclap remained alive.

That put the Star Alliance up two victories. One more, and the Divine Monarchs would lose their crown.

Chapter 283: Evolution and Retirement

In the eyes of the audience, there was no satisfaction to be had in this fight. The comment section was a plethora of curses and unmitigated irritation. Deimos had lead his Star Alliance to victory, but in the hearts of the onlookers the Divine Monarchs were the real winners. Thor's valiant showing was proof, defeating both Bahamut and Windbreaker with nothing but his own abilities. It left quite a profound impression.

Since when was Deimos reduced to relying on self-destruction to win a straight fight? All he had to do was hide in the concealing moonlight. Any other map, he'd likely have lost terribly.

Mo Xiao was silent, her heart filled with sadness, sadness for Deimos. She was witnessing the sunset of an era. The Starlord was too old now, and had to use cheap tactics to obtain the upper hand.

Just then, a smooth and sultry voice filled everyone's sim pods.

"Ladies and gentlemen, salutations. This is Deimos."

Eight words were enough to command absolute silence from everyone.

Why was the Deimos speaking after these two fights? According to DreamNet's policies, he shouldn't be interrupting a competition.

Did it have something to do with his actions?

He continued. "Of your five matches, two have been completed. I have two announcements to make. The first concerns myself, and the second all of DreamNet."

With this news, many of the audience members began to panic. What did the best mecha pilot the universe had ever known want to say? Even before his disappearance, Deimos was famously tight-lipped.

"We will begin with the first. After today's competition, regardless of the outcome, I will be retiring from DreamNet. These will be my last fights."

Last fights? This hero of a bygone era was retiring, which meant his name would be stricken from all the lists. He would fade in to history.

Several in the comments section grumbled about the hypocrisy of this announcement after winning two fights. Deimos went on.

“For the second matter, I represent DreamNet in making the announcement. After today, DreamNet will be down for three months. With the exception of some universities and private simulators, all public pods will be collected and recycled. But don’t worry, everything be back. DreamNet will be taking this time to upgrade its services to all of the Alliances, ushering in a new era for this generation’s pilots.”

The shock of Deimos’ retirement was already a news-worthy item. The addition of DreamNet’s shutdown and subsequent upgrade caused an uproar.

Roughly a hundred years had passed since DreamNet’s founding. Throughout its run, the system had constantly undergone upgrades, but they were largely procedural adjustments. Never once had the entire network needed to be shut down like this. For three months, DreamNet would be unavailable.

In truth there were several gaming networks that were analogous to DreamNet. Were they not afraid of being surpassed by the competition? Then there were the true fans, who took DreamNet for granted. For many this was a second home. How could they close their home for three months? How could they get used to it?

Deimos was not finished. “I imagine many of you find this strange, maybe upsetting. Why would this upgrade need such a large-scale operation, even recycling all of its sim pods? I’ll tell you. This upgrade will bring DreamNet in to the future, an upgrade that will change everything. After the new pods have been installed, they will allow users to employ their Discipline in the simulations themselves. However strong your Talent, DreamNet will render it in real time. Finally, Adepts can compete in a safe place, holding nothing back so that they may learn and improve with one another. Of course, this includes mecha piloting, and all suits will thus be able to sustain and utilize its pilot’s powers. To punctuate this another way, DreamNet and the real world will end up with an eighty-five percent compatibility after these upgrades are complete. Afterwards,

pilots can rely on DreamNet for all of their training needs.”

Discipline Simulation? Deimos hardly had time to finish before the comments section exploded.

In truth, an upgrade like this had been rumored for a long time, though it was largely conjecture. No one could have anticipated that the announcement for such a revolutionary upgrade would be made during this god-ranked battle.

And it wasn't just the audience, even the Divine Monarchs were stunned by the revelations.

Lan Jue's first reaction was that of admiration. DreamNet had chosen a spectacular moment to reveal their future plans. It was likely DreamNet had never enjoyed an audience like the one they had today, and then choosing the famous Deimos as their mouthpiece made the announcement that much more hard-hitting. It made everyone excited for the three-month hiatus.

However, intermingled with that admiration was indignation. The DreamNet guardians never revealed any of this to them. Instead they had claimed this exchange was to raise the fighting power for all of humanity, in preparation for invading foreign foes.

The other three Monarchs had similar thoughts. They had been fooled. None of this was something they wanted or agreed to.

Deimos' voice was still speaking through their communicators. “Presumably you are all wondering how this will affect combat in DreamNet going forward. You needn't wonder: our next fight will be using the new system. Call it a diagnostic test.”

“A-Jue, what the hell is going on?” Hua Li's voice interrupted the broadcast. He had been told earlier about the new pods.

Alone in his pod, Lan Jue shook his head. “I have no idea. I was never told any of this.”

“Where do they get off making this sort of decision for us?” This time it was Chu Cheng, his voice thick with irritation.

Before he could answer, a voice from outside the pod caught Lan Jue's attention.

"Come on out a second," the voice implored. It was strangely familiar. Shocked at who he knew to be outside, Lan Jue disconnected from DreamNet and opened the pod.

Outside stood a man in formal attire, with a wig and a glimmering scepter. It was the Wine Master.

"Wine Master? What are you doing here," Lan Jue asked in surprise.

In lieu of response, the Paragon waved his scepter. There was a flash of silver light, and suddenly two new sim pods appeared where there had been nothing.

Compared to the original pods, these were about twice as large. The quality of the materials used looked amazing. By now Hua Li had also exited his pod, and looked quizzically at the Wine Master.

The Wine Master looked at the two of them for a moment, then began to speak in his traditionally quiet voice. "Deimos' announcement was a spur-of-the-moment decision. This wasn't part of the plan when you two were being recruited for the task. It was supposed to be a simple competition. There was no time to bring you all in to the loop. We hope you forgive the circumstances. We ask that you use these pods for the next fight."

Lan Jue couldn't help but scowl as the Wine Master explained the situation. "What's the meaning of this? Is there some sort of relationship between DreamNet and Skyfire Avenue," he asked, his voice clearly revealing displeasure.

The Wine Master answered with a nod. "Not just the Avenue. The Three Alliance, the Conclave, even the two Citadels. All of us are in constant contact with DreamNet. Since the beginning the network has been run by those in power. Considering the circumstances, this upgrade is absolutely imperative. We just didn't expect things to be ready so quickly. Once the Bookworm broke through to Paragon, the problems that had blocked him were overcome as well. He had a series of revelations and, with the help of the Keeper, was able to push the project through to completion. So, the

DreamNet administrators had a meeting and decided now was the time. They would... borrow this event to make the announcement.”

“Everything the DreamNet Guardian told you before was true. Humanity will face an unprecedented foreign threat. The Northern Alliance has already dispatched another exploratory mission, this time with a mothership-class battle frigate fully equipped for combat. According to the situation as it stands now, the enemy can appear at any moment. This is why DreamNet is in such a hurry to get this upgrade finished. It is paramount that we do everything we can to prepare humanity for this confrontation. We hope you can understand and cooperate with the changes.”

Hua Li’s brows furrowed. “Is it correct to assume then, that you yourself are a DreamNet Guardian, your majesty?”

Once again, the Wine Master nodded. “You could say that, though it’s very rare that I show up anywhere in DreamNet. I’m not a pilot, just an Adept. After the upgrade, though, I’ll likely start making appearances.”

Lan Jue was next to speak. “This time I’ll give you face and participate. However, I do not agree that the DreamNet administration never approached us for permission before making this decision.”

The Wine Master’s normally stoic expression darkened. “You don’t agree? You have the nerve to disagree? Before you had no scruples agreeing to help the Gourmet or the Pauper with their little task. You were going to steal in to cellar and abscond with one of my treasured possessions. You don’t agree?”

Lan Jue, surprise written clear on his face, blinked at the new master of Skyfire Avenue. “The Pauper actually succeeded?”

“Those two bastards have just vanished,” the Wine Master spat confrontationally. The Pauper even had the gall to leave a message. He said if there was a problem to call you. He probably knew I’d see you during the competition, and can settle accounts then.”

Lan Jue gave the Paragon a bitter chuckle. “But I never directly participated! I’m a victim here too you know, I didn’t even get to drink any

of your precious treasure. The Gourmet, that guy, he never even told me. And he calls himself a friend.”

The Wine Master snorted furiously. “Fine, enough nonsense. Hurry up and get ready for your next fight. When All’s said and done we’re sit down.”

“What about Hades and Prometheus,” Hua Li asked.

“They’re already prepared and waiting.”

The two Monarchs climbed in to the new pods and reconnected to DreamNet. Lan Jue was prepared somewhat for the differences – after all, he’d done this before. He did note that the pod was more comfortable than the experimental design he’d used earlier. Overall it had seen some significant improvements.

Hua Li was pleasantly excited by the novelty of it. Being able to use your Discipline in DreamNet... this was no normal upgrade!

Lan Jue immediately got back in contact with Chu Cheng and Lan Qing.

“My dad brought the new pod to me. What’s all this? I’ve got no choice but to continue with this farce,” he said angrily.

Lan Qing’s words were likewise surprising to Lan Jue the most. “A few commissioned officers brought the new one to me here at Headquarters.”

Zeus went on to relate their own experience with the Wine Master.

Chapter 284: Fully Simulated Battle

“So what do you think, boss? Do we trust ‘em?” Chu Cheng asked.

The four young men were clearly struggling with discomfort over the sudden change in circumstance.

Lan Qing’s deep voice replied. “Soldiers are bound by duty, and follow commands. Headquarters has commanded I proceed. For the rest of you, the decisions are your own.”

“We go on,” Lan Jue said resolutely. “I have faith in the Wine Master, Keeper and Bookworm.”

Hua Li nodded his head. “Let’s do it. Gives us a chance to see what these things can really do. If what Deimos said is true, these things will be a huge benefit to our training. It’s a true, fully simulated battle!”

“You leave Thunderclap to me this time,” Lan Qing growled dangerously. “With my discipline, he’s in for a nasty surprise.”

A digitized voice asked the Monarchs if they were prepared to continue.

Lan Qing answered in the negative, claiming he needed to debug. It was a new pod, and they needed to get used to it.

In the meantime, the third map was announced:

“The Dark Forest!”

Like the map before it, this was an old classic. It was comparatively complicated, with bogs, hills, rivers lakes and more dotting its surface. The Dark Forest was about the size of the previous two maps combined. There were only two spawn points, one on either side of the map. Teams spawned together, so the Dark Forest was an excellent map for any number of cooperative tactics. Of course the rugged nature of the map also meant there was considerable risk of damaging one’s suit inadvertently.

It was a very good choice as the first map to test the fully-functional sim pods.

Ten minutes later, Prometheus indicated that his team was ready to proceed.

Mo Xiao's voice called to the audience, calm once more.

“Even with all my years as a host, I could never have anticipated an event this dramatic, this exciting. We've seen incredible upsets, which cut right to the heart of me. And yet, what a display of power from our beloved Poseidon!

She was practically an advertisement!

She was certainly earning her keep as Hua Li's manager, Lan Jue thought wryly. Through all of this she never once missed an opportunity to talk him up.

Her blatant plugs were the focus of quite a bit of discussion in the comments section. The fact that Poseidon was a god-ranked pilot on top of his other talents was a very widely utilized fact for both Poseidon Entertainment and the Gobi Group. It did wonders for his popularity.

Of course, it was common that a powerful pilot in DreamNet ended up being less than stellar in reality. After all, a real master pilot used their Discipline together with their suit.

Critics and analysts have argued the fact, but many insist that DreamNet god-ranked pilots would likely be at least Sovereigns in the real world – likely on the higher end as well. They couldn't, however, claim that every one of them would be god-ranked.

Aside from their masterful control of a mecha suit, pilots were also required to be at least ninth-ranked Talents. This was why Su He was so unwilling to state he was a god-ranked pilot.

Of course the addition of this new feature was a massive reshuffle for DreamNet. In the near future, only truly God-ranked pilots could claim the title in the simulated world! Could Poseidon really possess a ninth-level Talent? Didn't the other Monarchs – Prometheus, Zeus, and Hades – also have to be at that level to be so successful already? And what about the Star Alliance?

A host of new and exciting questions filed the hearts of the audience. Their zeal, their enthusiasm for the coming fight was at a fever pitch.

Mo Xiao went on. “Sadly the situation is what it is, and there’s nothing I can do to change it. I am but a host, and these matters are above my capabilities. All I can do is offer my support to Poseidon, and his Divine Monarchs. I pray they come back from their two-loss deficit, and I believe they have the power to do it!”

“Both sides are ready to continue. Fight number three – the Dark Forest. Begin!”

“Three. Two. One. Commence combat.”

The screens flashed, and the audience squinted against the gloom to see the Dark Forest appear.

The Star Alliance appeared at the map’s Northern border. The Divine Monarchs were in the South.

So far, neither side revealed anything new or different after the change. As with the first two battles, so far this was all maneuverability. Both teams set out in search of the other.

As the Star Alliance pressed forward, the other members created a circle of protection around Starlord. Bahamut served as vanguard, scouting the path.

This sort of terrain – large and difficult to see – was Bahamut’s home turf. Long range probing attacks and high-grade scanners were always big helps in any team composition.

On the other side of the forest, the Divine Monarchs had chosen a different approach. Instead of remaining together, they set out through the trees in four different directions.

Of course everyone one of the competitors knew the nuances of this map, due to its perennial status. They didn’t need to be timid, or feel out their way forward. They moved inexorably forward, toward a fated meeting in the map’s center.

The first to arrive at the center was Bahamut, who able to capably and speedily negotiate the terrain. The dragon-like suit was ever surrounded in an orb of light that alternated between blue and red, which at this time was darker than average. If one didn't look carefully, it really could be confused for a black hydra. Were it not for the occasional flicker of the aura, no one would be able to tell its true color.

The machine cunningly swept through the area, its two heads peering in different directions.

The most emotionally effected competitor from the last match was Yu Honghu. He had been so easily fooled in a god-ranked match, in front of a full audience. Under the magnificent and terrible force of Thor's Starfall, he'd lost. He never even had a chance to really show some force. He was determined to remedy that mistake this time.

Just then, a flash. Blue and purple intertwined as a figure appeared from the shadows.

And speak of the devil, here to open old wounds! It was none other than Thor!

Bahamut refrained from rushing in for an all-out attack. Yu Honghu's first reaction was to report Thor's location to the others. With the information shared, both heads released jets of energy from the maws toward the sapphire mecha.

Just as Zeus didn't know their abilities, they didn't know just how powerful he was. The first encounter would be seeing what each other was capable of. There was still a significant distance between the two of them – enough for a talented pilot to flee if needed.

Two roiling balls of energy tore through the air, leaving sizzling contrails in their wake. It took no time at all for them to reach Thor, aimed just right.

Thor's figure launched forward, sped up, and changed direction to get out of the way of Bahamut's attack. The maneuvers were needed, for the dragon's breath were tracer blasts. Two orbs of power stuck right to Thor's heels, and were gaining.

Thor froze, then turned and slapped at the projectiles.

Poof! With a whimper, Bahamut's attack was dispersed. No collision, no explosion. Thor swatted it away like one would cigarette smoke.

Discipline? What Discipline was this?

The audience stared in wide-eyed bewilderment.

Thor's metallic eyes flashed as they looked Bahamut's way.

But he did not charge. The sapphire mecha executed a practiced bow and then, without explanation, disengaged and fled in to the woods.

"Huh?"

Doubt flooded Yu Honghu's mind. Thor withstood his breath attack as though it were halitosis. He absolutely must have employed his Discipline. It was enough for Yu Honghu to estimate Zeus' Talent at ninth-ranked, at least. Only a ninth-ranked Talent could be that strong.

However, Bahamut was not anxious at the revelation. The two massive metal wings at its back spread wide, then the dragon was off like a rocket in the direction Thor disappeared to.

Blast after blast of its breath weapon rocked the forest, as Yu Honghu blindly sent them coursing through the trees.

There were two goals in employing this tactic. The first was to flush Thor out of hiding, so as to give chase. Secondly, the noise alerted his other team members to his location, as well as the direction and speed they were moving.

The small comprehensive map revealed the location of all the challengers. It showed the audience that Bahamut's teammates had gotten the message, and were rapidly in route to his location. The three other Divine Monarchs also gave chase, though they were swinging around to attack from the flank.

In terms of speed, there wasn't much difference between the two teams. Thor and Bahamut maintained distance, with the former artfully dodging the dragon's attacks they sped between the trees.

Yu Honghu, alone in his pod, growled angrily. His skin had begun to crack, forming in to scales. A closer look showed that they, like his suit, were also blue and red and were separated on either side of his body. His hand speed sped up, in the same instant that his mecha began to emanate a powerful aura. Once more the two massive dragon heads opened, and within the depths of their mouth two points of energy began to congeal.

Radar exactly pinpointed his foe's location.

Last time, Yu Honghu lost at Zeus' hand. Now, he clearly had the advantage – this map, and distant engagements, where his forte. And so Bahamut gave chase, but not because he had any illusions of defeating Zeus on his own. Soon the rest of his team would arrival, all he had to do till then was keep up the pressure. He had faith in his team, and in the idea that they had to be ninth-ranked pilots. Other than the Knave, who was comparatively weak, his companions were strong enough to clench victory.

The two congealed orbs of power gathering before the dragon faces became larger with every passing second. Waves of staggering power warped the air around Bahamut.

Then Thor reacted.

Chapter 285: A Mighty Clash

Thor's maneuver seemed exceedingly strange, with him retreating rapidly like a beam of light. This was followed by a headlong rush and, before Yu Honghu could react, the safe distance he'd tried to maintain disappeared. Thor appeared behind the two-headed dragon mecha.

Impossible, how could this be? His Discipline is speed?

The three incredulous thoughts set him to scowling.

The change was too fast. Thor's frightening speed was far beyond what Yu Honghu anticipated. Once again he was forced in to defensive maneuvers.

But things were different this time. Like his foe, Yu Honghu could use his Discipline.

He didn't panic. Bahamut released the charged breath attack, but instead of reacting to the enemy behind, Bahamut launched itself directly in to the roiling ball of energy.

Instead of destroying the mecha as one might expect, as the dragon suit entered the dual-colored orbs they congealed to form a sort of energy shield around it. It was like a giant protective bubble that hung over him.

There was no denying: Yu Honghu's Discipline was metamorphosis, specifically a Hydra of Ice and Fire – one of the greatest transformational Disciplines known to man.

With this fact revealed, and protected by its own weapon, Bahamut was able to avoid falling in to a disadvantageous position. Once again, the mecha's hammer-like tail swiped at Thor.

Thor decided to forgo the use of weapons and simply side-stepped the flailing appendage. It's thick mechanical hand rose to knock it away.

The general audience determination was that this choice was unwise. Bahamut was a sight larger than your average, humanoid mecha suit, and more powerful. Paired with Yu Honghu's Discipline, it was stronger and more study still. Was Thor being cautious by refusing to use weapons?

Clunk! Thor was knocked away, tumbling at least ten meters in to the distance as Bahamut's tail connected.

But as Thor tumbled away, the sky darkened. Ominous peels of thunder rumbled in the distance.

The threatening sounds set Yu Honghu on edge. Alone in his pod, his body began to glow with an internal light.

The other members of the Star Alliance and the Divine Monarchs were quickly closing the gap. Sounds from the battle between Thor and Bahamut urged them onward.

Thor raised a single metal finger to the heavens. As if in response, the skies split and a bolt of lightning descended from on high to assail the dragon mecha.

The bolt was a blinding gold in color, and hit like a freight train. It was impossible to tell how much stronger this empowered strike was compared to those from their earlier encounters. Bahamut, still recoiling from the strike on Thor, was too slow to avoid it. Contact was inevitable.

Bahamut's whole body adopted a golden hue as the bolt found its mark. Arcs of lightning cross-crossed it's metal frame like angry serpents.

Thor disappeared. A moment later, it was spied high overhead and, leaving behind a golden contrail, descended toward Bahamut at terrifying speeds.

Boom! Bahamut was once again reduced to slag. Yu Honghu had lost again.

If he had lost the previous fight from lack of tactical assessment, this time it was purely due to insufficient power. With a slap and a single attack, Bahamut had been given more than it could withstand. But it wasn't the loss that made Yu Honghu feel like there was a boulder on his chest – it was Thor's appalling speed! Even specializing in speed, he was outclassed.

Mo Xiao earnestly continued her duties, calling out the action as it appeared on the screen. "I've just found out there's no way for me to

comment on what we're seeing. Like all of you, I have no idea what Disciplines these great pilots possess. I haven't the slightest idea how Thor was able to suddenly become so fast. Could it be that Thor's Discipline is actually speed? Perhaps Zeus is able to share speed with his suit?"

After destroying Bahamut, Zeus stopped trudging the warpath and retreated several meters from the point of collision. His speed was back within expected parameters.

This fight was now four-on-four.

The Four Divine Monarchs converged on Zeus' location from all directions. The remaining Star Alliance members were suddenly hemmed in, forced in to a standoff.

Each of the Four Divine Monarchs' mechas glowed according to their intrinsic powers. Thor's dazzling display was especially prevalent, and it filled the Star Alliance with dread.

"Zeus, do you dare to meet me solo?" Thunderclap called out over comms. 1

Most of the time, silence was strictly adhered to in battles such as this. Thunderclap seemed to have no claims parting with tradition. He didn't even finish before his mecha was racing forward to intercept his rival. He didn't seem the least bit anxious about besieging all Four Divine Monarchs.

Starlord, Skyshade and Windbreaker hung back. Thunderclap was on his own.

This was the arrogance of high-level pilots. Zeus certainly wasn't under any obligation to face Thunderclap one on one, but choosing sneak attacks over direct confrontation would likely earn the God of Lightning considerable disdain from his fans. None of this violated any regulations.

"So be it," Lan Jue replied, simple and direct. Thor detached himself from his compatriots. There was a flash as the mecha reached out its right hand, and then there appeared a shimmering golden spear of lightning caught in

Thor's grip.

"His weapon is a sword. Watch out," Chu Cheng warned over the team channel. He'd learned this the hard way after losing a duel against Thunderclap in an earlier fight. In fact, had Thunderbolt not taken the initiative and challenged Zeus, Hades likely would have proposed one himself. These one-on-one showdowns were a dramatic display of force. Chu Cheng strongly believed that, with the use of his Discipline now permitted, he'd have had no trouble dealing with him.

Both mechas and their pilots bore names related to the chaotic force of lightning. This fight was undoubtedly to determine who the strongest Lightning adept really was. It was no different from a real-world fight. Whoever won was the uncontested master of electricity.

Thunderclap's color, a manifestation of his abilities, was inherently darker than Thor's. It was blue, but a sort of dark blue like peering at the universe through the evening sky. Even the intermittent flashes of electric power were a deep shade of cobalt. The power it represented was palpable.

The two proceeded as though their duel was pre-arranged. In a single fluid motion, both of them rose in to the air and came barreling toward a collision. The simulated earth below trembled when they met.

No one was able to see the result. Likely even other pilots couldn't puzzle it out. The two god-ranked warriors were simply too fast. All that could be discerned were two indistinct figures, who would collide and separate again and again. Sometimes there would be more shadows, but they would soon disappear, only to re-appear once more a few moments later. They would engage for a moment, then break. Rinse and repeat.

Thunderclap bore a navy-blue sword in its hand, with its tip pointed toward the ground and wreathed in lightning. Every collision between the two pilots was punctuated with explosive peels of thunder.

Violet met deep blue in the skies over the Dark Forest. Artifacts of their fight hung in the air and left a charged residue in their wake.

The series of feints and attacks were largely exploratory, and neither side employed their strongest attacks directly. Neither of them currently held

an advantage over the other, it appeared the two of them were more or less evenly matched.

Thunderclap lifted its cobalt blade and pointed it at Thor. Thor, likewise, positioned its crackling spear for attack.

Strangely, in this moment the colorful auras around the two machines began to change. Thunderclap's deep blue blanched until it was a pure, radiant silver. Tendrils of lightning raced across the whole surface of the suit, making it look silver itself.

Thor, on the other hand, was a magnificent gold. Like his opponent, grasping tendrils of electricity lashed out from Zeus' mecha erratically in all directions.

Their display of power continued to rise, strengthening until it seemed the entire battlefield was positively charged with electricity. The waves of energy caused the skies to ripple.

The other six mecha pilots looked on with baited breath, watching as they traded blows. It was an important moment – whoever won here, would grant their team a real and oppressive advantage.

Thor and Thunderclap launched in to their second round of attacks. They were like two bolts of electricity, one silver and one gold, clashing in the center and sending sparks flying in all directions. Another ear-splitting boom swept through the map. An aftershock erupted and spread out in all directions, a result of their impact.

Two massive, revolving balls of energy hung in the air where the two mecha met. One was gold, and the other silver, and the majority of the Adepts' raging battle occurred within. Sadly, no one could clearly see what they were doing.

Mo Xiao exclaimed in joy and surprise. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is what a god-ranked duel looks like!"

Boom-boom! Less than ten seconds later, both orbs detonated at the same time. The two indistinct figures within disengaged.

Finally, the two mechas could be clearly seen. Both were changed by the

fight.

Thor's chest plate had been badly damaged, with a cross-shaped burn splitting it in to quadrants. It was clearly a new addition. Its left arm was worse off, and was broken beyond repair. Tendrils of lightning still raced over its metal frame, both gold and silver.

Thunderclap wasn't any better off. It had lost its left leg somewhere, as well as its left hand. Even half the suit's skull was missing, mangled. Electricity surrounded it as well.

The exchange had cost them both dearly.

With a flick of its wrist Thor's spear vanished as though it were never there. Then, in a distinct break from traditionally expected, Thor's movements took on a strange quality. In opposition to the hard, fast, explosive nature of its elemental power, Thor now began to move like flowing clouds and trickling water. Every motion was smooth and natural, like a dance.

"This is..." Mo Xiao trailed off, but the incredulity in her voice was obvious to all. Incredulous and uncertain.

Thunderclap raced forward, though this time his speed was a sight slower than it had been. With a twist it brought the lightning blade to bear, but the blow was nowhere near close enough to damage Thor. Instead, the sweeping motion spawned a dozen arcing waves of electric light. They spread and grew, until there was a veritable army of screeching electric dragons tearing across the sky. From every which way they approached, converging on Thor's location.

Thor was suspended in the air, unmoving. Its working hand made a small semi-circular motion, then pushed outward toward its foe.

The auction coaxed the whole of Thor's aura to migrate to its palm, and congeal therein. Little by little the power consolidated in the small space, until the small spot of light seemed dense enough to obliterate everything around them. The color darkened until the twinkling gold was gone, replaced with a deeper hue.

1. For anyone uninitiated, this entire exchange is very much like the e-sports phenomenon we're experiencing today, specifically with games like DOTA and LoL. Both these MOBA games are intensely popular in China, so a fair amount of the terminology and design of these fights may look familiar to those of you who also partake. Here, this is equivalent to 'lv1 me bro'.

Chapter 286: Victory!

A dozen silvery dragons of lightning screamed toward Thor. Strangely, though, there appeared to be some invisible force acting upon them. Like water following a riverbed, the writhing electric bolts all flowed toward Thor's right hand.

One after another, they gently disappeared in to the gathering golden light.

The orb expanded with each passing moment, now an intermingled sphere of silver and gold. Thor thrust his arm out toward Thunderclap.

The resulting release of energy shook the forest, as a beam of light fired outward. The beam itself was thirty meters in diameter, and easily swallowed Thunderclap in its depths. Then the beam went on toward the rest of the Star Alliance, watching nearby.

Deimos and his crew were not prepared for such a dramatic change in circumstance. As the fight neared its conclusion, Lan Jue had also been in contact with his team, outlining his plan. At Prometheus' command, Coeus, Triton and Cerberus rushed in to the fray directly behind Thor's beam.

Prometheus lead the charge, and in his wake were spawned several tornados that went spinning after him. They swept around to assail the Star Alliance from several directions.

Hades' Hellfire Cannon roared like a demon as it's payload was released. He didn't need to charge it, he already had his target in his sights – Skyshade.

The Knave's mecha was lit in red, gold and silver. Thor's beam was seconds away with him dead center. If the fastest hands in Dreamburg dodged, his only escape put him directly in the path of the Hellfire Cannon's barrage.

The three Monarchs reacted exceedingly fast in grasping the opportunity. The moment Thor's strike consumed Thunderclap, their duel

was considered over – no one said there needed to be downtime between winning and continuing the fight.

Hades and Prometheus took up position on either side of the lightning god, while Poseidon took to higher skies. Where Triton soared, a wake of metallic blue light followed its trident. Upon reaching the peak of its arc, the glorious three-pronged weapon silently burst in to a bloom of light. The vibrant colors painted the world in blue, and when in the next moment it was restrained there appeared countless halos hovering in the air. They fell over Poseidon and his companions, enveloping them in a shroud of gentle energy.

It was a perfectly executed attack and regroup maneuver. A testament to the excellent synergy of the Monarchs.

The Star Alliance had been caught completely off guard, Deimos included. The Knave saw the attacks coming a fraction of a second late, but his hand speed was fast enough to cover the hesitation. Skyshade split in to two images, each strafing sideways to avoid Thor's energy beam. But there was still Hades' Hellfire, and it was right on top of him.

A mecha's inherent powers were changed when a pilot added their Discipline. It was a fact the Knave understood, however in this critical juncture, his reactions only took in to account the DreamNet Thor he knew, not the one battling him now. His doppelgangers were effective in dodging the first threat, but nothing escaped Hades' Hellfire. Skyshade was knocked away, encased in flame.

A nearby cyclone was just in time to snatch up the tumbling mecha, as though it had been waiting there for just that purpose. The Knave was spat out right back in to the gold and silver beam.

Boom—! The unfathomable power of the beam claimed another challenger.

Another dramatic encounter was setting up as Prometheus and Windbreaker met on the field.

As suspected, Windbreaker had been chosen specifically as a counter to Prometheus. As Coeus' cyclones came for him, Windbreaker used his

Discipline in attempts to disperse them. That was his power, mastery over air. Between he and his mecha, Prometheus would have a hard time influencing much with his wind Discipline.

However, when their powers collided Windbreaker was confronted with his own naivete. His control over air wasn't enough to stop this wind, like it had a will all its own. Six whirling tornados converged on Windbreaker's location, and as he was swallowed in to the buffeting assault, all he could do was focus on not being smashed to pieces in the storm.

Poseidon's radiating power continued to descend from on high. Like the fathomless ocean, Starlord was drowned in it. Thor then focused its beam at the Star Alliance's leader.

The moment he became the target, Deimos was in motion. His first reaction was to take an oblique juke up and to the side. As he did, those twinkling stars appeared again upon the mecha. Halos of resplendent light burst in to existence, and merged to create a shield that looked like a microcosm of the galaxy surrounding Starlord.

Still, Poseidon's Boundless Depths attack was there first. Poseidon's area-wide emulsion couldn't break Starlor's shield, but it did slow him down considerably.

Starblade flared to life, with a myriad of constellations appearing along its make. It split the Boundless Depths like a tree parting a stream. He cut a majestic igure with sword raised high to face the incoming tide. However, this didn't stop the other three silhouettes who were coming at him from three angles.

Eventually Poseidon's energies overwhelmed him, and Starlord lost control of its motive functions. Deimos could only watch from his cockpit as Thor's golden beam filled his screen.

Boooooom-!

The galactic orb detonated, sending out twinkling detritus as though the Milky Way itself had exploded. In its center blazed an orb of fire so bright, it was like a mother star at the heart of the galaxy. It was stunningly beautiful.

And yet, there were few to appreciate its beauty. For the audience, the more important circumstance was what the fireball meant.

Starlord, the greatest mecha pilot to have ever lived, first under heaven, was beaten back.

Deimos had finally been bested.

It wasn't just the audience members who were stunned, either. Even the streak-breakers themselves, all four Divine Monarchs, looked on speechlessly as their mighty foe burned.

Still their victory was tainted by Deimos' announcement of retirement. On the contrary they were sad. They had contributed to the downfall of a public hero.

In addition, they had found it strange and disconcerting that Starlord had employed no Discipline whatsoever in his defense, or in conjunction with his mecha at all. It meant, or might have meant, that this man who had dominated DreamNet for so long was in fact a weak Adept. He relied on other things to get himself the advantage in combat, and that alone catapulted him to the very peak of the mecha pilot world.

Windbreaker was finally relinquished from the cyclone's grip, but lasted less than a second. This fight was decided.

And yet there was silence. The audience, in fact all of DreamNet was still as the grave. If there were any who doubted Deimos earlier words were a result of his two wins, they changed their mind now. He then went on to announce the addition of disciplines to DreamNet. This said everything. He could have waited to make the two announcements until after the games. He could have preserved his spot at the top of the lists. But he didn't. Instead he used his own defeat to showcase this new era in simulation. It was a fine display of spirit, and dedication to the cause.

Chapter 287: Electric Payload

As the match ended, the Four Divine Monarchs approached the swirling ball of flame that was Deimos. The mecha gathered round, and as one, bent low at the waist in veneration. At this point they had no further qualms with DreamNet or their guardians. Deimos had paid far more in his time than any of the Divine Monarchs likely will. He gave a majority of his life for DreamNet, and that was to be respected.

“I can’t say I’m happy with this result,” Mo Xia pined. His words mirrored the feelings many spectators shared.

“I imagine that, even though the Star Alliance lost this match, we’ll forever hold Deimos in our hearts as one of the greatest pilots to have ever lived. Long live Deimos!”

:Now to the Monarchs, let me say I hope you’re ready to pull out all the stops for our next battles. Let your actions bring honor to the First Under Heaven, until his very last strike. Win or lose, please respect our hero!”

Mo Xiao’s figure appeared, hovering in the air before the giant Sanctuary screens showing the fights. She bowed as well.

Now, it was on to the fourth map.

“Turret Legend!”

Another legacy map from DreamNet. This one had been available here since the very day DreamNet launched, and enjoyed the nostalgic affection of millions of pilots. It was a balanced map, with no inherent advantages for any one class of pilot.

Like the last fight, the map was separated into two camps. However, the difference lay in what sat in between. Countless towers dotted the landscape, stretching to the horizon. The prerequisites for victory here wasn’t the destruction of your enemies, but to raze their stronghold. The towers and their formidable defensive capabilities served as watchmen and protectors.

There were three separate paths to the enemy base. With two teams of

five, there were a number of tactics that could be employed here. Each road had to be defended, least the enemy march directly in to the base unopposed.

The fight started without any further pomp or circumstance. A series of flashes heralded the competitors' arrival.

Nine figures appeared. This time, when the audience watched there was something different in their eyes. There was a sort of solemn respect, both for the Star Alliance, and the Divine Monarchs.

DreamNet's upgrades had shown the two god teams in a new light. These fights were destined to be remembered for as long as DreamNet remained.

But what about the last fight? What was that beam of gold and silver Thor had used? What new surprises were in store for this battle? Was Thor now the strongest of the Monarchs? These questions and dozens more peppered the comments section.

They hoped this fourth encounter would answer some of them.

As the match commenced the Divine Monarchs broke for their respective routes. Cerberus took the top lane, and Coeus took bottom. That left Thor and Triton were in the middle.

'Mid-lane', as it was referred, was the widest of the three. It was common practice to send two members to defend it together.

The Star Alliance was deployed as well. Skyshade and Windbreaker were up top, and Thunderclap in the middle. Starlord took up position on bottom lane. Bahamut, for his part, chose no road. Instead it employed it's impressive speed and disappeared in to the surrounding jungles, toward the enemy stronghold. Flying-class mechas had a slight advantage there.

The trade-off was that those same flight-specialized mechas were prime targets for towers. Any time one of said towers came under fire, it sent continuous pings to team members, to come and defend.

Thor raced ahead, with Triton taking up the rear. After the last fight, they were still in high-gear.

There had been quite a degree of luck involved in their last victory. In fact, even the other three members of Zeus' team weren't aware of what that beam he'd used was. Only Lan Jue himself knew.

During their duel, it had taken him two collisions to puzzle out precisely what Thunderclap's Discipline was. As expected, it was electricity. Thunderbolt and electricity, in fact, precisely the same as Lan Jue himself. The difference was that Thunderclap's powers were intermingled. Just light real life, his lightning back to come before thunder. The two wouldn't manifest simultaneously. It was enormously powerful, but lacked flexibility. But there was more than that.

Lan Jue's dual disciplines were of a purely positive nature. The lightning powers bore a positive energy that served him well in destroying the darker inclined. Any negative Discipline faced quite a struggle when encountering Zeus.

This was precisely the opposite for Thunderbolt, though. His was purely negative. Simply put, it was diametrically opposed to Lan Jue's. It was something he'd heard from his teacher many years before was possible, and he'd since sought to see it for himself. 1

Positive and Negative working in harmonious union. A true and complete electric payload! That was what that gold and silver beam was.

Lan Jue employed a special method for using his powers. He used the positive force of his lightning to contain and command the negative force of his thunderbolt Discipline. The result was a ying-yang conglomeration of the two, manifesting as a beam of energy. Even though the attack wasn't itself classified as a protogenic power, it was stronger than many of them. The violent and definitive destruction of his enemies in the last fight gave credence to the claim.

It was an understatement to call viewing such a special circumstance today a 'pleasant surprise.' Thunderclap! No matter the result, Lan Jue was resolved to confront him at the end of their competition. Were the two of them to combine forces, they'd be powerful enough to rival Paragons!

He remembered the lesson of his professor from so long ago. If you met

the opposed aspect of your Discipline, he said, don't let them go. If they were of the opposite sex, marry them. Otherwise make them your best friend.

Lan Jue had completely forgotten about it until this second. The possibility had seemed so slim back in the day that he hadn't considered it. He never would have expected to be confronted by that infinitesimal chance here.

Thunderclap, he surmised, must not have been familiar with the mysteries of yin yang, or may have otherwise forgotten. As a yin-prominent Discipline, he also would never likely be in a dominant enough position to seek one out.

The question then became how to persuade him. He had to find an excuse to meet with him after the matches, first. If Thunderclap was a denizen of the East, there'd be no better circumstance he could hope for.

"Careful." Hua Li's voice brought him back to the present.

Lan Jue's eyes were stabbed by a flash of dazzling light.

Starblade!

Thor's spear appeared in its grip, almost like it had a mind of its own. In the next moment, dozens of lightning-fast spear strikes filled the space before it. The stress and difficulty of the situation was a boon for Lan Jue, and he felt in better shape than ever before. One thousand and eighty spear strikes passed in the blink of an eye.

The starry shield surrounding the Starblade couldn't stand against Thor's rapid-fire assault, and shattered. Under Zeus' impressive martial assault, Starlord's forward charge was shut down.

*

1. Chinese Yin-Yang Theory underpins a great deal of what the Chinese do. At its heart, it's a simple idea of positive and negative, though neither have the same connotation we expect in the West. Neither is

inherently good or inherently evil, they just are. Further, there are several aspects of the yin-yang relationship that make things more complicated, but expand the theory to involve all life as we know it. Those are a.) the opposition of yin and yang – each one controls the other to ensure there is balance, and not excess of one or the other. b.) interdependence – each one requires the presence of the other to exist; yang requires yin as a root so it won't float away, and yin requires yang to ensure it remains motile and doesn't sink c.) interchangeability – yin and yang can transform in to on another when there is too much of an excess, to maintain balance and d.) interconsumption – the relative levels of the two forces are ever in flux as they strive for balance, a little bit of the one exists in the other.

Chapter 288: Starlord's Finale

Deimos' frontal assault cut short, and forced to retreat. Was this the power of a Discipline-infused mecha?

And as the others stood in silent tribute, Starlord took its opportunity. While still charging backward, it swiped Starblade toward the stationary enemies.

Meanwhile Thor, hovering in the air, began to wobble to and fro as though it were losing its balance. Then with an audible bloop, the sapphire mecha was engulfed in a bubble. The strange shield was a gift from Poseidon, who stood close by.

Triton had a mechanical hand resting upon Thor's shoulder, trident in hand. In the next moment the god of the seas swept his trident out, and great waves went crashing toward Starlord.

The star-spangled mecha thrust its sword high in to the air, and a dazzling pinprick of light exuded from its tip. Triton, meanwhile, started to wobble just as Thor had before – like Poseidon was having trouble wresting controls.

A staggering streamer of condensed starlight violently made its way toward the Divine Monarchs, forcing them to retreat.

Starlord Deimos, still a force to be reckoned with!

Both Lan Jue and Hua Li were intensely surprised by what they'd witnessed. Their strange and sudden wobbles were not for no reason. Each time either of them had tried to advance, Deimos had placed a shot precisely in their path. They had only just begun to move when Deimos correctly assessed their intention and cut them short. Their rhythm was shattered. Thor's indomitable advance was barred.

Knowing his enemy's motives in advance? Deimos was that intelligent? Unless, it wasn't that he didn't have a Discipline – his Discipline was Foresight.

Starlord's attacks laid siege to Thor and Triton's shield. Its mighty sword

never paused, and the torrential attacks kept coming.

However as the audience watched, they noticed that Starlord's attacks weren't actually damaging their targets. It wasn't that the strikes weren't fierce, or swift. They simply weren't strong enough to penetrate the shield!

Were one to only consider mecha construction, Starlord was in a class all its own. Even compared to the tricked-out Thor and Poseidon's deep pockets, Starlord was a terrifying force. But things change when Disciplines are added to the equation.

Starlord's attacks hadn't changed since the last few fights, before the new sim pods were introduced. However, Thor and Triton were infinitely more powerful now. In skill, technique and tactics Deimos was nigh impossible to overcome. But in sheer power, in Discipline, the younger pilots had the advantage.

This was the difference between being an Adept, and not. It was for this reason it is true all god-ranked pilots are also accomplished Talents. One fed the other.

As Thor slid backward away from Starlord's attack, it hefted the crackling lightning spear in its hand. The skies overhead erupted in to a terrifying and violent display, where hundreds of thousands of lightning bolts came crashing down upon Thor. The towering mecha absorbed them, then released the contained power in a cone of devastating electric fire. Forest of Lightning!

The beam of light from Starblade, and Thor's Forest of Lightning met in the air. Amidst the shuddering corona of disparate energy, the two vanished. However, where Thor and Triton had been under pressure moments before, now the tables were turning.

As god-ranked pilots, and ninth-ranked Talents, these men were masters of battlefield control. Without any hesitation, making a split-second decision, both Thor and Triton were in motion. They positioned for an area attack.

Golden blasts of lightning joined with crashing blue waves. They seemed to cover the whole of this simulated world. Despite Deimos' wealth of

experience, he was still losing ground.

The comments section was silent. Many of the older pilots shut their eyes, bitterly refusing to watch. They knew DreamNet's upgrade meant this was the end of an era, and they didn't want to see it happen. Would Deimos – heroic pilot, legendary powerhouse – have to exit his kingdom in this way? They feared it might be.

But in the end...

Boom–! Starlord disappeared in to the storm of destructive energy. Mecha, sword, and pilot went up in flames.

A unified cry went up through the audience: “No–!”

But there was nothing they could do to change the result.

Deimos fall was indicative of the rest of the match. Thor and Poseidon tore down mid lane unopposed, which drew the ire of Starlord's teammates. They came thirsting for revenge, eventually converging in the center of the field. The Monarchs and Star Alliance went head to head, but the end had already been determined. In the end, the Monarchs lost Poseidon and Hades, but the Star Alliance headquarters was destroyed. The Monarchs had won their second victory.

Miao Xiao had not continued to offer explanations or analysis during the fight. From beginning to end, she maintained her silence. When the fight was finished, everyone was quiet.

There were no more illusions about these matches. Deimos – originally the strongest of the Star Alliance by a massive margin – was now the weakest. The anxiety and suspense was gone, and the audience knew Prometheus would give the enemy no quarter. No matter how many battles followed, the result would be the same.

Mo Xiao by this point had received some information. She looked it over and then, with serene expression and a small smile, began to speak.

“I apologize, I've been very quiet. Watching this last fight, I could hardly breathe. Unfortunately this is the inevitable march of time, as the newer generations grow and improve the elders are left behind. Still, it's not what

we want! I actually have some news, from the Four Divine Monarchs. They would like to announce that they are forfeiting the fifth and final fight. With this development, we would like to announce the winner of today's first ever God Team Competition – the Star Alliance! Deimos remains undefeated, and leaves DreamNet after this final victory. For those of you who have already purchased the full analysis package, DreamNet will reimburse thirty percent of that.”

Mo Xiao carefully and clearly revealed the news. Once again, the comment section erupted in to excited discussion.

Part of the Monarchs' decision to forfeit was certainly out of respect. Their esteem of Deimos was such that they didn't wish to see his legend tarnished. In turn, it earned them some respect from audience members as well. The comments section confirmed it.

In effect, there were no losers in this fight. DreamNet's evolution would constitute a massive change for the network. Certainly there were those, like Deimos, that would see their prestige diminished. On the other hand, there was certain to be more young adepts appearing on the scene. It was an integral addition in the end, allowing DreamNet to more accurately mimic life..

Already DreamNet had expressed the fact that there will remain certain sectors unavailable for Discipline use. In this way some of the charm of the old DreamNet will remain, as well as to keep it fairer for non-Talent pilots. It was there that Deimos' name would forever live at the top of its power rankings.

These were DreamNet's plans and machinations for the near future. Undoubtedly the results would be more than favorable. At the very least it will overshadow any grumbling about the change.

“Hey bro.” Zeus' voice called over the coms.

Prometheus was alone in his pod. No one could see the sadness in his eyes. “What is it?”

“There's something I need to discuss with you,” the younger Lan went on in a quiet voice.

“Alright. We’ll open a dedicated channel.” Lan Qing did just that. There were few methods more reliable for absolute secrecy than a god-ranked pilots conversation in Sanctuary.

Their exchange didn’t last very long. Chu Cheng and Hua Li waited patiently for them to finish. Both of them were content to stand in silence, ruminating on the circumstances. Neither appeared to be in a pleasant mood. Although victory was all but assured, it wasn’t a win they wanted. The top spot was poisoned.

Likewise, had there not been a sudden change in DreamNet structure, their defeat would have been inevitable. The same would have been true if Deimos was an Adept.

After a little while the two brothers finished their conversation. Prometheus nodded at Zeus. “Alright, we’ll leave it there for now. I’ve got to head out.”

A voice interrupted Lan Qing’s exit. “I was wondering if I could have a word with the four of you,” it said.

Shock froze the Divine Monarchs in place. It was Deimos who approached them!

Several figures walked to the gathered Monarchs. At the head of the small entourage was the First Under Heaven. Thunderclap, the Knave, Yu Honghu and Windbreaker fanned out to either side. The whole of the Star Alliance stood and stared at their rivals.

Deimos didn’t look any less regal after the affair. He stood straight and tall, slowly made his way toward the others.

Lan Qing stopped. Clearly he couldn’t leave just this moment, not least because he was interested in what in the world Deimos had to say. Even with all his wisdom, he couldn’t puzzle it out. Where it simply about his retirement, or the upgrade to DreamNet, there were better avenues. Instead he’d chosen this one.

The Starlord waved a thick hand. In response, the world around them became a universe of twinkling stars. Constellations swam in the dark

expanse that surrounded them on all sides. Eventually the lights receded and a room was revealed. All nine of the competitors appeared within.

“This is...” Hua Li trailed off as his eyes stared in bewilderment.

“Discipline!” Lan Jue’s eyes were wide. This wasn’t some DreamNet function, it was Discipline! Deimos was indeed an Adept like the rest of them. Now he felt them, the waves of power pulsing from the Starlord from somewhere deep within. They had been well hidden. But now he felt it – terrifying was the only way he describe the sheer volume of ability he felt! They were all wrong, he surely was a powerful Adept. But, then why didn’t he use it during the fight?

“Sir, what’s the meaning of this,” Lan Qing coldly greeted.

“Forgive me,” Deimos replied while shaking his hand apologetically. “I hope you all don’t think I’m looking down on you, or was taking it easy. In truth, I can’t use my Discipline in combat. I don’t have the ability to control it anymore. Seeing as we’re safe and separate here, there’s also something I want to talk with you about.”

The Four Divine Monarchs were finding it difficult to respond. Their minds were muddled by the strange revelation they just had. Yet they felt at ease with Deimos, and felt as though they could trust him. There was no time for small talk or wasted words now.

But what did he want to say?

Deimos lifted his hand again, and removed the mask from his face.

Chapter 289: Deimos Is...

Masks were an integral part of a god pilot's outfit here. In DreamNet, there was no way to change one's appearance, so they existed to protect anonymity.

Deimos looked...

When the First Under Heaven removed his mask, all four Divine Monarchs stared in disbelief. Not because he was old, but in fact quite the opposite. He looked like a young man.

His handsome and vibrant face belonged to a man in his thirties, with eyes that twinkled like the depths of the universe. It must have been those he used as inspiration for the color of his mask.

Standing there, he radiated a gentle, dim light. It wasn't strong, and didn't bear any powerful sense. It was difficult to express, but not unpleasant.

For reasons unknown, Lan Jue felt something familiar about him, about this aura he released.

Deimos was famous some fifty years before their encounter today. He certainly be looking this young. Perhaps he used some sort of special scientific process to regain his youth, like the Keeper and Bookworm? Or perhaps he wasn't even the 'original' Starlord.

Deimos laughed. "I imagine there's a lot of confusion in all of you right now. How could Deimos be that young, you might be asking. Let me start by assuring you that I am Deimos – but I am not, at the same time. You're looking at a mask, just a mask of the former me."

Lan Jue and his companions were still befuddled, perhaps worse than before he'd started talking. But before any more questions could be uttered, they witnessed a strange change overcome the Starlord.

Hua Li, Chu Cheng and Lan Qing handled the transformation well, considering. It was Lan Jue who was particularly struck by it. As the young man's face began to age rapidly, he was sure he knew this man.

And indeed he did. He'd known the Starlord, First Under Heaven, for years.

"How... how can this be?" Lan Jue asked in utter disbelief. It was light his lightning Discipline was sending bolts through the recesses of his brain, and yet all the things that weren't clear before suddenly made sense.

Deimos' face bore a small smile as he watched their expressions change. As they looked on they watched this heroic individual age a hundred years before their very eyes. Wrinkles sprang up and spread across Deimos' face, which grew paler and more gaunt with each passing second. His body became frail, thin, and weak and he began to stoop like the weight of years lay on his shoulders. Only those two twinkling eyes retained the youth of his former appearance. Eyes that could see the whole of time and space.

"How can it not? Jewelry Master."

Lan Jue's eyes were big as saucer. He simply wasn't prepared for the number of shocking circumstances he'd experienced today. But first among them was this, because never in a million years would he ever have expected Deimos to be...

The Clairvoyant!

Yes, Deimos was indeed the Clairvoyant, founder of Skyfire Avenue and the third strongest Paragon to have ever lived. Did that mean Deimos was the Clairvoyant's real name? Was this truly the frightening powerhouse of DreamNet, known as First Under Heaven?

The Clairvoyant only smiled. "Alright. The rest of you can remove your masks as well." The statement was directed to the rest of his team.

The Knave was the first to comply.

When Lan Jue finally spied the face of the clown, his mouth curled in to a scowl. It was a face he was very familiar with. The Coffee Master!

The jittery man chortled at Lan Jue. "Yeah, you had no idea the fastest hands ever would be mine, huh!? You know, when I first found out you were Zeus, I couldn't believe it. And I still don't agree with these results – if it hadn't have been for the addition of our Disciplines, I'm positive we'd

have won without trouble.”

The Knave was actually the Coffee Master. Lan Jue couldn't believe what he was seeing, it was like all the surprises from his entire life were rolled in to these last few hours.

After the Knave's revelation, the next person to remove their mask was the one under continuous assault from Zeus. Bahamut.

“Jewelry Master, I have to say you pack one hell of a punch! Let me introduce myself – I'm the Bartender. We're not at all familiar with each other since I'm rarely in the Avenue. The Wine Master has, unfortunately, stolen a good deal of my business.”

He was a middle-aged man, handsome, with a head of long blue and red hair split down the middle. He had a calm expression, and gentle eyes . There was no animosity for his destruction at Lan Jue's hand.

“Hello, Bartender,” Lan Jue replied. He looked at those gathered, wondering if they all were...

Windbreaker stepped forward, and removed his mask. “How...!” Lan Jue couldn't help but sputter out the word, but was too stunned to finish the thought.

As Windbreaker removed the mask, their body shrunk like a popped balloon. His large and robust figure became thin and curvaceous. With the mask removed, a smiling face greeted him, one he knew well; Wendy, the Seamstress!

Wendy giggled. “Why not, huh? A pleasant surprise right?”

“Pleasant surprise?” Lan Jue repeated with a sheepish laugh. “Amazing! Our Skyfire Avenue has no shortage of savants! And what about this one? If he's also part of the Avenue that's an amazing and welcome coincidence!”

“Hurry the hell up and tell me how you absorbed my Discipline? How'd you do it?!” The second Thunderclaps voice reached Lan Jue's ears, he knew.

“You!” Lan Jue took a lunging step forward and tore the mask away from Thunderclap’s face, revealing the resolute face of the Driver!

Thunderclap was Lan Jue’s drinking partner!

Lan Jue was temporarily speechless. As he looked out over the crowd of familiar faces, he felt a discontent welling in his heart.

“You all knew from the very beginning you’d be fighting me in the god battle, didn’t you? Hell, I was drinking with you, Driver, just a few days ago! You guys...”

Hua Li and Chu Cheng were just as stunned, and looked on with mouths agape. They weren’t as intimate with the denizens of Skyfire Avenue as their compatriot, but they knew enough. It was stupefying, to say the least. How did they even get themselves in this situation...

Only Lan Qing looked on with dispassionate expression. He fixed the Clairvoyant with calm eyes. “Your Majesty, I think you owe us an explanation.”

The Clairvoyant replied with an emotional sigh. “We didn’t tell you about any of this earlier because we were afraid the surprise would get out. And it looks like our plans were successful.”

Lan Jue couldn’t help but interject. “So this DreamNet upgrade is a result of Skyfire’s involvement? No wonder it was the Wine Master who brought us the new pods.”

But the Clairvoyant shook his head. “No, they’re only relying on us to manage the upgrade and distribution. DreamNet represents the whole of man kind, and I can tell you that everything Piao Hong told you before is true. The real reason behind all of this is to inspire the next generation of pilots to train and grow strong, so that we’re ready when we need to be.”

“But that doesn’t explain the most important thing,” Lan Jue contested. “You’re dead!”

A slight smile wrinkled the Clairvoyant’s face further. “In retreat, and they’ve left a sim pod with me. After all, I was once the First Under Heaven – up until my recent retirement.”

“If that’s the case, then you’re health...” Lan Jue probed.

The old man laughed. “No change. If I still had the years in me we wouldn’t have had to scheme up this competition. And you all performed well, more than worthy for the future I have seen.”

The future he’s seen? The Four Monarchs furrowed their brows in confusion.

The Clairvoyant’s face adopted a deep, serene expression. “I have had the last prediction I will ever see. It is the vision I shared with the Pontiff and Satan during their visit. I told them the result of what I’d seen. But what I shared, was false. My death will serve another purpose.”

“My fortune telling abilities have grown clearer as I near the end of my days. Over decades I’ve watched humanity take to the stars, and I was delighted. The universe was infinite, and with these leap humanity would continue for a hundred million years without threat. For the continuation of the human race, it was undoubtedly a watershed moment. But that didn’t mean peace. We would face many challenges, many obstacles as we pushed toward the stars.”

“We have only just begun to explore the heavens. The universe we know is only the smallest fraction of an unfathomable whole. There is still so much we don’t know, and so many dangers lurking out in the darkness. As we grow and expand, it is inevitable that we should meet them. As we colonized the planets we’ve come across, there have been terrible poisons and powerful beings. Through scientific advancements and stubborn tenacity, humanity has prevailed so far. In that way we have come to the present, treading the path our fore-bearers laid. Modern times see three great Alliances with territories that stretch hundreds of light years. But the dangers remain, out there, waiting. As we take leaps forward, so too do they. What I saw as my power left me, was a great and terrible calamity, that threatened the whole of our species.”

Deep concern was written clearly on the old man’s face. His voice became a whisper. “I have tried many times to peer closer at this, and learn more. I employed everything at my disposal to try and find a

solution. My first premonition happened fifteen years ago. At that time, I felt a terrible wave of death emanate from the darkness. It was slight, but clear – and the results were terrifying.”

Chapter 290: The Clairvoyant's Confidence

“I was in decent shape at that time, which was good since I expended a great deal of energy in completing the reading. I had worked desperately in hopes of finding out more, perhaps a way we could avoid encounter this terrible premonition. But what I found, was nothing. If that sense of destruction should fall over humanity, there was more than an eighty-percent chance it would spell the end of our species. As for that twenty percent, that was the chance that ten percent us would somehow survive. It meant extinction would be delayed, but not stopped.”

Lan Qing, Chu Cheng, Hua Li and Lan Jue simply listened in pensive silence as the Clairvoyant told his tale.

Had this come from anyone else's mouth, the Monarchs would have dismissed them as doomsayers beneath attention. But this was the Clairvoyant. The Eye of the Future! They wouldn't dare question this great sage of humanity.

An oppressive sense hung over the gathered pilots. Like their team leader, the Seamstress, Bartender, Coffee Master and Driver bore similarly solemn expressions. It was likely the first time they heard these dark omens as well.

“As time went on I would continue to search time for an answer, so long as my body was capable. In my time here I've seen that there is an element of predestination in everything. And yet, under specific circumstances with specific factors involved, variables exist to change our fate. In the universe we live in, there are no pure stalemates. So I dedicated the remainder of my life searching for the light in the darkness. Vitality in the stillness of death.”

“Prophecy after prophecy, my hopelessness grew. My body weakened with each effort. Although I used every technique I'd learned to extend my life, a man's life is ultimately finite. Even Paragons are slaves to the rules of nature. Three years ago I first began to feel my vital energies

exhausting. I see the future, and I knew in this moment that there was nothing more I could do.”

“And just when I was preparing to resign myself to the painful fact of our end, you appeared!” The Clairvoyant’s startling starry eyes fell unto Lan Jue. Their depths stared at him, through him, as though there was nothing the Jewelry Master could hide.

“Me?” Lan Jue blinked, confused.

The Clairvoyant offered a slight nod. “Yes, you – Zeus, Jewelry Master of Skyfire Avenue. The day you came to us I felt something, a strange disturbance. Suddenly things got more complicated.”

Lan Jue’s mouth curled in to a scowl. He rather felt like he’d been dropped in a pile of shit.

The Clairvoyant then shook his head, and with a laugh said “Not a pile of shit. More like... a mire.”

Lan Jue stared at the Clairvoyant, mouth agape/ He can read my mind? He thought.

The old man went on. “Later I did several readings regarding you specifically. Finally there was that light I sought. Clear, and strong, but my final reading brought it in to focus. I saw the fire of life burning, fighting against the encroaching darkness and clearing the darkness from my sight. I could see it all. The opportunity to survive lay squarely on you young men and your generation. It is you, and the men at your side, that must carry the torch in to the shadow. So before I pass on the mantle entirely, there are some things I wish to impart. In three months come by the Museum. My successor will deliver them.”

Lan Qing’s quiet voice interjected. “Your Majesty. Have your visions revealed what we have to do?”

The Clairvoyant shook his head. “The tides of fate will guide you. How to proceed, I cannot say. Stay true to yourselves as you traverse the path, and have faith that the proper way will be illuminated when needed. Keep up the fight, no matter what.”

The old man smiled to ease some of the harsh bite of his words. "Very well, I've said what I had to say. I'm afraid I must trouble you all to come together in three months time to the museum. There, someone will deliver the items I spoke of. Jewelry Master, if I might have a word with you in private?"

"Alright," the younger man responded.

With a wave of his gnarled hand, the Clairvoyant called upon his powers to envelope both of them in twinkling starlight. No one outside of the beam would be able to hear their exchange.

"Skyfire Avenue is the result of my blood, sweat and tears," the Clairvoyant began. "It was my hope from the very beginning, that through my efforts I could help the human race improve, and grow stronger. So that we could face whatever lurked in the depths of the universe. As I leave, my Avenue is entrusted unto you, the youth of today. Now I've already spoken with the Wine Master and the Keeper. I would like to elect you, as Chairman of the Skyfire Avenue Council."

"Me?" Lan Jue stared at him, dumbfounded. "Your Majesty, why me? I'm not strong enough--"

The Clairvoyant cut him off with a wave. "Power isn't everything. This is something the last Eye of the Future told me. When you came to us, beneath all the pain and anger, I saw vitality. You had experienced hardships, and you would again. The only thing you lacked, as far as I concerned, was the power to hold the position. Trust that you will one day rise to the heights I know you're capable of. Remember that setbacks are transient, and pain does pass."

:I am not just entrusting you with Skyfire Avenue. I place the fate of humanity on your shoulders. Don't bother asking, because I haven't seen what choices you will make, or what you should do. All I can tell you is this: Man's future, his hopes, his ability to survive the coming cataclysm, even the beasts who bring the reckoning... all of it is closely linked to you. Your life no longer belongs just to you. Nor will you assume the title of Chairman now. But once you are ready, and I'm sure you will be, the

responsibility will fall to you.”

“But responsibilities are not easy. In contrast to the others, I must leave you with a task. The Wine Master will help you see it through.”

“I’m ready,” Lan Jue replied without hesitation or inquiry. Peering in to the Clairvoyant’s clear, deep eyes, he just knew it was something that needed doing.

His mind inadvertently wandered to the young soldier he’d met on Taihua. His words rang in his ears: Our obligation is the safety of the public. Now the situation arose again, but instead of a young soldier, it was an old one. Surely the message was the same.

It was not a duty to be taken lightly, but looking at this old man who had dedicated his life to the betterment of his species, a fire grew in his heart. He felt his blood – hot and anxious – coursing through his veins.

“Unless I’m mistaken, Jue Di was your teacher.” The old man said.

Lan Jue blinked. “How’d you-“

The Clairvoyant smiled. “Originally I had no idea. But watching you today reminded me of the man. You fight like him, and in fact that palm attack of yours is an old technique from ancient times he liked to employ. I can see you have cultivated essence, but only he can point you on the right path to improvement from here. When you’ve reached the heights of ninth rank, seek him out.”

Jue Di, first among the Paragons. No one knew his whereabouts, only that he was an Easterner. The real power of the Alliance.

This was, in part, why the East was considered above the West and North when considering Adept power. It was also why the West and North were in a tentative alliance to undermine the East.

The great master left no trace of his whereabouts. But he was around, that was certain.

About twenty years ago, the North mobilized its armies for a large incursion on Eastern territory. That was the last time Jue Di made his

presence known.

The results of that battle were – according to the North – confidential. No one was entirely aware of what really occurred. All that was certain, was that the North turned tail and fled as quickly as they could, and they haven't made any overt signs of hostility towards the East since.

Even among Paragons, Jue Di was a legend. Not even his compatriots knew precisely how powerful he really was.

Lan Jue quietly nodded his head in agreement.

The Clairvoyant's eyes were alive with starlight. "Since you're one of his disciples, you should know that there are more than just we ten Paragons in the world of man. My task for you is to seek them out. If possible, gather them together. We will need their strength in the twilight of humanity's existence."

Lan Jue felt his heart skip a beat. Of course there were more than just ten Paragons. There had to be more hidden in every corner where man has tread.

He still remembered something his father once said. He was not the strongest of all humans, just strong. The Clairvoyant said something similar now. A strange feeling began to well up inside of him – the fighting spirit! The courage of a warrior!

The Clairvoyant spoke again. "The Wine Master has some clues that can be used to help direct you to him. You should go with him. Remember, though, that we don't have much time. You must use this opportunity to grow stronger and gather our forces."

"Yes," Lan Jue affirmed.

With a wave of his hand, the Clairvoyant dismissed the column of light separating them from the others.

The elderly master's eyes flit to the Coffee Master, Seamstress, Bartender and Driver. "Each of you are outstanding members of the new generation, masters of mecha piloting. I may have set up the Star Alliance, but now it is your responsibility to continue it. You are also members of our Avenue.

Jewelry Master, in the future I hope you end up leading this Star Alliance in my place. It's time for Skyfire Avenue to organize."

Lan Jue looked toward the other four members of the Clairvoyant's coterie, and nodded. The Driver met his gaze with a wry smile and, shaking his fist in determination, nodded in agreement.

"Alright, I swear it!" Lan Jue's words were solemn, and serious as he made his promise to the soothsayer.

Chapter 291: Everyone Passes

DreamNet's evolution was under way. Deimos, the Starlord, has retired. The Star Alliance is lauded as the greatest god-ranked team in history. A day after the games, it was front page news across all three Alliances.

DreamNet's gambit was a success, and mecha fever was sweeping the realms of man.

For the students of the NEU's ARC class, though, their life was still an abyss of suffering.

While the sim training the Demon Drillmaster had them doing was very basic, it was a far sight better than the razor blades and boiling water they'd faced earlier. Of course, as time progressed, so too did their feelings.

Eventually they determined these pods not to be simulators of mecha combat, but a vision of what hell must be like. They could not hesitate, even for a moment, otherwise they were punished. That jolt of electricity only needed to be experienced once to convince the students they didn't want to try it again. It was like their insides were squished together and pan seared. The feeling indeed was...

They had no recourse but to put their full effort towards completing the tasks.

Indomitable will persisted, until it didn't, and then the shock stimulated them back in to action. They were performing at their peak, because anything less equaled pain.

This program designed by the Gobi Group was constructed to increase their fundamentals, so that they became second nature. They would never forget these basic movements, they were so deep in their muscle memory they performed them in their sleep.

Beyond that it was dull, but required their full attention at every moment.

After the third day everyone's face was pale, drawn and gaunt. They

looked like a coterie of starved vampires. As they left for the cafeteria on the fifth day, every student needed help getting there.

After seven days, only a fraction of the students could keep down food.

But for Tang Xiao this was a silver lining. After all, there was no better way to lose weight!

Jin Tao was one of the few who were able to take any sustenance. Like Lan Jue determined so long ago, here was a young man who was vicious, rabid, and would relentlessly pursue whatever he felt to be right. No matter the hardships, his willpower saw him through.

And he ate like a glutton.

Other than he, the only others who could eat were three women. The Savage Goddess was one, and though she was a sovereign-ranked pilot before they'd begun she didn't look any better than the students she was looking after. But she did have a much more solid grasp of the basics, and that helped. She was progressing faster than any of the other participants.

Tang Mi was also among them, and though the training hadn't even progressed to the one-month mark, the changes she'd undergone were surprising to behold. She hadn't smiled in ages, and her pretty face grew hard and frigid. Her capricious and headstrong actions had caused her classmates to suffer inhumane torment, and it was a fact she lived with daily. The lesson was a scar she still felt stinging.

I won't drag anyone down. I will be the strongest! A woman's tenacity will trump a man's strength any day. The mantra ran through her head again and again. Though she would vomit up a portion of everything she ate, she persisted. Her brother found it hard to watch, and any time he felt the need to step in, Mika was there to – violently – dissuade him.

The final girl still able to eat, much to Lan Jue's surprise, was Zhou Qianlin. She was also performing best out of everyone, Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan included.

Her clearance speed may not have been as fast as Tan Lingyun's, but her adaptive abilities were unmatched. Though there was a pallor to her face

as well, it wasn't as pronounced as the others.

Zeus' amazons were all simultaneously impressed and surprised by what they were seeing. As Lan Jue and Hua Li were not present, they were in charge of observing the students. Qianlin was the one they spent the most time watching. Their ultimate determination was that her balanced capacity and adaptive abilities were almost super human. What others had to grit their teeth and fight vehemently to sustain, she did with half the effort.

During meal times she didn't eat as much as Jin Tao, but ate as she normally would as though the effort she was expending on training wasn't having any adverse effects. It was like this training wasn't anything different from the normal one's she'd participated in at school.

Eleven days passed. They were approaching the fasted recorded time this procedure had been completed. Of course, no one participated in this batch would be able to beat it. In fact, many of them were reaching their physical limit.

Killing one's students wasn't conducive to proper training, though, so the program was designed to be at least moderately humane. When a body reached critical dehydration levels, the pod itself injected them with nutritive fluids to keep them going. There were also medications to keep them alert and awake so that they could finish.

When Hua Li and Lan Jue returned, they began by carefully examining the conditions of their charges. The most surprising discoveries for the Demon Drillmaster came in the form of his client, Zhou Qianlin. Hua Li was stunned by the progress of all the students.

"They're doing much better than I'd have expected," Hua Li revealed to Lan Jue.

"Oh?" Lan Jue turned his masked face toward his friend.

Hua Li continued with a nod. "They're progressing very quickly. If they keep this up, they'll be done in around twenty days."

"Barely managing is 'much better'?" Lan Jue muttered.

Hua Li's response was curt. "Do you have any idea how many of the core Gobi personnel are able to even compete this simulation? No more than thirty percent. We have very strict selected criteria to Gobi, too. What I'm saying is, these kids are already better than most. Of course your bioelectricity and the medicinal baths have helped, but I suspect the protogenic powers they absorbed were most helpful. It helped them assimilate all that they experienced before and catalyzed their potency. It's a perfect cycle! The training methods build on each other, making them better than the original."

Lan Jue gave a little chuckle. "Good! And just wait till I get paragon. I'll let you know and we can find a second batch to start training."

Hua Li rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure. I think I'm more interested in when I get Paragon. To be honest, though, I hadn't thought coming to Skyfire would be so good for me. Not only do I get some residual protogenic powers from a Paragon, but the inspiration from our god-ranked battles is great. I feel like I'm on the verge of a breakthrough myself."

Lan Jue nodded. "That's great. Same here, ever since coming back from Taihua I feel like my improvement has sped up considerably. We have to keep it up! The Clairvoyant's words have got me motivated as well."

Hua Li replied with a helpless expression. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid I have to be leaving. If I don't I'm legitimately terrified of what Mo Xiao might do. You saw her threaten me, in front of billions of people, right?"

Lan Jue gave a soft smile. "Head back. You've hung around here long enough. But Mo Xiao's a good girl, alright? I think you two'd be a good fit. If this dreamlover of yours isn't real, consider the girl."

Hua Li petulantly waved away his words. "Cut that shit out. Look, being here hasn't been a vacation alright. But I had a good time. Look after yourself, and call me if you need anything."

Lan Jue's face fell as he sighed. "I'm not sure what circumstances we brothers will meet for next."

Hua Li looked at his good friend in the eye. "Don't put any undue pressure on yourself. I don't know what you and the Clairvoyant talked

about, but humanity's safety is everyone's responsibility. Don't fool yourself in to thinking you're some kind of savior. You've got partners in crime. Whatever comes, we handle it together."

Lan Jue's heart was full of comraderie. He reached out and patted his brother on the shoulder. Hua Li took the opportunity to wrap him up in a fierce hug.

"Alright, I'm out of here. I'll be back in three months. The big guy and Chu Cheng will too, I'm sure. The four brothers will meet again. I expect you'll be a good host and keep us entertained!"

Lan Jue chuckled, and nodded.

Lan Jue left, with little he had to gather. He left Skyfire silently, without pomp or circumstance. It wouldn't be long before his next Sounds of Nature concert, though.

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The first one to finish the sim program, unsurprisingly, was Tan Lingyun. Relying on her supernatural gifts she completed it in fifteen days.

Despite her physical fitness, when she exited the pod she nearly collapsed, emaciated as she was. Lan Jue had his amazons immediately submerge her in a medicated bath.

Six more finished on the sixteenth day. Wang Hongyuan, Tang Xiao, Tang Mi and Geng Yang.

On the seventeenth day, seven more.

Jin Tao emerged on day eighteen along with nineteen others. Almost all of them immediately collapsed in to a coma.

On the nineteenth day, nearly all o the remaining students were done. Only a few holdouts remained.

Zhou Qianlin was among them, and hadn't yet completed the simulation.

Lan Jue, looking over the data, found what he'd expected; though she adapted well, her basics weren't as strong as the students who majored in

combat.

On the morning of the twentieth day, the remaining students exited from their sim pods. All but Zhou Qianlin.

It wasn't until nightfall that she emerged.

Finally, everyone was finished.

Of course the next few days were no better, it was just a change of scenery. Hours of boiling in turbid soup was the theme for a while.

By now, however, the students considered this a spa treatment over the training regimens. They determined boiling to be a better torture than being stabbed or electrocuted

Chapter 292: The Second Stage of Training

Through the process of the twenty-day Gob program, students had completely absorbed the stimulation from Lan Jue's bioelectricity. Everyone's progress was slightly different, but the largest improvements were almost exclusively seen physically. They were stronger, and leaner than when they started. It also meant the energy they could sustain through their Disciplines was stronger. It was most evident after their training, however, as there were no more screams or whines as they sat in the boiling water.

But if there was one Lan Jue had to choose as most improved throughout the whole process, it would have to be Zhou Qianlin.

Fifth rank! In this short time she'd actually progressed that far. More than just the students around her were surprised, Lan Jue was absolutely stunned. More than that, he still couldn't tell what her Discipline actually was. It was exceedingly strange for a fifth-ranked adept to still be waiting for their Discipline to awaken.

All he could tell was that her congenital energy reserves were far more abundant than average Adepts. At fifth rank, she had a higher energy volume than most sixth-ranks, and exceedingly pure comparative to sunlight. And there was more, something else hidden inside. It was an enigma. Lan Jue, sadly, wasn't yet strong enough to pierce the veil and see more.

"Do you know what day it is today?" Lan Jue, in his golden mask, regarded the gathered student body. His voice was cold, which his demeanor shared. It demanded attention and respect.

The students had greater and greater respect and fear for their instructors as time passed. There was a simple reason for that, and it was that everyone had already improved much further than they could have dreamed. At the outset, Lan Jue had assured them that he could raise their Disciplines by at least one rank. The words still rang in their ears. When he'd said it there were many who doubted the promise. By now, however,

all of those doubts had been put to rest.

And yet, though they were certain of their progress, there were likely many of them who would have passed this chance up if given a second chance. They didn't even dare think about the trials they've been through. The memories were too painful.

Thus there was fear for their Demon Drillmaster. Now, as the first part of their training came to an end, there was a great deal of anxiety swirling around what Lan Jue would have in store for them next.

He went on, his voice even. "This is our one month mark. You've been under my charge for a full thirty days. You haven't experienced much, but you're keeping up have proven that you're qualified. Now it's time to take things to the next level."

Next level?

Even the hard-as-iron Tan Lingyun couldn't entirely suppress a shiver. Throughout the month, she'd developed almost a fearful reverence for 'Lei Feng' throughout the course of the month. He was heartless! But she, too, could sense her improvement. She felt as though she may have even broken through to ninth rank.

"Our training time is two months. The first month was to test your mental fortitude, and make it stronger. To make you aware of what kind of training this is." Lan Jue went on.

Test mental fortitude... it was the most terrifying test they'd ever taken.

Fifty one souls, students and teachers. All of them felt like their willpower had undergone a change.

"For the remainder of this training I will personally guide you, mold you in to true soldiers."

Soldiers?

The words washed over them, and the Drillmaster's charges looked back, confused.

In the East, everyone had to serve in the military once reaching

adulthood 1. Everyone enrolled in an institution of higher learning was required to participate, without exception. One difference between that training and this one, was that after graduation they could directly join the armed services.

Their military responsibility was for two years, unless special circumstances required more. If not, they passed through on to other things. It was mostly considered a training regime in service to the population. Therefore, it was also a way to raise the fighting capabilities of the whole Alliance.

There were many more male students than female gathered now. Many of them had dreams of being soldiers, of charging their metal suits in to battle. However, their skills and training were far below expectations for a true warrior. Then there were others who desperately tried to avoid the required training.

Dodging military training was a felony, and was strictly forbidden unless under extreme circumstance.

And now here was their drillmaster, telling them he'll turn them in to soldiers. But while there was no small measure of apprehension, there was also curiosity growing in the students' hearts.

"Starting now, you've got thirty minutes to gather your things for a field trip. We're going in for a change of scenery. Remember, there is no quitting. You had your chance when the classes started. Anyone who tries to give up, will wish they were dead, plain and simple. If you aren't standing here in front of me in thirty minutes, I'll find you and help you pack. Trust me, you don't want that. Disperse!"

If these students had learned anything over the last month other than how much torture they could handle, it was how to follow orders. Before the word even left his mouth, the students were at a ran to their bunks.

Tan Lingyun trotted over to Lan Jue. She spoke with a low voice. "Lei Feng. What are we bringing these kids out to do? We have to ensure they aren't in any danger."

Lan Jue locked her in place with a hard stare. "You are an assistant

drillmaster. I make the calls here. You have no right or qualification to be second-guessing my training regimens. You just need to obey. Twenty-nine minutes, no exceptions.”

Lan Jue could actually hear the Savage Goddess grinding her teeth. But ultimately she said nothing, and left to prepare like the others.

As he watched her leave, his heart was full of a dark satisfaction. If you want to tame the Savage Goddess, you have to be twice as savage.

Thirty minutes later everyone was in place, standing at attention with their rucksacks slung over their shoulders. A hoverbus was waiting for them.

Lan Jue clapped his hands. “Let’s go!”

The students made their way on to the transport in single file. This did not include all Zeus’ Amazons, though. After consideration, Lan Jue chose to bring only Mika and Xiuxiu. Lin Guoguo and Ke’er were left behind to look after the shops on the Avenue.

But where were they all going?

The same question was on the mind of every student. However none dared ask – even the Savage Goddess had lost her nerve.

The bus took them to the civil air hangar, where they made their way to a private lot. Lan Jue’s building came in to view, and when the bus stopped they filed out of the bus as organized as they’d gotten on.

The students each took in the large blue building as they got off the bus. The massive metal doors slowly spread wide as they approached, revealing what waited for them inside.

An airship hangar? Was he planning to take them off the planet? Where in the galaxy were they going?

Excitement began to intermingle with fear and curiosity. Among them, a number of students had never left Skyfire’s atmosphere. It was a fun prospect, to be leaving the planet for the first time.

Before long the doors were open, and the hangar’s interior was bare to

all. What they saw was a dazzling, sapphire blue airship slowly taxiing out in to the open air.

Perfectly streamlined, a comfortable and dark blue, the machine was a marvel of modern technology. It was the boys who reacted most dramatically, their eyes wide, replacing fatigue with excitement.

What a beautiful ship! It must have been prepped for battle, they reckoned, but since when were patrol ships so pretty? It must have been built to spec.

Tang Xiao swallowed when he saw their ride, and shot Jin Tao a glance. The psycho was almost quivering with anticipation at his shoulder.

“Hey dumb-mutt. You think this thing belongs to our teacher?” Tang Xiao’s voice was low, and furtive.

Jin Tao returned the clandestine glance. “So what if it is? Professor can do anything. Long Live the Master! Man, so sexy – I’ve never been in a battleship. This is too damn cool.”

The magnificent blue ship rolled free of the hanger, then stopped. The hangar doors shut behind it.

A beam of light exuded from the leading end of the aircraft, projecting on to the floor.

“Oh man, a state-of-the-art traction beam! Awesome! This has got to be a fighting ship.” A student called from somewhere.

Lan Jue’s sharp words interrupted their thoughts. “Fall in ranks, and board!”

As he spoke, he turned his face to Wang Hongyuan, bearing a silver mask at his shoulder. The Dance Instructor was no less surprised by the affluence than any of the students. He’d already known Lan Jue’s background was... different, but he’d never have guessed the guy had his own damn battleship.

And if the students had any doubts, he had none. He was sure the NEU didn’t have anyone with the skill set to fly a boat like this, much less

possessed the funds to buy and outfit one. It looked smaller than your average patrol boat, but just glancing at its appearance and the tractor beam showed how much money had been poured in to it. He had some serious cash!

Neither was it possible that this thing belonged to Tan Lingyun. The fire in her eyes burned more fiercely than the young men.

In truth her excitement had begun once she heard Lan Jue express his plan to turn them in to fighters. In truth, she'd enrolled for military service after she'd graduated from university, but once her family found out they'd forced her to give it up. They found her a job as an instructor, because they wanted her to be safe. In her family's eyes, what sort of female made a good soldier?

She'd been interested in battleships specifically since a young age. Of course she'd been on them before, though the feeling she'd had before and the one she was experiencing now were worlds apart. Previously she was always going with someone, and it felt more like a visit. Now she felt like a participant.

Tan Lingyun didn't wait for Wang Hongyuan to lead them through. With great strides of her long legs, she was through the beam and unceremoniously vanished from view.

The students followed, entering one after the other as Mika and Xiuxiu kept them in line.

The familiar hum of Zeus-1's engines spooling up filled the air.

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1. This is something they do in China. Once while in middle school, and again while in high school and then college, students are required to undergo 'military' training, which lasts about a month if I remember correctly. In middle school they spend this time making kites and singing patriotic songs. In high school/college this becomes standing in formation for hours in the sun, then running several kilometers. In

the end there's no real connection to the military. Thankfully I was exempt when I was doing my schooling.

Chapter 293: Plastic Bags

The students were surprised at how small and narrow the interior of the ship was.

Although it wasn't 'small' by conventional standards, compared to its bulks it was less than anticipated. Several metallic chairs had been added – recently, by the look of things – in the center of the bridge.

“It looks so big outside. Why's it so small in here? It's got to have like a lounge area, right?” Tang Xiao muttered inquisitively to himself.

Jin Tao sniffed in disdain. “You know nothing. Where do you think a ‘lounge’ is, eh? This sort of ships only have a cockpit, this is where the crew rests and works. There's nothing else. The rest of the bulk must be the ship's propulsion systems and weaponry. Look at the weapons panel there, it's more than seven meters long. Enough firepower to take on a fleet. You'll need at least four crew members to run all the weapons at once. For a normal patrol boat, you'd only need one. We're basically sitting on a miniaturized destroyer.”

Tang Xiao listened with rapt attention, and looked at his fellow Disciple with amazement. “Jin Tao, how do you know so much?”

Dumb-mutt beamed with pride. “I may not be the best student, but I've loved airships since I was a little kid. I read all about them whatever chance I got. Of course I'd know a few things.”

By now everyone was on board and in the bridge. Aside from them, there was only one other person.

He was a young man, not much older than the students who stared at him. Clad in sweat pants and a t-shirt, with the stick of a lollipop jutting from his lips, he seemed well at ease. He raised his eyes from the screen for just a moment to regard the gaggle of young men and women, then went back to work.

It was no surprise that these mecha pilots would be interested in a fighter ship. The moment they entered, the cockpit's decibel level shot

straight up. Some spouted whatever knowledge they had about airships, after all it wasn't just Jin Tao who had a passion.

There was a flash of light, then Lan Jue, Mika and Xiuxiu appeared on the bridge.

"Silence!" Lan Jue's august voice commanded. The young people were well trained, for they immediately shut their mouths upon hearing their Drillmaster.

"Pick your seats according to our rank orders, and fasten your seat belts. Accountant, alert the tower we're ready for takeoff."

The lazy-looking man threw up an 'ok' gesture to Lan Jue.

Indeed it was the Accountant piloting Zeus-1 today. He'd actually approached Lan Jue the night before he'd returned to West Hill with a simple request – he wanted to run away.

Ever since the arrival of the Bookworm, he felt like he was going insane. Previously there had only been one crotchety old bastard intent on ruining his life. Once he'd finally got used to that hell, a second hateful geriatric showed up.

Before the Bookworm became the Karmic Scholar, he'd begun force-feeding as much knowledge as possible to the Accountant. He knew well that if he failed in his endeavors to prolong his life and reach Paragon status, he didn't want all he'd learned to go to waste. 1.

The Keeper, natural, did not disapprove. The Bookworm had many students, but there were only a very select few he chose to pass on the entirety of his knowledge, as a disciple. Most students only learned a infinitesimal part of what he knew.

The Bookworm was also particularly interested in the Accountant's Discipline. So his collusion with the Keeper was more of a conspiracy to create a sort of science and tech super-scholar.

At long last the Bookworm achieved his goal, leaving only the Keeper to look after the Accountant during his studies. It was now or never, his opportunity for freedom had arrived.

Lan Jue still felt like he owed the Accountant after Lir, and so he went in secret to the Keeper to plead the young man's case. The old pedant did not object, and left him in Lan Jue's charge.

He didn't let him go without purpose, however. To use Lan Jue's words, he was to 'make good use of waste materials'. Zeus-1's navigation was temporarily under the Accounts purview, now. At any rate, the young pervert was just glad for the opportunity.

The students sat in accordance with their rank order. The furniture was set so that there was only half a centimeter of space between them, so they banged together with each slight movement. Comfort as not a consideration.

Once settled, they tried to look every which way at once with eager eyes. A lot of the desperate fear that followed them dispersed. No matter what the Demon Drillmaster had in store, they got to travel to another planet for their training. That was pretty sweet.

Lan Jue strode to the front, and addressed his students in a calm voice. "After discussion with the school officials, we agreed that two months wasn't enough time. Here on out, there is no time frame for when this training will end. It will most likely be longer than the two months you signed up for. You will have ten minutes to tell your family, and tell them you're safe. Anyone who shares details of what we're doing here will have a special training protocol designed just for them."

Tell their family?

Just the prospect of speaking with those almost-mythical caregivers was enough to inspire some students to tears. Xiuxiu and Mika walked handed out communicators, and made sure Lan Jue's orders were followed.

The golden-masked Drillmaster stood before them and watched in silence.

None of these talented students could be considered fools. They all knew precisely what Lan Jue was talking about when he told them to keep the training under wraps. None of the pain or misery that was the vast bulk of their lives now – only happy smiles and puppy-dog tails to placate their

worried parents.

It had been a full month of torture! Many of the students couldn't hold back tears upon hearing from their loved ones, but it was inevitably followed by Lan Jue's cold stare.

Ten minutes passed in a blink. The communicators were taken away. By then the student's appearances had changed. They looked far more at ease.

Lan Jue brought their attention back to him. "Soon we'll be leaving for another planet. The pressure on you, the intensity, will be higher than the first month. Believe it. You can relax during the flight. Prepare to depart."

Rest? The students exchanged looks of disbelief. They never thought they'd hear such a nice word come from this demon's lips.

Lan Jue couldn't care less what they thought. He simply made his way to the wide, comfortable captain's chair and took a seat. He then shut his eyes and focused on clearing his mind.

Mika and Xiuxiu, hidden behind silver masks, took up position in their traditional spots.

Zeus-1 slowly taxied to the runway, then after a minute, took off toward the cloud cover. It pierced through like a fine sapphire needle, and before long they were in the emptiness of space.

Fast! This was the thought on everyone's mind as they rattled in their chairs. The each had a front-seat view through the ship's transparent shielding that afforded them a look of Skyfire from thousands of kilometers overhead. After exiting the atmosphere, the ship steadied and continued on its trajectory.

As the ship set itself to cruise velocity, the silence and isolation of space hung over them.

The beauty of space was a stunning visual, no matter how many times you'd seen it. It was the first time for many of these students, and the starlight reflected in their wide eyes.

“Hand them out,” Lan Jue quietly commanded.

Xiuxiu rose to her feet, holding a sack as she approached the students once again. She extricated plastic bags from within and passed them out.

What was all this about, the students wondered? Curiosity was writ clearly on their faces.

Lan Jue arose as well and stood before them. All eyes fell unto their teacher. “In modern times there are two things that encapsulate our current understanding of science and technology. One, are the mechas you each are well familiar with. The consistent progress of mecha suits has made our species stronger. Many – mostly boys, but not all – desire to become mighty pilots, riding these great metal constructs in to battle against their enemies. But aside from them, there are also airships. Combat airships, specifically. We relied on them for colonization of the galaxies, and still do today to defend us against those who wish us harm. Both of them together are the force behind our military power.”

“As several of you have surmised, the ship you’re on now is fitted for combat. I promise you, there’s a whole lot of punch in this tiny boat, enough to tear a battleship in half. It’s been fitted with more materials and power gems than an expedition freighter. Don’t make the mistake of looking at this like a patrol boat.”

Seeing the student’s eyes grow ever more interested, Lan Jue obliged. “Interstellar travel is lonely business. Usually this shit is equipped to support about a dozen crew members. The seats you occupy are a temporary addition. You can understand, then, why comfort is not a priority. So to combat this loneliness, our in-flight entertainment will be a demonstration of just how nasty this little boat really is. Is it really stronger than a battleship, you wonder? Well, I can’t reliably assert that this is the strongest patrol-class ship ever built, but it’s certainly up there. What do you say, are you interested in a little showing off?”

“Hell yeah!” Someone called out. This wasn’t to placate their teacher, but to express genuine interest, and was a sentiment shared by several more young men. Tang Xiao was conspicuously silent.

Tang Xiao couldn't help but frown as he stared at his Professor. He knew his teacher, and it was definitely not his style to be so nice. And then there were these plastic bags...

Lan Jue nodded his head in sinister satisfaction. He turned to the Accountant. "Are we ready?"

"You know it!" The Accountant's response was excited, jittery. His fingers drummed rhythmically on the keyboard like rain on a tin roof. From what the students could see, he was typing at about forty CPS. Those who noticed were surprised indeed – could it mean this young guy was also a god-ranked pilot?

Lan Jue returned to his chair and, leisurely but pointedly, fastened his seat belt. Mika and Xiuxiu followed suit, though markedly faster.

A stifling sense of foreboding filled Tang Xiao's heart.

The students felt the automatic harnesses in their chairs tighten and click in to place.

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1. I'm not sure if I went in to this before, but the study situation in China is dismal. The sheer number of people means everything is a struggle to pull ahead of the pack. Success only comes (in the minds of the older generation) through accolades in school, and graduating from a good college. If you fail to do this, you are doomed to a life of penniless struggle where no one will love you, you will fail your family, and society will shit all over you. That's the bleak future anyone not stellar in school faces – again, according to 'common knowledge'. As a result, school work is stupendously difficult and voluminous. The pressure to succeed in school is so great, in fact, that during the Gao Kao – their equivalent of the SATs – police are on high alert to help students get to testing locations, be on the look-out for suicides, and drive students to the hospital if they have panic attacks. There's a saying in China that God cries for the students during Gao Kao, so it

always rains on the day. It was true for almost every year I lived there. Long story short, this might better equip you to understand why the Accountant is pissed.

Chapter 294: Redline

The safety restraints did just what they were intended to do. They gave the students a sense of support. But, wait, that means...

“Full speed!” The Accountant called out, and everyone felt the ship shudder as it’s main engines engaged.

The terrifying forces pressed them hard against the seat, and the skin of their faces flapped as inertia took it’s toll. They felt like the acceleration was threatening to tear the skin from their bones.

The scenery outside the cockpit screen blurred, and everything took on a dream-like quality. The speed played with their perception, too, and made it hard to think. They could only sit there and let it happen.

Zeus-1 continued to quadruple its speed until it neared sub-light speed. The closer they got, the more the scene within the cockpit warped until everything around them was a mess of strange lines and colors.

Of course Lan Jue wouldn’t be so kind as to give them a true rest. his was a special combat class, it was silly to expect anything else. They were here to grow stronger, not have a good time. This wasn’t an etiquette class!

About ten minutes later, the ship began to slowly decelerate. As they reached a more normalized velocity, the ship’s stabilizers were able to kick back in as well. By then the students were like sacks of wet noodles. Where it not for their safety harnesses Lan Jue feared they’d collapse.

It was a good judge of one’s Discipline as well. The stronger their Talent, the better they were able to sustain the bearing g-force of sub-light speed. Tan Lingyun, for instance, sat stoically upon her chair like nothing had happened. Wang Hongyuan’s face had blanched, and his head was full of particularly choice curses for Lan Jue and this deathtrap.

Tang Xiao was pleasantly surprised by how well he’d managed to hold out. Now that his Discipline had broken through to eighth rank, he was much better equipped to deal with exogenous stressors. Moreover, though he’d lost a fair amount of weight he was still hefty, and the excess girth

had protected him from some of the force. Of all the students, he had fared best.

Although several of them looked worse for wear, they were much better off than most. A normal person had a significant health risk if they had tried to go that fast without stabilizers. But these were Adepts, and mecha pilots no less – this wouldn't cause any lasting harm.

Tell that to the poor students, though, whose pale faces and wide eyes showed precisely what they were thinking.

Lan Jue's calm, cold voice filled the cockpit. "You just experienced the sensation of going several times the speed of sound – nearly sub-light speed. Remember these sensations. Throughout this trip you will be expected to adapt and maintain in the face of many environmental changes. If you can't handle that, you'll never be strong enough to contribute to society. Continue!"

"Simulated evasive techniques against enemy fire!" The Accountant called out the situation as the ship's stabilizers were inexplicably cut.

The students were squashed to the back of their chairs as Zeus-1 began its maneuvers. It took turns at break-neck speed, tearing up in to the black, then quickly changing directions and hurdling back toward Skyfire. The students swung and jerked and shuddered with each movement of the ship, never knowing which way was up. Under constant assault from the rapid movements, the students could swear their insides were being shuffled around.

Lan Jue's attention never left Zhou Qianlin. He watched her head flail around, sending her hair cascading in every direction. He was a little worried for her, but at the same time he knew that – while she wasn't in the best shape – she was strong enough to handle it. His respect for her grew as he continued to watch.

Ever since the beginning of the ARC classes there had been no end to the complaining, from everywhere. Everywhere, that is, except Zhou Qianlin. No matter what was thrown at her, she kept her piece and did as she was told. Never once did she use the spirit caller gem, to speak or to

whine.

She was not a mecha pilot, but she held just as well as they did, and her progress was astounding. This was one tough woman! It didn't matter that she was specialized in research and development, because she took everything on without hesitation.

Still Lan Jue found it hard to watch. She hadn't been a large girl when they started, and like the others she had lost a great deal of weight through the course of the training. There were more than a few times Lan Jue had to force himself to keep going, instead of telling her to leave.

So they went on, because this training wasn't for one person. This was for the benefit of all. Not to mention, if he did let her leave, what it would do to the psychology of the other students.

Lan Jue did recognize that many students who earlier were unable to keep up had by now learned to adapt. Part of it was certainly the presence of Qianlin and Tang Mi, venerated as the two most beautiful girls in school. Men were built with the innate need to appear strong in the eyes of women, much less women as stunning as those two. A secret hope lived in the hearts of every one of them, the hope that their strength and determination would earn the girls' attention. In a way, Qianlin was the very mascot of adaptation and struggle.

After all, if a woman from the R&D department can handle all of this, what excuse did they have? That was something Tan Lingyun loved to remind them about.

And so, so long as Qianlin was able to hang in there, what right did Lan Jue have to pull her out?

Time after time she surprised him. This was especially true for the Gob program, which she completed despite his expectations. It had taken her longer than the others, but what was her training? What was her mecha experience? Practically nil. Even completing the task without any basic training was almost inconceivable! More than talent, she had willpower.

Ten minutes later the ship returned to normal operation. The students found out what the plastic bags were for.

“Yeeeuuhh!! Egghrrghh!” No one knew who the first to lose it was, but it took only a few seconds for the chain reaction to begin. The sound of violent vomiting filled the cabin, and in the end more than half of the fifty students were clutching bags to their faces.

This was their life, for four days. They would fly steady for roughly an hour, then the stabilizers would turn off and the worst roller coaster of their lives would commence.

Lan Jue made sure that these students understand all the different ways a human could suffer.

From beginning to end, Lan Jue held his tongue. Except for the evasion maneuvers, things happened without warning and out of where so far as the students were concerned. Lan Jue, naturally, didn't care.

The vast emptiness of deep space was broken up when a large planet appeared within Zeus-1's field of vision. They shot toward it.

The young pilots held on to the armrests of their chairs, only remaining seated because their harnesses wouldn't let them curl in to a ball. When the planet came in to view, a few openly wept for joy. They'd earned a new appreciation for solid ground.

A few dreams of combat had been crushed by the experience certainly. They never wanted to live through something like this again.

Two patrol boats, silent as specters, suddenly appeared off the bow of Zeus-1.

“Warning. Warning. Weapons lock, recommend engaging shields.” That was the ship's mainframe, its thoughts given digitized voice by the computer.

Mika reacted right away. Her fingers danced over the control board in front of her, and a cipher appeared on her screen.

The two ships turned around and took up position on either side of their ship. The harsh sound of the ship's alarm ceased as the weapon's lock was canceled. The three ships proceeded in formation toward the planet below.

Meanwhile the students were given a moment to recover. They'd all lost count of how many plastic bags they'd gone through. Even Tan Lingyun couldn't hold back. Torment didn't begin to describe what they'd gone through.

"Clean yourselves up and put on a straight face. You're making it look like I'm mistreating you. The second part of our little excursion is about to begin," Lan Jue said.

The students stared at him in disbelief. OF COURSE YOU'RE MISTREATING US, they wanted to howl.

TORTURE!

NIGHTMARE!

Someone please kill me!

Of course no one dared voice their misgivings.

Lan Jue rose from his seat and made for the exit. He passed Zhou Qianlin but paid her no mind.

But the soul caller gem warmed.

Lan Jue: How are you? Holding there?

Zhou Qianlin: Fine.

If you can't handle anymore, tell me.

I'm fine.

Zeus-1 quickly pierced the atmosphere, revealing the kakhi-colored earth below. Their surprised faces peered through the windows set within the fuselage. Their shock wasn't due to any inherent beauty the planet possessed, but rather because it was hideously ugly.

It looked like a ruined mass, destroyed by some forgotten cataclysm. Their eager eyes scanned the horizon, but there was no water, no life anywhere. Nothing, stretching endlessly to the horizon.

An undeveloped planet? The same thought ran through everyone's mind.

Lan Jue's voice called them back to the ship's interior. At some point their drillmaster had returned to stand in front of them.

“So what do you think, looking over this place? Tang Xiao.”

The large pilot sputtered his answer immediately. “It musn't be suitable for human habitation. No signs of vitality, no water, no plants... but judging by the size it's definitely a planetary body and not a meteor. Judging by the time it took us to get here, this place is probably within the Eastern Alliance, but right on the boundary.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Well done. You've got a solid foundation. It's more than likely this is your first visit to the planet. You only get allowed in with special permission. However, I'm sure you all know it by name. An Lun.”

An Lun?!

It was the natural guardian of the East, the stellar vanguard, An Lun? Home to the legendary Prometheus?

Chapter 295: Blood and Iron

When Lan Jue revealed the name of their destination, neither student nor teacher was spared the surprise. Cold this really be the place? Home to the Supersoldier of the East?

There presence here meant the second portion of their ARC classes would take place here among the heroes of the East. It was unbelievable!

By how was it this planet was so barren? How could Prometheus even lead his armies out here? How could they live to protect the Alliance?

“Tang Xiao’s determinations were correct. This is not a planet that is conducive to habitation. But this isn’t just a planet, it’s a resource. When we discovered this place during our stellar colonization, extensive exploration revealed a cache of minerals including rare metals and power gems. Although this place was not a great find for life, it still became an integral asset for the East. It had everything we needed to give our Alliance the correct foundation.”

“It’s also adjacent to the borders of the Northern Alliance. Our front line. You saw how close the wormhole leading to the Alliance’s heart is from here. That is to say, if the North wanted to send a ship through our territory, it would have to pass by this place. As a result, this planet has remarkable tactical value.”

“We know the North also understands this. Sixty years ago they tried to take it from us. They knew An Lun had enough resources to provide five hundred years of mining. Top three in all the known resource planets, none the less. It remains a very pretty prize to control.”

“Therefore, the East has spent an astronomical amount of human and material resources to turn this place in to a military outpost. Barracks and facilities were constructed to keep it safe. Although our Bastion ships and technology are inferior to the other Alliances, this planet has made sure every incursion by the North has been foiled. I’m sure you’ve learned all of this in class before.”

“What I want you to understand is, that even in this barren and

inhospitable place, there is a group of valiant warriors who suffer the discomfort to bring us peace. Here they remain, as the vanguard against our enemies, to protect the foundation of the East and protect our livelihood from those who wish to take it. They spend their youth, their vigor – even their lives – in servitude. They are soldiers, An Lun’s guardians. You know them as the East’s Iron Army, the North’s Nightmare.”

“Without the benefits of superior technology, relying only on their tenacity and strength, these young men and women keep us safe. They are lauded as the greatest fighting force the East possesses, with a singular, almost suicidal mindset. This isn’t just military power, but mental fortitude as well.”

Lan Jue paused in his lecture.

As their instructor’s voice reached an emotional crescendo, the students’ dull eyes began to light up. Here they were among the heroes of blood and iron, treading the land they walked. For these young pilots, it was almost mind-numbing.

“I’ve already spoken with the brass here, and they’ve agreed to let the second half of our ARC training commence here. Your trainers will be of the Iron Army itself. Remember that you are citizens of the East. I imagine you’ll do your utmost to ensure you don’t embarrass Skyfire or the NEU. Appreciate how rare of an opportunity this is for you – no outsiders have stepped foot in this land in over ten years. Henceforth I will be treating you like soldiers, like An Lun’s soldiers. For the next month you are no longer students of the National Eastern University, but its protectors. When we leave you can do so with head held high, because you got to defend the Alliance shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers of Blood and Iron. Because you were brothers and sisters in arms!”

Lan Jue’s motivation address lit a fire in their hearts. All of the pain, all of the exhaustion that they’d suffered so far was worth it. What could be a better reward for their torturous existence than training with the East’s elite?

Their pale faces were suddenly ruddy and vibrant.

Zeus-1 tore over the shattered landscape under the guidance of the two patrol ships. Before long a massive fissure appeared on the horizon. They followed the An Lun pilots in to the valley.

“I made a promise to the officers here before we arrived that everything we see and do here is considered a state secret. If any information about any of this gets out, the military will deal with you in their own way. That’s a court martial at the very least. Understood?” Lan Jue’s voice was once more cold, and full of the promise of cruelty should he be disobeyed.

“Understood!” This time it was the Savage Goddess who answered first.

Lan Jue looked her way, his golden mask thankfully hiding his surprised expression. She was like a young girl, full of gusto, with her clenched fists pressed to her chest. Her eyes blazed with a furious desire, and even her voice cracked with barely-contained anticipation.

What was going on?

The valley’s dips and curves were revealed to the students as the ship skimmed passed. The further in to the planet’s crust they traveled, they began to see metallic structures springing up all over the place. It almost looked like this entire planet had been converted in to a make-shift Bastion ship.

As they entered the base, they lost their line of sight to landmarks. They no longer were able to differentiate location or structure, and they didn’t know if they were facing East or West. Thankfully the small ships on either side lead them to a small landing strip. Zeus-1 touched down there.

“Remove your harnesses and disembark.” Lan Jue commanded. The Accountant rose along with the others.

This was a wonderful vacation, as far as he was concerned. Piloting this magnificent ship was always a treat. It satisfied a craving to bring them here, and the Accountant was well satisfied with the boat’s performance. The violently vomiting students may have also contributed to his

enjoyment.

As the students and teachers of the NEU exited the airship, they were greeted with the smart ranks of a military welcoming party.

There were ten in all, clad in immaculate black military uniforms. They were tall, strong, and looked straight ahead as though they were made of stone. They looked calm, but closer inspection revealed the icy poise of a warrior.

Each of them bore five golden stars on the armband tacked to their left arm. This was the symbol for the Eastern Alliance 1. Their right arm bore a patch with a dragon embroidered in blood red.

The East called itself descendants of the ancient Chinese bloodlines. This badge was a nod to those olden days, and was known as the Mark of Blood and Iron. Only the greatest of An Lun's soldiers were permitted to wear it. It wasn't just some meaningless honorific either. It was a token of heroic achievement, and the dream of every young fighter.

All of the students present were students of mecha combat, and were well familiar with the tales of these soldiers. They knew what it took to earn that badge. It was also the first time they'd ever seen it in person.

They looked back as the contingent of living legends welcomed them to their home.

One such legend told of an Eastern government representative who was giving a speech during some public activity. Someone ran up and interrupted what he was saying, and begged that he postpone the rest for fear the crowds would become dangerous.

The man's bodyguards rushed forward to bar his way, but then the stranger pulled out one of these badges. The senator, upon seeing the mark, immediately stopped his speech. He commanded his entourage and the local venue workers to disperse the crowd. He ended up giving the rest of his speech through another medium.

As his speech concluded, before the entire audience, the official bowed to the young man who made his concerns known. This senator would

become our Chairman – Zhou Xueguan. That soldier would die in battle three years later.

The Mark of Blood and Iron was an accolade, awarded to the best the Iron Army had to offer. It remains theirs so long as they remain in active service here on An Lun. When they leave, the badge is returned.

It was an honor that simply defied explanation.

The students arrayed themselves in ranks without any orders needed. Five rows of students stood facing the decorated warriors in a show of respect. Their torturous journey here had already faded in to memory, as they stood toe to toe with these heroic public servants. What's more, the bars on their chest revealed them to be lieutenants, with their leader being a Lieutenant Colonel.

Lan Jue separated himself from his charges and stood before the gathered soldiers. He snapped to attention, and gave them a sharp military salute.

The unit commander stepped forward and mirrored the greeting. The sounds and smells of metal flowed around him.

“Gao Lei, battalion commander of the First An Lun Independent Mecha Pilot corps.”

“Lei Feng, Drillmaster for the National Eastern University's Advanced Robotic Combat training regimen.” Lan Jue returned.

“We have the honor of representing Vice Admiral Lan Qing in welcoming you to An Lun, Drillmaster Lei Feng. Please contact me directly if you need anything.”

Lan Jue nodded his head. “Thank you very much.”

Gao Lei nodded back. “If you would please follow me, we'll take you to your bunks.”

The commander turned and strode off without any change of expression. The ten soldiers who brought with him turned as one unit, and followed on his heels in perfect formation. They looked like a crack mecha

bettalion, like they were machines themselves. Their unyielding presence was almost oppressive.

Lan Jue followed, with the Accountant, Mika and Xiuxiu just behind. Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan led the students forward.

The Savage Goddess tried to look in every direction at once. The look on her face was in stunning contrast to normal, so it was a good thing the mask covered it. She looked like she was in love.

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1. Modeled, I'm sure, after the five golden stars of the Chinese flag.

Chapter 296: The Brothers Meet

These were real men! Tan Lingyun's heart was full of admiration for the young soldiers. At the same time, a face swam up to the forefront of her memory, a face she'd never actually met. However, she'd lost count of how many times it appeared when she closed her eyes.

Gao Lei lead them to their quarters, which were nicer than expected. In fact, they were nicer than the NEU dorms as well. Though only around eight square meters, each student had their own room. It had a bed, a bathroom, a cabinet, and a desk. Everyone had their own space, and that alone was a very pleasant surprise.

The rooms, like the structure itself, were entirely composed of galvanized steel and were linked one to the other. There were about five levels, connected by ladders.

Gao Lei turned to Lan Jue. "These are the barracks. You'll be staying here for the duration of your visit. If I may, Drillmaster Lei Feng, when is your training set to begin?"

Lan Jue nodded. "It's about four o'clock local time, yes? We'll begin tomorrow."

"Simple meals will be provided by conveyor belt to every room," Gao Lei said in response. "Please make sure to remain in the barracks unless training. There are many restricted areas around the base, tell your students that if they trespass they do so at their own risk."

With his instructions delivered, the soldier turned on his heels and left without so much as a wave of his hand.

In truth Gao Lei couldn't understand why the brass had permitted these kids to stay here. They all looked sickly and unsteady. Would they be able to train with the soldiers? And then this 'Lei Feng' guy with his ridiculous mask. The whole thing was a farce.

But following orders was the duty of every soldier. He didn't make the rules, he just executed them.

Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan didn't need to wait for Lan Jue's instruction. They were already in the process of assigning rooms to their charges, and telling them to rest up.

Long flights were always exhausting, especially without any sort of crew cabin. And then, of course, there was the g-force training.

Even the students' excitement over training with these heroic men wasn't enough to keep them awake. The moment their heads touched their pillows, the world went dark. Before long every one of them was comatose.

Lan Jue's next command was directed to Xiuxiu. "Inject each of them with a nutritive solution. It'll help them recover from the fatigue."

His long-time Amazon looked apprehensive. "Boss, aren't you afraid this is too much? They've suffered through quite a lot in this last month."

Lan Jue smiled behind his mask. "A person's potential is almost limitless. You know what I'm talking about, you remember my training."

Xiuxiu nodded, then left with Mika to perform the injections.

Lan Jue exited the barracks. It was also the first time he'd visited this famed place, but he didn't share the novel excitement of his students.

He's lived here for ten years! He started as a private, and now he's actually a vice admiral. To rise through the ranks so quickly outside of wartime was spectacular.

Of course, what price Lan Qing paid for it, only he knows.

Lan Jue examined the meal they were offered. They were vacuum-sealed bags, MREs, with a thick and unappetizing contents. The scentless sludge was packed full of everything a body needed – assuming you could swallow it down.

Conditions on this planet were not ideal for habitation, which meant there was a spartan simplicity required to make it work. Life here wasn't only war and preparation, but it was still more than most could suffer.

The moment Lan Jue stepped out from the barracks, two soldiers

blocked his path. Laser rifles were raised and trained on him.

“You are not permitted to leave the barracks without orders,” the soldier on the left nearly growled.

Lan Jue nodded, but did not move. “I’m waiting for someone.”

The two men lowered their weapons, and returned to their watch. They were like statues, standing in resolute silence on either side of the door.

Lan Jue remained as well, with similar posture to the young soldiers. Silence prevailed as the drillmaster waited.

The soldiers paid him no mind in the beginning. But as time passed, and no one came, they began to grow curious. Half an hour crawled by.

Life on An Lun was exceedingly lonesome. Any outside visitor – aside from those they were meant to kill – was an interesting development. In fact there had never been visitors such as these, so far as most of the soldiers could remember.

The Iron Army didn’t accept new recruits. Soldiers were chosen from a pool of servicemen who’d been on active duty for at least three years. Only after selection were they allowed to begin training here.

Nor was the treatment here stellar, and yet there was no shortage of warriors desperate for a chance to join. Three years was the minimum required tour, but no one stayed less than ten years. It was considered a disgrace to leave before then, not to mention you would be ineligible for the Mark.

Today’s medical knowledge has extended life considerably, so ten years wasn’t a life-long commitment. But once you rotated out of An Lun, you returned to civilian life a hero of the Alliance with a bright future ahead.

Every year business moguls would send people this way as veterans left the service. They would attempt to ply them by any means necessary. Some would take the offers, and others would remain as career soldiers. Those who remained were fast-tracked for officer positions.

But every year, the number of young men and women who reach that

coveted retirement stage were only in the double digits. Most of them bore debilitating injuries.

So what was it about this place that gave it such unique charm? No one could say. But for the Iron Army, this place was their pride and joy.

The clanking sound of metal on metal drew Lan Jue's attention. In the distance, a figure approached.

The two soldiers who'd been curiously waiting for Lan Jue's friend to arrive were shocked when they discovered who it was. Even for soldiers here, seeing this one was a rare treat. They snapped to attention, and gave a flawless salute.

The figure stopped a few paces away and returned their salute. He would not deny them the respect, despite their low rank.

"Come with me." The three curt words were directed at Lan Jue.

The Demon Drillmaster complied, nodding as he fell in behind the man. This time the soldiers didn't dare block his way. How could they? He was leaving with the An Lun Supersoldier, their Vice Admiral – Prometheus!

Who was this golden-masked man, where the Vice Admiral himself would come to get him?

The guardsmen weren't permitted to speak, but everything they wished to say could be expressed with a look. They saw their confusion and curiosity mirrored in the others' eyes.

Lan Jue watched his brother, with his straight spine and chilly persona. He was bemused to discover that these soldiers were all essentially cut from his mold.

A soldier was also a representation of their commanding officer!

A verti-car waited for them outside the barracks. It was not a fancy transport, and was fitted with only what a soldier might need. Lan Qing swung in to the driver's seat, and Lan Jue took shotgun.

As the doors closed, the two brothers were cut off from the outside world.

“I’ve prepared a month’s training already,” Lan Qing’s quiet voice assured.

Lan Jue nodded, looking over his uniformed older brother. He didn’t know why, but suddenly he felt a wave of sadness pass through him.

Lan Qing, perhaps sensing the emotive change in his sibling, looked his way. “Have you spoken with that one from Skyfire Avenue?”

Lan Jue knew his brother was referring to Thunderclap, known to the denizens of the Avenue as the Driver. The one with the yin to his yang.

Lan Jue nodded again. “I’ve been good friends with him for a long time. Once this business with the students is finished, perhaps he and I will start joint training. He’s a racer, though, and I believe he’ll be leaving for the West soon to participate in a competition.”

Lan Qing’s brows furrowed. “It’s been a long time since you’ve been back. When do you think you’ll have time to visit home?”

Lan Jue felt a sharp pang in his chest. A confused and complicated look flit across his eyes. “Have you been back?”

“Last year,” he answered. “Dad’s doing well.”

Lan Jue opened his mouth, but hesitated a moment before speaking.

“Did he mention me?”

Lan Qing shook his head. “I tried to. I saw disappointment in his eyes. I actually called him not long ago and let him know what was going on with you. He didn’t answer.”

Lan Jue reacted by sputtering a bitter laugh. “Really! I’m a disappointment.”

Lan Qing let the silence hang in the car for a moment. “You should go visit.”

Lan Jue only nodded.

“So if these guys do well enough in your training course, brother, do you think there’s a chance for them to join the Iron Army?” Lan Jue asked.

Lan Qing shook his head without giving it too much thought. “No. We can’t buck tradition. If they want to come to An Lun they need the requisite service experience. Then there are all the assessments and tests. Anyway, do you think these kids are actually interested in being soldiers?”

Lan Jue was silent for a moment. “I can’t say if they want it, but I can sense the tenacity in them. The things I’ve put them through can’t be much different than what you do here. You just wait and see.”

“You should know, there are no exceptions here,” Lan Qing assured. “You’ve only been permitted by special approval. I’m guessing the Avenue must have been involved to make this happen.”

Chapter 297: Wait and See

“Here our ideas diverge,” Lan Jue announced. “You’ve done it right – the well-disciplined do not break. But don’t forget what the Clairvoyant told us; we will face a cataclysm, one that’ll threaten all of humanity. It’s something not even the Iron Army will be able to handle on its own. You’ve forged a powerful unit, but it isn’t absolute. What if it isn’t enough to repel the invaders? I feel that the Iron Army’s prestige and training would do better if disseminated to a wider audience. The more soldiers you turn in to warriors the better, not just sitting on our haunches.”

Lan Qing’s brows knit tight. “You don’t understand the military. One hundred poorly managed units can’t stand up to one crack team. When you join the An Lun forces, you’re walking a path only the greatest soldiers have walked. When you serve here, you do so with the best of the best. My men, are all supersoldiers. If humanity should encounter a terrible war for survival, you can bet the Iron Army will lead the charge.”

Lan Jue, upon listening to his brother, was struck with how little he understood about this world. His brother was called the god of wisdom for a reason. “Maybe you’re right. But I’ll prove that these kids I’ve brought are the best of the best.”

Lan Qing replied, his voice low and indifferent. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Lan Jue replied with a nod. He opened the car door once they’d arrived and stepped out.

Lan Qing didn’t step out of the car, but followed his little brother his eyes as Lan Jue returned to the barracks. What the demon drillmaster didn’t see was Lan Qing sitting alone in the dark car, with the faintest ghost of a smile on his lips. There was something else there, too, hidden within the grin. Relief.

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BEEEEEP! The ear-piercing screech of an alarm broke the silence. The exhausted students were very rudely torn from their slumber.

A cold voice broadcast over the announcement system. “You’ve got five minutes to get ready, and five minutes for breakfast. Gather at the door when you’re finished.”

Their brains still sluggish with the fog of sleep, the students began to mill about and prepare. But as they did they noticed that the voice didn’t belong to their normal tormentor.

Luckily the previous month of training had prepared them for this sort of life. Many were somewhat surprised to discover that they were fresh and ready to go after last night’s recovery. They felt ready to take on whatever An Lun had for them.

On the bedside tables there had been placed MREs for breakfast, arranged at some point while they slept. To them this was bed side service!

Ten minutes later, the students were waiting in orderly rows at the door to the barracks.

Lan Jue in his golden mask, and Xiuxiu, Mika, Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun in silver, stood facing them.

Gao Lei, in the same uniform he’d worn yesterday, lead the small contingent to the training field.

There was surprise written in the eyes of the battalion commander of the First Independent Mecha Combat Regiment. Obviously he didn’t expect these young pilots to be ready in such a short time. But more importantly, they all seemed ready and raring to go, as opposed to how they looked yesterday. It was like they were entirely different people.

“Drillmaster Lei Feng.” Gao Lei addressed Lan Jue. “For the next month, my brothers and I will be leading your group in training, but we are only responsible for executing the program. We will not stop to make sure your charges can keep up. How much they can handle, is up to them.”

“Fine.” Lan Jue’s response was as tepid as his brother’s.

Gao Lei turned away, and looked at the students with a distinct light of scorn in his eyes. He shouted at them in a booming, commanding voice. “Atteeeeeention! Left-face! Get to running, maggots!” He was off like a shot,

with his small coterie of soldiers close behind.

Lan Jue followed with his assistants and students in tow.

As they left the barracks area, Gao Lei picked up speed. The base had been under constant development for the last ten years, so it was vast and well paved. Everything fell under a protective shielding that kept An Lun's toxic atmosphere at bay while they worked.

There was a tradition among the Iron Army soldiers, that unless you were on official business or there was an urgent matter, you got to where you were going only by virtue of your own two legs. It strengthened both one's body and one's will.

And so, their training had started the minute they stepped out of the barracks.

Gao Lei continued to increase the pace. The decorated soldiers on his heels kept up without any trouble. Stamina, after all, was one of the pillars of strength for An Lun soldiers.

Any sluggishness the students may have been struggling with melted away as they started to run. Their curiosity and excitement took its place as they remembered where they were and what they were doing. This was planet An Lun! They had been accepted in to an elite military base, to train with the East's most lauded warriors. How could they not be excited at the prospect?

The world of stark metal buildings passed around them, and the students tried to take it all in as they passed. Despite its location deep within the fissure, the headquarters did not want for space. In the distance there was a tarmac for airships and, what was that? It looked like a giant mecha! The nearby warehouse was likely where they stored their excess energy cells. And there, specialized mining equipment? Clearly they were still in the process of exploiting the planet's abundant resources.

Under command from their curiosity, the students tried to look in every direction at once. They let the novelty and excitement flow through them, which mitigated the strain from their full sprint Gao Lei was subjecting them to.

It was, of course, deliberate on the part of the battalion commander. Let the students get a taste of what true work was, he thought.

Gao Lei, commander of this crack independent unit, was truly one of the best military personnel this floating rock possessed. The First Pilot was what the title suggested, the first among his peers, best of the best. He was a weapon, and the soldiers of his unit were the tip of the blade. He couldn't remember how many accolades he'd received, how many times he was chosen for a job. And then there was today. He had been confused, upset when the order came down that he was to be responsible for these children. He couldn't refuse, of course, but that didn't stop the displeasure from living in the back of his mind. This was a waste of time, time he could be spending training his own people, or performing missions for the betterment of the Alliance. Looking after these kids was nothing but a waste.

He made the determination that they needed to know what really went on here. He would show them no quarter, and then he'd see how much they enjoyed their little field trip. Best case scenario, they'd complain enough and quit. No one could blame him or his people for that, he was just putting them through the same training his soldiers received. Another An Lun tradition was fraternity, and every upper-level officer made it a point to protect their own. How could they be expected to be an iron wall against their enemies if they couldn't rally to each others' side?

There had once been a conflict within the Eastern military forces. Many thought their commanding officer had spent too long on An Lun and wished to switch him out. When the army failed to listen, their response was to call in for their papers and retire – over three hundred of them – all of whom bore the Mark of Blood and Iron.

This news had spread like wildfire. Before long over one hundred ships from all of the alliances converged on An Lun, in the hopes of snatching up some of these talented – if disgruntled – ex soldiers. Luckily the East was able to backtrack somewhat, and reworded the release papers so that the officers cycling out were simply going for 'advanced studies' off site. When they returned they were all reinstated, and given promotions. There

were no more complaints after that.

With that painful experience still fresh in their minds, the top brass of the Eastern armed forces released a declaration that all future commanding officers in An Lun would be internally selected from men who'd actually served there. This was an important announcement, one that showed a great deal of autonomy for the Iron Army. That's how important they were. 1

The officer who spear-headed the revolt was Lan Qing's predecessor. He became the supreme commander of An Lun's forces until old age forced his retirement. He felt he could no longer effectively direct An Lun's affairs, and stepped down of his own volition. He recommended Lan Qing as his successor, who was only a colonel at the time.

He had been groomed for three years for the position. With the blessing of An Lun's officers, he was elevated to the highest office this border planet had.

This was the tale of An Lun. Gao Lei knew his visitors were familiar with it.

Half an hour passed, and in that time they covered at least forty kilometers. They were almost at the training field, so the First Pilot finally began to reduce his speed. He looked over his shoulder.

What he saw nearly made him stumble in disbelief.

The students were just as organized and in step as they had been when they left. Not only hadn't any of them lagged behind, but they were in perfect rows. If it weren't for their school-issued flight suits, he might have mistaken them for actual soldiers.

These guys are in excellent shape! No wonder they chose this place.

But while Gao Lei was surprised at the run, he still didn't find it overly remarkable. Being in shape didn't make one a soldier.

The training area was a large, flat field that was separated in to numerous sections. The one thing missing, the students noticed, were sim pods. The field was surrounded by several towering warehouses, each

delineated by a large sign.

Gao Lei brought them to the center of the training area, where they stopped to catch their breath.

“In accordance with our military orders, we’ve arranged a training program for you. It will be modulated by your capabilities. What this means is that you will progress through the course only if you are able to pass the early portions. Today, it’s running. Our little jog here was a warm-up. Ten circles – do that in a reasonable time, and we can move on.”

The field was massive, with one circle being easily ten kilometers. He was asking for a hundred kilometers from these kids.

Why so little? Is the An Lun training program really this easy?

None of the students could actually say what they were thinking, though.

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1. I’m not sure if the author intended this, but this small aside bears interesting parallels with the Tian An Men riots. The chairman at the time, Deng Xiao Ping, was trying to consolidate power after the train wreck that was Mao Zedong’s final years as overlord. To do so, it’s reputed that he had to make nice with the army. This afforded them with a daunting amount of power, so much that Deng couldn’t effectively contain them. When the democratic protests erupted, Deng was forced to rely on the military again, who responded in tragic, exceedingly violent fashion. The army was too important for Deng to ignore or weaken, so he had to let them do their thing. It resulted in tragedy. At least, this is how I understand it/was told. If anyone knows a different story, share in the comments. Sources are even better!

Chapter 298: Manifest Excellence

Training at West Hill was much harder than this. The students exchanged glances, some actually beginning to suspect they weren't being taken seriously.

"No holding back!" Lan Jue's harsh voice sent a shiver down their spine. They snapped to attention, with the stark reminder that there was no relaxing when the Demon Drillmaster was watching.

Gao Lei followed on the golden masked man's heels. "Go!"

Lan Jue did not remain to observe like the First Pilot. Instead, he lead the group, with his assistants fanning out behind.

The Demon Drillmaster would train as well? The young pilots where stunned to discover that he was, but they knew it only meant they had to work harder. They had better keep up, because the consequence for falling behind would likely be dire.

Gao Lei languidly swung to meet the gaze of a soldier standing nearby. "Double the gravity," he ordered.

"Sir!" The soldier snapped to attention before darting off to do so.

Upon seeing their Drillmaster move to the front of the line, the students were filled with an inexplicable happiness. So far, compared to the torment they'd suffered on Skyfire, this was paradise.

Running was an afterthought now. They were adepts, with Disciplines that fed strength to their bodies. After their first month of training and the medicine baths, it was hard to gauge just how much they'd improved but it was more than just significant. If what they were seeing was the gist of it, this An Lun training would be a vacation.

A few minutes in to their first kilometer, something seemed off. Their legs were heavy, like they were drained. There was no agility in them.

"Double gravity," Lan Jue shouted to the others. "Maintain pace."

Double gravity? Sure enough, the training wouldn't be as easy as it

seemed. At least they were prepared for the unexpected, after Last month's experiences. Their pace remained lock-step, if a mite slower. They never broke rank.

Really? Now, Gao Lei really was stunned. Even specially selected soldiers doing their first run here had trouble with sudden shifts in gravity. Many of them tripped straight off. These kids' physical fitness was quite a bit better than one would expect! They hardly reacted at all.

Their first circle passed quickly and without incident. They moved like a single organism, with only the slightest of variations. Second lap passed much the same, then the third...

With each completed circuit the surprise in Gao Lei's eyes grew. He was beginning to understand why the COs were allowing these kids to train here. Of course they'd have to be above average.

In the next hour they completed seven laps without a dip in speed. The steady thump of feet were like a metronome. Sweating was inevitable, but Gao Lei couldn't see an ounce of fatigue in their faces. On the contrary, they were smiling!

What was double gravity to them? It was hardly a warm-up.

"Pick up the pace, run at your peak!" Their Drillmaster's voice called back again, and in the next second he was off like a shot down the track. His four assistants were right in his tailwind.

Peak?

The students audibly groaned. The pace they'd been running was just above comfortable. Now there was no more playing around.

The first to break in to full sprint was Tang Mi. Her pent up rage and frustration were too much. The second she heard the order to go all out, she exploded like a hurricane. She stretched out her long legs to break ahead of the pack, plowing through toward the Drillmaster.

Before the dust of her passing could settle the others were on her heels. Geng Yang, Tang Xiao, Jin Tao and the rest didn't hold back. Tang Xiao had the worst of it. His weight and the increased gravity conspired to

make this doubly difficult.

The students flailed and kicked as they fought to keep up. They were racing at twice the speed they'd just maintained.

The soldiers at Gao Lei's side watched with surprise. Since when were college students so fierce? They sure ran like soldiers.

Lan Jue completed the run, coming to a stop before the First Pilot. He didn't breath heavy, nor was his face red. He regarded Gao Lei the calm expression. "Commander Gao, we're ready for the next exercise. I imagine we can complete at least one more before lunch."

Gao Lei's expression didn't change, nor did the look in his eye. What did this mean? Fitness wasn't everything.

The students quickly put away the remaining laps. Though out of breath when crossing the finish line, they didn't seem all that drained. Even the stragglers were in good shape.

"Alright, you guys finished the first exercise very nicely. Next we'll work on your stamina and defense. We're going to pair you up with the soldiers behind me in a bare-fist fight. Your job is to not got punched in the face. If you give up, you're out of the program. Three minutes in the minimum to pass. Let's get going."

Defense, eh.

"Can we hit back?" Several dozen wide eyes looked in disbelief at the speaker. Jin Tao's seriously expression met their gaze.

"Hit back?" Gao Lei sputtered in laughter. "Of course! If you think you got the stones for it, go ahead. Tell you what, if anyone lands a blow on one of my soldiers, you'll get honored."

Lan Jue, standing at Gao Lei's side, added, "No Disciplines."

Gao Lei shot him a glance. "Alright."

Upon hearing their drillmaster's words, the students' faces fell, because they knew it had been directed towards them. The battalion commander, however, didn't seem to get it.

Gao Lei continued. "Give me ten groups. Prepare to fight."

The Iron Army soldiers fanned out, as did the students under the Savage Goddess' direction. The women were all placed together in one group.

Jin Tao was first in line, head of the first group. He visibly twitched in excitement.

Tang Xiao was also first in his group, and stood abreast to Jin Tao. The two Disciples eyed each other sideways with fervent, defiant glances. Clearly this was to be a competition. Who was going to last the longest.

Tang Mi stood at the head of the female group. She was clearly the strongest of the group in battle prowess. Their soldier training partner was also female.

There were decidedly few women in the Iron Army, but those who met the criteria were certainly something to behold. They were vicious warrior princesses.

"Round one. Begin!" Gao Lei shouted.

The students all reacted differently. For instance, Tang Xiao – his face doe-eyed and honest – waddled toward the instructor. With his apologetic smile and self-deprecating stance, he quietly asked them to go a little easy.

Jin Tao descended on his instructor like a rabid spider monkey.

Tang Mi also didn't wait to strike. Her long legs lashed out like whips at the female soldier's head. No one would mistake her for timid.

With five meters between them, she leapt in to the air and swung her leg heel-down toward her opponent.

"Showey. And impractical." The soldier snarled disdainfully. She waited until Tang Mi's foot was inches from her face, before taking a rapid step to the side. Her fist shot out through an opening.

The step was small, but quick and accurate. Tang Mi's flailing kick met nothing but air.

The younger Tang reacted well, however, bending her knee and aiming for the woman's temple. Her arms reached out to ward her counter strike.

The soldier didn't change course, but did pick up speed. The moment her fist struck Tang Mi's palms she could feel it vibrating. The force of her strike vibrated up in to her arms, shivering her bones. She couldn't steady herself suspended in the air as she was, so she tumbled out of control. Her knee swung wide.

The soldier's fist groped out in attempts to grab Tang Mi's ankle. She gripped it tight, and viciously pulled Tang Mi to the ground. The young pilot struck the floor at a full spin.

Though smaller than Tang Mi by a head, this female soldier was at least twice as deadly. A startling aura of bloodthirst surrounded her, hung around her with a promise of violence. It rattled Tang Mi, for sure.

Tang Xiao's sister curled in like a shrimp as the soldier's fist met her abdomen. There was no mercy, and Tang Mi felt as though her organs were all shifting around one another. She met the floor again with a crunch. The soldier stood over her, foot raised. With a grunt she brought it crashing down toward her head.

Tang Mi managed to lift her arms up just in time to block her foot. She was knocked back several meters, but she hardly felt it through the grey haze the hung over her mind.

Seeing their fellow student so assailed, the girls were stunned and frightened. She was lauded as the best fighter, and she was put down in three hits. This soldier was terrifying!

Vicious, callous, and not the least bit showy. This was clearly her style, and it was frighteningly effective.

Similar scenes repeated themselves among all the other groups. These kids hadn't the ghost of a chance against these hardened warriors. One after the other they were put down. And yet there were no cries for mercy; either because they didn't wish to be disgraced, or because they'd already had the sense knocked out of them.

There were, of course, exceptions. Jin Tao and Tang Xiao, for instance.

Jin Tao had been on his enemy from the beginning, His attacks were

anything but refined – after all, he'd never studied combat – but what they lacked in polish they more than made up for in pure mad ferocity. He swung his fists at the defending soldier like a crazed cheetah.

The soldier dodged and juked quick as lightning then, kicking out with his leg, tried to sweep the crazy little bastard.

Only Tang Xiao rolled free just in time. He wasted not a second, and went right for the soldier's throat once again.

Tang Xiao, on the other hand, circles his enemy with wide lumbering steps. His hands are raised and would occasionally lash creep out like he was looking for an opening. Of course, the foxy bastard was just trying to buy time. They said three minutes, right?

The contempt in his opponent's eyes was thick and fierce. With a roar of frustration, he rushed Tang Xiao head on.

Chapter 299: Tang Xiao Breaks Out

At that very moment, Tang Xiao saw his sister about to get her head stomped in. He stopped dead in his tracks, fat jiggling, eyes locked in the scene. In the next instant, a wave of startling power began to emanate from him.

Little Mi! The scream was internal, but he reacted by bull-rushing the soldier responsible for his own group. He didn't care what would happen to him, or how he'd be seen – something Mika was very familiar with. This was his sister!

He'd heard from Jin Tao that his sister had remained by his side the entire time he was meditating. Though he never said anything, how could he not be moved by the display? Ever since they were small, he'd looked after her. She was big now, he knew, and was able to take care of her self but it was a part of him. Family was the most important thing, and their dedication to one another was something he cherished.

Watching his sister suffer, the cunning depths of Tang Xiao's mind turned to mad violence. He threw himself at the soldier with wild abandon. Their trainer, though possessed of a wealth of combat training and experience, was nonetheless stunned by the sudden ferocity from this fatty.

But the young man's rush was unrefined. He threw himself in to danger without thought of protection of tactics. The soldier answered by swinging his thick, powerful leg right towards Tang Xiao's copious belly.

"Ughh!" Bullseye! Tang Xiao, in his blind rage, couldn't dodge the kick. But the soldier discovered something objectively terrifying when, as his foot connected, he got the distinct impression something was wrong. Tang Xiao stomach was soft and supple like cotton, and after the kick landed, the soldier couldn't pull his leg free!

He yanked and kicked his leg, trying to free himself from the disgusting hold. But he failed, and Tang Xiao took the opportunity to press forward.

In generally, the more meaty individuals had more strength than

skinnier folk. At least they weren't at a disadvantage. Tang Xiao wasn't a normal fatty, either. Moreover, he was a particularly talented Adept all his own. He couldn't use his Discipline, but he knew how to take advantage of an enemy's short-comings.

However the soldier was not alarmed by the change of circumstance. He pressed his weight on his captured leg and, regaining some semblance of balance, swung the opposite foot around to try and catch Tang Xiao on the shoulder. The intention was to force his leg free with a distracting strike.

But Tang Xiao followed up with something the soldier couldn't anticipate. He jumped as high as he could.

Despite his girth, he got some considerable height on the leap. With his opponent's leg caught, Tang Xiao managed to spin in the air until the soldier was point right toward the floor, positioned to break the young pilot's landing. His doughy belly toughened up and keep a vice-like hold on the leg. There was no way for the soldier to wrench his leg free, now.

A ferocity shone in the depths of the warrior's eyes. In the blink of an eye there was a knife in his right hand, pulled free from a pocket on his uniform pants.

"Ah!!" The pained scream pierced through the air, hanging over the field.

Wasn't this a bare-handed fight? What was he doing with a weapon?!

The thought raced through the heads of onlooking students as the soldier sought to extricate himself from this awkward situation. Tang Xiao prepared to Discipline to ward the inevitable stabbing. But much to his surprise, the soldier swept his dagger down toward his own ankle.

There was no hesitation. Even though this was training, the soldier was about to cut off his own foot for battlefield supremacy!

"Enough!" A figure appeared suddenly from the corner of their eyes. With lightning-fast speed, the newcomer grabbed the soldier's arm before the strike could land. In the same motion he guided their fall so they could land safely.

Gao Lei looked over the two of them. He fixed Tang Xiao with his gaze,

something strange in their depths. "You win," he said. "Well done."

Tang Xiao relaxed his stomach and allowed the soldier to pull himself free. But he didn't care about the result, his eyes were already searching for his sister.

The losing soldier's face was a mask of rage and disappointment. After he regained his feet, Gao Lei responded by viciously kneeing him in the gut. The soldier fell to a knee with a pained groan.

"You underestimated the enemy. If this were a real fight, you'd be dead. You've forgotten the principle of throwing everything behind every fight, no matter the enemy, haven't you? This is a warning, forget again and you'll be punished."

The exchanged had happened in just a few seconds. But it dominated the attention of every student. This was the Iron Army on An Lun! They would maim themselves even to win in training. If the fight hadn't had been stopped in just that moment, surely the strike would have permanently disabled the soldier.

Nearby, Jin Tao was still battling his instructor.

By the time Tang Xiao had won his victory, Jin Tao had been viciously beaten down by his instructor seven times. However, each time he got back up. He refused to be put down, like a cockroach. He'd dust himself off, then launch headlong at his enemy once more.

The soldier's eyes were full of stunned disbelief. This kid was tough as rocks! And he sure as hell could take a hit. Although each rush resulted in him being knocked away, he defended himself in just the right spots and at just the right times, to ensure there wasn't any serious damage. This was training, after all, and the soldier wasn't interested in killing his charge. What's more, it took him longer and longer each time to repel the psychotic student.

Gao Lei stood not far off, watching carefully.

Combat was an excellent display of ability. Power, speed, psychology, reaction speed... everything came out when the fists started flying.

Even people with the same skills and strength could see vast differences in combat results if you considered their willpower. And those were only a few criteria.

The longer he watched, the more surprised Gao Lei became. These kids were much, much different than he'd expected. Not only were they physically primed, but they had a tenacity that was practically inhuman. Since the fight started, no one has cried for help, or given up.

Even in the military, this was something else.

Tang Mi passed out, Tang Xiao went berserk. The students were like rabid animals, with a ferocity that was hard to explain.

Their basic abilities were also quite good, considering. They were also strong, and desperate. The soldiers couldn't kill them, so they sought to thoroughly route these kids instead. However, they were finding it very difficult to do so. The fights took longer and longer.

Even the elite soldiers they poached from other units couldn't perform at this level. Gao Lei's disdain had slowly begun to melt away as he watched them perform. He couldn't help but not in silent appreciation. They were all exceptional talents, with a wealth of potential. And they were young! The Vice Admiral was right – these kids deserved to be here. With time, every one of them could be part of the Iron Army.

Every student fought until they passed out. Not a single one gave up. To them, this beating really wasn't that bad. They rose to their feet, dusted themselves off, and went in again. Over and over.

After all, compared to boiling water and a dozen metal rods and bio-electric lightning storms, what was a few gut-punches?

Jin Tao was a special case. The kid was a freak. While the other soldiers had nearly finished with their groups, these two were still at it. The soldier was drenched in sweat, and his breath was coming ragged. Jin Tao's face only revealed excitement. They were already passed the ten minute mark!

In the end, Gao Lei could do nothing for it but give the kid his well deserved honors. He had other training courses to get to, and at this point

the kid had so thoroughly embarrassed his soldier that he had shown his worth tenfold.

Lan Jue watched in silence, never moving. Until Zhou Qianlin fainted...

Qianlin was the final one in her group to fight. When it was her turn, Tan Lingyun had quietly approached Lan Jue, expressing concerns that she was no combat student. Lan Jue shook his head, and told her that this was Qianlin's choice. She had made the decision to be here-she had earned it.

And she really didn't have any combat ability to speak of. What she did have, was an expected calm. Her tiny arms darted here and there to ward off the attacker's strikes. She was knocked out in under a minute, but when looking at her from the perspective of a 'civilian', it was an impressive feat.

But when she ultimately hit the floor, Lan Jue couldn't stop his hands from curling in to fists.

The process was done in about half an hour. Seventeen of the fifty students had managed to pass muster. They had all made it at least three minutes. Although this was less than a third of the participants, Gao Lei no longer looked at them like pain in the ass kids. Even those who hadn't passed needed only slight adjustments to make it the next time.

"Drillmaster, would you and your assistants be needing this training as well?" The First Pilot turned to regard Lan Jue, who'd been silent through the whole thing.

Lan Jue turned his mask face toward the soldier. "Would the commander mind showing me a few things?"

A light shone in Gao Lei's eyes. "Alright," he said.

"Excellent." Lan Jue nodded his head in satisfaction, then walked to the center of the training field.

Most of the students had come to already. All eyes were now on Lan Jue and Gao Lei. Their brief exchange had not been quiet, after all, so they all knew what was about to happen.

So now they would get to watch their demon drillmaster at the First Pilot of An Lun have at it.

They forgot all about their aches and pains. Their eyes were wide and unblinking as the students' two instructors met on the field of battle. The memory of their Drillmaster's tyrannical victory in his saber mech was still fresh in their minds, but they didn't know how he was in actual fist-fight. Grappling and mecha combat had many fundamental differences – would he be able to stand up to this battle-hardened commander?

Lan Jue walked to the center of the training field before turning back to face Gao Lei. "We go until someone taps out?"

Gao Lei nodded. "As you like."

"Let's do it," Lan Jue returned.

Gao Lei's face curled in to a frown. "Feel free to start us off." Although he didn't say it straight, his meaning was clear: He doubted Lan Jue had any chance at all, if Gao Lei were allowed to start the fight.

Lan Jue said nothing further. He simply stepped forward and, with terrifying speed, whipped his back leg at Gao Lei's rib cage.

Chapter 300: The Man in the Green Mask

A twinkle appeared in Gao Lei's eye. He took a step to the side, then forward so that he was inside Lan Jue's leg, effectively negating the strike. It was the same reaction the female instructor had used in avoiding Tang Mi's attack. Likely something universal in their training.

However, he changed it up a little. After moving in, Gao Lei twisted on his heel and threw both arms up front of him.

Bang! Gao Lei flew off like a cannonball. He hit the ground and skid a good dozen meters before scrambling back on to his feet. The gathered soldiers suddenly paid much closer attention.

This...

Their first pilot was unceremoniously smoked by this masked stranger. What was going on? Gao Lei's combat prowess was well known among his soldiers, even going so far as earning him the title 'the Tiger of An Lun'. He's passed every training with accolades, and earned nearly every military commendation on offer. Years of military service have honed him in to a weapon of war.

And yet, he was trounced by this strange professor. Was he really that strong, to send their illustrious commander flying?

There was an expression of appreciation in Lan Jue's eyes, that twinkled from behind the golden mask. His reaction time was fast, and his determinations swift and correct. In the blink of an eye he'd determined Lan Jue's kick to be uncontrolled, and swept in close to take advantage. He was also able to judge Lan Jue's power by the strength of the kick. By what he saw, the drillmaster was no weakling. So, seeing that he couldn't avoid or negate the strike, he threw his hands up to block it. The resulting blow caused him to tumble away, but he'd taken no damage from the trade.

"Alright!" Gao Lei growled, but not in pain from the strike. A violent light shone in his eyes as he raced forward to re-engage. His right hand slashed out with the flat part of his palm cutting through the air like a blade. He was aiming right for the center of the drillmaster's chest. His

movements were precise, and lacked any hesitation. His whole body moved like it was a perfectly cohesive unit, prepared for anything.

Lan Jue watched him come. He didn't move, and made no effort to prepare for the attack. His eyes followed Gao Lei's hand as it chopped through the air and, as it drew within a few scant inches of Lan Jue's chest, the drillmaster lashed out with a lightning fast punch toward the First Pilot.

Gao Lei's hand made contact. However, as his chopping attack finally hit the drillmaster, he felt a powerful vibration. His whole body began to shudder, and just then Lan Jue's fist found its mark. The punch caught Gao Lei in his left shoulder.

But when the strike hit Lan Jue felt Gao Lei's shoulder move, like it was dislocated. The pilot swung his left shoulder back, and Lan Jue's strike brushed along his opponent's side. Once more Gao Lei's hand chopped at Lan Jue, aiming now for his carotid artery. In the same motion his knee bent, and lashed out at his opponent's legs to catch him off balance.

Lan Jue's left hand hung down to block the knee, while his upper body twisted sideways and down. This helped him avoid Gao Lei's chop while simultaneously knocking the knee aside. These close quarters encounters were brief, but fierce.

Gusts of air swept passed the onlookers as the two collided.

In truth neither were supposed to use their disciplines. But this wasn't a friendly sparring session. It would more accurately be described as a death match! The students and soldiers watched with rapt attention – this was a true meeting of two combat masters!

And yet as they fought, the onlookers began to take note. Though they looked to be neck and neck, Lan Jue hadn't moved an inch from his starting location. Gao Lei had approached from every angle to try and get him to budge. He crashed against Lan Jue over and over like a relentless tide, while the drillmaster remained a steadfast solid cliff face. The stronger Gao Lei's attacks, the more severe the response from Lan Jue. The more vicious the offense, the stronger his defense.

Gao Lei's reactions and fighting style were fascinating for the students. When comparing the two, their Drillmaster's fighting style was simple and direct. He was like water, and reacted where needed. This ensured that Gao Lei didn't get an advantage.

The advantage, in both speed and strength, lay with Lan Jue.

The students were all talented pilots, and knew how to read a situation. It didn't take them long to discover why it was their drillmaster was in a better position. Strength, attack, speed... he was better in every category. Gao Lei had to strike in very precise areas to have any hope of landing a solid blow. He was also very careful not to suffer one of his opponent's attacks directly.

Gao Lei was also using fundamental attack patterns, simple and straightforward. He was trying to make a point: with enough power, speed, and perception it didn't matter how strong your opponent was or what style they used, you could beat it.

And generally he'd be right.

Gao Lei secretly battled a fear that was welling up in his chest. Facing off like this, he couldn't get but be reminded of when he first arrived on An Lun, and his first drillmaster. No matter how hard he tried, how hard he fought, his opponent was indomitable. The oppressive defense was so much he felt like he couldn't breathe. And the guy wasn't even using all of his power!

Was he doing it on purpose?

Gao Lei clenched his teeth. Already he'd thrown everything he had behind his attacks. He attacked from all angles, rotating around Lan Jue to find an opening. But, no matter how hard his strikes or from what direction, each one was negated by the drillmaster's defense.

Total defense! This was Lan Jue's strategy. Gao Lei's hands and arms were red, and swollen from continuously beating against Lan Jue. He was only still going because his pride demanded it.

I can't lose! I represent the Iron Army, the glory of An Lun! The fire in

Gao Lei's eyes grew fierce and bright. None of the students admitted defeat, he thought, how could he? That would be unacceptable!

Lan Jue nodded. "Alright, let's stop here I think." Lan Jue brought one hand to rest at the small of his back, with his other reached forth. A strange power manifested afterward, with a traction force that grabbed Gao Lei and sent him spinning.

The First Pilot fought to regain control, but the harder he fought the stronger this strange force became. When he hit the ground it was a good ten meters from Lan Jue's position. He tried to shoot to his feet for a counter attack, but that power remained. He was forced to the floor a second time.

Everyone looked on as Gao Lei was easily swept aside.

Gao Lei's jaw was rigid, his face red. He scrambled angrily to his feet, glaring in unbridled rage. He had not given in!

"Alright, Lei." A cold, indifferent voice interrupted.

A man had appeared at some point, clad in the military fatigues of an An Lun soldier. He wore a green mask to hide his features, with two twinkling eyes that were trained on the instructors.

The moment the soldiers saw him, they were in motion. Who was this man? How did he appear here so suddenly? An Lun soldiers didn't hide behind masks.

They wanted to rush forward and wrestle the answers from this stranger, but Gao Lei's voice stopped them in their tracks. "Stay your hand!"

The First Pilot snapped to attention and gave the green masked man a smart salute. "Drillmaster!"

"At ease." The masked man slowly walked closer.

Gao Lei's anger was gone, replaced with respect and astonishment. Almost as though he'd arrived on queue, here was the man who trained Gao Lei when he first arrived. He was an idol to the young soldier.

"Drillmaster Lei Feng. Allow me to offer my insight to you and your

students.” The man’s voice was impossibly calm, and quiet.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes, and the two exchanged a long look. After a moment, Lan Jue nodded. “Alright.”

The green masked man looked over the gathered trainers.

“All together, then.”

Damn, was he this strong?

The students were abuzz with the new development. Especially those who knew Lan Jue’s power; Tang Xiao, Jin Tao, Qianlin and Hongyuan.

Who did the green masked man think he was? He was going to face their drillmaster and his assistants?

Watching their demon drillmaster handle the First Pilot had filled the students with a great deal of pride. Although the first month of training had seen them very cruelly tormented by this man, they nonetheless felt a profound sense of elation. Plus, someone other than them was facing the damn drillmaster’s torment now.

“Very well.”

The assistants stared blankly at him, stunned he’d actually agreed.

Then, he was on the offensive.

In polar opposition to the last fight, the demon drillmaster was first to launch an attack. He was fast, appearing before the green masked challenger in the blink of an eye. His right hand reached out to grab him by the shoulder.

The man allowed Lan Jue to grab his shoulder. Then, with a rapid shake of his arm, the man was free. Lan Jue replied with a wild throw, which the challenger blocked head on. The two collided in reckless assault.

Bang!

Lan Jue was pushed back three paces. The other rolled his shoulder, but wasn’t budged.

Gao Lei stood nearby, watching with a dumbfounded expression. Of

course he knew who the green masked man was. This visiting drillmaster's actions were almost sacrilegious. Now, though, he could see why it was he lost so cruelly to this man. He could stand toe to toe with his own teacher. It even looked like he was holding back.

When the two men collided Tan Lingyun, Wang Hongyuan, Xiuxiu and Mika all rushed in. They approached from four different directions to surround him.

Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan were at a complete loss as to who this man was, but once they were singled out they had no choice but to respond. He looked like a worthy opponent as well.

Xiuxiu and Mika, though, had already begun to puzzle out the man's identity. They were certainly familiar with their boss' strength, and his acceptance of a one on five match-up spoke volumes to the man's abilities. Who on An Lun could be that strong? The answer was obvious.

"Hmph!" The disdainful grunt was from behind the green mask. A terrifying atmosphere erupted from him.

Chapter 301: The Old Way

Suddenly everyone nearby felt like they'd been hit by an armored truck. That murderous aura was thick as syrup as it hung over them.

Lan Jue felt sluggish, and the others felt it too. His four teaching assistants could barely move.

Such a powerful, dangerous aura!

The green masked man didn't race toward Lan Jue right away. He took a step, and then suddenly he was off like a gust of wind. He threaded between Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan, then whirled around so that he was behind the dance instructor. Now the assistant stood between Lan Jue and his opponent.

While Wang Hongyuan was fast and reactive, the green masked man was simply too quick. He couldn't keep up with the man's speed. He kicked a leg out behind him in hopes of connecting, throwing everything he had in to it.

In this sort of all-out melee, the focus was to do more damage to our opponent than he did to you in a short time. But as the green masked man moved around, he reached out with a hand and slipped to the side. This permitted him to simultaneously avoid the kick, and grab Wang Hongyuan by the back.

By this time Lan Jue had arrived. But instead of pursuing the green masked man, he instead headed straight for Wang Hongyuan, and punched at the beleaguered dancer's shoulder.

The poor man felt a strange power course through his shoulder, and his back grow hot.

The green masked man wrenched his hand back as quick as he'd lashed out. A quiet 'yi' was sputtered through the mask. But he wasn't done, and before Wang Hongyuan could turn the man was slapping viciously at his back with both hands.

Lan Jue, never idle, reacted by thrusting both hands forward toward

Hongyuan's chest.

The National Eastern University's dance instructor became the proxy for the war between the two masked drillmasters. He could feel a series of blasts rush from behind him.

Tan Lingyun grunted in dissatisfaction, throwing herself in a flying kick over Wang Hongyuan and toward his green masked assailant.

The man retreated a step, faster than anyone would have thought. Now his series of exchanges with Lan Jue had come to a close. As he retreated, Wang Hongyuan's clothes fluttered, then dissolves in to ash. He stood there, naked as the day he was born.

"Ah!" Mika, Xiuxiu and Tan Lingyun were all understandably taken aback. Xiuxiu especially yelped in surprise.

The green masked man moved like the wind, weightless and effortless in every movement. He raced to the side, smooth as silk, appearing behind Xiuxiu.

Xiuxiu's bashful and timid nature had her stunned at the image of Wang Hongyuan's naked body. All she felt was her body going numb, and then suddenly Xiuxiu collapsed to the ground.

A dignified indignation flared in Lan Jue's eyes. Faster than lightning he raced forward to meet the green masked man head on, and protect the second of his companions assailed by this stranger.

Since the beginning, this man's target had been Wang Hongyuan, and then Xiuxiu. And Wang Hongyuan's clothes, specifically. A true master of battlefield control.

"Back off," Lan Jue's voice growled. "He's mine." He knew attacking in numbers would add no pressure to this man. On the contrary, it just gave him more opportunities.

Wang Hongyuan tiptoed off the field, his face bloodless. There was a flash, and he vanished. That was certainly his Discipline at play.

The fight had only been very brief, but it had felt like hell. Wang

Hongyuan could feel wave after wave of that terrifying aura passing through him. Although it did no harm, he felt himself frozen, locked in place like a statue. Even the bursts of air that passed by him didn't strike. But the mere fact of being that close to the terrifying specter of death was draining. For these two, clearly the slightest mistake could mean terrible consequences.

Insane! These two are like damn nightmares! Without any hesitation, he was gone the moment Lan Jue said he wanted this fight one on one. He couldn't have gotten out of there fast enough.

Gao Lei watched as Wang Hongyuan veritably blinked out of existence. It caused his brows to raise. He was no weakling, evidently! More surprising, though, was the golden masked drillmaster. He really could face down his own military instructor. Who the hell was he!

Mika and Xiuxiu backed off the moment they heard their boss' voice. Tan Lingyun, however, did not.

There was a light for the lust of violence in her eyes, and excitement written clear on her pretty face. She looked at Lan Jue fervently.

"If you want to go one on one, that's fine. But let me go first!"

"You?" Lan Jue paused, looking toward the green masked opponent.

He stood calmly to one side. "Very well then," he said without being prompted.

The light in her eyes shone ever brighter, and she crouched like a lioness eyeing her prey. Then, straight as an arrow, she launched herself fist-first at the man's face.

The green masked man swept his arm back and around, slapping Tan Lingyun's fist toward the ground.

Tan Lingyun's wrist flowed like water, wrapping backward around the man's own hand. But she didn't stop there. Her hands were like silk, and slid along the inside of his arm until she struck his chest.

"Huh?" Lan Jue blinked, surprised at what he saw. Even without the use

of her Discipline, she was a competent fighter. It was news to him.

A flash of surprise flitted through the masked man's eyes as well. He twisted his torso, and with the motion his arm began a corkscrew motion downward from the shoulder. Lingyun's arm began to vibrate.

But Tan Lingyun was right where she needed to be. Her body arched as her legs swept up and over. With an acrobatic twist, her legs wrapped wrapped around the man's neck. It was a nigh inhuman display of suppleness.

The green masked man stumbled back a step, groping at her back. She writhes from side to side like a snake, deftly evading his hands. With her ankles locked and her legs squeezing his neck, the Savage Goddess twisted her body violently to the side, making a full one hundred and eighty degree turn.

The very acrobatic strike was unexpected. Lan Jue also knew this was not some manifestation of her Discipline. She sure had some spectacular fighting methods.

Unfortunately, she didn't know what she was going to face

Her legs were clamped around the man's neck, but he responded by throwing his head back, trying to throw her free.

The inertia from her upper body forced her legs to twist. She hoped the fulcrum of the twist would force the green masked man to the ground.

But the end result was similar to Gao Lei's exchange with Lan Jue. It was like the masked man could anticipate her every move.

Her legs were strangling the air from the man, but despite her hold and twists he never moved. She'd come at him full bore, but he was like a cast-iron statue. He would not be budged.

She felt a fist like steel strike her lower abdomen. By virtue of his terrifying strength, she was thrown away flailing. She curled in to a ball, pained by the strike.

There were many things to consider in a fight between a man and a

woman. A man had to be careful not to strike a woman's head, face or private areas. As a result, the abdomen became the primary target. Hits there didn't leave any permanent damage, but they certainly reduced your opponent's combative prowess.

Tan Lingyun flew a good five or six meters before striking the ground. The green masked man approached and, with the tip of his boot, kicked her.

Tan Lingyun was in the air again, flailing unceremoniously toward Lan Jue.

The drillmaster caught his assistant. Immediately he could see the skin of her face around the mask was pale and drawn. Sweat was coursing down her forehead. There was a fear in her eyes that spoke volumes, underpinned by a strange and unsettling mania.

Lan Jue passed her over to Mika, and then slowly turned to face her assailant.

Their powerful and frightening Savage Goddess lost so easily? The students of the NEU stood in shocked silence. Who was this man? He was like a monster!

The green masked man returned Lan Jue's stare. After a moment his calm voice emerged from the mask. "I did indeed look down on you all. But this woman's strength is passable, and your students are not entirely worthless."

Lan Jue nodded. "I hope to have them undergo the Iron Army selection process after their training is complete. What do you say?"

"If they can pass twenty courses, then fine." The man said.

"Excellent!" Lan Jue's voice was fierce and prideful. Then, once again the fight was on. He raced forward toward his opponent without warning. He even began much the same way Tan Lingyun had, fist first.

The green masked man responded by lashing out with his own fist. The two white-knuckled appendages met in mid air, and where they collided there was an audible bang! A burst of air followed, and the gathered

students and soldiers stared wide-eyed and open mouthed as they gust of air buffeted their faces.

How strong were these guys!

Lan Jue attacked, fast as lightning. His whole body was like a martial weapon, and he used every part to put pressure on his enemy. Hands, shoulders, elbows, knees, legs – even his head. Whatever was needed to get the edge.

But the green masked man's defense was impermeable. His hands were like fan blades, no matter which direction Lan Jue approached from, his blocked any attack that came his way. Gust after gust of wind blew out from between them with each exchange.

The wind was strong to begin with, but as the fight raged on it became almost a tempest. The sounds of their strikes landing sounded like thunder. Footprints and craters appeared on the battlefield beneath them. The metal alloy floor couldn't stand up to the sheer strength of the two men.

Chapter 302: Wisdom and The Way

They got faster and faster as time stretched on. Some of the students were having a hard time following.

Were they really not using their Disciplines? This was a question in the minds of every spectator. If they were so strong and frightening without Disciplines, how much of a terror were they with them?

Bang! Lan Jue's body was cast away, with a footprint displayed prominently on his chest. He soared twenty meters and hit the ground with a grunt.

"There has been progress," the green masked man said.

Lan Jue's eyes narrowed. He rose to his feet, but remained stationary instead of racing forward to re-engage. He lifted his arms, trailing them gently through the air in a smooth arc. A gentle sensation began to radiate from him, and the surrounding students and soldiers felt the energy modulating their temperament. The hard and implacable became gentle and calm. There was an almost indescribable elegance to it, an ethereal quality that was difficult to pin down.

The pain in Tan Lingyun's stomach where she'd been struck eased almost immediately. Her eyes lit up when she saw the man she knew as Lei Feng undergo the transformation. "The old way?"

The green masked man took a step forward, knees in, hands up. One arm was held in front of him with the palm pointed toward his chest. His other hand was raised above his head with palm pointed to heaven.

It was the strangers' turn to attack. He launched off of his back foot, and floated like a leaf on the wind straight toward Lan Jue. He reached out with a palm strike.

The advance looked slow and easy. Even reaching out for a hit as he was, he seemed gentle. But Tan Lingyun could clearly see that his hand had grown, swelled almost, and a green light was radiating out around it. She could sense, even just by looking, that the man's hand could probably

chop right through a boulder.

Lan Jue lifted his arms to block the strike. When the two connected, the drillmaster flowed like water under the attack. The man and his powerful lunge were negated, and cast aside.

The green masked man came at him with strike after strike from his palms, both of which were surrounded in a dazzling golden light. Each wave of those hands looked easy, almost lazy. But there was a startling power behind them. Lan Jue moved as well, and with both of his hands spread, he extended his legs out wide in a single coordinated movement. Every attack he received was diffused or redirected. Every strike was met at just the right point to render them useless. However the deafening blasts were gone, and their exchange was much slower than they had been. Now, again, the onlookers could see clearly. From what they could see, this part of their fight was much more frightening than what had come before, even without the gusts of wind and bursts of thunder. The slightest mistake, on either side, meant obliteration when using attacks this strong.

The green masked man's palm strikes became more oppressive as time passed. But still he retained that strange sense of calm harmony.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, gave the impression he was one with everything around him – an integral piece of the natural way. Even the air around him was like a part of him, and his movements were as smooth as clouds through a calm sky. But underneath the gentle display, was the potential for explosive power. He would show it from time to time, and the green masked man would retreat and reevaluate.

Tan Lingyun's own Discipline was mastery of the Supernatural, so she could feel the powers clearly. It was fascinating, for even she couldn't achieve that level of symbiosis with nature without using her Discipline.

The gathered students and soldiers watched with rapt disbelief as their two instructors duked it out. Mika and Xiuxiu forced them back and out of harm's way.

Gao Lei continued to watch, shock in his eyes. This is martial arts, he thought, the ancient styles of kung fu!

The martial arts were skills developed in the ancient days. But they were more than skills, they were a way of life – with a culture all their own. These particular styles came from China of the former era, with roots tens of thousands of years old on the mother planet.

Unfortunately as time passed and man progressed, more and more of these combat styles were lost to history. Gao Lei could faintly remember hearing that the masters of these styles passed their knowledge through word of mouth, as family secrets. True masters of the craft were said to have powers to match Adepts. Of course, they didn't have the sphere of influence a Discipline afforded.

He'd always been told that an Adept who could learn and develop with a martial arts style that suited their natural abilities would undoubtedly grow strong. So it was that many of the highest order of Adepts would seek out and learn a style. Of course, finding a master of an ancient fighting tradition was much easier said than done.

He knew that Tan Lingyun had used martial arts in her fight, but he'd never imagined this Lei Feng or his own master would be such powerhouses.

Just then, the situation changed on the battlefield. Without warning, the green masked man threw himself in to a vaulted back flip. He pressed his palms to his chest and, amid a dazzling display, was enshrouded by a golden aura. The scent of sandalwood filled the air, and then his aura silently burst in to bloom, expanding to fall over Lan Jue.

“Mantra of Spirit.” The green masked man's deep voice hummed the words. Even the tone seemed infused with magical essence, and as his body doubled in size no one could look away.

The golden light and aura of profundity seemed to cover the whole world.

Lan Jue planted his feet, stretched out his arms, and drew a slow circle in the air before him. A dull, peaceful white light sprang up, and like a vortex drew the encroaching wave of energy in to itself. They clashed and tangled, and Lan Jue was slid back a few paces. However he never lost

poise, and his ethereal link with the supernatural never wavered.

The green masked man landed. Then, striking forward, he pushed his pressed hands outward.

“Mantra of Clarity!”

The sweeping force of golden energy retracted, and was drawn in to the man’s outstretched palms. Two beams of pure light exploded from them.

Lan Jue drew back his arms, folding his arms like holding a ball. The white light that had surrounded him condensed between his cupped hands, and then it too was launched out.

Once again the white and gold lights met.

Boom—!

A wild whipping gust of wind tore across the field. Lan Jue was pushed back, one step after another for ten paces. Deep grooves were left where he’d stood.

A nimbus of golden rays protruded from behind the green masked man. He retracted his hands, clenching them in to fists.

Lan Jue was breathing heavily as he regained his footing. His chest rose and fell with the effort. He didn’t move, remaining still, with his eyes closed. The green masked man was also at rest, waiting with his fists crossed at the small of his back.

A moment later, Lan Jue opened his eyes. He offered a nod to the other man. “Thank you for the instruction.”

“You’ve improved,” the masked man replied. He said nothing further, and left without acknowledging anyone.

Lan Jue turned back to the students. “Have you seen enough? If so, we’ve got more training to do.”

The esteem in Gao Lei and his soldiers’ eyes was evident. Although they had no idea what rank or Discipline this Lei Feng Drillmaster really possessed, but from what he’d revealed just now he was certainly awe inspiring.

The exercises continued, but Lan Jue stood back a ways. He was silent, choke full of emotion – at last he'd been able to face down the mantra of clarity! He could still remember years ago, the best he could do was the mantra of spirit. Each time he had to face clarity, though, he'd lose. This time he'd almost compelled him to resort to his final attack.

He went over the fight in his mind, the details clear and fresh. He pondered, and digested.

It is said the top pilots were always the ones who were able to join themselves with their suits. But in the world of mecha piloting, that isn't enough. Training in a martial art is very important.

Until now no one had learned how to fully incorporate all three aspects. A suit capable of doing so would be prohibitively difficult to construct. The rarest of metals would be needed for the alloy, the most powerful power gems, and it would need to be perfectly customized. Every martial master's requirements are different, not to mention the need for their martial art and Discipline to combine. If they didn't, both would be made weaker as a result.

This has been an important watermark for pilots in the East, even though they rarely had the opportunity to use it. There had yet to be built a specialized martial mecha suit, and that where the pilots met their hard ceiling.

Lan Jue had actually used some of his most fundamentally understood martial moves with his mecha during the god team battles. After years of improvements and upgrades, and years of practice in DreamNet, he was able to perform some very basic moves.

It was during his battle with the Driver, known to him then as Thunderclap. He'd managed after a fashion to join the art with his Discipline, and it was that that had allowed him to combine the yin of Thunderclap's power with the yang of his own. The result was the terrifying powerful beam attack, that turned the tables.

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"A-Jue. Your Discipline is a manifestation of the firm, and the positive. It

is the accumulation of the earth's true energy. When you follow the right path, your Discipline will be strong; but if you lose your way, your Discipline will weaken. Remember to keep yourself on the path of righteousness, do not permit exogenous evils to persuade you. Stand tall through bright days and stormy nights. What is hard can easily break, so today I shall begin to teach you the secrets of Tai chi. Therein you will learn flexibility in the face of hardships. Firm, and pliable; Yin, and Yang. A man of military and social responsibility."

"A-Qing. Quick, clear, controllable. For you, the mantras of freedom, so that you might keep an even temperment. They will sooth the tempestuous winds within you, and also give them freedom. This will be a grand achievement. Turn the cool breeze to a raging hurricane, and the world will bend the knee. But unbridled freedom has no root. It is easy to grow deficient without a source of sustenance. To you, I will teach the Hannya. Wisdom. And with it, just as you control the winds of storms, you will also command the Vajra. Your power will be fearsome!"

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Boom—!

"Bro, you're art is too much for me. How am I supposed to block it without my Discipline?! Tai chi is as soft as water. It's useless in blocking your attacks."

"You heard the teacher. If your Tai chi can one day block my three mantras, then you'll have perfected it. Get up! If the teacher says you can do it, then you can do it!"

Boom!

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The NEU students' solid foundation carried them through the remaining exercises, pushing the limits of the training. As the day wore on the ten trainers they ere allotted became fifty, and each student had a sparring partner. Lan Jue's fifty-first student trained with Gao Lei directly. Tang Xiao had won that honor.

Chapter 303: The Right Guess

Tang Xiao had made quite the impression with his rage-filled assault in the last fight. It left a particularly powerful impression on Gao Lei. He was so impressed, in fact, that he'd approached Tang Xiao before the training, patting him on the shoulder, and shared a few words. If he ever joined the forces, he'd said, Tang Xiao was sure to become an excellent soldier. He promised to lay a solid foundation so the young man could achieve that dream.

Then Tang Xiao...

Wang Hongyuan, Tang Lingyun, Mika and Xiuxiu were underwhelmed by the military training, when compared to the last month the students had suffered. For them this was especially true; what they needed, was combat experience.

It was also notable that they were still forbidden from using their Disciplines. To Lan Jue, the best way to become better was trial by fire.

When meal time came, the students wolfed down their nutrition like ravenous animals. They fell asleep almost immediately and, in conjunction with the injections the young women were administering, they were right as rain by the time they woke up.

"Drillmaster Lei Feng." Lan Jue turned to face the unfamiliar voice, an uninvited guest in their dormitory.

Tan Lingyun stood a small distance away. Even in her flaking mask she was a stunning vision of beauty. The tight-fitting flight suit accentuated her feminine charms.

"What is it?" Lan Jue's door was open. He had yet to remove the mask, so his identity remained intact.

"I wanted to verify something with you," she replied.

Lan Jue shot her a curious look. "Verify what?"

The Savage Goddess' chest heaved in a sigh. She looked as though she were struggling with herself. "That man in the green mask... he was the

An Lun supersoldier wasn't he? The one they call Prometheus."

"Why do you say that," Lan Jue answered.

She went on. "I know what kind of power you command. You showed that today with the fight – more than any normal man could handle. But the other one was even stronger. He was able to wander around here without any of the soldiers stopping him, and young. If he isn't Prometheus, then I have no idea who else he could be."

Lan Jue's eyes reverted to the calm indifference they usually bore. "So you think he's Prometheus. I guess he must be. It's late, time for you to get some rest."

Tan Lingyun didn't move. She just looked back at him. She sputtered suddenly "That means you're probably Zeus. I should stop calling you Lei Feng. Drillmaster Zeus – that's what I should address you as."

"Eh?" Now Lan Jue was truly taken aback. He thought desperately about how he revealed himself.

Tan Lingyun's eyes twinkled fervently as she looked at him. "There are so few god-ranked pilots, and even fewer in DreamNet. You've worked hard to keep your identity a secret, but I first saw it during the god-ranked battles. There are a few small movements you and Zeus perform exactly the same. Furthermore, we've seen that you have a strong Discipline, that focuses on lightning. There are only a few famous pilots who fit that description. That, and your close relationship with Prometheus which we could guess from that exchange, just confirmed it. You're Prometheus' brother in arms – Zeus. I'm right, aren't I? And that man who came to the NEU and helped with the training, that water Adept, he must have been Poseidon!"

Lan Jue rose to his feet, and approached Tan Lingyun. She unconsciously took a step back, but her eyes were as bright and excited as ever.

Lan Jue knew that look. It was the same way Poseidon's fans looked at him.

"Get out!"

The training schedule was a full one. The soldier training program was as brutal as it was trying. But the students were elated, because there were many devices here a soldier might use for training – tools they now had access to. Not least of these were the mecha used in actual combat.

A month was hardly any time at all to them. Though the work here was laborious and tough, and they only had about four hours of rest a day, but they had the best instructors and then those nutrition injections which made it bearable.

More and more the students were realizing that the hell they'd experienced during the first month was to help them achieve a very solid foundation. It helped them improve their skills, as well as their ability to carry on in the face of hardships. Now they were like sponges, and absorbed every little detail they came across.

Of course the bioelectricity, the medicine baths, and the protogenic emulsion they'd absorbed, all conspired to help them gain as much as they could from the experience, to absorb and assimilate it as quickly as possible. Of course, they didn't necessarily realize it themselves.

Almost every day a student was breaking through to a new level – not just their Discipline, but their spirit.

Innocence was systematically drawn from the fresh faces of the young pilots. It was replaced by a steadfast resolution, a deep-seated iron quality. They adopted the same expressionless face the soldiers bore. No matter what they encountered, they did so with an indifferent façade.

They had also gotten used to this painfully dreary – and physically painful – existence. They were even starting to like this metal world they inhabited. Every day they worked, they had a deeper understanding on the An Lun soldiers and what they did for the Alliance. Not only were their bodies finely honed killing machines, their willpower was also forged to be hard as steel. Only men and women like these could defend the Alliance from its enemies.

“You're certainly an effective Drillmaster!” Lan Qing stood on a metal

platform, overlooking the training field. As always, his voice was soft, hardly louder than a whisper.

Lan Jue allowed himself a small smile. He wasn't wearing his mask: his face needed some fresh air.

"Do you really want them to undergo the selection process?" Lan Qing turned his face to look at his brother.

Lan Jue nodded. "So they can prove to themselves how far they've come. Powerful people require confidence, and confidence is the root of power. If they use their abilities to improve their confidence, they'll improve even further. Then they'll really be ready to stand on their own."

"What then? What's the plan once they've completed this training?"

"Make me a battalion commander," Lan Jue said off-handedly.

"Eh?" Lan Qing looked at his younger brother in stunned disbelief.

Lan Jue's grin revealed rows of pearly white teeth. "I've always wanted my own team. I mean, my power has its limits but these kids are full of potential. I'm certain, in a few years, I could turn them in to an elite fighting force."

"You. Join the Army." Lan Jue just stared.

"Not now of course," Lan Jue said. "If what the Clairvoyant said is true, I'll come and find you when the enemy appears. I'll be your errand boy, how's that?"

"You believe these kids will continue to follow you?" the commander asked.

Lan Jue looked over the students gathered below. "Step by step, brother. Why do you think I brought them here? I'm certain they'll never forget their days on An Lun, long after this month of training is over. In old China there was a saying, wasn't there? 'Only the father and son can win a battle.' We don't know who our father is, but when the enemy does show I want to be by my brother's side."

Lan Qing's rock-solid face crumbled just enough to allow a small smile.

He raised a hand and patted Lan Jue's shoulder. "We've got to get stronger!"

"Yes. So if these kids do manage to pass muster and get selected, you're going to owe me something." Lan Jue said through a smirk.

The smile on Lan Qing's face widened still further. "Everything you've said so far was building to this sentence."

"Worthy of being known as the 'God of Wisdom'," Lan Jue said.

Lan Qing shook his head. "I didn't guess. I knew because I'm your big brother. You're never so nice as when you need something."

Lan Jue brought his eyes back to Lan Qing. "If – when... when the day comes that I can, I'm going to beat the ever loving crap out of you."

Lan Qing met his gaze. "I'm looking forward to it. Now let's get going."

"Go where?" Lan Jue asked.

"I've helped you train your Tai chi, and I see you've improved considerably. You have to keep it up."

Lan Jue's face scrunched in displeasure. "Don't give me that. You just want to smack me around some more."

"Of course."

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Fifty-one students stood in five rows. Their faces were still, devoid of expression. This, and their dark flight suits, lent to the faint aura of deadliness that had begun to follow them.

Lan Jue, in his golden masked, stood before them. Tan Lingyun, Wang Hongyuan, Mika and Xiuxiu where fanned out to his left and right.

"It's been nearly a month since we've arrived. Soon we'll be heading back. This means that the second portion of our overall training is complete. It's time to leave An Lun." Lan Jue's voice was soft, but carried well.

The students stood in formation, absolutely still. No one dared move, or

make a sound. They were like statues, dangerous statues. At the very least, they were much more disciplined than when they'd first arrived.

But there was more in their eyes; loss.

Their time here on this famed planet was – literally and figuratively – a world different than the life they'd lived on Skyfire. They didn't even want to consider time during the first month of training. Every day was a battle against the pain that consumed them, to where they hardly wished to live. They didn't even want to remember those awful days.

But here, on An Lun, things were different. Although they were weary, beaten down, and in pain, but they felt enriched. They were learning new things every day, things they lapped up like a thirsty man in the desert. They could all feel the vast improvements they've made since classes started.

The impractical and showy fisticuffs they'd shown up with were gone. They'd learned the proper way to fight, simple and direct without any unneeded flare. Efficiency, callousness, obedience and fearlessness – that was who they were now. These were things they learned from the soldiers, things only the elite could understand.

Many were surprised to discover that they liked it here. Only those who fit in could see, could understand the industrious and hardworking life the soldiers had here, and why they liked it.

In this world of steel and iron, every one of them had grown tremendously. And not just in power, either. They'd arrived as boys and girls, but now they were men and women. Now they were on their way to being warriors.

And now it was time to leave? The last two months were all that was left in their memory, that torment and torture and surprise and elation. It was almost done. At the outset the number of students who'd wanted out were innumerable. But that fear and loathing were gone, now they were struggling with regret.

Those emotional, conflicted eyes followed their Demon Drillmaster.

Chapter 304: The Assessment Challenge

“But as we’re leaving, it’s important for us to leave something behind. Your instructors have trained you diligently for the last month, putting their heart and soul in to it. When I asked for their help, they complied. They did so by giving you all a chance to feel the reality of life as an An Lun soldier. In a moment, I will lead you all through a very special test. If you can pass it, then you definitely can pass the An Lun acceptance criteria. If, one day, you decide to join the armed forces and come to An Lun, then the doors to the Iron Army will be wide open for you.”

As the words washed over them, the students couldn’t help but mutter their thoughts to one another. Lan Jue could see the light of excitement in the eyes of several young men in the front row.

“Drillmaster, is this for real? You’re saying we can join the Iron Army?” Very few people would have the stones to interrupt the Drillmaster. Of course, Jin Tao was one of them.

Lan Jue nodded. “If you can pass the test we’re about to administer, then yes. You have a shot.”

Jin Tao pounded his fist in to his left palm, and grinned like a mad man at his instructor.

Being a soldier had been this young man’s dream for years. Over the last few months, he’d seen a tremendous change, and every day he felt stronger. Being here on An Lun had also forced him to grow up somewhat. More and more he felt as though he were no longer a child – he was a man, and no more Dumb-Mutt Jin Tao. And it didn’t go unnoticed, for Lan Jue recognized him as the most excellent student in the whole group.

It wasn’t that the others didn’t try as hard as he did. His passion... his obsession was more than the others could match. He approached every training course with a rabid tenacity, and threw everything he had behind every action. He just wouldn’t stop, until he had it down perfectly. Gao Lei had even approached Lan Jue in secret, and urged him to leave Jin Tao behind. He liked the kid, after all sometimes soldiers needed to be a little

crazy.

Many had the same thought process Jin Tao did. In this last month they hadn't just been training, but were also coming to understand An Lun and the warriors who protected it.

More and more they were beginning to see the truth behind the Iron Army. It was hard, but glorious work.

And now they had the chance to join them, if they could pass this assessment. This pie in the sky dream of theirs was a possibility, suddenly. They could hardly contain their excitement.

Lan Jue went on. "This assessment and An Lun's traditional selection process are different. This is largely because we didn't have the time to participate in several specialized training courses. However, for any warrior there is no better display of ability than actual combat. So, your final assessment will be a fight, with An Lun as your battlefield. Your enemies will be the First Independent Combat Group, led by the First Pilot. And do you remember that man in the green mask? He'll be directing his soldiers. They will have mechas with training weaponry. Myself and my four assistants will be in charge of your team. If you guys can win, then you've passed the assessment."

Real mecha combat?

Once again the students were blind-sided by the revelation. They'd been using actual mechas throughout the training, but never true combat. It was a dangerous endeavor, especially for students. The specialized training weaponry they used were harmless lasers, but they still recorded damage. The suits were designed to shake and smoke when the damage threshold had been reached, and that was a sign that the pilot was down. The lasers also recorded shield damage for close-combat attackers.

Lan Jue turned, and pointed toward the distance. "Do you see it? That is an An Lun combat mecha suit." Their drillmaster indicated an array of pitch black suits with red dragon heads emblazoned on the chest plate. They stood in orderly lines, and an ominous sense of dread sprang up in the heart of all who looked upon them.

The students had used the basic versions of the same mechs for their training. 'Basic', though, wasn't an adequate phrase. Even the lowest level models here were treated with a special coating that made them stronger. It allowed them to fight in space as well. Each time the students were confronted with them, they were extremely excited. After all, who wouldn't want to fly in the same suits the An Lun soldiers used?

"If you pass," Lan Jue began, "the army has agreed to lend each of you a Bloodlust suit equipped with an interspace armlet, for one year."

"Woah!" Many students audible let their surprise known. Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan, however, shot their drillmaster a strange look.

Lending mecha suits? It was the first time they'd heard anything like this. And they even had interspatial armlets.

The armlets were basic fare for any suit that needed storage. It was restricted to mecha specific items, but startlingly pricey. For these students, it was a beautiful addition.

Not everyone's family had the funds to purchase a suit. The NEU wasn't a top university, or a particularly affluent one. Their students were normal people living off of normal salaries. These military suits, though, weren't even on the market for the rich!

Almost immediately, the excitement before a fight sprang up around them, almost palpable in the air. Aside from a few less enthusiastic participants, everyone was itching to give them a try.

Lan Jue's deep voice cut through the din. "I do need to remind you, the difficulty to win matches the prize. According to An Lun tradition, a battalion has one hundred men. This means you will be having two-to-one odds, against trained killers. Their leader is a god-ranked pilot even stronger than I. He was an almost superhuman ability for critical thought and tactics, on top of being a powerhouse physically. So, when the fight starts, don't underestimate your enemies. Don't enter in to this with the mistaken assumption that it'll be easy. You must follow orders to the letter. Next I'll be giving out specific assignments."

Lan Jue looked over the crowd. "We have fifty-six bodies, which we'll

separate in to five teams. First team will be led by Tan Lingyun. Those I call line up behind her...”

The groups were arranged quickly, five as he’d promised. However, none of the groups contained the Drillmaster himself, or his two mysterious female assistants – Mika and Xiuxiu.

The group leaders were Tan Lingyun, Wang Hongyuan, Tang Xiao, Geng Yang and Tang Mi.

“The actual fight will take place on a hilly battlefield roughly ten kilometers in diameter. This is a seek and destroy mission, so victory won’t be achieved until all of our enemies are defeated. I will be passing down orders throughout the match. Group leaders, make sure the instructions are followed to the letter. The base rules are as follows; do not continue to fight when you’re down or otherwise instructed; do not leave the allotted battlefield area; and do not give the enemy the opportunity to flank you. As the situation on the battlefield changes, you’ll be given more specific instruction. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the students roared.

Lan Jue nodded. “Good. Time to get started!”

The mecha suits they would use had been prepared earlier. They were military suits, but specifically altered for training purposes. All of their weapons were replaced with training gear as well.

Lan Jue, Mika and Xiuxiu also entered in to similar suits. Fifty-six mecha took off simultaneously, then formed ranks and headed for the battlefield.

By now the students were all very familiar with the lay of the land. Like their teacher said before, this was their chance to leave a mark before they left. It was a chance to show off what they’d learned over the last month.

As they left the base, the barren wasteland of An Lun’s surface came in to view. Now that they were beyond the base’s environmental shields, no living thing could exist out here. It was all noxious gasses and poisoned earth. The suit’s life-support systems were the only things between them and a painful death.

But despite the less than hospitable conditions, it was a perfect place to start a fight.

A small overhead map appeared on the console within each suit. It was a common tool in the arsenal of the warrior. Within no time at all they were following the map to their final destination.

As they were told, the terrain was hilly here. The ground rolled from peaks to valleys, stretching in to the distance. The tallest peak was only five hundred meters of dull yellow rock.

They received the signal from the An Lun soldiers; their enemies were in position. The assessment was set to begin at any moment.

“Attention everyone. Engrave it on your memory – this is not a drill. You are to treat this as a real battle, and use everything you’ve got. Disciplines are permitted. Remember to cease the moment your opponent’s suit starts to smoke. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the students replied through their communicators.

Lan Jue’s deep voice crackled through the consoles. “Alpha team, take cover in sector B. Echo and Delta, to your assigned positions in sector A. Charlie will start for sector D, and Bravo to E. Move out.” The students complied.

Fifty-six mecha spread out and shot off in different directions. Lan Jue, Mika and Xiuxiu headed straight for the opposite end. He was the commander of these students, so that meant he not only needed to give them direction, but also serve as scout.

Sector A was closest to the enemy’s starting position. Wang Hongyuan was leading his group there, as was Tang Xiao. Sector A did have higher ground, so the primary objective was controlling that area. Control of high ground was also of paramount tactical importance, because it made it easier to control the overall situation. That’s why there were two groups here.

Alpha team, led by Tan Lingyun, was the strongest one they had. Jin Tao and other accomplished pilots fought at her side. At least six of them were

emperor-ranked pilots already.

The ping of functioning radar filled their cockpits as the ultraviolet rays swept toward the distant horizon in search of enemies. The deep heralded a frightening site. Every screen in Sector A saw it – a thick cloud of red dots descending upon them.

The An Lun soldiers spread out like a net, spreading wide as they approached the students' location. None of their enemies were spotted in the skies, which was to be expected – it would make them easy targets. They worked together a cohesive unit and, although they looked to be spreading further apart, they were all ready to react to their neighbor's movements at the drop of a hat. They came rushing in to the sector, then slowed as the search for their victims began.

Chapter 305: Terrifying Enemy

The opposition had an entire battalion, and the green masked man. One hundred and one enemies, almost twice the number of students from the NEU. Lan Jue didn't know how good these soldiers were in the realm of mecha combat, but they were undoubtedly better than his own students. He figured they had practically no chance at victory in this one.

If they wanted to have any chance, the first step would be breaking through their formation. If they can spread them out and sow a little chaos through the ranks, it could do something but help.

For the NEU contingent, their greatest advantages lay in their Discipline. Now that Qianlin's Discipline had advanced, there was no one among them with a Talent below the fifth rank. In fact, over the last two months every one of his students have had their Disciplines improved, though some more than others. Those who were originally fifth rank saw their Talent improve a whole grade and then some. Between the copious amounts of medicine and Lan Jue's bio-electricity, how could they not improve? Then of course, there was no improvement without suffering.

Lan Jue led Mike and Xiuxiu toward the center of the zone. He knew, of course, this would reveal them to enemy radar.

Sure enough, five enemy mechas detached and formed a strike force, headed their way.

To preserve equanimity, everyone had exactly the same mecha suit. This was true for the lowest soldier to Lan Jue and the green masked man as well. This situation presented a problem, however, in that Lan Qing couldn't tell where Lan Jue was in the mess of identical suits. This was the same for Lan Jue.

For those two, the beginning of the drill was a battle of wits and courage. If the enemy general was among those five encroaching mechas, they had a hard fight under retreat to look forward to. On the other hand, if he wasn't among them then the enemy side was short five men. It was a gamble, but this was how the game was played at their level.

Lan Jue wasn't playing foolhardy risks. He knew his brother, and though he was a calm man, he had no hesitation to go for the throat in matters of military strategy. Of course he also wasn't a fool. Lan Jue's brother was a keen military mind, with a far reaching strategic vision. If he was among them, bringing soldiers along not only concealed his identity, but increased his combat effectiveness at least thirty percent.

With these truths concerning his enemy in mind, Lan Jue's own principle during this fight was to be steadfast, and calm. Be patient, and wait for opportunities to present themselves.

He led Xiuxiu and Mika away, maintaining low altitude as they cruised toward sector A and the others. When the five mechas arrived at the location they were just at, they didn't give chase.

Suddenly, a blast of electromagnetic energy tore through the area. The Iron Army was buffeting them with radar blocking. Lan Jue and the others were blind were blind.

"Enable signal interference!" Lan Jue commanded. His voice crackled through the coms as he rapidly positioned the teams.

The earlier exploratory excursion was to entice the enemy, a tactic both Lan Jue and Lan Qing used often. Now their contest was truly under way.

Lan Jue picked up speed, leading his two amazons toward his small army's left flank. If one were to look from on high, they'd see all of the students using the hilly land to conceal their numbers and location, just as Lan Jue was.

When fighting against superior numbers, consolidating was the best defense. It was a basic tenant of military strategy. The students began to congregate under the cover of an undulating landscape.

Lan Jue was certain Lan Qing was counting on this. He didn't know how his brother would approach this situation, nor did he want to guess, but he did know very well how strong Lan Qing was. If he led the vanguard, they might as well not even bother fighting. No, they would have to just wait, and hope for an opportunity to take them by surprise.

The students were almost completely assembled. Clearly, their two-month training had not been a waste. They reacted swiftly, and their situational awareness was on point. They knew to conceal themselves as they arrived, and to remain so to foil the enemy. They re-positioned with great care.

Then, suddenly, an ear-splitting alarm rattled through Lan Jue's suit.

"This is Geng Yang. We've encounter the enemy. They're approaching in arrow formation." Geng Yang's urgent voice filled the small cockpit.

Lan Jue's heart sank. From the radar he could see the whole flank charging forward. It was a perfect arrow, tearing forward like a scythe before weeds. Delta team was right in its path.

At this point Alpha, Bravo and Charlie were very close. Echo had already formed up beside Delta. The way the enemy's charge was positioned, it threatened to cut the two sets of teams off from one another.

"Echo, break off and hide. Delta, retreat!"

But just then, Geng Yang's voice returned to report that the arrow had dispersed. Then, the sky was blotted out by a hail of laser fire. The sizzling red lights engulfed Geng Yang. Like that, it was likely his Delta squad was cut down.

Even from a distance away Lan Jue could see plumes of dark black smoke rising from of Delta's position. The sign of a ruined suit.

Echo squad, under Tang Mi's command, quickly found hiding places. Luckily she hadn't rushed full out to Delta's aid, or her team would likely be among them.

Lan Jue's expression was dark and grim. He knew his brother would be a trial to deal with, but he certainly hadn't anticipated tactics like this. Attack with everything you got – a full swam. Simple, direct, effective.

"Come with me!" Lan Jue raced forward in a counter-charge, bringing three squads with him. Thankfully Geng Yang's defeat was not in vain. They knew where the enemy had been, and could track them from there if needed. Follow, nip at their heels, pick them off, retreat and repeat. Circle

around them and peck away until there was nothing left. That was their chance!

He sped to the peak of a mountain, and looked out over the terrain. Once more, his face changed.

He saw all one hundred and one An Lun soldiers, their dark suits like a cloud of angry bees from this distance. They were concentrated in a valley, organized so that squadrons faced out in all directions. They were unapproachable.

In their brief hand to hand exchanges, Lan Jue and his students had come to learn the ferocity of the An Lun warriors. Speed, formation, leadership – they were much higher trained in all aspects. Lan Qing could command as he pleases without fear of reprisal!

The remains of Delta squad limped from the carnage, reduced by a fifth. This final exercise was only getting more difficult.

Had it not been for Lan Jue's reconnaissance, they'd have run headlong in to the entire battalion. It goes without saying that would have ended poorly.

A direct assault was suicide in situations like this. Lan Jue immediately gave the order to halt. The three squads moved as a unit, finding cover. Only Lan Jue and the amazons ventured out to survey the enemy's formation.

They'd likely been there five minutes, and clearly not expecting a sneak attack. As they watched the group switched formation, and drew in to a single battle array. It started heading for Lan Jue and the others.

Lan Jue understood. This was the contingent Geng Yang had seen coming their way, before they'd disappeared, revealing the enemy's advance. Lan Qing wasn't giving him any chance at all!

In this sort of situation, he had four choices it seemed; retreat, veer left, swing right... or if they were adventurous, straight ahead.

Breaking through was ridiculous, of course. His main force would be discovered immediately. They would meet their end surrounded by Lan

Qing's terrifying Iron Army. Left, right or retreat... but Lan Qing likely had a reply and response for each. He was stuck in a progressively shrinking box.

What can I do?

"Retreat." Lan Jue's voice was calm and dispassionate. The command trickled down from leader to leader. The three squads broke off in separate directions. Echo, so far untested was also given specific orders to fall back.

Lan Jue tapped a few commands through the mech, and in response his viewing screen filled with data.

His eyes brightened. His face, lit by the streams of data flashing passed his screen, revealed the faintest hint of a smile.

Lan Qing had been calmly commanding his soldiers from the front, in the center of the independent battalion. He'd seen what Lan Jue's students could do this last month, and didn't look down on his brother's training regimen. They were talented, and dangerous, pilots.

Adepts were a relatively rare thing among the vast spread of humanity. Finding those above the fifth rank was even less common. Among these soldiers it wasn't even certain all of them even had Disciplines. Though Adepts were prioritized over ordinary humans due to their superior physical fitness, the talented ones were also sought after.

The Iron Army did have the highest concentration of Adepts in all of the East's armed forces, but even then they composed perhaps a tenth of the total forces. The remaining non-gifted were selected through an exhaustive, layered process that included mecha combat. It was imposing and difficult, but it would be true to say there weren't any non-adepts among the ranks of God-ranked pilots, rare though they were.

Every single one of Lan Jue's students were Adepts, and decent ones. To the Iron Army they were equivalent to their upper echelons of Talents. Throughout the training, none of them had been permitted to use their Disciplines outright. Lan Qing couldn't know what they would be bringing to the fight. He'd be needed at the front to command them directly. He

suspected each student individually would require about twenty soldiers to overwhelm and defeat. Under his command they could do it easily. After all, what was one month of training compared to over ten years of experience?

His plan was revealed, at least in part. He would command in battle groups, whose concentrated firepower would deny them the chance to use their individual advantage.

Chapter 306: Lan Jue's Tactics

With one charge a fifth of a squad was defeated, as anticipated. He had a wealth of talent and experience in military matters, and knew what to expect. Right now, though, the most important thing was finding Lan Jue. If his younger brother were allowed to direct these students, joining their Disciplines and the mechas, he was afraid of the result. If he wasn't there with his soldiers, they'd probably be wiped out.

His eyes narrowed. This wasn't just a contest between student and soldier. This was a duel between brothers.

Over the last month the two engaged in several 'exhibition matches', none who which Lan Jue won. However, Lan Qing was very clearly able to see his brother's improvement.

In fact, Lan Jue's progress was no less than the students he led. He was a ninth ranked, seventh degree Talent – how could he be advancing so quickly?

Lan Jue was also aware of the changes. He felt like he was undergoing a second awakening, and under the direction of his militant older brother he was improving quickly. His Discipline was as strong as ever, but he saw greater improvement in all other aspects. This was especially true for his level of fitness. After continuous training, he could now ward Lan Qing's Mantra of Clarity and maintain stability in combat, and sustain much longer during mecha battles.

"Prepare to engage." Lan Jue's voice was cold and hard. The laser rifles rose to a ready position. All of the suits around Lan Qing were sharpshooters, so the signal interference the enemy was using didn't much affect them. They could accurately peg anything within their field of view.

The enemy's suits were outfitted the same as theirs, so Lan Qing knew they couldn't stand against the concentration fire of thirty attackers. That was what brought doom to Geng Yang and the others. They'd tried to employ their Disciplines when first spotting the rush, but they

nonetheless dropped like flies under the volley from his sharpshooters.

An ominous sensation tickled at the back of Lan Qing's mind. It was a feeling he hadn't felt for a long time. As a ninth ranked, ninth level Talent he was very nearly a Paragon, with the ability to command protogenic power. He'd long ago learned to pay attention to his feelings. "Defensive positions," he shouted.

Less than a second later, the surprise attack commenced.

The An Lun soldiers had been organized in to a single file battle array. The benefit of such a formation was permitting for mutual support if they got caught under fire. It also spread them out to control more of the battlefield. If they encountered a more tenacious force, the head and tail could wrap around to surround the enemy and attack them from every side.

But the benefits of this formation were castrated when the surprise strike arrived. It was too quick, and from too many directions.

Errant laser blasts tore through the area as the ferocious charge ensued. The surface of An Lun was once more a war zone.

Lan Qing looked at his tactical map to discover that they were attacking from five points. They were evenly spaced, and designed to attack his battle array at its weakest positions. The execution had been perfect.

How could he make such an accurate prediction, especially with their radar blocked? Lan Qing was stunned, but that didn't stop him from engaging the enemy. As the An Lun soldiers fought back, energy shields flared around the attackers. There was still some distance between the two sides, so they exchange rifle fire as they neared.

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Lan Jue led the charge with Mika and Xiuxiu on his heels. They sped around the middle section of the formation, and engaged it's left end.

A corona of blue light sprang up around the black mecha, leaving behind a stream of pale color as Lan Jue sped forward. The demon drillmaster knew his window of opportunity was a small one. It wouldn't

be long before Lan Qing joined the fray. How much damage he could inflict would be a matter of skill.

He hadn't chosen a sniper mech, sticking to his preferred sword-bearing model. The alloy weapon in the mecha's hand vibrated ever so slightly, then began to crackle with electric energy like the rest of it. The electric power coalesced with the blade at its center. When he jabbed the weapon toward the heavens, all of the lightning was released in a terrifying blast of power. Forest of Lightning!

He and his students were outnumbered two to one, this was not the time to hold back. Manifestations of his power tore through the small contingent of soldiers like a deadly wave. Their shields fluctuated and flashed as they attempted to save them from the attack.

Lan Jue's mecha was not, unfortunately, Thor. His attacks did not have the benefit of employing power gems to beef them up. All of his strikes would be pure Discipline. However, that didn't stop the waves of lightning from tearing through the shields, and immobilizing the pilots within.

Lan Jue kept up the assault like some kind of nightmare. His sword, coursing with power, exploded outward in to shards of pure energy. It was like a hail of a hundred million tiny daggers.

In this moment, the individual potency of the An Lun soldiers was revealed. There were certainly adepts among them, but none with strength enough to contend with Lan Jue.

Lan Qing arrived to aid his beleaguered soldiers. Gusting winds with a faint cyan hue gave the supersoldier a tailwind, so he arrived quick as a flash. But even before he arrived, cyclones were converging on Lan Jue's location from all directions.

The younger Lan twisted in midair, and the errant bolts of electricity which surrounded his suit congealed to form a solid layer of armor. In the same instant, several orbs of surplus lightning were cast toward his assailant.

The Forest of Lightning and the thunder orbs cost energy, but Lan Jue did not hesitate to use them. This was their chance.

Mika and Xiuxiu, who had followed him at the onset of his charge, weren't with him now. They had charged toward a different section of the formation, cutting off one part of the group from the others. The remaining section were focused on their flank, where Tang Mi's Echo squad had their attention. Mika and Xiuxiu put pressure on them from the opposite side. Although they had a disadvantage in numbers, they were out-positioning their enemy.

Lan Qing knew well what Lan Jue was planning. He would keep Lan Qing at bay while Mika and Xiuxiu mopped up.

The battle unfolded between them. Alpha, Bravo and Charlie joined the fray against sixty hardened soldiers.

Could they succeed? Other than himself, the others had Gao Lei to contend with. They only had a few small squads of soldiers, so how realistic was winning? His brother had done a masterful job in seizing an opportunity, but the end result would be the same.

But as before, the NEU wouldn't be counted out. They had the Savage Goddess, Wang Hongyuan and Tang Xiao, and they had yet to make their presence truly felt.

Chapter 307: Frightening Rapport

Tan Lingyun took to the front, rushing headlong in to the fray. She didn't have the dual knives she usually preferred, but had chosen a sabermech instead. Two daggers were replaced with two enormous titanium alloy broadswords.

A pale green light surrounded her suit like a cloud of vibrant energy. As beams of laser fire surrounded her, some found their mark but most were deflected by the shield. Being more advanced than the students, and certainly faster, she pierced the line and tore in to the enemy camp first.

The An Lun soldiers were able to mitigate some of Lan Jue's damage due to the distance between them during the opening salvo. With Tan Lingyun, things would be more difficult to deal with.

The center of the soldier's single-line battle array retreated, stretching them in to a thin arc shape. The entire contingent focused their fire on the Savage Goddess.

Fortunately, the three student squads arrived in time to give her backup. They approached from three directions, trying to box in the soldiers.

Tan Lingyun's unit swept passed her and in to the fight with guns blazing. Like her, manifestations of their Discipline surrounded their suits.

It had been almost unbearable this last month. Not because of the difficulty of the training – though there certainly was that. For the entire course of the training they had been expressly forbidden from using their Disciplines. The power inside them felt bottled up and ready to burst. Now, at last, their Drillmaster had given them permission to pull all the stops, and they couldn't be happier. This only deepened when they finally got to sense how much their Talent had improved.

The area around them was a deadly forest of laser fire. However, even with their advantage in numbers the soldiers couldn't mount a counter-attack. They tried to mount a rush, to shatter the student surprise attack, but couldn't.

Their commanding officer was Gao Lei. His mecha was a ball of a fire, with bright flames scorching the dark paint. He faced his suit toward Tan Lingyun and charged forward, while a group of soldiers nearby formed up and followed. Teams of five broke rank to face the Savage Goddess.

Were this a real fight, the mechas certainly wouldn't have been so uniform. There would be specialists, scouts, defenders and strikers. Scores of different roles to round out a fighting unit. Uniformity failed to cover all aspects of a fight, leaving them weaker overall. In the end this was a training exercise, and the suits were identical to preserve fairness. The soldiers would have to depend on superior tactics and formation to win.

The rest of the soldiers formed up in to groups of five, with twenty suits becoming four strike teams. They retreating while maintaining cover fire.

They didn't separate, instead working well as cohesive, five-man teams. This give them both an element of defense as the soldiers were able to tackle threats from all directions, but also the ability to rapidly switch targets and focus-fire a single enemy.

The tactic was proved successful when one of the student fighters' suits began to smoke, as their Discipline was exhausted the concentrated fire took its toll.

The soldiers were all blazing fast in their reactions and deployment. They were separated in to groups of five, but worked like a single organism. They would advance and retreat as one, moving without flaw or hesitation to engage enemies as needed. Even when they focused an enemy, their rifle fire was all in one spot.

The NEU students also worked together, but not at the same level as the soldiers. They mostly relied on their Discipline and individual piloting ability. Amidst the mess of fire and the ever-changing terrain of the battle, they would dodge and re-engage. But these soldiers acting as though they were of one mind, to the point where all four groups would pick one target and assail them relentless until they feel, giving them no chance.

Alpha squad had yet to join in, but already two of their number were eliminated. It viscerally underlined their deficiency in the face of

experience.

Among the Alpha squad was one mecha, resplendent in a pure white light. There was a flash and then, with the speed and force of a cannonball, the mecha barreled in to one of the An Lun units. When the mecha made landfall the ensuing blast shook the ground, and left a crater in its wake.

But the soldiers did not flee. They held, and refused to be routed, much to the surprised disbelief of onlookers. They watched the scene play out with wide eyes.

As the kamikaze mecha made its attack, all four groups leapt in to the air simultaneously. Were one to look from on high, they would appear like heavenly figures spreading light throughout the barren wasteland. On the ground, it was a much more terrifying experience. As the soldiers flung themselves in to the air, they began to fire – all twenty – in to the hole where that brash student had fallen.

Puff! A plume of black smoke arose from the crater. Whoever that was had used the full force of their Discipline behind the attack, but was left exhausted. Ho, then, could they survive against the focused fore of twenty soldiers? Alpha squad lost another one.

But Gao Lei and Tan Lingyun's engagement was just beginning. Tan Lingyun tore her sword through the air, and where it passed a tail of green light followed. Under the assault, Gao Lei was steadily being pushed back.

As far as Lan Jue could tell from where he was watching, Tan Lingyun certainly understood the idea of overwhelming attack.

Gao Lei's fire-based Talent was seventh ranked. Lingyun, meanwhile, was approaching the peak of eighth rank. However, in regards to mecha control, she lacked polish. Her style was to rush in guns blazing, and wreak as much havoc as possible.

Gao Lei sat in his cockpit, gritting his teeth and glaring daggers. Whoever this person was, they hit like a battleship. They wielded their two alloy blades like a dervish of deadly steel. Gao Lei was confident in his combat abilities, but his opponent was practically a force of nature.

Whatever that green light was, it seemed to gather the atmosphere around their sword. He couldn't find any opening for a counter-strike.

As the fifth member of Alpha squad met their end, the An Lun units moved in to engage close-quarters.

The students' mechas were replete with the manifestations of Discipline. It penetrated their suits and hung around them like a halo of light. The soldiers, on the other hand, fought back with expert coordination and tactics. What's more, clearly the soldiers were using the minimum effort needed to keep their energy reserves high. This allowed them to keep up sustained, concentrated fire without ceasing. That was how they finished Alpha squad's fifth casualty.

Just as Lan Qing had posited, these students, with only a month of training under their belts, couldn't stand up against the frightful cooperative power of the Iron Army.

In the end, an Adepts advantage isn't very significant without the mecha to back it up. After all, mecha suits were sheets of steel and machinery. Trying to destroy one without the aid power gems would be pretty difficult. It couldn't overcome the soldiers' strength in numbers, and superior tactical understanding.

Fortunately, as the sixth Alpha squad member was felled, Tan Lingyun managed to knock Gao Lei flying. It gave her some breathing room, and that was all she needed.

She puffed heaving breaths in the darkness of the cockpit. As her fury and determination consumed her, Lingyun's discipline imploded. Her body took on a crystalline composition, flooding the mecha's interior with refracted light. She coaxed her mecha higher and brandished her two enormous swords. With a terrible warcry, she launched herself toward two enemy groups. Her swords shone brilliantly, leaving resplendent arcs of light in the wake as she brought them down upon her foes.

B-boom-! Her enemies were scattered by the tremendous blow, flying in every direction. The unfortunate targets of her strike were both billowing black smoke.

In a flash, she was off in another direction. Hunting for prey.

Chapter 308: Stalemate

The leader of Bravo squad was Wang Hongyuan, and they appeared to be faring better. This was to expected, however, as his enemies didn't include Gao Lei.

Speed was the dance instructor's specialty, and the other students in his group were similarly endowed. So it was that when the charge was called, they were like the tip of the spear.

Their answer to Wang Hongyuan was the same as it had been for Tan Lingyun: Groups of five, focus-firing weak targets. His leadership skills were better than the Savage Goddess', which was shown when he had his small company form in to a line with him at the head. Like an arrow they pierced through the battlefield, with Wang Hongyuan at the fore. His massive sword flashed as he knocked away anyone in his path.

The soldiers' reaction was quick. The four groups scattered, then turned to attack one point from their new locations. This prevented Wang Hongyuan from protecting the rest of his formation. By the time they drew close again, two of their number were out of commission.

Thankfully this wasn't a real fight, but even so the frightening capabilities of the Iron Army were evident to all. To them, this whole process was routine – but one they threw their whole self in to. There was no second round, there was no next time. The enemy would be crushed right now.

Wang Hongyuan grit his teeth. His voice called over the comes to his unit, telling them to separate and fire at will. If they remained in formation, his whole squad would be lost. If they focused their attacks on a single strike unit, the other three would tear them to ribbons. He feared his students wouldn't have an answer for that, so it would fall to him. He knew he couldn't allow the opposition to continue its concentrated assault for too long. Their hit rate was too high, and there would be no opportunities for him and his to dodge and counter.

They were down to nine men. Wang Hongyuan launched himself at the

most distant enemy team, while the remaining eight students also charged their targets.

Once they got close enough, it was time for the students to show what they could do. Although they all had different Disciplines, they were all possessed of potent energy they could employ during battle. Pouring this energy in to their suits, they fanned out like a deadly lotus.

A strange sanguine aura hung around Wang Hongyuan's suit. An undulating cloak of blood hung at its shoulders. In no time at all, he caught up with the enemy team, and as he arrived a strange choking fog of red surrounded them.

The five soldiers quickly determined this one was a powerful adept, but it only made them a more cohesive unit. They holstered their rifles, and pulled out their close-quarters weaponry. The small group bristled with titanium prepared for the encounter.

They, too, poured energy in to their suits. Wang Hongyuan could feel it, a strange and uncomfortable sensation that filled him as their swords came slashing through the air.

The dance instructor's suit seemed somewhat off-kilter, but the veil of vitae surrounding him and his enemies reacted. It seemed to throb, filling the soldiers with a profound sense of unease. Their strikes all missed. Wang Hongyuan took the opportunity to charge in to the center, bull rushing the whole team.

They simply didn't have what it took to hold against the Sovereign-ranked pilot. Four enemy soldiers were put to rest.

Similar scenes were appearing with the other enemy strike forces. So long as the students could ward off destruction for their enemy's volley, they could close in and finish them off.

Their five-front surprise attack ultimately was a success. At the very least, they'd inflicted significant casualties on the enemy's side.

Tang Xiao Charlie squad against one end of the enemy formation. As they engaged he was first to clash with the enemy. A silvery metal plate

hung before him, defending him both above and below like a tower shield. The enemy's concentrated laser fire bounced harmlessly away while Tang Xiao plowed through them like a tank.

Tang Xiao's Discipline was even stronger than the dance instructor's, and in fact was second to none among all the trainees. He was also the most cunning.

He'd chosen to make his approach under cover. He'd employed his Discipline to pick up a boulder, and push it on front of him to conceal himself as he drew nearer. He was right on top of them by the time he was discovered, and that's when the metal shield appeared and he rushed in. The shield was important, for not only was it an excellent means of defense, reinforcing it with his Discipline gave it the ability to self-repair.

Still, the soldiers were a highly disciplined group, with superior tactics and strategy. Twenty enemy soldiers split into groups and spread out to attack. Tang Xiao couldn't move very quickly with his shield, so while he could defend his fellow students the counter-attack was simply too intense. He couldn't push further, and his Discipline was quickly becoming exhausted.

Just then, ten beams of steady light fired from behind Tang Xiao's massive shield. They found their target, a group of An Lun soldiers.

Not all students had chosen melee fighters, of course. In fact, other than Tang Xiao the others in Charlie squad were all long-distance attackers. The reason for this was simple: Tang Xiao was confident in his defensive capabilities. Within a reasonable scope, he and his squad wouldn't need to fear the enemy's attacks. In the face of the Iron Army's chosen tactics, long-range engagement was likely the most effective strategy.

Accuracy wasn't a problem for these crack NEU students. One among Tang Xiao's number was famed for his sharp-shooting, a student they'd named Deadeye. He could spot and anticipate an enemy's movements, and what's more shared the benefits of his Discipline with those around him. At his current level of cultivation, he could share power with people in a thirty-meter diameter around himself.

Tang Xiao was familiar with his abilities and strength. He was a good choice for command, and so far this was as good a result as Charlie squad could hope for.

The soldiers couldn't defend against the invisible attack. The moment they rose in to the air they were targets. Right away one of them was taken out of the fight.

Their second volley came on the heels of the first. With their Disciplines capable of shoring up their weapon's abilities, the students had a real advantage in speed.

Three more enemies were defeated. Tang Xiao's defense remained impregnable.

The An Lun soldiers realized they needed a change in tactics. The remaining pilots broke for the ground below, with some switching out their rifles for swords. They certainly didn't like being in a retreating position under pressure, but they fought hardest when they were cornered.

Hidden behind his massive shield, Tang Xiao's pudgy face revealed a wily smirk. This is exactly the result he wanted! Now he could use the whole of his eighth-ranked Talent!

Alpha, Bravo and Charlie had manipulated the battle to their purpose. Their plan was coming together. They'd suffered under assault from the soldiers, but they took out a bigger chunk while tying them up. They couldn't close the ends of their battle formation to surround and destroy the enemy, as they'd hoped.

However, things weren't going quite so well for Echo squadron.

Tang Mi headed the trainee's weakest student squad. All of the female pilots had been placed with her, Zhou Qianlin included.

Tang Mi's own powers had improved quite remarkably during the course of the training. In the end, she'd broken through to sixth rank. They'd been hidden and isolated when the sneak attack commenced, so they had had to take a different approach. They had no recourse but to charge from a poor position in to concentrated enemy fire. Five of their number were

taken out right away.

Six pilots were all that remained of Echo squad. The Iron Army was fighting on their back foot, being pushed back, but even though their comrades were falling around them there were still another twenty or so to contend with. They were closing in, but they didn't have the numbers to cause any real damage. It looked like this would be their final stand. They would be defeated quickly, and the remaining enemies would be free to support their fellows. Victory would be that much more difficult.

A familiar voice crackled through the cockpit of Tang Mi's suit. "Keep it up, Little Mi! Spare nothing, charge in with all you got." Her suit shook as she felt something latch on to her back. A pale, eggshell white light gently exuded from the second suit's chest plate. It swelled until it surrounded both of them.

Tang Mi felt a warm and pleasant sensation penetrate through her. It catalyzed her Discipline, causing it to burst out of her like a volcano.

Tang Mi's Discipline was similar in category to her brother's, though not as strong. Now, though, she felt like she could take on an army – so that's what she did.

The two titanium alloy swords in her mecha's hands blazed with radiant silver light. With a heaving grunt she swiped her sword at the enemy soldiers, which sent waves of power tearing through the air. Two of her targets were caught off guard and where struck on the side by her attack. Both were immediately removed from action.

Tang Mi didn't have the opportunity to ask Zhou Qianlin what was happening. With the help of this strange power, Tang Mi felt like her power had increased a while grade. Instead her suit shot forward with alarming speed toward the next confrontation, slicing through the unit closest to her. The silvery energies coursing through her weapons was more than these simple suits could defend against. One after the other, the soldiers fell before Tang Mi's rampage.

Tang Mi was blazing fast. Although she couldn't turn herself in to metal like her brother, her attacks were hard as a train and lethally sharp.

Supported by Qianlin's power, her enemies had no choice but to gather together and attempt to take her down as a group.

The younger Tang felt strange, like she was having difficulty controlling her own body. Her Discipline and natural physical energy both were so full they threatened to burst out of her. While dodging a strike moments earlier she'd actually left a fuzzy image of her suit behind – the precursor to ghosting! She went fast, hit harder. The soldiers closed in on her position.

The surviving members of her squad rallied, and came to her aid. Whether it was her valiant display or the residual power of Zhou Qianlin, they fought harder as well. Tang Mi stood at the front with the rest of her squad moving in to assist. They stood in battle formation as the Iron Army amassed in front of them.

Chapter 309: Black and White

The battlefield was locked in stalemate. In the center of it all, Lan Qing and Lan Jue's duel continued.

Flashes of lightning painted An Lun's wasted surface an electric blue. The powerful strikes were area of effect, and where by design. Lan Jue wanted to keep Lan Qing engaged as long as possible.

The master strategist, meanwhile, was little taken aback by what he was witnessing. Dodging was pointless for area attacks, but their power was weak. It was a waste of energy.

Already Lan Jue had used his forest of lightning over half a dozen times. Thunder orbs, he'd used four times. Still, the young jewelry master continued his assault like his energy stores were boundless. Lan Qing figured his brother only had about one strong attack left in him, before he'd have to retreat.

He's buying time. Does he think his students actually have a chance?

Lan Qing was keeping his eye on the battle as it unfolded around them. As he fought over supremacy with his brother, he kept track of the tactical situations developing through the fight.

The NEU students were much stronger than he'd originally planned for, if he was telling the truth. Mika and Xiuxiu were battlefield terrors he knew well. His soldiers would suffer dearly at their hands. But, these losses would be acceptable if he could defeat Lan Jue in time. Once he did, there would be no way his enemies could mount a defense, much less steal victory. After all – he was among them!

But there were other hot-spots he was paying close attention to. Tang Xiao, in particular, kept his eye. In tactics, timing and power he was a talented youth. More and more of his soldiers were being lost to the cunning pilot with each passing moment.

Doubt began to creep in to Lan Qing's iron-clad discipline. How on earth was his brother able to locate his forces, and execute such a sneak attack?

It had ruined his serpent formation.

Without tactical superiority, even individual power couldn't assure victory. Right now, his little brother beating him in both strategy and troop command. It was something Lan Qing was stunned to face.

The fight continued. An Lun soldiers dropped like flies from the onslaught of student Adepts. When it came to close-combat, the young pilots were terrors. Once they got the rhythm of the battle, even first-ranked pilots could display impressive power. The addition of Disciplines made it that much harder for his men.

Lan Qing's forehead wrinkled, and a pale cyan light sprang up around him. He himself was surrounded by a dim golden light, which radiated out from within. This was a manifestation of his Hannya style.

He couldn't go out like this. His side was already losing ground. Mika and Xiuxiu were too strong to contend with. With the two working together, his soldiers were lost. At present they were moving in to assist Tang Mi. If they were allowed to continue, he'd lose that front as well. It wouldn't be long before his entire force was routed.

The first priority was quickly putting Lan Jue to rest, then closing ranks. That would turn the tide.

Lan Qing began flooding his suit with his Discipline and martial power. His defenses thickened, and the pale gold light that hung over him deflected his brother's lightning bolts. The An Lun super soldier shot forward in a column of blue-gold light, bearing down on Lan Jue with the force of a hurricane.

But just as he was gaining speed a light shot down from the heavens. It was strange, composed of black and white intertwined. They did not intermingle, and yet maintained a balance of hue.

Lan Qing's eyes flashed. The winds racing passed him spun in to a cyclone and spun off toward the light. It grew in size and intensity as it tore across the ruined surface of the planet. Flashes of golden energy flashed chaotically within.

The flashes of blue that filled the sky dimmed in comparison to the apocalyptic cyclone. But as it came upon the strange beam of light, they passed through one another as though neither existed. The odd light swept right passed and full upon Lan Qing.

The vice admiral looked on in surprise and alarm as the maneuver functions of his suit cut out. He was barreling forward at breakneck speed, completely out of control.

Was this... data? Lan Qing was at a loss. For all his wisdom, he didn't know what to do.

His brother's force came through his comm systems. "Heh. Hey bro. I forgot to tell you, we're not actually fifty-one people. I've got fifty-seven."

Lan Qing's mecha began to belch thick, black smoke as the blasts of lightning subsided. Lan Jue pulled up beside his brother.

In the distance, another foot furtively made its presence known. Even the machine's approach was uncouth, almost wretched. It could only be one person.

The surprise in Lan Qing's eyes subsided, replaced with contemplation. He went over the last few moments in his mind.

"So your timing was based on calculations. You must have someone who specializes in it." It took him very little time to uncover the truth.

"That's right," Lan Jue said. There wasn't any reason not to be candid by this point. "Let me introduce you. This is the Accountant, hailing from Skyfire Avenue." He didn't mention the Accountant's relationship to the Keeper out of respect for the young man. No one liked to live in another man's shadow.

"Hey there, Supersoldier. Heh, you're probably feeling pretty crappy right? You want revenge on the Jewelry Master? It's him who made me do it." The Accountant chortled.

From the start, Lan Jue never expected his students to defeat a force lead personally by his brother. Both because the soldiers were exceptional, and the overwhelming strength of Lan Qing. No one knew Lan Qing better

than his younger brother, and the stories of Prometheus' abilities were vastly understated.

There was just the tiniest flaw in his otherwise invulnerable exterior. He was using a training mecha.

True combat was conducted in suits the pilot was familiar with, who probably designed them themselves. If Prometheus was piloting Coeus, this would have been an embarrassing brief war game. Thankfully, training mechas were a different story. It was the mechanical composition and A.I. that determined how much martial power and Discipline a suit could take.

Then there was the Accountant, who had improved as well through the training. Not that he'd participated as the students had; his improvement was from assimilation. The young man had endured cruel treatment at the hands of the Bookworm while they were on Lir, but he had also been force-fed a tremendous amount of knowledge.

The Bookworm had already expressed his thoughts to the Keeper, that the Accountant was the best candidate to be their successor. The relative weakness of his Discipline wasn't an issue – after all, even those two old Paragons had to start somewhere, right? They didn't get to Paragon status by being born with the ability. They got it through hard work and study. They reached supremacy by understanding the world around them like no one else. Their cultivation methodology was a unique one, that couldn't be faked or simulated.

But the Accountant also had a strong enough Talent to sustain the constant inhumane treatment the two hateful old men subjected him to. Ever since he was young he'd had to study under the Keeper's tutelage, and his talents in several areas of study were made apparent. While he was exceedingly indolent by comparison, he was standing on the shoulders of giants. He was like a pig, but with two Paragons as his teachers, at least he was a pig who could count.

He hadn't been interested in participating in any of the training. Ever since arriving on An Lun he'd spent his time lazing about the place. But

when he was bored and there was nothing to occupy his mind, his thoughts invariably turned to his two teachers and everything they'd been trying to teach him over the last few months. As he absorbed everything he was taught, as well as the medicine the Bookkeeper had volunteered him for, he got stronger. To the point where he had a breakthrough of his own. He was now an eighth-ranked Talent.

Lan Qing's determinations were correct. Indeed, that strange column of black and white light had been a physical expression of the data stream. Although these suits were not bad for what they were, between the Accountant's manipulations and Lan Qing's own overwhelming power the suits were insufficient.

With Coeus it would have ended differently. Never mind the fact that it's A.I. was top of the line, it was also protected from interference by no less than a dozen layers of defensive subroutines. The Accountant would never have broken through his security so quickly.

Had Lan Qing been at all clued in to the Accountant's presence, it would have been very difficult for this data stream to find its mark. However, as it was, Lan Qing was busy dealing with his brother. Lan Jue had gotten stronger, strong enough in fact to be a danger to him. He'd gotten careless, and that's when Lan Jue took his opportunity. In truth it was masterfully done, for Lan Jue had the Accountant use his powers just as Lan Qing was pouring everything he had in to his strike. It left him vulnerable, just what the Accountant needed. Lan Qing had been ready to charge in with everything he had, but it had made him confident. That was what the Accountant capitalized on.

In his brash certainty Lan Qing had chosen not to dodge, but to deflect. Of course it could not be said that his defenses were weak, but the academic powers of the Accountant weren't physical. You couldn't knock it away, and that is what caused Lan Qing to lose control. The black smoke that poured from his suit now, meant he'd lost today's exercise.

Lan Qing was not upset, nor was he too hard on himself for the oversight. It was the first time he'd encountered a situation like this. To him, that had been an invaluable experience. At least he'd be ready for it,

the next time.

Chapter 310: Victory!

“I don’t blame him. After seeing how much he’s grown, I’m happy. Not bad... the fight was not bad at all. I’m delighted you took take the tactical victory.” Lan Qing’s voice was soft. It was still hard, and cold, but lacked any malice. As ever, he appeared entirely indifferent despite his words of elation.

Lan Jue chuckled. “So, should we call an end?”

His determination was correct. With the loss of Gao Lei and Lan Qing, the soldiers couldn’t compete with Lan Jue’s students. Despite their dogged determination, they’d lost.

The strengths of the NEU pilots was simply too much. There were two ninth ranked adepts on their side – Lan Jue and Mika. Xiuxiu, Tan Lingyun and Tang Xiao were eighth ranked, as well as the Accountant who’d hid through most of it. Several more were seventh. They were more than an equal to any soldier.

“If any of your students are interested in joining the Iron Army, they have my blessing,” Lan Qing announced. “They’ve earned every promise and commitment we’ve sworn to. Cease fire!”

As the words rang through everyone’s cockpit, the students of the NEU erupted in a triumphant roar! They’d done it! They’d defeated the Iron Army! Although they knew their advantages were many, they still faced an experienced opponent in higher numbers, with mid-level Adepts of their own. To take on and wrestle victory from their idols... this sort of feeling was intoxicating.

Just as Lan Jue had promised them, this was an experience they would remember until the end of their days.

On top of this, they knew their victory meant they could enter the Iron Army themselves at their leisure, AND they got to leave with a mecha to use for a whole year! They were the Bloodlust Warsuits, symbols of the brave departed. This was their prize. They weren’t just sturdy suits, for when you got in to one you were imbued with the spirit of Blood and Iron!

The field was cleared, and the students gathered back at base to celebrate. So elated were they in their victory, that they temporarily forgot their fear of their Demon Drillmaster and hoisted him in to the air.

Lan Jue didn't stop them, or admonish them for their actions. He let them have their moment – it was the release of two months of pressure.

There was no alcohol anywhere on An Lun, so when the students were done with Lan Jue and sought further ways to expel their energy, they took to the training field. They ran about wildly, shouting and recounting the battle. They were as wild as the planet they'd come to adopt.

Standing on the sidelines, watching his charges jump and shout, the hardness gradually went from Lan Jue's eyes. He was pleased to find his own hard work paying off. Not only had he given them a true battle experience, he'd given them confidence. If they could take on the Iron Army and come out victorious, who else stood a chance?

"Thank you." The soft voice came from behind.

At once, Lan Jue adopted his ice-cold persona. He turned his head, and spied Tan Lingyun standing nearby. The Savage Goddess had snuck up behind him at some point.

She walked to his side, fixing him with an appreciative look. "You've changed them for the better. Me, too. I've learned quite a lot these last two months, and improved more than I have in the last several years. If possible, I would like to continue training. If you accept, I'd like to stop being an assistant, and be a student."

"The training isn't over," Lan Jue answered.

"Huh?" She looked at him inquisitively.

They'd said the training would be two months! They'd already learned so much. From knowing only the basics to taking out the Iron Army, that was how far they'd climbed!

"Didn't you say we were leaving? What do you mean the training isn't finished?"

Lan Jue answered with a nod. "Who said training finished once we left here? If you recall, I said this portion of our training was finished. We've still got the third round of exercises. Like I said at the beginning, this training might take longer than two months."

Tan Lingyun blinked at him. "What else could there be to learn?"

"You'll know when we get there," Lan Jue said dismissively. "Stop asking questions. If there's nothing important you may rest for the remainder of the day. We leave in the morning."

Tan Lingyun looked at him for a moment. She chewed on her lips for a moment before blurting out.

"Are you married?"

Surprised did not describe Lan Jue. The possibility of this happening was the farthest thing from Lan Jue's mind.

"What the hell?"

"Nothing," Tan Lingyun said. "Just a casual question."

"It's a question I refuse to answer," Lan Jue replied. "This has nothing to do with the training."

He gave her no space to reply. He turned his back on her, and left the field.

Tan Lingyun watched as he walked away. Suddenly, she shouted after him. "Give me a chance to pursue you!"

Lan Jue very nearly fell on his face. He recovered, and nearly ran to the dormitories.

Tan Lingyun burst in to a fit of laughter. All of the pressure fled from her through gasping breaths. This man, this demon drillmaster, Lei Feng, Zeus – he was a coward!

With her chest puffed out pridefully, Tan Lingyun sneered.

"You have no chance." The soft, emotionless voice interrupted her laughter.

Tan Lingyun jumped. She'd never heard someone approach. When she turned, she saw only a woman with fiery red hair and a silver mask.

She knew this to be one of the other assistants Lei Feng had brought with him. No one knew who she was – they simply called her 'assistant instructor.'

The red-haired one, and the black-haired one. That was how the students referred to Mika and Xiuxiu.

"Why do you say that?" Tan Lingyun was not affected by the negative comment. She stood where she was, surrounded in an air of high-handedness.

"You're back of the line," she said. "He's had a healthy following for a while. So if you think you're just gunna jump in, you've got another thing coming."

Tan Lingyun blinked at her. "You two?" Tan Lingyun took a minute to size up her sudden competition. Mika, she discovered, was no less a catch than she. She looked back at the two ember-red eyes behind the mask. They glowed, almost.

Tan Lingyun knew that look. This was war.

'Timid' was never a word Tan Lingyun had had in her vocabulary. She bulled through every challenge she'd ever faced. The harder the task, the more she rose to the occasion. And the stronger her ego. Learn and overcome – that was principle.

She had always had an idol in her heart, like any woman, but it was not Zeus. It was Prometheus.

She was no longer a young girl. It was time for her to find a boyfriend and settle down, but she had some pretty lofty standards. In her mind, her future man would be perfect; he would be possessed of herculean strength and sage-like wisdom. Prometheus fit that mold rather well, so he was her ultimate goal. Had her parents not expressly forbidden it, she'd have joined the Iron Army herself long ago.

She'd been blessed with the opportunity, through this training, to see

Prometheus with her own eyes. However, when she finally met him that fervent sense of puppy love had calmed.

When she'd approached Lan Jue with her conjecture before, she was going to ask him to introduce her. She couldn't slip from the excitement of the discovery. But never once during that night did she dream about the green-masked man. No, the scene that played in her mind over and over was an experience she'd remember forever.

She was on his lap, watching as he masterfully commanded his mecha suit. She remembered watching him work, feeling the heat of him against her, surrounded by his masculinity. That was what she remembered.

The next day she woke up red-faced and flustered. Throughout the morning she couldn't shake the thought from her mind. The excitement she used to feel for Prometheus was gone. But the image in her heart wasn't gone, just replaced. It was Zeus.

He was a cold, cold man – but heroic! For the last two months he had been ruthless to everyone he came across. She herself had to fight through more than a few weak moments.

But in the end this terrible experience had lifted them to lofty heights. The ARC classes were unprecedented, and through them she saw that Zeus was strong in more than just combat.

And just now he'd beaten Prometheus in smarts! Although she hadn't seen how, the victory was enough. After that, Lei Feng completely usurped Prometheus from his spot in her heart. That's why she'd confronted him like she had – she sure was backward when it came to relationships. But pouring her soul and seeing it reduced to a joke was more than she could handle.

"Just because he doesn't like you doesn't mean he won't find interest in me. Let's just see who he picks!" Her hands were clenched in to fists, and her voice rose to a challenging crescendo.

Mika just laughed. "Sure! At the very least we'll see how novel you make the situation." With the final words hers, Mika turned and walked away. She didn't see Tan Lingyun as any sort of competition. She knew who her

real competition was.

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Lan Jue walked from the training field in a confounded daze. She certainly was cute...

But curiosity was all there was. She was a good girl. He could still remember his maltreatment at her hands, how awkward she'd made everything. Still, he had a very good impression of her. She was grumpy, mean, with a terrible temper – but with a fundamentally good heart. That's why he'd risked his identity to help her out – and ended up somewhat getting himself exposed anyway.

“Come with me!”

Lan Jue turned his head, and saw his brother standing nearby.

*

1. This is the single greatest Chinese trope you'll come across. Understand this, and you'll get relationships in China. A woman's role in the far east has always been to find a good man, and provide. They are expected to do this immediately – I mean, immediately after university. Remember that they are forbidden from having any relationships prior to college, and even then it should never go beyond a few stolen kisses. This means there are slews of 25 year-old parents, and every year you don't have a husband and a child, you're less and less desirable. So much effort is poured in to nabbing a good man from both parents and the girl herself that school can often be an afterthought. This is, however, thankfully changing.

Chapter 311: Lan Qing's Analysis

Lan Jue didn't say anything, and asked no questions. He immediately trotted over to his brother and followed him as Lan Qing left.

Before long a mag-lev car appeared parked nearby. They both got in, and started for the bowels of the camp deep underground.

Eventually they reached their destination – a metal door set by itself far from anything else. Lan Qing exited the car and stood before it as a beam of light swept over his body.

The doors opened with a groan of protest. The brothers entered.

They walked in to a simple room which, like the rest of An Lun's military base, was mostly metal. Every inch of the place was densely covered in instruments and computer screens. A couple workers were busily toying with the equipment. They all stopped, and snapped to attention as Lan Qing entered.

The vice admiral returned their salute. Without a word, they sat back down and continued their enigmatic work. Lan Qing made his way to one screen in particular, and Lan Jue followed at his heels.

"We've already prepared all the mecha suits for your students. Gao Lei is bringing the arm bands by personally." Lan Qing said.

Lan Jue answered with a nod. "Thank you."

His older brother waved dismissively. "No need for that. Your students' due reward, nothing more. Your people far exceeded expectations, a rare thing these days."

His words were simple and his tone indifferent, but from his mouth it meant quite a lot.

A small smile crept on to Lan Jue's face. "How could my students be anything less than spectacular? You just commanded an army, and I had a few kids."

"Don't be so self-satisfied," Lan Qing replied. Lan Jue stared back, at a

loss after his brother's chastising tone.

Lan Qing turned on the monitor. A few button presses, and a recording of their simulated battle appeared on the screen. It was showing from the beginning.

As they watched, a series of changes swept across the battlefield. From the staggering charge of the Iron Army, to Lan Jue's surprise assault leading Delta squad, they watched the fight unfold.

"Why am I watching this," Lan Jue asked.

Lan Qing stared at the screen with his arms crossed. "We're looking for problems. You and your students did very well this time. In training, your students do very well especially on an individual basis. As soldiers, though, they're far from adequate. Where this a real battle, the Iron Army would certainly have come up victorious, despite suffering heavy losses."

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes as he watched the recording. He spoke, his voice thick with challenge and irritation. "You wanna try it again? I never took you for a sore loser."

Lan Qing fixed his brother with an even, hard stare. He reached out and pressed a few keys. The image of the screen magnified so every detail was apparent.

As he watched, he saw dozens of black figures darting across the screen. They were An Lun soldiers – rather, a simulation of troop movements, and as Lan Jue watched his smug expression faded.

Among them he saw Gao Lei, who was rushing to meet Tan Lingyun. In the end he'd been defeated, unable to break free from Tan Lingyun's indelible frontal assault. She'd cleared the path for victory by smashing that part of the line.

However, as he watched there was a change. Gao Lei wasn't defeat, but perished together with Tan Lingyun in a ball of flame.

Lan Qing's quiet voice explained while Lan Jue watched. "Each Bloodlust Warsuit comes equipped with a self-destruct system. It varies with each individual, and can only be initiated by the pilot. For pilots without

Disciplines, when the energy flow reaches critical mass, they press the button. For Adepts, the suit's own energy and their Disciplines combine to extend the force and blast radius. When their core detonates, the resulting blast is three times stronger than the pilot's individual strength. Your assistant wasn't weak, certainly, but wasn't suited for command. She took out Gao Lei, but sacrificed her squad in the process. She failed to protect her comrades-in-arms, despite her status as an eighth-ranked Adept. This is not behavior befitting a soldier. If Gao Lei had employed the self-destruct sequence during their encounter, there would be an eighty-seven percent chance he'd have taken her with him. The remaining thirteen percent sees her alive, but rendered combat ineffective. That's a one-hundred percent chance you lost your squad leader and all her soldiers."

Lan Jue watched, though incredulity was clear on his features. "But would Gao Lei have chosen the right moment? After all, he'd be giving his life."

Lan Qing answered by knocking his fist on the desk. He spoke to the soldier on his left. "In the last five years how much of our total losses have come from self-sacrifice?"

The soldier shot to his feet and saluted. "Vice Admiral! In the last five years, self-destruction has accounted for eighty-four point six-three percent of total casualties."

Lan Jue looked at the soldier in surprise.

What did this mean? That more than eighty-percent of the An Lun soldiers chose death when their mechas suffered critical damage. Once that decision was made, there was no going back – no escape. What Lan Qing was trying to impress upon his brother, was that Gao Lei – in fact, almost all of his soldiers – would have taken his students with them if this were a real fight.

"This is too cruel!" Lan Jue was not a pacifist. On the contrary, he had significant blood on his hands from past battles. A few times he'd been willing to give his own life in the course of a fight, much like on Taihua.

But to require that of his students? He simply couldn't imagine it.

“Cruel?” Lan Qing sniffed. “There is no such thing in war. Only victory, and defeat. Had Gao Lei chosen self-sacrifice, your assistant would have been lost. His remaining forces would have captured the advantage, and maybe even gone on to win their skirmish without any further losses. One life for twenty – it’s simple math. These twenty soldiers could then go one to support their brothers fighting other enemies. The other engagements would end similarly. Your students are strong physically, but do they have the same strength of will, strength of character? After seeing their friends lost to even just three kamikaze attacks, their morale will have been completely eroded. Ten, and you students would be routed. I’d have needed only thirty percent of the soldiers I brought to secure victory.”

Lan Jue listened carefully, but internally he was conflicted. He felt like he knew nothing.

“But they’re people, not machines!” Lan Jue looked at his older brother fiercely.

Lan Qing, as always, remained indifferent. “Alas, that’s what the Iron Army is – machines of flesh and blood. If you can’t give yourself to the cause, then you aren’t really a warrior of blood and iron. Officers, commanders, vice admirals... we all have this self-destruct sequence installed. Coeus, is equipped. By the time we join the Iron Army and step in to the Warsuit, we are ready to give our lives for the Alliance. What your students faced today wasn’t the real Iron Army. It was like fighting us with our arms and legs tied. Watch!”

He pressed another button. The video slowed to a crawl.

Lan Jue’s keen observations revealed what his brother wanted to show. One by one, as the soldiers’ suits neared annihilation, they brought their right hands to their waist and fumbled for something.

“That’s where the self-destruct signal is initiated. Even in an exercise you can see them, unconsciously reaching for it. You know we’ve carefully calculated how many it would take to destroy a god-ranked pilot. How many would it take to end a ninth-ranked Adept? Confidential military information, of course, and exceedingly important. The Iron Army

routinely suffers very little damage in a fight, but our death rates are sky high. Now you know why this is.”

Lan Jue was well and truly stunned. He’d wracked his brain, pulled out all the stops to help his students win victory over the Iron Army. In the end, though, it had all been a game.

Lan Qing started the recording over. “But, if you left those kids under my command, accompanied by a trained combat unit, things would be different. Of your five groups, only one met the grade.”

The video cut to Charlie squadron, led by Tang Xiao. They watched as he defended his team through the conflict, then rush in to secure victory.

“Deployment here was well thought out. Your officer is strong and competent. Clear-headed. The defensive advance caused their enemies to give ground. They had no recourse but to take to the air. They proceeded to wipe the enemy forces without casualties. This, is the bright spot among your chosen teams. This student is qualified. The others are unacceptable, yourself among them.”

“You aren’t far off, but still inferior. The reason being, you were too focused on me.” Lan Qing had no qualms underlining Lan Jue’s faults. “Your tactics were reactionary, revolving around how I paced the battle. You were locked in to one objective and left the rest of the field to their own devices. If you’d have micro-managed better, losses would be significantly lower. But your greatest fault lies in deployment. You students are all Adepts, and not weak. Why, then, didn’t you arrange them by specialty? In this way you did well with this team, though even then their full power wasn’t accessed.”

Chapter 312: Qianlin's Discipline

"If you gave me these fifty students to train," Lan Qing said, "They'd be eligible soldiers within a year. At present, if they meet a powerful enemy they will most certainly fail, and at heavy cost."

It was rare for Lan Qing to speak this much, at least as far as Lan Jue knew. In simple words, he delineated each one of Lan Jue's tactical mistakes. He explained the capabilities of the students, and how they were still not reaching their potential. Every detail was delivered, painstakingly explained.

At first he'd been upset with his brother, but as Lan Qing's instruction continued Lan Jue's features changes. He grew serious and attentive. As he watched it was clearly shown that, without Lan Qing and Lan Jue present, the winning side would not have been his.

The An Lun soldiers were truly like machines. They made for terrifying enemies.

At last, Lan Qing finished his explanation. He handed a copy of the recording to Lan Jue. "Inside is all the data we've collected. When you get some time, look it over. Pay attention to the soldiers, and how they react in different circumstances. From there, teach your students in accordance with their needs."

Lan Jue took it with a wry grin. "I thought I'd figured it out already. Now when I look at it, though, I see we've got a long way to go. Thanks for pointing it out. Do you think they should remain for a while longer?"

Lan Qing answered with a shake of his head. "We've focused on their deficiencies, but the kids you brought have talent. Under your training, they've been given a strong foundation, including in their Disciplines. They've gone about as far as they can go at this point in the fundamentals. But remember, the strongest get there through actual battlefield experience. Now, what they need is to be tempered, not trained. Here's my suggestion..."

Lan Jue nodded his head, while his brother imparted his knowledge. "I

feel like I've been hard, but it's nothing compared to what you're saying."

Lan Qing's voice was dispassionate. "A short time of brutality so that they may live longer in the midst of war. Are you their father? No – you're their drillmaster. You're here to teach them how to kill."

"I know."

"By the way," Lan Qing went on, "This one here has a noteworthy Discipline. Unless I'm mistaken, that's a very rare amplification Talent."

The video passed frame by frame, focusing on two mecha suits. They were surrounded by a pale white light, and the bottom one was veritably tearing through whatever was in its path. They watched as it cut through the ranks of the Iron Army, blades flailing madly.

The other mecha remained plastered to the first one's back, and followed where it went. The white light was coming from that one.

As Lan Jue watched, he blinked in recognition. Wasn't that Tang Mi's suit? Who was that behind her? He couldn't remember assigning a student with that sort of Talent to her team! He narrowed his eyes in thought.

"If the Discipline is pure amplification, it'd have unending uses on the battlefield. When you get back to your pupils, pay attention to this one."

"Yeah." Lan Jue nodded. He already had his suspicions.

By the time he returned to the barracks, most of the students had already gotten the excitement out of their system. As they milled about among the crisply-made beds, they felt free and uninhibited for the first time in months. It was hard for them to express the sensations they were feeling.

Lan Jue did not immediately share what he'd learned from Lan Qing with them. Instead, he walked directly to a single room, and knocked on the door.

A familiar, charming face answered. As the door opened and she saw the golden-masked man on the other end, she shook ever so slightly. However,

she reacted instantly.

“Hello, Drillmaster.”

“Can I come in?” he asked quietly.

“Of course.” Qianlin opened the door wider. She took a step back, her heart still racing somewhat from the surprise of his arrival. Since the beginning of their training, this was the first time Lan Jue had taken the initiative and sought her out.

Lan Jue stepped inside, and Qianlin shut the door behind him. It was a small room, with little more than a single-person bed. There was hardly any room to stand, and with the two of them there it felt tight.

Qianlin pointed to her bed. “Go ahead and sit.” In this private setting, she didn’t refer to him by his title.

Lan Jue complied, sitting on the bed and pulling the golden mask from his face. For reasons unknown, Qianlin felt a wave of relaxation overcome her as Lan Jue’s true face was revealed behind the mask.

“Much better without the mask,” she sighed almost unconsciously.

Lan Jue answered with a chuckle. “Why? Am I not myself with it?”

Qianlin nodded her head emphatically. “I think so. You’re scary with that thing on. Everyone’s afraid.”

“How about you? Are you scared of me?” Lan Jue said around a smirk.

Zhou Qianlin returned his smile. “Yeah.” She shivered theatrically.

Lan Jue couldn’t help but laugh. “Alright, I never thought you were scared of me. I’m actually here to ask you something. Do you know what your Discipline is? You were the one supporting Tang Mi earlier, weren’t you?”

Qianlin had guessed this question was coming. She nodded her head. “Yes. I just... could feel it. I just suddenly knew. It was all very strange, but it seems like my abilities are purely support. It doesn’t work on all levels, but it does seem to join with the target’s own Discipline and amplify it. Tang Mi and I gave it a try, and it worked very well. You saw it on the

battlefield.

Lan Jue nodded. "Try it on me, let's see."

"Alright," she replied. Qianlin raised her hands, and gently pressed them toward Lan Jue. Instantly, ripples of pure white light radiated from her palms and fell over her drillmaster.

Lan Jue felt a sensation of warmth and comfort wash over him. A pale blue light emerged around him like a halo.

He searched his feelings, and was surprised at the result. His discipline was full, surging with excess and... oily? No – but motive, surging through the meridians like a raging inferno. Though the addition didn't push him through to Paragon levels of ability, it was at least half a rank higher with Qianlin's help.

For Lan Jue, amplification to this level wasn't enough to turn the tide of a battle. But the fact she could even amplify powers as high as his was an impressive feat.

Qianlin was currently a fifth level genetic Talent. Where she to use her amplification Discipline on an equivalent Adept, the results would be spectacular. It was a truly impressive Discipline to possess. What's more, if she kept improving at her current rate, her powers would be able to significantly impact his in no time.

"I never would have thought you'd have such an extraordinary Talent. It's support, but a wildcard."

Qianlin answered with a roguish smirk. "'Wildcard' doesn't sound like such a good thing. Did it help you?"

"A little," Lan Jue admitted. "It's true that a wildcard has few individual characteristics that are personally helpful, but as a good support the benefits are endless. Since it's very rare for someone like you to use your powers on someone with an identical Discipline, you're essentially a universal amplifier. You can help everyone on the field to push against the enemy. Your Discipline is also very pure, and very gentle. I felt no ill-effects from your energy. This makes your abilities even more precious.

Keep improving, you're sure to be the primary support for the ARC students."

There were three other support Disciplines among the students.

"I'm just trying to keep up," she said.

"It's been rough on you," Lan Jue replied. "You're thinner."

Qianlin sighed. "I can handle rough. I just miss my friends from the hospital. I've been gone for so long, and they can't get out. I wish I could see them. I'm sure they're worried."

Lan Jue gave her a reassuring smile. "Take it easy, I've taken care of it. Ke'er and Guoguo go there often. They're helping you look after your duties, so things are good when you get back."

Qianlin's face lit up. "Really?"

Lan Jue nodded.

"Thank you." Qianlin could feel her cheeks redden with heat. She wasn't sure whether it was from excitement or modesty.

The questions that needed asking were asked, and the results were pleasing. Lan Jue prepared to leave. He was, after all, in the women's dormitory, and remaining in a students too long would certainly be suspicious.

Just as Lan Jue was rising to his feet, however, Zhou Qianlin reached down, perhaps to grasp something from the bed. It happened simultaneously, and the result was what one might expect.

Qianlin yelped as they collided, and Lan Jue instinctively wrapped an arm around her waist. The force of the bump plopped him right back down on the bed. The arm around her waist pulled her right on to his lap.

Qianlin instinctively steadied herself with an arm around Lan Jue's neck. Her eyes shone, and there was little bashfulness there.

Her soft flesh and feminine smell lingered between them, and Lan Jue pulled her tighter. For a moment, he really didn't want to let go.

But this was the dormitory!

“I should go.” He said.

“Don’t move.” Qianlin said, softly.

They remained that way for a moment, in each other’s arms. He looked to her eyes, framed by long lashes, and didn’t have the heart to make her move. So they sat, with Qianlin’s head on his shoulder and Lan Jue unsure of what he should do. Except remain calm.

His heart didn’t get the message. An intense ideological struggle raged within. Just then the gentle sounds of breathing arose. Zhou Qianlin’s supple body relaxed as she slipped in to sleep.

Her sweet smell hung in his nose, with her head against his shoulder. In his arms, she snuggled closer.

Chapter 313: Light Bulbs

A strange, gentle sensation lingered within Lan Jue. The training had been exceptionally laborious for these talented kids, but Zhou Qianlin persisted. Never once did she cry out in pain, or for help.

He slowly stood with her in his arms, then laid her gently onto the bed. She never loosened her hold on his neck – even when he tried to get himself loose, she just held him tighter. “Don’t go,” she murmured.

Lan Jue hadn’t been expecting her to pull back, and she’d gotten quite strong after her two-month training. He practically fell down on top of her.

Qianlin’s breath caught in her throat, but she didn’t wake. Only her cheeks reddened.

The contact was like an atomic bomb in Lan Jue’s brain. They were so close, this sensation... Lan Jue’s breath began to quicken, and Zhou Qianlin instinctively gripped the bed sheets.

Bang bang bang! A knock sounded at the door. Tang Mi’s voice called in. “Qianlin.... Qianlin you there?”

Lan Jue’s eyes popped wide, and he shot to his feet. He was so quick to extricate himself from the student that he banged his head against the wall. He pressed a hand to his head and winced. Qianlin was, by this point, completely awake.

“I’m here Little Mi. What’s up?” She fought to bring herself back under control while speaking to her friend.

“Open the door, I have to talk to you about something,” she said.

She glanced at Lan Jue, who had already replaced his golden mask. He gave her a nod.

“Coming.” She stood and opened the door. Tang Mi’s impatient face appeared on the other side. She blinked curiously at her friend’s rosy cheeks and heaving chest, then gave her wink

Qianlin just looked at her, confused and unsure of her meaning. Tang Mi pulled the door open the rest of the way to step inside, and that's when she saw Lan Jue.

"Ah! D-drillmaster, you're here too! Hello." She snapped to attention.

He nodded. "I also had something to discuss with this student. Our business is complete – I'm leaving." He shot Tang Mi a glance before swaggering out of the door.

Tang Mi smiled sweetly, and stepped aside to let him pass. But the moment he was gone she shut the door with a disdainful sneer, as though she were removing something repulsive.

"Little Mi... what are you doing?" Qianlin said in agitation.

Qianlin's friend looked her over. "Are you alright? Did he do anything to you?"

Qianlin's response was cold and irritated. "What the hell is wrong with your head?! He was asking me about the fight today, and my Discipline. Now what do you want?"

Tang Mi heaved a sigh. "Good... good. It scared me! I thought... well, you're so pretty. And he's so strong. If he wanted to, ehm, emulate the birds and the bees, which one of us could stop him? It's good he didn't do anything."

Qianlin's lips curled in to a frown. "What makes you think the Drillmaster is such a despicable person?"

Tang Mi sniffed derisively. "Who says he's a good man, either? Have you already forgotten how he tormented us? I still remember the needles he stabbed us with. That pain, I'll remember for the rest of my life. When I'm stronger, I'll give him a taste of his own medicine! Henh henh henh henh..."

The young politician's daughter laughed in spite of herself. "Alright, that's enough. Weren't you just telling me about how much improvement you feel you've made? Say what you will about the Drillmaster, but his methods are effective. Why the change of heart all of a sudden?"

Tang Mi chortled. “Alright, fine. I’ll be honest – he’s actually very cool, and ruggedly handsome I think. I wish I knew what his face looked like under that mask. They say people with disabilities hide them behind masks. I think that’s probably why he does it, otherwise why wear a mask all the time? His assistants, too. It’s all too strange, am I right?”

Qianlin was on the verge of erupting in to laughter. She quickly and silently relayed this information to Lan Jue through the Spiritcaller gem. She responded to Tang Mi before she could tell something was amiss. “How do I know?”

Tang Mi continued on her ruminations. “Or maybe he’s as handsome as Poseidon! That’d be nice. Then he’d be the perfect man. You know I saw the way Tan Lingyun was looking at him – very unusual. She’s been staring at him through the whole training, intentionally or not. Like she wants to eat him. Think I should throw my hat in the ring? I may not have a mature figure, but my advantage is in age!”

Qianlin patted her forehead. “Hey! Would you stop being such a nympho? You go through dream lovers like candy. First it’s this one, then another. How about a little consistency!”

Tang Mi adopted an indignant, morally superior air. “I like what I like. If, one day, there is a man who is worthy then I’ll put all my attention on him.”

“Alright,” Qianlin said, wishing to change the subject. “Get out of here, I’m sleepy. I think I’ll take a nap. Rest is a rare thing.”

Tang Mi jutted her tongue out at her friend. “It still looks like you’re upset! And I don’t get a ‘thank you’ or anything. I risked offending the Drillmaster to come save you!”

Qianlin smirked. “Yes, yes – thank you ever so much, Sister Mi.”

Eventually, with great effort, she managed to send Tang Mi off. Qianlin couldn’t help but shake her head. Tang Mi was a good friend.

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Lan Jue had returned to the boy’s dormitory by the time he heard

Qianlin's messages.

The Spiritcaller Power Gem:

Lan Jue's voice was thick with umbrage: She thought I was there to take advantage of you?!

Zhou Qianlin: Then what were you doing laying on me?

You pulled me!

You're strong as an ox. I weigh a hundred pounds, how can I pull you?

Ah? So you deny it? So if that kind of man, I guess I could just sneak in there while you're asleep...

...

What do you think about that?

I wouldn't be disinclined.

I... a thousand showers wouldn't clean the spirit from that. You really pulled me!

It's fine, no need for excuses. At any rate, it's not like you were in any rush to get off me. What, you didn't think I was awake?

This is emotional abuse! I'm being framed!

Don't worry. I forgive you.

...

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In the early morning, the traditional bugle call the NEU students had all come to recognize roused them from their slumber. There was no departure party or flashiness – it was just time to go. Not even Gao Lei was present. Only the guide was there, to lead them to Zeus-1.

The small sapphire ship took off and glided through the atmosphere, under escort from two An Lun patrol ships.

After a moment, Lan Jue's ship shook and they sped off toward the stars.

Lan Jue watched An Lun shrink in to the distance from a porthole. He

struggled with conflicting emotions.

Brother. I'll be back. I look forward to standing at your side in the fight to come.

The students felt similarly. They were silent as An Lun slowly disappeared behind them. A month wasn't very long in the grand scheme, but they'd learned a tremendous amount in that time. Everything they'd gained here would benefit them for the rest of their lives. It was an important, life-changing experience.

As they set their course for home, the students all unconsciously tightened their safety harnesses. Who knew if the Demon Drillmaster would take this chance to test their g-force resistance again.

But the ride was unexpectedly smooth. However, it wasn't long before a silhouette appeared before the ship, suspended in space.

"Do you all think you really won that battle, yesterday?" Lan Jue's question was simple, but there were clear notes of disdain.

He snorted. "Truth is, that's what I thought. Then, I discovered I was wrong..."

Lan Jue went on to share what he'd learned with the students. Their faces blanched as they came to the realization.

He then went on to discuss groups. After discussion with his assistants, the squads were restructured. There were still five teams, with some changes. Jin Tao switched with Tang Mi, for one, replacing her as captain of Echo squad.

The reason for the slight change was simple: Echo had taken the most casualties from their exchange. Only Qianlin and Tang Mi had survived. Their decimation was a direct result of Tang Mi's command.

Jin Tao had been in Geng Yang's group for the fight. Although Delta was sacrificed, he fought with bravery and relied on his own strength to pull him through. He'd put himself between the enemy and his squad to cover their retreat. Unfortunately, his opponent had been Prometheus.

Although they'd ultimately been defeated, Geng Yang and Jin Tao's sacrifice had revealed the enemy's location. Although Jin Tao's time on the field had been brief, he'd performed admirably. That is why he was promoted.

Tang Xiao was also commended. Charlie squad, under his command, performed the best. Tan Lingyun, conversely, was criticized for the great losses her team had endured.

After the teams were restructured, they found their roles similarly adjusted. After witnessing the demonstration of their Discipline, Lan Jue was able to separate them more effectively. New tactics were devised to better suit the changes.

Chapter 314: The Crimson Massacre

The interior of Zeus-1 was not exceedingly large, but they were able to explain maneuvers and tactics with the help of a whiteboard. Sadly, the ship didn't come equipped with a sim pod, otherwise they'd do this in DreamNet where the results were likely to be better. But even if they had a pod, that idea was no good. DreamNet was in the midst of an upgrade.

This sort of training was a blessed relief to the students. As far as they knew, the training was over – they could relax on the way back to school. In fact, the ARC classes had been a truly transformative experience. They were looking forward to the next few days, as they returned to normal life.

They were somewhat surprised by how quick the flight was. When they peered out of the portholes on either side, they saw a queer sight.

It was an asteroid belt, that stretched for hundreds of millions of kilometers. The background light of the universe shone between them, obscuring the details so all that they saw were hulking silhouettes suspended in nothingness.

This isn't right! There was a specific flight path for the return to Skyfire, and to their knowledge they weren't supposed to be any asteroid belts this large on the way. Could they have gotten lost? Unlikely! All ships came equipped with cruise control, especially combat vessels.

In the midst of their confusion, Lan Jue turned on the ship's holographic projector. As the light sputtered to life, an enormous silver ship was revealed in the distance. A few of the students recognized it immediately. It was a cargo ship, for interstellar travel. It could be fitted to house both freight and passengers. Judging by the markings, it was an Eastern ship.

It floated easily along the lane. The transport vessel hung in space, disappearing among the asteroids and re-appearing moments later. It looked almost like one of them.

Lan Jue said nothing. He just returned to his seat, and kept his eyes on the ship.

These ships were effective for their purpose – comfortable, and spacious. It was humming along at a good speed, he determined. Ships like this could sustain sub-light speeds for quite a long time, longer than normal patrol boats. They were both comfortable, and spacious.

As they watched, there was a twinkling light in front of the silver vessel, and suddenly a massive net of shimmering light appeared. The ship collided head-on with the deterrent. Thankfully, its shields were operational. They lost control, but the shields kept them from being destroyed. Instead, the silver cargo ship spun listlessly through space.

Just then, seven or eight patrol ships of varying colors appeared from the blackness. They were like specters, arriving without notice. Obviously they had set an ambush: eliminate your target's ability to flee, and mop up.

In no time at all, they were surrounded.

The silver ship was fighting to right itself when the ships appeared. The pilot seemed to know what was coming, and tried to urge the ship forward. Unfortunately, although the ship's top speed was impressive, it needed time to reach that level.

A barrage of guided missiles collided with the ship's shields. The attacks came in concurrent blasts, one after the other, that prevented the ship from gaining speed.

The students, under careful observation, were beginning to understand. The beleaguered ship looked to have been stopped by a cloak mine. It was likely placed there by one of the Alliance from back in the day. It operated like any other mine, except that it was fitted with a cloaking device. Its sheer damage, and the fact that you could be right on top of one when it went off, made them exceedingly dangerous. Because of the insidious nature of the weapons, the Alliances eventually agreed to discontinue their use. After all, ships were expensive.

Pirates. That's what they must be, those vicious boats surrounding the silver cargo ship. The ship came to a full stop as damage rendered it inoperable. The video's angle cut to the interior.

Armed personnel stalked the halls bearing laser rifles, their faces set as

they faced inevitable demise. Thousands of souls were on board, and at this moment they were clambering over each other in terror.

At last, the shields failed. Without weapons to defend itself, the pirate boats were able to pull up right alongside. The hulk was cut and breached quickly, venting the ship's oxygen in to space.

Several mecha suits fought through the hole. The screen flashes as laser fire was exchange. But the passengers were no match. Unequipped and unprepared, the interior of the ship became a hell-scape, with mountains of bodies and rivers of blood.

Men, women, children, elderly... it didn't matter. They were put down without a second thought. Only a few pretty women were kept, locked in the hold below.

The fresh blood and mangled bodies were reflected in the students' eyes. The images were terrifying, atrocious, sickening. They fought rage and nausea as they watched these mechas callously murder everyone they came across.

The video panned to the side, revealing a pirate mecha standing nearby. It raised its alloy sword overhead. He brought the blade down on a child – he mustn't have been more than five or six. Screams and gasps sprang up all throughout the NEU trainees.

Their cries had no power over what they saw. They could only look on in terror as innocent lives were summarily extinguished. They were Easterners, like them, just trying to get somewhere.

In the end, the ship was a floating hulk of metal, home to nothing but the dead. The prettier victims had been hauled away, and the ship itself towed in to the black.

The pirates knew when to go and when to stop. They'd only breached the outer hull, leaving the interior structure undamaged. Even in this condition, a ship of this size would catch a pretty penny, not to mention whatever cargo it may have contained.

The image dimmed, and vanished. Lan Jue's dark voice hung in the

ship's bridge.

“What you just watched happened about six months ago. It as a massacre. It happened on the outskirts of the Shattered Starfields. That part of the lane was supposed be patrolled by the North, but they were inexplicably absent that day. The victims were our own, from the Eastern Alliance. Two-thousand three-hundred passengers, two-hundred sixty crew. Fifty-four women were abducted, and all the rest were put to death. They were pirates, the Crimson Flag. According to our intelligence reports, they were among the best equipped pirate clans in the Fields. Their base wasn't in the three main planets of that system, but that didn't matter – their benefactor was the Northern Alliance. If you were to claim they had no connection to the North, no one would believe you. More than two-thousand five-hundred lives, taken in this way. The Crimson Flag hid in deeper recesses of the Starfields after that, knowing that the East would send a fleet to answer for this crime. However, the North – who controlled the regions around the Starfields – blocked their passage. To this day those pirates have never answered for this atrocity. It's been known ever since as the Crimson Massacre.”

The students collectively glared at the space where the screen was. Their hearts were full of anger, and sadness. Many of the young men openly sneered, their knuckles white as they gripped their arm rests.

Most of them had heard of the Crimson Massacre, some even knew the details. The Shattered Starfields were a chaotic and unruly place, where 'complicated' failed to describe it. Larger ships simply couldn't make it through due to this. On top of that, the East couldn't send ships through their own borders to the Starfields without having to traverse the whole of it to get to their last known location. The closest ingress was in the North's territory.

But the North decreed their space unapproachable. Each request by the East to pass was met with cool refusal. They negotiated, but the North couldn't forgive the grievances that had built up between them over the years. This is one reason why many suspect the North were complicit in the massacre.

Lan Jue had asked Chu Cheng about this when it'd occurred, but he didn't know anything about it. The Northern military was an independent force and the strongest of all human federations.

The video they were watching had been given to him by Lan Qing. The vice admiral sometimes had his hands tied in the bureaucracy of the military machine. Lan Jue was not so constrained.

The Mercenary King had once stalked the Shattered Starfields, decimating every pirate clan he came across. They would feel the cold gaze of death on their backs in every dark corner when he was finished. They dared to assault Eastern civilians. They slunk deeper in to their holes after that.

Lan Jue rose from the captain's chair. "If you recall, before we left for An Lun I noted that our training period may increase as needed. Your training, is not yet finished. Specifically, this is our third phase. Originally I'd planned something else, but with some additional data concerning the Crimson Flag – plans change. Your task is simple: Annihilate the Crimson Flag."

"Professor, put me at the front!" Jin Tao fiercely shot his arm up. His eyes were red – his grandfather had been one of the victims.

Others followed, who originally had been loathe to interrupt their Drillmaster.

Lan Jue looked out the porthole. "Accountant. Take us to the Starfields."

The Shattered Starfields! Their Drillmaster's words set a fire for vengeance in their chests. They were headed for the legendary pirates' haven.

If An Lun had been a common site on the map, how much truer it was for the Starfields. None of them, however, had ever previously had a yearning to visit.

The pirate playground, a den of degenerates and scum. Danger lurked around every corner. That was where they were going.

The heat in their blood cooled a few degrees. Only the confidence earned

from their training and skirmish victory stopped some from outright fleeing. After all, they were students. Out there were pirates. What they were about to experience could mean life or death!

But Lan Jue looked in the faces of each of his students, and he was satisfied. They remained calm, and in the face of this revelation that was no easy task.

“We will head directly for the heart of the Crimson Flag territory. Your task will be to suit up, in the Bloodlust Warsuits that you have earned, and eliminate the clan. They should all die a thousand times, but you can give them one at least. In the process, your second objective is to rescue a compatriot under their control. This is the third phase of your training.”

Zeus-1 deftly maneuvered toward the heart of the Shattered Starfields under the Accountant’s masterful control. The sapphire ship darted like a fish between the spiraling asteroids, failed planets and ship wreckage.

Chapter 315: Lord and Lady

The star map he'd been given from the Moonfiend Empress was in Lan Jue's hands. Although the entire ordeal had been a trap, the map was real enough. It'd been a little while since their last visit, but the map should still be current enough for their purposes.

The Crimson Flag wasn't among the strongest of the Starfields' pirate clans, and compared to the Moonfiend pirates they barely registered. However, they did have the Northern Alliance as silent benefactors. They fit right in on the borders of the Northern Alliance's stretch of the Starfields.

Their base of operations was a small planet, roughly a tenth the size of Skyfire. It resided in a relatively stable part of the asteroid belt, so it was relatively safe from impact.

According to intelligence from the An Lun army, the Crimson Flag had a moderate roster. As far as was known, they had three mecha combat camps that were all excellently equipped. They may have appeared as lawless cretins, but underneath were hardened, armed killers.

They also possessed two battleships, and somewhere between ten and fifteen patrollers – more than almost any other pirate clan. Each of those were equipped with enviable power gems that made them more than a match for any similarly classed ship they may encounter.

Zeus-1 was cutting through the blackness, already approaching the Northern Alliance side. They would be arriving at their target in two days. The Crimson Star, was the name of the planet they'd come to dominate.

“Engage stealth cloak,” Lan Jue commanded.

The shimmering blue color of Zeus-1 deepened until it matched the expansive darkness of the universe around them. This obviously wasn't proper stealth, but a special cloaking capability of the coating Zeus-1 was covered in. Following, Lan Jue had the Accountant start their radar interference to conceal them from scanners. Within the scope of these functions, the ship was all but invisible.

Lan Jue sat up on the captain's chair. His eyes were hard and cold. He'd made several incursions to wipe out pirates during his time as a soldier for hire – but he never got his hands on the Crimson Flag.

“We're approaching radar range.” The Accountant coaxed Zeus-1 in to orbit around the Crimson Star. Any closer, and they'd be spotted.

“Prepare main battery,” Lan Jue growled. “Accountant, give me a layout of enemy positions.”

The young man looked at Lan Jue wide-eyed. The drillmaster looked him right in the eye. “I have faith.”

“Alright.” The Accountant nodded his head resolutely. Suddenly, his hands were dancing on the keyboard lightning fast.

Zeus-1 was indeed the most excellent craft he'd had the opportunity to pilot. Everything – from the combat systems to the life support and everything in between – was state of the art. The ship's radar scanned the planet while the Accountant kept his eyes glued to the screen. A rapid sequence of frames flicked before him in quick succession as he and the ship put their minds to uncovering the enemy's position.

“Found them.” He pointed to something on the screen. “Their airfield is here.”

“Status of main weapons?”

Mika's voice answered. “Primed and ready.”

Lan Jue slapped the armrest of his chair. “Fire!”

“Fire!” Mika confirmed the command. Their cloak dissipated, as congealing orbs of energy appeared before the ship's main barrels. A few moments later the space around them lit up with resplendent blue light, as a series of lethal energy beams peppered with starlight burst forth.

The students unconsciously gripped their armrests as they witnessed the battle commence.

It wasn't long ago that many of these kids were taking their first interstellar trip, their first ride in a fighting vessel. Now they were engaged

in open combat. But could Zeus-1 find its target from this distance? Would it cause sufficient damage for an opening salvo?

They had their answer right away.

A shield protected the airfield. It flashed white as Zeus-1's battery made contact. It was sufficient to block the surprise attack from causing damage. However, as the students watched from the main screen in the ship's cockpit, the beam began to twist and rotate. The action condensed the energy, and increased its penetrating capabilities.

A drastic explosion arose, the sound of crashing metal and roaring flames audible even from their location.

Then, the Crimson Star reacted. Dots of light appeared on the surface, and that's when the Accountant spoke up. "It's a planetary defense system... shit, are we sure this is a pirate colony and not a Northern army base?"

Neither his mouth nor his hands ever stopped moving. In the midst of his curses the Accountant immediately re-engaged their stealth routines, and pulled the ship out of stable orbit. It pitched in to a combat roll.

Mid-maneuver the students could see what the Accountant had – dozens of anti-airship volleys were converging on their position. They danced around one another to form a wide-reaching net of deadly energy. Thankfully, the Accountant's reactions were swift and the ship narrowly avoided destruction. They raced to a safer distance.

"These idiots think they can hit me?" The Accountant was hyper-focused, almost like a different man. The formerly lecherous youth with a sour temper glared at the screen in front of him. Flashes of black and white twinkled in his eyes like lines of code. His fingers raced over the keys faster than the students could keep up.

Even with the gravitational stabilizers engaged, Zeus-1's occupants pitched and jerks with each severe motion of the ship. Now, the students understood why Lan Jue had subjected them to that extreme g-force. Right now it was looking downright necessary. At the very least, their former experience afforded them a sense of calm, and their bodies were better

equipped to handle the rigors.

“Drillmaster. Our main battery penetrated their shields and have destroyed one battleship. Heh, I bet that hurts!” The Accountant cackled gleefully as he made the report and dodged incoming fire.

“It’ll hurt a lot more before we’re through,” Lan Jue said with fire in his eyes. “Turn us around. Prepare to engage.”

It was time to nail this coffin closed.

The Crimson Flag would have to respond after such a devastating loss. They watched as several patrol ships took off and headed their way. They spread in to an intercepting formation as they drew near.

Lan Jue could not help but admit that these pirates were well trained. They scrambled an answering force in no time at all, under fire from an unknown enemy without provocation. Clearly they were always vigilant for this sort of situation. Out here, every pirate clan had to be ready, and mastered their own ways of doing it.

Lan Jue’s expressionless face remained pointed at the screen. He watched the boats approach, stoic. No matter how powerful this foe, he thought, they must pay for what they’ve done. Zeus-1 turned to face its pursuers, hidden in the inky blackness of space.

Eight pirate patrol ships were en route. The Accountant’s determinations were correct, and one of their battleships lay smoldering on the tarmac. The second had yet to lift off, either because they were underestimating Lan Jue or for some other purpose.

ζ

The leader of the Crimson Flag was a man named Feng Lin. He was an exceedingly portly fellow. At this moment, he was watching his screens with a malevolent twinkle in his eye.

The harsh notes of an alarm rang from all directions. The sudden attack had set off the planetary alarm and defense systems.

He was in the battleship, the one that had been spared destruction by

the surprise attack. He was a man known for his brutality and blood lust, but also his caution. It was the arrogant pirates that became corpses, so he chose his flagship and headquarters to be one of the battleships and kept it under ground. He'd have kept both there, if they'd possessed the ability to make the underground hangar large enough.

He looked to be a man in his forties, with a face unfortunately plagued by scores of soybean-colored growths. They were about the size of his eyes, and twitched with the muscles of his face as he frowned.

Ever since they'd attained support from the Northern armies, he had grown complacent and confident in his strength. He was the uncontested lord of his domain. But in contrast to his fierce exterior, Feng Lin possessed a delicate heart, and feared death. His covered this ruling his pirates with an iron fist. As for the planetary defense system, it had cost him quite a lot of money for that peace of mind. After all, it was a system to ensure planetary dominance. It was a micro-version, to be sure, but nonetheless difficult to acquire since it was military grade.

It was a source of pride. Other than the three largest planets in the Starfields, no other clan could match his technical superiority.

Though he was a cruel man, he was prudent, and so did not get himself involved in a fight he couldn't win. He only revealed his presence if the advantage was well in his favor. It was this quality that got the attention – and support – of the North. But to the other pirates of the Starfields, it was a shameful existence. They called him the Lady, for his feminine timidity.

This was why the second ship wasn't in flight – Feng Lin's cautiousness. However, it had been refitted to allow for long-range engagement. That was its trump card, in the event he encountered an enemy he couldn't best.

"Who the hell is this?!" he bellowed. Feng Lin watched the screen before him as the patrol boats spread out and searched for the culprit.

The enemy had been briefly revealed through radar, and from what he'd seen it was a smaller ship, like a patrol boat. But that didn't make any sense – that blast had had the force of a battleship behind it!

"Bastard... when I get you, I'll skin the flesh from your bones and use

your tendons as guitar strings!” Feng Lin growled ferociously at the screen. However, he did not give the order to have his ship engage. Feng Lin’s nickname was not given lightly.

Chapter 316: Valiant Clash

Just then, a series of energy beams glowed stark against the black sky. They swept over a patrol boat, and that was when the little blue boat appeared on Feng Lin's screen.

He shows himself! Feng Lin's eyes narrowed as he carefully regarded the image on the screen. Something he saw, however, turned his face a ghastly pale.

The golden lightning bolt painted on the side.

Boom-! The assailed pirate boat exploded in a shadow of flames and debris. A fiery ball burned ferociously where it had been.

Meanwhile the sapphire ship weaved and dodged. The remaining vessels couldn't land a strike.

"Enough! Retreat!" Feng Lin shouted.

His lieutenant looked at him in confusion.

"Boss – retreat? We can take this guy! It's got some crazy firepower, but there's only one of them."

Slap! Feng Lin turned around and with such speed and force that the slip he gave his attendant sent him spinning.

"Moron. Don't you know who that is? That boat belongs to Zeus. Dial the planetary defenses up to eleven. Whatever you do, do not let Zeus get close to our base. Send a distress signal to our allies in the North. Now!"

The orders were roared at his subordinate. But the last few sentences were filled with something else – a clear and present fear of the man who was coming for them.

Zeus was an infamous character in the Shattered Starfields, a name everyone recognized. His solo murder trip around the Starfields had ended with no less than thirty pirate clans wiped from existence.

When it came to things such as this, Feng Lin did not overestimate his abilities. There was only one attacker, but Feng Lin knew himself, and the

men he commanded. Clans much stronger than theirs had fallen before the wrath of the mercenary king. What chance did they have? The only advantage they had right now was the planetary defense system.

A deep regret had settled in Feng Lin's heart. How could he forget this monstrous killer! He should never have agreed to attack that Eastern cargo ship, like the North had asked – or at least not that obvious. All it had served to do was announce their culpability.

But hadn't Zeus been gone for several years? Why now? Why here? Damnit! What shit luck!

The skin tags and carcinomas of his face became a crimson red as his anger rose. It made him look particularly unpleasant.

§

One of the eight ships sent to intercept them was destroyed. After the Accountant's impressive display, the remaining seven had turned tail and fled.

"The hell is this? Too scared? I thought they were pirates!" The Accountant watched slack-jawed as his targets made for cover. He could hardly believe what he was seeing.

"Prepare for light speed," Lan Jue calmly instructed.

"Light speed." Mika and Xiuxiu responded with one voice.

Lan Jue then turned his attention back to the students. "When we breach and make landfall, the fight is yours. I will not be participating. You all remember your task?"

"Yes, sir!" The students' response was quick, but their hearts were struggling against confusion, fear, and excitement. Their courage and training kept them stable.

Lan Jue's deep voice continued. "Alpha squad will be responsible for destroying their planetary defenses. Bravo will proceed with the extraction mission. The remaining forces will focus on exterminating these pests. There will be no survivors."

“Yes, sir!”

This time the answer came from Tan Lingyun, Wang Hongyuan, Geng Yang, Jin Tao and Tang Xiao.

The bloodlust in Tan Lingyun’s eyes was obvious. She’d never participated in an actual battle, but the desire to enact justice ran deep to her bones. After seeing the cruelty to her compatriots on that video, a fire was ignited within her for vengeance.

Wang Hongyuan was much calmer than his co-worker. To him, this sort of ‘cleanse’ was not a problem. After all, there was a reason he chose a life on Skyfire, working in education.

Tang Xiao, as cunning as he was, had had his confidence boosted considerably after the An Lun training. His determination to succeed and grow stronger burned fiercely.

Geng Yang, in comparison, was more fearful of what was to come. But, he was a star pupil, the pride of the NEU. Before Tang Xiao’s sudden inexplicable leap in power, Geng Yang was the one to watch. There was no time to slow, no time for hesitation. So he swallowed his fear – he couldn’t play second fiddle to Tang Xiao!

Jin Tao’s eyes were a dangerous red, and his heart already roared in his ears. He yearned for battle – to visit ruin upon those bastards who hurt his family!

“Main drive systems prepped.”

“Energy levels at maximum capacity. Main thrusters are open!”

Mika and Xiuxiu delivered their reports one after the other.

“Holy shit! What do you think you’re doing?!” The Accountant looked at Lan Jue like he was a mad man. Was he planning to use their ship to ram through the defenses? Granted it was a watered-down version of the system, but it still had enough firepower to rival a battleship. If they chose a straight rush, the defensive systems would undoubtedly tear them apart. What’s more, the system was designed to be condensed and intensive. Getting passed one line of defense didn’t mean you were out of the woods.

They were likely to encounter resistance every step of the way. A blitzkrieg was not something the pirates feared.

Of course, Lan Jue wasn't swayed in the slightest by the Accountant's fears.

"Engage!"

Lan Jue closed his eyes, and from overhead a half-helmet descended and settled on his crown. The armrests also reacted, simultaneously opening and extending two metal orbs beneath his palms.

The Accountant snapped back around and busily banged the keyboard before him. However, he was surprised to discover that his screen had gone dark – he could not control the ship from his station. The whole of the ship's interior went dark. From the window, he could see that a pale blue light had sprung up around the ship like a bubble – their shields.

He's really going to try and ram through? This guy's crazy!

The Accountant knew he couldn't stop it. He couldn't do anything.

Suddenly the passengers of Zeus-1 were violently thrust against the backs of their chairs as a tremendous accelerating force arose. The students felt it too, and for those brave enough to turn their heads they could see the universe warping uncomfortable from the windows. Zeus-1 charged screaming toward the Crimson Star like a vengeful bolt of lightning from the gods.

The planet's defenses were already operating at full capacity, as per Feng Lin's command. A wall of laser blasts pierced through the planet's atmosphere to meet them.

Part of the system's strength was its lack of a 'blind side.' Of course, this was supplemented by frightening powerful weaponry. The trade-off was a stupendously expensive price tag, and the power gems to run it.

As a result, Zeus-1 could not evade or out maneuver the system to reach their objective. The only avenue open to them was a head-long rush.

Zeus-1's shields flashed as the strikes collided. The whole ship shook

under the assault. The students looked on in shock; only a few had complete confidence in Lan Jue, the rest had gone pale.

This was space they were floating in. Once the shields were gone, there was only a thin sheet of metal between them and asphyxiation. No one would survive if the hull was breached.

Everyone's mind was on the same fact. The question was, would the shields hold?

The ear-piercing squeal of the ship's alarms filled their ears. They shook and pitched, but in that moment a vibrant blue light erupted around Lan Jue. Bolts of errant electricity revolved around him. His hands were living lightning, opaque and super-charged as they sat on the metal orbs. The brightest point was around their Drillmaster's helmeted head.

The Accountant was more than familiar with all manner of technological devices. Now that the process was revealed, he understood what Lan Jue was going for. Specifically, he was using his Discipline to reinforce their shields. But was this crazy guy's individual power enough to face down an entire planet's defensive systems?

The Accountant was scared, furious, but as he looked once more out of the window he spied their shields – studier than ever. Shimmering bolts of electricity surrounded them like a protective net and fed their defenses. Although the anti-aircraft batteries were strong, they weren't enough to pierce Lan Jue's power. They were deflected harmlessly in to space, like they were little more than an afterthought.

Zeus-1 was picking up speed.

Lan Jue's patrol ship was fitted with excellent drive systems that could ramp it up to light speed in no time. It had been fast enough to circumvent the Bastion and battleship attacks during their earlier foray in to the Starfields.

Despite the fully-powered systems desperately trying to dissuade it, Zeus-1 would not be denied. It drilled through the planet's thin atmosphere under heavy assault. The ground came in to clear view.

“Brace for impact!” Xiuxiu’s sweet voice rang loud in the cockpit.

The students felt their harnesses tighten. The shields outside their window flared with energy. They were charging at light speed – slowing down would be a problem. Unless you hit something. Like a planet.

Boom.....!

It was like the entire planet shook. A shockwave of excess energy blasted out in all directions. Four of the seven returning ships were instantly disintegrated by the force. The remaining three fled wildly, colliding with one another in their furious escape. The damage was extensive – they were no longer threats.

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Feng Lin sat in his captain’s chair, staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at what he’d just seen. This was why Zeus was so terrifying – this was the mad Mercenary King. Not even a planet could stop him.

Zeus-1 crashed in to the surface like a nuclear bomb. Their point of collision left a crater twenty kilometers wide. Where there had been an airstrip, there was now only rubble.

Chapter 317: Your Turn!

Zeus-1 was, itself, a weapon of mass destruction. After the terrible collision, by virtue of the ship's powerful shields, it revealed itself to be completely undamaged. Of course, the impact was still felt – the NEU students were all dizzy and confused after the strike.

Hack! Cough! The Accountant heaved and sputtered, trying to shake off the uncomfortable feeling. He coughed for several minutes.

His discipline was unique. It had very little effect on the physical body, so he was struggling to keep himself in equilibrium following their crash landing.

Mika and Xiuxiu, meanwhile, had already disengaged their harnesses and were milling about the bridge. Lan Jue was next, and as he rose to his feet he indicated with his right hand. In response, a bolt of lightning shot out, fractures in to countless smaller projectiles, and landed upon each of his students. The purpose was to dull their nerves so that the impact didn't hurt so badly. It would also help them recover faster.

“The rest is up to you.”

The Crimson Star was pretty hostile to life, as might be expected, though it wasn't quite so bad as An Lun. You could survive in this atmosphere for a short time, at least. Gusts of strange, toxic-smelling air filled the ship when its doors were opened. By then several of the group leaders were already standing and organizing their people.

The interior of the patrol boat was too small for them to get set with their mechas right away. Originally it wasn't constructed to handle even the amount of people it ferried now. They'd have to choke down the caustic air for a few moments before exiting the plane, and getting in their new suits.

Lan Jue was the first to disembark, with Mika and Xiuxiu at his heels. They didn't need a mecha suit just yet – their Disciplines would sustain them. Eventually, all the students followed. The Accountant remained behind the ship's controls, shutting the door once everyone had left.

The An Lun mechas were relinquished from their interspatial confinement through their wristbands, so it took very little time for the students to extricate and board them. They arranged themselves by team, and awaited instructions.

Lan Jue didn't keep them waiting. "Keep a line of communication open with the ship. It will provide you with a map, and markers for all objectives. Remember that this is a live fire battlefield. You aren't using training mechas. How you proceed out there could mean everything. If you fail, the price will be your life. Now is the time to put away all your fear, all those negative emotions. Focus on the enemy. Focus on the person we're here to save. Move out!"

Five small groups of students launched toward the skies at his command. Under their squad leaders' commands, the teams raced toward their predetermined targets.

Mika and Xiuxiu stood at Lan Jue's shoulders. Xiuxiu's timid voice chimed in. "Boss... are we really leaving them to their own devices?"

Lan Jue chuckled. "So long as the pirates don't mount any sort of effective defense. Remember, they're the school's elite piloting An Lun Warsuits." As he spoke, he fitted his flight suit helmet on his head. He spoke in to the mic. "Accountant, give them the map."

The Accountant had, by now, entirely recovered. He couldn't help but share his thoughts. "Jewelry Master, you are unequivocally insane. What if your shield wasn't strong enough, ey? What then?"

"Impossible," Lan Jue responded indifferently. "Stop with the nonsense and get to work."

The former mercenary took his own advice, for even before he'd finished talking his right hand was already lifting. He could feel the surging energy of the phylactery stone in his palm.

Lately, all of his more powerful manifestations – whether the training on An Lun or their dramatic entrance here – were touched by the power of the phylactery. With power enough to run a mother ship in his palm, certainly some would be expelled unconsciously when in combat. During

the course of his fights some would leak out and fuse with his own abilities.

§

Tan Lingyun, commanding Alpha squad, was racing toward her own objective – the main controls for the planet's defense system. Now that they were passed the defensive perimeter, it would be much easier to disrupt.

In no time at all, the Accountant had tapped in to the planet's communication systems, using it to deliver information to the students. The control systems were located deep in the enemy base. Its layout, even personnel locations, was revealed on the Accountant's map.

Tan Lingyun looked over the information from within her own Warsuit. It wasn't as well designed or as powerful as her Sovereign-ranked suit, but she wanted to feel the spirit of the blood iron soldiers as she performed this righteous mission.

As ever, her weapons were dual swords. They glinted as she raced forward to their objective. Her radar incessantly swept the area before her for surprises. She kept one eye on the stream of information the Accountant was feeding them.

This was a true fight! Lan Jue's address within Zeus-1 had inspired her. Her failure during the An Lun trainings was serious, and now the chance arose for her to redeem herself. What happened was irreversible – there was only the path forward.

Clearly, she was advancing much more cautiously than the last time.

However, as time went on Tan Lingyun discoveredn that her caution was perhaps unwarranted. The information they were receiving from Zeus-1 was supremely accurate. All she had to do was following the route laid out, and that was it.

Hell, this real fight was looking much easier than their training!

Similar revelations were shared by the other group leaders. The Accountants information was exhaustive, comprehensive and completely

accurate. It was like he had a dozen eyes in the middle of the camp, feeding him info.

Tan Lingyun and her team arrived at their target in ten minutes. According to their intel, there were thirty mechas stationed here. Because of their rather flashy entrance, the suits were already armed to the teeth and prepared to defend the system.

It was the pride and joy of the Crimson Flag. There were here to obliterate it.

Lingyun raised a hand signal, and came to a stop just outside the enemy's detection radius. The enemy had long ago engaged their own interference devices, which served to hide them well. Pirates, of course, were well versed in actual combat, and knew what had to be done.

Luckily, the pirate interference systems would only effect mechas, and not the whole of Crimson Star's electrical systems. What's more, the cameras they relied on outside of the base belonged to the Accountant now! That was how they got such accurate information concerning enemy routes.

Tan Lingyun gave out tasks to her charges, using the information in her mecha to direct them. The first strike group included her, and the eleven members spread out. They turned on their own radar as they pressed forward.

Tan Lingyun stalked like a cheetah. Silent as the grave, she crept up behind an enemy mecha and readied her blades to pierce it through the cockpit.

Interstellar pirates lived a life of blood and corpses. They made them, or became them. And so, even though Tan Lingyun approached from his blind side, the pirate's sixth sense kicked in. He felt the impending danger, and strafed sideways.

Clang! Lingyun's swords pierced the enemy mecha's metal shell. She'd missed the cockpit, but it was good enough she felt. She poured her supernatural energies in to the blades, and right away they glowed with a vibrant green. She wrenched her blades sideways to the cockpit, and the

blades moved smoothly through like a hot knife through butter.

A scream arose from somewhere inside the suit. Tan Lingyun didn't stay to gloat – in a blink, she was stalking her next prey.

The attacks on other targets were also underway. The students' maneuvers weren't exactly refined, but they had just completed an exhaustive two month training course. Though they weren't on their A-game, they were still talented Adepts with extensive mecha training. They had the advantage.

The entire operation was unfolding before them.

Similar scenes were playing out for every squad. They swept through the enemy forces without any showy moves or fancy tactics. This was war, and wars were won with strength and discipline.

The students' foundations were solid. What they lacked, was actual battlefield experience. This was their first time encountering a true enemy who wished to see them dead. Clearly they weren't used to it, yet. Still, they possessed a unique supremacy in their Disciplines.

Obviously, Talent alone wasn't going to win the day. But it could save their lives, and give them a chance to correct their mistakes. Luckily the opening charge had gone smoother than they'd anticipated. Now, however, with the fight well and truly under way, things were becoming more challenging.

Now was when their individual strength would be revealed.

Alpha squad was under Tan Lingyun's command. Wang Hongyuan was responsible for Bravo, and Charlie followed Tang Xiao. Geng Yang and Jin Tao led Delta and Echo respectively.

Jin Tao's squad was composed of melee specialists. Their objective was the underground base of the Crimson Flag. They encountered opposition immediately.

Jin Tao led the charge. A faint golden aura surrounded his Warsuit as it plowed ahead. In his wake a strange image followed, like a spectral lion that moved faster than the wind. He leapt like a beast on a nearby enemy

and then, with the golden aura around him flaring, he tore the machine's arms off. He repeatedly rammed his suit's head in to the mangled enemy's cockpit until the screaming stopped.

Fierce, vicious, and wild. He was an angel of death, who's like a knife cut a bloody swathe wherever he went.

The Crimson Flag was not a weak clan, but even if they were twice as powerful they couldn't match up to the Iron Army! They were decent fighters, with extensive combat experience. But they didn't cooperate, so they were a mess of disparate parts falling to a superior force. Against the soldiers of An Lun, they'd have lost. But these were pirates, and their deaths were all but assured.

Lan jue, Mika and Xiuxiu did not engage. This was truly in the hands of the students, now.

Chapter 318: Geng Yang's Crisis

Plumes of acrid dark smoke rose to the skies, as angry fireballs dotted the Crimson Star's surface. Explosions roared like thunder.

A battleship rose from the fray, heading toward the atmosphere. Its sleek surface was painted orange by the dancing flames below. It rose under cover of the planet's defense systems, just as they went offline.

Feng Lin's chins quivered in fear, and his eyes flashed with enmity. The Crimson Star was his territory. He'd poured years of blood and sweat in to making it his, but now this bastard was taking it away.

The moment he saw the blue ship crash in to the planet, he knew he had no chance to fight them off. Zeus was too strong. More than once he'd seen video of what Zeus did to pirates. He dispatched the whole of his mecha warriors, while ordering his closest subordinates to join him on their flagship.

The battle below was in full swing. Zeus and his people were on the path to wiping them out, but they needed time. Why, then, should he stick around, Feng Lin thought? No point in pining for grass when you were off to greener pastures.

Thankfully, Feng Lin's caution helped. His ship's systems and communications weren't connected to the planets, so the Accountant had no means to stop his escape.

The young man reacted quickly, however, when he saw the ship angling for escape trajectory.

"Jewelry Master, a battleship is attempting to flee. Should I give chase?" he asked.

"No need," was Lan Jue's response. "Keep up your analysis of the battlefield situation. I'll deal with that boat myself."

There was a flash of blue light, which gradually rose in intensity until it was a blazing orb of golden energy. It released the condensed energy in a lancing bolt of lightning, which raced in to the heavens and disappeared.

About a thousand pirates remained, with three hundred mechas among them. It was enough for three standard military companies. This was something rare for a pirate clan to organize. Among them were also several proficient pilots. Pirate life made for effective motivation. If you didn't learn a skill, you died.

7

Geng Yang's rifle muzzle smoked. In front of him, the headless body of a pirate collapsed to the floor. The enemy mecha twitched, expelling a shower of sparks.

Things on his end of the field weren't going precisely as planned. His team was responsible for storming the compound together with Charlie and Echo. But despite having three squads, the enemy's numbers were far superior. In this area alone, the Accountant's analysis read one hundred and fifty enemy soldiers. They had thirty.

As the fight began, the enemy soldiers were in disarray. With their suits, Discipline and the element of surprise, the students smashed through their perimeter defenses and began to clean house. Twenty mechas were destroyed in the opening moments, but the pirates were experienced in the ways of small skirmishes such as these. They recovered quickly and mounted a defense.

A pirate's life was lived on the edge of a sword. Every one of them had taken a life before. They were fiercer, tougher, and far less scrupulous than the NEU students – worse than they'd thought. Still, the young pilots cut intimidating figures in their Warsuits.

The fight against the An Lun soldiers had left Geng Yang with a profound impression. He and Jin Tao had worked well together, giving their own team an opportunity to regroup and reengage. Unfortunately, they had been completely annihilated.

This time, he was determined to protect his soldiers. And so, from the very beginning he threw everything he had in to the advance. More than six enemies had been felled by his gun already, at this point.

He staggered, but recovered quickly as the enemy forces began to focus

their fire his way. He swung around rifle first, and used it to deflect a laser blast. He took the opportunity to steady himself.

Geng Yang was a first-class pilot, and their trump card. He had an innate talent when it came to mecha control. He dodged the enemy's shots with fluid feints left and right, then fired his rifle in to the soldier next to him at point blank range. The pirate screamed helplessly as he was blown away. But Geng Yang turned to the other one who'd tried to get the drop on him, simultaneously drawing the alloy blades fixed to his back. In three chops, the enemy sneak attack was put down.

Geng Yang felt his Discipline flood through him, growing strong and prosperous. A golden aura sprang up around his Warsuit, condensing in to a vibrant amber as it empowered his weapons. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied another contingent of pirates heading his way. He twisted, and with a mighty sweep of his blades sent out a blast of power over ten meters long. The force knocked the enemies flying. It would buy his team a few more moments.

The young pilots were even more practiced in technique and cooperation this time. A result of their affair in An Lun, certainly. However, nerves had to be considered, and some were so nervous it was effecting their combat effectiveness. After all, this was a real fight, where the consequences of failure could very well mean death. Under conditions like these, how could these students – who had never taken a life before – not be nervous?

Geng Yang's breath came quick and haggard. Sustained use of his Discipline was exceedingly draining. He took a quick glance at the battlefield analysis to see that at least one hundred and twenty enemies remained locked in conflict. He was unfamiliar with the terrain, but he could see they were trying to position around and encircle his squad.

No good! That would certainly lead to injuries or deaths.

The An Lun Warsuits were equipped with thick armor and a powerful core. The central energy core was also tied to a reserve shield system. If the suit were to encounter an attack it couldn't survive, the shields would

come online. It was in part due to this functionality that Lan Jue's students had yet to report any incidents. However, energy had its limits. Because they were nervous, many of the inexperienced pilots begun the fight pouring all of their powers in to the opening charge. Now, about halfway through, they were starting to fade.

In regards to mecha piloting, these fearsome pirates were no less adept than their attackers. As their Talent advantage waned, naturally the pirates' response strengthened.

In another part of the battlefield, Tang Xiao was taking to the fight like a duck to water. His eighth-ranked Discipline was a terrific boon, and even the enemy suits could be manipulated by his powers once he got within range. His enemies fell, ended by their own weapons. At the outset, at least four pirate mechas were destroyed before they could engage their shields. Tang Xiao forced their metal cockpits to fill with spikes. They were dead before they even knew what happened. His smarts and Discipline currently had him at the least of most confirmed kills.

Jin Tao, on the other side, had just bust through the enemy line. His Discipline was, in essence, amplification. When poured in to his mecha it increased the machine's power and speed to frightening levels. Him and his melee-focused team maintained blitzkrieg speed, so the pirates never got a chance to regain their footing.

Unfortunately, Geng Yang was having trouble. Him and his team were distance attackers, and as the battle continued they found themselves squeezed in to a tighter and tighter box. By virtue of their combat experience, the pirates had eventually surrounded their position and were closing in. Naturally, the closer they got, the harder remaining alive would be.

The only way Geng Yang could defend his team was to be everywhere at once. Under the pressing drive of their energies, his people's mecha energy reserves and Discipline continued to deplete. They couldn't keep this up for long, even with Geng Yang's support.

"Tang Xiao, we're getting overrun." He didn't want to ask for help, but he

wouldn't let his pride result in the injury of his friends. These weren't students fighting for the attention of pretty girls – they were fellow officers locked in a life or death struggle.

“Lead the fight to me,” Tang Xiao said without hesitation. “I’m moving in to support.”

“On my way!” Geng Yang swords burst in to golden flame, as he viciously carved a path. Once a path was cleared, he ordered his team to retreat through the opening. They joined up with Tang Xiao’s squad immediately, giving them a chance to catch their breath.

Just then, though, Geng Yang turned his eyes toward an ominous sound. As his vision swept the field, he saw an enormous crimson mecha barreling their way. He was fast – too fast for Geng Yang to react when the enemy slammed in to the student in front of him. He watched helplessly as his teammate was thrown aside.

Surprised and enraged, he raced forward in the hopes of saving his comrade.

By then the dark red mecha had turned to face his newest challenger. As Geng Yang drew near, he saw that the suit was constructed to resemble a beast. It had features like a lion, but locked in an eternal roar. The mane around its head was a series of compacted metal spikes. The whole suit was built in the same fashion, with sharp claws on its hands and feet. Wings fastened to its back were the lone exception.

After smashing in to Geng Yang’s friends, the beastly mech made landfall on all four feet. He turned and in the blink of the eye, leapt at Geng Yang like a wild animal. A hungry blood lust filled the air as red light surrounded it. The enemy’s clawed hands reached out for Geng Yang’s shoulders.

He was also an Adept, and not a weak one!

The NEU star pupil had only half a second to make a decision. He set his feet, gripped his weapons, then lifted them high!

He wasn’t, sadly, very used to the use of these alloy blades. He was more

proficient with spears in melee combat. There wasn't much choice in the Warsuits they were so generously given – all were standard construction.

The beastly mecha twisted violently in the air to whip its frame around. This caused Geng Yang's blades to skin passed, leaving it unharmed. Light flashed off of the beast's claws as they groped for him.

Geng Yang hastily retreated a step, in attempts to avoid the grab. However, an angry, crimson light fired from behind the lion-looking suit which propelled it forward faster than he was expecting. The two mechas collided chest-first to the sound of crunching metal.

Dark red light shimmered along the dozens of spiky thorns surrounding his enemy's head. Geng Yang's eyes widened – if his shields couldn't stave off what was coming, he might not make it home.

Chapter 319: The Blademaiden Appears

In the moment of truth, Geng Yang revealed his worth as an emperor-ranked pilot. His Bloodlust mecha suit rapidly swung backward blades first, in attempts to pin his enemy to the ground.

But the lion mech was too good for that. It's clawed hands swiped at Geng Yang's weapons. He was exhausted from the fighting, so the blades were not possessed of a great amount of his Discipline. The result was that the weapons went flying. Geng Yang was disarmed.

The beastly mech then swung around, and kicked with its back legs at Geng Yang's hips. The wicked-sharp claws tore through the mecha's shields, then the metal structure of the student's mecha with a grating screech. Geng Yang was trampled to the ground.

Finished. It was all he could think about. His mind was blank except for that crushing realization. But his Discipline surged, reacting unconsciously to the danger to explode outward in a fiery display. His lion assailant was consumed by the flames.

Unfortunately, the beast's shields were strong and protected it from any serious damage. Still, it knocked him back and gave Geng Yang some space.

The red aura around the lion mecha began to condense in preparation for a finishing blow. The young NEU pilot, prone on the ground, had no way to dodge.

His squad mates were equally helpless. Ten other enemy had swarmed them in the red mecha's wake. They were busy fending them off – too busy to disengage and save their leader.

Geng Yang's eyes grew wide. He stared at his opponent, waiting for the killing blow. It was then a silvery light lanced across his vision, obliquely colliding with the lion mecha.

Clang! It was like it was struck with the force of a mountain and the red mecha went flying over a hundred meters.

The silvery light was like a specter, some sort of guardian angel that flitted off in another direction after Geng Yang was free from danger. Two pirate mecha nearby stopped in the tracks as the light raced passed. They split first at the chest plate, slowly separating until the mecha was severed completely in half lengthwise. It was like their shields didn't even exist.

"Can you get up?" A woman's voice asked over the coms.

Geng Yang tried to maneuver his suit. Not bad – the strike landed, but handled damaged the joint. He rose to his feet. He gulped, covered in a cold sweat. He'd only just barely escaped with his life.

Geng Yang spied a silvery-white mecha standing a short distance off. It had a sleek and aerodynamic design, without any decoration or unnecessary accessories. It was covered in strange grooves, and exceedingly frail-looking for a war machine. It's two arms were thin like blades. The mecha gave Geng Yang a cursory look, and then she was off – there one second, and gone the next.

So fast! This mecha's amazing! There was a flash, and once again that beastly mecha was sent flying.

As he watched a red orb of energy descended from above. It was a roiling orb of flame, and it crashed in to the prostrate pirate like a meteor.

It's silhouette was stark, set against the raging orange of the fires. A silver light swept through and pierced the beleaguered mecha's cockpit. The silver mecha slowly lifting its arm, backlit by fire, with the beast mecha impaled upon it. She unceremoniously flung her foe aside like garbage.

Thus did Geng Yang's would-be murderer meet his end.

A fiery red mecha descended from the skies. Its entire construction made it look like a mass of writhing flame. He could tell from the construction that it was a woman's mecha. Her weapon was a staff – no, a scepter? A glowing red power gem was on its crown.

The gemstone was almost half a meter in diameter. It had only a hundred and eight facets 1 It shimmered, alive with an internal fiery light.

The red mecha lifted its scepter, and another orb three meters in diameter was cast forth. It landed in the midst of an enemy squadron, and exploded with frightening ferocity. The surrounding enemies were instantly immolated.

The silvery-white mecha took a different approach. She raced from one side of the field to the other, and everywhere she went, she left a trail of bodies in her wake. One, then another, and other fell before they could even see her coming.

Geng Yang by now had guessed these mechas' origins. He'd caught a glimpse of these suits in passing during the An Lun battle. They were piloted by two of the assistants the Demon Drillmaster had brought with him. He hadn't seen them engage anyone during that fight. He had no idea they were so strong!

The titanium-white mecha especially captured his attention. She was like a living weapon, and where she went her enemy's shields were useless. Sharp, was the best way to describe her.

With the arrival of these two new players, the game was completely changed.

Although Geng Yang still had motive capability, he nonetheless gathered a few squad mates around him before checking on his fallen comrade, who'd been struck by the lion mech. Thankfully he'd only sustained concussive injuries, nothing that was life-threatening or would take him out of the fight. They reorganized, then under Geng Yang's command proceeded to give their nearby brethren fire support.

Interstellar pirates were a tough breed. If a battalion of soldiers were to suffer around thirty percent damage to their unit, they were in danger of collapse or defeat. The pirates, though, fought ever harder as their losses neared half. After all, where could they retreat to?

Mika urged her mecha – Jezebel – onward 2, revealing to all its frightening power. In truth the cudgel she bore was not a weapon, but an amplifier. Mika called it her wand. Jezebel's Hellfire Wand.

As the mecha raised its wand high, Mika's eyes flared with an unholy

light. Under Lan Jue's direction she had been attempting to call forth the power of Satan, to control it. Under Lan Jue's guidance, they could watch to see if she was tending toward a loss of control. He would then step in and help stabilize her. Now, she felt more confident in allowing herself to let it free. She needn't fear losing herself to the evil.

Finally able to employ and cultivate her powers, Mika's powers had improved dramatically. She was well through ninth level first rank, and closing in on second. As Satan's successor, she was certainly the strongest of his Amazons in regards to potential.

The Hellfire Wand pulsed with an unsettling, dark red energy. A corona of light hung around it, expanding. A terrible, oppressive aura hung over the field. The pirates grew frightened at the sight of her. That stifling sensation slithered through them, making it difficult to breathe.

The first pirate to try and flee was near the edge of the conflict. A second followed, then a third.

Mika's fiery hair flailed through the cockpit like it was caught in a spectral wind. The feral strands darkened until they were the same devil red as her eyes. With a grunt, she poured her monstrous power in to Jezebel.

The massive gem at the top of the Hellfire Wand shone brilliantly like a small sun. The red aura thickened, and spread like storm clouds over the area. Of course, that shimmering stone was a power gem, an a-ranked Hellfire Stone to be precise. Its function was to greatly amplify any fire-based Disciplines. It increased Mika's by three hundred percent. In truth, no normal a-ranked stone could do what this one was doing.

The clouds grew dark, but instead of lightning their lines were painted red. Moments later, screaming balls of crimson fire came tumbling from the heavens. There were few at first, but they were soon followed by countless more. The sky was burned behind them, leaving a trail of angry fire and choking smoke while they barreled like inevitable doom toward the fleeing pirates. Where they landed, the earth was obliterated, scorched black and ruined. The land around the pirates was blanketed in all-

consuming fire, deafening them with terrifying blasts.

Charlie, Delta and Echo had completed their objectives, and their foes lay slain or fled in terror. They watched in stunned silence as the world before them burned indiscriminately.

This...

No suit was capable of this level of destruction. No, this had to be the teaching assistant. This had to be her Discipline! This red-haired, normally silent woman was unceremoniously exterminating their foes.

Alpha squad had succeeded in taking the planetary defense system offline. Tan Lingyun watched the distant horizon as it was painted red. She saw that mecha, like a demonic god, and her pupils contracted.

At her level of cultivation, she was of course capable of sussing out another's power level. No wonder she was so confident that day, Tan Lingyun thought, she was a ninth level Talent. Her mecha was also something to behold, and powerful if it could strengthen her Discipline to this level.

The apocalyptic meteor shower continued for a few minutes more. The earth below was desecrated beyond recovery, and belched fires that would melt the student's suits. Clearly, there were no survivors in that lake of fire.

Jezebel and Asura descended to join the others on the ground. A message from the Accountant flashed on their screens, encouraging all of them to seek out and destroy any who might have escaped. The squads fanned out in all directions and proceeded to hunt down any remaining foes. There was no more fear, or worry over the result. This battle was won, it was just time to put it to bed.

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Feng Ling was furious! He ground his teeth so hard they threatened to break. He could see all that was happening below, on his Crimson Star. Alas, he didn't even have the courage to blast the planet with the ship's main cannons and give them support. He wouldn't delay one second – that

was Zeus, the stuff of nightmares!

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1. 108 is an important number in Buddhist lore. It's also important for Hinduism and Jewish faiths, but the author likely meant to evoke the Buddhist bit. As far as I remember, the beads represent the one hundred and eight lessons of the Buddha. It's almost ubiquitous with martial arts, and is seen often in fictional literature as a superhuman technique or series of techniques that ties the user to the universe.
2. Unless I'm mistaken, this is the first time we've seen Mika in her suit. I've chosen to name her Jezebel after the tale of Jezebel, which while I don't see it here, is sometimes referred to as the 'Mother of Harlots', or Satan's Whore. In Chinese the name is 'Demon Concubine' – close enough, I think. If I'm miss-remembering, and I've already named her mecha, please remind me.

Chapter 320: Less Than You Deserve

He had to run, quickly and as far as he could. He would hide somewhere in the Northern Alliance, and find safety under their protection. He still had a battleship, it would serve to raise his worth in their eyes.

Luckily, most of the money they'd gained through looting over the last several years had been poured in to the pirate leader's flagship. Every pirate knew that a day like this would come eventually. So, he had spent his time preparing.

The radar squealed an alarm.

"An enemy is in pursuit," a pirate hollered.

Feng Lin felt his whole body quiver. He raced to the screen to see for himself. A shimmering ball of blue light was closing in. It was impossibly fast, and was already practically on top of their position.

Blue! He knew what that represented.

Feng Ling was full of anger and resentment, but none of that was worth his life. "Open her all the way up – all thrusters and main engines. Full speed ahead!" He shouted the orders, his voice ringing on the bridge.

He tensely watched the screen, watched as that blue orb approach. However, as he looked on he saw the ball of light flash – and then, it was gone.

"Eh?" The pirate sitting in front of the radar panel was furiously trying to find the orb. "Where'd it go?" The encroaching danger was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, the entire ship began to shake.

All the color drained from Feng Lin's face, turning the fleshy nubs from a dark red to a sickly pale. "Mechas!" He shouted. "Get the mecha ready! Attack!"

Mechas couldn't compete with battleships on any level, this was a simply fact. Look at the sheer amount of resources that are required to

build a battleship! In both attack and defense, a battleship outclassed a mecha by orders of magnitude.

Speed, for instance – an ordinary mecha couldn't reach light speed, something that was true even for most God-ranked mechas. Battleships, however, needed only slight modifications before it was capable of the feat – even FTL.

However, in the universe there were no absolutes. What a mecha suit couldn't do on its own, it could do easily with the right pilot.

An example was Jezebel, and the terrifying hellfire meteor shower she'd used to decimate the pirate fighters. If anyone other than Mika were to pilot it, it didn't matter who they were the same results could not be achieved.

Thor was another. With his own powers and the lightning energies of the suit, he could easily and quickly reach light speed.

Battleships were only capable of accelerating to light speed in the vacuum of space. Feng Lin had yet to break atmosphere.

At its speeds, Thor was like a twinkle of light. In no time at all, it was beside the ship. The ship's shields were up, however, and those were formidable for a mecha to handle alone.

Thor tore through the air, spinning like a drill with its spear leading the charge. The shields shuddered, flashed, then parted. Thor was through.

Bang! Thor attached itself to the hull of the ship.

Although battleships and patrol boats were only separated by one 'level', they were vastly different vehicles. Patrollers were meant as supports for battleships, or their stationed planets. They were closer ranged skirmishers, and search vessels. Conversely, battleships were adept at traveling long distances, and were capable weapons for nearly all manner of combat. Because of this, its armor was considerably thicker than its smaller counter-parts. They had to be made to withstand blasts from rival battleships, after all. The result was a much harder ship when compared to patrol boats.

But Thor didn't seem to be aiming to destroy the ship it was clinging to. As it stood there, latched to the ship, it began to pulse with waves of electric blue light. The strange energy swept across the length and breadth of Feng Ling's escape vessel.

Inside, the ship was a chaotic mess. His ship was powerful, yes, but badly understaffed. In his rush to escape, Feng Ling had brought only his most trusted men. Less than fifty mechas were available to mount a defense.

Feng Lin himself clambered in to a suit. He shook terrible as he got the machine started. He only felt safe inside the belly of one of these beasts. But, why was it so quiet all of a sudden...

Screeaacchh! The strange sound suddenly filled the cockpit. The control board sizzled as bolts of electricity raced through it. Smoke began to fill the interior. All of the ship's electrical equipment had gone haywire.

Creaks and groans arose as external pressure slowly began to crush the ship. The lights cut out.

"Ah!" Feng Lin screamed impotently, and turned on the suit's flood lights. He dove to the side and in to a corner.

Suddenly the room's interior was host to a second figure, this one encased in gold and emitting rays of brilliant, electric blue light. Gold hair, gold robe, gold mask.

That majestic figure lit up the area like a small sun, but the pirates could only feel the creeping chill of fear crawling up their spines.

Every pirate in the Shattered Starfields was familiar with this figure. The blood of countless buccaneers stained his hands, more than anyone knew.

"Zeus... Zeus, you have to listen to me. Take it easy now, alright? Let's just... let's just talk this out." Feng Ling's voice cracked from fear. Zeus wasn't in his suit, but from what he knew of the man that didn't make the slightest bit of difference.

According to the stories, he could destroy this battleship with nothing but his bare hands.

A cold, empirical voice boomed through the entirety of the vessel. "Say what you need to say."

Feng Ling's chest rose and fell with ragged breaths. "I-I know what we've done is wrong. Piracy, is wrong. But none of this was my choice! It was all the Northern Alliance, the Northerners made me do it! They said it was so the East would send ships in to the Starfields. I'll tell you everything, I swear. Just, please let me go! I'll stand trial and tell everyone about the North's plans. Is it money? I'll give you everything I own. Y-you can give it to the victim's families, as compensation."

Now, staring death in the face, nothing else mattered but life. He was on his home turf, surrounded by his men. And yet, upon seeing Zeus he knew the fight was ended.

"Did you think about this when you massacred those people? Did you give any thought to the fact that this day would come?" Zeus took a step forward. Hundreds of errant golden lightning bolts fired in all directions from his body. They were so intense, that the pirate closest to him was immediately encased in golden light. The pilot within was reduced to ash before he could scream.

The other suits reacted by turning on their shields. They began to slowly retreat – none dared face this terrifying man.

"I was wrong, I'm sorry! But, but I didn't want to do it! What could I do? I can't stand up to the whole Northern Alliance! And if I didn't do it, they'd just get someone else. Then they would come for my head! I surrender, I'll follow you anywhere. I'll do anything you want me to do."

Zeus sniffed disdainfully. "Under interstellar law, I cannot kill you once you've surrendered. And yet, when you came across that transport ship, I wonder if you extended them the same courtesy. Was it the North who told you to slaughter them like dogs? Did you give those innocent souls any second chances? You did not stay your hand once – not for the elderly, not for the children. You just cut them down. It's too late for words now. You, all of you, will be reborn in the next life as beasts. And even that will be too good for you."

“Get him!” Feng Lin howled. Zeus had made it clear he would offer no quarter. If he wanted to live, defeating the Mercenary King would be his only chance.

The interior of the battleship flashed erratically as laser rifles fired. The air hissed and sizzled. The ship’s interior was sturdy and well equipped, with its own interior shielding. In fact, they were specifically installed because the pirates knew the risk of fighting on their own ship was significant. They had to avoid damaging this very expensive war machine. The haphazard rifle fire ricocheted in all directions, but left the ship itself largely unscathed.

The pirates’ eyes grew wide as they watched the blasts penetrate Zeus. They did it! Did they?

But not a moment later, everything around them was painted a blinding gold.

“I command the clouds to gather!”

Foreboding mists of gold crept around them, appearing from nowhere. It reached in to every nook and every corner. Only particularly well-shielded areas seemed to keep it at bay.

“The heavens... shall splinter!”

Bolts of golden electricity – thicker than man’s waist – exploded through every hallway. Countless lightning bolts surged like an ocean, obliterating everything it came in to contact with.

Where they on the planet, Lan Juwe would have needed the help of Thor to route the enemy this quickly. But in the confines of this floating metal coffin, the pirates had nowhere to run – nowhere to hide. Zeus had grown tired of speaking with these animals, so he would speak with action. Under his precise control, those terrible bolts of lightning relayed his message.

When he was finished, not even corpses remained. The pilots in their cockpits had been disintegrated, wiped from the universe by these righteous bolts.

Only one single mecha was spared the reckoning. When that terrifying lightning ceased to wreak havoc, Feng Ling remained. He sat in the cockpit, too frightened to move. His arms and legs shook, and at some point he'd urinated himself. Just the presence of this awesome protogenic power was making it hard to breathe.

This was the power of Zeus' Ascension. The mighty god of lightning made real.

Once again that golden figure appeared silently out of thin air. He stared silently at Feng Ling for a moment, then spread his arms. Loud creaking protests rang through the ship when suddenly Feng Ling's chest plate fractured and blew apart. The pirate lord tumbled to the ground.

Lan Jue's face became a sneer as he looked upon the man. The small ugly thing had soiled himself as well, and the stench hung heavy in the air.

"Tell me. Who from the Northern Alliance asked you to attack that transport?" Zeus' cold, cruel voice was like metal.

"It was..." Feng Ling spilled what he knew without hesitated or remorse.

Lan Jue huffed. With a dismissive wave of his right hand, a bolt of lightning ended the miserable man, removing him and his stench from existence.

Chapter 321: Ruinous Blow

Lan Jue picked off his cloak and wig, then calmly walked to the battleship's control panel. He flooded it with current, and the ship came back to life.

He wasn't happy with the obliteration of the pirates, on the contrary his brows were furrowed ominously. He connected to Zeus-1 on the planet below through a secret cipher code.

"Jewelry Master? Everything went smoothly? Don't worry, everything on the surface is normal. Beta squad has found fifty-six Eastern women who had been held hostage by the enemy. They've already escorted them to safety. The remaining teams are cleaning up the stragglers."

Lan Jue's quiet voice responded. "Relay my command, Accountant: Everyone is to fall back to Zeus-1. Take off and pick them up. Once you've got 'em, come and get me. Quick, now."

The Accountant felt nervous as he heard Lan Jue's urgency. He didn't dare dally, and performed his task without hesitation. The students, as well, felt strange as the commands were relayed. Didn't he say not to give any quarter? Wasn't their job to eliminate all of the pirates? They were well in control of the battle, and the pirates had no chance at victory. What's the idea?

Although they were uncertain, their time on An Lun had taught them a little something about following orders. So despite their confusion, they did what they were told as fast as they were able.

Zeus-1 rose quickly under the Accountant's command. Flashes of light sputtered from its thrusters as the ship swept by, landing just long enough to gather up the rescued women and the students. The ship – already near capacity – was downright crowded with the addition of fifty more souls. The students had to remove their suits before boarding, obviously, though it slowed the escape process.

The seats were all given to the captives, who all looked relieved to be freed from their ordeal. But one could tell they were scarred. There was a

vacuity in their eyes, like their souls were dead or locked away. A few wept silently, or stared blankly at nothing. Seeing them, the students couldn't help but clench their fists and gnash their teeth. Who knew how much torment these poor women had to endure from these despicable pirates.

"Quick!" Lan Jue's urgent voice pulled their minds back to the present.

"Everyone's here," the Accountant said. "We're in flight, en route to your position."

Lan Jue, meanwhile, was watching the the screens at the battleship's control panel. Sweat dotted his forehead.

Lan Jue had used his Ascension powers and protogenic abilities to quickly deal with the pirates. Doing so that quickly, of course, drained a good deal of energy.

Of course, his command to recall the troops wasn't a pointless endeavor. Despite his handling of the situation, a terrifying sensation washed over him as he did. Something that made it hard to breathe.

It was a sensation he hadn't even felt on Taihua during the invasion. The fighting there had been more or less within his ability to deal with, however the feeling he had now was enough to rattle him. There was something... deadly.

It was a feeling he felt only once before. The day Hera died.

This was why he was so quickly commanding his students to retreat.

Zeus-1 tore through the air under the Accountant's expert flying, headed for Lan Jue and the battleship. Lan Jue wasted no time with explanations, sending the ship on a speedy trip in to the recesses of the Starfields. The two boats followed the same path, one in front and one behind. The Crimson Star shrunk as they raced away.

"We're boiling up in here, Jewelry Master. We're like a bowl of dumplings. Why don't you take some people with you on your ship! I can barely breathe!" The Accountant's voice was a little irritated.

In fact, he was downright depressed. As far as he knew, the Starfields

were positively rife with pirates but at least here they'd be handled. But they were ordered to leave before they could even divvy up the spoils!

The students didn't care – they hadn't done this for riches. It was enough for them to have saved these women, some of whom clearly would need years of help to get over what had happened.

Lan Jue didn't answer. He kept up the speed, forcing Zeus-1 to push full throttle to keep up. Before long both Zeus-1 and the battleship were at light speed. The ships weaved between the countless failed planets and fractured asteroids as they made their escape.

The Accountant glowered with his brows knotted as he watched the pirate battleship. The Jewelry Master was too cautious, he thought to himself. There was nothing going on! According to the star maps, there weren't even any other pirates clans in the vicinity. What's more, how could any of these piddling pirates stand up to the Jewelry Master and his awesome power?

As the confusion in his heart grew, the Accountant's eyes were stabbed by a fierce light outside of the window. It was pure white, and so powerful that the whole of Zeus-1's interior was blanched by it.

The women cried out in alarm with one terrified voice.

They could see it clearly from the windows. As they sped away a massive column of light – fifty kilometers long – tore through the darkness of space, right toward the Crimson Star. As the pearly light struck it, the entire planet adopted the pallid hue.

The Accountant's eyes grew large, and threatened to pop out of his head. The lollipop in his mouth tumbled to the floor. The planet disappeared in a stupendous explosion before the lollipop even stopped rolling.

It was a small planet, but it was a planet. The Crimson Star disappeared as this enigmatic attack reduced it to space dust. So powerful was the blast, that even the errant asteroids in the vicinity were instantly vaporized. The resulting displacement of energy condensed in to a powerful wave. Both ships had their shields up and full of energy by the time it hit them.

The Accountant's face was a sickly white, and his heart was absent any further doubt or blame. How could he even describe what he was seeing? Terrifying didn't cover it.

The students were equally stunned by the display. Never had they seen something like this before. What the hell was that white light?! An entire planet was erased by this light, to the point where even the asteroids around it were destroyed.

The women had stopped crying. They had been rendered speechless – had not these people come for them, they would have suffered the same fate as the Crimson Star.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, took deep gasping breaths as the light show concluded. Finally, safe at least for now, he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Though the students and the rescued women didn't know what that light was, the Accountant and Lan Jue were well familiar. The Savage Goddess and Wang Hongyuan could guess some of it as well.

Nothing in the natural universe could produce an attack that powerful. This was something beyond that, a supernatural power with enormous destructive power. In the realms of men there was only one thing that could produce power like that: A Bastion ship.

The battleship slowly began to decelerate. When it slipped behind Zeus-1, it listed to the side and took the brunt of the shock wave. Immediately the souls on Zeus-1 felt her stabilize considerably.

In all the vastness of the universe, the power of man was infinitesimal. But Bastions, those were different. Not even the strongest Paragon could survive a blast from a Bastion's main battery. It had the power to effect galaxies.

"Boss!" Mika and Xiuxiu shouted as they saw the battleship shudder violently from the impact of the wave. There was nothing they could do.

The harshest part of I was coming. If they could survive this, they would make it home.

The students were stunned, and afraid. They could see the battleship on the main screens, protecting their rear and being pummeled in the process. It looked as though its shields would fail any second.

It was more than fair to say that these students had endured torturous conditions since the beginning of the ARC classes. Especially Lan Jue's needles and electricity, it was a living nightmare. How could there not be a bitter hatred for their Demon Drillmaster?

Eventually, however, they discovered the sweetness after the bitter. They saw what this cruel training had forged them in to. There would always be hatred there, but that and the fear were reduced as they got stronger. Now there was also respect.

As they watched that ship behind them, protecting them from the worst of the blast, their fear grew but their resentment disappeared.

They were smart, talented youths. They knew Lan Jue must have considered these things before making his decision. There were limits to the shields of a battleship that had already been boarded. Plus, who knew how long they'd have to defend against this aftermath? Regardless, he put himself between them and danger without hesitation, and they knew what that meant. There wasn't just respect now; he was like a strict father who – although stern – came to their defense in their hour of need.

Zhou Qianlin watched with large, frightened eyes. Her hands held on to Tang Mi with a white-knuckle grip.

Tang Mi grabbed her in a hug and held her tight.

Chapter 322: Arachnid Class Bastion

Zhou Qianlin was truly scared, but it wasn't because of the shock wave.

For almost a full minute, the violent shaking continued. Eventually their speed helped them escape from the diffused destructive energy. As they stabilized, the passengers gradually calmed.

Sweat soaked everyone in the airship. They had felt the cold chill of death at their shoulder, and knew they had just narrowly avoided destruction. Had their reactions been even half a second slower, they'd all be space dust.

The Accountant was more affected. He'd performed his earlier task begrudgingly, but he also knew how important following instructions was in situations such as this. Thinking back, if he would have dragged his feet their bodies would have remained in the Starfields for ever.

Anyone who claimed to not be afraid after staring death in the face, was a liar.

Lan Jue was also shaking slightly, though he wasn't as fearful. Most was rage. The only thing capable of carnage like that was a Bastion ship. There was only one group in this area that had one.

The Northern Alliance.

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Deep Space.

A colossal silhouette hung in the emptiness of space. It spread out like an enormous spider, with its spindly legs crawling through the black. It was over ten kilometers long, and weighed in the hundreds of millions. It stalked the recesses of the galaxy in darkness and in silence.

The Arachnid, one of the Northern Alliance's seven Bastion ships. It defended them from the Starfields, and any sneak attacks that might try to pierce their borders. It was equipped with the strongest military weaponry available to mankind, and housed the North's Seventh Cosmic Fleet. The fleet was composed of a Sovereign-Class Mothership, four

Commandships, and a large number of battleships. And yet all of this comprised only one-seventh of the North's total military power. The armed might of the North was unquestioned.

Within the belly of the massive spider sat a silvery-haired man. Slowly, he dropped his finger from the large, blood-red button.

The distinguished gentleman sat straight and tall, in a crisp white military uniform. He was a towering man, with steely blue eyes that made people uncomfortable. An hooked nose hung over a thin mouth that gave him a distinctly vulture-like appearance.

Three golden stars adorned the labels on his shoulders. They glinted in the fluorescent light.

This was the commander of the Arachnid, Admiral Holmen.

He represented the more hawkish faction of the Northern military. Since the beginning he'd advocated for a firm and combative stance toward the East and West. He was a legend among soldiers.

He was seventy-six years old this year. At eight he'd begun his training in mecha combat. By fourteen, he was a full-fledged pilot. He transferred to battleship command training when he was eighteen. By the time he was twenty-two, he was in the army and wracking up commendations. It took him forty years to earn the title of Admiral, where he committed himself to exploring the frontiers of space for mankind. The Seventh Fleet under his command was the North's trump card, and was known for its strength.

Eight years ago he had achieved his latest promotion – Chief of National Defense. That was when he was given command of the Arachnid. Now he was among the top echelons of Northern command.

His political leanings were certainly more hostile toward outsiders. His techniques were always raze and occupy, and would crush any indigenous populations he came across. There were constantly calls for his removal from the more peace-loving factions, so in the end he was given command out here. Let him destroy pirates, they thought, and his proximity to the East would certainly frighten their neighbors.

Ten years ago Admiral Holmen had proposed a military campaign for An Lun, but was ultimately denied due to vociferous opposition. Lately, however, the more military minded had begun to grip the political majority. With the recent attacks on their exploratory expeditions, the calls for action were growing louder. Already there were plans put to the Ministry of National Defense for an eighth Bastion ship and three more Cosmic Fleets.

“Admiral!” A colonel shot to his feet and saluted. He was always shown the utmost respect.

“Speak.” Holmen’s voice was deep, rich, and cold.

“Our long-range satellite imaging confirms, designation Crimson Star has been destroyed. The nearby planets and asteroid belt were also destroyed or displaced by the resulting shock wave. The test fire of our main battery has completed successfully.”

“Excellent. Commence radiation recharge.” Holmen rose to his feet, slapped a military cap on his head and left the bridge. The red button he’d used to erase a planet retracted, and disappeared in to the admiral’s chair. Only admirals had the right to fire a Bastion’s main weapons.

Holmen’s face revealed a cold satisfaction as he traversed the halls. Zeus? Even someone like him was destined to become ash in the face of a Bastion. One pirate clan for one of the East’s top adepts was more than a fair trade, he felt.

Feng Ling’s calls to help had been sent to the Arachnid. Of course, why should they have any cause to listen to him? Only Holmen gave the commands here. Once the Admiral had heard of Zeus’ presence, things changed.

There were simply too many pirates on that cursed planet who had evidence of the North’s involvement. It was unallowable, they had to be silenced. He advocated war, yes, but on their terms. Sometimes it was best to avoid conflict while you prepared to strike. He was bound by congressional regulations, like everyone else, and they were always hungry for more evidence. But with all trace removed, along with that nuisance

they call Zeus, how could anything be brought back to him?

With his pirate influence, and the ever present fear of the Arachnid hanging over them, Holmen was certain it wouldn't take long to put together another batch of reprobates for his purposes.

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The passengers from Zeus-1 were transferred to the battleship, and its controls were relinquished to the Accountant. Clearly this was his area of expertise. Mika and Xiuxiu were more than capable of piloting Zeus-1.

Lan Jue was less than pleased. It was not because of his brush with death, but because of how the pirates were destroyed.

He sat in the commanders chair in the cockpit of Zeus-1, mulling over memories from three years ago.

ζ

“Run! Jin Yu, RUN!”

“It's too late, Lan Jue... it's already too late. Goodbye, my heart. I love you. Please forget me... fare well.”

Boom- — -!

ζ

Lan Jue squeezed his eyes shut. He'd unconsciously curled his hands in to fists. Those past wounds still festered, and now he knew at least part of what happened. The difference from today, was that was a fixed planet Hera was on. There was no way anyone survived.

That powerful light from the distance had re-opened old, deep scars.

Could this all be some sort of coincidence? Although all of evidence said it was an accident, but how could it have been so sudden? What if it wasn't?

After Hera's death, Lan Jue lost himself for a long while. When he finally came to, he set out for any indication of what happened. But with the planet's destruction, any hope of following a trail was gone.

So it was that he hid himself on Skyfire, and chose a quiet life on the Avenue. But for more than half a year, he would dream of that explosion every night. Now he had seen those nightmares come to life.

It had been a small planet, the Crimson Star, but it was still home to thousands of pirates. But while they certainly deserved death, their families were innocent.

Even during Lan Jue's own pirate purge, he'd never visited harm upon their families, nor plundered their belongings. Bringing those things back had no meaning anyway. Their families needed to eat, so he left them their ill-gotten goods.

This time there was nothing left. Every living thing on that planet had vaporized in the blink of an eye. Tens of thousands of lives, gone.

If he'd thought pirates were cruel, what about the ones responsible for this? There were no words to describe this monstrous act.

These were innocent lives!

"Jewelry Master... Jewelry Master do you read?" Lan Jue's coms crackled to life. He connected, and isolated it from the outside noise.

"What is it?"

The Accountant's nasaly voice answered. "Guess what I found. Hehehe, these pirates were some really crafty bastards. You know they hid their entire cache of stolen goods on this ship? This whole thing's a damn treasure vault! This is the first time I've ever seen this much wealth in one place, and I live on the damn Avenue. They got mecha suits, power gems... so many power gems. It looks like they traded for them, for convenience. We're rich! Ah-hehehehe! We've got enough here to outfit an army."

"Shut up." Lan Jue's voice was curt, he didn't have the patience for the Accountant's nonsense. He cut the connection without another word. Riches had never been his goal. If all it took was money to bring back that one person, he'd give up everything he owned.

Chapter 323: Training Ends

At long last, the training was done!

Zeus-1 led their trophy, the pirate battleship, back to Planet Skyfire. When they arrived, the ship remained in orbit as Zeus-1 shuttled her occupants back to ground. It was, after all, rife with pirate markings and was an unregistered warship. The planet's defensive systems would be on it immediately if they got too close.

This was also the seat of the Eastern government, and home planet to the Alliance. You could guarantee its defenses would be a great deal more troubling than the Crimson Star's.

Lan Jue immediately got in to contact with the Wine Master, and they deliberated on what to do with the women. They would need a good deal more manpower at the very least. That went double for the battleship.

Through testing the Accountant had discovered that the battleship had undergone a series of significant adjustments. First, its energy stores were comparable to Zeus-1, and that was impressive. It was armed to the teeth, too, but unfortunately a lot had been damaged by Feng Ling and Lan Jue's acquisition. In its current state, they certainly couldn't get the most out of the ship's impressive armaments. Most importantly, though, was that its shields far outstripped anything else of its class – enough to ward that terrible blast.

Lan Jue stood with his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes glinted with a cold light that flashed intermittently, and each time it did space seemed to warp around Lan Jue's face. It only appeared to calm when he watched the soldiers take away those poor women to safety.

The Wine Master stood at Lan Jue's shoulder, and watched as well. He nodded his head, ever so slightly. "What you all did today was a great service. However, it would be very difficult to officially commend you, considering the fact this was done of your own accord. Still, private remunerations can be arranged. What do you think would be appropriate?"

He was obviously appraised of the situation by this point. There was nothing in it he felt inappropriate; in fact, if not for the fact Paragons had to be careful about revealing themselves he'd have done the same.

Lan Jue answered by shaking his head. "Nothing. Just look after these poor women. I can't imagine what they've gone through. Also, help sell the power gems we recovered, and make sure they get all of it."

The Wine Master shot his young friend a surprised look. "Are you aware of how many power gems you brought back?"

Lan Jue's brows furrowed. "Is that important? Will any number be enough for these women to forget what they had to live through?"

A small smile appeared on the old man's craggy face. "You know, it's really no wonder the Clairvoyant was always ranked higher than I. Even his ability to read people was damn near superhuman. He told me once that although we couldn't understand you, he knew you had a good heart. This kind of personality roots you, keeps you grounded. Anyway, you don't have to worry. The Alliance will make sure they're very well taken care of. They'll have specialists in traumatic psychosis on hand as well, using state of the art medical and psychological treatments. They're families will be alerted and trained in how to help them reintegrate in to society. They will also be given compensation. So take those power gems you captured, and maybe you'll find out why they say too much wealth can be a bad thing."

Lan Jue's features relaxed. "As for the battleship, I'd ask that you help me donate it to the Alliance. Don't mention my name – I don't want them snooping around."

The Wine Master laughed in spite of himself. "Very well, I'll have someone take care of it. I'm starting to feel like a fence 1."

Finally a bemused smirk cracked Lan Jue's glower exterior. "It's not such a bad job, I reckon. In that case I'll probably make another few runs in the near future."

The Wine Master's face suddenly grew serious. "Now considering what you've done here I'm willing to forgive your past transgressions. Except for that horse-pucky with the Gourmet and that vagabond. If you hear

anything about it, you tell me right away!"

Lan Jue suddenly remembered the news, that the Gourmet and Pauper had stolen away with some extraordinary wine from the Wine Master's vault. He gave a wry smirk. "Look, I didn't benefit from any of that. I'm just suffering the result. Those fellas have definitely drank it all by now, anyway. Just don't dwell on it."

Lan Jue could actually see the Wine Master's face twitch. "Don't dwell on it'? Did you know they took the single most prized bottle of my entire collection? But at least I can be sure that no, they haven't opened that bottle."

Lan Jue chortled. "Fine. You'll be hearing from me soon anyway, to help find one of the Three Great Master's descendants like I promised. Lately things have been... hectic, but they're slowing down. Have you been able to discover anything?"

The Wine Master's eyes flashed excitedly. "Yes, in fact. I'm organizing things now, and I'll let you know when we're ready. It looks like we'll be taking a little trip to the West."

"Alright," Lan Jue answered with a nod. "I'll wait to hear from you."

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The students had all been sent home to their families. They were exhausted, and after being gone from home for so long they deserved a good long rest with their family. It had been Wu Junyi's suggested after hearing about the entire ordeal.

Lan Jue's first order of business had been to seek out the Wine Master and deal with the poor women they'd rescued, so he hadn't seen the students as they left. He didn't mind – after the explosion at the Crimson Star, and the memories they brought up, he wasn't in the best of moods.

"Boss." Mika's voice at his shoulder caught his attention.

"Hm?" He said, turning his head.

"The students asked me to bid you farewell on their behalf," she said.

“That Tan Lingyun woman was looking for you, too.”

“I swear to God, I can’t get away from that woman,” Lan Jue moaned. “Anyway, this training regimen seemed to have gone very well, but they have to keep it up. If not, the whole thing will have been a waste. Let them rest for a little while, then Wu Junyi and I will see whether or not this training needs any work. I’m leaving those power gems to you to deal with. Might as well put them in the store first. After processing, we’re give a third to the Skyfire Council.”

Lan Jue had a great deal of experience in cultivating how to deal with people. Failing to share a windfall with others was not appropriate behavior, and he prided himself on propriety in this regard. The Avenue had its own needs, and he was happy to contribute. He had a clear conscience, but they shared in times of rain or shine.

As for the Accountant, he’d already grabbed one of the larger gems and disappeared. More than likely he was going to present it to his grandfather, to make himself look good.

When Lan Jue entered the doors of Zeus’ Jewelry Shop, he immediately felt himself begin to relax. That familiar scent filled his nostrils as he made his way to the back apartments. He took a shower, then sat on the bed to rest. Physically he felt fine, but mentally was another matter. They’d all gone through a great deal these last couple of months.

The god-battles, the Citadel visit, the ARC classes, then An Lun and the Starfields... one thing after another, entirely contrary to the life of comfort he’d sought on the Avenue. And although the entire experience had been an enriching one, he was certainly fatigued.

He slipped in to a deep sleep, and in his dreams he was once again assailed by the visions of that terrible explosion. He could still see Hera’s warm eyes, full of tender affection. She reached out with a spectral hand, as though to grab him, but was always just out of reach.

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When sunlight touched his window, Lan Jue awoke. He felt refreshed, but the shadow that had crept in to the back of his mind was darker now,

and clearer. He felt haunted.

With a bitter smile he took a cold shower, to wake him up for the day. He changed his clothes, then exited out in to the shop.

He still had a great deal he needed to do. The follow-up to the god battle was of the highest priority currently. He also had to visit the school and see what needed to be done there. His etiquette class was a total mess he'd need to deal with.

Thinking about normal classes, the smile on his face grew. More and more he was enjoying the life of a professor. It was never more true than when he was in class.

There was only one etiquette teacher on staff, and that was him. Everyone thought he was a normal man, and treated him as such. The life of a 'normal' professor was a nice one, relaxing and enriching. The dark cloud that hung over him dissipated somewhat when he was teaching.

Yeah, I have to go to school and check things out tomorrow. There are classes to prepare. Today, I'll have to figure out what I want to teach them.

His leisurely stroll quickly brought him to his destination: Sunbucks Coffee.

Lan Jue pushed his way inside. It was early still, so the shop was empty. Two pretty young women were busily preparing things behind a counter. Both were clad in fine white button-down shirts and coffee-colored suit pants.

The Coffee Master was nearby as well, quietly enjoying a steaming cup of a pungent brew. He jumped a little when he spied Lan Jue, then smiled.

Lan Jue approached and took a seat without invitation. He was smiling, as well. "You know, I really want to kick your ass."

The Coffee Master's face dropped. "What the hell?! You just got back yesterday and already you're talking about beating people. You're the leader of the Star Alliance now, too. Is this how you treat your compatriots? Your fellow warriors? Do you have any humanity?"

Lan Jue just chuckled. “Humanity? I guess it depends on who I’m dealing with. A clown, for example. I think I have the least humanity for clowns.”

The Coffee Master dropped it. He knew there was quite a large difference in ability between he and the Jewelry Master. Outside of a mecha suit, he was like a toothless tiger. His muscle speed and Lan Jue’s lightning were an unfavorable match-up, regardless.

“So did you just come here to threaten?” The god-ranked pilot asked in agitation.

*

1. For those who may not be aware: A fence is someone who specializes in moving stolen goods Thieves will come to them with their ill-gotten gains in exchange for untraceable cash.

Chapter 324: Blue Mountain

“No actually,” Lan Jue said. “I haven’t had breakfast yet. Fetch us a little something yeah?”

“Shit!” The Coffee Master used his quick hands to deliver to Lan Jue the international symbol of displeasure 1. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t poison you!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “I trust your moral quality, Mister Knave.”

The Coffee Master rose to his feet in a huff. He stomped to the counter and shared a few words with the women there.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, simply sat with noble air upon his chair. He politely nodded in greeting to the ladies. “If you wouldn’t mind, I would love some Blue Mountain Coffee. I’d also like a sandwich and some greens as well, please.”

The Coffee Master turned back around and shot Lan Jue a venomous look. “No Blue Mountain!”

To this, the Jewelry Master sighed. “Fine. Might as well cancel any plans you might have with the Wine Master or Gourmet, I suppose. I’ll be sure to tell them about your sudden lack of inventory. They’re probably low as well.”

“Ruthless,” the Coffee Master snarled.

Blue Mountain coffee was considered among the best of brews. It was a rare product of a place called Jamaica, on former era Earth. It was still sold today, though modern Blue Mountain was a simulated approximation of the real thing. They had to reproduce the conditions on former era Jamaica, and that contributed to its higher cost. Even the Coffee Master couldn’t as much as he’d like, much less enough to sell. He only ever brewed a pot on particularly happy occasions.

The Coffee Master didn’t return to his seat beside Lan Jue. Instead, he walked behind the counter and busied himself with other things. The entire process – grinding the beans, filtering the coffee – wasn’t quick and

it wasn't slow. Each movement the Coffee Master made was purposeful, and graceful. His eyes were especially focused.

Watching the man at work dispersed some of the gloominess that still hung around Lan Jue. Coming back to the Avenue was always pleasant. He got to watch a master at work.

Lan Jue rarely drank milk due to his lactose intolerance ². Too much undoubtedly aggravated his stomach, and he couldn't eat for the whole day. His preference was for straight black coffee, and since it was high-grade coffee there was no need for sugar. It would adversely mask the coffee's natural flavor.

After a short while, a waitress arrived with a plate, upon which sat Lan Jue's sandwich and assorted greens. The Coffee Master eventually returned with another tray.

His was occupied by two delicate china coffee cups, and their saucers. A sophisticated silver coffee pot steamed between them. The Coffee Master placed the tray on the table, and extricated the cups. The white porcelain cups seemed exceptionally thin, almost transparent.

It was Lan Jue's first time in the many he's visited, that he saw such fine chinaware. He nodded in satisfaction. "Very nice. Sixty degrees centigrade, more or less, to ensure it doesn't adversely affect one's body temperature when you drink it ³. It also keeps the aroma, and Blue Mountain is especially good when boiling hot."

The Coffee Master lifted the silver pot and filled their glasses. Immediately their noses were filled with the rich fragrance of the coffee. It was warm, and refreshing, and Lan Jue could feel all his pores opening from the scent alone.

The Coffee Master lifted his own glass to inspect its contents. Without fear of being scalded, he took an appreciative sip of the dark liquid. Lan Jue did as well, despite his hunger. He wanted a taste of the coffee while it was still fresh. As it slipped passed his lips, Lan Jue could taste the bitterness on his tongue. That was part of what made Blue Mountain special, and he could feel it sliding from the tip of his tongue to the root

like silk. As it poured down his gullet the bitter flavors became subdued, and complicated. The heat filled him, causing the hairs on his arms to rise. The comforting sensation was like being swaddled.

Lan Jue's eyes brightened right away. When he looked to the Coffee Master, he was much the same as when Lan Jue entered; eyes closed, smiling, enjoying the flavor. Almost like he was drunk off the stuff.

Neither paused, or wasted the moment with idle chatter. They sat in silence, sipping the excellent coffee from equally exquisite glasses until they were empty.

As he'd mentioned, Blue Mountain was best served in white china at sixty degrees Celsius. It was best to finish it off quickly, before it got too cold. And yet, every detail of every sip was important, otherwise it was just a waste.

When Lan Jue reached for the pot to refill his glass, he was surprised to find it empty. The Coffee Master had made enough for two cups; no more, no less.

"Is the handle to your refrigerator broken?" Lan Jue complained as he lifted his sandwich. He was as yet still hesitant to eat, savoring the lingering flavor of the coffee.

"Eh?" The Coffee Master opened his eyes, awoken from his appreciative coma.

"You're stingy!" Lan Jue whined.

The Coffee Master almost bound out of his chair. "You're a damn beast! Finish your food and get the hell out of here! I share a glass of my Blue Mountain and you still call me stingy? Have you no shame? You're just like the Wine Master – you sure look like a gentleman, but you're really just a damn thief."

Lan Jue continued to eat, unperturbed. "You don't offer enough to satisfy, which is a minimum of three cups. I've been far too kind before, I thought to even that out with some authentic Blue Mountain. I never expected you to get so bent out of shape about it. At the least I'll bring you

out for a meal.”

“And when are you going to let me have some of that finer liquor,” the Coffee Master asked with a huff.

“When you abstain from coffee for a while,” Lan Jue answered.

“That’s impossible,” the Coffee Master returned. “Coffee is my life, alcohol takes a back seat.”

Lan Jue smirked. “Not all fine alcohol is forbidden, I guess. Wine, with it’s rich flavors, is a waste if your taste buds are dulled. Single-malt whisky is another story. Smoking a cigar and sharing a bottle is a lovely experience. I’ll call you over the next time I visit the Driver and Seamstress. They have a good stock. I hear he’s supposed to be back soon.”

“Indeed, in a few days,” the Coffee Master confirmed. “He left when you did, just saying there was a competition. Now don’t think we went about trying to fool you, because between you and me we didn’t know who anyone was before the fight. We only figured it out when we got together in DreamNet. I had no idea he was Thunderclap. I’ve wanted to test my strength against him many times. After you, he was my second target. After the god battles the two of you have since swapped places. You’re eighth on the total aggregate power scale now.”

“Not important,” Lan Jue said. “What is important, is when DreamNet’s going to be ready.”

The Coffee Master shrugged. “This, I have no idea. I’m looking forward to it. If DreamNet can actually pull it off, it’d be revolutionary. There’s already a year-long waiting period for the new generation of sim pods, and that’s with production plants in all three Alliances churning them out night and day. Someone’s made one hell of a lot of cash.”

Lan Jue raised a brow. “You mean the Keeper and Bookworm.”

But the Coffee Master’s expression spoke otherwise. “You can’t really not know... DreamNet is used by all Alliances, true, but it’s also publicly owned. The Clairvoyant and Bookworm own twenty-eight percent of its

shares. The Keeper came later, but his contributions for the last upgrade were so integral that he was given five percent of the shares. All together they comprise one-third of DreamNet's total stock. So who profits, you ask. Well, the Clairvoyant transferred his fifteen percent to the Avenue, setting it up as part of the organization's fixed assets. Since that news was published the other Alliances have lifted some of the economic restrictions they've had in place for Adept exchanges and so forth. Don't you feel like there have been more people around lately?"

Lan Jue was surprised indeed. Just yesterday he'd given a great deal of power gems to the Council. Compared to the wealth from those DreamNet stocks, his power gems were like trying to get meat from a mosquito's legs. When he spoke, it was with a bitter note in his voice. "It really isn't conducive to happy living to be so kind. How am I supposed to know how many people have been wandering the Avenue, though. I just got back last night. I still haven't been to the underground."

The Coffee Master sat back in his chair. "The two Citadels failed pretty badly with their visit. They failed to find out anything about us, and failed to apply the pressure they'd hoped. Though the Clairvoyant is busy staving off death, the Avenue now have five Paragons! This is more than the West and North put together. Granted, the Bookworm and Gourmet are new to the power, but they're Paragons nonetheless. In fact, we received an invitation from the North. They want us to send an Adept to participate in the Great Adept Battle they're preparing."

Lan Jue shot him a glance. "Are you going?"

Again, the Coffee Master shrugged. "Why should I? To be disgraced? Nothing will make me face that sort of embarrassment. I heard there's an age limit as well, ostensibly to increase cooperation among the younger generation of adepts. Something about raising the foundation for humanity."

Lan Jue's lips curled in to a sneer. "I'm definitely getting a 'bad premonition' kind of feeling from this whole thing."

This caused the Coffee Master to chuckle. "Well, if they ask for my

recommendation it's going to be you! Young, strong in Discipline and piloting ability – 'able men are always busy', isn't that what they say? You may as well volunteer, really – I don't think you're going to have much of a choice."

Lan Jue glowered. "Give me another cup of Blue Mountain, then!"

"No!" The Coffee Master returned without an ounce of hesitation. "I can't have any fine red wines, so there's nothing you can threaten me with!"

A sinister smile spread across Lan Jue's lips. "Alright, your decision. You're right, anyway, I should probably take the initiative. It's our duty to share the burdens of the Avenue. The Wine Master leads us now, and I'm sure he'll respect my opinion, since I'll be recommending several people come along with me. I don't want to be angry. You know, you have an average Discipline, but who knows where you could be with a little training..."

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1. That's how it's described here, heh. I'm sure you can figure it out.
2. This was likely put in because a staggering amount of Chinese have some level of lactose malabsorption. It makes him more relatably Chinese.
3. ~37°C for our American and UK audience.

Chapter 325: God of Wine

The Coffee Master's face hardened. "You can't do that!"

Lan Jue rose to his feet. "Why not? I'll go do it now." He made for the door.

"Fine! I'll make more Blue Mountain." The Coffee Master's voice was urgent.

"Too late! I'm a gentleman of moral integrity. I won't accept gifts given in contempt."

"Rrrggh!"

Lan Jue cackled.

Clearly he felt torturing the Coffee Master was an enjoyable past-time. Lan Jue was in a much better mood leaving Sunbucks.

The Coffee Master's words had made a great deal of sense; if age was a factor, he was the most likely candidate. There were also other considerations. The Citadels were likely surprised when, during their bullying, so many high-class Adepts responded. In truth, Lan Jue himself was surprised by the sheer number. With the addition of the Gourmet and Bookworm as Paragons, the Avenue was certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Of course the North, with their storied high-handed nature, were not happy with this situation. This was likely a large part of their decision to hold the Adept tournament. Going would be nothing but helpful, and the patterns would be insightful. There was still a month to prepare.

If he didn't go, he'd then have to find the descendant the Wine Master was after. The Wine Master was a... tenacious fellow, so their trip was unlikely to be without incident. So much to do!

Despite the negative line of thought, he didn't feel upset. Perhaps it was because he'd spent three years wasting time. In these last few months, with everything going on, he felt life to be more enriching. The crippling sadness he'd felt was slowly abating, the busier he became.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Lan Jue's communicator started to buzz. He lifted his arms and smiled ever so slightly when he saw the number. He answered.

"You're back?" A familiar voice greeted him.

Lan Jue chortled. "Yeah! Why, you didn't save me any alcohol?"

The Gourmet's voice was direct, and without mirth. "Come by."

Lan Jue, who had been heading for the Underground, changed directions.

He found his way to the small building. When he arrived, he found the door shut and the lights off. However, with closer inspection he could see a screen blocking the light from inside. He pushed the door open, moved the curtain to one side, and entered. 1

He was greeted with the sight of several people, seated on either side of the Gourmet's pride table. Among them was one of his more surprising recent discoveries – Windbreaker, the Seamstress. Her face bearing a bewitching smile, she waved him over. The Gourmet and the Pauper were on the opposite side. The newly minted paragon smiled warmly at Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master pulled out a seat and joined them. "You two... so honest, so much integrity. You succeed, and then off you go leaving me in the Wine Master's warpath. Luckily I had important business, otherwise he'd still be grilling me."

The Gourmet smirked. "So we were supposed to wait around for him to catch us? You know as well as we do, the Wine Master's famous temper. But in the end that stingy and crotchety exterior is an act – he's a good man. At worst, we'll find ways to compensate him in other areas."

"Well if you haven't drunk it yet, let's take a look," Lan Jue offered. For the Gourmet to result to outright thievery, it had to be a particularly special acquisition.

The Gourmet answered by rising to his feet, and walking to the back. He returned a moment later, holding a bottle.

It looked very similar to former era French bottles, from the burgundy

area. The rich, dark red fluid was filled to the bottle's shoulders. Clearly, someone had had a taste already.

The label was faded and yellow, but Lan Jue could still make out some of the lettering. At the very top was a coat of arms, but the ink was too worn for him to make out any detail besides an animal on its back legs swinging some sort of flag.

Beneath the image was a string of words: Vosne-Romanée. Lan Jue's knowledge of fine wines immediately revealed it as a wine's location – Romanée!

Beneath that was another: Cros Parantoux. It was a smaller area within the larger Vosne-Romanée.

In Ancient France, wines were labeled differently. Bordeaux, for instance, was labeled according to Chataeu. Chateau Lafite Rothschild, or Chateau Letour were examples. Burgundies were labeled by their region, often going from large to small. Romanée was a larger swath, with the second name being a smaller region within it. That was considered the wine's name.

“Cros Parantoux!”

He read it out loud, his voice rising with every syllable. He could feel his whole body tingling.

There were so few people who spoke the ancient French dialect, but his basic knowledge allowed for a passable translation. What this meant, made Lan Jue's heart start racing. He quickly snuck a peek beneath the foot of the bottle. That was the name that would confirm it all.

As expected, stamped there in the glass was indeed a name: Henri Mayer!

Lan Jue let out a low gasp. “This is really it. It's a bottle hand made by the legendary Henri Mayer. No wonder you resorted to thievery, who knew the Wine Master was hiding such a treasure!”

Henri Mayer. The name reverberated like thunder in Lan Jue's ears. He was one of the three great vintners from ancient France – in fact, he was probably the greatest of them all! All with only a few choice fields.

Two of those fields were considered special, and one was 'first class'. Richebourg and Cros Parantoux were those special regions. Once his Richebourg wine hit the auction, it was immediately adored, and fetched sky-high prices.

However, those who truly understood Henri Mayer, knew that the Richebourg was not his masterwork. No, this master's true magnum opus hailed from that first-class vineyard, a place they called the Vintner's Jewel; Cros Parantoux.

The Wine Master always used to say that drinking was an never-ending hobby. He meant that there were always better wines out there. But this one was legendary. This was the wine the Wine Master was really talking about.

It indeed was special. In wine, the year it was produced is important. Only specific wines on specific years were really classified as legendary wines. They were uncontested treasures of the wine world.

For example, the Bordeaux 1941 and 1961 Chateau Latour. The 1941 and '82 Lafite were also spectacular. There were a dozen perhaps, in all the thousands of years and types of wine.

There were a few Burgundies, however, that are lauded as eternally special. No matter the year, this wine is the top of its class. One, was the Romanée-Conti he'd forced the Wine Master in to sharing. The bottle before him now was another.

If that Romanée-Conti was the King of Wines, then the Cros-Parantoux was God. Lan Jue couldn't compare their flavors, since he'd never before been lucky enough to sample a Cros-Parantoux. What Lan Jue did know was that only roughly three hundred bottles had been produced for that year, and exceedingly small number. The Romanée-Conti, by comparison, was a low yield but still produced six thousand bottles. That quite clearly underlined how uncommon a discovery like this really was.

For the longest time, Lan Jue had thought Henri Mayer was more legend than man. The likelihood of him ever coming across one of his storied bottles was nonexistent. The demand for this was astronomical, and so

few remained. But here it was, made by the hands of a master. A 1993 Henri Jayer Cros-Parantoux.

Lan Jue almost felt dizzy. This thing would fetch enough at auction to buy a battleship. It would still not be enough to do it justice.

“What do you think? Was it worth it?” The Pauper finally chimed in, his face split in a wily smile. “I’ll tell you, I had to call on every ounce of willpower when nabbing this thing not to steal a swig or two!”

Lan Jue shot him a glance. “Oh this was worth it. This is like a glimpse of heaven.”

The Pauper took an appreciative gulp. “Well we’re all here, Gourmet. I say it’s time to start. You know how hard its been to wait!”

The Gourmet nodded. “People usually drink at night. The Wine Master wont expect anything if we’re missing during the day.”

“No! You can’t open it!” Lan Jue blurted out.

“Why?” The Pauper asked, incredulously.

Lan Jue sighed. “This is all so sudden. I had coffee this morning.”

The Pauper’s face suffered an irritated tick. “What coffee? Ugh, that taste wont be gone for a whole day.”

“tomorrow,” Lan Jue offered. “I’ll come back tomorrow morning, and we’ll enjoy the spoils of our misadventures.”

The Gourmet and the Pauper exchanged a glance. They each swallowed again, this time trying to choke down their regret. Together, they sighed. “Alright.”

The Seamstress finally let out a small laugh. “Look at you guys, all afraid of backbiting like little thieves. Relax, I wont drink your precious grape juice. On another note, Jewelry Master, what are your plans for the Star Alliance? The Clairvoyant put it in your hands, and that means you lead the way.”

1. Door curtains are often used in China, both decoratively and practically. They can be used as mosquito nets, to keep in the cold, or just for looks.

Chapter 326: Returning to University

“I just got back, and haven’t even had time to settle in,” Lan Jue explained. “Now that I’m one of you our numbers are back to five. A small group, but each one of you are impressively strong. I believe we should focus on expanding, making our group the largest gathering of god-ranked pilots in the universe. If the threat mankind is indeed on its way, a team like that could stand to do some real good. No task would be too difficult.”

The gourmet nodded his head, sagely. “The elitist approach, it may work. Under certain conditions, skill can trump any odds. And the more you keep striving for perfection, the more interested and hard-working your fans will become.”

It was Lan Jue’s turn to nod. “After DreamNet’s upgrade we’ll be sure to see some restructuring around Dreamburg’s god pilots. The real ones will quickly rise to the head of the pack. We can start taking a closer look then.”

“Also,” the Gourmet went on, “the Northern Alliance has sent out an invitation for us to join in their pan-alliance Grand Adept tournament. Did you know about this?”

Lan Jue grunted. “I just heard about it from the Coffee Master. It’s pretty unlikely I’ll be able to weasel out of this one, huh.”

“What do you think?” was the Paragon’s response. “Really, this shouldn’t be such a terrible task to accomplish. There’s quite a lot of tasty things to sample in the North. I’ll show you around.”

Lan Jue lifted a brow. “You’re going as well?”

The Gourmet grunted. “I’ll be the chaperone. If there wasn’t a Paragon there, what would you do if things go south? If I’m there, they’ll at least have to be less blatant about trying to murder you.”

Indeed, the presence or absence of a Paragon was a strategic aspect for these sorts of visits. They were a deterrent from more overt and violent action, simply due to their immense destructive capabilities. A Paragon

with no concern over his own life could destroy an entire planet! The gourmet's assurances were no boast, but fact.

Lan Jue chortled. "I guess I had no real plans to escape anyway, and now that you say that I'm happy to go. Just let me know when we're supposed to leave."

"It'll take place on Planet Luo, rather far away. We'll probably be leaving in around twenty days," he said.

Lan Jue nodded. "How many of us will be going?"

The Gourmet leaned back in his chair. "The rules state that the participating Adepts can be no older than forty. We're planning to send around ten. With myself as the chaperone, we're looking at the Seamstress, the Coffee Master, the Driver, you, the Barber, the Beautician, and the Bartender. We're still considering people for the remaining spots."

Lan jue snickered. "Sounds good to me. I shall obey as ordered."

"I saw you and the Pharmacist getting on famously," he said. "Perhaps you can convince her to come along as well. She is exceptionally strong, and with her on the team we're sure to fare well. Remember that we'll be representing the Avenue – we have to make a very good showing."

"I'll try," Lan Jue promised. "I can't make any promises."

The Gourmet smiled. "Very good. If there's nothing else then you're free to go. Remember to keep our secret, though. We mustn't let the Wine Master find out before we have a chance to drink this wine. If he does, losing this opportunity will be the least of our worries."

Lan Jue shot him a roguish grin. "He's really sore over this whole thing. We should invite him when we open it up. If we don't, he'll never forgive us. What do you think, should we also prepare something tasty to go with such an exquisite wine?"

The Gourmet grunted. "With this sort of wine, you don't need anything at all to go with it," he explained. "I'll prepare some fine cheeses – those will go well. Make sure you don't eat anything else with a strong taste today. If you do, we won't be able to wait for you. I'm not used to all this

sneaking around.”

At this, Lan Jue laughed openly. “Alright, alright. I’m out of here.”

Drinking this fine wine without the Wine Master would likely turn out very poorly, he felt. It was entirely possible there would be a fight. So, after leaving the Gourmet’s tiny shop, Lan Jue left immediately for the school to deal with those matters quickly. He had his own classes to prepare for. In truth he was a pretty terrible part-time teacher. He’d just taken a long leave of absence, and was about to request another.

He got his antique bicycle from the store and lazily made his way to the university. Rickety tires brought him down the road as a light breeze caressed him. It was a very comfortable and satisfying ride.

This is the life! Lan Jue could certainly get used to this feeling.

By the time he arrived at the school, it’s large gates had already been shut. It was long past the normal time for students to be coming in for morning lessons. Of course, as a teacher he had no trouble, and the guards let him right in. He made directly for the electives department. As his antique bicycle rattled along the small pathways, he shot a quick call to Wu Junyi to tell him know he’d arrived.

The Director’s response was swift. He said he’d come find him in the offices soon. When Lan Jue arrived, the electives offices were practically empty. Only four or five teachers were there. His friend Jin Yan was not among them, and neither was Wang Hongyuan. It was likely the latter was still recovering; the last couple months were hard on him as well.

The few teachers present couldn’t hide their surprise when they saw him. They were absolutely flabbergasted that this teacher would have so much leeway! He was polite enough, but the man barely showed up for classes! They’d lost count of how many times this etiquette class was cancelled. This last time – over a month – was almost too much to bear. They guessed – maybe hoped – he was here to clear away his things.

When Lan Jue made his way to his desk, he was surprised to find it very clean and in order. Most likely, Jin Yan had helped him keep things neat in his absence. A small smile crept unsuspectingly across his face.

As he settled into his seat, he began to ponder on what he would teach. Although he would be leaving again soon, he wanted to speak with Director Wu and see if he couldn't fit a few classes in before then.

Before long, the director's serious face peeked around the office door.

"Professor Lan. Could I speak with you privately for a moment?"

Lan Jue complied. As he walked to the door, he could clearly feel the other teachers' eyes following him. They looked sympathetic, obviously believing their determinations had been correct. Surely this was the last they would see of Lan Jue the etiquette teacher.

What they could not see once Director Wu shut the door, was the man's joyous expression. "Professor, you've worked so hard. You should really take a couple more days off. Are you sure you'd like to come back so quickly?"

Faced with Wu Junyi's warm smile and kind words, Lan Jue felt strangely melancholy. After all, all this 'business' was a direct result of this cunning fellow before him.

Chapter 327: Military Uncertainty

“I’ve brought everyone back, and the training has been completed,” Lan Jue said. “You can check on their improvement yourself. My responsibilities for the ARC are completed, so I’m getting back to my etiquette courses. Unfortunately, though, I’ll need to be leaving again in about half a month. Perhaps we can fit a few more classes in to these couple of weeks.”

Wu Junyi quickly nodded his head. “Not a problem. We’d have you in for classes every day if that’s what you wanted. Just let me know what schedule you’d like, and we’ll see it done.”

Lan Jue nodded, appreciative of how helpful the Director was.

Then, a cunning smile spread across his face. “Professor Tan was telling me earlier about the training, and how much improved everyone is. Apparently, every single one of your students has shown incredible gains. It only makes sense that we should keep this going, don’t you think? But relax, we won’t bother you too much with it. Just some instruction on how to run it would be grand.”

Lan Jue knew that some the Director was here for some self-serving purpose. He frowned openly as he replied. “It is entirely unacceptable for you to copy my training methods 1. And if I’m being honest, I’m surprised at how good it all turned out. A lot of it was due to luck, and unforeseen access to beneficial resources. Do you think you’ll even be able to rustle up another group like this, with their level of talent? If you managed to pull together another batch, then another training wouldn’t be out of the question – the school would have to cover all expenses, though.”

The training had been a massive expense for Lan Jue, both mentally and monetarily. Between the materials, medicines, and cost of flying Zeus-1 all the way to An Lun, the costs were enough to make a normal man blind. And he’d assumed it all himself.

Wu Junyi struck a more conciliatory tone. “Ah Professor, you’ve sacrificed a lot for us, we know this. Take it easy, the school will definitely

make sure you're compensated. Once all the checks and determinations have been finished we'll refund whatever you've spent."

Lan Jue's brows rose. "Director... that's quite a lot. Where will the school get the money?"

"From the training class, evidently," Director Wu explained. "Apparently one of the big shots opened his mouth. The military has explained that they will be giving out monetary compensation for every student that joins up after graduation, to pay for training."

Now, Lan Jue was truly surprised. "The Army? Those sneaky bastards. I bust my ass to turn these kids in to soldiers, and all the Army has to do is say they're interested before you toss them away?"

Wu Junyi was taken aback by the young professor's response. "These pilots are being turned in to warriors, isn't that what we wanted? Certainly this is beneficial for everyone."

Lan Jue's face crinkled in displeasure. "You should also pay attention to where they'll be serving. The military doesn't just train bodies, but minds. You shouldn't seek to recoup losses like this. If you're really interested in making money, the best way to do that is to train your charges properly. Think about it, how difficult will it be for them if they decide they're not interested, but the university is obligated? The administration should really think this over."

Wu Junyi was an astute man. His face hardened from the unspoken indication. "You're saying someone's worried about these students becoming Eastern assets? Every aspect of the training was a strictly-kept secret – how could anyone from the outside have learned about it?"

"How precisely the information leaks is a question that needs answering," Lan Jue said. "I know that none of my charges could – every opportunity to communicate outside of the training was blocked. It's the university that has to consider resources. I'm sure that whoever has agreed to pay your price for these students will likely test their skills to determine payment."

Director Wu was beginning to understand the problem. "Alright, I'll dig

a little deeper. If there are any problems, I'll let you know."

"Be careful where the money comes from, Director," Lan Jue said. "That's all they need to steal our bright minds away, and obligate our students in to service. If you don't accept, you – and the students – will have more options. The second you accept, that's it."

Wu Junyi looked back at him hesitantly. "So should we continue their assessment?"

Lan Jue nodded. "Yes, that would be good. It'll help ease doubts and shore up confidence. Give the students a week to recover, and we'll keep our ears open for any news. When you have the results, come to me immediately."

"I will." The happiness with with the Director had begun their exchange was gone. He left without another word.

Lan Jue did not remain in the office. This was a matter he'd have to think deeper on. With all the work and effort that had gone in to the training, a leak seemed impossible."

Lan Jue exited the electives building and pushed his bicycle toward the campus exit. He continued to ponder on the issue. If things really were problematic, he thought, he could rely on the Keeper's influence to get more information. As for the students, he had a couple routes to consider. First, he had to ensure that the rest of their time in school was suitably intense to keep their skills sharp. If they did choose to join the army then An Lun would be the best destination. That was Lan Qing's turf, and most important was they were a cohesive and unfractured unit. There was no room for internal strife, or disobeying orders. His students would need to be iron both body and mind before they were ready to be true An Lun soldiers. Then they would reach their true potential.

So he would wait for news, and learn who this bigwig was. If he was a trustworthy person, then the possibility of a military deal wasn't out of the question. After all, service to the nation was a noble obligation.

A rough voice interrupted his trek. "Once again you just saunter ahead without looking where you're going. What the hell are your eyes for,

anyway?”

Lan Jue was rudely brought to the present. He lifted his head to see Tan Lingyun – clearly ready for a fight – just ahead.

Lan Jue’s face immediately darkened. His voice was deep and displeased. “Who do you think you are talking to?”

Lan Jue was immediately and violently struck with regret. The moment the words left his mouth he remembered, he was no longer the masked Demon Drillmaster. He was the meek etiquette teacher Lan Jue!

As might be expected, Tan Lingyun’s reaction was as quick as it was fierce. She traversed the distance between them in a single stride. “To you actually. Your blind ass is staggering down the street with that rusty piece of garbage and not even looking forward. Do you have a good reason for trying to run me off the path? Not only are you a piece of shit with no real skills, but you routinely run around pissing women off. People like you are the basest scum of the earth!”

“I-I didn’t see it was you.” A wise man knows when to retreat. Lan Jue had to resort to placative language to keep from blowing his cover.

Tan Lingyun’s brows shot up. “Oh! And if it wasn’t me, you think it’d be fine to just tear in to randomly people you nearly hit on the street? Hypocrites like you make me sick.” She snarled, then whipped her leg at his shins with force enough to break them both.

“Eeeeeiiii!”

*

1. While this is true everyone, China is a culture of professional secrecy. ‘Ancient Chinese Secret’ is a trope you see often in older kung fu movies and the like, and it’s rooted in reality. Especially for things like this, Chinese masters are famously tight-lipped about their methods. Even while I was in med school, I was told by no small number of people to find a ‘lao zhong yi’ or old Chinese doctor to be my mentor.

If I was lucky, he'd teach me all I'd ever need to know about Chinese medicine.'

Chapter 328: You?

“Eeeeeiiii!”

The shins had no skin to soften the blow, and yet were densely covered in nerve endings. Lan Jue couldn't help but yelp pitifully from the blow.

Tan Lingyun just glared at him, as one would something disgusting. She sniffed at him – her final insult – then sashayed away.

Lan Jue hugged his shin and hopped in place for a good minute. Eventually the pain eased, replaced with an anger so violent Lan Jue felt like he could spit blood. This was that obedient assistant he could command at will not a week earlier. The change on the other side of the mask was intense – this Savage Goddess was certainly a unique character.

“Just wait... oh wait, and one day you'll see how I'll deal with you.” Lan Jue snarled the words under his breath.

“Oh? And how are you going to do that?” Tan Lingyun stopped dead in her tracks.

Lan Jue's face scrunched and froze. He forced the expression away, replacing it with a sheepish grin. Then, everything started spinning.

The sky was a lovely shade of blue as – to Lan Jue – it slowly slid passed his vision. The clouds were a beautiful fluffy white. It hurt like hell when he hit the floor.

“Remember this – if you're going to talk shit, have the strength to back it up!” Tan Lingyun shook her red-knuckled fist in the air above his nose, ruining the picturesque scene.

Once she left, Lan Jue picked himself up off the floor and awkwardly stumbled to the campus exit. He hopped on his bike and started the ride home. All the while, the scene played out in his head. The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became. Was there no solution for dealing with this woman?

He dialed Wang Hongyuan's number in to his communicator.

“Eh? Professor Lan.” Wang Hongyuan’s surprised voice answered.

Lan Jue replied. “Professor Wang. There’s some business concerning the ARC classes I needed to ask you to handle. Something we have to nib in the bud...

...

Good. And make sure you tell Tan Lingyun. It’d be better if she also appeared to deal with this personally.”

“Alright, got it.” Wang Hongyuan said. “By the way, Professor, I just got this message from the university. They’re planning another trip for the teachers who went to Taihua. We’ll be gone for about a weak.”

“Ah? Another trip?” Lan Jue’s lips curled in to a frown. Their last vacation had almost claimed his life! It’d turned out a blessing in disguise – one he inexplicably recovered very well from – but it had certainly made an impression. So now there was this, and then the competition in the North. He just got back, he was hoping for at least a few days of rest!

“Yup! The school’s trying to make up for what happened.” Wang Hongyuan explained gleefully.

“Sounds like you’re excited to go,” Lan Jue said.

“It’s free, why the hell not?” He answered. “They’re giving us play money and sending us to the West.”

The Western Alliance? Upon hearing this, Lan Jue’s brows raised. Wasn’t the West where the Wine Master had said the descendant was hiding?

“So you going?”

“I have to think about it,” Lan Jue said. “I’ve been skipping classes for so long. It’ll look terrible if I’m gone again.”

He could hear Wang Hongyuan grunt. “How? At this point, even if you restarted the classes you wouldn’t have that many students. It makes no difference if you come back in a few days or weeks. And with the clout you hold, the school will certainly help publicize when you’re ready. Just be

consistent from then on.”

From Lan Jue’s mind to his mouth. It’s like he knew I need to leave again! They exchanged a few more words, then Lan Jue cut the connection. So they would be going to the West. According to Wang Hongyuan, it would be a famous travel destination. The planet was called the Barrows, a beautiful place said to resemble Former Era Earth.

A Journey to the West? He would have to ask the wine Master where, precisely, he wanted to go. They would be drinking the Cros Parantoux tomorrow, and perhaps the fine wine and his promise to help with soothe the flames of the Wine Master’s fury. It would be closer to the North as well, making it more convenient to leave directly for the tournament afterward. It wouldn’t delay or inconvenience anybody.

He decided to return to the Avenue and seek out the Wine Master first thing. He’d need to know if the Barrows was close enough to where he suspected the descendant to be. If so, he’d just separate from the other teachers and make a little side stop during their trip. So long as he let Director Wu know, there wouldn’t be any problems.

He trundled along the road toward the Avenue. His shins still throbbed and ached, but inwardly he smiled. If Hua Li and Chu Cheng could see him today, they’d say the same thing: karma, bitch.

Beep! Beep! Beep! Lan Jue’s communicator called for his attention. He looked down to see Xiuxiu’s number.

“Xiuxiu, what’s up?” He sounded a little surprised. It was very rare that Xiuxiu troubled him on his communicator. She only used it in emergencies.

Xiuxiu’s voice seemed strange. “Boss, you need to come back right away. We have an uninvited guest.”

Lan Jue’s pleasant bike ride was no longer so pleasant. “Alright, I’m on the way. Avenue or Underground?”

“Underground,” she answered. “And don’t worry, all four of us are here.”

“Got it.” Lan Jue hung up, then hopped off the bike. A light flashed from

his hand, and the antique bicycle disappeared in to his interdimensional storage space.

Satellites were rarely trained on a single person, but even if one was it would be completely impossible for it to follow his speed. The scenery passed in a flash, and before long Lan Jue was back on the Avenue. A quick jog and elevator ride later, and he was in the Underground.

Just as the Coffee Master had claimed, the Underground seemed particularly busy. The streets were bustling with activity, surging with adepts from all over.

Lan Jue fought through the crowd until he reached his store. The door bells chimed as he entered. He was immediately greeted with the sight of his four Amazons, surrounding a very nervous looking man.

“What? You?” Lan Jue’s brows shot up.

ζ

Grace Hospital.

Zhou Qianlin had already been busy all morning helping the tenants. She’d arrived early to make up for having been gone for so long. She missed all of her friends. With so much to do, she’d decided to take a week off of classes. She’d report in and tell her parents she was at school, and that would be fine.

After returning from the training, her parents asked her all about it. She replied with understatement and half-truths. Some were outright lies, like when she claimed it was just a normal school training. She was thinner, certainly, but they couldn’t tell anything from her face or mood to contradict what she was saying.

“Hey, Qianlin! You know your boyfriend is a fine young man. He’s come several times since you’ve been gone to look after us. Well, not so much this last month. Is he doing alright?” A kindly old granny asked.

Qianlin’s heart was filled with warmth, and she smiled pleasantly. “He’s doing very well, Granny Li. He’s been so busy this last month, but I’ll make sure to bring him soon to visit.”

“Good, good! It makes all of us old coots feel a little younger with you two around. You know when I was your age, I also had quite an umber of handsome suitors pursuing me. For example, when I first entered the service...”

The elderly never had too much to say, and Qianlin didn't interrupt. She always listened attentively with a smile, and helped when they got stuck. She'd heard many of these stories several times, so she knew most of them by heart. She felt like it helped them remember the past.

Despite her busy morning, she didn't feel the least bit tired. She couldn't help but laugh – it looked like that training even helped her with housework!

Eventually Granny Li's story concluded. Zhou Qianlin politely excused herself, then picked off her ruby gloves and went upstairs. She used them for cleaning, and to protect her delicate hands from becoming coarse. Although she didn't care, her parents might notice and grow worried. Once she realized this, she'd started using gloves.

She made her way down the hall to the last door, and gently knocked. “Granny Bess?” She called. “Can I come in?”

The quavering voice of the tenant called back. “Come on in.”

Qianlin pushed the door open to see Granny Bess in her normal position beside the window. She stared in to the middle distance with an expressionless face.

Zhou Qianlin dexterously made her way to the elderly woman's side, and spoke with her in a quiet voice. “I'm going to clean the room a little for you, if that's alright. Then I'll go clean your clothes.”

“Alright,” Granny Bess answered.

Qianlin wasted no more time in polite conversation, and busied herself with cleaning. She tried to be quick, but quiet so as not to disturb Bess. She deftly cleaned every corner, for she knew Granny Bess appreciated cleanliness.

It didn't take her long to clean the tiny room. She gathered up the

woman's clothes and brought them to the laundry room, then returned. "Granny Bess? The clothes are washing now. I'll bring them back in when they're ready. If you're ok here, I'm going to look in on the others."

It was their tradition. She would pop her head in and explain, then leave without interruption. This time was different, however, as Bess waved her over with a hand. "Come."

There was a moment of hesitation, but Qianlin quickly complied. Bess fixed her with those unusually clear eyes.

"You've changed a lot."

"Oh?" Qianlin replied.

The old woman lifted her right hand with surprising agility, and grabbed at Qianlin. Her fingers were more like claws, and a sanguine light shone from her red-painted fingernails. A supernatural gloom blanketing the small apartment, until it seemed like the light was devoured completely.

Chapter 329: Seeking Help

Skyfire Underground, Zeus' Jewelry Shop.

Lan Jue was certainly surprised at who he saw. Instantly, he knew why Xiuxiu had him rush down here.

The Four Amazons were masters at the 'imposing stare.' This was especially true of Mika, who looked like her eyes were ready to belch fire. The air was positively heavy with her violent intent. The impression was a modicum of self-control was the only thing keeping her from blowing up.

"Zeus." The newcomer's tone was respectful.

"Why are you here." Lan Jue's response was cold, and hostile.

With their boss' arrival, the four women almost unconsciously stepped back and took up position behind him. Xiuxiu brought over a chair for him to sit on. Lan Jue thankfully accepted and settled on the chair, while Guoguo produced a small warm hand towel. He smiled pleasantly as he wiped his hands. Only once this had been finished, did Lan Jue return his attention to his guest.

"I've come to ask for your help. Only you can save the Empress." The plea was genuine and urgent.

"Help? I think maybe you've made a mistake. After what happened when we met you the last time, you still have the gall to come ask us for help?" Mika almost screamed the challenge.

Of course, the target of Mika's rage was none other than the man who inspired Zeus and his amazons to visit the Shattered Starfields – Gao Yong. The ninth ranked gravity Adept and second hand man to the Moonfiend Empress looked nervously at the five of them.

"Her Majesty had no choice!" He whined. "In truth this was her very last resort. Her sister has been captured, and she's been forced to concede to their demands."

Mika opened her mouth to say more, but Lan Jue waved her silent. Her overt anger subsided somewhat. The Pontiff's ambush during their last

visit was specifically to grab her. Forcing Lan Jue to become involved to protect her, causing him to get hurt, was all the Empress' fault, and Mika's resentment went to the bone.

"So what do you want," Lan Jue asked dispassionately. Gao Yong chuckled nervously before continuing. "I'm sure you know that the Empress used to be part of the Pontiff's Citadel. She was their angel of the morning sun. Disagreements arose and she left, wandering until she settled on the Shattered Starfields and became our Moonfiend Empress. Sadly, the Pontiff had no plans to let her go. They searched and searched, until eventually they found her."

"I don't know how the Pontiff learned of your relationship with Her Majesty, or how they planned that ambush. What I do know was that the empress fought them every step for the way – until the Pontiff sent two of his top angels to take her away. She looked calm as they led her away, but she did leave a letter for me to give to you. That is why I am here. Only you have the strength to save my Empress!" He produced the letter with that final sentence, and handed it to Lan Jue.

Paper letters were a rare thing in this day and age. Ke'er reached out and picked it from Gao Yong's hand before giving it to Lan Jue. He took it up, and opened it to read the contents – a few scant sentences.

"I'm sorry, Zeus. That day when we met, it was like a knife to my heart. If there was ever one thing in the universe I cared for, it's you. I don't expect your forgiveness, and I do not ask for it. I just want you to know that I had no choice in anything I did. They are dangerous people hidden behind sanctimonious faces. They're even more dangerous than the Dark Citadel. Signed, Little Yue."

There was nothing in the note asking for help, and it looked like it had been scribbled hastily. He looked a little longer before folding the paper and putting it away. "You can go," he said to Gao Yong.

The pirate shifted from one foot to the other. "What about my Empress...?"

"Our boss said you can go," Mika hissed. "Are you deaf?"

Gao Yong was surprise, but remained persistent. “The planet is already falling to chaos without her around to keep the peace. We’ve been the top for so long, and entirely self-sufficient. We rarely go out to plunder any longer. If we don’t bring some order back soon, the Starfields will be a mess just like they used to be as someone seeks to fill the power vacuum. The three starfield planets will once again be homes to the most violent and depraved pirates alive – a galaxy of vice and murder. I’m sure you don’t want this to happen, and neither do we. I’m begging you to help bring our Empress back. We’ll pay whatever price you require.”

Lan Jue remained indifferent. “Go. I’ll think about it.”

Gao Yong still had more to say, but Mika quickly and fiercely removed him from the premises. Once the door was shut, she stomped back grumbling in irritation. “Messing with us the one time isn’t enough, he wanted us to show up for a second round? Does he think we’re stupid? Boss, don’t let your soft-hearted nature win you over. Nothing good will come of helping that wretched ‘Empress’.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “No... in truth, there’s something I haven’t told any of you. We could have fled last time, before the Pontiff’s men had arrived, but it would almost certainly have led to terrible things for little Yue. She’d told me with her eyes, and if she hadn’t we’d have walked right in to their trap unprepared. Everything I said then was to confuse the Angels and throw them off little Yue’s scent.”

Mika was still not convinced. “You better not be falling for her charms, boss.”

To this, he laughed. “If not a Moonfiend, why not a Succubus, right?”

Mika’s face reddened, but she didn’t pursue the thought. “So what are we going to do? Are you really planning to go and save her? You’re talking about walking right in to the belly of the beast. You’d be facing the total power of the Citadel, and they’re stronger even than Satan’s men. That guy was right when he said they were a bunch of sanctimonious hypocrites. There isn’t a halfway decent person among them. You shouldn’t risk it!”

Lan Jue huffed. “You’re assuming I’m all heart and no strength. And anyway, you think I’m stupid enough to take on the entire place by myself? I only was able to beat Michael with a steaming heap of luck. You all can relax, I’m not going to risk my life.”

Mika heaved a sigh. “Fine, fine. You want some water, boss? I’ll pour you a cup.”

Lin Guoguo giggled. “I’ll rub your shoulders, boss!”

Lan Jue could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise – danger! “What are you guys planning? Only the wicked hide their intentions behind unsolicited kindness!”

Xiuxiu offered a demure smile. “We aren’t planning anything. We just see you working so hard lately. We’re just trying to help!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “You think I can’t see through you guys by this point? If you want something, just go ahead and say it.”

It was Mika who spoke up. “Boss, look... we need an upgrade. Our mechas, Zeus one two and three, everything. We should have been doing this years ago. We haven’t talked to you about it because the shop’s been needing work. Now that we’ve had this sudden windfall of power gems, we have enough capital to get the project finished. Business is good enough that we have a surplus, so shouldn’t we be upgrading? You told us to pick a few out and use them before, if you remember. We’ve got some ideas.”

“So this is your secret,” Lan Jue said through a smirk. “Of course there’s no problem. I leave it up to you all. How could I say no?”

Mika, suddenly excited, went on. “We’ll handle it! Ke’er’s already started on the blueprints. What about Thor? Should we re-outfit it as well?”

He shook his head. “You don’t need to bother with Thor, I’ll handle that myself. Focus on your own suits. Remember that you should always handle your mechas by yourself. You shouldn’t rely on anybody to do or help you with it. Only in this way can you really understand every part of your suit. And then once you know, the more it becomes an extension of yourself. Every top level pilot had made their suit a part of themselves, like

a limb and not a tool. They may be made of metal, but mechas are almost sentient things. They have a spirit, a soul. The more you put in to it, the more it will give back.”

The girls nodded emphatically. They exchanged fiercely excited glances.

In some ways these ladies were still kids. Although they’ve been happy here, Lan Jue’s depression had effected them as well. Lan Jue had indeed been busy lately, but he was living. This filled them with vitality as well. In witnessing the strength of the Avenue, watching Paragons rise and fall, and witnessing the god battles, that excitement only grew. They were impatient to get better. They didn’t like to see him in such a rut – how could they help him then?

Lan Jue excused himself and returned his apartments. He laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling with half-lidded eyes. Was there really nothing he could do about the troubles in the Starfields? The amazons were only around because of his intervention.

He need to clear his mind. This trip to the West was starting to look fated. He’d take advantage of the school trip. But first, there were things to prepare.

ζ

Blood-red claws swiped at her face, so quick Zhou Qianlin couldn’t dodge. But she reacted quickly, and her right arm shot up to throw her hand between her and her attacker. The delicate bracelet on her wrist twinkled, and suddenly the hollow metal charm hanging from it burst with rays of radiant blue light. Before her eyes, a giant water elemental ten feet tall materialized.

It was the power of the Pelagic Pearl, the one Lan Jue had forced her to take.

This was the first time she’d seen it’s power. It hadn’t been needed during their fight with the pirates, but Lan Jue had required her to wear it before he’d let her participate in the fight.

Now, faced with Granny Bess’ sudden attack, her unconscious reaction

had been to call on the pearl for help.

Splash! The red fingernails dug in to the body of the summoned beast. Then, in an impressive display, it froze around her hand and refused to let go. Then, a chilling scene unfolded. The massive elemental darkened until its entire form was a deep crimson, and began to emit a strange odor.

Half a second later, fingernails that had grown five times their size burst through the elemental's back. It was too quick – and she too stunned – to dodge.

The Pelagic Pearl's elementals were powerful enough to contest an eighth-level Talent in attack, and a ninth level third rank Talent in defense. This was to be expected, considering its outrageous price. And her pearl was of the highest grade!

And yet it collapse at the first swipe of granny's wretched claws. It hardly slowed her at all, and the power she'd used had completely corrupted the creature. What sort of nightmarish power was this?

Qianlin shut her eyes tight and projected her will in to the Spirit Caller power gem. But nothing happened. Somehow, the stone had lost its efficacy. The great claws grabbed her, pierced her. She was filled with a freezing terror that sunk to the marrow.

Chapter 330: The Military Quandary

Beep! Beep! Beep! Lan Jue's ears were pierced by the harsh call of his communicator.

"Professor Lan." It was Director Wu. His voice was uncharacteristically quiet.

"Results already?" Lan Jue asked.

"Yes! It's the goddamn Lir University if you can believe it. After my investigation everyone came out clean except for one, who ended up being a scout for the school. He must have caught sight of part of the training before you left for An Lun. I suspect he made a report to some lieutenant friend in the military and that got the ball rolling. Word is he was instructed to check whether the training was truly effective and, if it was, steps would be taken. More than that, this spy must have told them about you, too. When I was inquiring with the military office, they told me they would gladly call you in to train their soldiers."

First, Lan Jue was surprised. However, that quickly turned in to a chilly sneer. "A lieutenant? Missed the mark there, fellas. It doesn't matter, Director. It isn't something you need to worry over. Just don't accept any money from anyone and you're fine. More important as that we don't delay their testing. Call them all back and do it as soon as possible. It'll really solidify where they were and what they achieved."

"Hm?" Director Wu replied. "Do you have an idea on how to deal with this?"

"If I didn't, how could I call myself these kids' teacher?" Lan Jue answered. "This isn't some military black op or political game – this is a university trying to be cute. I'll have someone politely remind them to mind their own business."

"Alright." Director Wu trusted in this young man's ability to handle the situation. This etiquette teacher was definitely stronger than he liked people to think. With such a man in his corner, what did he have to fear from a lieutenant?

Their conversation concluded, Lan Jue cut the connection then dialed in another number.

“Ey? What made you think of calling me up, underclassman?” Su He sounded calm, relaxed, and groggy.

Lan Jue smirked. “Upperclassman. How’s your vacation going?”

Su He answered with a lazy laugh. “I have forsaken my life and duty, and sink in to a sea of self-serving pleasure. I can’t even remember the last time I felt so relaxed. Out here, having fun with the people I love, what more can you ask for? There isn’t much more that’d make life better.”

“Well, unfortunately I have to bother you with something,” Lan Jue said.

“Oh? What’s up?” Su He sat up a little straighter. Lan Jue’s voice was calm, but he could hear the seriousness in tone.

Lan Jue quickly relayed the information he’d been given from Wu Junyi.

“What?!” The moment Su He heard the news, he was upset. He was a guest teacher in high standing at Lir, so this tarnished his reputation as well. And he even had to get the Bookworm to help get him there. He was the respected Paragon’s apprentice! How could they do this?

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll handle this. I’ll get in contact with the university leaders right away. They must have a goddamn problem in the brain, and they’ll regret it. Thanks for bringing this to my attention! I owe you a favor.” And he meant it. It was no surprise he would react this way. Lan Jue had a dozen ways he could have solved this, but Su He was his first thought. It would give him face, and he knew Lan Jue had his back.

Lan Jue gave a placating laugh. “Don’t let this darken your holiday, upperclassman. It’s not a big deal. I just didn’t want to see your improving spirits spoiled on someone’s whim.”

“It’s fine, underclassman. I know how to take care of this,” Su He said. “Oh, by the way, I watched your god battles. I’ve got to say, I really admire you. I had no idea you’d grown that strong. You and your brother are getting to be about the same.”

Su He had known for a long time that he was Zeus, and that Lan Qing was Prometheus.

“Ugh, stop cursing me,” Lan Jue said through a chuckle. I’ve really got a long way to go before I catch up to my brother. He’s at the choke-point.”

“Ah?” Su He was clearly very surprised by the news. Of course he knew what Lan Jue meant. It was something to be feared, because if an adept failed to break through they would never improve further. And yet, it was still a symbol of an Adept’s mastery. Of course, they were talking about ninth-rank, ninth-degree Adepts. Those who hit the bottleneck, were preparing to break through to Paragon status.

Su He knew precisely how old Lan Qing was, and for him to reach this point was entirely unprecedented. It would go down in history.

“Ah, there really is a lot to envy. Jealousy, is what it is. I’m not talking to you anymore, it hurts my pride. I’m going to handle this business with the university right now.” He ended the talk on a somewhat helpless note.

“Ah wait upperclassman,” Lan Jue answered. “I do have some good news for you.”

“What’s that?” He was genuinely curious, since he couldn’t think of any news Lan Jue might have that would involve him.

Lan Jue smiled. “I can tell you haven’t heard. Your master broke through.”

“He did? Wow, that’s damn impressive to achieve at his age!” Su He almost absentmindedly answered, but as the last syllable rose it stuck in his throat. “Wait. He... he broke through?”

Su He had suddenly remembered how strong his teacher was. He was at the peak of ninth rank, and that meant...

Lan Jue could hear him swallow on the other end of the communicator. For a moment, he was more excited than if he’d broken through himself.

The Bookworm had been deep in to the winter of his life. He’d known it for a long time, and he’d even discussed plans should the Bookworm pass.

He never thought the old man would achieve this, and now that he had the promise was that his life would be extended greatly. Even at his age, this would be significant. At the very least, he'd have nothing to worry about for another ten years. He was very excited, and why not? He was his disciple!

Hearing his friends' reaction, he couldn't help but feel joy for them both. He couldn't help but laugh. "It looks like the Bookworm was also concerned with interrupting your holiday. Anyway, he's been very busy lately. No doubt you know about the DreamNet upgrade, which he helped orchestrate."

"Well that settles it," Su He said resolutely. "Vacation's over, it's time to go back and help my teacher."

Lan Jue could only shake his head. "I really shouldn't have said anything. Your wife's already going to hate me."

"Nah," Su He assured. "I'll make it up to her when this stuff is settled. We've been out here a long time already. In the future I'll make sure to give myself a break, so we'll both benefit."

"So long as you're happy," Lan Jue answered.

They exchanged a few more words, where Su He asked about the details of his master's breakthrough. All the way until they hung up, he could sense Su He's happiness for his master. That was a true teacher-student relationship.

Lan Jue was also very happy for the old man. Not only was the Avenue stronger for it, but all of humanity had a great scientific mind to its benefit.

Having Su He deliver the message to Lir was enough. But the military wasn't something you tried to bully. But it would be an issue easily resolved, nonetheless."

Chapter 331: Popping Corks

Lan Jue dialed in the Keeper's com number, and shared the situation in a few short sentences. The Keeper answered with a single, irritated sentence: "These idiots – they only ever spoil what they touch." He cut the connection, and Lan Jue knew the situation was handled.

Originally, Lan Jue had planned to visit the Wine Master tonight and explain the situation with the wine. However, upon second thought he decided to get him the morning of their drinking date instead. He could get everything done together, and would instead spend the night eating something small and meditating.

Ever since returning from Taihua, Lan Jue had felt as though his progress had quickened. He felt stuck at the edge of ninth rank seventh degree, but if this trend continued he would reach ninth rank ninth degree at his brother's age. As an Adept with two disciplines, that would make him especially dangerous.

Lan Jue meditated through the night, solidifying the electrical power that had strengthened around his Core after the recent battles. When he awoke, he had a glass of water and two pieces of plain white bread. He didn't want anything tasty that might influence the wine he was about to enjoy. He finally left for the Gourmet's small residence.

The roster was the same; the Gourmet, the Seamstress, and the Pauper look like they've been waiting anxiously for this moment.

The moment he saw Lan Jue, the Pauper shot to his feet. "Alright! Everyone's here, let's get to drinking."

The Gourmet nodded. He rose and approached his wine cabinet, extricating the Cros Parantoux from within.

"Alright, so whose dropping the knife or fork." It was wine nomenclature 1, and it was describing a means to open a bottle of wine. Traditionally, one would use a corkscrew to achieve the desired result, but using two forks or knives inserted in the edges worked just as well. The most important thing in opening wine was making sure that one removed the

whole cork.

The cork itself was a type of oak bark. So long as its integrity remained, the wine inside was protected. Sadly, those bottles which had been poorly corked may find the stopper broken, or reduced to pulp. The residual cork in the wine and its aeration promptly ruined it. So, opening bottles was a delicate art, and in a group of friends it was always the one with steady hands who handled the bottle.

In the new era, good corks from fine were a pricey commodity. This was of course especially true for the cork from a legendary wine like the Cros Parantoux. Both it and the bottle would fetch a good price at auction. They were, after all, rare antiques. There was no small number of people who would pay handsomely to add these to their collections.

The Pauper raised his hands, as though to ward him away. “They call me Cork-Killer for a reason, so don’t hand that to me. If I ruin it, I’d have a room of very angry people to contend with. Can’t you use your Discipline to remove it?” the Pauper asked.

The Gourmet shook his head. “Drinking wine like this requires a process. It’s like a pilgrimage. The path is pure, with only the tools they used in the old days. How could we defile this moment with cheating, by using our Disciplines? It’s a shame the Wine Master isn’t here – he’s the most wise and practiced about these things. In all honesty I don’t entirely trust myself to open it! Jewelry Master, what about you?”

“Remove the foil and let’s see what condition the cork is in,” Lan Jue said.

“Alright,” replied the Gourmet.

The foil was a thin sheet of aluminum metal wrapped around the bottle’s neck. Its purpose was to help seal the bottle for future consumption.

Judging from the look, the Henri Jayer masterpiece still seemed well sealed. It was astonishing that a bottle from nineteen ninety-three would have survived so well. Burgundy was much harder to properly store than Bordeaux.

The Gourmet produced a small utility knife which, among its several functions had a knife specifically for removing wine foil. It was a fancy looking thing, with a cover that looked simple but masterfully carved with decorative designs. Lan Jue could recognize immediately that it was made of mammoth tusk, which was exceedingly rare even in the former era.

There were other differences as well. The corkscrew was longer, specifically designed for opening older bottles. Often the older ones had longer corks. A corkscrew had to almost fully penetrate a cork to extricate it successfully.

Two quick circles of the serrated knife, and the glass beneath was revealed. They could see the cork inside. When they saw it, all four onlookers' faces changed.

"It permeated." The gourmet's brows furrowed.

The cork was no longer brown, as one might expect. Now it was a puce hue. The bottom of it was almost black. The wine had, over such a long period, seeped in to the cork. Thankfully the contents looked clear – a turbid wine would have caused Lan Jue to fear for it.

Any wine that had too much sedimentation or was simply stored too long would spoil. Too aged, was the phrase used often – directly saying a wine had gone bad was disrespectful to the wine.

The Gourmet plucked up a clean towel from nearby and carefully wiped the bottle clean, along with the black condensation on the cork. It wasn't dirt, but old wine that had penetrated through.

"Should you or should I?" he asked.

Lan Jue took a deep breath. "Let me." In the moment of truth, Lan Jue took on the responsibility. He didn't have the culinary mastery of the Gourmet, but when it came to wine he had a wealth of experience. This wouldn't be the first rare bottle of wine he'd opened.

The Gourmet handed the bottle and utility knife to Lan Jue.

"So if I get the cork out without issue, you're going to give me this knife right?" He wouldn't be able to take the cork or bottle as a souvenir, the

Wine Master would certainly want those.

“You are nothing short of a wretched bastard, did you know that?” the Gourmet snarled. “So long as you get that out, you can have it. What if you don’t, though?”

A smile crept across Lan Jue’s face. “Then I owe you no less than three bottles of thirty year old whisky.

“It’s a deal.”

Lan Jue pulled the corkscrew out, then placed the bottle flat on the table before him. He put all his focus on the bottle. His breathing slowed. Both the Pauper and Gourmet nodded inwardly in appreciation as they watched. The Jewelry Master may have been young, but he was mature and level-headed.

With the steady, slow hands of a surgeon Lan Jue brought the corkscrew down. It’s tip pierced the cork in it’s exact center, and Lan Jue carefully pressed down while turning the utility knife, forcing the corkscrew deeper in to the compromised cork plug.

He pushed and turned, keeping a steady rhythm that saw the corkscrew slowly dig further and further. It stayed dead center, not deviating. When it was eventually lodged deep in the cork, Lan Jue placed the metal lever against the lip of the bottle. Now, was the moment of truth. It was time to pull it out.

This was the most likely time for the cork to break. Breaking it wouldn’t ruin the wine, but it would be a great pity.

Lan Jue picked up the bottle, held it horizontally, and only then began to pull. Anyone with experience in opening wines would know this method was the least likely to ruin a cork.

The Pauper and Gourmet’s eyes watched, unblinking.

Slowly, the cork began to creep out from the neck of the bottle. Lan Jue kept the pulling strength constant, and didn’t rush. When finally the sides of the cork peaked from the top, everyone inwardly sighed in relief. Though permeated, the cork’s sides had not been dissolved. They wouldn’t

have to worry too much about causing the cork to break apart.

The revelation caused the three onlookers to be overcome with joy. This only proved the exceptional quality of the wine they were about to imbibe.

Ever so slowly, the cork inch out until – at last – it was free from the bottle. Entirely in one piece. When the cork was free, Lan Jue smiled in triumph. With his experience and steady hands, this was no problem.

Phomp! The muffled pop of air rushing in to the ancient bottle hit their ears. But just then, a flashing silver light appeared that blocked the bottleneck.

“Aw damn. It’s been marked.”

The whole of the small shop was suddenly awash in brilliant silver light. A booming, furious voice thick with pretension howls from within.

“I’ll kill you bastards!”

Lan Jue was the first to react. He raised his hands high, the bottle cradled within. “Hey hey hey! Don’t do anything crazy, think of the wine!”

The dangerous aura that had strangled the room eased, as the Wine Master’s eyes fell on the bottle. Lan Jue’s other hand had the utility knife, with the cork still impaled on the corkscrew. The bottle was open, but there was no scent.

“You bastards... my treasured wine!” The Wine Master’s whine was sad and tortured, as he snatched the bottle away. He did it quick, but ever so carefully. He looked upon it like a man would his lover.

The Pauper and the Gourmet exchanged a wide-eyed look, their expressions awkward. The plan had been to call the Wine Master once the bottle was open, but that was also supposed to be after they’d had a sip. They had feared he would prevent them from having any at all. After all, they hadn’t exactly asked before taking this particular bottle.

“Give it here!” The Wine Master roared.

Lan Jue winced, and quickly handed him the cork. “Look, don’t scare the wine! It’ll change the scent.”

The Wine Master glared him down with a look that could murder. “I knew you’d be here as well.” He snatched the cork away and looked carefully at it. He could still clearly discern the name stamped on it, Henri Mayer.

Upon seeing that the cork was still whole, the old man’s dark glower eased somewhat. He turned his attention to the Gourmet next. “Well, why are you looking at me like an idiot? Get out your best glasses.”

*

1. No? At least nothing I found, If there are any wine connoisseurs please feel free to educate me.

Chapter 332: The Charm of a Legendary Wine

“Coming right up!” The normally cool and collected Gourmet was quick to his feet to accommodate his guests. He brought over the glasses, which had been prepared earlier.

They were fine looking large burgundy glasses, composed of beautiful crystal. The thin walls of the glass reflected the shimmering light of the wine Master’s residual power.

The Wine Master coldly watched his every move. “I’m surprised you don’t expect me to take this and keep it for myself. I won’t even tell you how much this single bottle costs. Suffice it to say that every one of you owes me, tremendously. If you can’t agree to that, then I’m leaving and taking my wine with me. I’d have to seek recompense afterward, and I won’t be nice about it.”

The Pauper gave a bitter smirk. “Well when you put it that way, how can we say no? I accept, I accept.” The strongest portion of the wine Master’s murderous aura had been directed at the Pauper, who had done the actual thievery. He dare not upset an already intensely irritated Paragon.

The Gourmet looked sheepishly at his old friend. “I agree, but I can’t help my cravings. But consider this, the Seamstress and I are together now, and you haven’t presented us a congratulations gift. You have a commitment...”

They could all see the veins in the old master’s forehead growing large and prominent. “And who the hell in their right mind would offer a Henri Jay bottle as a wedding present?! If you plan to then I’ll get married every day and find a new one every night.”

“Pfft!” The Seamstress couldn’t help herself, and broke in to a fit of laughter. “Don’t lump me in with these rascals. I’m just here for the entertainment, I’m not having any. A sip is equivalent to the cost of a power gem.”

Lan Jue quickly interjected. “I’ve already agreed to help you with that other business. Look, I’m trying to do the right thing here. I never once refused to help since you came to me with this. I’ve paid my dues.”

The Wine Master snorted. “No, the fact that you brought us fifty power gems makes you square.”

The Gourmet cackled at this. “Alright, alright. We don’t all need to be so nervous. It’ll mess with the taste! You only have this bottle, and we don’t want to ruin this chance to taste something so exquisite. Seeing as none of us have had anything like this before, are there any special considerations?”

Now able to educate his colleagues on a matter of interest to him, the Wine Master relaxed somewhat and took a seat. “Pour it like you would a Romanee-Conti. The only difference is, one should keep a ten minute break between sips of a Jayer.”

This was the first time Lan Jue had heard this. “Oh? Why?”

The Wine Master shot him a look. “Have some, then you’ll understand.” He followed up by gripping the base of the bottle, and pouring approximately two fingers in each of the four cups.

The moment the wine left the bottle, its fragrant scent wafted out among them. It was restrained, like a bashful maiden.

“A Jayer bottle is the ultimate treat. After about two minutes, we can have our first sip.” By now, the Wine Master’s expression had calmed. However, a smoldering excitement could be spied behind his eyes. This was a very special bottle, and it deserved the requisite excitement and respect.

The Gourmet’s small place sunk in to silence. The Seamstress – not in the least upset she was not participating – tittered to herself. Everyone had their hobbies, and hers didn’t involve red wine. The Driver’s influence had actually imprinted more of a love for single-malt whisky.

The Driver always complained that he was unable to taste the subtleties of red wine. He preferred simpler fare, and single-malt whisky was his go-

to choice. Perhaps it was his yin nature that contributed to his desire for the very yang-oriented drink.

Contrary to popular believe, red wine also wasn't the most expensive alcohol out there. While something like a Jayer would fetch quite a windfall, single-malt whisky was in a class all its own. Classified as a spirit, it could be left for ages without any requirements, and didn't need special storage like wine. Those whiskies which had survived from the Former Era until now were known to be exceptionally rich in flavor. The price was just as dramatic. To true connoisseurs, they were priceless treasures.

"Alright." The Wine Master lifted the fine crystal glass by the stem. He swirled its contents, looking for sedimentation. Lan Jue, the Gourmet, and the Pauper mirrored him.

It was important to note that the Pauper had looked very clean the last few days. Though he was only clad in little more than a wife-beater, he had taken pains to look as presentable as one might expect a beggar to be. He was even surrounded by a faint, pleasant scent. All of this was certainly to maintain the proper atmosphere for their tasting party.

The wine's scent wasn't strong, and nor was it entirely fragrant. It was complicated, and possessed layers of peach and pear blossoms, apricot, lily, forget-me-nots, cornflower, and tulips. Although the scents were faint, it contained a wealth of pleasant aromas. Once the bottom opened, it was like they were transported in to a flower garden. They could almost see them blooms in their minds eye.

If Bordeaux were considered a more masculine wine, then burgundy was its feminine balance. This, was its extreme, and the scent was like a punch with an open fist – hard and soft. It passed through ever cell, and settled in their hearts. It was like the essence of the scent was melting through them.

Lan Jue was suddenly somewhat unwilling to drink. He shook his head ever so slightly, then took another wiff, then again. It was like he truly was in a flower garden. He could almost see the lilies, and a vision of a

beautiful garden blanketed in moonlight swam behind his eyes. He felt the wine was even more complicated, now that he had his nose in it. It was a feeling very difficult to describe.

The Wine was first to partake. He took a sip, and not a small one. Only half of the treasured liquid remained. Truly exquisite alcohol needed to be enjoyed in somewhat larger quantities, only then could one experience all of its flavors.

The Wine Master's face scrunched in pleasure, and then Lan Jue and the others took their sip as well.

Romanee-Conti, it is said, penetrates your gums, right down to your very soul. The Cros Parantoux was something altogether different. As the crimson liquid slipped passed his lips, Lan Jue's mind went blank.

There was only one word to describe this sensation: boom!

Indeed it was like the flavors of the wine had exploded in his mouth. In contrast to its gentle smell, the flavors filled his mouth without subtlety. He – like the wine Master – winced as he felt his whole body react.

How could this be? It was just pinot noir, how could it have such a stupendous flavor? Lan Jue hardly noticed swallowing the mouthful. All he knew was that staggering, intoxicating sensation as the flavors overcame him. He'd never tasted anything like it in his life.

The four of them placed their glasses upon the table, one after the other. For a long time, no one spoke.

Lan Jue finally understood why the Wine Master had instructed them to pause for ten minutes between drinks. The flavor lingered, much to his delight.

The first few moments when a wine touched the tongue was called the foretaste. While in the mouth, the flavors were referred to as the mouthful, and then finally the aftertaste. When determining the quality of a wine, all three sections are important. It had to have all three, well balanced and pleasant, and only then was a wine even considered decent.

This wine, though, didn't have those three. It had one – an explosion of

flavor! It penetrated to the bone, even after the sip was done.

Even now he felt as though the aroma was seeping from his very pores. All three 'sections' of the wine were one in this complicated flavor that lingered on the tongue, as though it had been branded on the taste buds. It felt rooted in his mouth.

As predicted, ten minutes later the flavors had begun to subside, and gradually disappeared.

Licking his lips, Lan Jue wanted to say something, but ultimately refrained. He didn't want to say anything that would effect this ambrosial flavor. At any rate, he didn't think he could summon the words to tell them how this wine made him feel.

The five Avenue denizens sat just like this for the rest of the morning, quietly sipping wine.

Once the wine was gone, the Wine Master reverently gathered up the cork and bottle. The Gourmet shot to his feet. "I'm sorry."

The Wine Master glanced at him. "No need. Just remember that you owe me."

"I used to think drinking a bottle was much better than having one," the Gourmet said. "But now that I've had the Cros Parantoux, I know I was wrong. In order to truly appreciate this wine, everything needs to be perfect. The right place, the right food, the right atmosphere... every detail seen to. We were curious and capricious. Drinking it in this way was blasphemous. I not only owe you a favor, but a bottle of wine. Just tell me where another Jayer can be found, I'll do anything in my power to recover it. The next time, everything will be perfect."

A small smile finally appeared on the crotchety old man's face. "Understanding is enough. In a few days, the Jewelry Master and I will leave in search of the Great Master's descendants. I can't make any promises, but if while we're gone we do need assistance, I'll call on you. Make sure you don't leave the Avenue."

Chapter 333: Save Me!

“Count me in,” the Pauper said. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, and I’m sorry for drinking your wine. It was truly an experience I’ll never forget. I never thought I’d feel something like this in my lifetime. That explosion of taste, of flavor. So many layers. It was like having an epiphany. I think I may have found my path.”

“Oh?” The Wine Master’s eyes brightened. “If you have then it was no waste of a very fine wine.”

For ninth-ranked Adepts, finding one’s path had more meaning than the average phrase. Upon reaching the peak of their abilities, Adepts hit a sort of bottleneck – just as Lan Jue had said about Lan Qing. Once an Adept reached this point in their cultivation process, they began a lengthy journey of discovery, to find their own path. They began to search through a parallel world of protogenic energy, the root of things. Only once they themselves could fully integrate in to that world and learned to master their corresponding protogenic power did they become a Paragon.

It was a long and difficult process. This accounted for part of the reason as to why there were so few Paragons, and also why they were all so strong. Paragons and adepts were separated by orders of magnitude. Lan Jue at ninth rank seventh degree was a threat to an adept at their ninth rank peak. And yet, a group of ten such adepts would be no match for a Paragon.

Like Lan Jue, Lan Qing’s future was bright because he’d already discovered his path. For Lan Jue that was his Ascension, which was also his corresponding protogenic image. As a result, upon reaching the bottleneck their torturous journey would be considerably shorter. Comprehension of the protogenic energies would be quick.

The Pauper wasn’t fortunate enough to have known his path beforehand, and as a result had been stuck at his peak for many years. A bottle of wine for a lifetime of self-perfection was a fair trade.

“I feel as though I should go and meditate on this, and really imprint this

feeling on my mind. Please do bring me when you go searching for the descendant. I couldn't pass up another opportunity to taste such a wine again. I'm confident that another chance will show me the correct path. I've been preparing for this for years – the chances of success are good."

"Good." The Wine Master's response was concise.

"So it is for today, friends. I haven't prepared anything to eat, and I think I should meditate as well. I don't want to forget this either." He was, after all, the Gourmet. His appreciation of finer cuisine was all-consuming.

"Wine Master," Lan Jue interjected. "If I might have a word?"

"Certainly."

They left the Gourmet's shop, walking together toward the Gothic Winery. By now the Wine Master's expression was back to its normal stately countenance. However, every few steps he'd stroke the empty bottle, and a flash of regret would pass over his eyes.

"I suspect I'll never have another bottle like it, for all the rest of my days," he sighed.

Lan Jue smiled. "Of course you will. I'll help you. We're all excited for another taste. The Pauper, the Gourmet, and myself all felt it. That explosive, sustained, complicated flavor... it was an astounding thing. I'd have never expected such a gentle aroma to hide a taste that rich. It had a wonderful balance of powerful and subtle. It was the most intense wine I've ever had.

The Wine Master nodded. "Indeed! It was the greatest wine I've tasted in my life. My only desire now is to find that descendant."

"That's actually what I wanted to speak with you about," Lan Jue said. "Is your suspected location for the descendant far from the Barrows?"

"The Barrows? How'd you know that's where we were going," the Wine Master said, surprised.

"Ah?" Lan Jue was just as shocked. "That's crazy coincidence. The university is organizing a teacher retreat to the Barrows. Now you're

saying that's where the descendant is."

"I don't know if that's where they ended up, only where the clues lead. I asked the Clairvoyant to see what he could discover and he said the Barrows would be my destination 1. He said the world which was most like our mother planet. The Barrows must be our destination."

Lan Jue smiled. "This is good news. Two birds with one stone. I'll arrive as a tourist, and I guess you'll find your own how. Shall we leave in a few days?"

The Wine Master thought for a minute. "That's fine. Luckily there's nothing terribly important in the next few days. The Gourmet's back as well. We'll go and take a look, hopefully we'll find something. You'll be representing the Avenue in the North's farce of a tournament soon as well. Are you sure you have the time for all of this?"

"I'll be leaving for the tournament right after our business on the Barrows. The West is a closer journey. I'll meet up with everyone on Planet Luo."

"Very good then. You should have time. When precisely are you leaving for the Barrows?"

"Within the next couple of days – I don't know the specifics. I'm going to the university this afternoon, so I'll find out and sign up. Anyway, you arrive whenever you're ready and we'll meet up."

"Alright, and I'll let the Pauper know so we can go together." The Wine Master said with a nod.

Lan Jue smirked. "At least make him change his clothes, otherwise we'll start looking like a gang of homeless people."

The Wine Master laughed. "You don't need to worry about reputations with the Pauper. He is among the strongest adepts there are. He was once quite a dapper young man, actually. The power he inherited turned him this way. He became the Pauper to search for his path, and now he was lucky enough to find a hint of it."

But it was more than that. Wouldn't they stick out tremendously if they

ere wandering around with a beggar?

Lan Jue chose not to discuss the issue of the Moonfiend Empress with the Wine Master. It was his own private affair he had to handle. The Avenue had already helped him tremendously in a myriad of ways. He didn't want to trouble them any further. However, he knew they'd have his back if he couldn't handle it himself."

Lan Jue sen the old man back to the Winery then returned for his bicycle. He took the ride to work in order to prepare for the trip.

Suddenly...

"Save me!"

Lan Jue was puzzling over the best way to deal with the pirates when the faintest cry called at the back of his mind. His entire body froze.

His vision became sharp and focused, bolts of cobalt blue racing across his eyes. The cry had come from the Spirit caller gem.

"Come to the Grace Hospital."

The last message came from a croaking, sinister voice.

Lan Jue was stunned. Once the Spirit Caller gem was bound, only those two people could use it. Hearing another voice meant whoever it was had enough power to penetrate Qianlin's heart. Whoever had Qianlin was a master of the heart and soul.

No further communication came through the gem. The world around him was calm.

Who? Lan Jue's pace did not change. He was in no rush. In these moments, he'd learned to be calm.

From the sound of the voice, they were old. He was well familiar with Grace Hospital from his visits, and a single image swam up at him from the depths of his memory.

The old and silent woman, silently staring out of her window. He remembered her strange aura, and her calm demeanor. Her?

A blinding flash burst around him as Lan Jue changed in to a bolt of lightning. He flashed in to the skies in the direction of Grace Hospital.

Moving at such staggering speeds, he was at the hospital doors in the blink of an eye. He was surrounded by an imposing chilliness, worse even than when he'd adopted his persona as the Demon Drillmaster. Zhou Qianlin wasn't Hera, but she was a good person, and if she got hurt here because of her kind-hearted nature...

Lan Jue took a moment to bring his focus back to the present, then walked inside. He encountered none of the other elderly occupants, and quietly slipped through a nearby power outlet. His consciousness shot through the entirety of the hospital through the connections.

It didn't take very much time or effort for Lan Jue to find his intended target.

Indeed it was the room he'd expected. As ever she was looking expectantly out of the window, but there was something far darker in her eyes now. Nearby, a terrifying blood-colored cocoon sat. It slithered gruesomely with undulating threads of sanguine light.

That must be her!

Sparks of errant electricity spat from the socket in Granny Bess' room. In a flash, Lan Jue was standing in the gloomy room, his eyes alive with electric energy. He was careful to keep his powers hidden, but it was evident he was one wrong move away from bursting like a volcano.

Those flashing eyes fell upon the ancient woman in her chair. His voice was a growl. "Why."

She didn't move, didn't even look his way. It was then Lan Jue noticed her left hand, resting on the table by the window. Each finger bore claw-like nails, as red as the cocoon nearby.

She looked normal, unthreatening.

Lan Jue was careful not to act rashly. He saw the cocoon, but was unable to get any sense of Qianlin's location – but, maybe ever so faintly.

Bess finally turned her head and looked toward Lan Jue. Her bright eyes were the eyes of a young woman, but her voice was that of a crone. “No reason. I needed something. Both of you have it. Yours is somewhat better. So, if you agree to relinquish it to me, she will live. If you do not, I’ll need to take it from her.”

Lan Jue ground his teeth. “What do you want?”

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1. By the way, this was referenced all the way back in chapter 12.

Chapter 334: An Unknown Paragon

Bess hissed, “Altruistic blood! Hers is very pure, but the power in it isn’t strong. But yours... yours is strong. Though I do not know how deep your altruism flows. Of course, if you agree to give up yours for her life, that would prove it, wouldn’t it? You have a choice, puppet.”

Lan Jue met her gaze with one of his own – infinitely calm, and infinitely cold. “What if I refuse to choose? I only need to beat you to save her.”

Bess croaked a withering laugh. “You were smart not to involve the Avenue, otherwise you’d never have seen her again. And it is true that the only thing standing between you and this girl is an old lady. The question is, can you defeat me? I suppose we’ll see!”

The words weren’t even gone from her mouth before her clawed left hand groped out for him.

The room darkened as a sinister power drank the light. They were replaced by haunting rays of blood red, that painted the room in nightmarish displays. An all-pervasive terror bore down upon him while the tiny room seemed to expand until he was surrounded in a blood-red world of fear.

Protogenic Domain!

Lan Jue’s dispassionate expression changed. He knew Bess was strong – he’d felt that before – but not like this.

Use of protogenic ability wasn’t always a sign of Paragon status. Some talented Adepts were exceptions, such as the Four Divine Monarchs who were each able to use at least some protogenic ability. This was especially true after the inspiration they got from the Bookworm’s break-through. But to use protogenic powers derived from one’s own alternate reality? That is real power that only a Paragon could achieve.

But of the twenty known Paragons, Lan Jue knew she was not among them. It caused him even greater shock and anxiety.

Granny Bess was a truly unknown Paragon, and that made her

absolutely terrifying. His chance at victory in a straight fight was practically zero. But he didn't back down. For Qianlin, and for himself, he had to do everything he could.

Lan Jue had never faced a real Paragon in combat before, but that fact didn't discourage him. The bolts of writhing blue lightning turned a vivid gold. If he was going to face protogenic power, the only way to survive would be to use his own.

The piercing golden light filled the room. Those bolts of lightning eased in to a steady rhythm around him. In the same moment, a tyrannical presence like Bess' own rose – the stifling power of Lan Jue's Ascension come to bear!

All of the sinister red light within ten meters was consumed and became gold.

Granny Bess remained in her blood-colored seat, watching him from her world of black and red. The slightest hint of surprise registered in her eyes, and she silently nodded her head. "Very good. This should make my life a tad more interesting."

Once more, she swiped her hand at Lan Jue. The movement itself was unhurried, but the world around her became to ripple violently. Suddenly Lan Jue was a small spec caught in a giant hand, about to be crushed in the folds.

"The skies shall open!" Lan Jue roared, and his gold-coated body burst in to countless rays of light. The skies above were alive with a spiderweb of lightning. Bolt after bolt struck the top and walls of their blood-soaked world.

Several fissures appeared. The light emanating from Lan Jue grew ever more prosperous. In his left palm, the phylactery stone shone with a thick purple haze that drastically strengthened his power.

Protogetic power was a mystical and mysterious thing, but despite its similarities to Disciplines that was not how one learned to employ it. Unlocking one's protogetic capabilities required a fusion of Discipline and spirit, as well as the energies that surrounded them in that unseen

reality. All of that together is what generated such staggering power.

Motivated by the danger and pressure, Lan Jue's abilities were operating at their peak. If there were even the slightest chance to save himself and Qianlin, he had to be ready to take it.

As Lan Jue had commanded, the skies did indeed appear to be opening as a tremendous fracture appeared overhead. A blackness like the depths of space was seeping through.

Lan Jue took a deep breath and, ripping his hands apart as though he were physically doing it himself, he cried out.

“THE SKIES SHALL OPEN!”

A single blast of golden energy erupted from the top of Lan Jue's skull. It was heading directly for that gathering darkness in the heavens. The undulating, crimson landscape was rocked. Everything around them thickened, like congealing blood.

Granny Bess' right hand moved in response. The motions were fluid and unhurried, and with it a gentle red light – lighter somewhat than the surroundings – sprang to life. The strangely wavy quality of the landscape stabilized, and the apocalyptic fissure in the sky stitched shut.

The massive hand shut, blotting out Lan Jue and his radiant light with bone-crunching force. But in the center of that grip, Lan Jue was safe within a shell of his own protogenic power. It crackled thunderously as it battled against the murderous encroaching force.

He couldn't remain like this long. The entire weight of reality was bearing down upon him. The pressure was causing rivulets of blood to trickle from his ears. It was too much, he was facing a true master of these powers, and his was just a show. He could feel himself nearing total collapse.

Lan Jue, eyes wide, clapped his hands together before his chest. He swung back, gathering whatever remaining energy he possessed, and focused it through his arms by means of elaborate motions. His arms shot out, and the shell around him was injected with another inexplicable aura.

Suddenly the crushing energy was met by an elastic wall, rather than a solid defense.

Granny Bess' calm exterior fractured slightly. "What! Martial arts!"

Lan Jue's coiling arms met, and once again his palms clapped together. Reality before him appeared to dissolve. He pushed his palms toward the opening.

An explosive force to rival nuclear blasts erupted from his palms, three times stronger than the force from earlier. Behind him, the dazzling image of a lightning bolt was branded in the air. All of his Discipline joined with the force of his art, was directed at a single point.

The crimson hand splintered and fell away under the attack. Bess' nightmare world of blood and shadow, also collapsed.

"Well done! You're even stronger than I'd hoped."

Behind the hellscape was nothingness. It was vast, and empty, and darker than black. Lan Jue's heart sank in despair; Bess' protogenic reality wasn't just a single level. He was drained, having used all he had to tear away the world of blood. This place of oblivion was stronger.

Bess appeared again in his field of view. She was standing, it was the first time Lan Jue had seen her do so. She was slightly stooped, with her hair neatly combed and her pink jacket as clean as ever. She certainly looked ready for the grave, but the surging power that flowed from her spoke to anything but weakness.

She was thin, and short, but in this emptiness she looked enormous. With a wave of her hand that blackness smudged, and again a swath of crimson red shone through the black. That same terrifying pressure could be felt seeping through it.

"Hack!" Lan Jue spat up a mouthful of blood. He staggered, as the gold aura around him began to fracture and fade.

He couldn't do it – the tai chi-empowered protogenic energies were too much for him to sustain. Too much to control.

But as Lan Jue teetered on the edge of collapse, something stopped Granny Bess in her tracks. The expression on her face was more pronounced than the surprise she'd revealed before. This was shock.

She fiercely swiped her hand upward, and another monstrous fist of blood emerged from the emptiness. Lan Jue had no further strength to contend. It snatched him up by the trunk, and squeezed. A series of cracks and pops followed as the fist crushed Lan Jue in its grip.

There was a flash, and Lan Jue's battered body appeared floating in the darkness before Bess. She dipped a clawed digit in to the spattered blood on his clothing, then brought it to her nose for a sniff.

Her eyes widened, and a terrible light burned in her eyes.

"How... why does his aura surround you?!"

Lan Jue just looked at her, stunned and unable to speak.

Bess paused. Lan Jue couldn't know what she was thinking, but after a moment she waved once again and the hand that held him fast relaxed. He immediately collapsed, hanging limp in the black landscape. He felt more as though he were floating in some viscous fluid, which slithered through him to force his Discipline all the way down to its core. Lan Jue was no stronger than a normal man now, and there was no fighting back.

"Speak! Where's your wine," Bess croaked.

Lan Jue glared at her, obstinate and silent.

She spoke again, her voice soft like sweet poison. "Do you think you have any chance, puppet? You can choose not to speak, but if you do I'll remove one of her limbs."

Unadulterated hatred smoldered in Lan Jue's glare. "We drank it, in the Avenue. One of the Wine Master's treasures."

Bess looked skeptical. "You'd actually drink it?"

Once more she brought her wicked finger to her nose and sniffed. Lan Jue couldn't see her clearly, blocked by swathe of red she'd conjured. He could, however, sense her violent mood swings.

“It’s time to make your choice, puppet. Will it be her, or you? Only the most willing would be altruistic enough to sate my thirst.” She seemed to have recovered her composure.

Lan Jue never hesitated. “How do I know you’ll keep your word and let her go?”

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1. Chapter 122, and a little foreshadowing Chapter 254!

Chapter 335: Bess and the Clairvoyant

Bess' voice was indifferent. "Do you think you're in a position to make demands? It's simple – accept, and she lives. Refuse and she dies."

Lan Jue's lips curled in to a bitter expression, as though forced to swallow something unsavory. However, it was quickly replaced with an easy smile. "Alright, you can take mine."

Bess was suspicious. Anyone – regardless of the circumstances – would not be happy to face immanent death. And she could feel it from him – genuine happiness.

"What reason do you have to be so happy?" she asked.

"No reason," Lan Jue assured. "Death just isn't such a frightening prospect, sometimes." What exactly he meant, only he knew.

He'd been off kilter ever since meeting Zhou Qianlin. She looked so much like Hera, that he couldn't help but think about his dead soulmate every time he saw her. He felt a surge of affection whenever they were together because of it.

Of course, intellectually he knew it was wrong. He couldn't betray Hera's memory by falling for her sister, no matter how alike they seemed.

For this reason he'd been avoiding her. He almost lost control on An Lun, and they only stopped because of Tang Mi's interruption. He was disappointed in how strong an affect she had on him. Even if Hera had given him her blessings, it was impossible. Hera had cast too great a shadow in the depths of his heart.

He owed Qianlin, at least that's how he saw it. Family was important to Lan Jue, so no matter what he'd make sure Qianlin would get back to hers. If his life truly would spare hers, then it was an acceptable trade. His debt would be paid – and he'd pass on to the next world, where he would meet with his Hera.

As an Adept – indeed, as an Adept that may one day achieve Paragon – Lan Jue was convinced of the existence of the soul. Although he knew that

finding Hera's soul in the vast expanse of the universe would be nearly impossible, the possibility gave him hope. That's why he'd smiled, because death meant the chance at meeting his lost love once again. This certainly wasn't a bad thing. Life and death were trivial, in the end.

Bess nodded her head. "So be it, I'll help you meet death. Don't fret, I'll not waste everything she's given you."

As Bess spoke, she swiped her claw-like nails through the air. Gashes appeared on Lan Jue's limp wrists and bright rivulets of blood began to flow.

Lan Jue's blood was different from a normal man's. Instead of the dark crimson one might expect, his was a bright, metallic red. Once an adept achieved ninth rank, their Discipline was completely integrated in to their body. It mingled with the blood, bones, muscles and organs. The color and texture of his blood was borne from the presence of pure energy.

It's said a single drop of a Paragon's blood contains an immeasurable amount of energy. Under specific conditions, such a drop could perform incredible feats. Although Lan Jue was not himself a Paragon, he had a measure of protogenic comprehension. Some of that sparkling energy was protogenic power.

Lan Jue's lifeblood vanished drop by drop in to the surrounding emptiness. Suddenly there was a flash, and the world around him changed. A familiar silhouette appeared within the darkness.

Qianlin was lying in the emptiness not far from where he hung. She was bound by shimmering red cords of energy. Lan Jue could see her eyes – those stunning, gorgeous blue eyes – wet with tears.

Lan Jue's chest tightened. It was happening all over again, just like that day when he was forced to say farewell to Hera.

He could see what she wanted to say in her eyes. He wanted to say the same thing.

I'm sorry.

He could feel her affection for him, and though he wanted to call out to

her he was unable to. Bess slowly hobbled to her. She stopped at her side, hovering over her prostrate form. She lifted her right hand, then – swipe!

Qianlin winced as the arteries of her wrist were opened. Blood poured from her wounds. It, too, was not a dark red. Instead, it was surrounded by a haze of pure white light. It was like the precious fluid was protected by a fluorescent covering.

Lan Jue's whole body began to shake. He glared daggers at the old woman, furious at her treachery. One was not enough for this monstrous witch.

Bess looked infinitely calm. In fact, her craggy face bore no emotion at all – perfect apathy. The two dying before her were no more than insects.

The flow of blood increased, and very soon the fatigue of blood loss set in. Lan Jue, stronger than most normal men, was losing consciousness quickly.

Qianlin, I'm sorry. I brought this on you! Lan Jue's laments filled his heart, and he hoped it would somehow reach her through the Spirit caller gem. But there was no response.

Qianlin's eyes were locked on his. She wept openly, even as those eyes began to dim.

Bess swiped her arms through the air, and the two victim's other wrists were also opened. Both Lan Jue and Qianlin could feel a warmth penetrate through them, and then... darkness.

Lan Jue's metallic red blood flowed in to Qianlin's opposite wrist, while her own slipped in to his. The strange transfusion continued under Bess' control.

This continued until a pale white aura surrounded Lan Jue's body. For Qianlin, spiderweb-sized bolts of lightning danced across the surface of her skin. Bess' face remained expressionless, even when a burst of rainbow color exploded overhead.

Another figure appeared, but this one different – more like a projection. It hovered by Bess' side.

“This is different than what we’d discussed.” The voice was also elderly, and flowed from the strange image. Were Lan Jue conscious he would immediately recognize him – the Clairvoyant, third strongest among the known Paragons.

Bess’ response was cool. “What difference does it make? I’m upholding my end of the bargain – how I choose to do it is irrelevant.”

The Clairvoyant smiled. “It doesn’t matter to me, I just didn’t see it coming. It’s touching to see this side of you, a woman whose heart is normally cold as iron. It seems to me you might have some affection for this young girl.”

“I’d helped her, in another life,” the old woman said. “It’s so seldom we find someone with a soul so pure. Her heart bears many worries, but never have I ever encountered a young person whose conscience was so clean. You know I like clean. There’s more, as well. She has... old blood, and powers very few would understand. This other one you’ve asked me to help isn’t bad either. He was willing to sacrifice his life for his woman. He passed my test... or I wouldn’t have agreed to help.”

He smirked. “Are you saying you don’t trust in my visions?”

“I only trust myself,” the old woman responded. “You’re an old man on the cusp of death. Do you really want to squabble over nonsense? After this we’re even. I’ve paid my dues.”

The Clairvoyant sniffed. “You haven’t changed a bit. I always wanted to learn why, but you’d never let me know.”

Bess’ response was tepid, and dismissive. “The past is gone, it means nothing. You can die in peace, old man. As for my history, perhaps you’ll learn a little in your next life.”

“You know better than that,” the Clairvoyant teased. “Even if I do return here, it won’t be here. Another time, place and dimension beckons me. But before I go, I must trouble you for one last thing – watch over them. After all, you and I saw with our own eyes the growth of humanity.”

“This hasn’t the slightest to do with me. Now get lost.” Bess waved him

away as though he were some detestable thing.

The Clairvoyant was not perturbed by her attitude. "Thank you, Bess." He looked her in the eye, deeply and genuinely, before his image dissolved without a trace.

Only once the space beside her was empty did the old woman's iron façade change. A flash of regret flashed across her eyes as she stared at the dark space where he had been. She sighed, and shook her head.

The world of darkness around them began to melt away. Moonlight appeared overhead, full and bright, and where it touched the black and red were banished. What occurred next was a strange scene observed by none, for beneath the silvery glow the elderly woman herself changed. Her stoop figure straightened, white hair changed to rich gold, and the craggy features from before disappeared to reveal a beauty beneath.

She was beautiful, beautiful enough to catch a man's breath in his throat. Blonde haired, blue eyed and with a wonderfully slender build. Those hideous red nails changed, and began to radiate silvery-white light. Her voice was no longer the quavering croak of an old hag. Now, it was clear and melodious. She spoke softly to herself. "It's grape harvesting season again. I always think of you."

When Lan Jue came to, he found himself lying in the middle of a deserted wood. Qianlin was beside him.

Lan Jue pushed himself in to a seated position, and immediately regretted it as waves of weakness threatened to black him out again. His head hurt, and his body was stiff.

Qianlin was still asleep, but her breathing came slow and easy. He could tell from the flush in her cheeks that she was in no danger of dying.

Lan Jue couldn't help but look around in a daze. The moments leading up to this cycled over and over in his mind. Where it not for the discomfort he felt, he'd never believe it was anything but a dream. What kind of dream leaves you weak and stranded in a forest?

Chapter 336: Disciplines Change

Lan Jue lifted his head to spy the sky above. It was dark now, but the full moon seemed unnaturally bright. It was like a jade plate suspended high against a black velvet backdrop. As the radiant silver light washed over everything, Lan Jue felt... comfortable.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Jue searched inwardly for his core. One's Core was most important for an adept, and so long as it remained healthy he would be able to recover from anything.

Once he found his, Lan Jue was struck with amazement.

There were marked differences between his core now and what it was before. Usually it was a bluish-purple in color, with tendrils of white lightning surrounding it. It changed slightly as he employed either of his two Disciplines.

Now, his core was covered by filaments of silver light. They densely criss-crossed his core until they formed an encompassing net. The silvery threads released a faint white light, and it seemed to be constricting his energy flow. He could only call about a third of his power, by his estimations.

Put simply, all his years of training had been undone. A fraction of his abilities remained unchained. No wonder he felt uncomfortable he thought, his Discipline wasn't prosperous enough to promote healing.

Further investigation revealed that his body had undergone some changes as well. His vessels and bone seemed to shimmer, and appeared smoother than he remembered. Where once his whole body had shone with the faint golden light of protogenic power, now everything was white and smooth like milky jade. But if he looked very closely, some of that gold still remained locked deep down.

What's going on? What in the world happened? What did that Bess woman do to us?

Lan Jue rose to his feet, and focused on the surroundings. Thankfully, his

perception didn't seem affected by the constraints imposed upon his Core, and so he was still able to see the world around him clearly as ever. No one else was around.

Lan Jue turned back to Zhou Qianlin, and pressed his fingers to her wrist to check her condition.

What he felt was very strange. There was a link, somehow, like they were connected. The moment he touched her, he could sense the silvery net around his Core bloom with white light. It began to blend with his own power, and likewise he could feel traces of his own familiar Discipline within her. He felt as though he himself had grown my powerful, perhaps the peak of seventh rank.

What does this mean? Lan Jue stared at Zhou Qianlin in a stupor.

This...

He felt as though their connected had deepened, especially considering the link he'd felt in their pulses. Even more astonishing was finding echoes of his own Discipline within Zhou Qianlin!

In a moment Lan Jue felt like he'd become the village idiot. He had no idea what was going on. He'd trained for many years, was especially privileged, and had perfected himself to ninth level – and this was the first time he'd ever experienced anything like this.

Lan Jue lifted the sleeping Qianlin in to his arms, for fear the cold ground would make her sick. He couldn't help but again sense the changes in her.

Indeed, exactly the same. She had some of the exact same energies he did; thunderbolt and lightning. Both were yang, just as his were. Not a single thing was different from his own.

Qianlin's Core in her chest had also come more in to focus. The interior was that same milky-white hue, but now a net of golden lightning hung over it. Lan Jue was both amused and infuriated. The net surrounded and restrained her core, but as he held her hand the golden net dissolved and joined with that pure white light. Her core shimmered a pale gold. Now

her Discipline was as his, even about as strong.

What did this mean? It meant that when Lan Jue and Qianlin were hand-in-hand, there were two Zeus'. However when they parted, his power was reduced to only a third. Qianlin's returned to its normal white.

This was all too strange. Too strange for Lan Jue to know what to do about it. As far as he could tell, this was a bad thing. Alone, he was far too weak to perform as needed. However, with Qianlin they were twice as strong. That was the supposed trade-off.

To have his powers returned, all he had to do was break through that silver mesh hanging over his core. But the power it bore was strange. It felt almost like a part of his own Core, and using his own Discipline to attack it was completely useless. It was like shouting at a brick wall. But there was something else in there, something indistinct. He could swear the protogenic inspiration that filled him was slightly greater, but why he couldn't guess.

He wasn't sure, but the creeping suspicion that filled him seemed inspired. The only way he was going to free himself from this, was to break through to Paragon. Otherwise, he'd remain like this forever.

How could that be allowed to happen? There was still so much he had to do. Not least of which was a tournament, and he was probably equivalent to a ninth-rank third level now.

Although the levels of ninth rank were very different, it wasn't in the order of tens of times. In fact, the difference between a ninth rank first level and ninth rank seventh level Adept was about three to four times. This was especially detrimental to Lan Jue due to his dual Discipline.

For now, there didn't appear to be any way for him to fix this problem. He'd have to accept it until he got back to the Wine Master and Keeper for an answer. Only they could figure out what was going on. After all, they were Paragons.

Qianlin twitched in his arms, and called out. "A-Jue!" Her eyes popped open, and in her surprise she'd begun to flail her arms. Eventually she caught them around Lan Jue's neck.

Lan Jue held her tight, instinctively reacting to her concern. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Her eyes came in to focus, and the moment she recognized him she squeezed his neck tight and began to cry.

"It's over, everything's alright." Lan Jue gently patted her back as he comforted her.

She cried for a while. When she regained some composure, she lifted her head and searched Lan Jue's face, to make sure he truly was alright.

He stared in to her eyes, full of tears and sincerity. He was filled with a flurry of emotions, to which he answered by gently stroking her hair.

"Take it easy, I'm fine. I don't know what happened, but we're alive. N-"

Zhou Qianlin didn't let him finish. She leaned up, and kissed him.

Lan Jue sat, stunned. However he could feel that impulse rising up within him, but just in that moment a strange sensation overtook them. Both could feel their Cores shake, then suddenly release a blast of energy.

As Lan Jue watched in complete shock, Qianlin's body flashed white, then melted away in to his own body. Lan Jue's own silver-shackled Core burst in to a corona of vibrant light. Qianlin's Core, meanwhile, had also slipped in to his own body and mingled with his own. The two danced together within him, emitting pulses of powerful pure energy. Suddenly, Lan Jue felt lost in a sea of power. His Core was writhing his energy, and almost instantly he could feel himself tearing through the shackles of eighth level. The power surged still, rising ever higher to the peaks of ninth level ninth rank, and only then did it subside.

Lost in the sensation, he could faintly make out rays of golden light coming from... somewhere. They weren't clear, but they somehow bore an attraction he couldn't resist. Everything in him wanted to pursue that light.

Is that my path?

At some point Lan Jue had become suspended in air. There he hung, and he could feel his surging energies racing through him. They were the

same; thunderbolt, lightning, both yang. But he felt so much stronger. The difference between seventh rank and ninth rank was considerable – this was why Prometheus was such a terror even among the other Monarchs.

This is what it feels like to be ninth-ranked. But why... how did Qianlin do that? What the hell is going on?

Lan Jue turned his attention ward, to his pale gold Core, which appeared to have doubled in size. His entire body froze in surprise.

“What... what the hell is this?” Qianlin’s voice rang in Lan Jue’s skull.

All Lan Jue could summon was a wry, apologetic chuckle. “I have no idea. We fused together. It probably has something to do with that Bess woman. Our powers are stronger, and linked somehow. After the fusion, it seemed I was able to come out dominant. Qianlin, can you control my body?”

“No.” Once again, Zhou Qianlin’s voice was in his mind. “I can feel everything, but I can’t move. What is going on?!”

Lan Jue, too, could only sense her energy. “I guess the priority is figuring out how to get you back.”

The moment he formed the thought, Lan Jue could sense his Core begin to radiate with an ever-expanding silver light. It actually began to pour from his chest, until gradually the form of Zhou Qianlin reemerged.

And yet the alarmed Lan Jue all the more, for when Qianlin separated from the silver light she wasn’t the same. She was entirely naked, her silk-like skin bare to the world.

“AAAAHHHHH—!”

The trees shuddered as flocks of birds fled from the wail.

Chapter 337: Summing Up

Five minutes later.

Qianlin was wrapped in some of Lan Jue's oversized clothing, making her appear like an undersized mannequin. A bashful pink tinted her cheeks. Luckily, Lan Jue had brought some spare clothes in his interdimensional pocket, otherwise he really would not have known what to do.

Lan Jue sat beside her, and the two of them remained in silence, ruminating over the bizarre circumstance they found themselves in.

"Ehm... Qianlin."

"Hm?"

Lan Jue muttered, "We have no idea what caused this. But at least I can try and explain what I know – what do you think?"

"Alright." Qianlin nodded her head. Indeed these strange events had caused things to grow uncomfortable between them. Whether Lan Jue or Qianlin, both suddenly felt as though they were a piece of the other. Thankfully, however, they were unable to read the contents of the others' innermost thoughts – otherwise, it would be a truly terrifying situation they found themselves in.

"My Discipline appears to be blocked by a special seal," he explained. "I can only call on about a third of my total strength. About ninth level first rank. From what I can tell, the block has something to do with you because it vanishes whenever we have any physical contact. Then my power is back to normal. It seems like your powers aren't effected when we come in to contact, at least in terms of strength. Instead, you seem capable of using my own Discipline when we touch. Follow?"

Qianlin nodded.

Lan Jue continued. "When we, uh..." he paused, and shot her a glance. Her face was already flushed. "When we show intimacy, our bodies meld together. I guess more specifically, your body melts in to mine. This

increases my Discipline immediately and intensely. It was only for a second, but it felt like I was at the peak of ninth rank. So from what I can see, we can't call what happened here an entirely bad circumstance. At least not for you, right?"

Qianlin's eyes shot up and fixed him with her eyes. "How is this not a bad thing for me?"

Lan Jue blinked in surprise, while Qianlin's face reddened further.

Lan Jue was a smart man, and after a moment he realized her meaning. There were side-effects here, not least of which being their need to be effectionate to unlock their powers. Even if they wanted to, she'd simply melt away in to his core. Aside from the very expensive cost of always replacing clothing, this had a slew of problems.

"I-I wasn't finished. I mean, of course there are problems. Any time there's any sort of deep contact our bodies join. So, th-there's that. Right, and your clothes vanish. But it seems like metal and power gems are exceptions." He'd spied the Spirit caller gem around her neck, and the pelagic pearl on her finger earlier.

Zhou Qianlin didn't utter a word. She stared off in to the distance, resolutely ignoring him.

Lan Jue offered a half-hearted laugh. "I have no idea what to do about this either. But I promise I'll figure out a plan, and I'll ask around about it. This whole thing was strange. That Bess being a Paragon – and an unknown one! Plus, why did she do this? What was her motivation? What did she even do to us? I'll back to the Avenue, and I'll ask the Paragons there. Maybe they'll know something. What do you think?"

She only shook her head. Her mind was a mess, and her heart fluttered with a flood of emotions. Everything was too strange, too sudden. She was entirely lost.

Lan Jue spoke on, helplessly. "I guess we'll try this first. It's already late, anyway. I'll send you home."

"Mh." She nodded.

They rose to their feet, then stopped and stared at one another.

Lan Jue took the initiative, stepping forward. “Now that we’re here, we don’t have a choice but to deal with it. Now that you can use my powers, I’ll teach you the methods I use to control it. That way, so long as we’re together it’d be like having two of me.”

“Mh.” She acquiesced once again.

She was shy, he could see it in her face. He took up her hand. “We start now.”

The moment they touched he could feel it. His core opened up, unrestrained, and flooded him with energy. Qianlin felt light as they rose to the air under Lan Jue’s power

“Fix your attention on your core. Slowly coax the power free. If you immerse your will in it, you’ll turn in to a bolt of lightning. Now there’s no rush, take your time. Thunderbolt powers are fierce, so you mustn’t rush. It may reverse and harm you.”

As they soared through the air, Lan Jue carefully instructed her on control of his Discipline. Free of the forest, Lan Jue used his communicator to quickly pin-point their location. Luckily they weren’t far from Qianlin’s home.

They quickly and quietly made their way to the peak of the mountain. Along the way, Qianlin had had the opportunity to experience becoming lightning several times. By the time they arrived in her room through the electrical socket, she was more than a little surprised to find she was a little less shy with Lan Jue’s presence here.

Lan Jue spoke softly to her. “Change your clothes, then we’ll leave and come home the obvious way so we don’t arouse suspicion.”

“Alright. Turn around.” She’d only just gotten her emotions under control, and immediately her face flushed red.

Lan Jue entered the bathroom and closed the door.

Zhou Qianlin wasn’t alone. Even Lan Jue needed some time to process

this very strange turn of events. What the hell was going on?! On the whole it wasn't so bad, it just forced a very close relationship between him and Qianlin. Of course, she enjoyed the sweeter end of their bargain. While they were together, she immediately became one of a very few number of Adepts at the higher echelons. Although she couldn't use the powers too effectively now, she was definitely strong enough to do it. And at this level, even the smallest missteps have reactions.

"Alright." Before long, Qianlin's voice gently called at him from the other room.

Lan Jue exited the bathroom, then brought Qianlin through the electrical sockets and to the front door. He bid her farewell with a wave. He wanted to get back to the Avenue quickly so that he could consult the Keeper and Wine Master. Hopefully they had some idea of what was happening.

Zhou Qianlin watched him go with her eyes, and only once he disappeared from sight did she go back inside. She composed herself, since she was hot from so quickly changing clothes, then called out to her family that she was home. She went to her room.

She lay on her bed, those beautiful shining eyes staring at the ceiling.

There was something she hadn't told Lan Jue, and that was what Bess had told her.

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"Granny Bess, you-" Zhou Qianlin froze under the old woman's grasp. When did this kindly old woman become so frightening!

Bess ogled the pearl on the younger woman's finger. "That's a finer means of defense there. Of course it won't protect you from me. Don't fret, puppet. I'm only here to help you."

"Help me?" Qianlin couldn't help but reiterate the assertion, skeptical.

Bess explained patiently. "You've gotten very strong recently. Unless I'm mistaken, you possess the very rare Silkworm Discipline. Am I right?"

Qianlin's face changed suddenly. "You can see that?"

“Those who truly understand your abilities are few and far between,” Bess said. “I’d venture to say even you don’t really understand. Lucky for you, I’m one of those few. I’ve been observing you recently, you know. You’re a person of pure and good character. You have troubles, but you look after the elderly here with wholehearted, genuine care. It’s so unfortunate that you can’t properly use the powers. So, I’ve decided to help. I believe you used the power once on that young man you have following you around, yes? Is he worth anything at all?”

Zhou Qianlin was instantly calm. She gave the old woman a wry grin. “If there was anyone in this universe who deserved the benefit of my powers, it’s him. He had no idea I was a ninth rank Talent, Granny Bess, and I ask that you don’t tell him. We have a very complicated relationship.”

“I’m not interested in the plights of the young,” Bess muttered. “But I learned what I needed to know – he’s deserving. You must know that after you used the Silkworm, you and the recipient created a... past-life bond. The two of you are inexorably tied, forever.”

“Even those who claim to know the secrets of the Heavenly Empress only scratch the surface. Your powers are derived from virtue, and compassion. But this life is a fair one. You reap what you sow. People just forget why they’re getting what they’re getting. My job in helping you, is to get you that payback. And to keep a promise.”

“Granny Bess... I don’t know what you mean. I don’t understand.” Zhou Qianlin gave her an inquisitive look.

“You don’t have to understand.” Bess waved her hand, and a light flashed in her palm. Zhou Qianlin fell to the floor, unconscious.

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The memories played back in her mind. Qianlin’s eyes were awash with conflicting emotions. Bess hadn’t bore an ounce of maliciousness, despite her act. She was there to help them. So that must mean that the changes she’d gone through were her ‘payback’? But this wasn’t anything she wanted! The two of them joining together, and the increase in ability, must only mean they were meant to be partners.

Zhou Qianlin absently nibbled on her lower lip. She quietly focused on the subtle changes of her Core – sixth rank. Her Discipline certainly had grown stronger. With her powers of the Heavenly Empress, she naturally improved at a faster level, but even that didn't explain this speed. It'd only been a couple months!

Chapter 338: What Did You Do To Me?

All this simply by being near him. Indeed, if she could just be with him always then that would be grand. Zhou Qianlin felt a sudden surge of emotion, and tears began to drip from her eyes.

These last few months had indeed been torture. A torture that was difficult to describe. But as she thought upon the torment, she could suddenly feel something surging out from within her, aside from the emotions she felt. In the next instant, much to her surprise, there appeared another figure beside her upon the bed. Not a foot away lay the man she was just thinking about.

“You-... How did you get here?” Zhou Qianlin asked, stunned.

Lan Jue stared at her, wide-eyed. His pupils were struggling to adjust to the sudden shift in light. “How should I know?”

They looked in to one another’s eyes, and found confusion. What was this?

“What did you do to me?” Both of them expressed the same thought in the same moment.

“I didn’t do anything!” Again, together.

Silence. Not a sound was made as they lay in the dim interior of Zhou Qianlin’s bedroom. They simply looked at each other, confused and unsure on how to proceed.

Lan Jue sat up, got off the bed and turned back to face Qianlin. His features were serious. “I think it’s important that we perform some experiments. We need to figure out precisely how far this goes.”

“Alright.” Qianlin nodded her head. Yes! They did have to find out how close their connection had become. Did she just summon him?

“I had just gotten back to the Avenue. I was on my way to speak with the Paragons about what had happened, when suddenly I just found myself here. No warning, just poof. I didn’t even feel any sort of energy displacement or power. This has got to have something to do with you,

right? What were you just doing?" Lan Jue's questions were delivered calmly. Only logic would puzzle out what was going on here.

Her face reddened. "I was... I was thinking about you."

He blinked. "So you were thinking about me, and I suddenly appeared?"

Qianlin nodded. "I thought it would be nice if you were beside me. Then you were."

Lan Jue's face darkened to a scowl. This was some shit! It meant he had practically no freedom, and Qianlin could summon him at her leisure. This...

"I wonder if it works the other way. If I just think of you beside me..." Lan Jue muttered to himself, focusing on the thought of Qianlin at his side. When he raised his eyes to look at her, nothing had changed.

"I'll leave and try again," he said. He didn't even stop to let her respond before disappearing in to the power socket.

Zhou Qianlin rose to her feet. She, too, was surprised. She could summon him whenever she pleased, apparently. What was she to make of this?

After a short while, Lan Jue appeared once more from the socket, his face darker still. "Nothing. I tried thinking of you with me, but nothing happened. I suppose only you have the ability to summon me."

Zhou Qianlin stood in silence for a moment, before speaking up. "Do you really want me with you?"

Lan Jue's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

She dropped her head, her face reddening once more. "It probably needs to be a genuine desire."

Lan Jue was struck by the realization. He'd been so shocked with the summoning that he hadn't considered the implications. They'd separated, and she honestly wanted him with her.

"Qianlin..." Lan Jue didn't know what to say, but he felt it within him.

The young politician's daughter reigned herself in. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to trouble you. It's just, we are creatures with feelings and emotions. It was a.... a sort of hopeless attraction, I guess. It'll go away with time."

"That's not what I meant," he blurted out.

Qianlin lifted her eyes to his once more. "Then what did you mean?"

After a moment of silence, he responded. "Let's keep trying to figure out what's going on here, first. I'm going to try again." With that, he was gone.

As he left, Lan Jue's emotions were fluctuating more than his lightning Discipline.

Qianlin... if you feel this way about me, how can I face you? Hera will always be the only woman in my heart, and so long as she's there I can't give you all of me.

Five minutes later, he was back. Qianlin regarded him with an indifferent chuckle. "Still nothing? This is enough for now, we'll continue with the experiments later. And don't worry, I won't trouble with – I'll make sure to keep my thoughts in check."

Lan Jue silently nodded his head. "Alright. I'll start heading back."

The room flashed with light as he became lightning, and vanished. The corners of her mouth curled in to a sad frown. It appeared as though her guess was right: You needed to wish with your whole heart in order for the summoning to work. He didn't see her the way she saw him. He didn't miss her the way she missed him.

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Lan Jue's mood was equally dour as he made his way back to the Avenue. Time and again he tried to fill himself with longing for Qianlin, but every time Hera's smiling face swam up through the recesses of his mind to greet him. Every time, he failed.

Bess' actions had created some wonderful changes in the both of them, but they were sudden and chaotic. Lan Jue didn't know what to do about any of it. What would happen between he and Qianlin, he asked himself.

What would become of their relationship?

From the beginning he'd wanted to keep a strict distance from her. There had to be boundaries. Now, as he tried more and more to let her in, he couldn't. He acknowledged an affection for her, certainly, but affection and love were very different beasts. Worse still, he was sure how much of this affection was due to her similarities to Hera. This was most important.

When Lan Jue got back to the Avenue, he wasted no time in imploring help from the Keeper and Bookworm. They were busy men, but this was a very important matter.

"What?" After Lan Jue revealed his story, the two Paragons looked at each other. Their expressions were serious.

An unknown Paragon was staggering news in the Adept world. What's more, this person had attacked a member of the Skyfire Council only several kilometers away.

The Keeper's gruff voice was commanding. "Bring me to the hospital. I want to take a look." The Bookworm nodded in emphatic agreement.

With two Paragons at his back, Lan Jue had no need to fear Bess. Of course, as Lan Jue had expected she was no longer there when they arrived at her room. She left no trace, no clue to her whereabouts.

"We'll head back and discuss it." The Keeper, after a cursory glance at the room, waved his hand dismissively.

When they returned, all four of the Avenue's Paragons had gathered. Once more, Lan Jue shared his story, and as it progressed every one of the great powerhouses were scowling openly. Nearly killing a Council member made every one of them lose face! And yet, if this woman had indeed harbored malicious intent, Lan Jue would already be dead. Not to mention, Lan Jue was the Clairvoyant's chosen successor! He was the future of the Avenue.

What followed was a series of questions and experiments. Lan Jue was no longer a Councilman, but a lab rat.

“This is very strange. From the outside it almost looks like a Discipline aberration. It penetrates all the way to your core, though.” The Keeper examined him from head to toe, and gave his determination after.

The Wine Master nodded. “I sense the same. It’s a mutation, caused by outside forces. But ultimately, this doesn’t look like such a bad thing for you. Once your energy and that other power combine, the result should be intensely pure. It possesses the very essence of this energy. It seals your core, but it also softens and compresses it. My guess is it will improve the rate and quality of your cultivation practices. I know that I don’t have any ability to seal a core in this way.”

The Keeper shook his head. “Nor do I. I doubt it’s solely the ability of the Paragon that caused this. Even a Paragon couldn’t do this alone. You’re only ninth rank seventh degree – she could easily have ended you if she wished – but doing this would be difficult, even for a Paragon.

To this, the Bookworm chuckled. “This Bess woman sounds like she was acting like a matchmaker 1. You and that girl are suddenly attached at the hip, sometimes literally. If you want to fight at your best, you’ll need her with you. So, if you aren’t together, then the net result is poor, correct? If the two of you marry, then all of your problems are solved. Not only that, you’ll be stronger.”

Lan Jue’s brows tightened. “Let’s not talk about my relationship with Qianlin just yet. I can’t accept this sort of restriction. I’ve lost all freedom, like I’m chained up in a box. Is there any way to break this seal?”

“None,” the Wine Master assured. “We do indeed have the power to suppress the seal, but that would mean we’d have to be with you all the time. We’d have to be continuously pumping you full of energy. We’d be just as shackled as you are. The only way to do this, would be to obliterate your core. That would kill you. The only way for you to unlock this seal is to continue with your growth, until you’ve mastered the protogenic energies. Once your core has been infused in that power and born again, then the seal will be broken. Luckily, with this seal in place you’ll get about twice the result for half the effort in training. Right now, the only way to be free of this restriction, is hard work.

The Keeper nodded sagely. “This is also my conclusion. There are no other options, unless you seek out that Paragon. Only she knows the specifics of your condition. It’s as they say; only the one who used the poison knows its antidote.”

The Bookworm and Gourmet were newly minted Paragons. They had no solutions for Lan Jue either. He had no choice but to accept this situation. For now, he was a weaker man reliant on the presence of Qianlin.

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1. Matchmakers were widely used in China for a long time. In rural areas it’s still a common practice, complete with dowries and other ancient practices.

Chapter 339: ARC Phase Two

Lan Jue gave a morose sigh. “What can I do? Once more I’ve lost my freedom. I still have so much to do, and now with my strength so low...”

“Take her with you.” The Wine Master’s response was frank and curt.

Lan Jue looked his way. “But she doesn’t represent the Avenue.”

“Enough,” the Wine Master said in irritation. “That isn’t even an issue. It takes no effort to introduce someone to the Avenue. It sounds like you’re finding excuses not to bring her.”

“Men have responsibilities,” the Gourmet responded with serious countenance. “You have things to accomplish.”

“I-“ Lan Jue fought to tell them there wasn’t anything between he and Zhou Qianlin, but the words wouldn’t come. If they didn’t, how could they have become so entangled in this mess? Suddenly the woman who’d cheated him so long ago appeared in his mind’s eye, the one who set him on his path to Qianlin. If he ever found her or her organization, he thought, they’d have hell to pay. If not for them, how else would this nonsense have happened?

“I have to think about it. I need quiet.” Lan Jue had to accept the reality of what was going on.

He returned home and settled down to meditate. He had been assured that no outward power was going to free him from this prison. His only option, then, was to try and earn freedom from his own power.

He focused on cultivating himself throughout the night, and when he opened his eyes he felt refreshed. Indeed, he felt a little stronger. However, his face was still dark. The seal remained firmly in place. It never moved, much less released. Despite an entire night’s efforts, nothing changed. It was strange, though – during the night he’d sensed that that silver seal had actually absorbed some of the cultivating energies he’d focused toward his Core. It meant that the stronger he grew, the stronger the seal became as well.

Was it truly only possible to be free once he broke through to Paragon? It was practically impossible! Even the highest level adepts needed decades of training and no small amount of luck to achieve this dream.

Lan Jue's dour mood put him off breakfast. Instead, he got ready and left directly for the University on his antique bicycle. There were still things to do, and time waits for no man.

He sought out Director Wu, and sure enough the school was preparing them for another trip. The destination, the Barrows.

"I have to trouble you with something, Director," Lan Jue ventured after some thought.

"Of course." Director Wu had bent head over heels since discovering part of Lan Jue's identity. Any issue was immediately solved, most recently being the leak about the ARC. Since discovery of the culprit, the military had ceased any overt attempts at taking away their students. In fact, a representative had expressed their apologies to the University's Dean. He assured him that they need not worry over their students' future.

The circumstances had actually helped Wu Junyi come to a greater understanding of Lan Jue. He was even further convinced of the young instructor's superior abilities. Not only was he a powerful Adept individually, he also commanding staggering resources. If someone like this was interested in teaching here, who was he to deny him anything?

Lan Jue let the silence stretch for a moment before going on. "I'd like to participate in this trip. But, I was hoping to bring along someone else. I wasn't sure if this would be alright?"

"Of course it's alright," the director responded without hesitation. He didn't even care who Lan Jue was bringing.

He – as the etiquette teacher – had no classes. Through discussion both he and Wu Junyi agreed to pause it temporarily. In truth they had no option but to do so. The Barrows trip would take time, then Lan Jue had to get to the Northern Alliance. He wasn't even sure when he'd be getting back. Even if they had a couple classes now, what would happen in the future? When would they be able to start them back up again? No, the

best option was to simply wait until these matters were settled before starting in full swing. The students would understand this.

Once his business with Director Wu had concluded, Lan Jue did not return directly to the Avenue. He wandered absent-mindedly to his desk in the electives building.

His long night of cultivation had not produced the results he'd hoped for. He would indeed have to continue examining this with Qianlin, so that they could at least seamlessly join their powers when needed. This was his life now – what option did he have but to deal with it? Thankfully Zhou Qianlin was a sensible girl, so he didn't need to fear being summoned for no reason.

"Professor Lan! It's been so long!" The surprised call caught his attention. Lan Jue lifted his head, whereupon he spied Jin Yan walking his way with an arm full of textbooks.

"Professor Jin. Hello." He greeted her with a polite smile.

"I really must thank you for everything you've done for Jin Tao," she said with an excited tone. "Are you busy recently? It's been so long since I've seen you around. I was afraid you might have stopped coming for classes."

Of course, Lan Jue couldn't tell her about the ARC classes. "Family matters," he lied, "I had to ask for a little while off."

She snickered. "Well you chose the perfect time to come back. The University is preparing another trip for us. We're leaving the Alliance and heading to the West for twenty days. It's a ten day trek there and back, but still not bad at all."

"Aren't you afraid of running in to any more monsters?" Lan Jue asked.

She shook her head with a smile. "come on. I'm a realist – I don't believe in luck, good or bad. I believe in probability, and the chances are a coincidence like that are slim to none. Anyway, there are dangers wherever one goes. I've never seen the Barrows' dangers. Will you be going, too?"

Lan Jue nodded. "Yes, I'll be going."

“Professor Jin. Professor Lan.” Another voice interrupted their conversation.

Wang Hongyuan, his face bearing a smile, walked their way. Ever since he and Lan Jue had become friends, the negative cloud hanging over him had dispersed.

Lan Jue gave the dance instructor a lopsided grin. “Professor Wang! It’s been a while.”

For the briefest instant, Wang Hongyuan’s face bore a hint of confusion. They’d just spent the last few months together! Was the cruelty he subjected everyone to not enough to have him remember? Of course he couldn’t say anything – he’d just ‘been on vacation’ as well, and he couldn’t let Jin Yan know they were together. The charade would have to be maintained.

“Yeah! It had been a while, Professor. Are you going on the trip?”

Lan Jue nodded. “I’ll be going with you all. You’re going to have to protect us while we’re there, Professor Wang!”

Wang Hongyuan’s prowess as a pilot and Adept were not well known, but of course they knew this. After all, their experience on Taihua had been a telling one for all of them – and Jin Yan had been there to see it. It just hadn’t been brought up since they got back.

Wang Hongyuan shot Jin Yan a glance. “Nothing to fear,” he said. “If those monsters show up again, I’ll protect you.”

Jin Yan giggled prettily at him, and nodded her head.

Lan Jue looked at Wang Hongyuan, then looked to Jin Yan. Evidently their relationship was improving nicely, though they still weren’t very close. It appeared to him that Wang Hongyuan just needed to step up his game.

Jin Yan flashed them both a smile. “You guys chat. I have some things to clear up and classes to prepare.” She had been in a particularly fine mood lately. Her younger brother was home at last, and although he hadn’t told her anything about the ARC class he was clearly changed by it. Whatever

the situation, Jin Yan and the others were all very pleasantly surprised.

In only a few months, Jin Tao had actually grown roughly a head taller. His physique had also improved dramatically. That fierce, feral air that he'd become known for was gone, replaced with a steady calm. He'd grown up. His speech and behavior saw the most improvement, and he was no longer as flippant as he once was. He was an entirely new person.

Jin Yan knew all of this had to have something to do with Lan Jue. After all, it had been Lan Jue that took him away. Although she didn't know the specifics, both of them had been gone for the same length of time. Now, her baby brother was somehow inexplicably part of the elite ARC students. She knew very well that only the most promising students were enrolled in that program. She'd never have believed her 'good-for-nothing' brother would have been a part of it.

Naturally, Jin Tao's family was ecstatic at the changes. Jin Yan, also, was very happy. She'd wanted to ask Lan Jue more about it, but Wang Hongyuan had arrived by then. She decided to keep her questions to herself for now.

As Jin Yan left for her desk, Wang Hongyuan saddled up to Lan Jue. He spoke in low tones. "Professor Lan, the ARC class is done and the students have all gone back to their lives. What should we do?"

"What can we do?" Lan Jue asked.

"You know, I really wanted to thank you," Wang Hongyuan said. "Although I've never been treated so terrible in all my life, I've also never improved this fast. Finally, I can see some hope in continuing my training. I'm sure the students feel similarly. This is especially true after you piloted that battleship all by yourself, and protected our escape. I could see that it filled them with appreciation and respect. With the cohesion they're feeling now, it would be a shame if we just let them go their separate ways."

Lan Jue nodded. "Yeah! We should follow up with more. They've got a really stable foundation by this point, and the program really set them apart. Their next step should be practical application. If they can work

together like the An Lun soldiers, then there's no limit to their potential."

"So you're saying you want them to join the army?" Wang Hongyuan asked.

To that, Lan Jue shook his head. "Military service may not always be the best option. Certainly not right now. The Eastern Alliance's military has its own problems, and they aren't strong enough to protect themselves. Joining now would ruin their prospects. My hope for them is that they join once they're strong enough to handle it. By then, no one would be able to control them."

Wang Hongyuan blinked. "So what's the plan?"

Chapter 340: You Are the Father of My Child

A mysterious smile spread across Lan Jue's face. "Don't worry yourself over it. Once the trip is done, I'll have to head out for business. The whole thing should be a month or two, at most. They still need time to entirely process their training, anyway, to let it all sink in. When I get back, we'll start phase two of the ARC class."

"Really?" Wang Hongyuan's excitement shone through his features. "That's excellent! I'd like to be an assistant again."

"Sure," Lan Jue said with a nod of his head.

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While Wang Hongyuan and Lan Jue were discussing the class in the electives building, Zhou Qianlin was in Director Wu's office. Her family had received a note, asking her to present herself to the teaching affairs director.

"Director Wu, you asked for me?" She had made her way to his office directly upon getting to school. She was still technically on holiday after the ARC classes, and had intended to spend the next few days in Grace Hospital. Unfortunately, her encounter with Bess and the subsequent result had made her less than willing to meet people. She was still struggling to come to terms with some of it. Instead, she had so far spent the day at home.

"Ah good, you're here. Please sit." An uncommon smile was plastered on the man's face. Usually students only say the strict, fierce side of him.

Qianlin sat as instructed.

Once she was settled, the Director went on. "Here's the situation. You performed excellently during the ARC classes, despite your major in mecha systems. The faculty is quite surprised, and impressed. We've decided to give you an award for your performance – a trip to the Barrows with our teachers during their retreat. I called you here to let you know, so

that you may go home and prepare. We'll be leaving for the Western Alliance in three days."

"A trip to the Barrows?" She looked at the teaching director with wide eyes. A reward? For her alone? What was going on? Since when was the NEU so good to their students? She didn't even do all that well in the training!

"That's right," Wu Junyi affirmed. "That'll be all. You can go and start getting ready."

"Director," she engaged quietly, "Can I choose not to go?"

He looked at her with confusion. "You're willing to let this golden opportunity go to waste? The university is covering all expenses."

Zhou Qianlin apologetically explained. "We just got back, and I'm rather exhausted. Really, I'd just rather stay at home and rest. I'm not very interested in another trip."

"Well," he began, "In truth the idea was Professor Lan's. He'll be going as well. So is your class leader, Tan Lingyun."

Her brows rose, and a strange emotion filled her. She nodded. "Oh... well, alright. I'll go."

When the young girl left, Director Wu settled back in to his chair. He stared in to the distance, lost in thought. No, he thought. Professor Lan couldn't be here because of Zhou Qianlin...

He knew, of course, that she was considered the top beauty of their university. She possessed a fine mind, as well. Her reaction showed that she had some interest in the etiquette teacher as well. Director Wu was convinced it was something he'd have to keep a close eye on. Perhaps he could find another way to ingratiate himself to this Professor.

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The Spirit Caller gemstone warmed:

Zhou Qianlin: It was you who had Director Wu invite me to the Barrows, wasn't it.

Lan Jue: Yup!

Qianlin: You're in some kind of trouble?

I'm not sure yet. We'll know once we get there. You are going, right?

You're in this situation because you came to save me from Granny Bess. I'll help in any way I can. And don't worry, I won't pester you – now, or in the future. If you find a way to sever this connection we have, I'm all on board.

...

Alright, I guess I'll talk to you later.

Lan Jue could feel Qianlin's apathetic mood through the power gem. This girl... she was like an iron fist in a velvet glove – something he'd experienced before, certainly. There was a faint ache in his chest, and yet he thought that this would be good if it ultimately lead to her forgetting about him romantically.

Lan Jue went about his business. He arranged what he needed for the trip, and relayed the information to the Wine Master. He would be leaving with the school, while the Avenue' foremost Paragon would be traveling to the West with the Pauper.

The trip to the North for the Adept tournament, Lan Jue left for the Gourmet to handle. Those who would be joining them were the same the gourmet had mentioned before. But there was one that Lan Jue would have to deal with personally.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony.

Lan Jue strolled in to the pharmacy. Compared to the last time he'd visited, it was even more stuffed to the rafters with customers. The faint aroma of homeopathic remedies lingered in the air, lending an even deeper sense of mystery to the already ancient-looking structure. Likely, the atmosphere played a role in this shop's success.

As he entered, an assistant greeted him with a bow.

"I've come to see the Pharmacist," Lan Jue revealed.

“She’s currently entertaining guests,” the assistant explained. “I must trouble you to wait for a little while. I’ll let her know that you’re here.”

“Very good.” Lan Jue stepped off to the side without instruction to make way. He looked down the beautiful corridor, and the lotus leaves surrounding it. The peaceful environment helped to ease some his emotional turmoil.

Before long, the assistant returned. He address the Jewelry Master respectfully. “The Pharmacist will see you now.”

Lan Jue followed as the young man entered in to the heart of the Hall of Supreme Harmony. No small number of enviable stares watched him go. The rules of his place were quite strict; entrance beyond the shop front was strictly prohibited. Over the years there had been some who’d attempted to break that rule, though one can imagine the result.

They traversed a small bridge, then circuited a small lake before taking the long corridor to the octagonal pagoda at it’s end. This was where he’d met the Pharmacist last time.

She was there now. Someone else was with her.

He was a simple-looking man with red hair, and eyes to match. He couldn’t determine his age, but he could feel the fierceness of his aura, barely constrained. He seemed feral, almost beast-like.

“You can leave. I’ll contact you when the matter is done.” The Pharmacist was speaking calmly with the gentleman when Lan Jue came within ear shot.

The red-haired man’s brows furrowed dangerously. “There’s an order for all things. You won’t even follow such a simple standard?”

A biting cold flashed across the Pharmacist’s eyes. “What do you plan to do about it?”

“There’s nothing I can do,” the man growled. “At least I know the rules of the Avenue. But I still haven’t got what I came for. You must at least give me enough time to find something adequate for a trade. My time is valuable, too, you know.”

The young woman's face darkened considerably. "Leave. Take whatever you want, but I will not be changing my mind."

Anger flared behind the man's eyes. "Because of him? What the hell is he worth?" He didn't look Lan Jue's way, but the accusing finger he thrust out was pointed right at him.

The Pharmacist fixed the red-haired stranger with a dangerous gaze. "He is the father of my child."

The moment the words left her lips, the man's expression changed from anger to shock. He whipped around in his chair to stare at Lan Jue.

The beleaguered Jewelry Master felt strange. He would not contradict the Pharmacist's assertions, for after all she was right in a sense. He'd promised her that much.

Lan Jue met the man's glare with a polite smile, and a nod of acknowledgement. He didn't bristle at the man's discourteous words, and remained ever the gentleman.

"The hell are you lookin' at?!" The man shot to his feet, and instantly the brutal aura he'd been restraining exploded outward. "I'm curious what you did to become the Pharmacist's man."

Waves of overbearing, oppressive energy crashed against Lan Jue. It was condensed, with the full force of this man's suffocating bearing focused precisely on Lan Jue.

Suddenly, Lan Jue felt as though he were lost in a world of terror and nightmares. Before his very eyes, blood-red phantoms danced and shrieked. Hideous demons clawed at him as though they wanted to tear the life from his body.

Lan Jue's reaction was to furrow his brows. He instinctively took a step back – the man was strong, at least above ninth level sixth rank.

Where he at his peak strength, Lan Jue would have nothing to fear. However, the inexplicable tragedy that had befallen him and Qianlin had reduced him to barely ninth level. Even with both his Disciplines, he wouldn't be able to face this man in a straight fight.

Lan Jue's shoulders bowed, as a gust of powerful wind set his clothes to flapping. He rocked from the force of it.

The Pharmacist looked on, stunned. To her knowledge the Jewelry Master should have been a match for this red-haired man, and yet he wasn't. How was merely the threat of pressure was almost more than he could bear?

Just then, Lan Jue's arms shot up and traced a circle through the air with his hands. That overbearing pressure seemed to dissipate, as a vortex appeared before Lan Jue's chest. The stranger's mental assault seemed to be drawn in to the vortex, and was unable to be focused on the Jewelry Master.

Coiled bolts of lightning arced across Lan Jue's eye sockets. Now, it was his own intrinsic aura that bubbled forth.

"Tai Chi?" The red-haired man cried. The stifling power dissipated without a trace, as though the man had seen something incomparably startling. He staggered back a couple paces and stared in astonishment.

Lan Jue's expression tightened further. "You know of it?"

The stranger's haughty expression had fled, replaced with a near palpable discomfort. Cowed, he spoke. "I have been fortunate enough to have seen Tai Chi used effectively. I still remember it as though it happened yesterday. I'm sorry to have troubled you. I'm leaving, I'll go." He shot Lan Jue a searching glance and, assured that he would not stop him, he turned and left the pagoda. He was in such a rush that he'd forgotten the Pharmacist was even there. It was a strange contrast to his earlier demeanor.

The assistant was standing to the side, looking on with utter amazement. The red-haired stranger had been exceedingly arrogant upon arrival, he remembered. How was it that he so quickly became meek as a mouse before a cat? What in the world was 'Tai Chi'?

Lan Jue frowned as he watched the man leave, but he made no move to find out more. He simply wasn't in the space physically or emotionally to do so. But why was it that the use of his martial art alone was enough to

send this man running?

“Where’d this guy come from?” Lan Jue asked as he walked to the Pharmacist.

She waved her hand, and the assistant who had delivered Lan Jue left without a sound. Undoubtedly, his impression of the Jewelry Master had improved after this display.

“A loose end,” she murmured. “An impossibly arrogant ass. The Dhampyr – have you heard of him? He has the rare Blood Discipline. But you... I had no idea you were a disciple of Jue Di, or that he’d know about it.”

Chapter 341: Departures

Lan Jue gave her a wink and a sly smile. “Keep that a secret, eh?”

The Pharmacist offered a small nod. She faced him, and that disconcerting chill was gone from her face. Now her expression was like a warm spring breeze. “Thank you for coming. I thought you’d forgotten your promise.”

Lan Jue’s face fell in shame. “I’ve been off planet. I’m back for a few days, but I need to rush out again. I’ve come to see Jun’er, and also to speak with you about something.”

She nodded. “I already know all about it. You want me to go to the North and participate in this Adept competition. Originally I hadn’t planned to go because of Jun’er, but now that you’re here I can make the trip.”

“Perhaps you can take her with you,” Lan Jue said. “She may not be able to see, but keeping her cooped up in her home all day can’t be good for her. She’s a brilliant little one, but being locked up in a house isn’t good for her health.”

The Pharmacist looked at him in mild surprise. They were words she hadn’t expected from him – bring Jun’er? She was blind from birth, and the only thing remaining of her lost husband. She was a priceless treasure to the Pharmacist, and they helped each other through every day life like partners. This powerful woman was, in the inside, truly was a fragile thing when it came to her child. And she knew it. For fear of any harm coming to her baby, the two were inseparable. They hardly left the Hall, much less the planet.

Lan Jue proceeded. “Being blind doesn’t mean she isn’t healthy. But if she never leaves this place, that will definitely change. Bring her out, let her play. It’ll expand her world. Whether or not to participate in these fights, doesn’t matter – I’ll give the Gourmet some excuse. I’m not here to convince you, but I really do think it would be good for the little one to get out.”

The Pharmacist gave an anguished sigh. “Outsiders truly do see our

personal matters the clearest. You're right. I've lost sight of what my daughter needs, and she is brilliant. She's never bothered me about it. I've forgotten that she is, after all, a child. Thank you, Jewelry Master. Really."

Lan Jue answered with a sheepish smile. "You said it yourself, right? I'm the father of your child. Caring for Jun'er is my job."

The Pharmacist smiled, too. "Don't worry about any of that. I won't tell others. Just now I reacted on impulse. Sometimes I have a little trouble controlling my emotions. Come, I'll take you to see Jun'er. This last month she must have asked a hundred times for stories about you."

At this, Lan Jue couldn't help but chortle. "Today I'll tell her a story about soldiers."

With that, the two of them took the short trip to Jun'er's room.

"Mama!" Jun'er shouted excitedly as they entered. "Daddy's here too, right?"

"Jun'er! How did you know?" Lan Jue asked, his voice rich with emotion.

Jun'er launched herself off the bed, and her tiny feet pattered excitedly as she ran toward the sound of Lan Jue's voice. Her face was brighter than a sunbeam. "Daddyyyyy! You're back! I heard your footsteps!"

The Pharmacist's eyes were wet with tears. Lan Jue, too, was moved by the scene. This beautiful little girl was too cute to bear. She'd heard his footsteps only once and remembered them. This was clearly the thing she longed the most for, a complete family.

Lan Jue heaved her up with a dramatic grunt and ruffled her hair. Jun'er naturally threw her arms around his neck. "I missed you a lot, daddy."

"Daddy missed you too," he assured her. Lan Jue fell in to the role of father very quickly, after only the second visit. He looked at the Pharmacist, and saw in her eyes the same emotions afflicting him. She was missing a husband, and he was missing a wife. If Hera was still alive, they'd probably have a child of their own.

Lan Jue held her for a moment longer, then sat down on her bed. "You

know I've been out finding new soldiers to help protect us. I just got back. Do you want to hear some stories about what they do out there?"

"Yay! Yes!" she clapped her little hands together excitedly.

Lan Jue adjusted her on his lap. One hand gently stroked her hair as he spoke. "These new young recruits were really amazing, you know. All of them were Adepts! At least level five. But they were still young and had a lot to learn. So, I decided that they would need a very special class to make them stronger as fast as possible. I gathered them all up, and then taught them what I could."

Jun'er sat and listened intently, careful not to interrupt or be rude. The Pharmacist could see a faint golden glow emanating from Lan Jue's hand as he stroked her hair – undoubtedly a gentle current of bioelectricity. He was trying to stimulate her atrophied eyes.

The Pharmacist had exhausted all options in trying to help her daughter live a normal life. Nothing worked. She had aplasia of the optical nerve – it never grew properly. That was not something medicine could fix. She watched appreciatively as Lan Jue tried, knowing full well that the chances were small. Still, there was always a chance.

She had lived for years in a dull, dim world. But now, faintly, it was as though color returned. It was like they were a complete family again.

Lan Jue regaled her for an hour with the exploits of he and his students. No detail was too small for the ravenous Jun'er. The whole thing was told from beginning to end.

This time, Jun'er did not succumb to sleep. Admiration and excitement shone in her pretty little face. She could feel the strange power radiating from Lan Jue's hand, but said nothing about it.

"I want to be like all of them, daddy. I want to be a machine pilot, too."

Lan Jue laughed affectionately. "You're going to have to wait until you grow up, sweetie. I'll teach you, what do you think?"

But the small girl's expression immediately fell. "I can't see..."

“No matter what, your daddy will find a way to get those eyes working again,” Lan Jue promised. “Then you’ll be able to see it all, all the colors of the world around you. You’ll see what your mommy and daddy look like. Sounds good, right?”

Jun’er timidly nodded her head. She was a child, true, but smart. Her thoughts were simple, but her face still revealed doubt.

“Can you feel the tingly feeling on your back from daddy’s hand?” He asked.

“Uh-huh,” she answered. “My eyes feel funny.”

He chuckled. “That’s right. You have little nerves in your eyeballs that are weak. But you know, the last time I saw you I checked for myself. You know those weak nerves aren’t because you’re sick! What that means is, all we have to do is make them strong. Then they’ll start working with your eyes – and you’ll see! It’s going to take time, but we’ll find a way. 1

That shadow of doubt receded somewhat. “Really?! Will I really be able to see?”

Lan Jue nodded. “Yes you will. Little Jun’er’s such a pretty thing, she should be able to see how much.”

Jun’er threw herself against Lan Jue in a little bear hug, then kissed him on the cheek. “My daddy’s the best.”

Lan Jue gently stroked her hair. “So what would you think about going on a little trip, huh sweetie? In a few days daddy has to go out again. It might be a little while before I come back, like before. But I spoke to your mother, and she said we could all go together. We could go to a new place and play for a little while, what do you think? We’ll get to ride in a big airship!”

She gasped, and her big round eyes widened. Her chubby cheeks were a ruddy red from excitement. “Daddy! I love you daddy. I want to go! I want to go!”

Seeing her little girl so excited at the idea, the Pharmacist couldn’t control herself anymore. Streams of tears trickled down her cheeks, and

she covered her mouth to stop the sobs.

Lan Jue stayed for a long time, until Jun'er fell asleep. Only then did he bid farewell to the Pharmacist. Children were pure, and spending time with his surrogate daughter had helped to ease some of the troubles in his heart. Things were also clearer. Now that it'd happened, acceptance was the only way. It is what it is!

When Lan Jue returned to the jewelry shop, he picked out a bundle of his choicest gems and relinquished them to Mika. She was to use them for upgrades to all their mechas, as well as all three Zeus ships. He knew he didn't have to worry over management of the store.

Three days later, an enormous transport ship lifted off from the public air field. It was headed right for the Western Alliance.

Ships of this size were designed to transport three thousand passengers at a time, and a great deal of goods. All of them were equipped with FTL drives as well, for safety and commerce.

Like any transport, the ship was separated by class. First, business and economy as it had been for ages. The university teachers, naturally, sat in economy. After all, the university was footing the bill and their pockets weren't bottomless.

Lan Jue hunched helplessly in his seat. Economy! It'd been years since he'd had to be subjected to this.

It wasn't a luxury issue. He was simply too lanky. He sat with his knees practically by his ears. That hunch wasn't from depression but because otherwise his head would strike the ceiling.

This certainly didn't qualify as comfortable. Worse still, the trip would last five days and five nights. Although there would be periods of deep sleep as the ship passed through wormholes or made jumps, he felt like five days and five nights of this would either kill him or drive him crazy. Unacceptable! He had to find a way to upgrade!

It was made infinitely worse when one considered his company. Being economy class, passengers had no choice but to literally rub elbows. On

his left was his most recent trouble, Zhou Qianlin. His sins from the past come to haunt him took the form of the Savage Goddess on his right.

Qianlin was slightly better than the alternative. Their relationship was strange, and her mood toward him was markedly cooler. But she was important to him, and that was clear from his lack of self-control.

Tan Lingyun was an entirely different matter. She had looked physically disgusted when she'd found out Lan Jue was beside her, as though he were an insect.

*

1. I turned this in to an ELI5 because he's talking to an infant. TJSS wrote it in more medical terms. If you're interested, a more faithful translation ensues; "Your optic nerves had atrophied. Last time, I examined them and discovered that the nerves were not pathologically damaged. That is to say, all we need to do is stretch these atrophied nerves and they will begin to interact with your retina." She's a smart kid, but damn. Interestingly, though, Chinese medical terms and the normal every-day use words are the same, so young children can effectively understand. But that's not the case here, words like 'atrophied' 'retina', even the one he used for 'stretch' no child would ever know.

Chapter 342: The Two Great Beauties

It was unlikely any public airship would let you change seats on a whim while already in flight. Every seat was tied to its occupant's ID's, making changing a troubling issue.

"I warn you – if you touch me, you can't blame me for my reaction." Tan Lingyun growled in Lan Jue's direction.

He could only reply with a tight scowl. He desperately wanted to say something, to tell her that golden-masked man she pined for was him! The look of shock and confusion on her face would be delicious.

The thought would have to die unspoken, however.

"Trust me, it's definitely not a situation I want either." As he spoke, Lan Jue shuffled as far as he could toward Tan Lingyun. He curls in arms in and pressed his elbows to his side, like a beaten dog licking its wounds.

Wu Junyi sat nearby. Although he was the teaching director, he was also among them in economy class. He lived by the doctrine of equal treatment for all – and after all, the university's coffers had its limits. Hearing the two bicker, he couldn't help but snicker in spite of himself. He turned his face away so his mirth would not be discovered.

He was, of course, the architect of this seating arrangement. He would do whatever it took to keep Lan Jue tied to the university, so requests like this were happily agreed to. In inviting Zhou Qianlin, it clearly showed that Lan Jue had more than a healthy interest in beautiful women. If that was the case, then how better to keep the man that to surround him with beautiful women? From the beginning Director Wu had thought Lan Jue and Tan Lingyun were a suitable couple. The only obstacle was the Savage Goddess' ignorance, for she didn't know Lan Jue was Lei Feng.

When the ARC group returned from training, Tan Lingyun had sought out Director Wu. With a dogged determination, she tried to compel him to reveal the Drillmaster's identity. Wu Junyi had made a promise, and more than that, was quite afraid of Lan Jue's power. So of course he didn't tell her. But how could a man as shrewd as he not immediately see her

infatuation?

Tan Lingyun had become quite enamored with the mysterious, golden-masked man.

It was not an opportunity he could pass up. He would have to manufacture some sort of opportunity for things to take their course. The journey to the Barrows would take days, he thought – what better opportunity than that? The school couldn't afford first-class accommodations for Lan Jue, but he could at least be sandwiched between two gorgeous women. Perfect, he thought. The tighter the better.

Lan Jue could not know of Director Wu's clandestine maneuvers. All he could do, is lament his situation. When he'd tried to scooch away from Tan Lingyun, Qianlin had reacted by recoiling, and blocking him with her hands. It wasn't overt, but the expression on her face was like a stranger trying to keep someone at bay.

"Why don't you just say what's on your mind, huh?!" Tan Lingyun rudely rapped on his forehead with a fist. She was strong, Lan Jue remembered painfully.

"What the hell are you doing?!" He yelped.

Immediately, the Savage Goddess' eyebrows shot up. "What do you think I'm doing? You better be straight with me or I will throw you from this airship! Qianlin, if he even breathes on you, you let me know. I'll deal with him."

Zhou Qianlin could see how tortured Lan Jue was, and for an instant her eyes revealed pity. She hurriedly shook her head, and dropped the hand she held up to keep Lan Jue away.

The ship calmed as it broke through Skyfire's atmosphere. Portholes set along either side of the hull revealed the beautiful scenes as space slid by. Window seats always sold best. Qianlin had been given the one on their isle, and so she took advantage by aimlessly staring out in to the black. Lan Jue remained locked in the middle. Five days, he whined inwardly. He figured he'd probably die.

This must be what the students had felt during training, he thought. Pain of the body meant nothing, but afflictions of the soul were dire. Like them, there was nothing he could do about it.

"I need to visit the restroom." Lan Jue half-stood as far as possible in this little nest.

Lingyun shot him a dismissive glance. "Who are you talking to?"

"You, of course," he said in irritation.

"I guess your parents never taught you to be polite," she replied.

"You-" With great effort, Lan Jue managed to bite back the deluge of expletives he had in mind. His teeth audibly ground as he spoke.

"Professor Tan. I'm sorry to trouble you. Thank you tremendously."

She finally stood, and Lan Jue rushed passed as quickly and as carefully as he dared. His long legs send him toward the toilets and just short of a run.

A detestable scowl followed him as Tan Lingyun watched. She turned to her young student. "Be careful with that one. He looks useless, but he certainly is not a good person. Ugh, I can't stand this kind of good-for-nothing garbage. And he's supposed to be teaching etiquette! Back on Taihua he held everyone else up as we were running for our lives. Not only is he useless, he's also stupid." She didn't despise him quite so much as she let on, of course, but the result of him running from the escaping plan was still fresh in her memory.

Her opinion of Wang Hongyuan had changed considerably since their encounter on Taihua. But this was not the case with Lan Jue. Him, she still hated.

"Professor Lan can't be that bad. I think he's a good man, I've listened to his class." Qianlin couldn't bear to hear this woman bad mouthing Lan Jue so viciously. Of course, she couldn't make her disagreement too vociferous.

"Oh? And what is his class like?" The Savage Goddess was genuinely curious.

Zhou Qianlin carefully weighed her words. “He teaches very well. Very noble. We’ve learned a lot of things you don’t usually learn in a university, and you can tell he’s very warmhearted.”

“Hmph,” Tan Lingyun grunted. “I really don’t know what the administrators were thinking. Making us sit with that waste of air, honestly...” It was as though she hadn’t heard Qianlin at all.

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Lan Jue found a place with enough headroom for him to stand straight, and hung around there. It was then a familiar face came in to view.

“Professor Lan.” The tender voice was always a pleasure. Jin Yan smiled up at him.

“Hello Professor Jin.” He replied pleasantly.

“What’s wrong? You look upset.” She had spied his unpleasant expression, and that was why she’d approached.

Lan Jue shook his head. “It’s nothing. A small matter.”

Jin Yan smiled prettily. “Professor Lan, I didn’t get a chance to thank you properly before Professor Wang joined us. Although I haven’t the slightest idea what my brother had to go through, but he came back a completely changed person. My parents and I hardly believe it. I’m certain this is a result of something you did, so thank you very much. Jin Tao was lucky to meet you.”

Lan Jue chuckled sheepishly, but said nothing.

Wang Hongyuan was like Jin Yan’s shadow, never far away. He slid seamlessly in to their little gathering. Who knows how, but he must have arranged it so he could sit beside her on this journey.

“Hello Professors.” He grinned wide at them.

Lan Jue greeted him with a flat stare. Jealousy was this guy’s only motivation. He couldn’t even seal the deal.

“Oh, Professor Wang. You were also looking for Professor Lan?” She cantered her head in curiosity as she looked his way.

Wang Hongyuan chortled. “No, no. I just saw the two of you talking and I figured I’d join. It’s boring sitting in one place, and anyway we’re all elective teachers. We have a commonality.”

“You two chat,” Lan Jue said, sighing inwardly at the inevitable. “I’m going to head back. Ugh, these long rides are rough.1”

Wang Hongyuan’s pleading eyes had forced him to leave. It was impossible to find a quiet corner in this tiny ship! Lan Jue was beginning to regret coming with the school. If he’d known it’d be like this, he would have gone with the Wine Master. But that would have blown his cover.

He made his way back to his seat. He stopped upon encountering Tan Lingyuan. “My deepest apologies, Professor. Could I trouble you to let me pass?”

This time, thankfully, she said nothing – only got up and let him pass unmolested.

He slunk passed and crouched in to his chair once more. Immediately he was even more uncomfortable than he had been. However, as he was musing on his misfortune, he felt a hand tug on his right sleeve.

Turning his head, Lan Jue saw Zhou Qianlin quietly lift the armrest between them. She scooped closer to the window, giving him a blessed few more inches of space. A warm feeling spread through Lan Jue’s chest. Although she didn’t say anything, her actions spoke volumes. She really was a great girl!

Ships were constructed like this in consideration of couples. It was a nice feature that removed the obstacles between them during these long flights, so they could keep close and comfortable.

Without the armrest to constrain him, Lan Jue was able to spread out. His legs and elbows were able to separate enough so he could at least breathe. It was still uncomfortable, but who was he to reject such a kindness.

Naturally, the close quarters caused their arms to touch. The Spirit Caller gem warmed.

Lan Jue: Thank you.

Qianlin: Don't worry about it.

Lan Jue: I'm sorry, Qianlin. I was wrong before – I just reacted poorly to a sudden situation. I'm an adult, and there are certain things I've learned. I also know that we should always be looking forward. I've told myself endlessly that I need to begin my new life. But there's a part of me that remains, a root that sprouts when things get emotional. I silence it every day, but it always comes back. It's the part of me that never dies.”

*

1. I'm not sure if I mentioned this, but train rides are a reality of life in China. They are far and away the primary means of getting around. These airships are sort of meant to evoke that, even more than airplanes. Every year during the New Year Festival, everyone has to return to their families, often across the country. Trains are the cheaper option, but you'll have people sitting on little more than benches for literally almost a week in some cases.

Chapter 343: Lan Jue's Lament

Lan Jue: You're an amazing girl, and I like you very much. You're perfect in so many ways. Had I met you before I met your sister, I'm sure I would have loved you as I love her. Like her, I wouldn't be able to give you up. But that's not the case. Your sister is gone, and she took my heart with her. Give me some time, please. I will never be able to forget her, but I'll keep trying to put the pain away. If I can, then my heart is yours. Any other way would be unfair to you. Will you wait for me?

Zhou Qianlin quietly listened to Lan Jue's confessions through the Spirit Caller gem. When she lifted her head, her eyes were puffy and red. Tears traced wet lines down her cheeks.

Don't cry. Don't cry. He told her through their soundless connection.

Qianlin: Who likes you, huh? Stop trying to make yourself feel better!

Lan Jue: You're right, I'm trying to make myself feel better. Don't cry!

Ah! The cry was from Zhou Qianlin. Lan Jue felt his whole body tense up and then, he was flying through the airship's fuselage.

Time slowed as he was in the air. He could clearly see Tan Lingyun's hand gripping his shoulder. That's what had pulled him up. He fought against his instinct, going through the many ways he might be able to free himself from this situation, but he'd break his cover.

"I..." Lan Jue had just enough time to lament his misfortune.

Bang! An instant later, he was a crumpled heap on the floor.

Tan Lingyun had 'gone easy,' at least considering what she was capable of. She'd only thrown him around through the air instead of doing any real damage. If she had chosen to use her full strength, it would have ended very poorly for Lan Jue.

All eyes were drawn to the sudden, dramatic turn of events. Tan Lingyun was on her feet, glaring down at the dizzy etiquette teacher. "Clearly you weren't paying attention to anything I said," she growled.

“I didn’t do anything!” Lan Jue looked up at her, his face pained and pleading.

Tan Lingyun’s eyes flashed dangerous, and she jabbed a finger toward Zhou Qianlin. “You didn’t do anything? Why is the arm rest between you two up then, huh? Why is Qianlin crying? You absolutely did something!”

Her screaming had attracted the attention of nearly the entire airship. Everyone nearby were faculty from the school, and they looked on in shock from their seats. Wang Hongyuan and Jin Yan, who had just sat down, were especially stunned.

“You must be mistaken, Professor Tan.” Jin Yan’s pleasant voice spoke up, and she stepped forward to insert herself in the exchange. She reached down to help Lan Jue to his feet.

“The truth is right in front of us,” she snarled. “How can I be mistaken? You mustn’t be taken in by his appearance – this man is a cancer!”

The bile rising within him wouldn’t be denied, and he couldn’t help but speak up. “A cancer! I haven’t done a single thing to you, ever! And yet you’re always focusing your anger on me. I’m not bothering anyone!”

To this, Tan Lingyun huffed. “I can’t stand weaklings like you. Such a little bitch.”

“Alright, what’s going on!” Just then, the air marshals onboard became involved.

The two gentlemen were tall, and carried powerful equipment to deal with trouble makers. The most frightening thing for any airship operator was encountering mischief in flight. As a result, the marshals were always well armed, and treated exceedingly well. They’d only been in the air for a short time, and with all this ruckus they came running in a hurry.

“You’re just in time,” Tan Lingyun said. “This man is bullying your passengers. I think he should be isolated. I refuse to fly with him.”

“Me?!” Lan Jue’s anger was bubbling out of his control. Her constant abuse and the unwanted attention was more than he could handle.

Before the marshal's could respond, a small sheepish voice interrupted. "That's not right. Professor Lan didn't do anything to me. You're mistaken, Professor Tan." This was, of course, Zhou Qianlin.

The Savage Goddess' brows furrowed. "Don't be scared, Qianlin. There's no need to try and placate this waste of space."

Qianlin continued. "No Professor, you're wrong. I was thinking about family matters, that's why I was crying. I pulled up the armrest so I could go to the bathroom. That's when you..."

Tan Lingyun looked at her skeptically. "Are you sure?"

"You forget that I was part of the ARC class, Professor," she answered. "He's weak, so even if he did want to do something, I'd be able to protect myself just fine."

Tan Lingyun couldn't refute the logic. Although Qianlin had been among the weakest of the ARC participants, but she had completed the entire program on her own. Compared to any normal person, she was far stronger.

Lan Jue's face alternated between a sickly green and a furious red. This was her plan? She was just as bad! She even looked pleased!

"I'm sorry, gentlemen. It looks like this was all a misunderstanding." By now Director Wu had finally deigned to intervene. He spoke to the two marshals. "These two are teachers from my university. They seem to be having some trouble getting along. I do apologize. We're sorry to trouble you. I'm the NEU teaching director, so I'll handle this from here. I'll make sure they don't cause any more trouble."

He was all smiles until the marshals left. This his face darkened dangerously as he looked toward Tan Lingyun.

"I have told you more times than I can count, Professor. You cannot just react, you need to understand before you decide to get involved! You're far too impulsive! Apologize to your co-worker! How could you treat him so poorly, then expect him to behave the way you like?"

Tan Linyun looked between Wu Junyi's face – dark as a thunderhead – to

Lan Jue's murderous scowl. Her mouth curled in to a distasteful frown. "Sorry," she muttered.

Lan Jue ground his teeth so hard he thought they might shatter. If it hadn't had been for Director Wu's involvement, Lan Jue wasn't sure he'd be able to constrain himself much longer. This Savage Goddess was a damn nightmare! He had to train. He had to keep training until he got his strength back, then one day he'd show her how wrong she was.

"Hmph!" He stomped back to his seat without any of the degrading begging from before. He crumpled in to that uncomfortable position and yanked the armrest down between he and Zhou Qianlin.

Director Wu turned his attention to the cabin full of lookie-looes. "Alright. Get back to your seats, there's nothing to see here."

As he returned to his own seat, he sighed inwardly. Ah, Linyun, this woman... She was handed a golden opportunity, and made a mess of it. Can't she see how differently Qianlin looks at Lan Jue now? You've been around him for so long already, and you still you can't see what kind of person he is.

Of course, he couldn't tell her this. It was a thought he could share only with himself. Worse still, now the situation between Lan Jue and Tan Lingyun looked even more hopeless.

Lan Jue sulked quietly in his chair. He busied himself with conjuring up a hundred ways to torment Tan Lingyun. But alas, a proper man did not strike a woman. There would be no redemption for him. Moreover, though she had a very coarse exterior, Tan Lingyun was – somewhere deep inside – a good person. But these realizations only made Lan Jue more depressed. Taking out his frustrations on a good woman was even worse.

Alas, this woman was his bane. He was absolutely sure the only way to fix the situation was to stay away as far away as possible.

Lan Jue once more felt a light touch at his right shoulder. Lan Jue remained absolutely still, as though he never felt anything at all.

She tapped him again. Then her voice came through the Spirit Caller

gem.

Qianlin: Are you upset?

Lan Jue: No.

Qianlin: It was Professor Tan who threw you. Why are you upset with me?

Lan Jue: Don't think I didn't see that smirk of yours when that whole thing was happening!

That's right, I was just letting off some steam. Sometimes I wish I could beat you myself.

...

Qianlin covered her mouth, and forcibly choked back a laugh.

Lan Jue: No! Wait!!

Qianlin snickered, shoving him lightly with her shoulder.

Watcha gunna do about it?

Me? Lan Jue silently stretched out a hand and placed it on one of Qianlin's long thin legs.

Suddenly Qianlin's self-satisfied smirk froze. Strangely, her first reaction was not to push Lan Jue's hand away – instead, her eyes immediately shot toward Tan Lingyun. She used her sweater to hide his hand.

The temperamental woman was not paying attention. Her eyes were closed as she rested. She didn't seem the least upset by Director Wu's rebuke, and it was unlikely she took anything he'd said to heart.

Qianlin: What are you doing?! Let go.

Lan Jue: Shit, I already have a bad reputation. I might as well try a few bad things!

Qianlin: Let go or I'll scream!

Lan Jue: Go ahead.

Qianlin: You seem to be forgetting something.

Lan Jue: Oh yeah? What's that?

Gzzt! The cocky Lan Jue felt a jolt of electricity sear up his arm, forcing him to instinctively retract his hand. Half his body went numb.

He did forget. The moment they touch, Qianlin becomes his equal.

The airship continued on its way, ignorant of the drama occurring within. It entered light speed a little while later, where they would remain for a day's time as they reached the next jump point.

Lan Jue nested in his seat, about as uncomfortable as one could get. He didn't dare open the armrest between himself and Qianlin now, after what had happened. He was legitimately terrified of Tan Lingyun. Getting thrown around wasn't a big deal. The worst was the disgrace! What a loss of face!

The trip and excitement had exhausted many of the passenger, who now were also feeling the discomfort of economy class. Zhou Qianlin was asleep beside him, unknowingly leaned against him with her head on his shoulder. Her body felt soft, and a sweet fragrance surrounded her. Finally, he thought, something peaceful and gentle in this trial of a journey.

Tan Lingyun saw it, too, and watched with a strange look in her eye. She wasn't stupid, and the moment she heard Qianlin's defense of Lan Jue she knew something was up.

Seeing the young girl leaning against him made it even clearer. There was definitely something strange about their relationship!

Chapter 344: Cosmic Turbulence

Her very first thought was that he wasn't worth Zhou Qianlin's affection. Although Tan Lingyun was herself a woman, she recognized how attractive the girl was. More than that, she was also smart, and had a good character. After the ARC classes she was tougher, too. In essence, she was the pillar upon which the ARC class had stood. More than once Tan Lingyun had told those young men on the brink of collapse to look Qianlin's way. That was enough to have them dig deeper.

But she couldn't for the life of her understand why a girl like Zhou Qianlin would like a man like Lan Jue. As far as she was concerned, the man had no redeeming qualities. He taught a pointless subject, was exceedingly weak – except for passable looks, there was nothing special about him. Did the girl not understand that she needed to find a strong man? Looking the way she did, there must be many suitable men interested in her!

But to each their own, she supposed, and it didn't seem like Director Wu cared. What could she do about it? Act like she didn't see it. Out of sight, out of mind. So she closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

Lan Jue slept as well, though his was hard won. His dreams were fragmented, choppy, anxiety-ridden visions.

After some indeterminate amount of time, most of the sleeping travelers were rudely jostled away as the airship shuddered violently.

What was going on?

Space flight was very different from atmospheric travel. Space was almost complete emptiness, and that meant smooth travels. Of course, any problems were serious and deadly matters out in this endless vacuum.

Qianlin and Lan Jue woke up as well with the others. They exchanged a look before settling properly in their seats. Zhou Qianlin sat up quickly, but it took Lan Jue some considerable amount of effort to find an acceptable position. All the while he could feel... something.

The cabin was filled with a pleasant ding as the announcement system came online.

“Hello ladies and gentlemen. We seem to have encountered some cosmic turbulence. We’d like to ask all passengers to return to their seats at this time, and to ensure their safety belts are securely fastened. We repeat, we’ve encountered some cosmic turbulence. Passengers should return to their seats and fasten their safety belts now. Thank you.”

Cosmic Turbulence? The phrase caused Lan Jue’s features to sour. While many average flyers may not know precisely what cosmic turbulence was, Lan Jue was very familiar with it. He’d encountered it before.

Cosmic turbulence was a special sort of interstellar phenomenon, where bands of plasma sweep through the void between galaxies. They also often followed the passage of large moving bodies, like comets. Flights like theirs shouldn’t encounter cosmic turbulence, because their flight paths were specifically calculated to avoid it. But now that they had, there was considerable risk to consider. These bands of turbulence covered enormously large swaths of space – avoiding it would be very difficult.

Lan Jue stopped worrying over propriety, and leaned over Qianlin to look out her window. He was practically squeezing the poor girl back against her seat.

His eyes were met by the blackness of space, but in the far distance was a faint twinkling light. In its center was a little black dot.

It was too vague to be seen clearly. Lan Jue’s heart rate quickened.

Zhou Qianlin’s voice invaded his thoughts: Is everything alright?

Lan Jue: I don’t know. If it’s space debris causing some turbulence than it isn’t a big issue. If it’s an comet, though, we’re in trouble. The impact force from something like that would obliterate this ship, even with its shields.

Bang! Once again the ship rocked violently. A milky white light shimmered just outside Qianlin’s window – they’d engaged the ships

shields.

Shields were costly when it came to energy. Often they were left off unless absolutely necessary. If they were on, it meant the danger was real.

Tan Lingyun had pressed herself closer as well, though she couldn't see anything.

"Get out of the way!" She snarled and yanked him back, forcing Lan Jue to fall in to his seat. She wanted a look, but she also wanted to keep the creep away from Qianlin. She leaned over him to get a peak outside. Little did she know, the pose gave Lan Jue quite an unexpected eyeful of her full chest.

Lan Jue's eyes nearly popped from his skull, and he whipped his head away quick enough to give himself whiplash. See no evil! He screamed in his head. See no evil!

Qianlin didn't notice. She was nervously peering at the darkness outside.

"There's an object in the plasma wave." Tan Lingyun was a master in this regard, and began to recite her analysis. Her face grew more and more troubled.

Bang-! The sound of impact rattled through the cabin, and the whole ship pitched sideways a few degrees. Cries rippled through the passengers, their alarmed expressions stark in the blazing light of the shields.

"No good. If this keeps up we're in real trouble." From the last strike, Lan Jue knew they could only hold out for so long. If impacts like that continued, they'd be smashed to bits.

Lan Jue shoved Tan Lingyun out of the way and sprang to his feet. A hand shot out toward Zhou Qianlin. "Come with me!"

She didn't hesitate for a moment. She swept passed the Savage Goddess to Lan Jue's side.

"Where the hell are you two going?" Tang Lingyun challenged in surprise. She rose to her feet as well and hurried after them. The rest of the passengers were stricken with panic, and didn't notice the three of

them run off.

Wu Junyi saw Lan Jue streak by, and sighed in relief as he watched him go. Surely this meant he had a solution, and the airship's bridge was where he looked to be headed.

Everyone was locked in their seats, the marshals included. Lan Jue had no obstacles as he raced across the whole of the ship to the front cabin. The bridge was right in front of them.

"What do you think you're doing?" Several marshals sitting in the front row shot to their feet and blocked further passage.

Lan Jue came to a halt. His voice was urgent. "I'm a pilot. I know what's going on outside, and if you don't let me in there that turbulence is going to tear us apart."

"Hell no!" A grizzled older marshal spat. "This is a restricted area, authorized personnel only. Return to your seat immediately, or we'll be forced to assist you."

Lan Jue didn't fault them, and in fact praised their dedication. The worst thing in a crisis was chaos, and these men were preventing that. There was no shirking their duties.

Their tasers were already in hand. Lan Jue just needed to take one more step forward, and they'd pounce.

Lan Jue couldn't hesitate – lives were at risk. If their ship were to explode he'd survive, thanks to Thor. But he could only save one other! Even then, even knowing their coordinates, the likelihood that Thor could bring them to an inhabited planet before running out of juice was impossibly small.

This was it. He could no longer hide his strength. Something needed to be done.

Just then, he felt a hand clap down on his shoulder.

"Are you really a pilot?" The voice belonged to Tan Lingyun.

Lan Jue's head snapped around, and he nodded his head emphatically.

Tan Lingyun's voice was resolute. "Alright. I'll believe you this once." She pulled Lan Jue behind her as she spoke. As they exchange places, a vibrant green energy bloomed out around her. Four beams of emerald light fell over the marshals and froze them in place.

After the ARC classes, Tan Lingyun could feel that she was at the peak of eighth rank now. Ninth rank was separated by a thin wall, one she knew she would soon puncture. Although these marshals were also Adepts, they clearly were no match for her.

"Hurry!" Tan Lingyun shouted to Lan Jue. He shot her a thumbs up and then, pulling Qianlin after him, strode toward the bridge.

The bridge door flew open as they were about to reach it. A man bearing a laser pistol barred the way. "No one move, or I start shooting!"

He looked like the co-pilot, based on his clothing. He must have heard the ruckus outside and came to investigate.

He was no more effective than the marshals, and shared their fate. Another beam of light arose to stop him from moving. He'd actually managed to fire his gun, but the energy couldn't pierce through Tan Lingyun's Discipline.

Lan Jue and Qianlin raced passed.

This airship's bridge had space for thirteen crew. There was, of course, the captain and co-pilot. Aside from them were shield operators, piloting personnel, engineers and others. Each of them were responsible for their section, and all together they managed the enormous ship. Right now, each one looked increasingly more nervous than the last. The entire bridge was surrounded by windows, so they saw everything coming their way.

Lan Jue looked out in to space, and sucked in a breath. What he saw was precisely what he hoped he wouldn't.

Several massive comets were headed their way, with blazing tails that extended kilometers back in their wake.

"Who the hell are you people?" The captain was a man who looked to be in his sixties. His voice was harsh and threatening.

“I’m a battleship pilot,” Lan Jue said. “You aren’t prepared to handle this turbulence. Please let me take over.”

“Horse shit! And how are you going to prove your identity, huh?” He asked angrily.

Tan Lingyun had joined them, and stepped forward. Once again beams of vibrant green light exploded from her. “I’m an eighth rank talent, and I’m confirming his identity.”

Lan Jue begrudgingly praised Tan Lingyun, though he would never say anything. Despicable as she was, you could count on her in a pinch. She didn’t even know why herself, but she trusted him in this dire moment. That wasn’t something many people did.

BOOM! The entire ship shook, and rocked fiercely to the side. The captain staggered a few steps before catching himself. His eyes shot to the shield control array. The screen flashed a glaring red warning. Their energy stores were almost depleted.

“Captain, the incoming comets are far more densely packed. What is your order?”

Chapter 345: Narrow Escapes

Lan Jue rushed over to the control systems with big strides, and took over control from one of the crew. Behind him, Tan Lingyun shot her hands out. The motion cast two beams of verdant energy that separated the other personnel from Lan Jue and Qianlin.

One of the crew sitting by defense system controls looked nervously at the Captain. The ship's commanding officer lifted a hand in a silent order to remain still. Under ordinary circumstances, a breach would likely fail beneath the bridge's state-of-the-art internal defense mechanisms. It was enough to easily overpower any Adept seventh rank and below. But these were not normal circumstances – they were staring death in the face. In fact, the likelihood they'd survive – according to the Captain – was no better than eighty percent. Everyone was in a panic. If this man really did have battleship piloting experience, maybe he could pull out a miracle.

But miracles were known for being rare! These plasma tendrils with their massive comets were the nightmare of every airship pilot. An armada could obliterate it with a densely packed bombardment. They were in a transport ship.

The moment he realized what they were encountering, the Captain's heart had sunk to the floor. They were doomed.

Lan Jue settled in the the seat. His hands shot out, and his fingers danced nimbly across the keyboard like bolts of lightning. He shouted over his shoulder. "Shrink the shields to just over the ship. Reduce shield output to thirty percent."

"What?!" The crewman at the shield controls stared open-mouthed at Lan Jue. Their shields were outmatched as it is, and he wanted them reduced?

"Do as he says!" The Captain shouted from his chair. Now that he'd let the man take over, there was no going back. He was also a career pilot, and he knew what Lan Jue was intending; decrees surface area, and reduce energy consumption. Right now, the smaller they were the better.

The airship rolled sideways, narrowly avoiding a massive chunk of space rock. This unfortunately put them right in the path of three smaller stones. The ship shuddered and groaned as it was pelted by the dense and speedy debris.

Lan Jue's features were serious and solemn. Meanwhile, he spoke to Qianlin through the Spirit Caller gem: Put your hands on my shoulders. Then, I want you to focus your energies all around us. Block us from everyone's sight.

Qianlin swept behind Lan Jue without hesitation, and placed her hands on his shoulders. A white, peaceful aura instantly sprang to life around her. A moment later, that protective force spread outward and penetrated through Lan Jue.

Tan Lingyun's eyes lit up. She knew Zhou Qianlin's Discipline was supportive, so perhaps she was helping improve Lan Jue's reaction speed.

The rippling, milky light continued to spread in all directions. Those behind couldn't clearly see what Lan Jue was doing any longer. Lightning flashed in his eyes as his power surged. He could feel waves of his own power flowing from Zhou Qianlin and in to him. The amplification wasn't as dramatic as when they joined, but he was easily comparable to a ninth rank eighth level Adept.

It was stupendous that an amplification Discipline could lift someone up to this level. He could sense behind her, much to his surprise, Qianlin converting his own thunderbolt powers to that supportive energy.

He made a mental note that they would have to experiment more with the changes in their powers. Understanding each other's abilities intimately would be immensely beneficial to them both. Assuming they weren't evaporated by a titanic, gas-spewing space rock.

Lan Jue lifted his hand from the keyboard and placed it on a metal sphere set within the control station. This device was a power converter – it injected an Adept's power in to the ship, to help it perform better.

Almost all larger airships had such devices installed. A single Adept couldn't control a battleship, or inject it with enough energy to run it.

However, by using a power converter connected to amplification power gems, the issue could be overcome. In normal flight, this gave it a fine tune up.

Higher level Adepts were, of course, more effective in this situation. For truly powerful Adepts, sometimes their own energy alone was enough to power a ship – it's just that no one's done it.

The instant Lan Jue's hand touched the sphere, his energy burst from him in to the ship. In the space of an instant, he was in complete control. With Qianlin's help, he was now as strong as a ninth rank eighth level Adept!

It was like he became the ship. He could sense everything, feel all of it's adjustments and settings. With a thought he could change anything to his specifications.

Meanwhile, Lan Jue's right hand tapped furiously on the control panel, urging the ship as fast as it could go.

"You're crazy! What the hell are you doing gaining speed?!" One of the propulsion engineers shouted at him. He tried to force his way through Lingyun's barriers, but failed.

"Shut up! I want to live more than anyone on this damn ship." As he shouted, the crew watched in surprise as a helmet descended from over the master control board.

"Total manual control?" The Captain watched in wonderment. Although he couldn't see precisely how Lan Jue was controlling the ship through Qianlin's waves of power, he did recognize the helmet as it descended toward them. The only people who would dare put a ship like this in manual control were true specialists. The Captain, too, was capable of this, but was not very proficient.

With the helmet in place, Lan Jue could more quickly and efficient feel every aspect of the airship. He closed his eyes, and through his connection with the ship's systems he was able to see out in all directions, and much farther than his eyes could manage.

The comet swarm was drawing closer, and growing more densely packed. Lan Jue dexterously dipped the ship between two errant meteorites. They slipped through the frozen boulders with only meters to spare, avoiding the clouds of rock and dust as they smashed together.

The moment the Captain had recognized that Lan Jue was controlling the ship manually, his estimation of the young invader went up significantly. He looked at a nearby monitor displaying their detection reading for a closer look at the situation outside. It was obviously superior to simple line of sight.

But when he saw how Lan Jue evaded the meteorites, he couldn't help but resolutely nod his head. He himself would not have been able to accomplish that – surely this man's credentials were true.

The white transport ship deftly darted between incoming comets and meteor fragments like a tiny fish in an unending purple sea. Although coming out completely unscathed was impossible, Lan Jue picked which rocks the ship could handle, and avoided the others. Sometimes he would collide with smaller ones purposefully, where they would otherwise be smashed against a moon-sized comet.

The ship's energy systems were restored with Lan Jue's power injection. The shields were fuller and ready for stronger impact. Soon they were at top speed, drilling through the heart of the comet swarm. However, this was anything but comfortable for the passengers. The faster they went, the more the ship shuddered as though it were going to shake itself apart. They were swept from side to side as Lan Jue threaded between certain death.

And it wasn't just the travelers. Even some of the crew were beginning to look a little green. Tan Lingyun, on the other hand, stood with her feet planted as though they were nailed to the hull. No matter how violently the ship shook, she didn't move an inch.

But that wasn't the whole story. She stared out of the bridge's window with a face made of stone, but the light of passing comets revealed her white-knuckle fists. She was an Adept, and like Lan Jue there was a small

chance she could survive, but the reality of that was silly to hope for. She was an eighth ranked Adept, among the best of humanity, but that meant nothing in the vast expanse of the universe.

But this situation, and her heightened senses had helped her to see things a little more clearly. Lan Jue was complete garbage, as she asserted – at least he could fly an airship. She never would have guessed. At least now she knew why Zhou Qianlin liked him. He had at least one redeeming quality.

For everyone on the bridge, it felt like time slowed to a crawl. Every second was an eternity as they swept past rocks going tens of thousands of kilometers a second.

Bang! Another one. The ship listed sideways away from the impact, which was just enough to push it between another two massive comets. Thrusters on the ship's stern sputtered to life, spouting blue flame. And then – stillness.

The black expanse of space stretched out before them. Gone were the comets and screaming meteors that blotted out the heavens, barreling onward behind them.

The beauties of the universe were endless, and nothing was more perfect than the site of those distant, fixed stars. The peaceful silence that overcame them was transformative.

"You did it... we're alive!" A great cheer rose up on the bridge, as the crew unfastened their safety harnesses and began jumping for joy. Anyone facing the prospect of death is scared, but these men and women were trained to throw all of themselves in to a problem and not to break. But now that the danger was passed, and their safety was assured, they could celebrate. And why not? They knew the odds – one in a hundred survived an encounter like this.

Most everyone was sure they were doomed, and now that they were saved it was like rising from the ashes. They couldn't control their jubilation. Some screamed and laughed, while others hid faces covered in tears. They stole their lives back from Death's clutches! It was

undoubtedly the most harrowing experience any of them had ever experienced. The sweat-soaked crew continue to cheer their survival.

Chapter 346: Can You Handle It, Professor Tan?

The Captain was the first to recover his senses. Sharp claps rang through the bridge as he attempted to gather everyone's attention. He shouted over the din. "Alright! It's not time to celebrate yet. Get us back on course, and broadcast to the marshals that we're out of danger. Everything is back to normal. We are continuing in our route to the Barrows. Someone get me a report on damage sustained and remaining energy reserves. Turn off the shields!"

The crew members reigned in their joy and set about enacting the Captain's orders. Lan Jue rose to his feet, once the helmet rose from his head. He didn't dance or sigh as the others – he'd been through several life or death situations in his time. Zhou Qianlin dropped her hands from his shoulders, just as Tan Lingyun allowed her Discipline and its barriers to disperse.

Lan Jue made his way to the Captain. "I apologize, the situation was urgent and dire. I ask that you don't advertise my involvement in any of this."

The Captain replied by snatching up Lan Jue's hand in a hearty shake. "Thank you. Thank you for saving all our lives. How could we not share this news? You're a hero! I've never seen anyone pilot a craft like you did. You're one hell of a battleship pilot."

Lan Jue retrieved with hand from the old man's iron grip with some effort. He chuckled sheepishly. "If you really want to thank them, then let's keep this whole thing quiet. I guess I couldn't be opposed to a first-class seat, if you have one available. Tall as I am, economy class is pretty uncomfortable..."

"Not a problem, not a problem. Half the first-class cabins are empty. You and your friends are all welcome." By now the Captain had returned to his normal, gruff manner. The qualities and character of a commercial pilot needed to be very high to reach the professional level this man enjoyed.

He also understood some of Lan Jue's reticence – after all, what he'd done was extremely illegal.

The ship's crew looked at Lan Jue in an entirely different light now. Their eyes were full of admiration and appreciation. They were all trained airship operators, so everything they had managed to see, they understood. If asked to describe it, 'master at work' was the best they could come up with. Much like the Captain's praise, they had never seen anyone pilot a ship like that before.

Lan Jue stretched his lanky body, and looked at Tan Lingyun. "Thank you Professor Tan." She had been very helpful and compliant, questioning him only the once. He was also afraid he might have revealed himself, and wanted to find out more of what she'd seen. In the end, the Savage Goddess had made the right determination in the moment when he needed it most, and for that he was grateful.

She glared at him with hard eyes. Her face seemed a little pale.

Zhou Qianlin gave her a curious look. "Professor, are you alright?"

Tan Lingyun's eyes swept toward Qianlin. Without warning, she doubled over.

"Raaghhrw!"

Lan Jue watched wide-eyed and slack-jawed as Tan Lingyun vomited for what seemed like an eternity. She kept throwing up until nothing was left but bile.

Was this... was this motion sickness?

How could it be anything else? She'd remained right behind him, locked in place through the whole ordeal. She wasn't protected by any shielding or pressure relieving apparatuses like the crew had at their stations. She had felt every pitch and jerk and drop.

In fact, the only way she was handling it this well was because she'd experienced the g-force training Lan Jue had put them through. If she hadn't, she would likely already be curled up on the floor.

Fighting back a laugh, Lan Jue clicked his tongue at her. “Ah, Professor Tan – are you really suffering from motion sickness? You have to look after yourself! Take it easy...”

“Fu-ooouublaarrrrwwghhh!” Tan Lingyun couldn’t even finish her sentence before her body doubled over once again. Lan Jue couldn’t help it, and a booming laugh erupted from him. Such release! Finally, for the first time ever he had the upper hand over this exceedingly unpleasant woman.

The Captain was a man of his word. After another vociferous round of praise, Lan Jue was led to his free first-class cabin upgrade. It was a small room, with enough space for two people. When you were ready to sleep, the spacious and comfortable seats stretched out to become beds. Both chairs ended up being equivalent to two double beds. These tickets were about double the price of a standard economy seat.

The Captain assumed Lan Jue’s relationship with Qianlin and made sure the both of them were placed together in a cabin. Tan Lingyun had her own, all to herself.

Lingyun was too busy violently emptying her stomach to care very much about the room assignments. She could do little more than lay in her spacious seat and sip sugar water 1. This was her first time in a first-class cabin, though, so that at least improved her spirits somewhat.

Lan Jue returned to economy to tell Director Wu about the changes, then sauntered pleasantly back to his spacious cubby hole. What a difference it made! He immediately spread his chair out and slipped the pillow under his head. Splayed out on a leather seat with a comfy pillow – what else could you ask for?

Zhou Qianlin sat beside him. She wasn’t yet interested in laying down. She looked uncomfortable, with a slight tinge of red to her face.

After a moment of enjoying the new situation, Lan Jue noticed her discomfort. “What’s wrong?” He asked, surprised. “What’s making you uncomfortable?”

Zhou Qianlin didn’t say anything. She only glanced at him, then nodded

toward the wall.

Lan Jue followed her eyes, where he spied a sign with large red letters: Unscrupulous Activities Prohibited. 2

Lan Jue's face was strange, and then suddenly he broke in to a fit of snickering laughter.

Qianlin smacked him playfully. "Don't laugh!"

Lan Jue was in much higher spirits once leaving economy class, not to mention surviving violent destruction. They were safe, comfortable, and the Savage Goddess was somewhere else entirely trying to heave her stomach through her mouth. Things could hardly get better.

"I think I'm starting to get used to the changes in our Discipline," Lan Jue said quietly, changing the subject. "But it looks like there's still a lot we don't know. We should keep exploring the differences."

Qianlin replied with a nod. "I notice it, too. Once we touch, I can share your Discipline. My own Discipline is still there as well, and can transform in to yours. I can still amplify your powers without being merged. It gives us more options and flexibility.

Lan Jue cut in. "That's right. That's precisely what I think as well. As for the summoning, obviously if you're in danger don't hesitate to call me to your side. We should try and test the maximum distance of this summoning when we have the time. I'd be curious precisely how far we can be before this stops working."

Zhou Qianlin timidly nodded her head. She seemed a little less awkward now, and made herself comfortable by lifting her seat's foot rest. She sank in to the chair with a sigh.

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1. According to Chinese medicine, sweet foods are suitable as medicinal cuisine to settle an upset stomach.
2. TJSS put it as 'married activities are prohibited', I found that funny.

Chapter 347: Arriving at the Barrows

Zhou Qianlin's legs were beautiful, long and thin. The pants she wore outlined the firm muscle of her thighs.

Although they were in first class, space was still limited. Their seats were placed side by side, and the space between them was very tight. Lan Jue looked at her as he laid down, and was struck by how pretty she was, how soft she looked. How comfortable it would be to hold her in his arms, he thought.

The idea came unconscious and unbidden. As he looked at Zhou Qianlin, he saw her figure grow dim then vanish. Half a moment later, there was a warm body in his arms.

"Ah!" The cry had come from Qianlin, though Lan Jue's face revealed his own surprise.

So it went both ways.

Lan Jue lay unmoving with Qianlin beside him, his heart filled with surprise over the revelation. Qianlin, too, understood the implications once her own surprise had worn off. Just as she had summoned him, now it was she who had appeared by his side. It was strange, resting in his embrace, but also exciting.

Lan Jue blinked at her, but did not move. "I, uh... I didn't mean to. I just was giving it a try. It looks like this time I meant it!"

Qianlin's face reddened. "You still haven't let me go."

Lan Jue quickly released her, but the shift caused Zhou Qianlin to slip. Lan Jue instinctively grabbed her again to keep her from falling off the chair. In his rush the only leverage he'd managed to grip was Qianlin's backside.

As luck would have it, precisely in that moment was when their door swung open. The airship's Captain stuck his head in searchingly. What he saw was Zhou Qianlin lying awkwardly atop Lan Jue, supported by his hand on her rump. The two of them looked back at him with big round

eyes, like deer caught in headlights.

“Ah! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to disturb the two of you. I just wanted to come by and thank you again. I brought some of my favorite cookies as a little gift.” The Captain gruffly placed the cookies nearby then, vigorously waving for them to go on, left the small cabin. The door shut tight behind him.

Qianlin pushed herself away from him with a hand on his shoulder. “This is all your fault!”

The door opened again just a crack. A hand reached it, grabbed that red lettered sign, and disappeared once again.

Zhou Qianlin and Lan Jue watched in silence. Both weren’t sure if they should scream or laugh. For Lan Jue, that strange feeling within him only intensified.

Qianlin scrambled off and returned to her own seat, where she turned her blushing face away from Lan Jue. The former mercenary, meanwhile, nervously scratched his head. He turned as well and fought with the masculine urges within him. He fought them till he slept.

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The next leg of their journey continued smoothly. Although they’d expended a good deal of energy evading the cosmic turbulence, their reserves were enough to complete the trip. In five days, they’d reached their destination: The Barrows!

Thankfully, the marked improvement in his treatment made the remainder of their ride far more palatable for Lan Jue. He quite enjoyed it. It was the first time they’d spent so much time together alone, getting along. But they were not idle – in fact, there was one activity they engaged in rigorously.

Learning about the changes to their Disciplines, naturally.

For five days they trained and practiced, mastering the new changes. First was the process of sharing their Discipline. A certain degree of skin-on-skin contact was required first. Intertwining fingers didn’t appear to be

enough, they hand to grip hands.

Next they practice summoning one another. The crux of it was that the summoner needed a true desire to see the other person. What's more, the more they practiced, the more 'direct' the summoning became. The target appeared around thirty centimeters directly ahead.

The first time Lan Jue succeeded Qianlin fell in to his arms. However, that was because she'd been summoned from her back, so of course that's how she'd land.

The tight confines of the airship made determining a maximum distance for this summoning impossible. Nor could they practice merging, because the practice would sacrifice her clothing. She appeared in her birthday suit, and that was all. Qianlin flat out refused, and there was nothing Lan Jue could do about it.

Their experiments helped pass the time, so their five day journey didn't feel too long. It had also given Lan Jue a chance to teach Qianlin more tricks in using their shared Discipline, and smoothed out their cooperation.

Lan Jue was originally a ninth rank seventh level Talent, after all, with a wealth of experience in a number of fields. It didn't take long for grasp the essentials under his tutelage. By the time their journey was coming to a close, she had a solid mastery of the basics.

Their airship touched down on The Barrows. The Captain came to collect them personally, and send them off. He thanked them again on behalf of the crew. Lan Jue politely accepted the praise while reminding him to keep his involvement a secret. Lan Jue had never been interested in the praise afforded to heroes. A man did what needed to be done, and that was all. If he'd had any interest in that, Taihua would already have earned him quite a following.

No, Lan Jue liked the feeling of the deed itself. Whether it was helping the elderly in Grace hospital or saving people from terrifying alien species, it was nourishing for the soul. Nothing could buy that kind of feeling, nor the positive karma it brought. Doing good things was good for the heart.

Tan Lingyun was terrible with information. The moment they'd disembarked from the airship, it seemed like all the teachers knew he was a 'battleship pilot.' Lan Jue helplessly faced them.

Wu Junyi's estimation of his only grew, but Tan Liungyun's judgements never changed – he was still a waste. But of course there would be resentment. He had, after all, gloated over her affliction. That was not something she was going to forget.

And yet she didn't trouble him further. After all, he did save everyone on the ship. She decided she would have more patience toward him. She was much nicer to men with any skill to back them up.

When the ship touched down, the teachers were hearded in to a nearby mag-lev bus. They traveled to their destination, busily watching the scenery pass.

They ooded and ahhed at the passing buildings, in styles much different from that of the East. Most were built in the style of old-world Germany and France. Baroque influences were everywhere. A sense of history and culture permeated it all.

In contrast to the other worn-down teachers, Lan Jue was awake and alert. He had had a beautiful companion and a comfortable cabin. But despite his excitement, he knew that his easy days were coming to an end once more. Soon he would have a lot to deal with, but first among them was meeting up with the Wine Master.

Chapter 348: The Barrows

As the teachers tore through the scenic landscape on a mag-lev train, their mood had begun to improve once again. The only thing they'd had to do on their five day journey beside sleep, was sleep. Once they finally disembarked, they were still groggy. However, the gorgeous views and differences from what they knew in the East woke them up quickly.

Lan Jue, naturally, sat beside Zhou Qianlin. Everyone knew that she had been chosen to participate in the trip because of her outstanding performance during the ARC class – at least, that was what Wu Junyi had told them. There were some suspicions, however – after all, many of them had seen the exchange between Tan Lingyun, Qianlin and the etiquette teacher. Then, all three mysteriously vanished. More attention was being paid to the little known Professor Lan.

Jin Yan, too, would occasionally find her eyes wandering toward Lan Jue. When they did, her brows would furrow, and she'd get lost in thought.

“Are you alright, Professor Yan? You didn't get hurt, did you?” Wang Hongyuan's concerned voice drew her back. Wang Hongyuan had yet to leave her side. They were colleagues from the same office, and this colleague in particular had caught Wang Hongyuan's fancy.

“I wonder why Professor Lan is always with Zhou Qianlin!” She spoke quietly to the man beside her. “I wonder if something's going on between them.”

Wang Hongyuan answered with a shrug. “How should I know? They do look a little more intimate than one might expect. If you look carefully, you can see something strange in the way they look at one another.”

Jin Yan's pretty mouth curled in to a frown. “You're right, I can see it. How could this be allowed to happen?”

Wang Hongyuan laughed it off. “Why shouldn't it? Qianlin's a post-graduate scholar, and she's an adult – old enough to apply for financial aid. One without a partner is without family, they say. If it's love, who are we to deny them?”

Jin Yan was unconvinced. "But..." She had always held Lan Jue in high regard, and that had increased by leaps and bounds after discovering the changes in her brother. But more than that, she'd always born a curiosity about Professor Lan. She always felt as though there was more to him than met the eye.

"We shouldn't pry in to other people's business," Wang Hongyuan continued. "He's a colleague. And if he's got the skill to attract the attention of a beauty like Qianlin, then more power to him."

"What makes you so happy to see them together," she asked.

To this, Wang Hongyuan offered a light snort. "He's my competition!"

"Competition? For what?" Jin Yan looked at him in curiosity.

Wang Hongyuan shrugged a shoulder. "I have a girl I like, who knows Professor Lan. This girl seems to have a little bit of an interest in the guy. If he were off the market, she has to give up pursuit, right? That's my opportunity." His eyes shone as he looked Jin Yan's way.

Jin Yan blinked at him, surprised. "Really? Do I know her? Wow, this is the first I've heard you are interested in somebody! Who is she? Come on, tell me."

The corner of Wang Hongyuan's mouth twitched. He saw the fire of gossip alight in her eyes, but inwardly could only lament. Right over her head...

"It's a secret," he muttered.

Jin Yan frowned prettily. "Hmph, fine. Don't tell me. I just wanted to help... but I guess it looks like you don't need it."

"You really want to help?" A sly light glittered in Wang Hongyuan's eyes.

"We'll colleagues," she said. "Isn't that what friends do for each other?"

He nodded. "Yeah, in that case there is actually something you can help me with. The woman I like actually came on this trip. Stop looking around! You're making it too obvious. When I need your help, I'll let you know, ok?"

Lan Jue's ear twitched as he faintly heard his name from behind somewhere. He listened carefully at Wang Hongyuan's attempts, and couldn't help but smile. At last he was making his move. Lan Jue wished him luck.

"What's with the sinister smirk," Qianlin whispered at his shoulder.

Lan Jue chortled quietly. "It's nothing."

"Something bad, that's for sure," Tan Lingyun said. She was sitting on his other side. "One look at you shows you've got nothing but bad intentions."

Lan Jue stared at her. "Is this how you speak to your savior?"

She grunted. "Oh, and who did you save, huh? I can't think of anyone."

Lan Jue grunted right back. "It's no use trying to argue with the ungrateful. I'm done speaking to you."

Tan Lingyun openly wagged a fist at him. "Are you looking for an ass-kicking?!"

Lan Jue deigned not to answer. He simply sat in silence, with a scornful expression on his face. He could almost see her shaking beside him, but she wasn't as ungrateful as Lan Jue had accused. She wasn't one to let a good deed go unpunished. If it hadn't had been for his involvement, perhaps they all really would have died out in space. Perhaps he wasn't a total waste of space.

Qianlin snickered in to her hand on his other side. It was like the two of them had committed some unspeakable offense to each other in a past life. She didn't suspect Tan Lingyun as any sort of romantic rival. If she couldn't win Lan Jue over, then she suspected no one else could either.

The Barrows was an enormously large planet, easily three times the volume of Skyfire. They had views stretching to the horizon while they made their descend, and saw nothing but green stretching far as the eyes could see. All of the vegetation served to up the oxygen content of the air, which caused some of the newcomers to feel like headed. Once they got used to it, however, they felt very comfortable.

Endless scans and research on the Barrows had revealed a long time ago that the excellent surroundings actually served to extend its occupants' lives. Normal people who remained here for a long time might see their lifetime extend by five or ten years. For this reason, the Barrows was often the host to dignitaries and others who needed a sharp mind.

But the West's hierarchs were a cunning bunch. They didn't let just anyone stay here for long periods. They turned it in to a tourist trap, and even the staff were switched out every few years.

It's beauty and reputation, as well as the government policies around it, earned the Barrows quite the reputation. It quickly became a prime tourist destination. It was said that a visit here was cleansing for the body and mind, so the rich and powerful made regular pilgrimages.

Even more, a great deal of the West's best foodstuffs were produced right here. It was to the West what Taihua was to the East. And like Taihua, over development was barred, to make sure the environment was protected.

The Barrows and Taihua were originally about even in popularity, however the tragedy on Taihua had changed things. Since the attack, the planet had since been closed to outside traffic. Control had been handed over to the military, and even now their scans and searches continued. They searched for any information about these beasts, and any remaining eggs, to ensure that another catastrophe like that would never happen again.

There were cities on the planet's surface, but all of them were of very simply construction, entirely composed of wood. They were curious structures, since they could not employ or steel or concrete. But cities weren't accurate. They were really more like villages. There were over ten thousand of these tourist bases scattered around the land. Hence the planet's name; The Barrows.

There were also indigenous species, and the wooded areas teamed with life. However, the animals here were all good-natured. Very few of them even possessed the capability to harm a human. In all, the planet was an

exceptionally harmonious place.

The National Eastern University tourist party trundled along on the mag-lev train until it reached its destination; a small village of wooded buildings, much like all of the others. None of the structures rose higher than three floors. The hotel where they would be staying sported a small lake to one side. A majestic peak rose opposite its wooden doors. It, too, was interesting, as it was entirely draped in green but for the very top, where snow turned it white. With the mirror-flat surface of the lake reflecting the gorgeous vistas, it was quite the sight to behold.

There were two teachers to a room. Clearly, it would be impossible for Lan Jue to share a room with a student. Wang Hongyuan would be his bunk mate. Once they entered the place, Lan Jue immediately tapped a number in to his communicator.

“You’ve arrived?” Came the answer from the other end.

“Yeah. I imagine you are, too. Where shall we meet?” He asked.

“Turn on your positioning apparatus. I’ll go to you.” The Wine Master’s voice replied.

“Alright.” Lan Jue shut off the connection, then turned on his GPS locator.

“You’ve got friends in the Barrows?” Wang Hongyuan had overheard the brief conversation. His curiosity got the better of him.

Lan Jue smiled. “Yup! Some friends of mine will be coming by, and I’ll need to leave for a little while. But hey, old guy – good luck in your endeavors!”

“Old guy... how old do you think I am?” Wang Hongyuan glowered.

Lan Jue chuckled. “Nah, I’m kidding, you aren’t old. So how about Little Wang then.”

“Little Wang... ehn, we’ll stick to Professor Wang.” 1

Lan Jue choked back a laugh. “So it is, Professor Wang. So when are you going to make your confession to Professor Jin, eh?”

Wang Hongyuan suddenly realized his conversation on their ride over must have been overheard. He spoke, somewhat embarrassed. “Actually, I have no idea. You gotta help, Professor Lan. Give me a couple hints. I mean, if you can get a girl like Qianlin, then you’ve got to have some good info for me.”

Lan Jue looked at his friend in surprise. “Don’t tell me you’ve never had a girlfriend...”

The dance instructor’s face went stiff. “It means I’m pure!”

Lan Jue blinked. “You’ve... really never had a girlfriend?”

Wang Hongyuan chuckled sheepishly. “Before I moved to Skyfire, I was actually a Westerner – something I imagine you’ve already guessed. You’ve seen my Discipline, my powers. It wasn’t something I wanted, but the moment my Disciplines awakened, I was thrust in to that world. It was days of training, trying to perfect my abilities, but I never really liked where I was. I never liked how it felt. So, one day I ran – and I’ve been running ever since. I hadn’t even dared to go looking for a woman. I spend my days in hiding, afraid they’ll find me. I bounced around, hiding from place to place for five years before coming to settle at the university. At last, I’d found a way to live out my days in relative peace, and it’s given me time to think. Professor Jin is a fine woman; beautiful, kind, enthusiastic... I like her quite a lot. I’d like you to help me, Professor Lan.”

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1. Naughtiness implied. The original Chinese cannot be translated exactly, but I’ll try. He’s referred to as ‘Old Wang’, a form of respectful address to someone older than you. However, after Wang Hongyuan’s he changed it to little Wang. Clearly in English this is a crude penis joke, but in Chinese you have to add a particle to the end of the sentence that denotes an implied answer. Like a rhetorical question. However, the addition of that particle makes his name ‘Xiao Wang ba’ – which sounds like ‘little tortoise’ – which is slang for shithead, sorta.

Chapter 349: Confessions

Wang Hongyuan's expression confirmed Lan Jue's suspicions. "I knew what kind of person you were from the day we fought shoulder to shoulder," Lan Jue said. "I like what I saw. One's history isn't important. What's important are the choices we make. Forget what has come before. As for Jin Yan, I'll help you brainstorm. How about this..."

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Due to how exhausting these long journeys were, the school hadn't arranged anything for the first day. Rest was recommended, though many chose to wander the surrounding area. After all, this was all new to many of the faculty.

The diet on this planet was peculiar. Very few spices or other items were used in cooking, so as not to mask the natural flavors. All of it was greens or fruit, with no meat on offer. Killing the local wildlife for sport or sustenance was strictly prohibited.

"Mh! The food on this planet is delicious!" Jin Yan cooed.

Wang Hongyuan sat behind her, with a silly grin plastered on his face. "For you ladies, certainly. For us men, though, only a day with meat is a good day."

Lan Jue stretched. "I'm actually quite enjoying myself. It's relaxing here. You should ask around, Professor – I'm sure they'll have someone around here that can sell you a bite of meat. So long as it isn't meat from indigenous fauna, then it should be somewhere."

Wang Hongyuan's eyes lit up at the prospect. "You think so? I'll take a look tomorrow, and see what I can find."

He then turned his head to Jin Yan. "Professor, I was hoping you might be willing to help me with something today."

She looked back. "What's that?"

Wang Hongyuan continued, his voice dropping lower. "It's about that matter we discussed on the bus."

Jin Yan's face betrayed her excitement. "You're ready already? Aren't you afraid to rush in to things? Is hurrying really the best option?"

Wang Hongyuan shook his head. "Not a problem. Everything's ready. So how about you come with me to the place I've picked out and we think about how to make it better. Then, it's time to make my move. What do you say?"

Jin Yan nodded zealously. "Alright. Do we want to bring any other teachers along as witnesses?"

"No need," he replied. "In the event things don't go well, it'll be impossible for me to show my face. This girl is shy, too, so I think my best chances are when it's just she and I."

Surprise flitted across the young woman's face. "I didn't know you were so thoughtful, Professor! If it were me under all that scrutiny, I'd be so nervous. It would definitely effect the mood."

Wang Hongyuan, on the verge of a cold sweat, inwardly sighed with relief. He shot a quick glance Lan Jue's way. The Jewelry Master gave him a wink, and silently encouraged him to continue.

Obviously the emotional intelligence wasn't coming from him.

"Let's go then," he said. "Remember to keep my secret, though!"

Jin Yan snickered. "Look at you, so nervous!"

This earned a sheepish chuckle from the dance instructor. "To tell you the truth, I've never actually had a girlfriend. I really like this girl. If in the end it shouldn't work out..." As he finished the thought, his eyes dropped dejectedly to the ground.

Jin Yan rose to her feet, and gently patted his shoulder. "Come on, let's keep this positive. A true man valiantly chases after his desires, right? You just need to keep at it, and that's half the battle already."

Wang Hongyuan stood as well, and waved toward Lan Jue. "Enjoy your meal Professor. Jin Yan and I are heading out for a while."

Lan Jue lazily waved goodbye. "Enjoy."

As he watched the two of them leave, Qianlin's curious voice spoke up from his side. "They've got something going on, huh? Professor Wang looked so weird!"

Lan Jue chortled at her observation. "Of course there's something going on, and I hope he succeeds. We should go as well. My friend is already here, so we're off to meet up with him. We've got some plans that'll keep us away from the group for a while – Director Wu knows about it."

"Mh." Qianlin responded, and she rose with Lan Jue to leave.

Lan Jue smiled. "You aren't afraid I'm going to sell you off or something? You don't even want to know where we're going."

Zhou Qianlin fixed him with a stare. "If you think you can sell me, you're welcome to try."

This brought a laugh to Lan Jue's lips. "Let's get out of here."

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Wang Hongyuan lead Jin Yan to the second floor, where he and Lan Jue's room was located. As they slowly wandered down the hallway, Jin Yan said, "Professor, the most important thing is not to hesitate. Women can't stand indecisive men. A man must have courage. If you approach her with self-confidence and purpose, and show her how you really feel, she'll certainly respond. And you aren't bad-looking! I mean, I never liked that haircut if I'm being honest, but you're a handsome man! You're also a strong adept, so that's another big plus in your favor. I'm sure everything will work out great."

Wang Hongyuan's face beamed as she went on about his benefits. "Really? You think those things are true?"

Jin Yan resolutely nodded her head. She clenched her hand in to a fist and playfully shook it under his nose. "Confidence! You need to tell yourself, I'm the best! That's when success comes to you. Where is your room anyway, we haven't arrived yet?"

"Right here." Wang Hongyuan lead her to a door, grabbed the handle, then stopped.

“I’m still a little nervous,” he confessed.

Jin Yan feigned irritation. “We haven’t even started yet! If you keep this up you’re going to pee your pants when the girl actually shows up. Hurry up, open the door and let me see what you prepared. Otherwise I’m going to have to help you adjust your attitude.”

Wang Hongyuan pushed open the door. He walked in first, with Jin Yan hurrying in at his heels.

Jin Yan rushed in to find blackness. The lights were off. The thick window curtains had been drawn, plunging the whole room in to dark.

“Professor... Professor Wang? Are you still here?” She couldn’t see anything, and a slight tinge of nervousness nagged at her.

Then, suddenly, there was light. A dim, red light, that hung in the air a few feet before her. The small point of light grew in size and ferocity until it was revealed to be a crystal clear flower bud. It slowly opened in to a beautiful rose.

A warm light dispelled the darkness, revealing that the rose had not been floating. Wang Hongyuan held it aloft, having somehow changed clothes.

“Ah, that was fun! I was a little scared, but that rose was cute,” she said, oblivious.

Wang Hongyuan fixed her with a deep stare. “Jin Yan. We’ve known each other for three years.”

“That’s about right,” she answered.

Wang Hongyuan dropped his face slightly, and a dejected expression crossed his features. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time. But I couldn’t. Would you... like to hear my story?”

“Sure.” Jin Yan was starting to think something was strange.

Wang Hongyuan’s eyes were dim, and bitter as he recounted his tale. “I’m an orphan. I was on the streets since I was very young. I resorted to begging to survive. I never knew my parents, and I struggled against

starvation since I was eight. I had to rely on the charity of others. You know, the reason I slick my hair back like this is because when I was small, my hair was always in a mess. I always envied those kids with parents, parents who would help them comb their hair.”

“I don’t have as much class as Lan Jue, but I do make sure to take care of my appearance. That’s because when I was small I promised myself, that if I grew up at all then I’d be like them. A normal person, not a beggar.”

Jin Yan blinked, stunned. She didn’t know how to reply.

“When I was eight there was this man who would always offer me candy. I followed him home one day, and he had someone give me a bath, clean me up. Finally, I thought... Finally someone who’ll look after me, raise me. Things would change.”

“But then something happened that changed the dream in to a nightmare. I was brought to a place with a lot of other children, just like me. At first, as we all ate together, I was so happy. I felt like I was finally part of a family. That was, until I saw him. Some strange person, with a sallow face. Before I could react, he lunged at me, and bit in to my neck.”

Jin Yan gasped as his story unfolded. “W-why did he bite you?”

Wang Hongyuan was silent for a moment. “At the time I just remember feeling cold. Not pain, just... cold. Then, everything went dark. When I woke up, I was in some other place. Someone told me that I had been ‘embraced’, and that it’d gone well. I would live... in a matter of speaking. As a vampire. I had inherited that lineage.”

“A vampire?” Jin Yan unconsciously stepped back. Shock and fear shone in her eyes.

A pained grin spread across Wang Hongyuan’s face. “Professor Lan actually didn’t want me to tell you this. He said, if I did then my chances would be shot. But I think honesty is important. We might have gone our whole lives without you finding out what my Discipline is, but to me that is unfaithful. I want to tell you everything about me. I just ask that you let me finish. Let me say what I have to say, alright? I can’t hold this in any longer.”

Jin Yan looked at him with big, round eyes. Finally she understood – Wang Hongyuan's confession, all of this, was for her.

Chapter 350: Sincerely Touching

Wang Hongyuan went on. “I didn’t have any choice in becoming a vampire – my only course was to follow the one who turned me. I was forced to learn a number of skills, and spent the years cultivating my abilities. They would only let me live if I could achieve third rank or above. I worked hard, because my life depended on it. I would later come to discover that it was the Dark Citadel that took me – but we called it the Black Congress. The strongest of the vampires, our Patriarch, was given the traditional moniker of Dracula.”

“A vampire’s life is tedious, lonely, and cold. Thankfully, I was only forced to drink a little blood from the living to promote Discipline growth. I never fed from a human, something I found to be different from my expectations. The years passed, and I grew both in body and Discipline. Eventually, they started to send me out on missions. I started to rise in the ranks.”

“But I didn’t like it. I hated the darkness – my hope was to live my life in the light like a normal person. They got to enjoy all the things the world of brightness had to offer. And it was a dream I could accomplish, since generations of evolution had caused vampires to no longer fear the sun. I decided to run, and I would do it while performing one of their missions. I chose the East, to get as far away from the Black Congress as possible. I hid for a time, concealing my identity, until I felt like it was safe. Then I made Skyfire my home.

“I chose Skyfire because of the Avenue’s presence. I figured that would be a sufficient deterrent to the West, that would hopefully stop them from rolling in here whenever they pleased. Meanwhile, I was finally able to live the life of my dreams; I joined the NEU, and became an electives teacher. About that time I met a girl. She was beautiful, kind, vibrant, with maybe a screw or two loose – but to me, that makes her that much cuter.”

“I was finally happy. Every day I got to see this girl, and in order to earn her respect I worked hard. If the students liked me, then so would she, I thought. The school would like me so I could stay near her. That way I

could continue to see her every day.”

“Eventually it was all too much for me to bear. I came to know my feelings as affection, something I hadn’t really felt before. And as that feeling grew it became something greater – it became love.”

“This went on for three years. That whole time, I didn’t dare speak – I wasn’t worthy of speaking to her. You said you don’t like indecisive men, but that’s not me. It’s fear. Fear that I’m not good enough for you. I have no great ability, and my history as part of the Citadel makes it worse. I’ve never done anything brutal, like they wanted, but that’s my family background.”

“But seeing you every day makes me happy, and the more time we spend together the deeper I feel it. It makes it impossible to break away. When Professor Lan came, and I saw how you looked at him, it broke my heart. I was deathly afraid he’d steal you away. That’s why I wasn’t so nice to him when he first showed up. Eventually I came to know more about him, and those feelings went away.”

“Jin Yan. I really, really like you. Everything about you. I’m so sorry it’s taken me this long to say it, but I never felt like I had a chance. I still may not, not fifty or even one percent, but now is the time to speak my mind. If not now, then that unspoken love would have consumed me. But don’t worry – I won’t cause you any trouble. No one knows about my affection for you. When we get back from this trip I plan to give in my resignation to Director Wu. I went with those students on the training, and experienced life on An Lun. It affected me deeply. A solitary man like me would do well in the army. I lived in the West far longer than I did the East, but this still feels like home to me. Skyfire Avenue protected me when I needed it, so now it’s time for me to give back to this Alliance. Maybe one day, when I’ve earned enough merit and risen in ranks, I’ll come back. If you still don’t have a husband, I can give it another shot.”

She stood in one place, unmoving. Her features were calm, but the light in her eyes revealed the turmoil in her head.

Wang Hongyuan dropped to a knee before her and, lifting the crystal

rose in his hands, fixed her with his soft gaze. "Thank you for letting me get that out. I finally feel like the pressure has eased. I'm not an articulate man. I don't know what I can say to make you happy, but there is something I need to tell you: I mean all of this. If you agree to be with me, I'll love you with every fiber of myself. Every bit of me will belong to you. And I don't care if you laugh, but I've never had a girlfriend. I'm a virgin, so –"

"Pfhhfhtht!" Jin Yan couldn't help it. She tried to stop the laugh, but it fought its way through her lips.

His face reddened with embarrassment. "I made this rose with blood from my own heart. If you take it, it casts a spell. If ever I am untrue, my heart will wither, and I will die. Do.... Do you, accept?"

Jin Yan looked at him, on his knees, and gradually her eyes grew cold and hard. Every second was an icy dagger in Wang Hongyuan's chest.

"I do not agree." She said.

Wang Hongyuan knew it could happen. He'd guessed it might. Still, when the words left her lips he felt like he would collapse under his own weight. He even swayed ever so slightly, down on his knees.

"I'm sorry!" He staggered to his feet, then made for the door to let her out.

"Stop right there!" Jin Yan shouted. Wang Hongyuan froze.

"And not just me," Jin Yan said, "no woman in her right mind would agree to accept some flower made of heart blood. A woman is looking for someone she can depend on. Not some death pact. This flower is a burden. A curse, and not just for you but the person who accepts it as well. Now put that thing away, because even if you do betray me someday, I won't want you to die for it."

"I, uh..." Wang Hongyuan stood, confused. He wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

They stood toe to toe in the darkness. Jin Yan's eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. "There was another colleague before, who was

interested in me. You picked him apart, even struck him once. Was this also because you like me?”

He earnestly nodded his head. “Yes.”

“You have courage to fight someone but not to speak up and say something?” Jin Yan complained.

Wang Hongyuan hung his head. “I didn’t dare. I’m actually pretty thin-skinned and sensitive. I know my short-comings, just like I know I don’t deserve you.”

Jin Yan stepped closer. Her warm breath crashed against his neck in waves. “How much do you like me?”

His eyes widened, and he backed away half a step. When he saw the light in her eyes, though, he had no trouble finding the words. “So, so much. More than I could ever love myself.”

She chuckled. “Put your damn flower away, I don’t want it.”

“Oh.” He chuckled sheepishly, then the crystal rose dissolved in to silk-thin strands of light. The penetrated through his wrist and disappeared.

“Go out and get some real roses. There aren’t any here, and we definitely need some red flowers. Hurry up, I’ll wait for you here.”

“What?” Wang Hongyuan blinked at her. “Flowers?”

She waved him off. “Stop your nonsense. There aren’t any flowers here, and how is a girl supposed to accept anything if there aren’t flowers involved?”

“S-so you’re.. you’re saying you’ll be my girlfriend?” Wang Hongyuan timidly inquired.

Jin Yan didn’t even look at him. “We’ll talk about all that when you get back with the flowers.”

“Ah!” Wang Hongyuan yelped, suddenly.

Jin Yan finally turned her head to look at him. “What is it?”

He answered with a grin. “I just remembered that I forgot something.

We were supposed to come in, I'd have the talk, and then..." As he spoke, Wang Hongyuan lifted his right hand. Suddenly, light flooded the room.

The quick change in lighting caused Jin Yan to squint. Once her eyes adjusted, though, she gasped in astonishment.

They stood in a sea of flowers. The entire room was filled floor to ceiling in gorgeous red flowers. They varied in size, but all released a pale pink aura that bathed the room in a gentle glow. Wang Hongyuan clapped his hands, and petals began to slowly descend from the ceiling. The soft scent of fresh flowers hung in the air around them.

He plucked one of the flowers from nearby, and returned to his post on one knee before Jin Yan. "Give me a chance, Jin Yan. I will love you more than anything or anyone in the universe. I will protect you, I will be your knight. I will care for you no matter what we face. If you don't like how I look, I'll change. Whatever you want from me, I'll be. Because I love you."

As he spoke, he lifted a hand and rustled the carefully manicured hair on his head. He looked up at Jin Yan with eyes full of sincerity.

The rims of Jin Yan's eyes had begun to redden. She stepped forward, and took the rose from his hand. "Stand up."

Wang Hongyuan quickly shot back up to his feet. "So... are you my girlfriend?"

"Yeah." Jin Yan blushed, and nodded her head.

He looked at her, unable to react. A moment later, tears began to pour from his eyes. He wrapped Jin Yan up in a big hug, and she screamed in delight as he swung her around in circles.

Chapter 351: Richard's Domain

"I love you... I love you Jin Yan, so much. I'm no longer lonely, without a family. Now, I have someone to love. I can't tell you how happy that makes me."

"Let me down, silly!" Jin Yan playfully ruffled his hair.

Wang Hongyuan quickly and carefully did as asked. He used his free arms to wipe the tear from his face. "Sorry, I'm just very excited. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Jin Yan rolled her eyes. "I'm not a doll, alright. I'm not nearly that fragile. Do you know why I agreed to be with you?"

Wang Hongyuan shook his head.

She looked at him with an earnest expression on her pretty face. "Your sincerity. You started out by telling me your deepest secret. More than anything else, that was moving. The one who should be apologizing is me, actually. I had no idea you had these kinds of feelings for me. I'll admit that I had an interest in Professor Lan, but that was more admiration. I found out quickly that he and I couldn't be. I'm just guessing but I don't think that man is as 'normal' as he appears. There's something very different, you can see it in his eyes. There's a sadness in them. I decided to give you a chance because of your sincerity, so you have to make sure that sincerity remains."

Wang Hongyuan nodded his head. "Absolutely. To you, I'm as clear as glass. Anything you want to know, you need only ask."

Jin Yan narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh? So who is Professor Lan, really?"

Wang Hongyuan didn't hesitate to throw Lan Jue under the bus. "Professor Lan is a very strong man, stronger than me for sure. But we have to keep this quiet – I don't know why he came here, but he's a good man. On Taihua, it was actually him who saved everyone. I just helped."

Jin Yan looked around at all the flowers. "You and he live here together right? How are you two going to sleep?"

“Professor Lan said he was going out on a trip tonight, actually,” Hongyuan replied.

“If he not coming back? That means he and Zhou Qianlin...” She trailed off.

Just then, a voice called out. “Zhou Qianlin, can you come out to the front of the hotel.”

The voice was coming from somewhere outside. Jin Yan and Wang Hongyuan exchanged a glance. , then quickly went to the window to peer outside.

Both their eyes popped wide at what they saw.

From the second floor they could peer out to the beautiful horizons of the Barrows. They saw stretching vistas, gorgeous forests, and giant beams of golden light that formed words in the air: Zhou Qianlin. Below, a sea of flowers had been arranged in the shape of a heart before the window. A man stood amidst the fragrant flora, clad in a snow-white suit and an orange shirt behind a white tie. A golden rose was clutched in his hand.

Wang Hongyuan muttered quietly as he stared. “What’s this guy doing crashing our party?”

The flower arrangement Wang Hongyuan had set was beautiful, but what was going on outside...

He pulled open the window and attempted to climb out. Jin Yan quickly pulled him back in. “What are you doing?”

“I’m gunna kick his ass!”

Jin Yan chuckled as she held him back. “You shouldn’t compare yourself like that! I prefer the flowers in here.”

Hongyuan stopped, and looked at her. “Really? You’re the best”

Jin Yan closed the window, and pulled the blinds.

Wang Hongyuan still seemed perturbed the scene outside. “Should we go and see who’s trying to get Qianlin’s attention?”

Jin Yan answered by shaking her head, and sitting on a nearby chair. “I’m not interested in gossip right now. You said before, that you would do whatever I wanted, right?”

Wang Hongyuan nodded in confirmation.

Jin Yan smirked. “So it’s time to put that to the test. Tell me ten thousand times that you love me.”

Wang Hongyuan approached and once more dropped to one knee. He took up her hands in his own. “Jin Yan, I love you.”

“Go on.”

“Jin Yan, I love you.”

“Mmhm.”

“Jin Yan, I love you.”

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Most of the hotel’s interior was peaceful and calm, but outside it was more than Wang Hongyuan and Jin Yan who were surprised by the situation.

The ruckus caused a stir within the place, and many patrons wandered toward the windows to see what was going on. Lan Jue and Qianlin – just about to open the window – were among them.

“Is... is someone calling my name?” She asked.

Lan Jue shrugged. “Looks like it. I guess we ran in to an acquaintance of yours.”

Zhou Qianlin’s brows furrowed in contemplation. “Let’s go look.” She was off before she’d even finished her sentence.

Lan Jue hurried after her.

Before long, both of them were out of the small hotel’s front doors. The moment she exited, a beam of golden light showered down on her from on high. All the other lights dimmed and disappeared, leaving only that one spotlight, picking her out for all to see. The only things that remains were

Qianlin, the flowers, and the man who stood within them.

“Qianlin!” The man called out to her.

Richard looked majestic in his white suit. He was very meticulously put together, clearly.

Zhou Qianlin looked at him, flabbergasted. “You... what are you doing here?”

Richard gave her a charming grin. “Because you’re here. So, here I am!”

Her expression hardened. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Richard shook his head. “I’m not doing anything – I’m just here to see my wife. Have you forgotten? I’m from the West, and many of these planets could be considered my home. And now that you’ve come to visit my home, I must do the proper thing and introduce you to my parents. You are the mother of my future children, the continuance of the Austin lineage. We have to show you all of the manors you have now – whatever belongs to the Austins, belongs also to you. Because you are my wife.”

The windows were full of curious and excited faces. None of the many onlookers had ever seen anything like this before. They couldn’t look away.

Lan Jue stood a small distance behind Zhou Qianlin, watching the exchange. He didn’t move forward, or make any efforts to intervene. He calmly looked on, with a derisive smirk.

It had been quite a while since Richard had shown his face. He’d disappeared ever since his encounter with Hua Li and Chu Cheng. But for why he’d show up right now, Lan Jue had no idea.

Of course Richard was telling it true. The West was his domain, and his family was very likely the strongest in the entire Alliance. More than that, they had been so for the whole modern era. Qianlin’s family had gotten where they were through political tact and skill, remaining uncorrupted in the process. But the powers behind the Austin family were vast, and suspect.

Leaving a spy behind in the university to keep an eye on Qianlin was not a difficult thing to accomplish. So long as she was on Skyfire, Richard and his cronies wouldn't dare act indiscriminately. But that was the East, with Skyfire Avenue a few short minutes away. But now she was here, in the West. Richard felt this was his opportunity.

As for Lan Jue, he'd completely forgotten about the guy until just this minute.

Zhou Qianlin took a minute to process the crazy coming out of Richard's mouth, but a moment later she had regained her composure.

"Richard, you need to stop believing and spreading these delusions. Our wedding was never finished. I am not your wife. Please, stop calling me that. It makes me uncomfortable." Her voice was soft, but firm.

Richard smiled, and slowly made his way out from the center of the flowery heart. "Uncomfortable? That doesn't mean anything. I just want you, to be my wife. That's how much I love you. I have ever since the moment I laid eyes on you. Although my parents very much disapprove, I would rather die than live in regret. You're right, our wedding was never concluded. But, now that you're here we can finally finish the wedding you deserve. No one's allowed to marry on The Barrows, but if that's what you want, then it will be done without a problem. We'll have the grandest wedding anyone has ever seen. Anything you want, I will give you. You already have all of me. Qianlin, I love you, and my family is happy to give you everything you could ever want. All I want is for you to be my wife, and whatever you need for that to happen I will do."

"Enough!" Zhou Qianlin snapped.

Richard stopped dead in his tracks from her fierce outburst. He'd never seen her angry before. She had always ever been the picture of graceful poise. But now she was clearly full to the brim with anger. It made her even more beautiful.

Zhou Qianlin glared at Richard. "Love is not a transaction, Richard. I am not goods you can purchase by trading fine jewelry or extravagant weddings. I'll admit to you right now that I originally took advantage of

you, and that was a mistake. I'm sorry, and I regret that I did it. But after taking an honest look at myself, I knew I couldn't love you. You must give all of this up. I really hope this is the last time you harass me. I don't want to hate you."

"Hate me? Ha-hahaha!" Richard suddenly burst in to great peals of laughter. "Hate, huh? Alright, Qianlin – since you want to talk about this, I'll drop the nonsense. Whether you agree or not, we had our wedding, and you are my wife. Now that you're here, you can forget about going back. This is the West, and Skyfire's far away. Once things have been consummated and you bear my children, then I'll go back with you so your parents can see their grandchild. Right now, I just need you to come with me so we can finish this wedding." His hand shot out to grab her, and the light from above illuminated his hideous expression.

The skies suddenly exploded in to light, and a host of mecha suits descended. There were more than a hundred with flashing cobalt-blue armor and the Austin family emblem on their chest. Their sudden appearance sent many of the onlookers scrambling away.

Zhou Qianlin shouted right back at him. "What do you think you're doing! Are you trying to start a war?!"

Chapter 352: Force!

Richard's voice was soft and indifferent. "Don't label me with that nonsense. I am an individual, and this is my decision. This has nothing to do with my family, and if the East should want to investigate, then they can come find me. Now come, don't make me have to make you. And as for you." Richard's attention quickly shot to Lan Jue.

Lan Jue looked back. "What about me?"

"You will leave this planet forever. Spend your life repenting for how you've treated me in some quiet corner," Richard said. He waved his hand toward the etiquette teacher, and two of the nearby mechas took a menacing step forward.

Just then, however, a thunderous roar proceeded by a streak of turquoise captured everyone's attention. It smashed in to the ground between them.

"Let's see who dares!"

It was a massive green mecha, which exuded a strange aura of similar hue. The voice was infinitely cold and threatening. The mecha was crouched in preparation, bearing large spikes jutting from its hands.

"Lan Jue, Zhou Qianlin, get away. I'll hold them off!" Tan Lingyun called from the cockpit.

The Savage Goddess never faltered in the moment of truth. Director Wu had even tried to hold her back, but she threw him back and rushed in to the fray.

As a Sovereign-ranked pilot, numbers didn't frighten her. This was different, though. Nearly all of the mechas were pulsing with their own prosperous energies. They were not your average mecha pilot. Fitting for the Austin family, Tan Lingyun knew.

"Thank you, Professor Tan." Lan Jue called to her. He took Qianlin by the hand and ran.

"No, we can't just leave Professor Tan here!" Qianlin struggled, but couldn't break free.

The Spirit Caller gem warmed against her chest:

Lan Jue: Silly girl, I'm not going to jump in right here, in front of everyone! The faculty don't know my real identity or strength.

Qianlin: Ah? So what are we going to do?

Lan Jue: The sneaky always have their ways.

Richard could only watch as they fled. He howled at the surrounding mechas. "Get them!"

They moved out, almost before he even gave the order. One hundred mechas acted in synchronicity. These were the elite personal forces of the Austin family, and none of them were below Emperor rank. Immediately, ten of them surrounding Tan Lingyun. The rest gave chase to Lan Jue and Qianlin through land and air.

Lan Jue raced ahead of them, pulling Qianlin behind. Soon they were in the hotel's front courtyard again. The two of them hid in a dark corner.

The Austin family bodyguards were famed for being both individually strong, and excellent as a unit. A dozen mecha descended upon the courtyard from above, and surrounded the inky-black shadows of the corner. All together, floodlights from the mechas painted the corner with bright light.

However, to their surprise, neither target was there. They paid no notice to the electrical outlet set against the wall.

There was a flash, then Qianlin and Lan Jue appeared within the safe confines of the hotel. Zhou Qianlin turned to her protector. "Tan Lingyun is under attack, are you sure she's alright?"

"The Savage Goddess is fine," Lan Jue assured. "She's nearly at the height of Sovereign rank – almost a God pilot. These guys are no joke, but it'll take a lot to defeat her. What's more, although Richard came here to kidnap you, the West does have rules. He wouldn't dare murder somebody over this. That would make things far too loud and public. Even the Austin family wouldn't protect him then. He has only one objective, and that's to get you. So how are you hoping we solve this?"

“If we can ensure the teacher’s safety, then just get me out of here,” she said.

Lan Jue gave a calm response. “We could always kill him, end the problem once and for all.”

Qianlin looked at him, stunned, then shook her head. “Whatever the case now, I was almost his wife. I might not like him, but I certainly don’t want him dead. All of this came about because of me. I owe him.” Qianlin couldn’t allow that to happen. Richard still had no idea what he was up against. Zhou Qianlin understood that the only reason Lan Jue hadn’t handled the situation already was because it would expose him to the faculty. Although his features were calm, Qianlin could see the fury behind his eyes.

“As you wish,” he answered. “I’ll let him go. But I promise you a third encounter like this will end very differently. He’s already caused a great deal of trouble to us both. Next time, I’m going to beat the holy hell out of him.” He was not the sort to talk badly behind someone’s back, so he refrained from telling Qianlin about Richard’s earlier plans to have him ‘dealt with.’ He honestly didn’t care about that. Lan Jue had never really seen Richard as an enemy – a goofy stalker, maybe, that that was all. But now, with his true colors revealed, Lan Jue was ashamed he didn’t see it earlier.

Lan Jue connected quickly with someone through his communicator. They exchanged a few quiet sentences, then Lan Jue pulled her through the socket again.

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The targets had disappeared without a trace. None of the mecha could grasp how that could be, it didn’t make any sense! They must have sort of cloaking device, they postured, though where would they go?

“What? Disappeared?! You find them, you understand? I don’t care if you have to tear the place apart, find them!” Richard’s voice rose to a screeching yell. He was like a man who’d lost his mind.

Tan Lingyun was locked in an epic struggle. One on one she could

handle. Even three, or five didn't worry her very much. But ten was too many, and as a unit they were that much stronger.

There was a level of unspoken understanding in an Emperor Unit. None of them were weak, physically or in Discipline. Tan Lingyun sensed that they were equivalent to the An Lun soldiers and the ARC students. None were below fifth rank. With their expert training and the small area they were even more threatening. Under these conditions, they were even more dangerous than the An Lun soldiers. About the only difference was their mechas were equipped with self-destruct buttons.

Still, Tan Lingyun was fearless. She lashed out at them with her spiked fists like a wild animal. After the ARC training, she could feel that she had improved.

Tendrils of green energy constantly wove together and pulsed outward to ward off attacks that got through her jukes and parries.

"Take care of this one first, I don't believe they'll just watch one of their own get hurt. They didn't run." Richard looked on with calm expression. He cruelly, and calculatingly considered the situation.

The moment Richard knew where she would be, he encircled the positioned and kept it tight. Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin couldn't have simply vanished or broken through. He was even monitoring all air traffic through his family's connections. That was how he knew where to be so quickly. So long as they didn't get off the planet, he had his ways of tracking them down. At least, that's how Richard thought.

More cobalt blue mechas joined in. They slithered like quicksilver, weaving in and out to deliver attacks on to Tan Lingyun.

She was outnumbered, and it was becoming more than she could ward off. Their strikes and laser blasts pelted her incessantly. But her hand speed was enough, she had the capabilities for more – but she did not want to kill these pilots. Her only option was defense. If she killed any of them, nobody was going to be making it off this planet. Tan Lingyun, however, had made the same determination Lan Jue had. Richard wouldn't dare murder someone in full view of a crowd. Much less a foreign tourist.

Already what was happening would certainly get back to official channels through Director Wu.

A lazy voice called out above the din. “What is the matter with you – a bunch of men picking on a lone woman. Get out of here, you disgust me.”

There was a flash of light as a figure appeared, charging in from the side. A thunderous blast followed violent golden light – a dragon!

Boom—! One of the mechas was sent spiraling in to the distance. The pilot gaped at the jagged tears in his mecha’s chest plate.

A mecha’s cockpit was in the chest, so obviously that was where a suit’s armor was strongest. To damage that thick plate of alloy titanium at all was impressive, much less ruin it! The pilot shivered in terror.

The piercing, bestial roars rose in strength and volume. The Austin elite guards were thrown aside like rag dolls in every which direction as the dragon of golden light threw them to the horizon. Each ended the same – soaring limply through the air with their chest plates turned to scrap. Their shields were like paper before this terrifying beast.

“Who the hell is this?!” Richard roared.

“I’m your daddy!” The teasing, disrespectful voice replied.

“Young Master – Careful!” A figure darted out from the shadows and sprang in front of Richard, just in time to ward him against another’s arrival.

Bang! The one who leapt out to protect Richard was violently shoved back a few paces. They regained their footing, but the look of confusion on their face spoke volumes.

A man stood in the spot he’d occupied a moment before. He was disheveled, with a rat’s nest for hair and thread-bare clothing. A... beggar?

The Pauper looked listlessly around. He rubbed his dirty face and then, one finger digging in his nose to dislodge a booger, pointed with his right hand. Another great dragon of light roared to life at his gesture.

The guard, a man clad in black as it was revealed, did not dare

underestimate this situation. His hands shot out, and an expansive shield of blood-red energy sprang out to protect them.

Booom-! This time, the force was enough to send the man flailing away half a dozen yards. Richard had no one else to hide behind.

The Pauper motioned at Richard, and the young Austin family heir felt a terrifying pull dragging him toward his assailant. He fought, but couldn't free himself. Anger was no longer appropriate in this situation, he determined. So Richard began to wail for help.

"E-elder, please have mercy!" The man in black called out from a distance.

But by now the Pauper already had Richard by the neck. His finger since extricated from his nose, he use the same hand to rudely pat the young boy on the cheek. "Hey there kid, throwing our weight around are we?"

Richard couldn't respond, on account of his wind-pipe being crushed beneath that dirty hand.

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1. Funny note, 'booger' in Chinese is literally translated as 'nose shit'. I love it.

Chapter 353: Searching Separately

Several mechas had been maneuvering for a rush, but stopped in their tracks. These pilots were adepts themselves. They recognized their betters when they saw them. This beggar was able to ruin mechas with nothing but the strength of his own hands. How were they to win against power like that? What's more, the black-clad man beside Richard was a ninth rank Talent. Reputedly, he was ninth rank second level, from the Dark Citadel. But even someone with his training and abilities had been knocked away like a child. There was an unsettling sense that they hadn't even seen the worst these vagabond could dish out.

"You're absolutely right, Elder. I beg you to please release the young lord." The man had traded violence for pleading.

He knew this man's power clearer than the others – he'd felt it. That simple and modest power felt like it scorched all of his internal organs. The Pauper didn't even seem to be using much of his potential. He must be at least ninth rank seventh level, the black-clad man figured. There was nothing he could do to stop him.

The Pauper lazily looked around at the slowly approaching ring of mech suits. "You know," he said in that lazy voice, "I get nervous when there are so many people around. And when I'm nervous, my hands tend to tremble."

The Pauper sat, with Richard's throat still caught in his grip. He pulled the young man down beside him. "It would be a real tragedy, you know, if my hand should tremble. There'd really be nothing I could do about it."

"Everyone back off!" The man flailed his arms and shooed the encroaching mechas away. None of these pilots were a match for this man. They'd need a God ranked pilot if they wanted to stand a chance.

The Austin mecha pilots did not dare disobey. They quickly gathered their fallen comrades and retreated. In a matter of seconds, the outside of the hotel was cleared. Only the man in black remained.

"The men have all gone, elder. We've done as you asked and fled. Please

release the young master, and I swear we'll never return to this place. We won't be coming after anyone." Clearly this man had some clout with the Austin family himself, otherwise he wouldn't be making promises.

Even if they did get those two, so what? This man could clearly murder anyone here without much effort. Capturing some woman wasn't even remotely worth offending an Adept of this caliber.

The Pauper's response was tepid. "Yeah, alright. I guess I wouldn't get much pleasure from squishing this bug. Remember what you said, yes? I'm not a patient man, I will admit. And I especially hate people who lie to me. When I'm upset my hands tend to do whatever they want."

The Pauper threw Richard, who flew threw the air as though he weighed nothing. The man in black was there to catch him. Only after a cursory glance revealed that the young Austin was unarmed did the man appear to relax.

"What is your name, honored elder?" Although they'd failed, he at least needed to provide an explanation to his bosses.

"I'm just a nameless beggar! The destitute have no names. But if that's not enough for you, you can come asking around Skyfire Avenue." Before his voice even faded, the Pauper was gone in a flash of golden light.

Once more the man's face changed. At the mentioned of Skyfire Avenue, everything changed. Of course he would be! He had to quickly get back and let everyone know. A proper response could ameliorate the matter. Word of the Avenue's five Paragons had of course reached the West by now – they couldn't afford to upset them.

Richard heaved deep, gasping breaths. An all-consuming hatred burned in his eyes as his hands unconsciously clenched and relaxed. For the first time, he was confronted with the fact that only those who are individually strong get what they want. Power... I want that power! There will come a day when I will personally take Qianlin for my own.

Lan Jue, of course, couldn't know of Richard's sinister affirmations. Either way, he only had disdain for the boy. They ran from the hotel until they were a few yards in to the surrounding forests. They found a man

standing beneath a tree. His hands were clasped at the small of his back. He was staring up at the canopy overhead.

He was in a swallow-tailed coat and a fine, tailored suit. A silver-haired wig sat on his head. He certainly didn't fit in with these more rustic surroundings. However, the environment did seem to respond to him standing there. It warped continually, giving the unsettling sensation that the man was both very near and very far away. The entire scene was surreal.

"Well, we're here," Lan Jue said with a grin. "Shall we go?"

The man turned around, revealing himself as the Wine Master. "When the Pauper arrives." The change in locale didn't seem to have any effect on the Wine Master's mood or choice of outfit.

Lan Jue chuckled as he looked his old friend over. "You couldn't change your clothes? Or at least lose the wig."

The Wine Master looked at him for a long time. "No."

He could only shake his head. "Qianlin, I believe you both have met."

The Wine Master regarded her for a moment with those penetrating eyes. He nodded. "Hello."

"Hello," she responded with a small curtsy.

None of them exchanged any further words. The Wine Master simply returned his attention to the rustling leaves above. Lan Jue followed the Paragon's eyes to a patch of sky the trees couldn't hide. Stars twinkled prettily across the velvet-black background. He also caught the faintest light of regret in the Wine Master's eyes.

"You're thinking about the Clairvoyant," Lan Jue said.

He nodded, suddenly looking much older. "The man spent his life in servitude to the Avenue. You could say, to all of humanity. I truly wish there was a way to save him."

"But is there?" Lan Jue asked. "If there's any chance, you know we'll all do whatever it takes."

Yet the Wine Master bitterly shook his head. “He is a Prophet. No one knows the way of the universe better than he. If there was a way, he’d have found it already. There’s nothing that can be done about it now.”

Lan Jue went silent. He had a great deal of admiration for the Clairvoyant.

“So, where do we start our search for the descendants 1,” Lan Jue inquired. He needed to change the subject, before the mood became too solemn.

“I’ve already taken a look at the satellite images,” the Wine Master replied. “There was no new information to help us. If they are here, then they’ve found some special way of hiding their presence. It looks like we’re going to have to find them the old-fashioned way.”

Lan Jue frowned in thought. “That’s going to be very troublesome. This place is huge. The Barrows is even larger than Skyfire, so canvassing the place will be impossible. Are you trying to conceal your identity as well? If you use your Discipline, I’m sure we could find them.”

He knew the answer. The reason he’d asked the Pauper to intervene instead of the Wine Master, was because he didn’t want to reveal the current Skyfire Avenue leader’s location. A normal adept coming to the West would mean nothing. But a Paragon – that was something different, especially considering the Wine Master’s current appointment. Remember that, although the Wine Master may not have been as powerful as the Keeper for instance, his interdimensional Discipline was still terrifying. Who would want an enemy-affiliated, planet-destroying demi-god traipsing around their backyard unannounced?

If they needed to search this place inch by inch, than the best method would be the one they used on Taihua when fighting the monsters. A Paragon could soar high overhead and use their abilities as a sort of scanner. The method, however, produced a massive shock wave of energy pulses. Certainly any satellite would pick it up, and then the Barrows would be the center of some very uncomfortable attention.

The Wine Master responded. “I called you together precisely because

this would be difficult. You've got the gift of gab, and good perception. We'll be approaching the search from different angles. Here, I've made a map – there are twelve districts where the descendants are most likely holed up. You and the Pauper will take three each, and I'll search through six. The goal is to find them within the week. Of course, whosoever find them first will alert the others through communicator."

The Cosmagus fiddled with his communicator for a moment, and transferred the map to Lan Jue.

He looked it over. "Alright, so it is." It would have to be this way. He only had three districts, but they were large. The Paragon's interdimensional abilities would help him cover far more distance.

Just then, the Pauper quietly descended from overhead. "Situation handled, Jewelry Master."

Lan Jue threw the crusty man a thumb's up. "Thanks a lot."

The Pauper chuckled. "No problem. A non-issue among drinking buddies."

The Wine Master fixed him with a cold stare. "Let's get going, divvy up the work. If we haven't found them by the time we've swept these districts, it means they aren't here. If you do find them, don't act rashly. I believe there may be a Paragon among them. Wait for me to arrive before taking any action. Remember that we aren't here to cause trouble."

Lan Jue nodded. Of course they wouldn't leap before thinking, especially with the Wine Master around. The Pauper shrugged, as the old scoundrel was wont to do, but he wouldn't have hidden away in the Avenue if he didn't have a great affection for it. The Avenue had a good many known adepts on their council like the Pharmacist. And while both she and the Pauper were both at the peak of ninth rank, the Pauper was a wild card – a hidden gambit. That made him exceedingly dangerous. He wasn't the only one on the Avenue to hide their abilities, either.

The Wine Master strode forward, and just before he walked nose-first in to the tree before him, there was a silver flash and he was gone. The Pauper regarded Lan Jue and Qianlin for a moment. Then, with a laugh, he

turned in to a beam of golden light and pierced through the forest toward the horizon.

Lan Jue was also in a hurry to begin. He'd made a promise, and his loyalties would forever lie with his friends in the Avenue. He couldn't just drink a man's cherished Jayer and not try to repay him!

Lan Jue took Zhou Qianlin's hand. He could feel his powers swelling. Lightning sizzled around the both of them as he curled himself low. Then, with a grunt, he was soaring through the air with Qianlin beside him.

They dodged among trees, as Lan Jue spoke to Qianlin. "Pay to attention to how you feel when transformed in to lightning. Once you've mastered this and are able to completely transform yourself, then we'll be able to reached our max speed – the speed of light. However, the strain on the body to go that fast is severe. Although you can command the same level of power than I can, your body is comparatively much more fragile. Remember that if you end up controlling the pace. Don't go too fast. If you do ever need to pull out all the stops, make sure to reserves a portion to shield your body.

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1. Alright, so I've been bad. In previous translations, I believe I described the descendant as singular. I may have missed something, or it may be this is the first time they're clarifying it (sometimes in Chinese they aren't clear about how many. It's inferred unless specifically stated). At any rate, I apologize for the mistake.

Chapter 354: I Want To Take a Bath

Zhou Qianlin nodded her head. “I understand. Should I give it a try?”

“Alright, go ahead,” Lan Jue replied.

Three seconds later.

Boom–! A bolt of electricity smashed headlong in to a bush. Two figures clambered from the small crater.

“Why the hell did you go down?” Lan Jue said in irritation.

Qianlin sheepishly stuck her tongue out at him. “I lost control. It was too fast. I was off by just a bit.”

He patted his forehead with a sigh. “I forgot, sorry. Your psychic control isn’t strong enough to meet the amount of power you have all of a sudden. Your perception isn’t trained enough. We need to work on our coordination as well – but practice makes perfect. Let’s keep it up.” Thankfully falling wasn’t much of a concern when in electrical form.

Now that both of them had seen their Disciplines changed, control was paramount – especially for Qianlin. If she were able to learn to use his powers in combat, then they would have two ninth rank seventh level Adepts with the same Discipline – quite a frightening combo.

Qianlin was a smart girl, with uncanny coordination. It took a few painful lessons, but she got the basics of it very fast. She was even able to perform simple jukes and dodges. Lan Jue’s only job was to guide her efforts, and protect her from risk.

Now was certainly not the time for Qianlin to practice movement at light speed. It was far too fast for her to manage currently. It was very unlikely she would use the skill on a planet’s surface, anyway. The strain on the body was too great. It would most likely be put to use while within Thor during battle, where it would have the greatest effect.

They soared through the air until dawn, and as the morning rays peaked over the horizon their first destination came in to view. They ate a simple breakfast, then washed their faces in a nearby stream. Once the day had

started, the search for the descendants was on.

“The Wine Master had said he wasn’t able to find anything through satellite,” Qianlin said at one point. “What was he even looking for?”

Lan Jue smiled. “Pretty clever, actually – vineyards! If you want to make wine, you need grapes. Acres and acres of grapes. Contemporary estimates claim your vine should be at least twenty years old before you try to make wine from its grapes. The quality of a wine is, of course, directly correlated to the quality of its grapes. Makers of the best wines are exceedingly picky when choosing the best ones for their creations. Only the best begets the best. You know, some vines can live up to eighty years – and their grapes are the most sought after.”

“Well that makes sense,” she said. “So we just need to find the vineyard then we’ll find out targets, right?”

Lan Jue nodded. “Do you need to rest?”

She shook her head emphatically. “No need, I’m not tired. Let’s go.” She had never been a fragile girl. But beyond that, the Barrows was a gorgeous place. Although they were here on business, it was an enjoyable journey.

This place and Taihua were about as similar as Llamas and stone crabs. The planet itself was smaller than the Eastern tourist spot, but was densely packed with any biome you could fathom; mountain ranges, rivers, lakes, forests, rain forests, even glaciers – all of them were represented somewhere. Each of them were teeming with life, very little of which posed any threat to tourists. They certainly hadn’t encountered anything during their trip here.

It was very much like a vacation. Due to the requirements of their Disciplines, they had to spend most of their time hand in hand. They looked for all the world like a couple.

“When are you going to teach me how to use lightning attacks?” Zhou Qianlin asked.

Lan Jue lazily wandered down the paths as they chatted. “Not here. The environment is so nice, we should avoid damaging it as much as possible.

When we get back we'll use the Wine Master's Reaper Arena, and I'll train you there. Ah – but we may not have time. How about this, when we get to the Northern Alliance. In the beginning you don't need to learn anything complicated anyway, just my most common abilities.”

“We're going to the Northern Alliance?” This was the first she'd heard of it.

He nodded. “To participate in a competition. We won't be gone for very long. Do you need to ask permission from your family?”

Qianlin answered with a shake of her head. “I'm an adult. Mom and dad let me do my own thing. Lan Jue, be honest... if not for the connection between our Disciplines, you wouldn't have brought me along. Right?”

Lan Jue nodded without hesitation. “You're absolutely right. Both looking for these descendants and the Northern competition involve danger. How could I bring you, considering I'm your bodyguard? What happens if you run in to danger? But with our Discipline as they are now, you're strong enough to protect yourself very well so long as you're with me. And I'm here with you, so there's nothing to worry about.”

Zhou Qianlin rolled her eyes. Did he truly not understand, or was he playing dumb? He must know that wasn't what she meant. Still, she liked his answer.

The two of them continued to search the large area. If Lan Jue strengthened his perception to its strongest levels, he could still only search about a thousand meters at a time. Their only recourse was to adhere to the map, and wander back and forth until the whole area was covered.

The search continued until nightfall. In the end, there was no trace of their objective. Lan Jue was tired from the effort, so he meditated and recovered some of his energy.

The next few days passed much the same as the first. Five days later, two of the three areas they had been given were searched and found to be empty. Only the third remained for them to check.

By now both Qianlin and Lan Jue were exhausted. This was especially true of Lan Jue, who had spent most of the last week very carefully examining every inch they came across. But while it was quite tiring, it also served as serviceable exercise.

They searched about a third of the final sector, and still there was no indication that the descendants were anywhere nearby. Neither had he heard anything from the Pauper or Wine Master. Clearly, they hadn't had any luck either. This was likely their last shot at finding them somewhere on the Barrows.

"It's looking pretty unlikely we'll find anything here. They may not be on this planet. Hell, they may not even exist." Lan Jue sounded a little despondent at the revelation.

He had also genuinely wanted to find these people. If the secrets of those great wines were lost, it would be a great tragedy indeed.

"Ugh, I need a bath." Zhou Qianlin pointed to the shore of a nearby lake.

Lan Jue gave her a strange look. "What, you want to bathe together?"

"In your dreams." She replied. A blush crept in to her cheeks.

Adepts of higher levels didn't have to worry much about washing as often as normal folks. The bacteria that caused unpleasant scent and disease didn't effect them nearly as much. But she was a young woman, and going several days without a shower was unbearable. She'd been struggling with the need for a while, so seeing the opportunity was inspiration enough to take it.

"Of course, I was joking. I want to bathe too, so we'll separate." Lan Jue said.

She humphed in suspicion. "Then off with you, I'm going to wash up. It'll give us a chance to wash our clothes as well." Although she was not as strong as Lan Jue, her own level of Discipline was enough to dry a set of clothes.

"Then we might as well try joining like before. We haven't practiced that yet." He said.

“But my clothes...” She was hesitant. She had only this one pair. There was very little more precious on her person right now.

Lan Jue laughed. “Simple: Find a big tree, get behind it, and take your clothes off. Then just stretch your hand out. Eh... wait, maybe not. Last time we did it, we were...” As he spoke, Lan Jue’s eyes unconsciously wandered to her chest.

Immediately her face went red. “What the hell are you looking at?!”

Lan Jue grinned. “A beautiful woman!”

Zhou Qianlin stepped back a few steps. “I won’t join with you. Go find somewhere else to wash up. I’ll stay here and call you when I’m finished.”

Lan Jue didn’t hang around. With a sheepish laugh, he turned and walked off through the trees.

As she watched his retreating form, Qianlin couldn’t help but grin. “Coward,” she said under her breath.

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Lan Jue followed the coast of the small lake for a while. Eventually he came across a clear inlet, where he removed his clothes and jumped in. It was far enough away to protect his companion’s modesty. He was a gentleman, after all – he wouldn’t dare peek.

He was suddenly reminded of an old poem he’d once heard, and loudly called it out to the trees;

“I stand at the head of the River

Whilest my lover resides at its Source.

Though we drink from Identical Waters

Her face is obscured by the Course.”

Qianlin, who had just finished removing her clothes, snorted in laughter. She dipped a toe in to the water. “How about you drink from this water. How’s my foot taste then, huh?” she muttered mirthfully.

Lan Jue was blissfully ignorant of Qianlin’s sinister machinations.

Though the water was cold, he sighed in contentment as he was immersed. The pure waters felt as though they were washing his worries away. Laying in the lake's embrace was more comfortable than Lan Jue could express.

This section of the lake was shallow, and only rose to his waist. The further toward the center he tread, however, the deeper it became. Soon he was submerged up to his chest. Each step he took was clear as a bell, and the perfectly translucent water revealed the stony lake bed beneath his feet. He shut his eyes, and slipped in to a sort of half-meditation. He felt... disconnected, and it seemed immensely satisfying and refreshing.

He wasn't rushed – women took their time in washing, after all. He lazily floated amidst the spectacular views and let time flow by.

Gradually, in his meditative state, his consciousness slipped in to the ethereal. Psychic energies flowed from between his eyebrows, and fused with the environment around them.

Ever since the strange situation with Qianlin, Lan Jue felt as though he had a deeper connection with his own protogenic powers. It was small, but important – he felt as though it might one day make finding his Path easier.

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1. Interestingly, it is not uncommon for Chinese to shower once every three to four days in the colder and dryer northern climes. In fact, in some places that receive little rainfall, showers are a rare commodity. Thankfully the Chinese diet and anatomical make-up make them considerably less 'smelly' than Westerners. In fact, body odor was rarely encountered for me, even in tight places like buses and classrooms. Now booze sweat and unbrushed teeth are a different story.

Chapter 355: Lan Jue's Discovery

Just think: The Pauper had been lost in the search for his path for years, without result. The Keeper was an even more extreme example, and if it weren't for the Keeper's involvement he'd probably have died unable to break through to Paragon.

In this regard, Lan Jue was very lucky. His grasp of his Ascension abilities helped give him a glimpse in to how his path would look. As time went on, his understanding only deepened.

He did think it was time to visit home, though. He'd been too ashamed to do so in the last few years. Though he'd probably catch a beating, he needed to know how things were going.

A face swam up to him from memory, a craggy and ancient face with a serious scowl. Lan Jue couldn't remember ever seeing his father smile. It was always seriousness and intensity. That was something Lan Qing had inherited.

"Hm?" Lan Jue stopped in surprise, and focused as a strange sensation tickled at him. There was something in this water, an energy that he could feel flowing through him. It was faint, but he could feel it permeating his body and supporting his energies. It was pure, and clean, and although not strong the nutritive effects felt very comfortable.

A flash of inspiration shot through Lan Jue's head like a bolt of lightning. It was so intense that he almost leaped out of the water. Disregarding his clothes, he sat himself down cross-legged and began to meditate.

His eyes popped open after only a short moment. A light shimmered within them. "Yes... that's right!"

Just as he'd discovered the first couple times he'd meditated here on the Barrows, both the air and elemental forces of planet itself were strong. However, it wasn't stronger than parts of Skyfire, and not as pronounced as when he was in the water. This confirmed that the waters here were unique, and bore its own special energy. If that was the case, then...

All plants needed water and sunshine, and grapes were no exception. If the descendants of the gods of wine knew this, then it was very likely they'd create a vineyard around here. The source would be where this effect was greatest.

Lan Jue hurriedly pulled his clothes on while he thought. Once he finished, he dialed the Wine Master.

"What have you found, Jewelry Master?" Lan Jue could tell from the old man's tone that he was expecting bad news.

He went on to explain his thoughts.

When the Wine Master responded, he was clearly impressed. "Why didn't I think of that? You're absolutely right, the Pauper and I will start examining local bodies of water. If they have the same properties as you're describing, then we'll need to adjust our plans. There are countless rivers, streams and lakes on the Barrows, and densely packed as they are it'll take us forever to thoroughly explore them. Hopefully we can narrow these energies to a single area, that'll narrow the search."

Lan Jue immediately launched himself in to the air, with a light that shone bright in his eyes. Again, he spread his perception outward to probe the surroundings. Who knows? If he was lucky, perhaps the descendants were holed up somewhere around this very lake.

And yet the moment he felt his consciousness spread out around him, he felt it improper. He spied suddenly the very fetching woman bathing nearby. At his level of cultivation, every detail was outlined and highlighted, and instantly transcribed to memory even before he knew what was happening.

The sudden not altogether unwelcome shock almost caused him to tumble from the sky. He'd completely forgotten she was even here, with all the excitement of their lead.

He immediately retracted his perceptive field, adhering to the gentleman's code of ethics.

I didn't mean to, he kept telling himself. I didn't mean to.

Only his mind was convinced. The rest of his body reacted as any normal man would to the image of a beautiful woman naked in a crystal clear lake.

He swallowed hard, shook his head, then found a place to settle to ground. He had no alternative but to wait for her to finish. She didn't make Lan Jue wait long, however. Once her bath was done and her clothes were dry, she called out to him.

As Lan Jue saw her again face to face, it was like watching a lotus on the water. Pure, simple, and beautiful. Qianlin's beauty didn't come from cosmetics, but was all natural. Now scrubbed clean, she exuded a natural and comforting aura. She had a spectacular figure, with skin like milk and a face that looked like it was carved from marble. Her cheeks were a vivacious pink, that set off her eyes that were a blue more deep and pure than the lake they stood beside. Then there was her head of luxurious black hair. It was already dry, and swayed like strands of silk with the breeze. She looked like a fairy tale princess.

"There's been some new information, we should go." Lan Jue said. He reached out a hand to her.

Zhou Qianlin stretched out her own, and the moment their fingers laced their shared power upsurged. Her hands were cold, perhaps from the lake. Regardless of the reason, however, Lan Jue held her hand tight to confer some of his own warmth to her.

It was a simple gesture, but it touched something in her that was difficult to explain.

They soared through the air, with the lake stretching out beneath them. Together, they began to search the three-thousand meter diameter lake for any signs of their objective. After a circuit revealed nothing, they came to a stop.

If Lan Jue's hunch was correct, all they had to do was go back over their areas and narrow the search to water. Sadly, nearly all twelve of the suspect areas were densely peppered with various bodies of water. Only a few swaths were absent of it.

One by one, they went over the major lakes and rivers, and each time they left empty handed. In the end their second sweep revealed nothing new. Another conversation with the Wine Master ensued, where they decided that a latch-ditch search of the source waters was their final gambit. If they weren't there, then they weren't anywhere.

Lan Jue and Qianlin were tasked with searching their nearest target, an enormous inland lake. It took them half a day to reach its banks. Immediately they saw that this one was not like the rest. It was a stunning cobalt blue that stretched to the horizon without a single ripple.

Lan Jue approached, and crouched to dip his hands in to the lake. There was something, a faint tinge, so he spread his consciousness deeper.

As he'd experienced, the energies of the lake immediately penetrated in to him. It was purer and more abundant, but that may have been a result of the lake's sheer size. He discovered through his psychic exploration, that the lake got deeper the closer one got to the center. At it's deepest, it was a hundred meters to the bottom. At least, that was as far as he seemed able to sense. He'd have to dive in to learn if it went deeper than that.

Lan Jue extricated his hands and peered out over the horizon. He silently pondered the situation.

"What's wrong?" Qianlin asked.

"If you asked me to pick a place for a vineyard," Lan Jue muttered, peering down the shoreline, "I'd be hard pressed to find a place better than this."

Qianlin's face lit up. "So you're saying it's likely this is the place we're looking for?"

He nodded. "Let's see what we can find."

They were off again through the skies. The lake – called Soul Mirror Lake – was a massive expanse of water, but with Qianlin and Lan Jue's speed they completed the search in three hours. Sadly, despite Lan Jue's hope, they still turned up nothing.

When they got back to their starting point, Lan Jue's eyes were

beginning to betray despair. “Nothing. It looks like the descendants aren’t here after all.”

Their search was nearly concluded with nothing to show for it. Silence from the Wine Master and the Pauper proved their experiences to be much the same. Their chances looked grim.

But then there was obstinance, and it reared its head as Lan Jue stubbornly crossed his arms over his chest. “I refuse to accept that they aren’t here. I’m going down to take a look.”

Zhou Qianlin blinked at him. “Down?”

Lan Jue nodded. “My perception can’t reach below a certain depths. These waters, though, are very pure. I don’t know anything about being a vintner, but just look at the vegetation surrounding this place. It’s much thicker and more vibrant than the other ones we’ve visited. That means this lake must be providing all of it with nutrients. So look, you remain here and I’ll go down to take a look. If I’m not back in half an hour, to get the others – it’ll mean there’s something up with this lake.”

“No way.” Qianlin clamped down on Lan Jue’s hand as she flat out refused his plan. “When you’re by yourself, you’re much weaker than if we’re together. It’s much safer for both of us to go. We’ll be prepared if we run in to something. If you’re going, so am I.”

Lan Jue opened his mouth to patiently, calmly, and logically explain why that was an unwise course of action. But he shut it again when he saw the look in her eye.

It wasn’t that he was cowed, or afraid. It was the exact same look Hera had given him once.

A sharp pang seized Lan Jue’s heart. He nodded. “Alright, we go together then. I’ll let the Wine Master know.”

After a few sentences with the Paragon Lan Jue hung up and took Qianlin’s hand once again. With a leap, both of them tumbled in to the water.

Once an Adept had cultivated his abilities to about the ninth level, they

had a deeper control of their interior environment. Through micromanaging their body's systems, they could hold their breath for far longer stretches of time. This was also true in airless environments. Here, however, they didn't have the benefits of cosmic radiation.

Lan Jue pulled Qianlin down behind him, toward the murky depths at the lake's center.

Chapter 356: A World Under Water

With his whole body immersed in the water, Lan Jue felt the nutritive energies grow stronger. It was pure, and became more prosperous as the water pressure increased around them.

Lan Jue absorbed the energies and coaxed Qianlin to do the same through their shared connection. It couldn't be directly absorbed, since conversion was required to make it so. Even so, he gauged the special waters to have only about twenty percent impurities. To put it another way, an Adept who spent their time cultivating their abilities while in this water would improve by leaps and bounds over others. Simply, the planet's special life-giving properties were especially prosperous here.

Filtered light from the surface grew dimmer as their depth increased. This was no problem for Lan Jue, however. With a thought, spiderweb coils of lightning began to wrap around him. It was enough to illuminate their immediate surroundings.

The water was exceedingly clean and clear. There wasn't very much wildlife in it at all, though. Occasionally they'd see a sleeve fish dart by, but that was all. Like the creatures on the surface above, nothing in here could harm a human even if it wanted to. On the contrary, one particular fish hung around for a moment to watch them in curiosity. Lan Jue responded by ceasing his electrical light source, for fear of harming the fish.

The lake was much deeper than Lan Jue would have guessed. Before long they'd descended over two hundred meters, and still hadn't reached the bottom. Lan Jue's perception told him that the bottom was another hundred meters down.

Nothing. The quiet underwater world was still and beautiful, as though they were locked in a crystal. Sadly, no signs of the descendants were revealed.

Zhou Qianlin was just along for the ride, and wasn't nervous about their depth or location. Lan Jue was helping to regulate her internal breathing,

so that she wouldn't feel uncomfortable. All she had to do was feel and accept the special energies of the water around them.

They swam on for another ten minutes before reaching the bottom. Lan Jue's Discipline flickered to life once more, revealing the lake bed beneath them. It was flat, and littered with smooth stones. They came in all different colors, and glittered as the light of Lan Jue's power revealed them. It was a beautiful, surreal scene. Like a sea of technicolor jade.

They each bore their own faint energy. While individually none were as strong as the weakest power gems, together their powers were amplified. Perhaps the water got its special qualities from these stones. Whatever the case, it was a magical experience. Although they still hadn't found what they were looking for, the journey so far had been grand.

His musings were interrupted by an undertow, tugging at him. It wasn't a physical current, instead something else that drew both their attention toward it. Lan Jue, surprised, ceased the coiling bolts of lightning and peered in to the darkness ahead.

Still nothing, but Lan Jue's heart rate had increased. He couldn't say for sure, but there was something different about this place.

Once more Lan Jue called upon his Discipline, but this time the lightning sprang up around them in a protective net. He inched them forward, closer to whatever power was tickling at the back of his mind. Slowly, carefully, both his body and perception converged upon the spot.

A hundred meters seemed to pass in a blink, and that was when he started to feel a strange physical current joining with the energy eddies. This time, it was their bodies that began to be drawn in.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin exchanged a glance. Their concerns were the same; in this clear, calm lake, where would this undertow be coming from?

The former mercenary paused, looked at Qianlin, then pointed toward the water's surface.

Through the Spirit Caller gem...

Lan Jue: I think we've found the right place. We should get to the surface

and wait for the Wine Master and Pauper, as insurance. Then we can all come down and check it out together.

She nodded her head in agreement, and gave him a thumbs-up.

Alright.

Prudence was a virtue.

Were Lan Jue by himself, then perhaps he would have continued through the current to discover more. However, with Qianlin in tow, safety had to be the priority.

But as they were preparing to leave and contact the Wine Master, that gentle current strengthened sharply. Before they could react, both were sucked to the center of whatever invisible vortex awaited.

The two of them were a pair of ninth level seventh rank adepts, the top one percent of their species! And yet, in the face of this strange current, their struggles were useless.

The two of them were swallowed further in to the crystal-clear depths of the lake. Lan Jue knew that they'd been caused in some sort of invisible whirlpool, where the eyes couldn't see it but it could certainly be felt. The course and pressure sucked them deeper, ever downward, and they were powerless to stop it.

Lan Jue immediately pulled Qianlin close, hugging her tight to his chest. The net of lightning surrounding them flared intensely and became gold. It grew thicker until they were protected in a blazing golden cocoon of energy.

They pitched and rolled through the water, protected by the orb of light. The jerking motions were vicious, but Qianlin felt safe and secure in Lan Jue's arms.

Suddenly, the darkness around them was dispersed with the arrival of a powerful light. The tearing current also dissipated without a trace. Both Lan Jue and Qianlin could feel the pressure from being under water recede. When they hit the floor, it was confirmed – they found themselves somewhere altogether different.

Lan Jue's reactions were quick. He stabilized his energies and used them to help both he and Qianlin recover from the dizzying ride they'd just experienced. After a few moments, once both were acclimated, they stared stupefied at the scene before them.

With mouth agape, Lan Jue's eyes followed a mountain range as it stretched in to the horizon. Every square inch was covered in grapes. The expansive vineyard was carefully arranged and tended, with the meter-high plants separated in to lines by big old trees. Somehow, they'd found themselves in an altogether different world of beauty and mystery.

The mountains and vineyards themselves weren't anything to be overly stunned about. What was strange, was the air here. It seemed to ripple and undulate like waves, even though overhead looked for all the world like an azure sky. But it wasn't, their ceiling was the bed of the river.

Stranger still, there was sunlight down here. A blazing orb hung suspended in the air like the sun he'd expect on the surface. Warm rays hung over the amazing scene, however, and the grapes knew no different.

There was more than just grapes stretching off in to the distance. Several other species of flora had also been cultivated here. Like the grapes, they had also been carefully tended and arranged in their own areas.

Of course, pretty as it was, Lan Jue and Qianlin had other concerns. Namely, the people surrounding them.

There were eight in all, standing around in a circle. They were dressed in crude farmhand clothing, and bore hoes and scythes. Eight pairs of suspicious eyes pinned them in place.

"Alright everybody, we aren't here to cause any problems." Lan Jue raised his arms, revealing no weapons. Meanwhile, he instigated his Discipline to dry he and Qianlin's clothes.

All eight of their hosts were suspended in air, without wings to help them do so. It meant they were at the very least ninth level Talents. One in particular – the oldest of the crew – was surrounded by an aura as deep and vast as the ocean. That one was ninth level seventh rank or higher.

Lan Jue quickly determined that quietly adhering to everything these people said was the wisest course of action.

The elder looked at them with cold, hard eyes. “Who are you, and why are you here.” It was more a demand than a question. “And you’d better have an excellent explanation.”

Lan Jue grinned sheepishly. “We’re actually here looking for you. Truth be told, I wasn’t sure we would.” There was no reason to hide his objectives, Lan Jue felt. He couldn’t really lie about finding this place by accident, because what would they say? They were just diving? Where was their diving equipment?

“Looking for us?” The older man seemed surprised.

Lan Jue nodded. “Yes. We’re here looking for the descendants of the Gods of Wine. I presume that’s you all. We’re only here to talk.”

The man’s face darkened. He fixed them with hard eyes, but there was surprise at Lan Jue’s words as well.

“Take them down!”

The others dropped their crude weapons. Immediately, each of the other seven farmers were surrounded by a sinister blood-red aura. A sense of pressure, of crushing dread, poured from them with Lan Jue and Qianlin in the center of it all.

Even before they’d started talking, Lan Jue had carefully observed their attackers. He watched their every move, because he needed to be ready for a situation just like this. He would not simply stand by and wait for death.

An electric blue light flickered around Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin. Lan Jue thrust his right fist into the air, and a solid blast of electricity tore upward.

It formed in to a golden orb, and rose until it hung over them all – another small sun. It expanded, pulsing his waves of energy before erupting with a thunderous blast.

The explosion tore out in all directions, flattening acres of vineyard. The

others overhead had yet to fully combine their Disciplines, and the sudden shock of the blast completely dispersed their aggregated power.

Lan Jue couldn't hesitate. He'd stopped their channeling, but that old man's aura was still strong and growing. It flared large and encompassed his friends to protect them from the rapidly approaching flames of the explosion.

But Lan Jue wasn't fighting alone. He had a partner, and as he was dealing with the others a speck of light no bigger than a fingernail sped toward the old man before them. Zhou Qianlin watched in anticipation as her own attack rushed forward. In the same instant, Lan Jue release a second orb in to the old man's comrades.

Bo-Boom! Two shuddering explosions filled the air.

Chapter 357: Another Paragon!

The old man's aura quickly shifted to a golden hue, and the shield he'd created withered and vanished. A look of utter shock was plastered on his face. In the space of that instance, somehow, his Discipline dropped in power by half! There was absolutely no reason for him to suddenly have grown so weak. It was like it had just been swallowed up in to nothing.

The second explosion, obviously, had come from the golden orb. The other seven adepts lost their joined Discipline powers and – despite his efforts – were sent smouldering through the air.

In the second the chaos afforded him, Lan Jue gripped Qianlin's hand tight and morphed the both of them in to lightning. They flashed out from within the circle of adepts.

Fighting against numbers wasn't that frightening if you knew how to handle it. The key is making sure you aren't surrounded. There were eight adepts, and all of them seemed to possess the same Discipline. Had they been able to successfully link together, this situation would have played out much worse than it already had.

Thankfully, Lan Jue had been naturally equipped to protect against this. The combined discipline he possessed prepared him, with the lightning portion of his powers specializing in speed.

Lan Jue was confident. Despite the poor odds, the two of them hand in hand would not be at a disadvantage.

“Well no wonder you dared to come here. You two have a fair bit of strength.” The old man regarded Qianlin and Lan Jue with a sour frown. However, he made no move to strike. The other seven adepts regained their composure and stood at his back.

A crystalline red aura sprang up around each of them. The elderly man slowly lifted his right hand, and unfurled his fingers. Within his palm was a perfectly smooth crystal ball. It sparkled and reflected the red light that surrounded them all.

Suddenly, a sanguine light came piercing down through the mirror-like lake overhead. Lan Jue, seeing this, felt his heart seize. "Not good," he muttered. Immediately he grabbed Qianlin in preparation to change again and streak toward the furthest reaches of this underworld.

But it was no use. Before they could flee, the world around them became a sea of red. They could feel the power around them making their movements sluggish. A staggering pressure bore down on them, as though they were being slowly crushed by the weight of an ocean, like the skies were crashing down right on to them.

A golden light flashed in Lan Jue's eyes. Now things were desperate. This was their domain, and the fact that they'd attacked right away meant they would do anything to keep it secret. They had no qualms silencing both him and Zhou Qianlin.

Their priority right now had to be retreat. They would wait for the Wine Master, then return. They'll be better prepared, then. With a Paragon at their side, there would certainly be nothing to fear.

Lan Jue tugged on Qianlin's hand, and without a word she pressed herself in to his embrace. She lifted her head without hesitation, knowing precisely what Lan Jue's plan was. Her face betrayed a slight blush.

It was Lan Jue who hesitated, but only for a moment. He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. They were a little cold, but there was a strange sweetness to them. However, before he could really sense the kiss, Zhou Qianlin turned in to a ball of light that quietly merged with Lan Jue and vanished.

It was the second time, but Lan Jue already knew what to expect. Immediately his Discipline skyrocketed to the peak of ninth level. The world around them was still a soupy red deathtrap, so he had to react. Lan Jue lifted his right hand, and in response a golden light bloomed out from him in all directions. When his electric powers met with the overpowering red energy, the world began to shimmer as though on a hot day.

Eventually that golden light seemed to cover him entirely, exuding forth and transforming him in to his Ascension.

The old man's face changed. "Protogenic powers!" He said, eyes widening.

Lan Jue's commanding voice boomed. "Open!"

As his command rang out, the wine-red skies overhead shook violently. Thunderous blasts shook all around them, as a place overhead opened in a great fissure. Lan Jue then turned his eyes to the others in the distance. Calmly, he reached out his right hand as though to push them away.

A blast of golden lightning shot from his palm and through the air, right for the old man's chest. The red world was burned away around the lightning's passage. It opened a path right toward Lan Jue's attackers.

The old man scowled, and raised his crystal ball. It swayed in his grip, and with the motion the world surrounding them grew even more dense and tight. Both the path cut by Lan Jue's bolt of lightning and the fissure overhead were sealed.

Lan Jue was secretly very pleased with the results he was experiencing. After joining with Qianlin, his Discipline was now ninth level ninth rank – just on the cusp of Paragon status. With the addition of his Ascension, he was all the more terrifying in battle.

"Hmph!" Lan Jue dismissively regarded the man and his ball, when suddenly his body erupted in to a font of electricity. Bolts of electric power blasted out like a deadly spiderweb, hanging over everything.

Where the lightning passed, the world of red dispersed. Under it's explosive power this man's illusions could not sustain. Nor did the old man react right away – he was stunned at how powerful this intruder was.

He couldn't keep warding off these blows directly. With a grunt, another beam of light exuded forth, casting a half-boom shaped bolt of energy spiraling forth to meet the encroaching wall of lightning..

Boom-! The lightning exploded outward in a million simultaneous explosions. The old man and his colleagues radiated electrical energy as they were thrown backward. Some strange of that protogenic power became gripping chains, which captured and retrain the attackers.

Now, with a large swath of the under ground world free from the red taint, Lan Jue lifted his head to the faux sky. He shouted as loud as as strong as he could. "I command the skies to open!"

As if in response, a deafening roll of thunder echoed through the the area. Two massive golden hands appeared, and viciously ripped open a fissure in the skies even larger than the last.

Lan Jue fixed the eight captured Adepts with an imperatorial glare. Then, turning away, he transformed in to a golden bolt of energy and flew toward the newly made exit.

Even Lan Jue could not have imagine how much powerful his Ascension's commands were upon reaching this level of cultivation. It was almost like when he'd taken the entire Fantascia Genetica decoction on Taihua. The feeling – like he was strong enough to take on the universe – made his understanding of the protogenic world that much deeper. Struggle always leads to improvement.

But just as Lan Jue was preparing to escape, he heard the faintest sigh. It was sudden, and sounded as though it was right beside his ear. The world of red had been obliterated by his forest of lightning, but now the whole of reality seemed to crystallize.

An odd fragrance hung in the air, and as Lan Jue watched everything began t change. Reality warped like he was staring at the world through a pane of glass. The giant hands summoned by Zeus' command vanished in to smoke.

In fact, everything around him vanished. Once again, Lan Jue was lost in a very familiar universe of red. That fragrance grew stronger, penetrated through him, until Lan Jue felt like he was drunk.

To Lan Jue, though, it wasn't aromatic. It was bitter.

A Paragon's Domain!

Since when did these damn guys become a dime a dozen?! But this power was different from the Paragons he knew.

Lan Jue thought back to something the Clairvoyant had told him once;

find the Paragons spread throughout the universe. It was looking like one of those hidden paragons was right here among the descendants.

The sigh was craggy and ancient, born from an old throat. Even just through the brief sound, Lan Jue could sense a sort of genuine quality. He made no further moves to escape. He was in a Paragon's grasp now, and the only way out was to beat them in a fight.

However, as before Lan Jue would simply wait for destruction. No matter how or what, he had to do whatever he could to survive, especially with Zhou Qianlin's life in the balance. The situation was dire, but he had to try.

"Stay your hand!" The ancient voice called out, loud and clear.

Lan Jue felt as though the entire world was crushing down around him, like he was at the center of a collapsing star. He found himself in the middle of a terrifying vortex, with a pull he recognized from when he and Qianlin were in the lake. It was strong enough to completely stop him from moving forward.

He certainly couldn't say it was a comfortable situation to find himself in. He was struck dumb with amazement at the sheer scope of this power. After all, though he knew a few Paragons it was always incredible when another was revealed. The power they exuded was staggering and enlightening, every time.

Of all the great masters he'd met, the strongest aside from his own teacher was the Clairvoyant. He'd never experienced the full scope of the old soothsayer's power, though. Still, he was sure it was as great and boundless as the universe itself. That was easy to tell.

Their own master, the one they call Jue Di, had been known far and wide as the most powerful Paragon to have ever lived. However, Lan Jue never actually felt any protogenic powers from his master. That was because Jue Di never had to use it, and the torment he put he and his brother through was done without its need. For as far as he ever saw, Jue Di was nothing more than a common man with an exceptional love for martial arts.

What he felt now was different from the Clairvoyant's power, but he

could sense that this invisible Paragon's strength was greater even than the Wine Master's, or the Keeper's. Whoever this person was, they'd have given the Clairvoyant a run for his money.

Lan Jue couldn't do it. He couldn't continue to fight, especially with Qianlin under his protection. The vortex he was suspended within perhaps wasn't as damaging as Hua Li's, but nonetheless he couldn't handle it.

Suddenly the whole of reality appeared to shudder and change. Everything was backwards: Yin became yang, and up became down. Lan Jue stood, helplessly watching as the mad world around him changed. He was unable to do anything, especially when he realized his power was slowly draining away. Every passing second saw him more incapable of defiance.

He was almost at Paragon level himself, with Zhou Qianlin's powers combining with his own! Still, the end result was failure. One could only imagine how strong this unknown Paragon was.

"We did not come here with ill intent." A familiar voice said.

Chapter 358: Domains Conflict

Lan Jue felt as though his body had become very light. In the next instant a silvery doorway of pure light appeared embedded in the crimson world. Countless more streams of light fractured away from the silver glow and spread out from it. Where the light touched, the world of red quickly receded. A new, silver nucleus expanded from their location.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh of relief. "Excellent timing. If you' waited any longer I'm not sure there'd be anything to save."

The Wine Master stood calmly, scepter in hand. Disjointed planes of silver light expanded out in fractals around him, and the old man was reflected in each. The toxic red energies without swirled angrily around the border of this silver pocket, but could not invade.

This was a war of Domains. A Paragon's standoff!

The Pauper appeared from another interdimensional fissure, standing beside Lan Jue. Upon seeing the Jewelry Master, the Pauper gave him a surprised look.

The aura that surrounded Lan Jue was the focus of his shock.

Lan Jue nodded toward the beggar as he appeared. He maintained the same majestic façade, an integral part of his Ascension. After all, empowered with protogenic energy as he was why shouldn't he be confident in the presence of his allies?

"You should not have come here." The scratchy, ancient voice echoed all around them. It was as though it bubbled up from the thick world of red surrounding them.

The Wine Master's eyes flared with silver light, that shone out like a pair of stars. He raised his scepter high and, from the shimmering power gem at it's crest, a gentle wave of silvery light swept out like a shock wave. In it's wake countless motes of light swam and danced through the air. They twinkled, they swirled, they rose and fell, and as Lan Jue looked closer he was stunned to discover every one of those hundreds upon thousands of

specks was a star. As the swirling mass expanded, they found themselves in the center of a miniature Milky Way.

His Domain was evolving!

As the twinkling universe grew, the world of red receded like a shadow. But more accurately, the red was being devoured, for each individual star was it's own reality with a powerful vacuum force. Then, as it must have been at the beginning of time, the condensed cluster of stars exploded out in every direction. The reality around them grew until they sat in an entirely separate universe, entirely created of the Wine Master's will, surrounded by planets that would rival anything they'd seen before.

This was the true projection of a Paragon's Domain. The Wine Master was facing an unknown foe, who was likely significantly stronger even than himself. He made the right determination; pull out all the stops.

But then, something else was in the domain with them – another life force. As they looked on, a creeping presence like a weed snaked through the starry expanse.

Compared to an entire universe, what was a weed? This weed, however, spread it's creeping tendrils through the fabric of reality. Slow by cosmic standards, it grew and grew until it began to shock planets. The thickening twigs became wide as meteor belts.

It didn't matter how large this universe was. It didn't matter how many stacks of reality existed. The weed existed in all of them.

Both Lan Jue and the Pauper adopted focused, concerned expressions in the face of this threat. The powers of the Paragons were in contest, intertwining like serpents. They would war like this for supremacy. No matter who won, however, Lan Jue and the Pauper would be the ones to suffer the consequence.

Evidence pointed to their opponent as occupying the superior position currently. Their hidden opponent had taken the initiative, which put the Wine Master on the defensive. Worse, he couldn't stop her.

As they watched, the weeds – now thick as vines – encroached in to the

heart of the Wine Master's domain. They writhes and twisted over one another until they were a dense, living net. Closer and closer they inched, and coiled so tightly that nothing but the vines existed.

Gradually, the vines began to sprout little purple pearl-like grapes, and the heady scent of the fruit filled the air. As the grapes grew plump, they were treated to a beautiful display, hiding the danger beneath.

The silvery eminence of the Wine Master's powers continued to coil round. He simply watched as the scene unfolded. Stretching out his scepter, the old man still did not engage. He simply felt all that was occurring around him.

Eventually, a dim silvery light gradually arose. The image of a moon, reflecting the light from a nearby star, appeared suspended in the newly made universe. As it grew, its power intensified. The soothing silver glow hung over every minute vine.

The ripening grapes began to waggle of the vine under their own weight. They appeared as they they might fall at any moment.

The image reminded Lan Jue of a special, complicated system of making wine called biodynamics. A small part of it was the belief that grapes should be collected under the light of the moon. This Paragon was simulating the process of a grape harvest, or so it appeared.

So far, Lan Jue could to feel the adverse affects of their battle. However, he knew that if this continued, the situation won't only get more dire.

The Wine Master remained still, like a statue suspended in space. He was lost in the totality of everything around them, scrutinizing every detail.

The first grape fell. As it tumbled through eternity, it burst open. Energies sealed within were instantly absorbed by the vacuum of the Wine Master's multiverse. But under the light of that strange moon, even the stars changed. They dimmed, until they themselves became enormous purple grapes.

Then, there was a pulse of energy, as the newly formed grapes broke the

Wine Master's control. Lan Jue and the Pauper exchanged a silent, stunned look.

Both of them knew how frightening the world of a Paragon could be, but this was beyond expectations. Neither could have suspected that the simple grape could congeal, and drown an entire universe. The vine's unstoppable expansion was almost predatory, and permanent.

What neither Lan Jue nor the Pauper understood, was why the Wine Master wasn't doing anything! All he did was watch as that enormous star was lost to his enemy's power. Flashes of emotional turmoil did appear in his eyes, though.

More and more grapes fell, burst, and their contents covered the star further.

The Wine Master sighed, and waved his scepter. The mass of stars and planets, the entire universe, began to contract. It continued to shrink until the whole of it was reabsorbed back in to the Cosmagus' body. The three Skyfire Adepts stood now in a field of wild grape vines, stretching far as the eye could see.

The only thing that separated them from that reality was a translucent shell of light. The Wine Master looked out over the fields, and shook his head. "Clearly we aren't welcome. We should leave."

He punctuated the sentence with a wave of his scepter. A golden door of light appeared soundlessly before them.

This was the first time Lan Jue witnessed the Wine Master using a portal like this. It felt... steadier, than the silver dimensional fissures the Wine Master usually used.

In the end, a Paragon – even a defeated Paragon – could make their escape. Killing one was no easy task, even among themselves.

As the golden light of their succor filled the area, the nearby grapes became illusory. Gradually, they vanished until the only thing remaining of their presence was a lingering scent. The scene around them cleared as well, revealing them to be floating in the air over the vineyard below.

“Wait a moment. Gates, bring them to me.” The old voice returned, reverberating through the air like the voice of god.

Gates, apparently, was the old man who’d been the focus of Lan Jue’s ire earlier. The Jewelry Master turned an eye to the acting head of Skyfire Avenue. The Wine Master responded to the unspoken concern with a nod of his head. The Cosmagus swept his arm once more, and the portal vanished.

Now that the conflict appeared to be over, Gates dispassionately floated their way. He bowed at the waist. “If the three gentlemen would follow me...”

He wasted no further time in discussion, and headed back to the ground expecting them to follow. They did, once the Paragon felt safe enough to drop his shield.

Lan Jue did not bring Qianlin forth. Her... wardrobe issue would be a problem. Things would have to remain as they were for a while more.

They finally had time to appreciate their surroundings once they reached ground, and what they saw was as picturesque as anyone could ask for. Towering mountains in the distance grasped at lazily wandering clouds. At the peak of these mountains had been constructed great buildings made of stone. They looked worn, and crude, but retained a rural beauty. They were old-style castles, constructed to overlook the vineyards.

Most vineyards were established on the sides of mountains. Although flat-land grapes existed, they were few and far between. Most of the flatter plots were reserved for other crops.

It was like Shangri-La from the tales of old, idyllic and gorgeous. Now that matters weren’t so tense, Lan Jue took a deep breath to enjoy the perfectly clean air. The elemental forces here were stronger than on the surface world, and the vital energies swirling around them were plentiful. It would be a wonderful place to enhance Tan Lingyun’s ability. Wonderful, or terrible, depending on who you asked.

“I imagine this is a separate dimension.” Lan Jue said to the Wine Master.

But the old man shook his head. “No. We really are beneath the lake. Clearly they’ve used tactical employment of power to conceal themselves and keep the lake suspended. It’s the same way they simulate sunlight. Unless I’m mistaken, this place is very much similar to the environment on the Mother world. We have certainly found the right place.”

Lan Jue nodded, then smirked. “It’s a shame our arrival was met with less than stellar hospitality.”

“I’ll guess we’ll learn more in a minute,” the Wine Master replied.

Gates, who was ahead of them, hesitated half a step when he heard the Wine Master’s deductions.

They wandered through the fields, the soil’s fragrance filling their nostrils. Lan Jue noted that the oxygen content was lower here than it was on the surface, but he quickly got used to it.

If it was like the Wine Master said, then why shouldn’t he acclimate quickly? Men were of Mother Earth, and this place was made to emulate her.

Chapter 359: A Generation of Masters

Gates brought them across an expansive field of plump grapes. Their destination appeared to be the stone structure Lan Jue had spotted earlier. However, their ultimate terminus was not the structure itself, but what lay behind it, as they discovered when Gates brought them around the side.

Their trek had garnered no small number of stares from farmers. Their expressions were restrained, but the faint hint of hostility in their eyes was still visible.

As they wrapped around the stone building, they were met by a hidden hillside. Like all the others, it was blanketed with thick grape vines. However, in contrast to the others, these plants rose a good two meters high. The vines themselves were so thick a man could hardly wrap his arms around one, and were draped in heavy clusters of grapes. Each one bunch was a beautiful amethyst hue, and crystal clear. Certainly these were not your average grapes.

The Wine Master visibly recoiled in surprise. "This is..."

That craggy voice interrupted. "Welcome. Welcome to our village – Beaune 1."

Lan Jue and the Pauper looked on, eyes wide. The voice had come from the grape vine. Gates lead them closer, and each step brought the heady scent of wine to their nostrils. The scent was as full-bodied as it was aromatic.

Lan Jue looked toward the Wine Master, who was clearly just as stunned as he.

"When our domains conflicted, I saw that you hadn't the heart to destroy the vines or grapes. I could see in your eyes that you cherished them. You have earned the right to be here, you and your friends."

The voice was louder now, and directly before them. There was no mistaking it – the vine was talking to them. As they looked on, a face appeared in the the branches; eyes, a nose, and a mouth all became

apparent. Although the features were made up of twigs and grapes and branches, there was still a spirit there, a sort of humanity.

Was this really a talking grape vine?

This voice was the same he'd heard before, the voice of the Paragon. It must be, but could a vine be a Paragon? This was inconceivable!

The Wine Master took a step forward and, pressing a hand respectfully to his chest, bowed before the vine. "I am very honored to meet you, predecessor. We, your juniors, have come from Skyfire Avenue. There, I am called the Wine Master. Would you grace us with your name?"

"Wine Master? Very well, it does appear you have a great love for wine. I'll admit, however, that it is very surprising indeed that you should find us. As for this old fellows name... That, I remember... though I've forgotten many things indeed. How could I forget? When I made wine, my name was stamped on every bottle. This one's name, is Aubert de Villaine. 2"

Aubert de Villaine! The name struck like thunder in the three Adepts' ears. Even more than when the existence of a second hidden Paragon, this revelation left them dumb-struck. This was a legend in the world of a wine, in the... flesh.

Their goal in this journey had been to locate the descendants of the great Gods of Wine. The hope had been to recover some of the great masters' lost secrets. Never in a million years would they have guessed they would come face to face with one of them.

Henri Mayer was likely the most famous of the three, and the wine they partook confirmed his mastery of the craft. However, his wines could not compete with Romanee-Conti in the realm of reputation. The great red wine was too widely known, and Mayer's offerings were so few yearly. No wine would be more widely beloved than a good Romanee-Conti.

Because of this a lot had to be considered in the purchase of – for instance – a Mayer bottle. Average price and reputation were among them. Among the Burgundy wines, none could top the DRC 3. The DRC was both a company, and a family business. They had seven top-shelf wines, of which Romanee-Conti was but one.

Other than the Conti, there was also Poligny-Montrachet, La Tache, Grands Échezeaux, Échezeaux, Richebourg, and Romanée-St-Vivant. None of these were piddly boutique wines. The Montrachet was considered the pinnacle of Chardonnay, and no competitor even really came close.

The DRC had a number of excellent wines, that were consistently among the best in the world. They did it through advertising, skill and proper business management. Now the mastermind behind it, a man who was a contemporary of the mighty Mayer, was here now.

And indeed it was he, Aubert de Villaine. That was the name of this grape vine. Master Vintner of the DRC, Chairman of the Board of Directors, and legendary figure – Aubert de Villaine!

The man had been born at the beginning of the twentieth century. That would make him well over three hundred years old. Even Paragons, with their extended lives, were only able to achieve this once humanity had taken to the stars and discovered power gems. Of course, those early Paragons were also long-lived, but few lived much passed one hundred.

But Aubert de Villaine was a man! How was it this vine came to speak, and to call itself by such a name?

“I know, unbelievable isn’t it?” Aubert said.

The Wine Master took a moment to find his voice. “Absolutely astonishing. I’d never dreamed of one day actually meeting one of the great gods of wine. Much less under circumstances like these.”

“I am not the legendary god of wine,” Aubert assured. His tone had grown hard and irritated. “There is only one, and his name was Henri Mayer. Neither I nor Bize-Leroy were ever worthy of the name. Back in my younger years I was full of pride. But now, three hundred years later, I still can’t compete with the man. No one will ever match his talent.”

Were these words borne from the mouth of any normal modern vintner, the Wine Master wouldn’t not have paid them much mind. No one in their right mind would compare themselves to one of the three gods of wine. However each had their fans, and Aubert’s storied wines were the most followed. In those ancient days, it was unrivaled in many ways.

For the maker of such a fine wine – such a beloved wine – to say that... the Wine Master felt that deeply. He'd scoured any record of these great men, and never once did he hear of Aubert conceding to Mayer. The only thing he had said was that what he did, Henri couldn't do.

Lan Jue was just as shocked, maybe even more so. Hell, a grape vine was talking to them about being a three hundred year old master vintner. Things were strange.

The Wine Master responded. "Those great wines, those products of your efforts are quickly dwindling. Drinking one is to deny the universe a rare treasure. It was my hope to meet with your descendants, to find a suitable place, and to restore the glory of those old days. But I see now that would be akin to teaching a fish how to swim. With you here, things change dramatically."

Aubert's voice returned. "You can make wine?"

"I can't," he replied with a shake of his head. "I am just a humble fan, a sommelier. This is why they call me the Wine Master. I have, however, managed to amass a passable collection of old wines. Several from the DRC, in fact. Bize-Leroy and Henri Mayer bottles as well. If one were to create a superior wine, they would need to experience the product of the masters. I was hoping to donate these bottles to the descendants to help, but that seems unnecessary now."

After a moment, Aubert's rumbling voice replied. "Do you truly have bottles from all three of us? Which bottles, precisely?"

The Wine Master's response was quick and decisive. "All seven of the DRC labels are among my collection, each their best years. A 1990 Romanee-Conti, for instance. I have the entire set of Bize-Leroy masterpieces, like her Richebourg. I have a Romanee-Conti of her creation as well – after all, she was part of the DRC for a long time.⁴"

'Leroy' was also the name of their business, run by the Bize-Leroy family. It was also the name of the third great master of wine – mistress, in fact. Lalou Bize-Leroy.

She was a remarkable woman, known to many as a dragon lady with

iron-fisted control over the DRC brand. Some of the worlds best wines, she had a hand in creating.

Both DRC and Leroy bottles were comparatively greater in number than Mayer creations. However, for true wine lovers that wasn't overly heartening, for the greatest treasure were those few remaining masterpieces.

If this vine really was somehow the master Aubert de Villaine, then there would be no one who could repudiate his claims that Henri Mayer was the greatest vintner who ever lived.

"And Henri's? You have Mayer wines as well?" Aubert asked.

"I did... I had managed to discover a single bottle. Sadly the master's creations were few in number, even in your day. I had spent a great deal of energy in finding it, and kept it enshrined in my collection. Sadly, a few less than considerate friends had it opened. We had no recourse but to drink it." The Wine Master could still feel the dull pang of regret when he thought about the loss of that magnificent wine.

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1. Here's a link to the wikipedia description of the real-world town in Burgundy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beaune>
2. Here is his first mention in the story: Chapter 69 and a wiki refresher: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aubert_de_Villaine
3. Domaine de la Romanee-Conti.
4. Remember that de Villaine and Bize-Leroy were co-owners of the DRC back in the day, until differences in business aims got her kicked out. She later ran her own vineyard.

Chapter 360: Wine Tasting

“Drank it?” Aubert’s voice took on a strange tone. “That’s good. Good! Once all of his bottles are gone, Jayer will fade in to legend.” There was an audible undertone of resentment in his voice. Clearly, there was a story there.

“Since you all are true fans of good vintage, I insist you stay. You’re in luck, in fact. The grapes are ready... it’s time to create the wine. This has been in the work for three years. You can see how things are done, and try some for perhaps. Since you’ve had some of my past creations, you’ll be able to better compare them.”

“That’s excellent then,” the Wine Master said, delightedly. “Thank you for your generosity, and hospitality.” Wine had been a passion of his all his life. The opportunity to try a wine made fresh at the hands of a master was like a dream come true. Beyond that, however, he was excited for discovering that Aubert de Villaine still lived!

“Gates, give them the tour if you would. Then return, I’d like to hear their perspective.” Aubrey indifferently relayed.

Gates stood to the side, and indicated for the others to follow. Once the three visitors offered their respects to de Villaine, they made to follow. Lan Jue, the Pauper, and especially the Wine Master were almost in a daze as they mirrored Gates’ path. This entire experience was unprecedented, culminating in the discovery of a living legend. Was this some sort of reincarnation, where the man became what he loved so dearly? What’s more, the man was frighteningly powerful! In retrospect, it was no surprise his Domain had looked the way it did.

Following Gates’ lead, they entered into the old stone building. As soon as they entered, they were met with the rich scent of white oak. The inside was almost entirely empty but for a massive cask in the center. The wooden container was ten meters tall, perhaps six in diameter, and a mystery to the three visitors.

Gates seemed to sense their curiosity. “We use the most traditional

methods in biodynamics to make our wines. Part of that means absolutely no mechanical processes are employed. For instance, we till the land with horse and oxen. The grapes are harvested by hand, and only the best are selected.”

“We spent a great deal of time and effort in perfecting the soil here, all with the ultimate goal of returning those seven DRC wines to modern circulation. We irrigate the land from the lake above. That isn’t perfectly natural, perhaps, but we’ve taken pains to make this place as close to the mother world as possible. Currently, our vines are about forty years old. Once the wine is made, it is aged in oak barrels for eighteen or twenty four months depending on the crop. Sadly, our barrels aren’t old, so they will likely impact the flavor and quality of our wine this year. The result of our first harvest has already been bottles, while the others are still aging in casks. It’s still mostly flor.”

“Would we be able to sample some of the wine from your first year?”
Lan Jue asked.

Gates turned his attention to the young Jewelry Master, then nodded his head. “Certainly. Now that Master de Villaine has given his blessing, we encourage you to. If you would please come with me.”

They walked further in to the old stone fort, where they discovered a flight of steps. Gates lead them down the spiraling stone staircase, and they followed in single file. As they went on, Gates continued the tour.

“Traditionally, wine cellars must be at least ten meters underground. The temperature must be maintained at between twenty and twenty-five degrees Celsius with a stable level of humidity to ensure proper aging. It is a long process, that involves dust and bacteria, but all of it is part of a wine’s journey. Accumulation is the key. On the home world there were chateaus that had existed for thousands of years, passed down from generation to generation. That, too, was a journey. It was the accumulation of that time, effort and experience that created such wondrous vintages.”

“Are any of Aubret’s inheritors here among you?” the Wine Master asked.

“Of course.”

The Wine Master went on. “And you employ interspatial technology here?”

“Actually no,” came Gates’ response. “Master de Villaine preserved an old winery from long ago. Everything within it was exactly the same as it was during its hay-day. This isn’t that one, and in fact the original hasn’t been touched in ages. We’re not even sure the contents are still intact.”

Of course, the most important thing when sampling a wine was to make sure it hadn’t spoiled. A spoiled wine, of course, made for a terrible experience. Those wines that had reached such a state were simply called ‘old wine.’ These were largely wines that had been improperly stored, or left to ferment for too long.

Both Lan Jue and the Wine Master’s eyes were bright with the prospect of what Gates had revealed. There existed an intact winery from the former era? However, without interspatial technology to help control the wine’s environment, the harsh rigors of time would likely have spoiled all the contents. The chance that any bottle survived was very slim indeed.

They reached the bottom of the stairwell, and Gates pulled out a pair of wooden doors barring their path. They shuffled in to the next room.

Even before they saw anything, that rich oak scent rose up to meet them once again. Stalagmites peppered the area, holding high the stone roof of the small cave cellar. Scanning widely, one would discover rows upon rows of oak barrels stacked on two levels with two barrels each. They stretched on down to the dark recesses of the cellar’s far end.

“We’ve just started, so we have around eleven hundred barrels. About seven hundred of each vintage. The first vintage has begun the bottle process, and the third has just been placed in their casks.”

The cellar was easily capable of housing that many casks, and in fact they could see many open places where more barrels could be stored.

Lan Jue spoke up. “Mister Gates, what do you intend to do with your wines once they’re ready?”

Gates looked back at him. “The Western Alliance has helped us in the creation of this wine. It’ll be kept here in this Alliance.”

“The Western Alliance?” Lan Jue’s eyes lost focus for a moment, as he pondered on something.

The conversation didn’t continue, and they instead went on with their tour. After they completed a circuit of the cellar, they came upon a barrel with a metal tube sprouting from it.

“What’s this?” the Pauper asked the Wine Master, who stood at his shoulder.

“It’s called a bung. It’s used by bartenders and sommoliers. After all, a person can only drink so much. Putting away an entire cask would likely kill a normal man. So, to preserve the wine for later, you close the bung hole 1. Everything must be done to preserve this water of life.”

Gates offered the Wine Master a ghost of a smile, and nodded his head. He extricated three crystal glasses from a nearby cabinet and handed them out.

“First we’ll try one from a newly filled cask. This is called flor, before it’s fermented in to wine. When you try it, really imagine where it will be. A true sommelier can tell the quality of a wine from a sip of the flor.” As he spoke, the elderly vintner gathered up a long glass tube. There was a rubber stopper on one end, and it one looked closely they would see a small hole.

He made his way to a nearby cask, and removed the white spile plugging it closed. He dipped the glass tube in, and plugged the whole on the bottom with his thumb. When he pulled it out, the wine was suspended within. Atmospheric pressure was an important element of biodynamics.

Gates poured a little bit of the deep red liquid in to everyone’s glass, then returned what remained back in to the cask. He gestured for them to take a sip.

Lan Jue swirled his glass’ contents and examined the sentiment, then brought the glass to his nose. The scent was strange, not fragrant as one

would expect. Instead, it was very sour, and concentrated.

He took a sip and held it in his mouth. Immediately that acerbic flavor he'd smelled struck his tongue. This was what was called flor, and a little bit of grape juice.

Sour mixed with grape, a sensation Lan Jue had never had before. It was certainly novel. He swallowed it down. Through the glass he spied a name written on the cask: Vivian. This was their attempt at DRC's Saint-Vivant – a fine wine indeed! He would never have guessed the flor would taste like this.

For a long while that tart sensation remained in his mouth. However, over time, it changed to something richer. This was certainly no comparison to a good bottle, but it was an exciting new experience. He was well familiar with the taste of alcohol, but hops were different. He couldn't taste it as Gates had said, but perhaps that was because he lacked imagination.

One by one they went down the line, sampling all seven of the DRC's budding vintages. With more experience, Lan Jue was beginning to taste subtle differences. Once they'd gotten to the last barrel – the Romanee-Conti itself – his eyes lit up. A smile spread across his face. "You can taste it – the best wines certainly come from the best base."

Gates nodded. "That's exactly right. Just as the best champagnes come the best white grapes, so that even when the carbonation has gone it is still a fine glass, so too is it here. The principle is the same."

Lan Jue shot the old guy a thumbs-up.

These were the younger barrels, where their flor had been kept in storage for a year. The entire sight filled them with hope and expectation for the future. Each one of them grew more excited with each taste. The brightness in their eyes gave it away.

Eventually, their wine tasting party came to an end. They returned the glasses to Gates.

The Pauper gazed over the casks, and with a frown gently shook his

head.

“What is it?” Lan Jue asked?

The Pauper muttered. “Maybe it’s because of the taste, but the Romanee-Conti has an excellent taste as well as a strange osmotic property. It’s almost like it seeps in to your cells. These are young, and don’t have that sensation. Not the explosive flavor of the Cros Parantoux. It’s like it’s missing something.

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1. Yes, that is what its called.

Chapter 361: A God's Tale

The Wine Master smiled softly. "I'm already quite pleasantly surprised. A new Romanee-Conti for a new era! It will certainly be an amazing vintage once it's finished aging. Aubert de Villaine is absolutely deserving of his status as a god of wine. Although it doesn't surpass a Cros Parantoux, it's certainly a lot more accessible. Henri Mayer was a harsh and rigorous vintner, and only produced a limited number of his masterpieces a year. Meanwhile, five thousand bottles of Romanee-Conti were produced in the same time period. That's several times more than his competitor."

Gates, who had been listening to their exchanged, frowned. "If the gentlemen would follow me, we'll return to master de Villaine."

The three nodded. It wasn't long before the group stood once more before the talking vine. However, Aubert did not immediately question them on their tasting. When the elderly voice did reappear, it was weaker than the last time.

"You know, I should have died centuries ago. Two hundred years, in fact. I couldn't accept it then, I wasn't ready to leave."

"Now, I'm conflicted. When I was young, my only dream was to become the greatest vintner the world had ever seen. All of my instructors said I was a great talent. However, as I grew to make better wines, I found a strange contradiction. The better the wine, the worse my winery fared. The reason for this was my methodology – everything did and still does take a great deal of time and effort. Even just picking the grapes takes two months. If there is no full moon, then you must wait for the grapes to ripen and fall of their own accord. But you don't use those to make wine. These stringent practices ensure the best possible quality. However, the other chateaus with their bargain wines were doing much better financially. They made up for lower quality with higher selling volume. The largest Burgundy chateau at the time could produce eight hundred thousand bottles in a year.

"It was then my world view came under scrutiny. Why should the

greatest wines continually be so expensive? So, I began my research. It took me thirty years to strike a balance between price and quality. The result was the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti. However, at some point I lost it. Money clouded my mind, and my keen perception of the process was lost.”

“I never saw Henri Mayer as competition. He was a simple farmer, and I the successor of the storied de Villaine family. Fifty percent of the DRC belonged to me. It wasn’t until I was named the greatest vintner in Burgundy that I discovered, I could not follow in his foot steps.”

“Gradually I came to my senses. I had never been a match for Mayer, but my true love had never changed. Making wine. I redoubled my efforts, me and Lalou. We studied biodynamics and learned to apply it to wine making. We put our sweat, blood and tears in to it, and made the DRC something special. We were pioneers, blazing trails and revolutionizing the wine industry along the way. We gave our lives to wine, forsaking everything else, but those were the greatest days of my very long life. Once I felt the wines were good enough, we sent for the farmer Henri Mayer.”

“When he arrived, I took him on a personal tour of the Chateau. I wanted him to see the grandeur of the DRC. I wanted him to know how great our biodynamics system worked.”

“But, then he said to me, that the vines were like his own life. He and the crop were partners. When they were sick, they were carefully tended to with the proper fertilizer. Whatever they needed, he gave them. He didn’t need to follow some scientific theory.”

“I must admit, I was an awful host. I ask him quite arrogantly if he felt his wines could match up with my precious Romanee-Conti. At the time, the vintage he would later dub Cros Parantoux wasn’t ready. The vines were still too young. After tasting my creation, he said he could help me make it better if I gifted him some of my grapes.”

“In my pride I agreed. Lalou and I continued our valiant toils, carefully following our prescribed plan to make the greatest Romanee-Conti ever tasted. Mayer, meanwhile, would come every day to look over the vines we’d

separated out for him. He'd wander around doing god knows what."

"Two years passed quickly. Eventually our product was ready for bottling. Lalou and I had created twenty barrels, which would eventually become six thousand bottles of Romanee-Conti. Henri, meanwhile, managed not even a full cask – enough for a hundred and fifty bottles. We had expected something closer to five hundred, considering the acreage he'd been working with. Originally I'd thought he was doing something shady with the grapes. However, he said this was simply the result of his work. That cask was the only one up to his standard."

"Once all was said and done, we placed two bottles of Romanee-Conti on the tasting table. From the outside they looked identical, but for the name of the vintner printed on the bottle. Bize and I were confident our wine would reveal itself as the superior vintage. 1

Aubert paused, continuing after a moment of reflection. "'It wasn't until those two glasses of wine were placed before me, did I realize how wrong I was. Henri picked up the glass with Bize and I's wine, and took a sip. He then stood up and said to me, "Thank you for the opportunity to work in your lovely vineyard." He insisted we keep the wine he'd made, then left."

At first, I took that as a sign of his surrender, but then I tasted his wine. I experienced the incredible tannins through the rich, fragrant liquid. The flavor was incredible. I knew then that Bize and I had lost – not not just lost, but we had never even been in his league. Henri Mayer had committed two years of his time and effort, using his own methods to instruct us on how wine should really taste.

It was a deadly blow to my pride. For a while, I didn't eat. Worst, though, was when Bize left. She went to work with Mayer on his vineyard. I knew she sought him out for no other reason than his masterful skill... but the jealousy, and the resentment were still there. I sacrificed my health for the pursuit of perfection. I tried to kill myself, just to be better than Henri Mayer. I slaved in the vineyards, and picked only the very choicest of grapes from my countless hours of toil. But by then, Mayer's vintages were ready. Mayer was not a man concerned with riches, and his output was small, so the DRC had nothing to fret over financially. However, from that day

forward, I was no 'god of wine.' There was only ever one man on that altar."

"Eventually he died... heh, yes, he died. I went to find Bize in the hopes she'd return to my vineyard, but she refused. She told me that she loved Mayer, and even though he was dead she would remain his forever. She gave up her portion of the DRC, and returned to her family establishment to produce Leroy wines."

"Rumors circulated that I had her removed from the business. None of them knew my hurt. She was the only woman I had ever loved in my entire life. But she loved a man I had no way to defeat."

"I fought on, and recovered my health. My one motivation was to be better than Mayer! The man was dead, but his wines were still in circulation. I purchased as many as I could get my hands on. Every year I struggled, and every year the result was the same. As the world's environment failed I moved to more and more remote places. I refused to admit defeat. I had to keep trying. I couldn't let myself die. Eventually I found a way to merge myself with the oldest grape vine I possessed. To live longer, I became a vine. I figured this may help me better understand my goal, so that I could ultimately create the perfect bottle of wine. There will be a day my Romanee-Conti would be superior to the Cros Parantoux! And what a fine day that will be!"

Aubert's voice became shrill, reaching a crescendo as his story came to a close. Clearly, he was having difficulty keeping his emotions in check.

As he listened to the master's resentment of a contemporary, Lan Jue's brows furrowed. He sniffed.

"What are you sniffing about?" Aubert asked. His tone was cold and daring.

"Because," Lan Jue began, "If you keep up this attitude, you'll never be better than Mayer."

Aubert was furious, and the vines ripped rattan fencing away to brandish dangerously before the Jewelry Master. "Why?! What makes you qualified to make such a statement?"

Lan Jue shrugged. “Of course I can’t pretend to compare to you or Henri. However, I do feel that a vintner’s most important quality is the love of wine. It isn’t about being better. You said it before, you have an excellent talent. Jayer likely didn’t have the same talent you do, but in your heart there’s only victory and defeat. That is what’s preventing you from truly understanding grapes or wine. At least compared to Master Jayer, that’s your problem.”

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1. Potentially Important: The name for Lalou Bize-Leroy in Chinese is (as TJSS writes it anyway, he seems to like to change around characters for real names) 拉罗贝丝 which is kinda weird because that’s just ‘Lalou Bize’ which I not her full name. Anyway, 贝丝 is important... because I translated that as Bess! Now, I don’t know if that means anything, necessarily, but the Chinese characters are the same. Let the conspiracy theories begin.

Chapter 362: Fall of Divinity

The sentient grape vine went silent for a time. Aubert de Villaine pondered on the past, and only later did his deep voice return. "I did whatever I could, employed whatever methods possible, to beat Mayer. Have you seen the fruit of my vine? These are the product of my life's work – three hundred years of study, of trying to understand. Every grape is already fermented in to a self-contained dollop of wine. You have tasted Mayer's Cros Parantoux, so I invite you to try my own creations. Tell me if I've finally surpassed the man."

Lan Jue was surprised by the sudden shift in topic. He looked on as three vines, thick as a man's arm, stretched towards them.

The grapes situated on these vines were different from normal grapes. Those came in bunches, while de Villain's fruit came only one per bud. Each twinkling, amethyst-hued grape was about as large as an infant's fist. They looked delectable.

Three dropped from the vine, and fell directly in to the hands of the vineyard's visitors. Immediately, the heady scent of wine filled the air. The savory, mellow fragrances alone were enough to make them feel drunk. Tentatively, grapes were brought to mouths, but when they took a bite they did not find fruit. Instead, a gush of fluid burst forth and down their gullets. It was wine, a big gulp of wine in every grape.

Their taste buds were in overdrive. The intense flavors filled their mouths, stimulating every cell. It felt like the taste was invaded one's whole body. Thankfully, all three of the Skyfire Adepts were.... practiced enough in the art of drinking that they needn't fear getting drunk.

The Wine Master was the first to sense something amiss. But where Lan Jue and the Pauper's faces had changed from the wine's flavors, the Wine Master's expression shifted for a different reason. As he watched, his companion's flesh darkened until they were purple – the same tint as the grapes they'd imbibed.

"There's a problem with the grapes!" The Wine Master flourished with

his right hand and, in a flash of silvery light, his astrum truncheon appeared in his grip.

“No. I have used my own condensed life force and protogenic powers to create these perfect grapes. They are absolutely the pinnacle of grape farming. But grapes, you see, require fine fertilizer. After years of research I’ve found the best kind, and it may surprise you to find that there is no better fertilizer than human remains. Now that you’re here, and you’ve seen all of this, perhaps we’ll just have you stay. The wine didn’t get you drunk, as was my hope, but you still don’t have the power to face me.” Aubert de Villaine’s voice had grown murderously cold.

A thick purple light hung over the hillside. The massive vine waves erratically, pulling in all directions until it’s buried roots were exhumed. The sentient plants jerks and twisted until it assumed the shape of a man, made of bark and grapes.

By now, the Wine Master’s skin had also begun to darken. He heaved a long grunt. “Lan Jue was right, you aren’t even in the same class as Jayer. Your heart is poisoned – only interested in instant gratification and quick success. Your spirit was only ever interested in money, and that is why you were never able to understand the art of making wine. Even with all your talent, you will never be the greatest god of wine.”

A silvery bubble of energy surrounded the Wine Master and his companions. In response, dozens of slithering grape vines exploded from the earth all around them. They were a deep purple in color, and wrapped together to form a hideous face, frozen in an expression of rage. More appeared, and struck out at the protective bubble surrounding the intrepid travelers from all directions. There were so many that they blotted out the sky, turning everything purple.

“I have already used my protogenic powers to close this place. Even with your interspatial capabilities, you’re stuck here. The fruit of a god of wine is special, you see. It would kill a normal man – he would drink himself to oblivion. For Adepts, it reduces your Talent. One grape, diluted in water, can make a thousand bottles of the best Romanee-Conti the universe has ever known. But you – you are great lovers of wine, are you not? Wouldn’t

contributing your bodies to create such a splendid wine be a fitting end? You dare to look down upon my creation, to claim it inferior to that farmer's Cros Parantoux, so consider this death my gift." Aubert's voice was haughty, and full of venom.

The Wine Master fixed the vine-man's 'face' with a glare. "Indeed, you are inferior. The fruit of a god of wine is fine, but it cannot compare to the true love and devotion a vintner has for his harvest. These grapes have no love, just rage and greed. You can sense it in the aftertaste – it's fetid. You said it true before – there is no way for you to ever surpass the late Henri Mayer."

"You're clearly not qualified to make such assumptions. We will see the truth of it once you've come to fertilize my fruit. My creation will sweep the universe, and all those who drink it will be drawn in. From them, I will choose the best to serve as nutrients for the next harvest. I refuse to believe that, with the addition of so many wine lovers, that I will not surpass Mayer! There will be more love for wine than that old man could ever muster. I can finally rid myself of his specter. You three are lucky – my first crop, I'll remember you always."

The skies darkened until it was a reach, deep purple – almost black. The vines, hundreds now, wiped ceaselessly at the silvery shell. Each vine shattered as it thrust itself against the Wine Master's defenses, but with each strike the strain on the Cosmagus became more evident.

The Wine Master's skin became increasingly darker in hue. It crept up his body, slowly overtaking the hand holding his scepter. He gave a bitter smirk. Never would he have thought that the greatest love of his life would be his undoing.

As for Aubert de Villaine, the great vintner, clearly his rage and jealousy had driven him to madness. A Paragon lost to anger was terrifying, for who knew how many innocents would lose their lives. This place had become a Babylonian purgatory.

In regards to cultivation, the Wine Master and Aubert were not equal. However, the difference was not enormous. In part, the Wine Master's

understanding of protogenic energies was deeper due to his experience with interstellar migration – something Aubert clearly had avoided. None of that power or knowledge could be taken from him.

But this place, everything around them, was under the complete control of Aubert de Villaine. He had created it from nothing, using the skills and knowledge of the Former Era. He even turned himself in to an enormous grape vine so that his connection to the land was deeper. It was largely for this reason that the Wine Master found himself at such a disadvantage.

Evidently, the new Paragon's abilities were plant-based. In regards to combat, this couldn't hold a flame to interdimensional Talent. Here, however, those specific attributes were cut off – interspatial powers were suppressed because the entirety of this place was under Aubert's control. The grape's fluids seemed to permeate down to their souls, and the Wine Master already at a distinct disadvantage, there wasn't much in the way of resistance that they could offer.

In addition, Aubert was one of, if not the single oldest Paragon in the universe. By virtue of his age and experience alone, he had an advantage and he wasn't the least bit interested in holding back. The Wine Master knew very well what sort of destruction a Paragon was capable of. The three of them were like meat on a cutting board. All de Villaine had to do was wear him down.

Over and over again, the protogenic-infused vines lashed at them. With each strike, the Wine Master's shield dimmed. Once it failed, there would be nothing to protect them from Aubert's murderous thirst. Not even the Wine Master.

Lan Jue looked on as the Cosmagus fell to one knee. His scepter dug in to the dirt, the only thing stopping the Avenue's interim leader from falling to the ground. Tendrils of silvery light spread out from the butt of the scepter then. They were small at first, but quickly bloomed across the earth until it created a blinding lotus of glimmering light. It was dazzling, burning, and they could not look away. Each petal was its own self-contained universe, and they crashed and melded among one another.

Aubert's precious pocket of reality began to disintegrate, unable to sustain itself against the Cosmagus frightening power. The flower blazed like a sun until, suddenly, it shifted black. It became an impossible black, that drank up everything around it – a black hole, perhaps a meter wide. Almost instantaneously, all of the vines assaulting them were atomized.

There was a flux of energy, and that one meter black hole surged to devour a thousand meters.

Aubert de Villaine, standing at two meters, found himself directly in the center. As the insatiable hunger of the black hole came crashing down upon him, his viney figure ceased to be.

However, then a violet light congealed around the edges of the anomaly, keeping it from growing further.

This was the Wine Master's single most powerful skill. At the peak of his power, he was capable of devouring entire planets in its scope. Its confinement at any level was a stupendous achievement, much less to this small size.

"Your resistance is pointless. This place belongs to me. Did you think this would be enough to destroy me? My roots spread all throughout this place. I am everywhere." Aubert's figured re-emerged from the dirt as more grape vines twisted to form a mirror image of the previous body.

The compressing power surrounding the terrible black hole strengthened. Gradually, the last-ditch effort of the Cosmagus was shrinking.

"All of your power merely makes things worse for you. The more you employ your Discipline, the faster my grape's power permeates through you. There is nothing that can save you. With that wine in your veins, your demise is assured." Aubert De Villaine's voice was full of dark mirth.

1. To my knowledge, this is the first time anyone from the Avenue has used an Avenue denizen's true name in public. I'm thinking this is likely a mistake on TJSS's part – just an interesting aside.

Chapter 363: Calamity and Revival

The Wine Master's face had turned purple. He swayed on one knee, threatening to topple. The most terrifying aspect of these grapes was the fact that they were the product of pure protogenic energy. This wasn't any normal toxin they'd eaten, he'd have known right away if it was. It's properties were insidious, invasive. The victim slowly succumbed to exhaustion until they fell in to a deep, coma-like sleep. In a situation like this, when one needed to be at their sharpest, this was disastrous.

Just as the Wine Master was on the verge of collapse, Lan Jue – who had long since fallen limp – began to move. A stream of bright red blood began to seep from between his brows. However, it didn't drop down his face as blood should. Instead it coalesced in to something akin to a ruby, set within the flesh of his forehead. As a faint red glow surrounded Lan Jue's head like a halo, the faint scent of grape filled the air. It was the smell of wine, of the best wine the world had ever seen. The purple tint to Lan Jue's skin quickly melted away. When his eyes opened from the unnatural slumber, a flash of blood red raced across them.

Lan Jue shot to his feet, and his aura blasted out in all directions like an explosions. Gold replaced purple. There was a stuttering flash of energy, and Lan Jue vanished. He reappeared behind the Wine Master, with his right hand pressed against the ruby. A shimmering red orb of light swirled around them.

Under the strange energies, the purple covering the Wine Master began to recede as well. It rose like a mist from his pours, and when the poisoned hue was gone from his face the Wine Master's eyes flashed a dangerous silver.

"No! This is impossible! How are you able to counter the fruit's effects?!" Aubert de Villaine howled in shrill tones.

The Wine Master slowly rose to his feet. As the steamed remains of the poisons flowed around him, he lifted his astrum high overhead. Crackling ominously, the constrained black hole begun to shrink further. For half a

moment there was absolute silence, before the Wine Master's star-swallowing black hole swelled to a phenomenal size.

Silk-thin tendrils of silver light slithered through the fabric of reality around them. Where it met with the deep-purple halo of constraining energy, it created an interdimensional tempest. These hairline fractures in existence fused with the black hole, allowing it to expand even farther and grow even stronger like a flood following the course of a river.

This was the unbridled power of a Paragon. Unconstrained, and unaffected, the Wine Master had more tricks up his sleeve to turn the battle in their favor. Aubert's figure writhed in the distance, with each vine of it's body lashing out wildly in rage. In response, every single vine across the stretch this quaint French-style village began to slither like they had a mind of their own.

That purple energy thickened, blotting out the sky and casting everything in a hazy light. Pressure, as though the weight of a mountain were upon them, pressed in upon the hole and the three Avenue Adepts. With the Wine Master back to full strength, Aubert would have to rely on his own direct protogenic powers diffused throughout the whole city. He was no longer caught in the grips of his mania, and was frightened by the power of this old man. He was much stronger than he'd anticipated. Ultimately Aubert was confident he could win in a straight fight – but at what cost? At the very least, he'd be unable to protect Beaune from destruction.

More important to the god of wine, however, was how Lan Jue was able to expel the grape's powers. Not just that, but he was able to remove it from the old Paragon as well. All of that should have been well beyond his capabilities.

Lan Jue would not give him answers. Largely, though, this was because he didn't know what was going on either. The flood from his forehead was his, but why did it form the way it did? Why does it seem to possess these powers? He couldn't say.

With his hand on the Wine Master's back supporting his abilities, they

weren't in any immediate danger. Lan Jue looked around for the Pauper, to help him as well. When he found him, though, the Pauper was surrounded by a hazy golden aura. It seemed to radiate out from him, making his entire body gold as well.

Slowly, he pulled himself in to a seated position. His legs were folded beneath him, and his hands were pressed together level with his chest. The dirty, homeless man sat awash in light in grandeur and solemnity like a buddha. A halo of shimmering light revolved behind his head to the sound of a thousand chanting monks.

Protogenic power!

Lan Jue could feel the pulsing waves of primordial energy rippling out from him. He was fine, too? And able to use protogenic abilities?

After a moment of surprise, Lan Jue things were not as he imagined. The power surrounding the Pauper was protogenic in nature, but was internally derived. The power flowed through him, but he didn't move. He remained stuck to the floor like a buddhist statue.

Lan Jue understood. He wasn't trying to help directly with the Wine Master. His was a last ditch effort, using the swirling powers around them to help him find his Path.

The Pauper would not be launched in to Paragon status so easily, but by immersing himself in the understanding of protogenic powers, he would unlock the ability to use it – just like Lan Jue's Ascension. It would invariable help him break through to Paragon, assuming they lived through this moment. With time and further understanding, his route would grow smooth and his path short.

Lan Jue couldn't help but betray the surprise he felt. After all, witnessing a top-level Adept discover his Path was a rare and beautiful thing. Many ninth ranked Adepts went their whole lives without having this chance. It was unlikely the pressure of the situation was the impetus. He had been asleep from the effects of the grapes. There was only one explanation, and that was the grapes themselves.

Thinking back to that day they shared the Cros Parantoux, Lan Jue

remembered what the Pauper had said. An epiphany, and that was the very reason he'd come with them on this journey. Now, it looked like his goal was achieved. Aubert's poisoned grapes weren't expelled, but rather absorbed. That was the push he needed to find his way forward.

The Wine Master must have sensed something as well, for he looked over toward the meditating beggar. He allowed the briefest flash of joy to appear in his eyes, before it quickly passed. If they made it out, then having another powerful Adept with protogenic powers would be a great boon for the Avenue. What's more, he was younger – about as old as the Gourmet. With luck there would be another Paragon in the Avenue's future.

Aubert de Villaine didn't care for their happiness, and continued his murderous assault. The skies overhead were like a thick sea of fluid, and it started to swirl like an angry vortex. It was quickly devoured by the encroaching black hole.

Lan Jue's keen eyes watched, and spotted the vortex swirling amidst the near perfect darkness. It was like a glue, sticking to the black hole and gradually pulling it shut.

The Wine Master's black hole was a manifestation of his protogenic powers. It was birthed in to reality through his will. This was different from Lan Jue's Ascension, which was simply a sort of coat of protogenic energy. It was not true power – enough to amplify his abilities, perhaps, but not real control.

The battle between them now was a primeval war of pure energy. Aubert's insidious powers sought to clog and close the Wine Master's black hole. It came down to who could persevere.

Aubert's abilities were not as combat oriented as the Wine Master's. However, he did have the whole of this place under his command. With the energies of this place amplifying his own, Aubert was a terrifying force to reckon with. His attacks did not let up, coming as swift and ruthless as the Paragon's poisoned rage.

The Wine Master remained still, with his scepter held aloft. The war

going on overhead between his black hole and the purple vortex loudly went on, but he was still. His eyes narrowed as he peered in to the middle distance, as though thinking.

Escape would not be terribly difficult. With his powers fully restored, they would make it out alive. It would, however, consume a great deal of energy to have all three of them transported to safety.

But what next? Aubert would undoubtedly try to hunt them down. He'd lived here for who knows how long, and his intimate connection with the land made finding an upper hand difficult. With his connection to the Western Alliance, it would be difficult for him to lock up the airspace around the planet. At that point, they'd have no chance at returning home. What's more, it was easy for any Paragon to find their target, especially for Aubert. On this planet, every plant was his eyes and ears.

Things were different here than in the East. The military forces of Skyfire would mobilize quickly in an event like this. Not for the West. He had their backing, yes, but out here the only one to really have a Paragon's back would be another Paragon. Whether it was the Pope or Satan backing this madman, he could not say. In the end it didn't matter, for if either came to this madman's aid that would be the end of them.

Coming to this realization, the Wine Master's heart sank. He had no idea they'd have encountered a situation like this. One of the greatest vintners to have ever lived remained hundreds of years passed when he should have died. Unfortunately, he had become one of the very few corrupt Paragons.

It had happened before in the history of humanity, in the Former Era. One in particular was abnormally strong, with a corruption that spread the world over. He was a dictator, and his poison plunged the world in to war. He was eventually defeated, but the cost was borne on the backs of the innocent dead. Even now, the full extent of that tragedy defied understanding.

Chapter 364: Arrivals

The only way for them to resolve this problem, was the destruction of Aubert de Villaine. But killing a Paragon was no easy feat.

“Jewelry Master.” The Cosmagus looked over his shoulder at Lan Jue.

“Wine Master,” he replied. He could see the same thing his elderly friend did. He knew what he was thinking.

Skyfire Avenue’s acting leader fixed Lan Jue with a serious stare. “I will be sending you and the Pauper to safety. Make our way to Skyfire Avenue immediately. Tell the keeper he is now in charge of the Avenue, and the Gourmet will be his support. You yourself need to continue on your path, don’t let the Clairvoyant down.”

Lan Jue could feel his heart seize. He was a smart man, and immediately understood what the Wine Master was planning. His response was low and stubborn. “I have never, and will never abandon a companion on the battlefield. If you’re risking your life here, count me in. Send the Pauper – he’ll likely be a Paragon in a few years. If we work together, we may have a chance.”

“No.” The Wine Master flatly refused. “The Clairvoyant said that you are Skyfire Avenue, maybe even the hope for all humanity. You must live, and your life will not be one of joy. It will be a life of responsibility. A corrupted Paragon is more terrifying than you can imagine, but I am strong enough to deal with this issue myself.”

As he spoke, the Wine Master flourished the scepter in his hand. The space around them shimmered, and a golden portal appeared like the one they’d seen earlier. Like before, it was stable and unique – like it was created from some otherworldly power. The golden light painted their grim faces in a dim hue.

The Wine Master’s voice came again, stoic and determined. “Flee, now under the cover of my strongest abilities. If you wait too long, the chance will pass.” His eyes were hard, there was no second guessing this. He’d made his choice. Destroying a corrupt Paragon meant saving countless

lives, and if sacrificing himself insured that then it was a worthy sacrifice indeed.

“Now cut the shit and get the hell out of here!” It was the first time Lan Jue heard anything other than regal discourse come out of the old man’s mouth. He looked out over the expanding black hole. Soon, it would reach it’s critical mass, and everything would be devoured – including Aubert and the Wine Master.

“No one needs to leave. Things here are done.” An old, craggy voice interrupted their farewell. Much to Lan Jue and the Wine Master’s surprise, however, this voice was female. For the Cosmagus it was even more pronounced. This newcomer was a Paragon, undoubtedly, considering her ability to interceded here. Among the Paragons there was only one woman, and she didn’t sound like this.

Alas, this was an omen of doom, certainly. The only reason a Paragon would arrive now under these circumstances, was to bring aid to their enemy. This would be their demise!

The Wine Master answered by allowing the portals to close. Every Paragon, by virtue of their link to the world of primal energy, had some control over interspatial power regardless of Discipline. The Cosmagus could no longer be sure his portals were safe.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, was frozen in place. He was familiar with this voice!

Aubert was still as well, the moment he heard that voice. A column of blood-red light appeared then, shining down upon him from on high. He let out a shrill, forlorn scream. Immediately following, the constricting purple energies disappeared without a trace as did the Wine Master’s black hole. The Avenue’s Paragon was in a daze, uncomprehending.

Aubert begun to writhe and flail. Vines thicker than a man’s waist whipped dangerously all throughout the small town. They were illuminated by a blood-red moon that sat full in the sky.

Lan Jue and the Wine Master looked back to Aubert. Their senses heightened, they could see something else hanging over the mad vintner now. It was an arrow, white as snow, buried in his ‘body.’ It shimmered

like moonlight, and from the wound threads of poison black energy groped out desperately. Lan Jue could feel something else in the air as well, something kind and familiar.

Realization dawned on the Wine Master as he watched. This new Paragon, this sudden and frightening voice, was not their enemy. Her target was Aubert de Villaine.

The Wine Master and Lan Jue exchanged a look, but neither made a move. They weren't sure precisely sure what they were watching – it would be foolhardy to act now, before they knew where they stood. Meanwhile, the writhing mass of vines that was Aubert slowed and eventually stopped. The purple aura that surrounded them vanished, and was replaced by a soothing violet glow – but where Aubert's purple was harsh and violent, this green-tinged purple was far more gentle.

The column of red light, pinning Aubert in place, disappeared. The moon's own red hue melted away to reveal silvery white. The peaceful lunar glow painted the area in silver and shadows.

The grapes upon Aubert's form began to change with the addition of moonlight. The amethyst fruit were suddenly covered in a thin film of hoarfrost, and were no longer transparent. But what was this? Some sort of Discipline metamorphosis?

Lan Jue's expression revealed his confusion. He stepped forward, but the Wine Master quickly grabbed him by the shoulder. There was still so much unknown, the old man couldn't let Lan Jue risk his safety.

In the silence of the unnatural night, suddenly they heard a faint sigh. It stretched on for a long time, quiet and sad. After perhaps half a minute, it faded in to silence.

It washed across all of them. The Wine Master's face once more adopted its regal façade, for he knew now that they were safe. Who ever this person was, she was on their side.

"Why? Was it worth it?" The elderly female voice hung in the air as moonlight coalesced beside the body of Aubert de Villaine. The skies cleared, and were revealed to have changed from that angry purple to a

soothing lavender. What's more, the entire town felt... lacking, as though something had gone.

Lan Jue looked out toward the fields where he spied the farmers. They stood like statues, with tendrils of black escaping from the top of their heads. The poison energy would rise a few meters, then dissipate in to the air. Their expressionless faces remained blank, though now it was clearly due to confusion. Even Gates, the strongest of them, seemed as though he were just waking from a nightmare. The dark power over him had been the most powerful.

Once the gathering moonlight waned to reveal a human figure, Lan Jue couldn't help but gasp. "Granny Bess."

Indeed, this stranger – this woman who stopped Aubert's mad rampage – was none other than Granny Bess. It was she who'd attacked them on Skyfire, and caused the strange bond between he and Qianlin.

He'd known it when he first heard her voice, but nonetheless Lan Jue was shocked when he saw her standing before him. What was she doing here? He couldn't tell whether this woman was friend or foe.

The Wine Master, upon hearing Lan Jue's surprised cry, turned to look at him. Shock was in his eyes expression. "Granny Bess? Could it be... Bess, an anglicised version of Bize? 1 She is another of the three gods of wine – that's the only explanation!"

Lan Jue looked like he'd been hit by a verticar. His mind went back to the times he'd come across this old woman. Suddenly, a detail swam up at him from the images. It was after he finished the Cros Parantoux with the others, and went to save Qianlin in the hospital. During the course of their struggle he'd coughed up blood, and it was then 'Bess' mentioned the vintage. She'd reacted to the news. 2

It must, it had to be. This woman was the one who had been partner, lover and betrayer to Aubert de Villain: Lilou Bize-Leroy.

How could this be, though? Three hundred years after they should have died, two of the three greatest vintners in history were here. Bize, as she was apparently called, was not like Aubert – she hadn't needed to become

a plant. But how? It made no sense, and that cause unease. Questions still remained, the foremost being whether or not Bize had followed Aubert in to darkness.

Bize didn't pay them any mind. In fact, it was like she'd forgotten about them entirely. She sat at Aubert's side, with eyes only for him.

"Why go through this again, Aubert?" Her voice trembled with pain and sorrow.

Aubert, the vines composing his body limp and just barely clinging together, lay on the ground. The flora of his face spread in to a bitter frown. "Indeed... why? Ever since I let that poison jealousy in it has eaten away at me. I forgot everything that made this life beautiful. In my heart, there was only envy, anger, pride and greed. Those toxic seeds grew, until they consumed me. Thank you, Bize... thank you for helping me see."

Lan Jue and the Wine Master furtively listened in on their conversation. It appeared as though their conjectures were correct. This was indeed the Leroy successor.

She heaved a quavering sigh. "They are sins we all suffer – but the strongest of yours was pride. It ate at you that you were inferior to someone else. From that poison soil those seeds of envy, anger and greed sprouted. Eventually the illness reached your heart, and that's when you chose to win by any means necessary. That was when you were lost."

*

1. *Cough*
2. Good call andrewl11!

Chapter 365: The Terrible Cost of Misunderstanding

Aubert de Villaine spoke with a weak voice. “You’re right. No matter what I do now, it’s far too late. You’ve separated me from the illness for a time. I thank you for giving me this opportunity, to clear the haze from my eyes. I’ve lived for over three hundred years, and I’ve done far too much bad. It’s time I passed. You were right, I was full of arrogance. But I must tell you something... that I, Aubert de Villaine have only ever loved a single woman in my entire life. Even death won’t change that. That woman, is you Bize. Dying in your arms is a blessing. I need to ask you to help me end this poisoned life. Yet, I would ask that you continue building on what I’ve accomplished in this place. All of the men and women here, all of the workers and wine makers, they were all under my control. I infected them with my own hatred and took over their minds. Now that my power has been severed, they are free. Please be good to them.”

Aubert sighed, and turned his eyes to the sky. “Especially Gates. He is Jayar’s nephew. I’d stolen him away all those years ago. He was the first victim of my poison. I used my powers to keep him alive, so that one day when my wines surpassed his predecessors I could lord it over him. Now, that won’t happen. He was a great talent for wine making, please encourage that.”

“And then there’s this place... our beloved Beaune. I have never forgotten our beautiful homeland. I would like you to have all of it. I have carefully tended to all of these vines, adhering to the biodynamic principles we used from the beginning. Even though my soul is poisoned, these grapes are true. They will make you fine wines.”

Lan Jue and the Wine Master, standing off to the side, listened to their exchange. The anger and resentment they’d felt melted away when they heard his impassioned speech. Aubert de Villaine was a masterful talent who’s desire for success and blind pride lead him down the wrong path. Yet even now, defeated, the most important thing to him was the wine. A

god of wine was a god of wine, even if he did do it for the wrong reasons – a fallen god! Although they had had to fight for their lives, a sense of esteem grew within the Skyfire adepts at what they witnessed. They remained separate, however. This was something the two old vintner's had to do themselves.

“Die? Do you think it will be that easy? Have you already forgotten what you did, how you treated my sister and I? How you expelled me from the board of directors? That was the man who loved me? No, the one you claim to love was my sister.”

Aubert answered with a bitter smile. “The deeper one loves, the stronger their reproach. You left to find Jaye and didn't return. That was when jealousy took root. I knew I couldn't compare to the man – and in our world, making wine was the most important thing. I wasn't good enough for you, and when you finally did come back with that smile on your face I knew I'd lost you forever. Hate and envy lead me to the single greatest regret of my life, separating the DRC family. It was simple math; I owned fifty percent, as did you and your sister. I knew she fancied me so I roped her in. I couldn't stand to look at you, that was my only thought. Then you left, and oh do I remember the day. The look in your eyes... it brought me a terrible pleasure.”

“But in truth, I never loved your sister. When you left, I ended things with her. She went on to marry and have children. She was happy, so far as I know, until her passing.

Bize's sneer was cold as ice, and sharp as nails. “Really? Well I have something to tell you as well, Aubert. Why I was really smiling when I came back that day from Jaye's vineyard. I had figure it out... the true reason for his success. I had brought my knowledge back to share with you, so that we could create a superior wine together. Like you, I had only ever loved one man, until that man cruelly gloated that he loved my older sister instead, and the both of you forced me to leave.”

“Wha... what?” The defeated vintner's voice was thick with surprise. “Impossible! You loved Jaye! No... it can't be.. no!”

Bize laughed in his face. “Impossible? After all these years, in this place right here and right now do you think I would lie? I have never once in my life been dishonest. Aubert de Villaine, you are ridiculous. A truly laughable man.” She laughed so hard that tears began to stream from her eyes.

Aubert was completely dumbstruck. Almost unconsciously, he muttered “But... you’d said, you’d told me that the man you would love would be the one who made the best wine.”

Bize fixed the fallen god with a glare so full of hate it could have killed him outright. “Because at that point, I believed the greatest vintner to be Aubert de Villaine! I went to Jayer for that belief, so that I could learn what he knew and bring it back. So that you could once again be the greatest god of wine the world had ever seen!”

Aubert wasn’t dumbfounded, he was stupefied 1. He couldn’t find the words to speak. But those poison seeds in his heart stirred again.

Lan Jue could feel goose bumps 2 raise on his arms. All of this was a misunderstanding! A terrible misunderstanding, that ruined the lives of two people for three hundred years! A single mistake vast one in to madness, and the other in to bitter loneliness.

“I struck you with this soothing arrow because I needed you clear, lucid. I wanted to tear it out of you, to interrogate you until I knew why you did that to me. And now you say, it’s because you loved me... you don’t find that funny?”

“No! No, no, no!” Aubert howled suddenly with as much strength as he could muster. “No, Bize – you must listen to me! It was not like you say. I was wrong, I’m an idiot – worse than anyone. My jealousy never gave you a chance to explain. It was that arrogance, it hurt my pride. But it hurt you as well. All of it... all of it is my fault. Could you find it in your heart to forgive me? I beg you to give me another chance. My sins were many, my plans were terrible, but... everything was for the wine. Despite my desires I hadn’t yet hurt anyone. I don’t.. I don’t want to die. Pull out your arrow. You’ve given me hope, and that hope has started to kill those poison

feelings. Because of you, I'll never succumb to them again. I don't know how much longer O have to live, but if you'd like I'll spend the rest of it making amends. Three hundred years of debt, I'll repay. I don't want to die... I don't want to die! Bize.. Bize I was wrong. I was wrong!"

Purple tears leaked from Aubert's grape-like eyes, and trickled down the vines that composed his face. His emotional turmoil was causing all of the grape vines to writhe in discomfort. The blazing white arrow seemed to respond. Gradually, it began to rock back and forth, while the light dimmed to almost nothing. Eventually, it worked itself free from Aubert's body and fell to the ground.

Lilou-Bize Leroy looked down at the arrow in shock 3. This proved one thing; that the arrow of kindness could only seal evil, not kill. It was an ancient technique, which was painstakingly difficult to recreate. Since it had fallen out of its own accord, it meant that there was nothing further that needed sealing.

More importantly, however, it meant Aubert's words were true. Otherwise, these changes would not have happened.

It's true... he really loves... me?

Bize pushed herself away, her features stricken. She would never have believed this was the case. A simple misunderstanding had ruined their lives.

Now free from the arrow, Aubert quickly began to recover. The vines that were his form began to curl and twist again. The many grapes upon them shrank, then vanished. After a moment, the rest of his body followed. What remained was an exceedingly old human man. The only thing that distinguished him from any other centenarian was the fact that his skin was the color of grape vines.

"Bize!" He scrambled forward a few steps, and reached out to grasp her hand.

Bize subconsciously backed away. Aubert fell to his knees. "Bize, I swear upon my family name, that everything I said is true. From this moment forward I give it all up, everything, to just be Aubert with you. I will be

Aubert Bize. I will be your knight, your servant, anything at all so long as I can be by your side. If my life is what you want, you may have it. Because as of this moment, you are the only thing I live for.”

*

1. I'm sorry, I said I wouldn't do this, but it needs explaining; TJSS loves... loves the word 'surprised'. Everyone is surprised, all the goddamn time. If it bothers you that there are three thousand synonyms for surprised in this novel, that's why. Rant over.
2. The Chinese call it 'chicken skin'.
3. AAARRGGHHHH!!!!

Chapter 366: Three Hundred Year-Old Mistake

Bize swayed on her feet, as she looked at Aubert. After a moment, she limply fell to her knees. “Why must it be like this? I spend a great deal of time, energy and resources for that arrow. I’d created it specifically to torture you, and to discover what sort of monster you truly were. I didn’t expect this answer. The fault doesn’t just lie with you, Aubert. I bear some of the blame myself. You said it true, that our pride has brought us here. Not just yours – ours.”

The elderly woman weakly hugged her knees close, and began to sob.

The farmers, formerly under Aubert’s control, encircled the small group by this point. Many of them had been brought here and kept alive by Aubert’s power, all the way from the former era. Many stared blankly, standing still as statues and trying to come to terms with their new reality. Most simply rejoiced.

The poison that had consumed them was finally receding, after so many long years. The memories of what they’d done, and the things they’d went through gradually came back to them. It had been like a nightmare, but in the end they were still alive. Now, things were finally starting to look up.

“Three hundred years! Three whole centuries! Wasted, because of a moment of pride and envy.” Aubert de Villaine heaved a sigh, turning his head toward the others. “You two... come here, please.”

The Wine Master nodded, and with a wave of his scepter both he and Lan Jue floated over to the fallen god’s side.

Aubert looked at the younger Paragon, and nodded. “You love wine... I can feel it. All of you do. It’s a pure love, not like mine. I lost my way when wine became an instrument of dominance. That was my great mistake.”

Aubert weakly raised a hand. There was a flash of purple, and suddenly three grapes appeared in the air, covered in hoarfrost like the others.

“These grapes are absent the infection. I give them to you as

compensation. They are the product of years of my own heart's blood, and hard work. Through the purification of Bize's arrow, they are free of impurities. Not only are they going to produce wonderful wines, they are also imbued with some level of my own protogenic comprehension. Anyone on the verge of breaking through to Paragon can take one, and it will help them along their Path. The removal of impurities has strengthened these effects, and more. A normal adept will be drunk for seven days and seven nights eating just one of these. A paragon would not get drunk, nor enjoy quite so effective results."

Again? More of this fruit? Lan Jue looked toward the Wine Master for directly, but the older man had already taken them. He handed two to Lan Jue and kept one for himself.

"Thank you, honored predecessor." The Wine Master bowed respectfully before the old god of wine. Evidently, he didn't have any qualms about accepting the grapes this time.

Once more, Aubert sighed pitifully. "I've finally come to my senses. Do not fret, friends... the corruption that had consumed me is gone forever. With Bize at my side, I wouldn't dream of it. You all may go... I'd like to, spend a little time with Bize, just she and I."

The Wine Master simply nodded. At his level of cultivation, as with any Paragon, they were able to sense acute, and minute, differences in a person's aura. He knew what he was hearing was truth – you couldn't fake the reaction he had. The gods of wine didn't have to resort to that sort of base trickery anyway. Against two Paragons, they didn't stand a chance, so there was no need for falsehoods.

Lan Jue didn't ask the Wine Master why he was given two, and simply put them away. They had a lot to talk about once they left.

"Wait a moment." Bize, who had been quietly crying, raised her head. She tenderly rose to her feet, and faced Lan Jue.

"You must doubt that my arrival here was more than a coincidence. I will tell you the truth; it wasn't. And you needn't worry, all of this was the Clairvoyant's design."

“The Clairvoyant?” Lan Jue vaguely recalled something, lingering the back of his mind.

She nodded. “The Clairvoyant and I have been friends for a long while. He knew me I searched for years for de Villaine. Back then, when the Earth was dying, we didn’t want to leave. I thought I would return there to find my answers, but when I arrived at Beaune, it had been abandoned. Not a soul remained.”

“The signs pointed to an exodus, so I figured he must have relocated to another planet. I felt hopeless, after all where does one begin looking in the vastness of the universe? I sought out the Clairvoyant, and asked him to help divine some answers. He told me he couldn’t find him, because his status as Paragons shielded him from the power. He did tell me, though, that Aubert would find a way to extend his life. To achieve my own goals, I spend an incredible sum to make sure I would live. When you saw me in Grace hospital, I wasn’t just thinking as I sat by that window. I forced my body to consume as little energy as possible – that was the only way I could live this long. A month would pass like a day to me, but every day was like living in the body of a corpse. I lingered on like this, for years upon years. All because the Clairvoyant told me Aubert was still alive.”

“Eventually I came across something.. a sensation. Something had changed. I went to the Clairvoyant again, and begged him to expend his own precious energies to help me learn more. He confirmed my fears, that Aubert had fallen to corruption. It was he who taught me how to make the arrow. He said it would be the only way to clear your mind.

“It was an instrument passed down from the ancient days, requiring tremendous effort to create. With countless treasures needed, it took a hundred years to complete. But the most important thing this arrow of compassion needed... was altruistic blood. I approached the Clairvoyant one last time. He was old, nearing the end of his days. He must have known I was coming, he said that as his life faded, his powers grew. Strong enough, he said, to faintly see where Aubert might be. He asked me for a favor, for you. Meanwhile, I would get what I needed to finally get what I wanted.

Chapter 367: The Arrow of Compassion

“I used your blood – one positive, one negative – to empower the arrow. At long last, it was finished. At the same time I fulfilled my promise to the Clairvoyant, and fused your Disciplines together. Qianlin possesses the Queen of Heaven Discipline, a transformative power that is full of empathy and compassion. Altruistic blood is necessary to bear that power. Luckily we had a second who had been touched by her power, and whose blood had absorbed that essence. It was enough to make the arrow.”

“Wait a minute!” Lan Jue interrupted. “Granny Bize, just one second. I feel like I’ve heard that before, Queen of Heaven. And you said she used it on me... but when? I don’t remember anything like that.”

Bize heaved an exasperated sigh. “That’s because you’re an idiot. The Queen of Heaven Discipline is the kindest of them all, marked by a spirit of self-sacrifice. Those who bear the power are limited to using it only three times in the course of their lives. Three lives can be saved. If even the slightest heart beat remains, this power can bring life back where there should be none. It can knit bone and heal muscle. However, using the power reduces the ninth ranked Queen of Heaven back to the very start – like she hadn’t any Discipline at all. The process of saving a life looks like a cocoon, so it’s called the Silkworm’s power. The skill itself, the Mystic Raiment. Think now, puppet, there was a time you very nearly met death yourself, wasn’t there. It was she who saved you. You must have felt stronger, afterward. Cultivation felt easier, yes?. That was the after affects, all thanks to her.”

Gradually, realization crested on Lan Jue’s face. His eyes went wide... Near death? The only time that could have been was on Taihua. He’d passed out, but it had been the Wine Master and the Physician with him then. That experience had pushed him through to seventh level. It was true, since then he had improved faster.

His head whipped around, and he fixed the Wine Master with an inquisitive look.

The Cosmagus sighed under the pressure of the Jewelry Master's stare. "She told me not to tell you."

Lan Jue took a deep breath. Were it not for the fact that they were surrounded by people, he'd have brought Qianlin out right then. He had a few burning questions to ask.

Bize went on. "I could sense her power in you, what the arrow needed. In taking some of your altruistic blood, I also bound you together. Her powers are rooted in compassion, but that certainly doesn't mean they're weak. The Silkworm Dharma and Mystic Raiment leave a sort of mark, an energy that allows the Queen to use the power for her own. It only works when the two – the Queen and her mark – are in close contact. This also allows you two to merge in to one. The draw-back is a reduction in power. However, the girl did save your life and can strengthen you to much higher levels. You don't have much of a right to complain."

"Qianlin wasn't away of these abilities. I completed the process for her. You've borne her mark ever since she saved you with the Raiment. During that time, the two of you were joined, sharing the same blood. That connection is what allows you to combine in to one body. But this presents a problem as well. Before achieving Paragon, neither of you can become... intimate. Once those fluctuations of emotion begin, the connection through blood strengthens and you join. If in the future you should near Paragon status, then it is also required that you break through together. Otherwise, neither of you will ever reach the end of your Path. The two of you must work to remain together, to combine your abilities, your yin and yang. Once the protogenic world opens up to you, you'll be even stronger than other normal Paragons – as much as a Paragon is normal. You will almost certainly begin at the second tier."

Lan Jue couldn't even comprehend second tier Paragon status. He was barely following where he was at now. He had no idea he had such a history with Zhou Qianlin. He had indeed at some point heard of the Silkworm Dharma, but he had no idea that it possessed powers like this... yet, it made sense. That day in her room, when he thought he felt her Discipline awakening, he was wrong. It wasn't awakening, but recovering.

Three times, that was all. Each time, a peak-level Adept had to start from the very beginning. What an enormous price to pay! And he'd repaid this by trying to get himself murdered non stop. A tumult of feelings swirled inside Lan Jue.

Bize's voice was hard and cruel. "Do you finally get it now, puppet? Qianlin is a good girl, and if you ever do anything to hurt her, you'll answer to me. Are you listening?"

Lan Jue grinned sheepishly. "I'm just... a little overwhelmed, Granny Bize. Thank you for telling me this, otherwise I'd never have known who saved my life."

"You needn't fear or resent any of the changes your Discipline has undergone," Bize assured him. "I do suggest that you two remain together when in the process of cultivation. Half the work for twice the result, yes? While you do need to break through to Paragon together, it doesn't matter if you're joined or not, so long as it's in tandem. When you get to this point, you'll understand."

Lan Jue nodded. He really was a mess of emotions, and he almost couldn't wait to find a place where he and Qianlin could talk.

Bize waved, and the arrow that had fallen to ground not far away floated in to her hand. The Arrow of Compassion had since lost its white light, and looked like any other normal arrow now. She reached her hand out to Lan Jue and presented it to him.

"The Clairvoyant's visions were never wrong. He brought us together because he knew you'd lead me to Aubert. I'm giving this to you as recompense and reward. Other than I, only you and Qianlin can use it. Remember, it can only strike evil, and only seals it for a time. No matter how great the darkness, this arrow will banish it. However, it will need your blood before each use. Perhaps twice more, then it will have lost its power. Use it with care."

"Thank you." Lan Jue carefully accepted the arrow from Granny Bize. The moment he took it in to his hands, he could feel a pulse, that matched his own. There was a flicker, then the arrow melted in to him.

Bize nodded her head. “The arrow came to be because of you and Qianlin’s altruism. Now that it’s returned, it will nourish you and your spirits.”

Chapter 368: Why Didn't You Tell Me?

Indeed, just as Lilou Bize-Leroy said, he could feel the arrow strengthening him from within. The image of the Arrow of Compassion hung behind his eyelids, as though a mere thought would bring it back in to being.

Aubert de Villaine slowly made his way to Bize's side. "Bize," he began, "I..."

She cut him off with a sideways glance. "Remember what you said! Slave, those were the words – starting right now!"

Aubert was perhaps happier than any person who'd ever been coerced in to slavery before. After centuries, she had forgiven him – after a fashion. It meant they would finally be together again.

"I swear to you I will not repeat my past mistakes. No matter what – you could curse me, beat me, it doesn't matter – I'll be half a step from your side until the end. I'll use the remainder of my days paying you back for the wrong I committed. Wherever you go, I'll be there. Whatever you need me to do, will be done."

Lan Jue barely contained the wince he felt. He was all over her like white on rice.

It was, however, what Bize wanted to hear. Her features softened almost immediately. "You all may go. Come by once a year perhaps, we'll share the vintage we create. You can help bring us a few comforts that are difficult to get out here."

Aubert's brows shot up, then, as a thought came to him. He looked toward the Wine Master. "Actually, I was hoping I might beg a favor."

"Of course," he replied.

After a moment of consideration, Aubert continued. "My... plans get me in bed with some powerful people in the Western Alliance. With things as they are now, I have no interest in continuing that course of action. I suspect that with your power, together with Bize and my own, we could

move Beaune to another location. Just somewhere else here on the planet. If you were to open a dimensional pocket for it, no one would come to trouble us.”

There was a note of misgiving in the elderly vintner’s voice. It was the Wine Master’s time to mull things over, but after a second he replied. “If I may, predecessor, this cooperation you had with the West...”

Aubert shook his head. “I may have decided to change plans, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to sell out my former business partners. Find out for yourselves if you must, but you won’t hear it from me. You’re also under no obligation to help us move, we can manage otherwise I’m sure.”

“Not a problem,” the Wine Master said hurriedly. “I’d be happy to lend my assistance. It looks as though my friend needs some more time to meditate regardless. Perhaps we could ask you for your hospitality for a few days.”

The two old wine maker’s nodded their wrinkled heads.

Three Paragons working in concert were capable of miraculous things. Beaune was no small town, but between the three of them, moving it would not be an issue.

The Wine Master turned his attention to Lan Jue. “Jewelry Master,” he began. “Will you making preparations to stay, or will you be returning to the other teachers?”

He didn’t need to think very long for an answer. “I’ll be heading out, there are some other matters I need to take care of. Once they’re settled I’ll leave directly for the North. There’s still the tournament to prepare for.”

“Alright, then safe travels to you. The Pauper and I will return to Skyfire Avenue once business it concluded here. Keep safe,” the Wine Master urged.

Lan Jue nodded. He turned, then, to the two gods of wine. “Congratulations on finding each other again. I have to be going.”

Bize gave him a black look. “Lan Jue, Jewelry Master... whatever you

name is, puppet, I don't care. Qianlin is my protégé, and if you upset her I'll chop your legs off. Understand?"

He could only grin awkwardly. "Not to worry. I'm off!"

Aubert reached out with a hand, and the mirror-flat bottom of the lake overhead split down the center. The beautiful sky of the Barrows was revealed. Lan Jue thanked them with a bow, then changed himself in to lightning and darted away.

The lake closed behind him. Once things were back to normal, Bize brought her eyes over to Aubert. The old man had a smile plastered on his craggy face. "Are you hungry, darling? I can make you some food."

The Wine Master was the very picture of poise, but even he couldn't suppress a chuckle at the cute old pair. In the end, it all worked out well – better, for in fact two of the great gods of wine still lived! He was terribly excited to stay here for a few days. Then there was this storage room Gates mentioned, with wines from over three hundred years ago...

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Water exploded outward from the lake like a fountain, as Lan Jue blasted through the last few feet of water. In a flash, he was on the banks. His features were strange, struggling with a host of conflicting emotions. Microscopic bolts of lightning crackled behind his eyes. Silkworm Dharma... Mystic Raiment... Qianlin, you—

He pulled free a set of clothes he'd borrowed to give to Qianlin. He then shut his eyes. There was a flash of light, and the young woman appeared to separate from Lan Jue and appear at his side. She quickly scrambled to pluck up the clothes and put them on.

"Alright," she said, her voice thin and timid.

Lan Jue opened his eyes to find Zhou Qianlin staring right back. For a long time they just looked at one another.

He didn't even know how to begin, or how to face her. She'd given up a lot for him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He asked.

“What would that have achieved,” she said, as though she’d expected the question. “To earn some sympathy? Like it or not, I used my power. It’s done, so what’s the point in discussing it. I wasn’t even using it, really, and at my speed I’ll be back to ninth level in no time. I’m at no disadvantage, since Bize ensured that our powers are joined. With you here now, I can use a more offensive Discipline if needed. That’s a net gain in the end.”

Her words were soft, but the longer she went on the harder Lan Jue had to hold back. Seeing her like this – with her twinkling impish eyes and half-smile – he couldn’t stop himself, and grabbed her up in a hug. She found herself pressed tightly against his warm chest.

Zhou Qianlin didn’t know how to react. One second she was on the defensive, and the next she was caught in a bone-popping hug. A small turned the corners of her lips, while her head rested comfortably on his shoulder. Her fingers laced together behind his back.

“It was quite a scene. I wouldn’t have thought Granny Bize would have spilled the beans, but here we are – I’m embarrassed. Should I go speak to her?” Qianlin asked.

Lan Jue shook his head. “There will be other opportunities to meet with her. Qianlin... thank you, for everything you’ve done for me. Thank you for saving my life.”

Qianlin’s body stiffened as she pushed him away. “This is why I didn’t tell you – because I don’t want your thanks. My sister would have done the same thing. I’m just here to help, and I know that the only woman in your heart is my sister. That’s proven by the fact that you’re still single, even despite being surrounded by beautiful girls. It hurts sometimes, but it also makes me happy for my sister. At the very least, she picked a good guy. If she were still alive, you two would be very happy.”

“If you are really grateful for the help I’ve given, then I beg you not to say you like me as some sort of payoff. If we do get together someday, I want it because we grew to that point naturally. I don’t want it to be because you feel like you owe me something. Love shouldn’t be built on

compensation. Alright?”

As Qianlin lectured him, her features were calm and even. She stared at him with an earnest look. It was a look that silenced Lan Jue. There was a lot he'd wanted to say, but under her stare he simply pursed his lips and nodded.

“Alright, I promise.”

“This was a very unexpected thing,” Qianlin said. She drew closer to him again, smiling sweetly. “Who could have predicted this would have happened? Poor Granny Bize, harboring a three hundred year old heartache. Well, where to next? I don't know if the tourist party has gone yet or not.”

Lan Jue shrugged. “Whether they have or not, we can't go back. We've got somewhere else to visit – to save someone.”

“Save someone?” Zhou Qianlin gave him a strange look. Quickly, though, her face returned to normal. “It isn't another girl, is it?”

“Ehm... yeah. Yeah it is,” he replied.

“I figured. This guy...” Qianlin said with a frown.

Lan Jue almost sputtered, trying to get his response out as quick as possible. “That's why I'm bringing you! Under your supervision, I'll toe the line, right? If I mess up you can beat me up. What do you think?”

She snorted a laugh at his expense. “Fine, just remember you said it. I won't go easy.”

“Alright. Just don't hit so hard you hurt yourself,” Lan Jue said with faux concern. “And proper ladies don't curse.”

“You're a proper lady!” Qianlin pouted.

“Off we go!” Lan Jue grabbed her hand without warning, and the two of them were off like a streak.

As they tore through the sky, Lan Jue ruminated on the new information he'd received. The first thing he noted, was his growing affection for Zhou Qianlin. More importantly, though, that wall between them felt as though

it was much thinner.

Maybe all they needed was time. Lately, there was evidence enough for Lan Jue to take heart.

It didn't take them long to find a public use air terminal. Lan Jue was worried he'd run in to Richard, but he was nowhere to be seen. Apparently the Pauper's methods had been effective. A peak-level Adept's threats were not to be taken lightly. It appeared as though Richard's own ninth-ranked Adept protector had convinced the young politician's son to leave. Hence their lack of trouble.

But before they boarded the ship for the next long leg of their journey, Lan Jue decided to take Zhou Qianlin out for a nice meal. Things had been strange and emotional, so some good food would be appreciated.

It was a wonderful dining experience, even considering the fare was entirely vegetarian. Still, a shadow of anxiety still lurked in the recesses of Lan Jue's heart. Where they were going next, would be a lot more dangerous than Beaune.

Chapter 369: Eurmania

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, boarding will begin shortly for the Holy City of Reims, capital of Eurmania. At this time we’d like you to gather your personal effects and prepare to disembark. We’d like to invite our first-and business-class passengers to please board the aircraft at this time.”

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin were recovering from their large meal when the broadcast came over the loudspeakers. They were staring at each other, smiling.

“Good timing,” Qianlin commended. “Just as we finish, it’s time to go.”

“Not really. Eurmania’s the capital of the Western Alliance, so there are many flights a day. Come, we should get on,” he said.

“Alright.”

Lan Jue certainly wouldn’t skimp on his own comfort, so he’d bought the two of them first-class cabins. He figured he deserved it. They scoured a planet, got in to a fight, drank poison, then almost died. It was a busy few weeks, so when he sank in to that comfortable chair Lan Jue immediately sunk in to slumber.

Qianlin curled up in the chair beside him, and watched him sleep. Her face bore a small, delicate smile, but her eyes were troubled. There was something she was pondering.

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Eurmania, thankfully, wasn’t far from the Barrows. The flight would take them two days. Lan Jue slept for near a full day before finally waking.

Airships were not friendly spaces for cultivation. The passengers cherished peace and quiet above all things, but they didn’t always get it. Like their narrowly avoided calamity on the way to the Barrows, sometimes things happen. When meditating to cultivate one’s Discipline, absolute silence was needed but – more importantly – so was stillness. The gently bumping and rocking airship wasn’t a good choice.

But Lan Jue refused to be idle. Deep meditation was off the table, but a lighter introspection would suffice. He could also use this opportunity to teach Qianlin a little bit more about controlling his Discipline.

“All your deception really caused me a lot of extra work. Had I known you were ninth-ranked... Qianlin, I have a question,” Lan Jue Said.

“Go on.”

“When you sister...” Lan Jue began. “She was a ninth ranked Adept. I never did find out what her Discipline was. Was it the same as yours?”

Qianlin looked at him for a moment before speaking. “Probably, but maybe a little different. Neither of ours were much use in a fight, though.”

Lan Jue nodded in understanding. “Hera was one hell of a pilot. God-ranked. Her Discipline didn’t amplify her suit’s attack, but it did pump up it’s energy stores. You’ve got a talent for piloting, too. With effort you could be just as good.”

Qianlin shot him a glance. “You want me to be better than her?”

“No...” Lan Jue’s eyes stared off for half a second. “That’s not what I’m saying. I just want to make sure you have the ability to protect yourself. With your sister gone...”

Zhou Qianlin was silent, and Lan Jue didn’t further disturb the stillness. Both of them stared at the carpeted floor, lost in their own thoughts.

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Although the trip wasn’t long, Lan Jue felt like they’d made good progress in improving Qianlin’s control. Two days passed quickly, and before they knew it they were on approach to the Holy City of Reims.

In stark contrast to the natural beauty of the Barrows, Eurmania was overflowing with modern flavor. It was a gorgeous place, very similar to tales of what old Earth looked like. It had been discovered one hundred and eight years ago by the West. Development of the planet began immediately afterward, and no expense was spared. To ensure it’s resources and further development, the West made Eurmania its capital.

One particularly special characteristic of this place was its days. In a forty-eight hour day, thirty-six of them the city was bathed in sunlight.

They wasted no time once the ship landed. They followed the crowds out in to the streets of Reims. Throngs of people wandered along the pristine streets, and many of them wore the traditional black pastor's smock. They walked with gentle grace, easy smiles, and the light of fervent devotion in their eyes.

Lan Jue felt the Spirit Caller gem warm against his chest. Zhou Qianlin's voice filled his mind:

Qianlin: The person we're here to save lives in Reims? Not in the Cathedral, I hope...

Lan Jue: Clever girl.

Qianlin stopped in her tracks and stared at Lan Jue with open shock. He grabbed her hand and tugged her along quickly, which brought Qianlin back to her senses.

Qianlin: The Pontiff's Citadel?

Lan Jue: It looks like you know quite a lot about the world of Adepts!

After a moment of silence, her voice replied: This is really dangerous. What's your plan?

Take it easy, first we'll wander around town some. We're not going to find our target right away. The Pontiff is in the Cathedral, he commands it personally. Safety has to be priority. Obviously a direct play is suicide, so we'll have to succeed through wit.

Qianlin nodded her agreement, but didn't say anything else.

Lan Jue used the GPS on his communicator to find a nearby hotel, choosing something mid-range. Once they got settled, they could continue their conversation.

"Hello, and welcome. May I ask what sort of room you're interested in?" The receptionist greeted them with a friendly smile.

"A suite please, with a queen-sized bed," Lan Jue answered.

Qianlin, upon hearing the arrangements, couldn't keep her face from reddening. Although the situation with their Discipline meant nothing could happen, the prospect made her bashful.

After a few more moments the keys were handed over, and Lan Jue took up Qianlin's hand. They sought out the door to their new living arrangements, on the top of the six-floor building. Lan Jue had requested it specifically because it allowed him to look out across the whole city.

At the Northern edge there was the Reims Square, a massive public square capable of accomidating three hundred thousand people. It was three hundred and forty meters long, and two hundred and forty meters across 1. It was constructed in a semi-circular fashion, where the edges were bordered by a covered walkway. It was supported by two hundred and eighty-four white marble doric columns. Underneath the canopied path, one hundred and forty-two statues of influential Citidelian saints and sages watched passers-by. Their eyes in particular were masterfully carved, so that it seemed as though they were sentient. All of this was right outside their hotel window.

When they entered the room, Lan Jue shut the door and wandered over to the window. He let his eyes scan out over the horizon, while Qianlin inspected their suite. It was essentially an apartment; with a bathroom, bedroom and living room. It wasn't an overly large space – maybe fifty square meters, average for a suite.

Once Qianlin was done looking things over, she walked to Lan Jue's side. She peered out the window as well. "What can you see from all the way up here?"

Lan Jue grinned. "I can see the whole Cathedral. First we observe, then we find a way in. I'm afraid the front door isn't an option."

"Is there anyone who might recognize you?" She asked.

"Um... Maybe." Lan Jue said. "Probably more than a few, if I'm being honest. We aren't on the best of terms."

Qianlin folded her arms. "Are you ever going to tell me who we're here to save?"

“The Moonfiend Empress, mistress of the Shattered Starfields’ Moonfiend pirates.”

Qianlin blinked at him.

“A pirate? We’re here to save a pirate? Don’t you hate pirates?” She said incredulously.

He shook his head. “She’s different. The Moonfiend pirates are the biggest and strongest pirate clan in the Starfields. They control one of the three ruling planets. Since she took over, there have been much fewer raids. The Moonfiends also don’t kill – they’re only interested in plunder. Things are much calmer and much safer, in comparison, with her in charge.”

She still looked skeptical. “No other reason?”

Lan Jue gave her a helpless, exasperated look. “Does there need to be any other reason? We used to be friends. Back when I was a mercenary, I was in the Starfields to eradicate the pirate threat. I came upon the Moonfiend Pirates – at that time still small – battling against a stronger clan. I didn’t think any of these scum deserved to live, so I was just waiting for my opportunity to end both groups. But then I saw her out there. She was young, my age.”

Qianlin chuckled and patted his shoulder. “Being a little generous with ourselves, aren’t we?”

This brought a chuckle from Lan Jue. “You want to hear or not?”

She nodded. “I do,” she said through her grin.

He went on. “I was still with your sister then, but she hadn’t come with me. I just continued to watch, and to my surprise the tides turned. The Moonfiend pirates were outnumbered and outgunned, but well organized. Eventually, they managed to win. I was curious, and still preparing for my assault. So, once all was said and done, and the Moonfiend were victorious, I showed myself. She met me face to face, already injured from battle, and demanded a dual for the lives of her people. Of course, I won – but I found that her Discipline was strange. It was light-based.”

“As now I’m sure you know, an Adept’s Discipline is a reflection of who they are as a person – their spirit. More often than not, those with a light Discipline have good hearts. Of course, there are always exceptions. I asked about her history, but she didn’t tell me. Instead, she told me her cause. She said she wanted to bring order to the chaos of the Shattered Starfields. She would create humanity’s fourth Alliance. I liked how it sounded, and I thought it would end in a net positive for everyone.”

“The Starfields are a complicated place. Reaching a solution through brute force is impossible and ill-advised. Clearly, the area would do much better under some sort of governance. We wouldn’t have to worry about the development of dangerous weapons since the terrain prevented it. It both protected and restricted them. Who could say whether her miracle would come true, but at least it might reduce the number of pirate-related deaths, I thought. So, I told her they would be allowed to live if they followed three tenets; become the leading pirate clan within three years, don’t kill anyone, and maintain order to prevent any more massacres from occurring.”

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1. So like three football fields including end zones, which according to math I’m too lazy to do, would be able to hold 74,000 people. I dunno what magic is going on in Reims but I’ll pass, thanks.

Chapter 370: The Operation Commences

“She agreed, and in the end it had taken less than three years. In that time, the Moonfiend pirates had become the strongest clan in the whole of the Shattered Starfields. About then, I also discovered that she had hailed from the Pontiff’s Citadel.”

Afterwards, Lan Jue had come to rely on the Empress’ intelligence to protect him from Citadelian patrols during his adventures.

“I have a question,” Zhou Qianlin said, after hearing Lan Jue’s tale.

Lan Jue nodded. “What’s that?”

“If we’re going to face the Citadel, why didn’t you bring the Wine Master?” She asked. “He’s right there on the Barrows – I’m sure he’ll help if you ask.”

Lan Jue shook his head at the suggestion. “I haven’t told the Wine Master anything about all this. If it were just me then it wouldn’t much of an issue. Even if I was captured, the Citadel wouldn’t dare anger the Avenue. With two new Paragons in the East, they’d have to be crazy to harm me. There would be some sort of exchange or ransom, and that’d be the end of it.”

“Secondly, this is a personal matter and doesn’t have any connection to the Avenue. If I did drag them in to this, then it’ll be two powerful organizations at each others’ throat instead of a few people’s problem. The Empress is also an important part of their organization; she used Fantascia Genetica to empower herself to the rank of Six-Wing Seraph, the Morning Star. So this is an internal matter, making it even more inappropriate for the Avenue to get involved.”

“When we first came to the West with the Wine Master, I was considering asking him for help. With his help our chances of success are much higher, of course. But there are risks and consequences. If it was revealed that he was involved, the Citadel would undoubtedly have to respond. Although the differences in power between the Wine Master and the Pontiff aren’t enormous, the leader of the Citadel is still stronger. Not

to mention, this is his home turf. The Wine Master really wouldn't stand a chance under conditions like that – hell, we just saw what could happen on the Barrows. With the Wine Master preoccupied, we'd have to handle the rest; the Lord of the Archangels, Metatron – nearly a Paragon himself – and the six Archangels. Even if there were three of me, we'd be far outmatched. It'd be a hopeless, all-out fight to the death which no one wants. So after pondering, I decided it would not be a good idea to trouble the Wine Master about it. This is my own operation, and doesn't involve either the Avenue or the Citadel. I can't let my own issues instigate a conflict between two great Adept organizations.”

Qianlin nodded in understanding and agreement. It was indeed as Lan Jue had determined, everything here came down to one person. Elevating this to involve an entire group would make it a very different beast that could very well lead to confrontation.

“So what's the plan? Direct force isn't an option, so we'll have to be clever as you said. Are you familiar with this place?” Qianlin asked.

Lan Jue chortled. “Of course not. This is the first time I've ever set foot in Reims. But even the Pontiff's Citadel has to use electricity, and where's there's electricity there's a way in. We can't run in half-cocked, though. Not only are we getting Little Yue out, but we also need to protect our identities so it doesn't bring trouble.”

Qianlin shot him a sideways glance. “Little Yue, so intimate...”

Lan Jue grinned at her. “When you're handsome you can't avoid getting some attention.”

She kind of wanted to punch him in his smug face, but she knew it wouldn't have ended well. Anyway, she didn't really want to hurt him.

They had a bite to eat, then left the hotel room. Instead of going to the Cathedral, however, their first stop was the shopping mall. If they wanted to protect their identities, they'd have to blend in. A change of clothes was the place to start.

Lan Jue bought what he assumed was a middle-income set of clothing and accessories for both he and Qianlin. Of course, Qianlin's outfit was a

little more involved. It was necessary, considering the little they'd brought with them.

All of the buildings and shops that they passed had a religious theme. A crucifix hung above every doorway. A handsome man and a beautiful woman captured quite a lot of glances as they walked from store to store, so Lan Jue decided to buy a pair of large glasses to help hide his face. Although they were just frames, it served to conceal him well. He would have preferred sunglasses, but those were not allowed to be worn inside the Cathedral. It was considered disrespectful.

Once they'd made their purchases, they decided to leave. Exiting the shops, however, they were met with a very luxurious verti-car blocking the way. It was descending noisily from above, projecting light over its intended landed spot. People hustled to get out of the way.

Lan Jue felt his heart skip a beat. He grabbed Qianlin's hand, and pulled her to the side. The verti-car doors hissed open, and a man emerged. It was a man Lan Jue knew, had even confronted – the Archangel of Healing, Raphael.

Today, he was clad in ash-gray pants and vest. A dark-colored tie sat against a white colored shirt. He looked for all the world like a perfect gentleman. The Angel of Healing entered the shop without loitering around. Luckily, Lan Jue had pulled Qianlin aside just in time. Had he not, they'd have run straight in to him.

An Adept's aura, their strength, intermingled with the strength of others when revealed. Strength attracted strength. Raphael had no need to hide his abilities here in Reims. Lan Jue, however, had to be careful – revealing his aura would immediately give him away.

"Who's he?" Zhou Qianlin asked.

"Raphael, the Archangel of Healing," Lan Jue responded.

Her face darkened. "He's one of the ones who ambushed you."

Lan Jue nodded.

"He's by himself," she whispered. "Should we just deal with him?"

Lan Jue barely suppressed a laugh. “This is the Holy City of Reims 2. It’d be unwise to confront him here...” However, just as Lan Jue said this, a light shone in his eyes. A plan was forming. “Or would it...”

Lan Jue knew that when facing enemies stronger than yourself, the first step is to conceal your objective. If the enemy doesn’t know what you’re after, they can’t keep you from it.

Raphael wasn’t the weakest of the six Archangels, but he was lower on the roster. He was a support Adept, so his direct attack power was limited. With he and Qianlin hand in hand, Raphael wouldn’t be much a problem.

Lan Jue’s mind worked quickly. He only had a second, and in that second his plan was formalized.

“Let’s go.” Lan Jue pulled Zhou Qianlin back in to the store behind him. Raphael, as expected, wasn’t taking any effort to conceal his powers – his aura pulsed visibly. Even separated by walls and floors, Lan Jue knew where he was. There was no rush, so Lan Jue slowly and quietly lead Qianlin upstairs toward where Raphael lounged.

Third floor – that was their destination. It looked like a clothing accessories store, and the Angel of Healing was trying on a new wardrobe. Lan Jue turned right around and left the shop.

“We’re not going after him here?” Qianlin asked.

“We are, but not this minute,” Lan Jue explained. “These sorts of stores are almost certainly being monitored with surveillance video. We’re always being watched, there’s no hiding. All the Citadel would have to do is review the tape, and they’d know it was us. First, we’ll have to solve the surveillance issue.”

Qianlin noticed a peculiar light in Lan Jue’s eyes. “I never would have thought you’re such a pro at this.”

“Pro,” Lan Jue snorted. “This is all just common sense.”

Qianlin answered with a snort of laughter. “Alright. Common sense, then. Lan Jue, can you promise me something?”

“What.” He replied.

“We’re here to save people. I don’t want anyone hurt. People who come after you, that’s fine, but these shop owners are just living their lives...”

Lan Jue smiled in the face of her kindness. “Relax. The Arrow of Compassion is still part of me. Like Bize said, if I do anything improper than the arrow will punish me for it. This is why she gave it to me, and not to you. She has faith in your kindness. For her, I’m still a question mark. She never said it, but I’m sure this arrow was her way of keeping an eye on me.”

Qianlin’s response sounded anxious. “Will this have some sort of impact on you?”

He shook his head. “No. At most it’ll just limit some of my options. This was a weapon made through the power of a Paragon after all. I don’t want to mess with that. I’ve never harmed an innocent anyway.”

They returned to the first floor of the shop as they spoke. The whole time Lan Jue searched for the surveillance control room – for him, it wouldn’t be difficult to find.

Electricity was everywhere, and Lan Jue’s own electric Discipline helped to highlight where the energies were strongest. This shop – unlike the Cathedral of Reims – did not have defenses in place to keep Adepts out. So, Lan Jue did what would be considered suicide for any normal man and stuck his finger in a nearby socket. Through the coursing volts of electricity, he was able to follow them to the surveillance control room. Among Adepts with this ability, they referred it as creating a dynamic conduit.

Through the sensations he picked up in the electricity, Lan Jue was quickly able to find the location of the security surveillance room. Taking Zhou Qianlin once more by the hand, he lead her quietly to their objective.

1. Otherwise known as the Superman Effect:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8ou7oq6Td8>

2. I'm not sure if this has been mentioned, but this is a very typical Chinese response for certain things. 'This is China' is used any time the speaker wants to apologize for their country or chastise foreigners. Holy shit, is my taxi driver smashed on rice wine? 'This is China.' My boss just forced me to wake up at 5:30 to work an extra three hours with no pay. 'This is China.' What do you mean I can't pay my cellphone bill without showing you my passport? 'This is China.' Here, 'This is Reims' is used similarly to explain in a somewhat derogatory tone that her idea is stupid.

Chapter 371: Raphael and His Tailor

What happened next was simple; a ninth level Adept had no trouble dealing with the normal security – little more effort than lifting a finger. Lan Jue didn't even need to enter the room. He urged his electric Discipline through a nearby outlet, shorting out all of the equipment within. At the very least, all of their surveillance footage for the day was lost.

It was quick, and quiet. Those in the shop were none the wiser. Still, they'd left a mess and wanted to vacate as soon as possible. They returned to the third floor.

Raphael was still there. He was trying on clothes while chatting with the tailor. She was a woman who looked to be in her thirties. Her long black hair was stark against a white blouse with the sleeves rolled up. Agile fingers pulled her crimped hair back in to a pony tail, accentuating her long pale neck.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin watched from a distance. Raphael and the tailor seemed well acquainted. They would laugh together from time to time. She swatted at his shoulder from some comment he'd made.

One constant among the Archangels was their beauty. Each one of them looked as though they were sculpted by the hand of God himself. They certainly didn't have to try in order to attract attention, especially from women.

Raphael had replaced his outfit with a pale yellow three-piece suit, purple shirt and white tie. He looked like Spring, given flesh.

Lan Jue couldn't help but smirk. "This guy, desperately trying to act the young man. Fresh colors won't hide his age. It looks like he and the Gourmet share the same taste in tailors."

Qianlin blinked at him. "You mean the Gourmet and the Seamstress...?"

Lan Jue nodded. "They made it official not long ago. I'll bring you along when they hold the wedding. 1"

“Great! So, when do we make out move?” Qianlin nervously said.

Lan Jue produced two butterfly masks he’d picked up while shopping, and handed one to Qianlin. “Soon.”

Zhou Qianlin’s face reddened. “Should we...”

Her companion chortled, but did steal a glance at her delicate lips. “It won’t be necessary to handle Raphael. Let’s go, he’s in for a surprise.”

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Raphael’s appreciation for this store wasn’t simply because of the well-tailored clothes, but clearly involved the tailor – Julie. She was famous in the Holy City. In fact, Raphael wasn’t the only one interested in her, for Gabriel had also expressed some interest. In the end, Raphael had been more direct and more charming.

It was obvious to everyone that this was not Raphael’s first lover, or his last. Archangels were always in demand, and the only thing that mattered was bliss in the moment.

“Mh. Yes, very good. It’s a little young, but it’ll be suitable during springtime.” Julie looked him over with a small smile.

This was what Raphael appreciated about her. Man or women, someone who took pride in their work was to be respected.

Julie could feel his burning gaze on her. She raised her head, just as Raphael leaned down to plant a kiss on her lips. His deep voice whispered, “What would you say about spending a little private time? Just to clear our heads.”

The tailor’s face reddened slightly, and she gently bumped a fist against his chest. “What sort of Archangel are you? It’s the middle of the day, you aren’t afraid of upsetting the Father?”

Raphael smiled disarmingly. “How’s that? We aren’t in the Cathedral. And you’re my girl, there’s nothing wrong with this. ‘We love because He first loved us’; Book of John, chapter four verse sixteen. My affection for you comes from the heart, and thus the body yearns!”

Julie slipped from his grasp, but her expression showed that his words were working. Raphael didn't insist – he enjoyed the chase. He was a mature adult, and patience was a virtue.

The Archangel took another look at his suit. Julie had done a fine job, she was very familiar with his dimensions. Her suits were always perfectly fitted.

“Hello. I'm so sorry to trouble you, but is this shop open for business?” A pleasing voice interrupted their exchange.

Both Raphael and Julie swung their eyes to the door. The tailor's face was no longer red, and she smiled amicably. However, a strange look came over her when she saw who'd addressed them. They were certainly a strange couple, these two. Both had the bottom parts of their face hidden behind a face-mask.

Raphael scowled in irritation. “It's too early for Halloween, and this isn't a costume shop.”

A gentle titter came from the woman. “No it's not, but we felt like having a little fun. It doesn't change our need for a new wardrobe.”

Julie approached, full of professionalism. “Absolutely, please come in. Please don't worry, we take pains to ensure completely anonymity of our customers.”

Raphael said nothing further. Instead, he busied himself with admiring the suit. His plan was to return to the Cathedral wearing it, to make the other Archangels jealous. The Citadel imposed very few restrictions on the Archangels. They were often out and about integrating with the populace and, although they were devout, details tended to go unnoticed when they weren't under the Pontiff's watchful eye.

“I heard that the men of Reims were all very gentlemanly. Is that true?” It was the man who'd spoken this time. His voice sounded hoarse.

Julie continued with the small talk. “Oh, that must mean you aren't from here. I can't hear an accent, though.”

The couple slowly traipsed closer their way. The man laughed again.

“We’re not from here. I was just curious whether His Excellency Raphael, the great Archangel of Healing, cared whether you lived or died.”

Raphael had just been preparing to go, when he stopped in his tracks. His face changed suddenly, and grew dark with anger. However, before he could react, a milky white light enveloped Julie and separated her from the others. Shock was written clear on the tailor’s face, but in a testament to her character she remained calm.

The angel’s skin took on a radiant, divine glow. From beneath his feet arose a soothing pale light. But the murder in his eyes was anything but holy. He fixed the masked man with a cold stare. His deep voice filled the shop. “That is not a very funny joke.”

He hadn’t felt anything menacing since their pair had entered Julie’s store. Neither of them let off an aura, either. More importantly, however, was the fact that they stood in the near center of Reims. This was the home of the Pontiff’s Citadel, with all of the organizations most powerful players minutes away – including the Pontiff himself. No Adept would dare make trouble here, and the normal folk were all strict adherents to their religion. Using belief as a means of control worked better than Skyfire Avenue’s methods by a large margin.

Lan Jue, of course the man behind the mask, chuckled dismissively. “My time is precious, and I wouldn’t want to waste it making jokes about His Excellency. Now, if the Lord Raphael does indeed care for the life of this beautiful woman, we ask that you seal your Discipline and take a walk with us.”

Raphael was equal parts stunned and infuriated. “Do you think you can threaten me with this? Since you seem to know who I am, you should know this isn’t going to end well for you.”

Lan Jue looked at Julie, and grunted. “It appears His Excellency the Archangel isn’t as fond of you as he lets on. He isn’t willing to make any sort of exchange.”

Julie’s calm exterior never cracked. “None of this instigation is necessary. I never wanted to bring any harm to him – Raphael, go. They’re

here for you, just leave me here. Go!” There was an almost fervent air about her, like Raphael had completely brainwashed her.

Raphael had indeed been prepared to leave, but her words touched him. His mind reflected on the... benefits of her company. Pretty things were as transient as the clouds, but his affection was deeper for her than for any of his former lovers. Perhaps he could love this woman, until she grew old.

That split-second of hesitation was all that the pair needed. The man waved his right hand, the world around them began to swirl nauseatingly. Raphael felt a strange sensation race through him, as up become down and left became right. Even his Discipline was writhing and twisting inside him like a ball of worms.

What power was this? Raphael turned pale with fright, for right then he could feel that both his attackers were stronger than he. Under circumstances like this, he had but one recourse. His Light Discipline flooded through him and burst forth as he prepared to flee.

In the end, his own life was the most important. All vestiges of chivalry and valor were gone. He was already thinking about revenge, not how to save his ‘beloved.’

Whoosh! Raphael rushed out of the tailor’s as fast as he could. Although Julie’s pleas had been true and impassioned, her face fell when she saw him flee with no thought for her.

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1. In China, the marriage process is different than you might expect. It’s a long, laborious celebration laden with tradition and ceremony. It **BEGINS** with you and your spouse signing the wedding papers. From that point on, you’re legally married. However, the actual wedding celebration won’t occur for another six months to a year in some cases (seven months for mine). During that time all the preparations are made for the wedding, parties are held, groomsmen and bridesmaids carefully selected, and ultimately a date settled upon by your local

astronomer.

Chapter 372: Captured! Angel of Healing

He could hear Lan Jue's voice, faint but biting: "This guy is worthless."

In a flash, the two figured who had assaulted Julie were gone from her side.

Raphael stumbled through the store, headed for the window. From there his communicator could get a signal out the Citadel for help. These two were strong, but they couldn't be any higher than ninth rank – neither were Paragons. It would take time for them to take him down, if that was their aim, hopefully long enough for his friends to arrive. At the moment, Julie was completely gone from his memory. Surviving was paramount.

Just then, a strange attractive force caused him to stagger. It was coming from behind, pulling him away from freedom. In the next instant the world was spinning all around him. Reality warped, and a stifling pressure bore down on him with strength enough to shatter bone.

It was terrifying. Raphael had never experienced this level of suppression. The power of these strangers had the entire area under their control.

Was this... a Paragon's Domain?

Stunned as he was, he hardly noticed the pair of hands groping toward him; one black, and one white. He summoned the loudest shout he muster, and brought his Discipline to bear as a shield. It was just in time, for no sooner had his shield materialized than a series of blue flashes began to assail him. Somehow the power penetrated his shields, shocking him and constraining his abilities.

The massive hands came crashing down upon him, slamming in to the circle of holy light at his feet. There was a terrible sound, like glass crackling, then Raphael's protective shell exploded in a shower of twinkling light.

Real fear was reflected in the Archangel's wide eyes. These foes were even stronger than he'd thought, and there were two against just him. On

top of that, he'd never even seen this strange Discipline before.

Raphael focused the entirety of his remaining energy in to the palms of his hands. With a grunt, he shoved them both forward and released the energy in a staggering shock wave. His hope was to push his enemies back enough to make an escape.

However, just as the blast of energy left his hands, the world before him spun dizzily. A vortex swelled in to view just in front of him that dispersed his last-ditch effort.

It was a new sensation for him, and one that was entirely unpleasant. He'd never come across a power that could negate his holy energies in such a way. It was, in a word, incomprehensible.

He looked on as the masked woman appeared. From the center of her chest, she extended a palm toward him that was wreathed in tendrils of violet electricity. Raphael went flying.

That vacuum force returned, sucking him forward despite the crushing force that had blown him back. The large black and white hands reacted as well, reaching for him. Raphael felt like he was caught in molasses, unable to move. Although he desperately fought to withstand them, he had no more energy to do so.

The two hands clapped down on his shoulders, and again the world went spinning. Raphael felt his innards warp with it, like they were trying to tear themselves apart. Every inch of him felt as though it were being pulled in a hundred different directions.

The world went black.

All of this happened in the space of a spark. Julie had freed herself, and rushed outside just in time to see the hands lay Raphael flat. He was limp, and the masked man lifted him easily from the floor with a single hand. He flung the unconscious Archangel over his shoulder before approaching her.

"Y-you..." Julie shook, both from fear and surprise. Even under duress, she never doubted the strength of Raphael. These terrorists couldn't have

been stronger than he, she'd thought. To her, the Pontiff's Six Archangels were synonymous with unbeatable. However, what she was looking at now disproved that. These two were stronger than her sweet Raphael. Her brave, strong, valiant Angel of Healing was slung like a slain mongrel over this man's shoulder. It was unthinkable... something that she would never have thought within the realm of possibility.

"When his friends get here, tell the Citadel that I've taken him. Let's see who I get next..." He let the words hang in the air for a moment. Then, with a nod to Qianlin, the two of them and their sleeping prize vanished in a flash of lightning.

When turned to electricity, Lan Jue didn't have the capabilities or bringing someone with him. What he could do, though, was store a person in his interspacial container. At Raphael's level of cultivation, it would be a couple days before he suffocated to death.

Lan Jue was already familiar with the layout. They exited out in to the market while removing their masks. Then, with the change in clothes they'd just purchased in hand, they went in to the bathroom to change.

A few minutes later two entirely different people exited, or so it seemed. Even Julie would have a hard time recognizing them if she was walking right passed. They headed for the market's exit as an alarm screeched in the distance. They simply walked on, strolling by the shops like they hadn't a care in the world.

It wasn't until they reached the hotel room and shut the door behind them, that Qianlin felt safe enough to let out a sigh. She looked at Lan Jue and saw the light of excitement in his eyes. It was a different experience for her – she'd never kidnapped anybody before!

There was a flash of silver light, and Raphael appeared on the ground before them. He was still unconscious.

During their confrontation, Lan Jue was careful not to use any of his thunderbolt Discipline. Instead, he used his Discipline to empower his Taiji 1. Zhou Qianlin, in contrast, gleefully employed the electrical attacks of their shared Discipline with one hand, while the other was wrapped

around his waist. Through the Soul Caller gemstone they were able to communicate instantly, silently, and with precision. Under Lan Jue's command their coordination was flawless.

Raphael was unique – all of the Archangels were. However, he had never really been a match for Lan Jue individually, not to mention his support-based Discipline. In the face of two ninth level seventh rank Adepts, he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. Part of that, too, was the presence of Lan Jue's Taiji martial power. Such a spiritual based manifestation was almost certainly nothing like what he was familiar with.

Lan Jue sharply slapped Raphael's forehead. The action was met with a crackle of electricity that raced all across his body, making the angel flop like a fish on the carpet.

"What are you doing?!" Zhou Qianlin asked with a start.

"These sorts of Disciplines rely on occultism," Lan Jue explained. "They'll certainly have him tracked with some sort of spell. With a net of protogenic energy, I can lock that power away so he's no more traceable to them than we are. Now we get to watch as the Citadel goes crazy."

He'd walked to the window as he spoke, and looked out over the city. Just as forecast, it was only a few minutes before scores of guards dressed in Citadelian habit poured from the Cathedral doors. He could also see the faint light of a pulsing Discipline somewhere inside. Lan Jue was right – their response time was very fast. A minute or two too late, and they'd have been in real trouble.

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"What? Someone kidnapped Rafael?" Shock twisted Metatron's perfect features. What he was hearing was impossible.

This was the Holy City of Reims! How could there possibly be someone mad enough to take an Archangel? More importantly, they grabbed him without a sound, without a trace. The Citadel was entirely in the dark.

The Pontiff didn't trouble himself with most matters of the Citadel. Those clerical duties fell largely to the Lord of Archangels. There was a

reason for this, and Metatron quickly put away his surprise to get down to business. A chilly calm over him.

“Summon the Messenger of Death, Gabriel. And call for the Cherubim Uriel as well... we’ll have to go take a look for ourselves.”

Ten minutes later, three of the strongest Adepts in the Pontiff’s employ were standing in the tailor shop. Julie was among them, stunned.

These men knew Julie. The Archangels were close, and knew of one another’s exploits. Gabriel, with knit brow, was first to speak. “Tell us what happened, and don’t leave out any detail.”

The tailor took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Raphael was here trying on some clothes. Then, two people came in. They wore face masks that covered their nose and mouth...”

She spend the next few minutes going over everything that had happened, from beginning to end. Julie had a good memory, and the traumatic experience wasn’t likely one she was quick to forget.

“Let’s see who I get next?” Metatron’s handsome face bore a beautiful fury. This sort of arrogance was certainly their way of angering the Citadel.

Gabriel went on. “The Inquisition is already looking for them 2. Should we let Constantine know?”

Metatron nodded. “Yes. This whole thing is very unusual. Obviously they’re targeting the Citadel. I tried to locate him back in the Cathedral but could find no trace, so it’s likely they have him sealed away somehow. We have to be prepared, because they certainly were. Come, let’s check the security footage and see if we can pick up any details. Then we’ll go to the market, the shop that sells those masks. Perhaps the shop owner can remember something. Someone get on the communicator with the Inquisition and tell them the Holy City is now under martial law. Get lists of all foreign nationals staying in local hotels, with pictures. Leave no stone unturned.”

Metatron was a master at his job, and he put his full intellect to the

problem at hand. With clarity and without hesitation, their plan of action was implemented.

“If this attack was deliberate then we’re unlikely to find any evidence,” Uriel mused. “The assailants probably took this all in to account. I’d be surprised if we find anything at all. Should we bring this to His Majesty?”

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1. I can’t recall how I wrote this before – either Taiji or Tai Chi – but if I wrote Tai Chi then I was either drunk or negligent because that’s a terrible way to translate/spell it. It’s Taiji going forward, just know they’re the same.
2. In case you aren’t history buffs or fans of Monty Python, the Inquisition was a group of organization that were tasked with stamping out heresy, and anti-church sentiment. The most famous was probably the Spanish Inquisition who killed hundreds of Jews and forcibly converted thousands of others. All together, it’s estimated the inquisition killed between three thousand and five thousand people.

Chapter 373: Without a Trace

Metatron nodded his head. “This isn’t something we’ll be able to sweep under the rug. I’ll return to the Cathedral and ask the Pontiff for further instructions. From this point forward, you aren’t to leave each others’ sight. If you encounter the enemy, report it immediately. If what the tailor said is true, then they weren’t just here for Raphael.”

Uriel nodded in agreement.

They soon discovered that Uriel’s predictions were right; the equipment had been destroyed and there was no way they could recover the day’s footage. They did manage to find the shop where the masks had been sold, but the owner was no help. He noticed the masks were gone, and the money for them was in the till – and yet, he couldn’t for the life of him remember anyone coming in to purchase them.

Gabriel sent for someone to come examine the money in the hopes of finding fingerprints. They did – several hundred, in fact. The money they’d used was too well worn to even hold complete prints, so most were fragments anyhow.

Their only lead had been cut. Uriel anticipated the results of the hotel sweep to be a bust as well. These terrorists knew what they were doing, as evident by the complete lack of clues.

The whole atmosphere of the Holy City reacted. A thick anxiety hung over the city like a fog. Inquisitors swept through every street and lane. Every hotel was scoured and their logs confiscated. Everyone couple was stopped, especially the young ones, as the search ramped up.

Still, nothing.

Lan Jue had, of course, come prepared. Fake IDs had been used to book their rooms, which claimed they were from some large company here on business. When the Inquisition eventually knocked on their door, Lan Jue met them with an easy smile. He was even so haughty as to drop hints, but they never caught on.

It looks like they don't know anything. What's next? After the Inquisition left, Qianlin spoke with Lan Jue through the Soul Caller gem.

Lan Jue smiled. "Nothing. Sleep. I'm not impatient." As he spoke, Lan Jue nonchalantly wandered to the bed and took a seat. It was already dark out.

"Hey," Qianlin protested. "If you're on the bed, where am I sleeping?"

Lan Jue laid back with a grunt, and patted the mattress beside him. "Right here. It isn't any closer than when we were traveling on the airship. Plus, I'm about the safest man for you to have in this situation. If anything should start to happen, you'll just melt right in to me. And then –"

Woosh! Lan Jue didn't see the whirling sofa cushion until it smacked him. In the end, Lan Jue found himself sleeping on the sofa. They were only separated by a thin wall between the bedroom and the sitting room, but it felt like different worlds.

Lying in bed, Zhou Qianlin could feel her heart beating. A confused flurry of emotion filled her eyes as they stared at the ceiling. Still, she felt... secure. She knew it was because he was right outside.

Lying on the sofa, Lan Jue could hear Qianlin's gradually easing breath from the other side of the thin wall. He had sunken in to a quietude himself. In his pondering, though, he couldn't help but recognize that things were changing. The more time he spent with Zhou Qianlin, the more he mistook her for Hera. Whenever that happened his defenses dropped.

Wait, he thought. Sleep? We should be training!

Lan Jue's mouth curled in to a frown. What was he thinking? Clearly his emotions were clouding his judging. So be it, sleep it was. They'll continue with cultivating tomorrow. With no recourse, Lan Jue closed his eyes. Soon he was asleep.

While Lan Jue and Qianlin slept easy in their hotel beds, things were very different in the Citadel. Martial law had been imposed, and the word had been spread that the hunt was on for blasphemers. It was a frightening prospect for many, and although the West maintained it's

government here everyone knew the Pontiff's Citadel was the real power on Eurmania. However, while they enjoyed a powerful position in the West, things weren't decided by a single Adept organization. The Citadel's complete control only extended to the borders of Reims.

The Pontiff had yet to show himself. However, the Citadel had since lapsed in to a reverent stillness. One of the six great Archangels had been stolen away. Their beloved Angel of Healing, captured. It was a deep, burning disgrace for this holy order.

In truth, they didn't even know whether or not the attackers and Raphael were still in the Holy City. It had all happened so quickly, by the time the Citadel had caught wind the assailants must have had ample time to escape. The more time stretched on, the more difficult their search would become.

If they got out of the Pontiff's sphere of influence, things might get messy. Powerful adepts though they were, could they hope to contend with a government? With a galactic fleet? Of course not, so they would need to play by the rules.

They could also approach the government for help. Aside from the West's raw military power, they also stood to benefit from sweeping something as humiliating as this under the rug. Remember that half of this planet was lost to hell. The Dark Citadel was only too anxious to abuse any opportunity the Pontiff gave to degrade them.

One full day and night of searching had produced nothing. With satellites spells and manpower, not a trace was revealed. Although the satellites were precise, it was a long shot. In a crowded city like Reims, picking two suspects out from hundreds of thousands was almost impossible.

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Within the Grand Cathedral of Reims.

Six men were situated around a large, circular table. Although they all looked different, each were garbed in opulent garb – and wore a dark scowl.

Metatron was seated farthest from the door, head of the table. To his left was the Angel of War, Michael 1. He looked mostly recovered from his conflict with Lan Jue all those months ago. However, of all those seated here, his expression held the deepest fury. He and Raphael were close friends.

The next two positions of import were occupied by Gabriel and Uriel.

Across from them sat Ramiel, the Angel of Visions 2 and Sariel the Archangel of the Moon 3.

Metatron and five Archangels. This was the highest court the Citadel possessed, with the exception of the Pontiff himself. Constantine had been appointed Inquisitor General and was hunting his prey.

“Not a trace.” Metatron growled. “The attackers must certainly have prepared beforehand, and specifically to target us. Why, however, we don’t yet know. If anyone has any thoughts, now is the time to share them.”

Uriel spoke first. “The simplest answer is to wait for their next move. Like you said, we don’t know their aim – but they have Raphael, and he plays a part in it. Otherwise, they’d have killed him already. We wait for our opportunity, then sweep in before they know we’re close.”

Ramiel, seated across from the Cherub, scowled at the table top. “So you suggest we tuck tail, lick our wounds and let them hit us again?”

Gabriel shot his fellow Archangel a glance. “Of course not. Uriel is advocating caution. We mustn’t be rash.”

Ramiel laughed dismissively. “Rash? Your clever little trap from before wasn’t rash? Michael almost died because of it, and the news that our Angel of War was so severely beaten is still making the rounds in the bars. Now the enemy is at the gates – is this what you’re ‘advocating’, Uriel?”

“Watch your tone, Ramiel,” Uriel growled.

The Archangel of Visions laughed off his compatriot’s threat. “Metatron asked us to share our thoughts. I’m simply expressing my opinion. If you disagree with it, then keep your mouth shut.”

“What’s the meaning of this,” Gabriel interjected. His voice was thick with anger.

The Six Archangels were close, but stress had them on edge. The Pontiff’s Citadel had always sought to return to the glory of the old days. Canonically, there should be seven Archangels, for example. The Moonfiend Empress was that seventh, the Morning Star. Now they were down two.

The Empress, before leaving, had held a close relationship to both Ramiel and Sariel. Michael, the strongest of them, paid no mind to these cliques and games. The others, however, did.

“That’s enough, back to business,” Metatron said, knocking his knuckles against the table. For emphasis, the power of his aura began to thicken in the air around them.

Gabriel looked back to the Lord of the Archangels. “I agree with Uriel. Right now, our best option is to see what comes next. We mustn’t act blindly. That will only make things easier for our opponent. According to Raphael’s tailor, they are strong. We also don’t know if they have backup – it could be a whole coterie. Lord Metatron, did His Majesty have any instructions?”

“The Pontiff has commanded that we bring Raphael back as soon as possible, Metatron said. “His Majesty’s cultivation process prevents him from acting directly. Michael, what are your thoughts on all this?”

Although Metatron was stronger than Michael, the Angel of War was first among his Archangels. He specialized in combat, and with his experience Metatron often relied on his suggestions.

After a moment, Michael deep, rumbling voice replied. “I also believe Uriel is correct. We stay the course. Constantine and the Inquisition are already scouring the city. Our actions must be measured, and careful. From now on no one goes out alone.”

Metatron heaved a sigh, and a hard light flashed across his eyes. “This is an absolute embarrassment for our Citadel. Nothing short of a slap in the face. When I catch those vermin, I’ll hear their confessions after they’ve

been nailed to a cross.”

Ramiel sat back in his chair, with a mocking expression pointed at the table. The only female among the Archangels – Sariel – remained expressionless like none of this mattered to her at all.

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1. Here is an explanation of Chinese seating arrangements in terms of respect. In reality it isn't this strict, in most cases, but the left-hand side is the seat most coveted, equivalent to the 'right-hand man':
<http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/chinese-food/seating-arrangement.htm>
2. TJSS did his homework. Interestingly, Ramiel is also called the 'Thunder of God', and TJSS used the character for thunder – 雷 – to write his name (in pinyin it's Lei Mi Er, so if this is intentional it's a really clever little detail that fits perfectly with Chinese naming practices). Pretty cool.
3. Here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sariel>

Chapter 374: The Archangel of the Moon, Sariel

On the second day, martial law was lifted. They had to be cautious about remaining in that state for too long, lest panic set in among the people. However, it was all just appearances. The Inquisition was as busy as ever, searching every nook and cranny for their lost Archangel.

Lan Jue stood before the window of his hotel room. He stood there, with a small grin on his face, watching the Cathedral from afar.

“What’s the next step?” Zhou Qianlin stood at his shoulder and followed his eyes to the seat of the Pontiff’s power. They hadn’t stepped foot outside all day, and had only eaten from the hotel’s cafeteria. Lan Jue had spent most of that time silently staring out of the window.

“We’re in no rush,” Lan Jue said. “They’re the ones with their hair on fire for the moment. They’re waiting to hear from us. So that’s what we’re going to do.”

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Half an hour later, a paper slip was being delivered to Metatron.

The words on it were simple: If you want Raphael back, go to the Dark Citadel.

It was only one sentence, but the implication made Metatron furious. Clearly, this was their enemy fermenting mischief. The Pontiff’s Citadel and Satan’s coterie were long-standing enemies, but they maintained a tentative cease-fire. The West kept the peace by refusing to allow Adepts from either side to visit the other. The Citadels had their own safeguards as well. In Reims, for instance, there was specialized equipment for detecting dark-aligned Disciplines. In fact, the Pontiff’s own Astrum was very sensitive to the presence of darkness. He’d have felt someone immediately. The situation was undoubtedly similar in Hell – the side of the planet that the Dark Citadel controlled.

They’d learned something about the attackers from their investigation in

to the tailor's shop. One of them possessed a Discipline of black and white power. The other manipulated electricity. As far as they were able to tell, it was the woman who used the lightning. Neither of them appeared to possess a dark Discipline.

Metatron looked over the slip again, and felt disgust at his taunters. He discarded the paper, and it burst in to flames in midair. Not even ash reached the floor. His eyes stared off as he pondered upon something.

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"Metatron is almost certainly spitting blood by this point." Lan Jue smirked with self-satisfaction as he stared at the distant Cathedral.

Qianlin, puzzled, furrowed her brow. "If you knew they wouldn't believe your message then why did you send it?"

"To keep them on their toes," Lan Jue explained.

She still didn't understand, but he didn't seem in the mood to explain. She dropped the topic. Lan Jue, meanwhile, watched the Cathedral intently. A faintly discernible change had come over him.

"We're ready for phase two."

Qianlin looked back to the opulent building, but could see nothing different. It all looked normal to her. When she looked back at Lan Jue, the look on his face said he had a plan.

They hanged clothes – the clothes they'd bought from the day before – and Lan Jue perched those frameless glasses on his nose. Now, looking for all the world like two average tourists, Qianlin and Lan Jue set out for the Cathedral.

When they arrived, the two of them meandered among the famed walks as any visitor would. Lan Jue even managed to keep a pious expression on his features. Qianlin, however, was fraught with nerves. They'd just kidnapped one of this organization's most cherished soldiers, and here they were waltzing right in to the belly of the beast. They were certainly being recorded, and destroying that equipment was infinitely more difficult than their quick work at the tailor's shop. At the slightest sign of

trouble, with the Citadel as tightly wound as it was, things could turn sour. The Pontiff himself, a Paragon, was a shout away. If he showed up, it would spell the end for them.

She kept these concerns to herself, however. Coiling her arm around Lan Jue's, she followed him in to the center of the Citadel's power. They followed a coiling corridor, pushed along by the crowd toward the Cathedral interior.

All visitors to the Cathedral of Reims were accompanied by the church's clergy. Tourists and pilgrims alike were herded along at a brisk pace to keep things moving in a quick and organized fashion. However, Lan Jue wasn't interested in a tour – when he saw a small path before the Cathedral entrance, he pulled Qianlin with him out of the crowds.

They were met immediately with a clergyman. However, instead of stopping them, he produced two white robes and silently waited for them to pull them on. From the back, at least, they would look like any other Cathedral staff. Qianlin was even more unsettled, and not a little surprised by the situation. However, she said nothing, and simply followed Lan Jue with her hand in his.

They followed the silent clergyman through a series of curving, roundabout pathways that lead to a building. Once inside, they stopped to assess their surroundings.

The room was extravagantly decorated in former era European fashion. It's vaulted ceiling soared overhead, and the dome interior had been painted with stunning frescos. The carpeting was a wine red with interwoven golden fiber, and the furniture upon it were amalgamations of white and gold.

The soundless priest left without uttering a word. Alone, Lan Jue lead Qianlin to a nearby sofa and took a seat. He sat with the ease of a casual visitor, but Qianlin's small hands had begun to sweat from fear.

"Relax, everything is fine," Lan Jue assured with a disarming smile. She looked back and nodded her head, but said nothing. She didn't want to disturb his focus.

After a few moments the door opened and another figure entered from outside. Like the clergyman from before, this stranger was dressed in a white robe. Where they differed that that this newcomer was wearing a cloak that completely concealed their face.

Lan Jue sat, unmoving. Zhou Qianlin tightened her grip on his hand.

“You can relax, this is my meditation room. Once holy light fills it, the outside world is locked away.” Their voice was pleasing, almost musical, but bore a cold indifference. A pair of hands reached out from the flowing white robes to pull the hood back.

A shock of golden hair tumbled from within the hood like a wave. Her skin was impossible fair, pale as moonlight. Her namesake – a half-moon – was imprinted on her forehead. A pair of big, baby blue eyes shone like windows to the soul. Just her presence left an undeniable sensation, like they were in the presence of divinity.

Lan Jue rose to his feet and approached. He extended his right hand. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, her voice detached and unfriendly, “we aren’t... accustomed to shaking hands here.”

Lan Jue laughed it off and retracted his hand. “I understand.” And he did – she didn’t want to have any more contact with him than was necessary.

The girl continued, her voice soft and dispassionate. “She’s being held in the Tribunal, under control of the Inquisition. The whole place is blanketed in security. The Empress has already been tried and found guilty – the punishment will be to start anew. At the Pontiff’s command they’ll strip her of everything, and create a new Morning Star. The process of sealing away her process began a week ago. They’ll need forty-nine days in total to completely remove her Discipline.

Lan Jue was serious, down to business. “I’ll need a map – the more detailed, the better. Best would be a whole layout, including electrical lines.”

“You seem confident,” the young woman said.

“Not absolute confidence,” he confessed. “With the Pontiff here, our chances are... less optimistic.”

Her voice dropped low. “What you’re looking for... I can bring to you. But the Pontiff has already sealed her Discipline. Escape will not be easy. In a week Metatron will be leaving. He’ll be taking the Cherub and the Angel of Visions with him to the Adept competition in the North. They’re bringing someone else as well, some young newcomer. That would be the wisest time to strike.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “Metatron is smart – always thinking one step ahead. There’s no doubt that the Pontiff will increase security once the Lord Archangel and the others leave. No, the earlier the better. Just bring the package, that’s all you have to worry about – I’ll figure it out from there.”

“Very well,” she said. “Tomorrow I’ll have someone deliver the package to the designation place. One more thing – be careful to avoid the High Inquisitor, Constantine. He’s a powerful one, and bears an artifact that makes him stronger. If his Discipline were purer, he’d be greater than Metatron himself.”

Lan Jue nodded in appreciation. “Thank you for the advice.”

“Five minutes after I leave someone will be along to lead you back,” she stated.

Lan Jue smiled. “Alright.”

She replaced her hood and left without uttering another word. Zhou Qianlin looked at him, and opened her mouth to speak but was silenced by a gesture.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Lan Jue promised.

As the woman had said, five minutes later the same priest who’d lead them here returned. They took the same route back that they’d used before. Qianlin paid careful attention, and noticed the distinct lack of surveillance equipment.

The walk back to the hotel was uneventful. At last, Qianlin asked her

questions.

“You have a contact in the Pontiff’s Citadel? And not a grunt, by the looks of her. That woman’s aura felt very powerful.”

He smirked. “Are you familiar with the term bff?¹”

“Of course,” Qianlin said, a little surprised.

“That was Sariel, Archangel of the Moon,” Lan Jue explained. “She and the Moonfiend Empress were practically sisters. Little Yue had told me about their relationship once, that she would be the only one willing to help in a jam. The only reason I took Raphael was to create this opportunity, and let her know I’m here for the Empress.”

Qianlin folded her arms across her chest. “So should we keep waiting?”

He nodded. “For news.”

“Are you sure we can trust her?” Zhou Qianlin looked up at Lan Jue. “What if...”

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1. Translation note: the term in Chinese means specifically ‘a very close female friend’, but I couldn’t think of an exact equivalent. Hit me up in the comments if you have something better.

Chapter 375: Fusion

“I have back-up plans,” Lan Jue assured. “Anyway, according to what Little Yue told me, Sariel is different from the other Archangels. Her Discipline is the Light of Conscience. As part of her inherent energy, she can’t do anything if her heart isn’t behind it. Her Discipline is so integrated in to her being that doing so would cause her power to collapse, and may even driver her mad.”

Zhou Qianlin’s face fell in to grouchy pout. “Why are you always so secretive? What’s your back-up plan?”

A smirk spread across Lan Jue’s lips. “Raphael! If Sariel betrays us, we’ll be caught for publicly humiliating the Citadel and capturing one of their own. But of course, they’ll want their Archangel of Healing back. I’m a councilor in Skyfire Avenue, and as we haven’t caused any actual damage they’ll be forced to deal with them – leveling inquiries, and so forth. At that point, we’ll have to wait for the Wine Master or Keeper to come and retrieve us. We’re not in much danger – you think I’d just bring you waltzing right in to the tiger’s den unprepared?”

Lan Jue’s explanation served to ease Qianlin’s concerns. She smiled back. “You’ve got quite an impressive mind. I wonder why I never noticed before?”

He replied with a wry smirk. “I’m forced to, aren’t I. Hmm, but I just had a thought – Little Jue won’t be able to return to the Moonfiend Pirates once we rescue her. She had a solid foothold in the Starfields, but if the Archangels were able to drag her back, then it means she is no longer in control.”

Qianlin’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “So you’re planning to bring her home.”

“Heh – if I don’t, then I might as well just fold my arms and wait for her to die! You heard what Sariel said, they’re in the process of suppressing Little Yue’s powers. The Pontiff’s Discipline is steeped in mysticism, and has been strengthened with genetic manipulation. Once the process is

done, Little Yue won't remember anything about her former life. Without her to protect and lead the Moonfiend Pirates, they'll be wiped out. I also want to use the Starfields as a future training area for the ARC students, and we can't do that if it's a constant war zone."

Zhou Qianlin didn't respond. Instead, she quietly looked out of their hotel room window, out over the city. Lan Jue took her hand and pulled her around to face him.

"What are you doing?" She gasped.

Lan Jue gave her a cryptic chuckle. "Adhering to Bize' rules of cultivation! We didn't do any cultivating last night, and we need to really grasp how our powers interact."

Without warning, Lan Jue leaned down to place a kiss on Qianlin's lips.

They were warm, and soft. But he couldn't even taste her before Qianlin melted in to a figure of light and melded in to his own body.

Right away, Lan Jue felt his Discipline strengthen and begin to flow smoothly through him like a current. The opposite was also true, however – when she separated, he felt empty and constrained.

He was back to the peak of ninth ranked immediately. Settling cross-legged on the carpeted floor, Lan Jue closed his eyes and sank in to meditation.

The merging was thorough. He couldn't feel even a trace of some separate entity inside him. It was like the sudden explosion of his Discipline had no reason – and yet, he could still sense Qianlin's consciousness somewhere deep inside. Now their communication became an exchange of thoughts and feelings without even needing the Soul Caller gem. Within his spirit, the Arrow of Compassion began to exude a pale white light and focused his concentration. He could feel himself connected to everything around him – his own energies communicating with the whole of the universe.

Now, even as the cultivation process began, he could sense why this process would be beneficial for the both of them. Ninth level ninth rank

Adepts possessed at least double the overall energy of a ninth ranked seventh level Talent. The source was stronger, as was their ability to absorb energies from around themselves. Peak-level Adepts had an elementary perception, an understanding of the real truth of things. All of this meant that cultivating at this level made things faster and easier with half the effort required.

Most importantly, though, was the fact that his deeper communion with these truth brought him closer to a complete protogenic understanding. He could see it, sense it with a deeper clarity than before. Within, his core had doubled in size and shone with brilliant electrical power. Occasionally, threads of Qianlin's own pale white energies would appear and then quickly vanish.

Anything Lan Jue felt, Qialin could sense as well. Their consciousness was joined and, when the two minds joined in concerted effort, the results were almost mystical. Any deviation from concentration, any anxiety, was found and eased with each other's help. All of this helped to bring them both deeper in to contemplative stillness, and closer to ultimate understanding.

Qianlin especially stood to benefit from this. As they explored the protogenic energies around them, Qianlin was able to feel them the same that Lan Jue did. She was weaker than the former mercenary king, but that didn't mean she was ignorant of them – after all, the Queen of Heaven was a protogenic transformation, just like Lan Jue's Ascension! Perhaps it was the spirit of sacrifice, of dedication that made her protogenic transformation so pure. Certainly purer than anything Zeus had experienced.

These were certainly cheap gains for Qianlin, but her presence in this helped Lan Jue a great deal as well. He could feel different aspects of this power, now. It was as though he were experience it from an entirely different perspective.

Time passed quickly. When Lan Jue awoke from his meditations, it was morning on the second day after Raphael's capture. After two days of cultivation neither had eaten, but they didn't need to. Their connection to

the universe had kept them satiated to the point they felt overstuffed.

The actual rank of their Discipline hadn't budged. They were both ninth level ninth rank when fused together, so progress would not be so easily won. However, he could feel some changes in himself.

Another of Zhou Qianlin's gains in this situation had been access to Lan Jue's Discipline. Naturally this was helpful since she was unable to use her own powers in combat. While her control was still lacking, her understanding had grown. She was able to feel it as Lan Jue grew his powers. The electrical energies flowed through their shared meridians and mingled with the power of the world around them. It was enlightening to see how the power was meant to be directed.

Lan Jue found Qianlin's Silkworm powers fascinating. Her Discipline was an incredible nutritive force for the human body. After such a long period immersing himself in it, he'd come around to find himself in peak condition. His muscles, bones, even organs felt rested and ready. His body's ability to channel these powers also seemed to have improved.

This likewise meant he could sustain more.

Eventually, it was time for the awkward portion of their arrangement. He shut his eyes and waited for the telling sensation of Qianlin leaving his body. He heard her wrapping herself up in a blanket.

He couldn't help but chuckle. "It'd probably be best if you undress first and go straight for the blanket next time. It's more fiscally responsible."

Qianlin clearly didn't appreciate the humor. She glared daggers at him, but it only made her red cheeks more prominent. "You're in time-out! Face that wall, I have to shower."

Lan Jue mirthfully did as instructed. Now, alone with his thoughts, he had time to ponder on their situation. The more time passed, the more he found himself used to their reality. There was a dependence now, but so long as they were together things were fine. Then there was the merging, but in the end this was good too. He needn't fear losing control in the heat of the moment, since intimacy was impossible.

Sariel was dependable. Her Discipline made it impossible for her to betray her own good nature. The package he'd sought was delivered without incident. Afterward, he and Qianlin took a stroll through the market. They looked at the various things on offer, stopping in a shop on occasion to buy some. Once they were finished, they returned to the hotel.

"Why are we buying extension cables," Qianlin asked.

"This is our escape route," he said. "Getting Little Yue out is damn near impossible. The Pontiff's psychic force envelopes the whole Cathedral. The moment he senses that the ceremony to seal Little Yue's power has been interrupted, he'll appear. He'll lock us away from reality – there would be no escape. Other, cruder methods will be needed. We'll have things to do before we can save Little Yue. We'll need to do whatever we can to get the Pontiff away from the Cathedral while still keeping our objective a secret."

By nightfall, the Great Cathedral closed its doors to the public. Every day, when the sun set behind the mountains, the Cathedral shut its massive gates and lapsed in to contemplative silence.

"Thank you for visiting. The Cathedral has now closed for the day." A woman's pleasing voice called out to the tourists through the broadcast system, as they filed for the exit. Several members of the clergy were on hand, leading stragglers to the outside. However, they did miss the two people vanishing from a dark corner.

There was a flash, and the two mysterious figures appeared in a dark room. From the looks of it, this was a storage room. Lan Jue peered in to the inky darkness. There were no lights, but at their levels of cultivation their perception worked better than their eyes.

"The next step can get dangerous. We have to tread carefully. We should kiss, I'm thinking. It's dark in here as well, so you can remove your clothes beforehand" Lan Jue shared his thoughts through the Soul Caller.

Qianlin huffed in irritation. Her hands shot out to grab both sides of his face, then she kissed him. In no more than a second she had merged in to Lan Jue's body. In the dark, he could clearly see a pale blue aura

surrounding him after the fact – it was his own Discipline, overflow from rising in levels so suddenly.

Their meditations had not been in vain. Already Lan Jue felt like he had more control over their combined powers. He slipped on one of the white robes from before and stepped out in to the Cathedral interior. Pulling the hood of his coat up to conceal his face, Lan Jue moved deeper in to the depths of the church.

He came across several of the Citadel's number as he walked the halls, but none sought to block his way. Everyone here was used to the idea of peace. With the Pontiff here, they had nothing to worry about. No foe would dare plunge in to the heart of the Citadel. Or, so they assumed.

Lan Jue's circuitous route brought him before a pair of large double doors. Two clerics stood guard. They were different from the other clergy – dedicated, devout soldiers of god. They stood like sentinels, eyes forward, faces calm.

Chapter 376: Encyclopaedia Roboris,

Martial Articles

“Halt!” A man barring Lan Jue’s path lifted a hand.

“Are you new? You shouldn’t be wandering around – don’t you know this is Uriel’s meditation chamber?” The priest’s voice was haughty and dismissive. For him and the other clergyman standing by the door, this was a very honorable position.

“I’m very sorry,” Lan Jue replied, feigning awe. “I am new, yes. Thank you for the help, I’ll go this way.” He turned around and started back the way he’d come. What the two arrogant guards could not see was the small smile spreading across his face.

He’d approached to gather information, and the guards had been very helpful in providing it to him. The map he’d been given appeared complete, and now he had his target.

Sariel had armed with with blueprints and quite a lot of valuable intelligence. Most of it was concerning Uriel, Gabriel and Michael. According to what she’d told him, Michael had spent most of the last few months locked away in his room, recovering. He was almost completely back to normal. Gabriel spent the bulk of his days in prayer, while Uriel chose nightfall as the time to do his meditations.

Every Archangel had their own meditation chamber. The ultimate aim was to improve their photoelemental abilities and make them more powerful. Lan Jue had met Sariel in her own meditation chambers when they’d stolen in to the Cathedral before. This one was Uriel’s, as confirmed by the guards.

Lan Jue took a few turns through the corridors, before pushing passed a door in to a utility closet. The Cathedral was massive, so there were several of these small rooms strewn about to help the staff. They were mostly full of cleaning products and janitorial equipment. He didn’t have to worry, though – janitors kept specific hours, usually during visiting

hours.

Moreover, most surveillance equipment was turned off after hours. The selection criteria for clergymen here was very strict, which had the unfortunate side-effect of making them overconfident.

Lan Jue was left undisturbed. He looked around from an electrical socket and, with a flash, he was gone. He reappeared in a marvelously decorated chamber.

The meditation chambers were all the same, and Uriel's was no exception. Sariel had expressed that these rooms were the best place for the Archangels to get some privacy. No one was allowed inside without express consent from the Archangels, and violators were very harshly dealt with.

Lan Jue carefully examined his surroundings before slowly walking behind a nearby pillar. Here, he closed his eyes and focused his breathing. Gradually, his electrical Discipline vanished and was replaced by an infrequent shimmer of black and white light. But then something strange occurred, for as Lan Jue's aura coiled around him it began to solidify. It drew together until Lan Jue was like a statue hidden behind the pillar. Even if someone were to be standing right on top of him, it would now be difficult to sense out his aura.

The unity of heaven and man! Wholeness!

An Adept of appropriate skill who saw this might understand Lan Jue's motive, for only such a skill would have these results. Any ninth level Adept – regardless of rank – may learn the Wholeness. It also served to help expedite their training to at least ninth level fifth rank. It was a skill acquired through understanding, not hard work. When an Adept was able to fully grasp man's place as an integral part of the universe, it helped to improve their own Discipline. 1

It was an important step, a level of comprehension that prepared the Adept for the Protogenic realm. Once Wholeness was understood, the road ahead became easier. It was possible that every Paragon had to master this before they broke through. If one didn't, they would be stuck at the peak

of ninth level forever, searching for their Path.

Lan Jue had learned this skill three years prior, though he wasn't looking for it. After Hera died, he'd locked himself away in seclusion. For ten days and ten nights he didn't move a muscle. When he awoke, he'd somehow come to know the reality of man's connection to the universe.

The years following were spent languishing away. Had he kept to his cultivation, he'd undoubtedly be significantly stronger than he was now. At the very least, he'd be closer to where his brother stood.

The seconds ticked by. Outside the day darkened in to night. That was when he heard footsteps approaching.

"Lord Uriel. Lord Gabriel." Lan Jue heard the two guards outside greet the Archangels respectfully. The doors opened, and the two powerful Adepts stepped inside. Lan Jue, practically indistinguishable from the pillar he hid behind, couldn't move. However, this state did serve to enhance his perception.

Two of them together, Lan Jue thought, his heart skipping a beat . Bad luck? Or...

He didn't move, and barely breathed. So long as he maintained this skill, the only way they could know he was here is if one of them walked behind the pillar.

"Nothing – no news at all. And Raphael, he couldn't even get out a warning? Or delay for backup? He mustn't have, otherwise how could he be snatched up," Gabriel complained.

Uriel motioned for his compatriot to take a seat. He then shook his head. "I'm sure it's no so easy as that. They had to have planned this for a long time in advance, otherwise they wouldn't have been able to pull it off without leaving any clues behind. They must also have known that Raphael, with his healing Discipline, was the weakest fighter of us all. If the attackers were strong enough, they'd have been able to silence him before he could do anything. It's also lucky they used the tailor to help them, maybe make threats."

Gabriel's voice was low as he responded. "She'll have to go. Whether Raphael is returned or not, her presence here undermines our reputation."

Uriel nodded his acknowledgement. "Metatron expressed a similar thought. I'll send someone to deal with it. In a few days I'll be leaving for the tournament, but it would be best for you to remain here. I have a feeling the terrorists are still skulking around, somewhere."

Gabriel grunted in irritation. "That's good then, the more opportunity for us to discover who would dare kidnap an Archangel. When we catch them, they'll be nailed on a crucifix side by side for their insolence."

"Don't act rashly," Uriel cautioned. "They must be very strong, at least a match for you. Think about it, who would be able to beat Raphael so thoroughly he couldn't even get a message out to one of us?"

"How would I know? I've never seen it," Gabriel answered.

Uriel poked three fingers in to the air. "Three possibilities. A man and a woman with power at least comparable to our own. It's worth noting what Julie said about the man, that his Discipline manifested in black and white. Part of it contains a consuming element 2 This is no Discipline I've ever encountered, but my research has revealed three prospects. However, none of them could contest the abilities of your average ninth level Adept, especially since none of them confirm to this vortex aspect."

"You mean to say that this Discipline is completely unknown?" Gabriel asked, surprised. Although his face bore an indignant anger, he was careful and calculating.

Uriel shook his head. "No, I suspect that his power isn't necessarily a Discipline. I checked the Disciplines recorded in the Encyclopaedia Roboris, and came across something helpful."

Gabriel blinked. "Why didn't you tell Metatron?"

"Because there's no proof, only conjecture," he explained. "It also involves something we aren't supposed to be involved in. Look!" Uriel produced an ancient, yellowed volume from his robes. He handed the crumbling tome to Gabriel.

“Encyclopaedia Roboris: Articles on Martial Virtue!” Gabriel read off the book’s title. His tone rose with each word.

Uriel nodded. “Here,” he said, reaching over to flip open the book to the second page.

“The Martial Virtue of Taijiquan. Lost knowledge said to have been rediscovered by the master Jue Di. It is said that a true sage of Taiji is capable of using oneself to channel the yin and yang energies of the universe. Through this, the practitioner is capable of unmaking any living thing.”

As Gabriel read on, his eyes grew wide. He wasn’t sure how to react to the news. Most of it was noise, but two words stuck out like they were burned on the page: Jue Di!

Even just the name had caused the Archangels’ breath to quicken. They exchanged a quick look, and each spied in the others’ eyes the fear they themselves felt.

Jue Di! An average Adept may not be familiar with the name. Most would probably say it sounded pretentious. To those in the know, however, this name represented incomparable power.

Among the Three Alliances the strongest was undoubtedly the North. They were in control of the largest number of galaxies, more than both the West and East combined. By now – a hundred years after humans left for the stars – the nearby galaxies were all occupied. If any of the Alliances wished to expand, they’d have to reach out further in to the dangerous blackness of space. 4

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1. This is a core precept of yin-yang naturalist theory that states man is an integral part of the total Truth. We are not separate, only another aspect made up the combination of yin-yang and the five elements. In Chinese Medicine, this translates as an understanding that we follow the same rules as any other living thing and helps guide diagnostic

theory and treatment protocols. From a philosophical point of view, this means that we are already at one with the universe, and understanding the universe will help us come to understanding ourselves and vice-versa.

2. Ying-Yang theory also posits that yin and yang are interconsuming (as indicated in the yin-yang picture by the white or black tapering off near the bottom). This means that both yin and yang are capable of destroying and absorbing the other, but not completely. That may or may not be the idea behind Lan Jue's martial vortex from the earlier fight.
3. Jue Di is written as 绝帝 – translated directly as Absolute Emperor.
4. Disconnect! I had my wife read the end here and yes – this makes no sense. The only reason I can think of for TJSS to jump topics like this is either a. He was drunk or b. I'm drunk? I guess we'll find out next chapter.

Chapter 377: The Fabled Battle

Under situations like this, resources are required to fuel further scientific and technological growth. The North – who had always stood at the forefront of human innovation – was the most adamant about interstellar expansion.

However, since that time, when the universe had been carved out in to the Alliances, external growth was no longer an option. So the North turned inward. It became a race for resources, for anyone with enough resources could accomplish anything.

Obviously the remaining resource-rich planets were under the control of the East and West. Though the West was not on par with the North technologically, their disparity wasn't huge. The East took up the inferior position due to the fact that it had always been that way.

So, in order to secure more for themselves, the North saddled up to the West. Together they undertook several actions against the East, even going so far as to enact an economic blockade. All of this was just a ploy for the North to take what rightfully belonged to the East. 1

As the East struggled to deal with the aggression, one figure arose to stand against their foes. He appeared from nowhere, and after three nights the North had lost three of their top commanders in the field. After a month, three Bastion commanders were inexplicably found slain.

Because the West had never directly become involved in the conflict, none of their people died. However, there was a very public display made of the President. He was found hanging from the flagpole outside of the congressional building. Luckily he hadn't been hung by the neck, so he survived.

This enraged both the North and West. They dispatched their strongest Adepts to find the murderer, however they didn't need to look for very long. This mysterious man appeared, and challenged these adepts directly.

The fight took place on a distant planet. Five Paragons of the time came, including the Pontiff of that era. All of them perished. The one who bore

the title of Satan lived to get back home, but died from his wounds shortly thereafter. In all, seventy foreign combatants came to answer the challenge. Only twenty returned.

The West and North called it D-Day 2. It was a great military tragedy, and all of it was at the hands of one man: Jue Di!

Before the fight, the East's attackers had far greater numbers of top-level Adepts. After the battle, however, things were different. Since then, the East has enjoyed the advantage in regards to powerful Adepts.

Although Jue Di, the God-King, was never as famous as Master Qiantian – ranked second among the Paragons – he was nonetheless the strongest human being in existence. For a long time, Jue Di's name was a curse. No one dared speak it. In the end, the West and North dismantled their blockade. They even paid restitution for the damage it caused.

Jue Di disappeared after that, though he would reemerge in situations of dire need. Even today, the North wouldn't dare encroach upon Eastern land without confirmation of Jue Di's death. The Eastern Alliance had taken the opportunity, after Jue Di's actions, to put all their effort in to strengthening the country. Now both the West and North had to acknowledge the East's power.

This was why the two Archangels reacted so dramatically to the name. Jue Di's name was taboo – he was the boogeyman, only real and deadly. Neither of them had been present for that fight so many years ago, but they'd heard stories. With nothing but his own abilities, the God-King defeated the strongest Adepts of the day.

The current Pontiff had been there, however, though he was a Cardinal at the time. He was one of three from the Pontiff's Citadel to return. When information about Jue Di and the battle were recorded in the Citadel's annals, there was only one word he needed to write; invincible. Since that day he never again spoke of Jue or the things he'd seen. Clearly it left a deep and lasting mark on his psyche.

"No... that's impossible." Gabriel swallowed hard. The anger from before was gone, replaced with fear.

Uriel smirked. "That's my hope as well. But a power of light and dark, with the ability to draw things in... that sounds a whole lot like a Taiji Master. Whoever this is, isn't Jue Di... but they could be one of his disciples."

Gabriel's brows furrowed. "Why would they want to come after us? Did we offend him in some way?"

"I'm also interested to know why this is," Uriel mused. "If we want to discover who these people are, then the first step must be to find out their purpose. This isn't some pointless game, there must be a reason for all of it. Otherwise we likely wouldn't have been the target. But the more I think about it, the less certain I am of where they came from. The chances are very small that their agents from the North. The East, we were just in the Avenue and the Pontiff took pains to show goodwill. They have their own problems as well, not the least of which being the Clairvoyant's retreat. He likely won't come out of his museum alive. On the surface one might say the Avenue is a real powerhouse with their four Paragons. But the two Paragons together couldn't match the Eye of the Future. The Arcane Magnate and Cosmagus are not weak, but are further down the power rankings from the Pontiff. Anyway, if they were interested in power than the Conclave would likely be their first target."

Gabriel pondered for a moment. "What about rogue Adepts? Jue Di was a rogue Paragon, wasn't he? He belonged to that organization..."

Uriel huffed. "Not a chance. Sending someone our way, only to tell us some nonsense about the Dark Citadel... it's a ruse. Someone trying to stir up trouble, or deliberately trying to cover their tracks."

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully.

The book was returned to Uriel, and he hid it away in the folds of his robes. "Would you like a glass of coffee?"

His companion waved the offer away. "No. After what you've told me, how could I want a coffee? In the end all of this is because we simply aren't strong enough. So tell me, Uriel, how strong was Jue Di reputed to be? Five Paragons against one, and he walked away unscathed... is that

even possible?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it with my own eyes, nor do I have any way to accurately evaluate his strength. However according to what I’ve read from the Pontiff, it’s entirely real. The Paragons themselves also have a system of rankings, four to be precise. What they are exactly I’m not sure, but at that time Jue Di was supposedly at the very top. By comparison His Majesty, the Cosmagus, the Arcane Magnate are all still within the first stage. Master Qiantian is a mystery. He’s been missing for so long, who knows? Still, I doubt seriously that he’s stronger than Jue Di.” Uriel tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair as he thought.

“Ahh,” Gabriel lamented. “When will we breakthrough to Paragon? I’m desperate to feel what that level of power is like. Well, it’s time for me to go – I won’t trouble your meditations any longer. We must keep improving, or true strength will forever elude us.”

Uriel didn’t stop him, and nodded. “Take care of yourself. If you need to leave the Citadel, bring Michael. I’ll be locking myself in seclusion for the next few days before I leave. These stressful times help me to think clearly. Maybe I’ll break through.”

“Very well. If you’ll be here then I’ll handle the tailor,” he replied with a flat tone.

Uriel only nodded.

Gabriel stepped out of the room. From outside Lan Jue could hear respectful addresses from the clergy on guard. Once more, Uriel plucked the Encyclopaedia Roboris, Martial Articles from his robes and looked over it’s cracked leather cover. As he did the light of disappointment shone behind his eyes. What Adept didn’t dream of becoming powerful?

After a little while, Uriel lifted his hand from the book’s binding. A pale ball of white light extended from his hand and illuminated everything around him. The golden geometric designs set in the walls and ceiling began to glimmer brilliantly. A single column of light – soothing and pure – poured down on to him from on high. He prepared to meditate.

“I have a great deal of admiration for you, Uriel. Your reputation is well

earned, to find a clue in such conditions as this.” A voice, calm and slightly haughty, interrupted the Archangel’s silence.

The Cherubim’s eyes popped open. Before him stood a man concealed behind a butterfly mask.

He didn’t waste a second. Uriel was up and launching himself toward the center of the meditation chamber without even stopping to get a good look at Lan Jue. In situations like this, when you were already suffering from surprise, wasted time could mean one’s death.

Before Uriel could get far, however, Lan Jue shot forward as a bolt of golden lightning. He reappeared before him, blocking the angel’s path. Fluid as a lazy stream, he swept his hands in an arc, level with his navel. The action caused an aura of black from one hand, and an aura of white from the other to bleed in to one another. The result was a perfectly spherical orb of equal parts black and white, but then the light vanished revealing the image of yin and yang.

It was a strange power, and as it appeared Uriel felt himself being drawn closer to his attacker at an even greater speed. Uriel didn’t utter a sound, for even before he could reality upended itself. Colors were inverted, the skies turned to dust and everything became what it was not. He couldn’t tell where he was anymore.

Changing the world around in this way, even on a small scale... this was almost like a Paragon’s Domain! Uriel was stunned enough with the revelation that someone would have the gall to attack him in the heart of the Citadel. But he didn’t have time to dwell on it – escape was paramount.

The meditation chamber’s mystical spells had been activated, flooding the chamber with the elemental force of light coalesced from outside. It also served to separate the room’s interior from any outside distractions. Uriel’s goal had been to stop the beam’s power and allow sound out once again. When his enemy appeared before him, he knew his only chance was deactivating the spell, and so he had tried to bull-rush through, and take head on whatever power this man possessed.

Just then, a milky-white light rushed out from the center of his chest. It formed in to the shape of a blazing sword, and lashed out of it's own accord toward Lan Jue.

However before it could, the power of Lan Jue's Taiji energies sapped its power. It slowed, as though it were trying to slice through a mire, until amidst a host of impotent buzzing, the sword stopped dead in the air.

Uriel spread his hands wide, and at the motion his saber of light erupted. In to a million shards of light. They flowed like quicksilver toward his attacker, surrounded him. The world around Lan Jue was swallowed up in those twinkling, deadly lights.

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1. This is a nod to nationalism in China. The Chinese are very sensitive about what they view as their sovereign territory. Research Chinese territorial disputes if you're interested. It's an important topic for anyone who truly wants to understand China and East Asian politics.

Chapter 378: Jue Di?

Uriel's attack was not aimed at killing his foe. His hope was, instead, to create any opening for him to escape.

Unfortunately the man responded by expanding the scope of that black and white power. A pale white light bloomed from behind him. At once the room filled with a gentle and pure radiance. But the light was more than light – it was warmer, and softer than light was supposed to be. And the gentleness wasn't gentleness – it was softer, all-encompassing. Uriel felt his whole body begin to slip in to a relaxing calm.

Not good!

Who can fight effectively if they're completely relaxed?! Like a fetus in amniotic fluid, he was relaxed to his very bones. Vestiges of the energy began to congeal on the surface of his skin in the appearance of hoarfrost. He almost looked frozen.

His jaw jerked – he wanted to bite his tongue, hoping the pain would keep him alert. However before he could, the orb of intermingled yin and yang energies shrunk from over one meter in diameter to a single point of light. That vacuum force returned, stronger this time. It yanked Uriel forward like a rag-doll. No longer able to control himself much less his Discipline, the hail of light from his weapon spiraled off in all directions.

Uriel's face fell, settling in to a grim acceptance. Just then, a light burst from his eyes just as a white-hot flame spat from his every pore.

Holy Fire! It was one of the most powerful light-based skills the Citadel taught. The terrifying manifestations were a result of the Adept actually setting his Core energy ablaze. Six pearlescent wings stretched out from within the column of flame.

The deceptively gentle sensation strengthened suddenly. Uriel could hear the sounds of chanting, as clear as though they were being sung right beside him. A stupefying haze clouded his mind that extinguished the holy fires. His wings, too, began to wither and molt until they dissolved in to pure white light. Soon they vanished as well.

Protogenic power!

Uriel could only soar helplessly through the air. In the space of a blink, he was right in front of his assailant. He was met with an outstretched palm that looked as though it were composed from a black hole. The consuming energies easily defused the light from Uriel's Discipline, to the point where the light of holy 'holy soul' began to be pulled out from within him in strands of white light.

Poof! The palm collided with Uriel's arms, risen to ward off the blow. At first it felt like being struck with a pillow, but half a second later, the hidden power within was revealed.

Bang! Uriel was thrown away, smashing with bone-jarring force in to the far wall. There was a flash, and Lan Jue traversed the room to Uriel's side before he could even register the collision. The excruciating pain came soon after, and it felt as though his organs had all been set on fire. Then, it was gone, replaced immediately by that sublime relaxation. It was too much too fast – the agonizing pain and the blissful comfort blended in with one another, and Uriel could no longer distinguish one from the other. Unable to cope, his mind shut down and he fell in to a deep sleep.

Lan Jue looked over the prostrate angel for a moment before raising his hand. A silvery light fell over Uriel, and when it receded the Cherubim was nowhere to be found.

Just as Uriel vanished like breath in the wind, a terrifying oppressive force surged through the Cathedral. A deep, regal voice boomed through every corner. "Who dares!"

Uriel's meeting with the wall had apparently expelled more energy than his meditation chamber was capable of masking. That, and the sudden disappearance of Uriel's energy, had invariably gotten the attention of a world-bending power. This consciousness hung over everything like the eye of God, searching.

There was another flash of golden light, and Lan Jue reappeared at the outside edge of the Cathedral grounds. However, he was not fast enough. The consciousness swept over him, and Lan Jue felt like a tiny ant caught

beneath a giant's boot.

His face went ghastly pale. The only thing keeping him from collapsing underneath this staggering psychic pressure, was his enhanced power. His fusion with Qianlin kept him standing.

Lan Jue was ready, dire though the situation was. The dual forces of light and dark sprang out from him once more, accompanied by an aura of material disinterest and spiritual connection. At the very top of his head there appeared a strange sort of vortex that released an aura of enlightenment. 1

“Jue Di!” The Pontiff's booming voice was thick with shock. The oppressive powers receded like frost before the rising sun. It was a split second, but in that moment Lan Jue took a string in hand that was hanging from overhead. There was a flash, and he disappeared.

The Pontiff's psychic force came rolling back in like a tsunami. However, by then there was no one there.

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Two hundred meters from the Cathedral's gardens, a figure appeared in a dark corner. The extension cable hanging from the eaves of the building burned black, and was blown away as ash on the wind.

Lan Jue didn't move. He slipped in to the meditative state of Wholeness and constrained any signs of his presence. Escape through the extension cable had been wise. It was fast, but also concealed his abilities as much as possible. He could reach light-speed himself without its aid, but the subsequent release of energy could be clearly seen for miles around. It wouldn't take much for a Paragon to find him then.

Lan Jue's eyes swung back toward the Cathedral, where a golden light had risen over the ancient building. Though it blazed like the sun, it was not – it was the Pontiff, soaring high overhead. He was clad in resplendent golden robes, and bore the opulent crown of his office.

In his right hand was born the traditional Pastoral Staff, held aloft. His eyes searched the grounds, full of worry and doubt.

“Is that you?” The Pontiff was a man fabled for his saintly calm. Now, however, his heart beat so hard it threatened to rattle his rib cage. Unpleasant memories of that battle from so long ago sprang to mind, clear as they day they happened. He feared these memories would become reality once again.

Orbs of light appeared scattered around the Pontiff. Five of his Archangels emerged; Metatron, Michael, Gabriel, Sariel and Ramiel. Metatron looked at each of them in turn before speaking.

“Where’s Uriel?”

The Pontiff had his answer, delivered in a deep voice barely containing his fury. “He’s been captured.”

Every one of the Archangels stared at him with wide eyes. Uriel... captured?

The Cherubim was not considered among the strongest of these Archangels. In a fight, he was far less experienced than Michael or even Gabriel – to say nothing about Metatron. Where Uriel flourished, however, was intelligence. But even despite his lack of combat prowess, this was the Holy City of Reims! The very heart of the Pontiff’s Citadel, with the Pontiff himself in attendance! Their commander had been unable to stop this nightmare. Could it mean they faced a Paragon?

If it was a Paragon, one who concealed themselves to strike from the shadows, than this truly was an unmitigated disaster!

The Pontiff stared in to the distance, with brows knit tight. “Relay my commands: Reims is under martial law. All modes of transportation, public and private, are forbidden from leaving the planet. I will find this person myself.”

“Your Majesty!” The Archangels replied. The anger in their leader’s eyes light a fire within them as well.

The old priest held his astrum aloft, and from it’s dazzling length a beam of golden light tore through the night sky toward the heavens. It bloomed outward in all directions until Reims was bathed in light that

would shame the sun.

Many out among the town stopped in their tracks as they looked overhead. Night had become day at the Pontiff's hand – it was a miracle! Many fell to their knees in prayer. Lan Jue didn't move, even as the golden light fell over him. It was warm, but the comfort was deceptive for within was hidden a divine power. The anointed energies reached to all corners of the city.

Lan Jue, in his state of Wholeness, managed to almost completely extinguish his Core. He hardly breathed, as though locked in suspended animation, an even deeper stupor than Uriel had experienced. As the moment stretched on he hoped... he believed, that the Pontiff couldn't maintain this for long. He was bound to alert the rest of Eurmania if he did.

Next, orbs of milky-white light appeared within the illuminated streets. They started in the center of town, then moved and expanded outward toward the borders.

This is...

Even in his nearly dead state, Lan Jue could feel the change. Divine Faith! It could be nothing else. For a moment, he was too shocked to think... the entire city was laid out as a massive rune! Any unbeliever would be revealed, like a body eliminating a virus.

Metatron lead the others in splaying out around the Pope, as sweeping white lights roamed the city. As they looked on one of those illuminating orbs did stop, about a hundred meters away from the Pontiff.

It was Constantine, leader of the Inquisition. "Your Majesty, what's happened?"

The Pontiff's face was as smooth as the surface of a lake. "An enemy stole in to the Cathedral and captured Uriel."

Upon hearing this, even the famously calm Constantine couldn't help but stare slack-jawed at the Paragon. As Head Inquisitor, this was his responsibility.

“The failure lies with me, Your Majesty. I ask I be punished!” He immediately fell to one knee.

The Pontiff waved a hand, and at the motion a white light appeared before Constantine to lift him to his feet. “Our foe is cunning. But, he is no Paragon. A ninth level at his peak I suspect, who will be found as a heretic beneath these lights of faith. Take your men and find him – bring him to the Reims Square. That is, if I don’t find him first.

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1. Acupuncture was based off of Daoist principles. One of which is man’s connection with the divine. Near the top of the head, about where the fontanelle was located when you were a baby, lies an acupuncture point called 百会 – the hundred meetings. Here, the yang qi of the body coalesces. In qigong it’s seen as the house of the corporeal aspects of the Soul (Souls are complicated in TCM). It is also connected to the upper dantian from Taiji practice, which is connected to human consciousness. So in short, the area of this point – DU 20, as it’s called in the west – is man’s connection to the spirit, heaven, and to God as the ancient Daoists perceived It (‘Absolute Truth’).

Chapter 379: Avoiding Detection

“Yes, sir!” Constantine was as surprised as all the others. Employing this kind of power here was not a good thing for the Citadel. People would be seeing dangers in every shadow, and their enemies will be laughing at their misfortune. However, things would be done as the Pontiff commanded. It was never wise to get on a Paragon’s bad side.

Constantine left in a hurry to perform his tasks. As he did the Pontiff’s staff blazed even brighter. Rays of golden light pierced to the horizon. The Pontiff wasn’t confident in their ability to find the enemy, truth be told. For this person to have the gall to waltz right in to the Cathedral, they more than likely had an exit strategy. Still, with the Pontiff’s Faith and the light of his staff, they couldn’t hide for long. With the Pontiff himself leading the search, the Inquisition wasted no time. They splayed out down every street and alley just as they’d done for Raphael.

Lan Jue remained still as a corpse. Gradually a white light emerged from him, still partially hidden by the pillar he hid behind. The pale shroud dimmed in to a concrete grey which served to make him even less distinguishable from the surrounding buildings. To say nothing for the lack of people in the corner he’d chosen, even if someone were to chance by they’d be unable to see anything.

His heart rate was down to ten beats per minute – weak and slow. Even an infrared sweep likely wouldn’t show him on the scanners. Reims wasn’t a large city, but it wasn’t small either, the Citadel only had so many men they could use to clear the streets. There were limits, he knew, to what they were able to realistically achieve in a manhunt. However, the addition of the Pontiff himself aiding in the search changed things. It made the stakes much higher, and far more dangerous.

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By now the Cathedral square was full of people. Most were clergy, but a number were prisoners. They were marched here without warning or explanation, but in the face of the Citadel’s full strength there was

nothing they could do. With the Pontiff in the heavens above, blazing like a sun, who would dare try to fight back?

“Your Majesty, we’ve gathered all the unbelievers located by the Light of Faith. None were left out.” Constantine appeared again before the Pontiff, confident in his work.

The Citadel’s leader nodded. “You’ve worked hard, Constantine. Let’s see what we’ve got.” Before he’d even finished, the Pontiff and his Archangels were descending toward the heretics. The Paragon was already scanning the crowd for his prey.

One by one, he examined the prisoners. Many were spies or agents from the Dark Citadel, but none were the man he sought. None of them possessed a power above sixth rank, and he knew the attacker was ninth at least.

The Pontiff’s face was so sour he looked as though he might scream. All of this energy expended, and the only thing they found were petty criminals. They were pulling out all the stops to no avail. Everyone could feel the fury bubbling just below the surface. There was also fear, but he didn’t let anyone see that.

“What should we do now, Your Majesty?” Constantine asked. He enjoyed a very close relationship with the Pontiff, which certainly helped him get the office of High Inquisitor.

“Get in touch with the Western parliament. Ask for their help in our search. Detain anyone from the East, and make sure no Eastern tourists leave the city,” the Pontiff said.

“Are...” Constantine trailed off. What the Pontiff was saying, would have a significant impact. The Citadel was autonomous, but that was all. Even if the Western government did agree to help, what would be the cost to them? Likely too much.

“Are you sure this is wise, Your Majesty?” Metatron interjected. “This will undoubtedly sour our relationship with the East – it may even force Skyfire Avenue to intervene. I urge you to reconsider.”

The Pontiff's face eased visibly, his rage restrained. "Very well," he conceded. "Request aid from the parliament in locating a pair of terrorists. Ask that they take extra precautions with any Easterners attempting to leave Eurmania. Suggest an energy scan."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Constantine sounded relieved.

"Release them," the Pontiff announced, waving away the heretics. "None of you are to leave the city until tomorrow."

With his commands delivered, the Pontiff turned and returned to the Cathedral. Metatron followed close on his heels. The Lord Archangel noticed that his Master was not himself. He was usually far more level-headed.

ζ

All the while, Lan Jue never moved a muscle. The light of faith dimmed, and eventually vanished. Not until the faintest hint of a threat was gone did Lan Jue begin to revive. He walked calmly back to the hotel through the deserted streets.

ζ

"Your Majesty, are you alright?" Metatron followed the Pontiff back to his chambers, and only then ventured the question.

The old monk shook his head. "I'm fine. Just a little out of sorts. He was in my grasp, but then his aura... it was just like Jue Di's."

"Jue Di!" Metatron gasped.

"Your Majesty." Several of the other Archangels had followed their leadership in to the Cathedral. Gabriel took a step forward, his expression strange. The Pontiff motioned for him to speak.

The Messenger of Death continued. "Before Uriel's disappearance he was expressing the same theory to me. Our enemy had some connection to Jue Di." Gabriel went on to summarize the rest of their conversation.

The Pontiff nodded thoughtfully as he listened. "Uriel appears to have been correct. This man is likely to be Jue Di's apprentice. That aura is

unmistakable. I was too shocked at it to react, and he took the opportunity to flee.”

The atmosphere grew anxious and somber. Though irritating beyond measure, this enemy wasn't an insurmountable threat. They weren't afraid of this man. They were, however, afraid of the one who stood behind him. To the Pontiff, Jue Di was an inhuman thing – a demon. That was why he couldn't react.

“Your Majesty,” Metatron interjected with brows furrowed, “were you able to puzzle out this man's objective?”

The Citadel's leader only shook his head.

Gabriel looked at them both. “Could this be revenge for when Jue Di was besieged?”

“Jue Di's revenge? That's the best you can come up with?” Ramiel openly laughed. “Jue Di was the one who called for the fight, and in the end our losses were staggering. If anyone should be seeking revenge, it's us. The God-King has been missing for dozens of years, why pick now for any sort of revenge? This is a disciple. If it was the man himself, how do you think we could scare him off?”

The Angel of Visions openly shamed Gabriel, and his face reflected his displeasure. His voice was tight. “Again you go too far, Ramiel.” Both of his close friends had been taken, and Gabriel was in no mood to be trifled with. Ramiel's snide remarks instantly put him in a rage.

The Pontiff fixed both of them with a hard gaze. “Enough!”

All of the Archangels receded a step, and bowed respectfully before their master. He turned his attention to Metatron.

“Once more, tell me every detail we've gathered.”

Metatron and the others rose, then the Lord Archangel recounted everything they'd learned up to this point.

“Go to the Dark Citadel?” The old cleric muttered, going over it in his mind.

“When I received this information, I determined it was a ploy to get us to leave the city. The two clearly weren’t Satan’s agents, so I thought nothing of it.”

The Pontiff shook his head, returning from his thoughts. “Jue Di believed that words were important. A man should say what he means. If these terrorists are his apprentices then the message may not be a ploy.”

Metatron looked aghast. “You’re saying Raphael and Uriel might be with Satan? That these two are some sort of foreign agents for the Dark Citadel?”

“We mustn’t dismiss the possibility,” the Pontiff instructed. “Increase monitoring of all travel to and from the Dark Citadel.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

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“Huhh-“ Lan Jue heaved a sigh, pulling the window curtains closed. He shut out the scene of agitated bustling from outside. An angry Pontiff was certainly not someone to start playing with, and an errant satellite sweep could catch sight of him through a window. That would cause some troubling consequences. Right now, hiding was the correct move.

Zhou Qianlin had replaced her close and sat nearby. Her face was pale. Although Lan Jue was in control when the two were merged, she could still feel everything as clearly as though it was her own body. Now the fear was settling in – the realization of how close she was to death at the hands of a Paragon.

“Your Queen of Heaven transformation is very, very useful. More than I’d have thought.” Lan Jue said with a chuckle.

Qianlin gave him a flat look. You could say that again. The Protogenic abilities Lan Jue had used in his fight against Uriel were her own. What Uriel must have suspected to be some insidious attack, was actually a flood of healing energy designed to make him feel better.

Of course the Queen of Heaven’s powers imparted sensations of peace and comfort. Who would expect their enemies to heal them in the midst

of battle? Naturally, he resisted. However the Queen's powers are enhanced and perfected with the addition of protogenic power. Though not as complete as the Mystic Raiment, her regenerative powers were strong enough to seep in to every pore. Uriel, unable to resist the all-pervasive sensation, panicked. Lan Jue took that opportunity to finish the fight. Once again, the increased power afforded by his fusion with Qianlin had given him the boost he needed to definitively end it quickly.

Then, once he was out, he'd also relied on Qianlin's powers to help him blend in more completely with the environment. In situations like these, her protogenic transformation was much more useful than his.

Chapter 380: The Dark Citadel

Lan Jue had come to the realization that he could use Qianlin's Discipline just as she could use his. It was something he'd discovered the night they'd meditated together. The mother affect Qianlin's Queen of Heaven powers bestowed was like a salve, and nourished the source of his power. Even more interesting, because of the nature of the Discipline – supportive, gradual – its use didn't expend too much energy. Although it didn't look like it would be all that useful in a fight, Qianlin's Discipline was a great distraction when used suddenly.

Lan Jue was pondering the conversation he'd overheard between Gabriel and Uriel. They had come to precisely the conclusion he hoped they would. It was all by design – planting evidence to mislead an intelligent foe. Using what Jue Di taught him when confronted with the Pontiff had also been intentional. Everything, designed to produced a calculated response.

Although Lan Jue certainly wasn't in complete control of the situation, he'd mitigated the potential damage well. What he told Qianlin before was true; if they were captured, the Avenue would help. By using the specter of Jue Di, the Citadel was even less likely to act rashly. True or not, they were afraid of awakening Jue Di's ire!

Zhou Qianlin rolled her eyes at Lan Jue. "The more time I spend with you the more I'm afraid my heart can't handle it."

This earned a chortle from the Jewelry Master. "Take it easy, the best is yet to come. Next we leave for the Dark Citadel, to deliver Raphael and Uriel. I wonder if Satan will throw us a parade."

"The Pontiff will probably be blocking travel," Qianlin said.

"He can't close everything," he replied. "That would incite a panic. At worst they've increased checkpoints and monitoring. And what have we to fear of monitoring systems? Any mode of transportation we use will have electricity. We'll be going in a few minutes."

Although vast swathes of the city were in disarray over the disappearance of the two Archangels, that wasn't the case in every corner of the city. At the end of the day the Pontiff's Citadel was an Adept organization, and it demanded its power through faith.

Many official government offices were located here, so no doubt the West was aware of the situation over the past couple days. They'd already opened up channels of communication with the Cathedral. The next step was an official warning from the parliament, which they would have to act on. This was why the Lord Archangel and Constantine were so reticent for the Pontiff to ask them for help. An outside power would have control over how the Citadel reacts, and while their demands may not be overtly harmful to the Citadel it would result in restrictions. It would be a great blow to their prestige.

And so, the two Eastern Adepts checked out of their room and left as though they had nothing to worry about.

The Holy City of Reims was diametrically opposed on the opposite side of the planet by Gomorrah. Ever since anyone could remember, the two had been locked in a contentious stalemate. Eurmania was a large planet, but there existed no direct means of transport between them. It was a difference of faith. The Dark Citadel was an organization of faith as well, remember, though not to the extend of the Pontiff's army. At least, so it was on the surface. Under normal circumstance, the best way to get one from Reims to Gomorrah was hitching a ride with someone passing through.

Of course, 'normal circumstances' never described Lan Jue. Travel would not be a problem at his level of cultivation. He was limited to the speed of light when transformed to lightning, but passing over half the planet would be a quick endeavor. However, he would need to make sure that they wouldn't be picked up by satellite. Anyone who came across an object this close moving at the speed of light would undoubtedly get in contact with the authorities right away.

The public air hangar was likely the most carefully watched area in all of Reims, but that was where Lan Jue brought Zhou Qianlin. Often the safest

places were considered the most dangerous. Plus, it was simpler.

Inquisition agents had Discipline-detecting equipment, and were scanning everyone who passed through their security check. They appeared to be paying particular attention to young couples.

Lan Jue paid none of this any mind. A flash, and they went from the security check to the boarding gates without alerting a soul. He presented the checking officer with the tickets they'd purchased online, and were waved right through.

They took their seats, and the airship left without further incident. If anything, this whole incident proved the fact that a government could not contend the world of Discipline. There was no blocking an Adept with the will to go on.

After an hour the scenery began to change. Another hour and the buildings slipping by beneath them began to adopt the characteristic black matte of Gomorroah.

Gomorrah was, like Reims, a very unique place. Not only was it the seat of the Dark Citadel, but the city was also a hot bed of tourist action for Eurmania. All of the planet's most famous attractions and theme parks were located here. Surprisingly, the crime rate was very nearly zero – a figure even the Holy City couldn't touch. But that was on the surface. In the seedy underbelly, where the official surveys never reached, things were different. The Dark Citadel's support of the Western government made sure it stayed that way.

As passengers filed out from the airship, they were greeted with an unsettling broadcast on repeat: "Welcome... to Gomorroah." For those who were interested in a novel traveling experience, it was hard to beat Eurmania's version of Hell.

It was Lan Jue's first time here. It was certainly unique, he thought, as they stepped in to a dark world. Things weren't so much black, but muted. All colors seemed as though they had a black mist hanging over them. Bright was not an adjective one could use for anything in Gomorrah. It lent an oppressive feeling to the environment. As they walked the streets,

strange scenes assailed them. People with mouths dripping blood might pass, but nothing too unsettling.

This place had no industry – it was just a giant playground. Characters ran around in bizarre outfits; as nightmarish beasts, pale vampires or hairy wolf men. The story goes that some of these performers were the real deal, but no one could say for sure. It made the place all that much more exciting for visitors looking for a thrill.

This place was more suited to the tastes of Western and Northern guests. Easterners didn't appreciate the flavor. Their appreciations lay elsewhere.

"What do you think?" Lan Jue turned his head to look at Zhou Qianlin. They looked like any other couple on vacation.

She shook her head ever so slightly. "It feels overbearing."

This made him chuckle. "They've worked hard to build that atmosphere. Come on, we'll deliver our things then go, I've already got the return tickets. Look at us – door to door service, I'd call that exceptional!"

They hailed and boarded a maglev taxi as he bantered. The driver turned his head to look at the two of them. "Sir, madame. Where would you like to go?"

Lane Jue thought for a moment. "What's the most famous building here in Gomorroah? We're looking for something big and eye-catching, some kind of landmark."

"Then you're looking for the Dark Citadel," the Driver answered. "That's the most famous place in the city."

"Dark Citadel? Sounds spooky, let's go!" Lan Jue nodded for the driver to be off.

The two passengers settled back as the taxi began its steady trek. Zhou Qianlin spoke to Lan Jue through the Soul Caller gem.

"Is it a good idea to go straight to the Dark Citadel?"

Lan Jue shook his head: "It's not the real one. He's taking us to a tourist

attraction. I'm not even sure where the real Citadel is. At least at this copy we might find some guards to relay our message."

'Landmark' was an understatement for the fake Dark Citadel. It was the exact heart of the city. They could see it from miles away, situated on top of a mountain that spewed a river of magma. The mountain was about three hundred meters high, with the impressive structure perched on top.

A purple moon hung in the sky, directly over the Citadel. It cast everything in a ghastly light. Although Qianlin didn't like the style she could appreciate the creativity. It was certainly worthy of being a famed landmark. The taxi driver told them that no buildings were permitted to rise above the six hundred meter Citadel – a rule that was rigidly enforced. He took them through a series of winding, gloomy back roads that arrived before the Citadel's massive doors. Even though the structure was on the top of a mountain, a moat had been constructed around it which bubbled with a fluid that looked like blood. The tell-tale iron scent was absent, though.

Qianlin frowned at the images, and clutched tightly to Lan Jue's hand.

He laughed disarmingly at her. "What an incredible place! Whoever designed it really put their soul in to the work. I guess it's meant to look like the real Dark Citadel. Let's go in and take a look!"

They stepped through the massive, maw-like doorway of the Citadel. The interior was dark as night, making that stifling sensation ten times more potent. When they reached the ticket booth, Lan Jue realized this entire place was a haunted house – probably one of the biggest ever made. The pamphlets boasted that walking through the whole thing would take three hours.

To Lan Jue, though, the most terrifying thing was the price of admission.

Chapter 381: Crafty Satan

The haunted house version of the Dark Citadel was renowned for its fear-inducing hallways. The creators took pains to ensure that everything was real; if one encountered a vampire in the dark rooms of the mansion, then that vampire was real and likely thinking of sampling your blood. The werewolves, even the corpses, were not props. There were periodic areas for visitors to escape if they so chose, but of course they'd forfeit the cost of their ticket.

This was why in the West, there was a saying: A man's true bravery is tested at the Dark Citadel. They even gave a medal of bravery to anyone who completed it.

The house was a series of macabre scenes, including a 'sea of blood' and a morgue, according to the introductory material. The advertisements alone were enough to make Qianlin's face pale.

"Don't worry, we're not really going to walk through the whole thing. We just need a ticket to get passed the door. It certainly seems like a suitable place to hide something."

A few minutes later, with tickets in hand, Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin walked into the haunted mansion. If the exterior was somber, the dark confines of the mansion were bleak. They could only see the patches of what small flashlights in their hands revealed. Progress was slow.

Feral sounds, guttural and monstrous, swept by them as they passed. It sent shivers down Qianlin's spine. The temperature was cold and dropping the further in to the building they went. A stuffy blackness surrounded them, a cocoon of darkness where monsters lurked.

Lan Jue was unfazed, but Qianlin gripped his hand tight. Luckily, she didn't have to suffer long. A few turns from the entrance, Lan Jue placed his hand against the smooth metal surface of the wall. There was a crackle of electricity, and the pair was gone.

So long as it conducted electricity, Lan Jue could use it to travel. He didn't have a map, but that didn't matter. Their destination was up.

In a flash, they reappeared in the highest room of the Dark Citadel attraction. It was bathed in red, with every inch painted crimson. Organs had been pinned to the walls like artwork, stretched across canvases of dried human skin. A desiccated corpse was the largest 'piece' on display.

Qianlin wasn't ready for the sudden and grotesque change in scenery. Her eyes popped wide once she registered where they were. Then, bending at the waist, she began to retch.

"Kiss me!" She squeezed her eyes shut and raised her head toward him.

Lan Jue looked at her. The room didn't bother him, but there was horror written on his face now. "You... you're not going to vomit in my mouth, are you?"

Before he could even finish, Qianlin swung around and wrapped him in a tight hug. She pressed her mouth to his.

"Huerghhh-!"

Lan Jue only felt a hint of her ice-cold lips before she vanished. He was really beginning to dislike this place! Looking around, he was also set on edge by the gruesome decor. Still, it was better to share than to do it alone – maybe the Pope would like a look.

Perhaps because of the stomach-turning cost of the ticket, for the time being they were alone – no visitors or employees were within earshot. After a moment's examination, Lan Jue determined that this was an interlude between scenes and not a scene itself. What was the point, he wondered, when the breaks were more unsettling than the attraction. The corpse hanging from the wall looked like it'd been placed and prepared years ago.

Lan Jue began to film the scene from his communicator. He waved his free hand, and two bodies appeared on either side of the pinned-up cadaver. Uriel and Raphael looked like corpses themselves, and Lan Jue gave each a close-up so the Pontiff's Citadel could appreciate the artistry.

Lan Jue finished his small movie, but of course he would not be sending it directly to the Pontiff. He shot it off to the Accountant so he could work

his particular brand of magic.

“Goddamn Jewelry Master. Sending me this stuff so early in the morning... aren’t you afraid it will influence my development?” Came the Accountant’s reply.

“Alright, stop screwing around,” Lan Jue said with a note of irritation in his voice. “Send the video to the Pontiff’s Citadel through encrypted channels in two hours.”

The Accountant sounded shocked. “What the hell is going on? Is this some sort of joke? What the hell did you do to the Citadel? Why wasn’t I invited to the fun, I thought we were brothers?!”

“Fun?” Lan Jue said. “Well if you think facing down a pissed-off Pontiff is fun, by all means fly over. I won’t stop you. Bring the Gourmet and his people while you’re at it, you guys will be coming to the North for the grand tournament anyway.”

“I heard about this,” the Accountant whined. “But I wasn’t invited! The Gourmet said I was too weak and didn’t allow me to participate. I guess my Discipline is no good in a fight, either.”

Lan Jue laughed. “Alright, don’t get your panties in a knot – I can help you there. You won’t be in a fight, but I can make you one of the entourage. I’ll let the Gourmet know, you just get the details from him.”

The Accountant snickered. “Two hours. Got it, they’ll get your message.”

“Do not let them discover where the video came from,” Lan Jue urged.

“You think I don’t know this simple shit?” The Accountant snarled. “You’ll see – they have screens all over Reims, and that’s where this message will pop up. Hah! So what’s the deal, are we going to kill the Pontiff?! Man, Grandpa would get me something good for that!”

“Go ask him then!” Lan Jue sighed.

Immediately, the Accountant’s voice grew soft and timid. “Never mind. Grandpa and the Bookworm have been fiddling with something. No one’s seen them for days. I need to get out of here before those two madmen

accidentally blow up the Avenue.”

The Jewelry Master chuckled. “Well expect it. And don’t forget that thing! When it’s all done let me know.”

“No problem.”

Once his conversation with the Accountant had concluded, Lan Jue sned a short message to the Gourmet. The young guy wasn’t the most reliable, but when it came to high-tech gadgetry, he was the one to go to. He also had the benefit of being backed by the Keeper and the Bookworm both. Bringing him along would help him avoid all manner of troubles. He had a mind like a super computer.

Lan Jue made it back to the public air hangar via taxi. When he got there, he found an abandoned corner to release Qianlin and have her change her clothes. When she was ready, they boarded the next ride out of Gomorroah.

“I don’t know how much longer I can support this lifestyle,” the Jewelry Master complained. “In the last few days we’ve gone through several sets of clothing.”

Even now, Qianlin’s face was still pale and drawn. “When have you ever supported me? All these lost clothes belonged to me, thank you very much. You only ever got me the stuff from Reims.”

Lan Jue looked at the uncomfortable mecha research student. “Are you still scared? I thought you had guts...”

Qianlin pouted at him. “No scared. That was just... disgusting.”

Lan Jue laughed. “We should have gone through the whole thing.”

Zhou Qianlin looked at him discouragingly. “I’d have to strangle you to death.”

Their pleasant exchange was punctuated by the tell-tale rumble of lift off. They left the bleak landscapes behind.

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The Dark Citadel.

“Your Majesty!” Lucifer’s face bore a strange and unsettling expression and he burst in to the Dark Citadel’s daunting audience chamber. Satan sat upon his throne, meditating. This was also where he cultivated his powers.

“What.” The leader of these terrible beasts opened his eyes. Traces of scarlet red undulated beneath his eyes.

Lucifer motioned with his hand, and a pair of guards entered. They were dragging another two people behind them. “We found them in the haunted house,” he said with a sneer.

Satan dropped his eyes to the unconscious pair on the ground. Upon seeing who they were, he couldn’t keep his face from betraying shock.

“Do we know who brought them?” Satan demanded.

Lucifer shook his head. “Visitors, maybe. But we have no way of tracking the origins of the tourists. I’ve already dispatched men to take a look but they came back empty handed. This is no small matter! They could be enemies of the Pontiff’s Citadel, no? I heard from my source in the government that things haven’t been going well in the Holy City either. They’ve closed the city off twice within a few days. The Pontiff himself shuffled out, hunting for someone. It’s more than likely these two play a part in it.”

Satan’s eyes narrowed, thick with murderous evil. “So you suspect someone had captured the Angel of Healing and the Cherubim, and delivered them to us. Do they intend to place them blame on us, or do they have other motives?”

“I think they’re trying to set us up,” Lucifer said. “But it’s one hell of a gift. The loss of two Archangels is no small blow to the Pontiff. I looked them over and they’ve been cut off by some strange power. These ignorant subordinates don’t know how to remove it.”

Satan’s figure shimmered like a nightmare and, in a flash of crimson, he was beside Lucifer. The area around him began to swirl and warp, hanging over the room. After a time a cold smirk split Satan’s lips.

“They have been sealed. By protogenic energy, it seems, and pure. The adept is probably equal to yourself in strength, but he’s had some experience in the world of pure energy. Only a Paragon could unravel this knot. If it remains, though, it will consume the Adept of his Discipline. Eventually they would die.

“How should we handle this,” Lucifer asked.

“Someone wants us to shoulder the blame,” Satan said. “But that doesn’t mean there have to be consequences. Put these two somewhere safe until the Pontiff’s men come to collect. Ask for an s-ranked power gem for each of them.”

Lucifer nodded. “Of course, My Lord. And the seal?”

Satan’s response was dismissive. “We found them this way. Just the fact that we aren’t killing them should earn praise from that idiot Pontiff. When he brings them back and looks over them himself, he’ll see that it wasn’t our doing. If they’ve been hurt, it has nothing to do with us. We’re making a bargain, and that’ll give the zealot face.”

Lucifer’s eyes lit up as he came to understand. “My Lord is wise. I’ll handle this myself immediately. We’ll wait for the Pontiff’s Citadel to take the initiative.”

Chapter 382: Luring the Tiger From the Mountain

The Pontiff's Citadel.

Metatron had been in a sour mood the last few days. He hadn't felt like this for quite a long time. The easy days of yesteryear were certainly passed, he thought.

With the kidnapping of two Archangels, the situation was dire. Not only was it a terrible disgrace, but the Citadel had been in crisis mode ever since. Raphael wasn't so bad. He had been captured outside for the Cathedral, and he wasn't much of a fighter anyway. But Uriel? He was the Cherubim, known for his wisdom. However, that didn't mean he didn't know his way around a fight. He was a ninth level sixth degree Adept, and the fight had taken place on his home turf in the Cathedral. Everything had occurred right under the Pontiff's nose. Still he was captured.

Worst of all, their unknown enemy possessed the powers mastered by Jue Di. The prospect of what that meant was terrifying.

Who's next? Will it be me, or another of the Archangels?

Although the Pontiff's elite were silent, Metatron could tell from their faces that they shared his concerns. Their enemy possessed a power no less than his own, one that was as mysterious as the man himself.

"Lord Metatron!" A surprised shout tore him from his silent reverie.

"What's all the commotion," Metatron said in displeasure.

The clergyman, clad in the vestments of a Bishop, bowed low at the waist. The anxiety on his face only deepened. "Your Majesty, important news. The Citadel's mainframe has gone dark."

Metatron's scowl turned vicious. "So call a technician! Why are you interrupting me for this?"

The Bishop sheepishly fiddled with his robes. "The mainframe was taken over. All of the screens showed a single message. Look." As he spoke, the

Bishop insert a holodisk into the nearby projector. A three dimensional image sputtered to life in the space around them.

The Pontiff's chambers were turns in to a world of blood and severed limbs. The image of Uriel and Raphael beside a corpse was the main attraction. A voice, masked by modulator, boomed around them.

"If you want them back, the Pontiff will come alone to the Dark Citadel. The seal will begin to deal them harm in three hours. In twelve hours they'll be permanently disabled. Hehe... the Dark Citadel isn't even this intimidating."

The sound cut off.

The whole city was in chaos. They'd seen it even before Metatron had. A short time later, the Lord Archangel was standing before the Pontiff with the video in hand.

"Bastard!" The Pontiff bellowed. He looked like he wanted to murder somebody.

Metatron looked no better. "What should we do Your Majesty? It appears he wants to provoke something between us and Satan.

The Pontiff sniffed. "He underestimates him, then. Satan's... rabid exterior is an act. In reality, he's more insidious than anyone I've ever met. If it were you there, then perhaps Satan couldn't resist ridding himself of a powerful enemy. Raphael and Uriel aren't worth it. He'll make demands and ask a price."

"We should get in touch with the Dark Citadel and confirm this information," Metatron muttered. "If it is I'll go take care of it."

The Pontiff shook his head. "No, there's no point in you going. Satan won't use this to attack us, but he'll certainly turn it to his benefit."

"We'll give it a try through our correspondence first, hear any conditions they may have," Metatron said.

The Pontiff answered with a nod.

Ten minutes later, a holo-call was connected.

“Well, who is this?! If it isn’t my old friend, His Majesty the Pontiff.” Satan appeared in the room, languidly draped across the Demon Throne. A self-satisfied grin was plastered on his face.

“Satan.” The Pontiff greeted indifferently. “Are you holding Raphael and Uriel?”

Satan’s grin spread wider. “I am! Some... good samaritan delivered them to us early this morning. I pondered the meaning, then came to conclusion that it must be a gift. It’s really very generous of you – Your Majesty.”

The elderly priest regarded the shimmering image of his nemesis with calm façade. He looked impervious to any of the emotional jabs Satan threw his way. “This is the result of someone trying to provoke us to conflict. Return my men, and there will be no repercussions.”

The King of Devils shook on his throne, wracked with laughter. “No repercussions? Ah, you are a humorous old man. And for argument’s sake, let’s say I don’t. What would you do then, hm?”

The Pontiff’s voice remained calm. “The man doing this is likely a disciple of Jue Di. He took my Archangels, and used the God-King’s Taiji mastery to do it.”

Satan’s smirk slipped a fraction. His dark eyes narrowed. “Jue Di? What do I care if Jue Di himself did it? It was your house that instigated the siege all those years ago, and then fought from the back lines. That was what earned Jue Di’s ire. I remember my father forbidding me from revenge. He said he had a great deal of admiration for the God-King. He died of his wounds with those words. In his last hours, he gave me the Dark Citadel and tasked me with stamping out the Hades bloodline. He has no qualm with us. If he’s shown his hand, it’s to strangle you. We have nothing to fear.”

“But I will not waste time bantering with you. You want them back, fine – it will cost you one S-ranked power gem for each of them. Those are my terms, then they’re all yours. A Paragon will be needed to break this seal, and by the looks of it, if you don’t make a decision soon then they won’t be worth much in trade. It’s a pretty good situation I find myself in, you

know? I didn't even do the work, and I'm getting two s-ranked gems. Or I don't, and I have two less Archangels to worry about. Anyway, none of this was our doing and we've let the parliament know as much. What's next is up to you."

Satan's image shimmered and vanished.

The Pontiff's calm was gone, swept away in the face of his fury. Fluctuating emotion caused him to forget his power, and unrestrained vestiges of his Discipline brightened the room like it was midday.

"I beg calm, Your Eminence," Metatron entreated. The Pontiff responded with a curt wave of his hand.

"Satan isn't stupid. This is all an act to humiliate me. So be it, even if it does disgrace me. Be careful, even though all of this was perpetrated by our mystery attacker just to ferment trouble. Adhere to the tenets of the Church, lest the devil take advantage of your weakness. The rest of you will remain together at all times while I'm gone."

Metatron nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The Pontiff clapped his hands. A milky white orb of light surrounded him, and in seconds the old man melted in to a column of light. The beams vanished in to the center of the runic circle carved on the ceiling.

Metatron's mood had soured even further. "Please call High Inquisitor Constantine back to the Cathedral," he ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

This enemy was wily, and unpredictable. Even aside from taking two Archangels one after the other, he managed to evade the Pontiff's hunt entirely to deposit their friends in the hands of a bitter enemy. Now, no one had any idea where these two terrorists were. It was like some terrible practical joke. No one had been hurt – yet – but the trouble they'd caused was infuriating. If Jue Di had their back, then what was stopping them from doing it again? He'd already had the courage to snatch up two Archangels, would he be next? Metatron pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, fighting the headache he could feel coming on.

After a few minutes, the Archangels returned with Constantine. This was what remained of the Citadel's leadership.

Metatron's voice was low. "His Majesty has gone himself to retrieve our brothers from the Dark Citadel. To ensure everyone safety, you all be confined to this room until the Pontiff's return. He should be back in around two hours."

At the Pontiff's level of strength, getting to Gomorrah would take a matter of seconds. The remainder of that wasted time would be spent negotiating with Satan.

The four Archangels voiced no objection. Everyone had been on edge the last few days, and that went double for the Cathedral's upper caste. Although they knew no harm would come to any of them, the embarrassment was unbearable.

Sariel, Archangel of the Moon, was as expressionless as ever. She took a seat on a nearby sofa. No one noticed her fiddling with her communicator.

The Cathedral was closed to all visitors. It wasn't the first time, but in addition to all the other frightening happenings, people were on edge. Rumors were beginning to spread.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin idly strolled down a lane. She looked completely recovered.

"I prefer this place to Gomorrah." Zhou Qianlin let her eyes wander over the religious-inspired architecture.

This made him chuckle. "It means you aren't a psychopath. Only madmen like to live in the world of darkness. Come, our business here draws to a close. I owe you a new wardrobe."

Qianlin shot him a flirtatious smirk. "Not bad... but is all this 'for security', or your own interest?"

Lan Jue heaved a sigh, and Qianlin's smile fell away. Her big eyes looked concern. "What is it?"

Lan Jue's morose tones hung between them. "All this kissing... what If I

get addicted?”

Chapter 383: Rescuing Little Yue

Qianlin's face turned beet red, and she swatted at him. They were nearing the Cathedral.

The guard was thick, and the entrance clogged with both clergy and Inquisitors. Of course guards were only useful at protecting what they could see. Lan Jue found one of the many electric outlets that powered the structure, and in a flash he was gone.

Within the Cathedral, the High Inquisitor's office suddenly had a new visitor. It was empty, save for Lan Jue, and surprisingly spartan. In stark contrast to the lavish interior of the Cathedral, this metal-filled office was barely habitable.

Lan Jue expanded his perception. He could focus his eyes on the search, instead of defense. His Discipline would alert him of any living thing drawing near. Nothing! It looked like his plan was working – without the Pontiff here, there was no one who could threaten his life. The place was also absent the Paragon's all-pervasive omnipotence.

A ninth level adept had quite the scope of perception, but it was the most discriminate power. He could tell if there were living things, but who could tell if they were enemies, or who were clergy? As far as Lan Jue knew, there was no power that could distinguish friend from foe, and certainly not one Metatron possessed. This was one of the numerous differences between a Paragon and a peak-level Adept.

Sariel's intelligence continued to prove useful, and it took him no time to find the entrance to the Citadel's dungeons. She'd told him that it was protected with particularly tough defensive systems that could even seriously injure a ninth level Adept. What those defenses were precisely, she couldn't say. It was a closely guarded secret of the Inquisition that they operated in concert with the clergy.

This didn't trouble Lan Jue. No matter what these defenses were, they would undoubtedly require electricity or metal. So long as his objective wasn't hidden behind a layer of insulation, he could go where he pleased.

Lightning coiled up his body as he found a way in. Then, with a crackle, he was gone.

Lan Jue reappeared in a distinctly more dismal locale. He stood in what could have passed as a sepulcher, with a long and dark hallway stretching out before him. The walls on both sides were composed of damp stone. There would be no more electrical corner-cutting from here on out, he thought.

With his perception feeling the way before him, Lan Jue walked on. He stepped carefully, feeling for any fluctuations in energy. However, it was starting to look as though his caution was unwarranted – there didn't seem to be anything around to halt his progress. Twenty meters in to the darkness a stairwell appeared. His footsteps rang against the stone steps as he descended. When he reached the bottom, an expansive hall greeted him.

The chamber was ablaze with light, revealing the twinkling metal bars of prisoner cages. The cells stretched all the way to the far wall, numbering in the thousands. Amidst the chaotic din he suddenly found himself in, Lan Jue could spy a black-clad inquisitor wandering the lanes.

Lan Jue couldn't help but balk over the scene. It wasn't the existence of this place that surprised him – any organization had its secrets – but the sheer number of cages. What were they doing with all these prisoners?

Lan Jue took a cursory look around while still hidden from view. As far as he could tell, none of these prisoners were elderly, and nearly all of them appeared to possess a Discipline. It was a prison of Adepts, almost exclusively.

Why would the Pontiff's Citadel detain so many Adepts? He didn't know. The Cathedral was meant to be a place of faith! Who'd believe that, underneath, despair reigned.

Lan Jue crouched, concealed in a dark corner for a few moments. Then he was on the move. He knew he couldn't remain in one place too long or the inquisitors would find him.

The distance between the two Citadels spanned a planet, but it was

nothing to a Paragon. At that level of power, there was no science or machine that could match their speed. After all, a machine had to speed up, whereas a Paragon just willed themselves in to action. A round-trip from one to the other would not take the Pontiff very long.

The cells themselves were made of some sort of alloy. That helped Lan Jue move around a little easier. Some of the prisoners may have spotted him, but not in any form they'd recognize. A flash of electricity, perhaps, or a bolt of dim light. Downtrodden as they were, none paid it any mind.

Lan Jue reached his objective in little time. It was in the farthest reaches of the dungeon; a round altar, with a woman tied to a crucifix in its center. Her long black hair was splayed all around, and plastered to the sweat on her brow.

She hung with drooped head, from hands and feet that had been nailed to the cross. Strangely, though, there was no blood. A pale light swept over her incessantly, from head to the runic circle carved at her feet. The power would flow through her, through the dais to the eight pillars situated around it. The energies would rise and congeal at the peak of each column. Each identical beams of light shot from the pillars, to a golden gem over the prisoner's head.

Four figured sat at four corners of the altar. They sat with straight back, unmoving, as though they were deep in meditation. Their auras were strong – ninth level Adepts almost certainly – and they were young. A holy light shimmered around each of them.

Ninth level Adepts, yes... but in the early ranks, from what Lan Jue could tell.

The mercenary king approached unhidden. That was no longer a priority. Time was of the essence.

He appeared out of nowhere in a nearby corner, and his appearance stirred the four priests. Each of them slowly opened their eyes, and turned their heads toward Lan Jue. However, before they could even see the details of his face the world was upended. Everything around them began to swirl and melt until they had no idea which way was which.

Lan Jue's hands swirled around one another then, pushing outward from the center of his chest, a pair of white and black beams raced forth. They intertwined to form a roiling beam of yin and yang energy.

The four Adepts felt themselves being wrenched forward. Then, an equally striking and powerful force sent them flailing away in to the distance. Lan Jue leaped up and grabbed the golden crystal from over the woman's head. Channeling his yinyang powers through the gem severed it from the beams of light that held it in place. He dropped back to the ground, and placed a hand against the rune-etched crucifix.

The woman groaned pitifully as her body moved of its own accord. By some unseen power, she was lifted and detached from the cross. The nails in her feet and hands fell away.

She collapsed to the ground like a broken thing. For a moment, Lan Jue was afraid she was too far gone. He rushed to her side, and lifted her in to his arms. Her coarse breathing and pained whimpers filled his ears.

The four other Adepts were recovering. Shaking the haze from their minds, they looked toward the man and the woman they were responsible for. They watched just in time to see a large yinyang symbol appear emblazoned on Lan Jue's back. The power spread until his entire body was equal parts black and white.

It congealed around him, and just before it looked like it would consume him entirely, the dual and opposing forces burst out against the cross.

"Boom-!" A shudder tore through the dungeon as the startling shock wave ripped passed in all directions. They would be feeling that up top, he knew, even if just due to displaced dust. The blast sent the four channeling Adepts sprawling once again.

There was a flash of silver, and the Moonfiend empress vanished in to the interspatial containment ring Lan Jue always wore – the same he'd kept Raphael and Uriel in. He then raced back along the cages as a bolt of electricity to the exit.

No trace of the crucifix remained. Well, a crater smoldered where it had stood and that was all. The hurricane-force blast that tore through was

gone as though it had never existed. The prisoners had fared well with the cages to protect them, but the inquisitors were a different story. None of them were strong enough to withstand the blast, which sent them face-first in to the stone walls. They lay comatose on the floor with enough injuries to keep them there a while.

By the time they came to, their attacker was long gone. A depressingly familiar ear-piercing alarm rang through the Cathedral.

In the inner hall, the meditating Archangels each opened their eyes. Constantine was the first to react.

“That’s the dungeon alarm,” he cried. “The terrorist must have struck there.”

Constantine hadn’t even finished, before Metatron was gone in a brilliant flash of golden light. The other Archangels followed close behind. One after the others, they raced toward the dungeons.

The upper echelons of Citadel leadership knew the significance of what they called the Tribunal. What went on down there was more important even than a few missing Archangels.

Now it was beginning to dawn on them that this stranger’s target may not have been them, but something they had. Something in the dungeon. But what? There were the prisoners... and the Morning Star.

Only the wise would rise to lead the Citadel, and it was true for all of the Pontiff’s Archangels. Now they knew what had eluded them before – this wasn’t about starting a fight. It was a rescue mission.

The stranger had performed a flawless feint, looking one way while moving in another to throw off his scent. Only in the final moments of his plan, when it may have been too late, was the whole picture revealed.

Constantine was overflowing with anger. The inquisition and its Tribunal were his responsibility. The Pontiff’s excursion had forced him here instead of with his men – and now he’d been made a fool of once again. His pride, the Tribunal, had failed in a matter of moments.

Chapter 384: Nine Strikes of Taiji

He recognized the strength of their opponent's martial ability. Four ninth level adepts had been guarding the Empress, with a skill that grew stronger as they channeled together. And yet, one single Adept bested them all.

Metatron mulled over the details again and again. Annoyance was etched in the lines of his tired face. He had thought of everything. Everything, except the Empress.

Michael stood a few paces behind the Lord Archangel. He his body was almost completely recovered from his battle with Lan Jue, and in that time his mind had grown sharper. He had his own suspicions about who it might be, or who they might be connected but. Now, though, it was all conjecture. Besides, the victim was most important.

Metatron headed toward the Inquisition officers. A rattling sound followed as the Lord Archangel let his wings unfurl. Twelve spectacular wings spread wide, and he glowed with a golden aura that outshone the sun. The piercing blaze burst out in all directions, enveloping the dungeon in golden luminescence.

Seraphic Luminescence! The slightest details revealed!

An image appeared, suspended in the golden light. A figure, black and white. For half a second, no one moved.

Metatron's mood changed suddenly. He raised his hands to the apex of his head and pressed them downward through the air. A hundred thousand voices boomed through the dungeons in an angelic chorus. The whole foundation shook as the weight of the whole Cathedral came pressing down on that lone figure.

The figure was Lan Jue. He had gone as fast as he dared toward the exit, but Metatron was no slower. They met each other at the entrance to the dungeons.

Smarts would not get him out of this one. It was time to get reckless.

Metatron was more than worthy of his position as second-in-command. By speed alone he could outstrip any of the other Archangels. Only Michael was able to keep up. Constantine, who'd had yet to recover from his self-abasing haze, was last to arrive.

Lan Jue had managed to slip the mask on his face before their ill-fated meeting, so he didn't worry about his identity. His next movement was fluid and almost involuntary. He planted his feet as the crushing load came bearing down. He sank lower, but more like a cat ready to pounce. His hands fell toward his waste like sinking through a puddle before gently pushing out from his abdomen. 1 The space before his hands shimmered with black and white power before they swirled in to one another. They spun to create a vortex which forced the focused rage of the Lord Archangel to either side of him. Michael, who'd tried to flank, was blasted away by the errant power.

Becoming a Taiji master was a means to perfecting one's understanding of self and improving cultivation. The energies of yin and yang became interchangeable with one's own Discipline. The result was quicker improvement and fine-tuning of one's abilities.

In regards to combat and understanding of self, Taiji taught that it was best to use the enemy's strength against them. There is iron in softness. Artists of the craft perfected their own skills which, while not as directly powerful as the Three Canons employed by the Arhat of the Descending Dragon, were especially suited for their guile and wide application. All together, the moves were called the Nine Strikes of Taiji.

He'd used one to obliterate the runic cross in the dungeon moments before, a move called Deflect and Strike 2. The second he used now, was called Parry Block and Punch.

Parry, Block and Punch was the only one of the Strikes that was primarily defensive. It was the apex countermove, allowing the master to redirect a foe's attacks while created an opportunity to strike.

Jue Di had used this skill in his battle against the army of Adepts. It's defense was so perfect as to make him practically invincible. His mastery

of the skill was comparable to protogenic energy, able to create a Domain by this power alone. It came from a fundamental understanding of one's place in the universe, and thus was something no one from the West or North would ever come to grasp.

Metatron felt like a void had opened up between them, and watched helplessly as his power was deflected aside. Lan Jue recognized the opening, and pressed his right hand out toward Metatron's head. The dual powers swirled ominously, consuming everything around it like a black hole.

Metatron fought to keep himself under control, both emotionally and physically. It was important not to get careless in the face of this stranger's powerful attacks. He dropped in to a low squat while thrusting his right fist forward.

Lan Jue and Metatron's strikes met mid-air. While the Archangel expected to find fierce resistance, the strange power fell away like punching through a wet paper bag. The energy became a soft breeze that caressed his face.

Lan Jue's wrist went limp, allowing it to slide around Metatron's fist like water. Metatron, expecting resistance, was stumbled forward. Lan Jue's left hand swung around at just this moment and collided viciously with the angel, joining with the full brunt of Metatron's own forward momentum.

Strength hidden in weakness! Metatron's mistake cost him dearly. Still, he was the Lord of Archangels. His body was cultivated to near-peak form. The man was a small step away from Paragon status. His right fist flailed limply forward while his left arm was blocked. But he still had wings.

All twelve of his massive wings beat in unison. A golden light shone from the apex of each, then merged. The radiating light collided with the center of Lan Jue's fist.

Another misjudgement. Lan Jue's left hand became strangely opaque, like an illusion. Under the swirling vortex's guidance, the beam arced away and flashed just passed Lan Jue's cheek and behind him.

Michael had to dodge again.

With Metatron distracted by his left hand, the ignored right hand came crashing down with explosive force. The angel tried to block, but it was too late. Wielding opposite and complementary powers, using Metatron's own momentum, Lan Jue's right hand rose empty, while his left fist settled beneath his right elbow. The expulsion of opposing powers tore through the space between them like a torrent. Spinning, reversing, consuming and and again in the split second before reaching Metatron.

"Boom-!" The Lord Archangel soared backward toward the stairwell, but at his level of strength remained relatively unharmed.

This was the Third Strike; Fist Under Elbow!

Lan Jue originally disdained using this strike. He felt it less than honorable. After hanging around Fatty Tang for a time, though, well...

Metatron went flying. The other Archangels, by now, had gathered together for an assault. Gabriel, Sariel and Ramiel surrounded him, cutting off escape.

They looked on in confusion as the masked man did the opposite of what they'd expected, and chased after Metatron.

His gait became strange. Each stride swiped from one direction to the other like a yin yang pattern 3. The whole area around them began to twist. Reality inverted as yin and yang of all things swapped, a skill not unlike protogenesis.

The absence of a Paragon gave Lan Jue confidence, especially at his current rank. The fact that these angels had never experienced something like this gave him the opportunity he needed.

Lan Jue took seven strides, but they were more than that. The raging qi within him caused his strides to extend. Each one took him dozens of paces forward, like a ball of screeching yin yang energy.

Each step left a dot of light behind, blazing light a star. Where the Fist Under Elbow utilized trickery, this skill was righteous and straightforward.

Before Metatron went soaring, he could feel the opposing forces rip through his body. He had to call upon his Faith to protect himself from being torn apart. He'd also expected this stranger to try and flee, but instead he was rushing forward for another exchange. Each mighty stride caused him to swell until, by the final step, he was as tall as a mountain.

His flickering fist of black energy came tearing down Metatron's face. The Archangel roared in defiance as his wings blazed with golden fire. A halo more brilliant than the sun hung over his head. His entire body radiated pure golden energy, and as his hands reached out a blade of light pierced through the center of his palms. The golden blades stretched to meet Lan Jue's descending fist.

Reality around them still shuffled through a myriad of inverted scenes, heaven and earth were interchangeable. The terrible force of this strike used no trickery, and bore no flourish. It was a direct and devastating attack.

Seven Stars Fist!

"BOOM!" Metatron collapsed, his golden blades reduced to twinkling gold dust. Lan Jue swung back again and, netting his fingers together, brought both fists down on the angel. His momentum was so fast that a swirling contrail of black and white followed him. The resulting blast of energy sent Metatron's encroaching friends flying in all directions.

Downward Fist!

"Boom—" Metatron took the full brunt of the strike that sent him through the ground, and buried half of his body in the floor.

Lan Jue gave a dark chuckle. With the strongest of their number down, his work was done. He raced for the exit.

A blazing light filled Michael's eyes. He swept his holy blade toward him, and an arc of light tore out through the air. Gabriel, Sariel and Ramial all lashed out with their own powerful attacks to try and stop him. Constantine swept his hand, and the Spear of Destiny appeared in his grip.

But just as it appeared as though their foe had nowhere to run, he reached out and gripped something. There was a flash of light, and then – nothing.

The Angel of War raced forward, in time to sense the faint vestiges of electricity crackling through the air.

“Bang! Crack!” A series of small explosions reverberated off the wall. They were electrical lines, which burned away until nothing was left but ash. Just like that, the mysterious attacker was gone – a ghost amid the dungeon halls.

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1. He performs real Taiji moves during combat. The idea behind Taijiquan is maintaining balance in one's body for health and defense. So long as you aren't uprooted by an enemy, a perfectly balanced body becomes like a well-balanced engine; actions are strong, precise, and almost effortless. Taking advantage of the imbalance in your opponent is how you win, if that's your aim (most taiji practitioners do it to prevent fights, not win them). The move described above is called many things, but this resource refers to it as 'Apparent Close and Push'. If anyone is interested in Taiji as a form of health, exercise and self-defense you should really look in to it. The body's Qi is not some nonsense from fiction writers – you'll feel it if you learn how your body works.
2. You guys are going to be mad at me, but I'm not going to give Lan Jue's strikes cool names. I'm going to translate them as the Taiji movements are meant to be described, as basic as possible. This is not because I'm lazy, but because the spirit of Lao Zi and the Dao De Jing which Taiji was based off of, was striving for simplicity in all things. Here is an excerpt (all credit to Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English.), describing perfection in man: The Tao of heaven is like the bending of a bow. The high is lowered, and the low is raised. If the string is too long, it is shortened; If there is not enough, it is made longer. The Tao

of heaven is to take from those who have too much and give to those who do not have enough. Man's way is different. He takes from those who do not have enough and give to those who already have too much. What man has more than enough and gives it to the world? Only the man of Tao. Therefore the sage works without recognition. He achieves what has to be done without dwelling on it. He does not try to show his knowledge. Taiji began, according to my knowledge and travels, in a small farming village. The general who created it needed to train farmers, who were largely uneducated. Simplifying the names adhered to the precepts of the religion while having the added benefit of being easy to describe and remember. As an interesting addition, Taiji as a martial art is far less physically demanding in the beginning. This was also likely intentional, since the farmers couldn't be expected to work in the fields if they were half-dead from martial training.

3. Taiji practitioners call it 'empty stepping.'

Chapter 385: Succeed and Retreat

Lan Jue crouched in a dark corner, hidden in the shadows of an awning. He heaved deep, heavy breathes but there was still the light of excitement in his eyes. The crackling sounds of electricity filled the air as he vanished once again in to a power socket.

He'd planned all of this ahead of time, of course. Lan Jue had been confident from the beginning that the Pontiff had been the only one he need fear. Joined with Qianlin, these bird-men could be bested. Even Metatron couldn't handle it.

It wasn't that Lan Jue was 'stronger' than the Lord Archangel. The key lay in planning. He knew that everyone in the Citadel feared Jue Di a great deal. Seeing the mystical powers Jue Di possessed set them off balance, and gave him the advantage.

Lan Jue had trained in the mysteries of Taiji for years, but ever since experiencing Qianlin's Queen of Heaven it felt different. His comprehension had improved by leaps and bounds. Secrets that had been obscured were clear now, and that understanding had helped me escape from the lion's den unharmed.

Metatron's face was a pale blue – not from Lan Jue's strike, but from the internalized anger he was struggling to control. This was the first time since becoming the Lord of Archangels that he'd been so thoroughly defeated. If this stranger had been a Paragon it would be another matter, but he was just an Adept! A man with a Discipline no further developed than his own. Even with all his support, they couldn't land a single blow. Metatron couldn't afford to lose this man again.

Metatron had seen clearly that, had he blocked that final attack, his attacker would have needed time to recover. They could have grabbed him them, and kept him locked down with their Discipline. Unfortunately, he hadn't had the strength to content with Lan Jue's strike.

Gabriel and Constantine didn't say anything, but there was disbelief in their eyes as they stared at Metatron. Never once had they seen Metatron

employ the full range of his abilities like that. And still, this man who was one step from Paragon, couldn't stop a single Adept?

It was also the first time they'd ever encountered a power like this. Even now, they couldn't entirely grasp both the leveraging and explosive force of this martial power. That brutal offensive that beat Metatron to the ground still had them stunned.

Only Metatron himself clearly saw what had happened. It hadn't been strength – at least, not his enemy's strength. Through misdirection and subtle influence, he'd used his own condensing powers while borrowing Metatron's momentum to block others and strike at him.

All of that together had been too much, and Lan Jue was able to flee.

“Constantine, recall all Inquisitors and ask if they witnessed anything. Everyone else, with me. We're going to tear this city apart until we find him.” The Archangel was absolutely livid.

Metatron was off in the direction Lan Jue had fled. He was a flash of golden light as he raced to catch up with the enemy. The light around him revealed all, a physical manifestation of his divine consciousness that was able to differentiate things that were dissimilar. The Light of Faith

Compared to the Pontiff's, Metatron's light covered a much smaller area. While it was an exceptional ability, Lan Jue just needed to remain fifty meters away to ensure he stay hidden.

As the others rushed to search through the Cathedral, Lan Jue idly strolled down the lane, away from the scene of the crime. Lan Jue wasn't silly enough to leave the planet directly from Reims, so he boarded a flight to another city, the capital of Eurmania – Europa. Long-distance vehicles were the ones being most closely watched currently, so going directly was asking for trouble.

He didn't ponder too long on what the Pontiff would do once he returned. His objective was complete, and never once had he used his true Discipline to do it. Puzzling out who he was would be almost impossible. The last time he'd tussled with the Angels he was a rank six. No one would expect him to have grown this strong in only a few short months.

As to being pegged a Disciple of Jue Di... so be it. It was what it was. Anyway, the distinction wasn't false. In fact it couldn't be more correct.

With modern technology, commutes between cities rarely exceeded one hour. It held true for their trip to Gomorrah, and it was no different now. Half an hour after take-off, they were in Europa.

Zhou Qianlin and Lan Jue exited the plane together, hand in hand. They stepped out on to the streets of Europsa, and Lan Jue turned to his companion. "What are the odds of your fiance showing up, huh?"

Qianlin glared at him. "I don't have a fiance."

Lan Jue had been bored on the trip, and told Qianlin about the time Richard had sent his goons after him. All the old wounds Qianlin was trying to forget were reopened.

"When are we leaving, anyway? Are we going directly from here?" she asked.

Lan Jue nodded. "But not just yet. The Pontiff has a great deal of clout with the Western government, and a complicated relationship. They couldn't ignore this even if they wanted to. Right now, all long distance flights are being very closely monitored. So we wait, there's no rush. Besides, Little Yue can't stay in interspatial containment too long. She doesn't look like she's in very good condition, so we'll have to patch her up a little."

Europa was the financial and governmental capitol of the Western Alliance. It was a bustling press of humanity, weaving in and out of renaissance-era buildings that had been painstakingly brought all the way from the mother world. It lend the whole place a cultural, antiquated charm.

Lan Jue booked them a room in a hotel called The Westin. Unlike Reims, they wanted one of the best hotels the city had to offer.

There had been a need for secrecy in the Citadel's territory. Europa, though, was absent the Pontiff's absolute control. They wouldn't dare brazenly accosting citizens here without governmental consent. Luxury

accommodations were also much more conservative with their client's information, which was another reason he'd chosen this place.

Lan Jue chose one of the nicest rooms available, and they were lead to it. Once inside he immediately turned on the 'do not disturb' light, which earned a smirk from the bellhop. He was given a tip and sent on his way.

"You men are all pigs," Qianlin complained haltingly.

Lan Jue sighed. "I know! And I can't do anything about it with things between us like they are!"

Qianlin chortled at him. "Serves you right."

Lan Jue sorrowfully shook his head, then walked in to the bedroom. He retrieved the Empress from his dimensional pocket and deposited her on the bed. She was still unconscious, but breathing. Qianlin saw the ragged holes where she'd had her hands and feet nailed to the cross, and gasped in alarm. She covered her mouth and turned away.

Lan Jue scowled and he took the pirate's hand. He lifted her wrist to spy the finger-sized hole they'd left. The surrounding tissue had already begun to die. A thick, foul pus ran from her wound, but there was no longer any blood. The wounds in her feet were no different.

She was much thinner than she had been the last time. She was practically skin and bones, and by the looks of her the last few weeks had been torment.

Thankfully, Lan Jue could feel that her life force was still vibrant. Lan Jue's abilities didn't emphasize healing, and neither did Qianlin's. The empress, though, did have healing capabilities.

Qianlin acted first. She turned back and laid her hands upon the woman. Her power flooded through Yue's meridians, clearing them of blockages. Qianlin could feel that she had been sealed, like Raphael and Uriel had been. There weren't any traces of protogenesis, though.

Those gentle, soothing powers continued to permeate through the pirate's cells. After a time, the seal pulsed and released a faint light. The Moonfiend Empress reacted with a weak sigh. It was clear that torturous

ceremony had nearly drained her Core. Luckily, the damage didn't reach the source. She could recover.

Lan Jue fetched a glass of water, which he handed to Qianlin. She carefully helped the Empress drink a few sips. After a few minutes, color began to return to her sallow face. She opened her eyes.

They were a strange pink in hue, and when she could focus her eyes fell immediately upon Lan Jue.

"Zeus... am... am I dead? But wh-... why would you be here?" Her muttered words were barely audible.

"No," Lan Jue's deep voice assured. "You're very much alive. And so am I. We got you out from the Citadel dungeon. How do you feel?"

"You saved me?" She stared up at him with wide eyes. Moisture began to collect at their corners.

Seeing the look on her face, Qianlin followed her gaze up to Lan Jue. She smiled.

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1. In Chinese medicine, trauma is said to cause stagnation of qi and blood, which blocks the meridians and prevents nutritive energy from qi and blood from nourishing the injured tissue.

Chapter 386: The Fifth Amazon

Lan Jue coughed uncomfortably. “Your man came and got me. He said the Pontiff’s men had kidnapped you, and brought you back to the Citadel. Qianlin and I went in to get you out. We still aren’t safe, though. We’re holed up in Europa for the time being. Are you well enough to use your Discipline? Your wounds are serious.”

The Moonfiend Empress was fully present now, and looked from Lan Jue to Zhou Qianlin. Her face was calm, but there was an ache in her eyes.

Lan Jue produced the gem they’d pilfered while rescuing the Empress. He handed it to her. “We’ll talk more later. Right now, you need to restore your Discipline and heal. When you’re better, we’ll get off of Eurmania and find a safe harbor. We’ll talk then.”

“Mh.” She took the gem from Lan Jue without a word of thanks. He helped her in to a cross-legged position on the bed. She held the crystal in both hands, then with eyes closed galvanized what remained of her Discipline.

A short time later, a pale golden aura began to pulse around her. Lan Jue’s concern was visibly reduced then. So long as a ninth level adept survived, they would recover.

“We should spend time on cultivation ourselves,” Lan Jue urged as he looked at Qianlin.

“Alright,” she responded with a compliant nod.

The Moonfiend empress suffered from grievous injuries, but any Adept whose Discipline was light-based had potent healing capabilities. At ninth level sixth rank, her body’s own inherent regenerative abilities were already strong. Together, it meant her body would recover in a day. The Empress’ Discipline, though, would take time to fully return.

Lan Jue and Qianlin settled in to their meditative arrangement, just as Bize had instructed. It had been proven to do just as the old god of wine had claimed, and speed up their cultivation. After every session both of

them could clearly feel improvements in their Discipline. For Lan Jue, this had been building up since the beginning of ninth level.

Their fused meditations immersed them in protogenic energy, infusing them with an understanding they wouldn't otherwise achieve. However, although their individual Disciplines improved their power when fused together never seemed to change. It was to be expected, though – the peak of ninth level was the upper limits of humanity. Only Paragons, super humans, could pass that threshold. With their current abilities there was still work to do.

Regardless, they were cultivating at the level of a peak Adept even if their individual Disciplines weren't there. They could sense the fluctuations of protogenesis around them just as someone nearer to Paragon would. All of this was preparing them for their bottleneck, for when they would need to break through."

Europa was a worthy capitol city. Never once during their stay were they harassed. Lan Jue watched the Western news on the holograph projector for reports on the Pontiff's Citadel, but none were forthcoming.

Another day passed, and its end saw the Empress' powers back over ninth level. She wasn't back to her old self – that would need longer – but it was enough.

"When are we leaving?" The Moonfiend empress asked.

"Where are you thinking of going?" Lan Jue looked at her. "The Starfields? I think it might be better if you come back with us first. I'll have Zeus-1 send you home from there. There's something I have to take care of first. How about you go back to the Avenue and wait for me there."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not going back. The Moonfiend Pirates are entirely under the Pontiff's control now, but for a few. I couldn't take it back even if I went. And you, you've always watched over me. I don't want to cause you any more trouble than I already have. I am no longer the Moonfiend Empress, that woman is dead. I rise again as the Morning Star. But not the Citadel's. I shall be Zeus' Archangel."

Lan Jue could immediately sense the change in Qianlin's mood beside

him. “Little yue, this...”

The Morningstar’s face spread in a bewitching smile. She looked to Qianlin. “Zeus has his four Amazons, they don’t need me to round them out. My name... my real name, is Su Xiaosu – The Morning Star, Su Xiaosu. I am now the Fifth Amazon.” She rose to her feet and, with resolve in her eyes, bowed low toward Lan Jue.

Lan Jue bound to the side in an effort to avoid the uncomfortable ceremony. He laughed awkwardly. “Now Little Yue, stop this nonsense. How are you going to be forcing people to control you?”

She rose and smiled at him. “I’m not compelling control. Boss. If you refuse, I don’t mind. I’ll just walk back in to the Pontiff’s Citadel. When they put me down there, my old life was over – I don’t have anything else to return to. If you aren’t willing to accept my oath, then leave me here. I understand, and with four Amazons already you have a lot on your plate. You don’t need a Morning Star.”

Lan Jue spied the easy tilt to her lips, and relaxed. But though she smiled, he could see the sadness and rejection behind her eyes. How could she not? She was entirely alone, without help. Her Moonfiend Pirates were gone, so where could she call home?

What’s more, the Pontiff had harmed her gravely with their torment, and she would need a place to heal.

He heaved a sigh. “How about this. Head back to the Avenue with us first. You can hang around until you get back on your feet, but none of this ‘fifth amazon’ nonsense. I’m just a friend offering a place to stay. Once you clear your head, find a path, then we’ll part ways.”

“Alright,” she answered reluctantly.

Zhou Qianlin urged her will through the Soul Caller gemstone:

“I guess I know why those other women started hanging around you.”

“I can’t just leave her here helpless! She’s been through a lot, and has been injured. Relax, alright? There’s nothing between she and I.”

“Relax? Why should I have to relax – there’s nothing between you and I!”

“ ... ”

Lan Jue contemplated the decision for a moment more, but in the end he decided it was best to bring the Morningstar back to the Avenue. There was a chance her presence would be discovered at the adept tournament, but they wouldn’t be on home turf. More troubling was the exhaustive searches going on all through Eurmania and the ships around it. If Lan Jue left her to try and escape on her own, she’d likely be found – especially since she was headed to Skyfire.

With his mind made up, Lan Jue purchased two first class tickets on the next flight to Planet Luo. He then had the Accountant hack in to the transit system and get them an off-the-books third ticket.

The last part was easy; Su Xiaosu was concealed in Lan Jue’s interdimensional transport while he and Qianlin calmly waltzed through the security check.

Chapter 387: History of the Amazons

It looked easy, but in reality no ordinary person could pull it off. Only Adepts who were eighth level or above could hold their breath for long enough to be transported through a customs check. But this was more than that – the Morningstar was in a complete, compressed vacuum in the interdimensional space created by Lan Jue's ring. Ninth level Talent was the minimum needed to survive that ordeal.

There also wasn't any current technology capable of sniffing out a ninth level Adepts aura. At that point security forces just did the best they could.

Once they were boarded Lan Jue and Qianlin sat together. Su Xiaosu sat separately. She was quiet at first, like a refined young woman. No one would ever suspect they sat beside a fierce pirate Queen.

"I'm not sure she'll leave once she gets to Skyfire Avenue." Zhou Qianlin let her skepticism be known.

"I can't very well drive her away in that case," Lan Jue said with a helpless grin. "You were right, though. All of those girls back at the shop came my way for some reason or another. Mika's Satan's daughter, for example. Ever since I helped her escape, Satan's harbored a deep resentment. He could cause me no end of troubles at any moment. Xiuxiu agreed to follow me, but we've been friends since we were children. We grew up together. My grandfather had his own plans and made the arrangements. Guoguo and Ke'er I rescued from the North. Lin Guoguo's family is also quite storied, but because of her unsettling Discipline they plotted to have her killed. They'd find another successor, one easier to control. She narrowly escaped death, but Ke'er's story is the most tragic."

Qianlin looked surprised that the adorable Ke'er's history would be so bad. "What happened?"

Lan Jue's face fell as he recounted. "You probably already know that many of the West's Adepts got their powers through Fantascia Genetica and other genetic manipulation. That's largely the reason the West has so many more Adepts than the East. The drawback is that higher level

Adepts do not react well to the serum. The risks are very high, and the cost astronomical. It sees some use in the North as well, as part of their Adept creation process. Mostly, though, they're made by joining human to technology. The two are violently smashed together to force a result. Ke'er was an orphan out there, and grew up in their system. She was born with a Discipline, but it was very weak – first level, just barely. But then they came for her, and started their experiments. They said they were trying to make a super soldier.”

“They were careful to choose children with no background, no one anyone would miss. The experiments were a series of failures that often left the children permanently crippled. Many died. In their final ‘batch’ of subjects a few showed promise, Ke'er among them. Her core isn't a real one, but a special s-ranked power gem and her Discipline is mostly from the gem itself. Maybe a third of her entire body is precision military equipment.”

Qianlin's eyes almost popped out of her head. A child, forced to be cut apart and put back together with a machine, entirely without her will. It was a nightmare, that Ke'er had to suffer through day after day.

Lan Jue went on. “I guess I saved them all, not much different than Little Moon 1. So you know, what can I do? Could you just let them go their own way and fend for themselves? My only option was to let them stay. They live happy lives now, and the day they decide to leave I'll give them enough to live comfortably. I didn't agree to any of this Amazon stuff. I see them as my sisters.”

This was the first time Qianlin could think of that Lan Jue shared something so personal. She sighed. “That may be the case, and you're a good man, but what about them? How would they feel about bringing someone else back? Do you expect them to not have any sort of feelings for you whatsoever?”

Lan Jue was taken aback, and grinned at her. “What am I supposed to do about that? There are two sides to every coin, right? The best I can do is not lead them on. You know better than anyone who I hold in my heart.”

Qianlin didn't want to provoke him or act snide. She just sounded anxious. "You should really think about what needs to be done for these women in the next couple of years. They may grow up and make other plans, but what if they don't? you'll just let them stay with you forever?"

"You think I haven't done that yet? I've spoken with each one of them in private about it, but the second the topic comes up the tears come down. Sometimes they cry so hard they can't speak, or they desperately ask not to go. What am I supposed to do? I don't even dare broach the topic anymore. The second I start in on it, everything goes crazy." Lan Jue huffed.

Qianlin gave him a flat look. "From the looks of it, even if my sister were alive she wouldn't be happy marrying you. Not with so many women following you around."

Lan Jue humphed. "Hera was nearly so mean as you. She knew all those girls well and never once said a word about it."

She sniffed a laugh at him. "You talk like you understand women. No ordinary girl would ever approve of sharing her man. My sister was just a good person, that's all."

A deep and pervasive pain flit across Lan Jue's eyes. "Well it doesn't matter, does it. She's dead."

Zhou Qianlin was silent. After a time, she raised her head. "I'm sorry."

Lan Jue shook his head. "Do you know why I've kept you at arms length since I met you? I'm actually still a little afraid of seeing you, because every time I do I see your sister. You two look so similar, I still forget sometimes. I stay away to protect myself I guess, but that leaves you alienated."

Her eyes dropped to the floor. "I'd be very happy if I met a man who loved me as much as you love her." What she didn't express, was her own sadness for her unrequited affection for him.

Lan Jue said nothing more. He leaned back in the big, comfortable first class seat and closed his eyes like he were sleeping.

The ship calmly went on its way. Once it left atmosphere it picked up speed, and then at last Lan Jue could claim victory. The Once-Moonfiend empress, now again the Morninstar Su Xiaosu, was saved. Now that they were out in open space, the Pontiff's men would have a hard time intercepting them even if they found out they were here. The West wouldn't send troops after them.

The ship's destination was the capital of the Northern Alliance, Planet Luo. It was the single largest, populated planet in all the human colonies. It was the political and economic heart of the North.

This was as much true for Adepts as it was for normal citizens. The North's Adept organization – The Great Conclave – was located on Luo as well.

Unlike the Western Capital, Lan Jue had been here several times. It also happened to be the home of one of his close brothers. Chu Cheng, successor to the Hades bloodline, had his place here.

This Adept tournament was like a cyclone sweeping through the Adept world. It was one of the greatest occasions in the last decade, and it was starting very soon.

Chapter 388: Planet Luo, Luo City

The flight from Eurmania to the capital of the Northern Alliance took four days.

Su Xiaosu was quiet for almost the entire trip. She sat in thought, silently ruminating her fate. The several times Lan Jue went to check on her, he could see that she was far from her normal self. Of course she never admitted it, instead assuring him that she was fine. All she needed was time to get her head straight.

Zhou Qian Lin didn't press him any further about the Amazons. On the contrary, she was uncharacteristically warm. It was almost as though she were trying to make up for her past misgivings.

The two of them didn't cultivated together as they'd done on Reims, but did practice circulating each others' Disciplines. Lan Jue taught the young politician's daughter more finely tuned skills in using his powers, while also considering what he'd learned from the use of his master's Taiji abilities.

Ever since meeting Qianlin – even more since she'd used her powers on him – Lan Jue's cultivation was significantly faster. In a few months he'd discovered more than in three years of careful meditation. His decadent days of self-pity were gone, and though the pain in his heart persisted he was able to cope now.

Four days passed quickly, and before they knew it Planet Luo was looming large in their vision. They began their descent toward the capital of the massive planet – Luo City.

This was among one of the most famous cities in the history of humanity, and the economic hub of the Northern Alliance. The place was rife with service and entertainment for visitors, state-of-the-art scientific research facilities, and the Adept organization the Great Conclave. This place was the Jewel of the North, and the heart of Planet Luo.

The ship eventually touched down, and Lan Jue lead the two beautiful women from the hangar. The stewardesses watched him go with a fiery

light in their eyes. It was unusual to see a man with such an entourage, to say nothing for his first-class tickets.

Lan Jue found a place to change in to a blue leisure suit and a white shirt. The two-piece ensemble didn't need a tie. Qianlin was clad in a fine white dress with her sleek hair pulled in to a pony tail. She exuded youthful exuberance, and her big blue eyes shone like diamonds.

Su Xiaosu was less in the mood for pure beauty. She wore black trousers with a black jacket and white blouse. Her head of full, black, curly hair tumbled down to her shoulders. She looked as beautiful as she did capable. Compared to Qianlin she looked much more professional, and her red-tinted eyes bestowed a very different feel from Qianlin's cobalt blue. She followed a few steps behind Lan Jue, demure and silent like an assistant.

Two black-haired beauties; one in white, one in black; blue eyes, and red eyes. Although Qianlin was in a class of beauty all her own, Xiaosu had the charm and figure of an experienced woman. Both ladies were of a similar height.

With these two in his wake, it was going to be impossible for them to go anywhere without a host of eyes following.

Now that they were on Luo, Lan Jue wasted no more time worrying over the Pontiff and his cronies. They were safe here, and even if they did run in to some of the Pontiff's men here they had nothing to fear. So what if he brought Xiaosu? The Pontiff's Citadel had no proof that he'd been the one to save her. This being the North, even if they could prove it, so what? Even despite the glitz and glamour of this ornament, the Pontiff wouldn't be attending. The highest officer of the Citadel would likely be Metatron. With them being so thoroughly embarrassed, he wasn't sure when they'd show up.

"We're here." Lan Jue said in to his communicator.

"Come on out," a voice urged. "We're waiting at the front." The voice drawled on in a lazy tone.

They passed through the security check, and not an instant after they

stepped outside was Lan Jue able to spot their welcome party. The man wore a sharp suit of black and red, and was busily flirting with a woman laden with luggage.

“A-Cheng!” Lan Jue called.

Chu Cheng turned his face to the sound. Before anything, his eyes picked out the two beautiful woman at Lan Jue’s side, and his eyes shone with promise. The woman he’d been chatting up was entirely forgotten as he made his way over to them.

“A-Jue, why is it always like this with you! Always with a pretty girl on your arm! It’s a pleasure as always to see you again, Miss Zhou. And who is this new face?” Chu Cheng’s eyes roamed unabashedly over Su Xiaosu’s form. He wasn’t sure of Lan Jue’s relationship with Qianlin, especially considering her similarities to Hera. But this woman was free game, and was nearly as beautiful.

“Hello,” she said, politely extending a hand. “I’m Su Xiaosu, the boss’ new secretary.”

The muscles of Chu Cheng’s face twitched. He turned his face and stared at Lan Jue without uttering a word.

The former Mercenary King scowled. “Your own lady is waiting for you over there.”

Chu Cheng stared wordlessly at Lan Jue a moment longer before turning away. He called for the woman to come over. She did so, haltingly.

Chu Cheng returned to the group. He addressed with a note of embarrassment in his voice. “We, uh, just met. Exchanged a few sentences. Shall we go? The car is out front.” He wrapped an arm around Lan Jue’s shoulder as they meandered toward the exit.

Chu Cheng’s questions were relentless. “Another one for your store, eh? Fess up, all of these beautiful, feisty, voluptuous women... how do I get me some?”

Lan Jue glowered dubiously. “Can you not? Can’t you take a day off from chasing skirts? You’re like a bee, just mindlessly after honey.”

“Bullshit,” Chu Cheng muttered so just his friend could hear. “Do you think this common woman could compare to either of these girls? So you gunna find me a ninth level secretary Adept or what? Go on and tell me, how many is it you’ve got now? Or maybe we can talk a trade, right? I don’t see Mika here, and instead you brought the new girl. What gives?”

Lan Jue turned his head, and gave his friend a deceptively warm smile. “I’m not telling you!”

Chu Cheng scowled. “I thought we were brothers!” He almost shouted.

Lan Jue’s voice was thick with disdain. “And a proper brother wouldn’t ask to throw good women to the wolves. There’s a reason any girl who likes you turns out unsuitable. Hell out here they’ve got fire insurance, health insurance, and Chu Cheng insurance – every family knows. I’ll tell you what though, if I ever meet a woman I want to torture, I’ll send her your way.”

“You’re a sour bastard,” Chu Cheng complained. “I always knew there was something wrong with you. Fine, screw you then. I’ll find introduce myself, and if it works out I expect you to stay out of my way.”

Lan Jue waved his hand, wordlessly inviting Chu Cheng to make good on his threat. If he had the balls to chase the Moonfiend Empress, Lan Jue wouldn’t stand in his way.

As anticipated, Chu Cheng’s attempts fell on deaf ears. No matter what he said on their way to the car, Xiaosu replied only with tiny nods or shakes of her head. She didn’t open her mouth once, and her eyes never left her boss’ back.

Chu Cheng could do nothing in the face of her intractable silence. He had to accept defeat.

A gorgeous maglev luxury car was waiting for them outside, and they filed in. Chu Cheng and Lan Jue occupied the front, while the women sat in the back.

Lan Jue spoke up as they went on their way. “Is A-Li here? He mentioned he might be interested in participating.”

“He got here a while ago – even set up a concert on the planet. He really pissed Mo Xiao off, so he’s been paying his dues with a strong of performances. I made another guest appearance when he did the show here, actually. In fact the tournament organizers asked him to do the opening ceremony. I bet he made a pretty penny off of that deal.”

“Does that mean he can’t compete in the games themselves?” he asked.

“Hua Li wanted to, but Mo Xiao shot that idea down. She said unless there was no doubt he’d win, he was staying put. Said it would ruin his reputation.” Chu Cheng grinned.

Lan Jue laughed in spite of himself. “Mo Xiao’s a professional – she knows the business. What about you? Are you participating?”

“The master has to school the students,” Chu Cheng haughtily assured. “What, you nervous?”

“Oh yes.” Lan Jue nodded emphatically. “I might cry.”

“Well aren’t we an arrogant ass,” Chu Cheng replied, a little surprised. “I can sense that hidden power, not a bad trick. Make yourself seem weaker, right? A wolf in sheep’s clothing 1!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “You discovered my secret. I guess I won’t have that going for me when we meet in the ring. Oh, there’s something I have to tell you as well. You better mentally prepare for it, because your uncle’s coming with the Avenue’s team.”

Chu Cheng’s eyes popped. “Eh? He actually agreed to come out here?”

He already knew of his uncle’s rise to Paragon status, of course. It must have been a stunning shock to the whole family. It was of monumental importance to the Hades bloodline. At last, they had a champion to lead the charge against Satan.

Lan Jue went on. “I wanted to remind you and your family not to harbor any false hope for him. He didn’t choose Hades for his title. He chose the Infernal Vanguard. You should know what that means. Aside from him, you’re the only other one of this generation with the potential to reach Paragon. He left that title for you, when it’s your time. But he also left you

that responsibility.”

Chu Cheng’s face grew solemn. “The old bastard is shameless!”

Lan Jue snorted a laugh. “Stress is a motivating force. Work for it.”

“When you get to where we are, how much use is ‘working for it?’ The only improvements come from sudden epiphanies. Anyway, uncle coming here is a good thing. Whatever the circumstances, he should come home to visit. After all these years things are sure to have mostly blown over. I asked dad myself, and he said that woman’s death wasn’t his order.”

Lan Jue shrugged. “This is your family’s business. You should handle it on your own. As an outsider there isn’t much I can contribute. As far as I know, the Gourmet has zero interest in going home. He said he likes the Avenue, and liked being the Gourmet. Right, and your new aunt is probably coming as well.”

Chu Cheng nodded in understanding. “When are they coming?”

“Should be soon,” he answered.

Chu Cheng arranged for the three visitors to stay in the same hotel he’d visited before – the Intercontinental. Lan Jue wouldn’t be so brash as to insist on sharing a room with Qianlin, so the three of them had separate suites.

Chapter 389: Tournament Rules

Three people, three separate rooms. Of course Lan Jue and Qianlin would meet at night to cultivate their powers, but it would be done secretly to avoid questions and preserve Qianlin's reputation.

After the ladies left, Chu Cheng remained with Lan Jue in his suite. "So what's the deal – what brings you to Luo this time around? The Avenue sent several representatives, young ninth level Adepts, but what's the North's play here?" Lan Jue asked.

As a member of the Hades bloodline and under protection of the North, Chu Cheng was naturally a member of the Great Conclave. His all-pervasive disinterest assured, though, that he didn't have any real responsibility in the organization. But with his reputation, and his ninth level seventh rank Discipline, he was still a well respected member.

Chu Cheng replied. "On the surface, it's all about friendly inter-Adept exchange. Underneath they've got other plans. One of them is of course to see just how powerful our competition is. The sudden rise of two Paragons from the Avenue, and it's unexpected pressure on the two Citadels has made the Conclave nervous. They've changed tack."

"One of them, you said. What are the others objectives?" He asked.

Chu Cheng's normally jovial and impudent expression grew serious. "It has to do with those aliens. The North has gathered a fair bit of information about them after several exploratory missions. They even brought back some physical evidence. The science and tech department has been hard at work analyzing the findings. I believe they should share their findings sometime during the tournament. I don't know the specifics, but if the reaction of the North's upper brass is any indication than this is serious. These creatures are a hell of a lot stronger than we thought."

Lan Jue's face was hard as he peered in to the distance. He knew precisely how strong these things were. Between the Clairvoyant's forecasts and his own experience on Taihua, there were probably few who understood them better than he.

The universe was vast. There had always been a significant possibility that some strong outside force might be encountered. It was wise for the North to use this opportunity to spread awareness. It was already a danger to the whole of the human species.

Chu Cheng went on. "All efforts in the hopes that we can survive what's coming. The North already sent three Bastion ships out to the area as a precaution. If those alien planets are found encroaching on the territory, then war is inevitable. The Northern Alliance will be the first to face them."

Lan Jue nodded. "If they do attack, I'll be right there on the front lines. I plan to join the military. What's your plan?"

"Military?" Chu Cheng shot his friend a surprised look. "Shoulder to shoulder with the big guy, eh?"

Again he nodded. "We don't leave a man behind, right?"

Chu Cheng gave him a thumbs-up. "Word. I guess I'll kick up some trouble myself if it comes to that, and join the army as well. Hopefully hostilities between the East and North will be forgotten by then and we can join forces. After all, we have a common enemy."

Lan Jue grunted in acknowledgement. "That's the hope. Unfortunately there's a lot of history between the three Alliances. If it isn't taken care of then It'll be a serious handicap. So what else, other than this announcement. How is this tournament going to be run?"

"Nothing complicated," Chu Cheng assured. "A simply show of strength. There was a period of indecision, but eventually they landed on some rules. Anyone under forty is allowed to participate, and the prizes are well worth the effort. I think at last estimation, there'll be around two thousand Adepts competing – all top grade adepts. The actual match-ups will be decided by drawing lots so luck is also a factor. I think your first round is against a seventh level Adept. You won't have any trouble... that is, unless you pull my name out later. Then you're in for some trouble!"

Lan Jue patted his head in exasperation. "When pigs fly. Go on."

“Well, with so many people they had to keep things simple. It starts with elimination rounds until we’re down to sixteen competitors. Then, they’ll be separated in to four pairs. Once the losers are eliminated, those four will compete. Anyone who gets passed the elimination rounds will get bonus prize – an a-ranked power gem for getting in the semi-finals. Anyone in the finals will get an s-ranked gem, with an extra s-ranked gem for the grand champion. Runners-up will earn stones whose rarity will be based on their final standing. But they don’t accumulate. You only get the highest award you’ve acquired.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Easy is right, but also the best way to go about it. The whole thing shouldn’t take too long to complete. Is it all one-on-one, or is there anything else going on?”

His companion shook his head. “Nope. But I did hear some talk about an all-in mecha melee between the three Alliances. It’s supposed to happen when DreamNet’s completed its upgrades. The idea is to inspire more young people to work hard and join up. Pilots are going to see combat so this is likely to help prepare everyone for what’s to come.”

“Good plan,” Lan Jue commented. “That was also the idea behind our competition with the Star Alliance. Has the North instituted a draft?”

“Not just yet. There’s still some time before the threat reaches us. They won’t just show up on our doorstep,” Chu Cheng said.

Lan Jue grunted. “I’ll get in touch with A-Li. Should we get together tonight?”

This caused Chu Cheng’s eyes to light up. “Call those two ladies! Right, I forgot to ask – where’d Su Xiao Su come from? How the hell did you get so lucky, anyway. You’re always running in to these gorgeous female powerhouses. If five is finally enough for you introduce the next one to me. I’m marrying age now, according to the family, so they’ve got me set up on all these blind dates 1. Since our powers are genetic, the family makes to make sure I start on the next generation. Of course, now that I’m supposed to be getting married I’m not supposed to be meeting just any lady. Xiaosu is definitely not a bad fit. Introduce me, I’m serious!”

The look on his face confirmed his words.

But Lan Jue had long since grown immune from his friend's false assurances. "Cut the shit. If you want something, take care of it yourself. But don't say I didn't warn you – if you do shack up with Xiaosu, you're in for a world of trouble. You're already locking horns with the Prince of Darkness, and if you make things worse than even the Conclave might not be able to shield you."

Chu Cheng looked stunned. "What do you mean? Does she have some sort of connection to the Pontiff's Citadel?"

"Have you heard of the Moonfiend Empress?" He asked.

He nodded. "I've heard of her. The pirate lord out there in the Shattered Starfields, right? Don't tell me Su Xiaosu is the Moonfiend Empress! The hell are you doing with a pirate lord at your heels?"

Lan Jue laughed. "Pirate? If only it were that easy. She has another name: the Morningstar."

Chu Cheng's mouth fell open.

"You... you sure love to stir shit up! You've been back for what feels like a few days and already half the West wants to murder you. I'm starting to see a pattern – screw it, you can keep her. I suddenly feel a great deal of pity for you. They may look like beautiful women, but they're all time bombs!"

He wasn't wrong. These five women had more caustic baggage than a nuclear waste disposal truck. Every one of them was trouble waiting to happen.

Back when they were all hiding away in the Avenue, lost in their life of decadence, then there weren't any problems. No one would come to the Avenue to cause trouble, even if they'd had known they were there.

But once Lan Jue started coming out, his identity was becoming more widely known as was his location. Plenty of people already knew where he laid his head. All of his old rivals and new enemies would never be far behind.

Chu Cheng's face changed again as he remembered something important. "A-Jue. Are you going to participate under your real name or your title?"

"Zeus," he replied. "If I hide my face behind a mask, at least it'll afford me some level of mystery."

"You aren't going to participate with the Avenue team?"

Lan Jue nodded. "I won't be competing on their behalf. The Conclave has given me a good enough excuse as a competitor. Hopefully it'll protect me from getting assassinated."

Lan Jue said it like a joke, but it was only half in jest. As the once-Mercenary King he'd made quite a number of enemies. It was just as true for the Conclave as anywhere else. After all, he'd taken both Lin Guoguo and Ke'er from their clutches.

Chu Cheng's face darkened. "That's nothing to joke about, bro. You better remember that your name is damn near the top of the conclave's blacklist."

This earned a shrug. "What can I do about it? I know what I'm doing – and I'm going in as Zeus."

Chapter 390: Hua Li and Mo Xiao

Chu Cheng smirked. “Shouldn’t be a problem during the tournament. You’re right – since the Conclave is hosting, they’ve certainly taken security in to consideration. I know for a fact that Adepts have been told to settle their score in the ring only, no matter the situation. Anyone who breaks that rule will have the Conclave to answer to. Of course that’s only until the tournament ends. After that, we don’t care what people grumble about. The Avenue has sent a good group, but I’m still not sure they can protect you.”

Lan Jue laughed. “Alright, don’t go looking for devils where there aren’t any. I’ve got things under control.”

“Well if you have a plan then so be it,” Chu Cheng remarked. “There are still eight days before the tournament, though. Why’d you come so early?”

To this his friend shrugged. “No reason, really. Prepare for the fight. Let me get in touch with Hua Li and we’ll all go out for a meal tonight.”

He dialed Hua Li’s number in to his communicator as they spoke. A moment later his friend’s voice answered.

“A-Jue? You got here?” Hua Li sounded happy to hear from his fellow Monarch.

“Yup. You got some time tonight for a meal?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” Hua Li replied without hesitation.

But just then a second voice could be faintly heard in the background. “Absolutely my ass! You still have to prepare for the tournament’s opening ceremony!”

“Alright, alright – I’ve given you enough face lately. Give me a damn second to myself, will you? A-Jue and A-Cheng are both here. Worse comes to worse I leave early for rehearsal.” Hua Li complained.

“Fine, I need to eat too so I’ll go. That way I can make sure you don’t run off again.” The woman’s voice continued.

Hua Li could only sigh. “Looks like Mo Xiao’s coming too, A-Jue. Is that alright?”

The Jewelry Master laughed. “Of course, of course. I brought a couple female friends, they can talk.”

The connection ceased, and Lan Jue wondered out loud. “Poor Hua Li sounds like he’s living a nightmare. Mo Xiao has him locked down.”

Chu Cheng laughed at his friend’s misfortune. “You think this isn’t your fault? Mo Xiao was uber pissed when he ran off last time, so much she almost quit. Hua Li’s had to make up for that ever since. Alright, well, you go ahead and rest first. I know a good place for dinner, I’ll make the reservations so you don’t need to run around.”

With that, Chu Cheng left. Lan Jue then took a shower, laid on his bed and pondered the tournament to come. Like he’d told his friend, he could only represent himself this time, and mustn’t show his face around the Skyfire Avenue team. If he didn’t, a discerning observer might be able to guess who Zeus really was.

Although Lan Jue didn’t fear any of the Adepts who would attend the tournament, he didn’t want to bring trouble to the Avenue. This was especially true after his little excursion to the Pontiff’s Citadel. Even if he had to use his Taiji abilities in the fight, the Pontiff’s men wouldn’t be able to link him to the Avenue. He’d only be representing himself.

He didn’t know who the Gourmet brought with him to the tournament. From what he could gather, though, the most likely candidates were; the Driver, the Coffee Master, the Beautician, the Barber, the Seamstress, the Pharmacist and the Accountant. If there were more, he wasn’t aware. The Doctor would probably make an appearance as well.

It was a very strong showing, and certainly enough to properly represent the Avenue in the tournament. While none were peak-level Adepts, it was important to remember that all of them were natural Talents. They got to where they were through hard work alone, without any shortcuts.

The North and West had their own methods for creating Adepts, remolding people in to powerhouses. However, when it came to one-on-

one battles a natural Talent had a slight advantage. That was one reason why he had been able to employ his dual Disciplines effectively against Michael and survive. Those Adepts that used these methods were not only inferior in a fight, but also found breaking through to Paragon status significantly harder.

These competitors from the Avenue were their top fighters. They weren't many, but they were all of appropriate age, and all were higher than ninth level. Then there was the newly minted paragon, the Gourmet himself.

Lan Jue tried to contact the Gourmet, but there wasn't any answer. It was likely they'd already left for Luo, since coms weren't used during interstellar travel. This was true for civilian travel of course – military vessels didn't have this restriction.

Dusk fell across Luo City, and only then did Chu Cheng reappear at Lan Jue's door. He told the Jewelry Master to gather his two female friends and they would leave for the restaurant.

Chu Cheng had chosen a traditional Eastern eatery. Hua Li arrived not long after they'd been seated, with a woman in blue business attire at his heels. Just as she threatened, Hua Li's Agent and the famous emcee – Mo Xiao – had come along.

“Hey hey, A-Jue! A-Cheng!” As ever, Hua Li was covered from head to toe. He only removed his glasses and facemask after walking in to their private room 1. Mo Xiao walked in behind him, and removed her sunglasses. Though they were large enough to conceal half her face, they were far less extreme than Hua Li's costume.

“We aren't late, are we?” Hua Li asked. He didn't look any different from the last time they met. He was working more, but it didn't seem to affect him all that much.

Lan Jue smiled. “Nope, right on time. We just got here ourselves. It's nice to see you, Mo Xiao – it's been a while.” He smiled amicably at his friend's agent.

Her face was a frigid mask, and she only acknowledged him with a nod.

She never uttered a word.

Hua Li scowled at her.

Chu Cheng was wise enough to skirt the awkward pause. “Take a seat, guys. Let me introduce everyone; this is Hua Li’s agent and the CEO of Gobi Entertainment. If you pretty ladies were ever interested in how business, then Mo Xiao here is the one to talk to. Best agent in all three Alliances, without a doubt.”

“Hello.” Zhou Qianlin beamed her a pretty, friendly smile.

When her eyes fell on Qianlin they grew even colder, but there was surprise behind them. “Hello. You look quite a lot like someone I knew!”

Qianlin shot Lan Jue a glance. “You mean my older sister. We were very much alike. Lan Jue’s made the same mistake.”

The memories caused his face to redden ever so slightly in embarrassment. ‘Made a mistake’ was an understatement.

Wrinkled marred Hua Li’s brow. “Stop acting like everyone owes you money, Mo Xiao. If you keep acting like this how are people supposed to eat?”

Mo Xiao stared hard at him. Her tone was thick with anger. “Who made you run off the last time, huh? Do you know what kind of damages your disappearances caused the company? Lan Jue was the reason for the whole thing.”

Lan Jue chortled. “You think we were going to elope or something? Relax Mo Xiao, alright? Hua Li’s cute but I’m for more conventional fare.”

Hua Li’s face twitched at the underhanded comment. It caught Mo Xiao off guard for a moment too, but she recovered with the same venom as before. “I don’t care about whatever nonsense is going on between you. So long as it doesn’t affect my job.”

Hua Li had had enough. His voice rose. “Will you give it a rest?! We’re here as friends having a meal. If you don’t want to be here then you can get lost – I’ll be back before it affects any of your precious company

plans.”

Mo Xiao was silent for a moment, then moisture began to creep in to her eyes. “Y-... you yelled at me! Fine! I’m leaving!” She shot to her feet and did as she promised.

The jovial atmosphere was gone, destroyed by their emotional display. Hua Li’s face was pale, and his features angry.

“You just gunna let her go?” Lan Jue prodded.

The entertainer hesitated, but eventually rose to his feet and followed after her.

Lan Jue sighed. “These two... Mo Xiao’s a good lady, she treats him well. Hua Li’s just projecting.”

“Sounds like gossip,” Chu Cheng urged. “Let’s hear it.”

“It was Hua Li himself told me,” Lan Jue began. “He said he likes someone, but it isn’t Mo Xiao. I think that’s probably the real reason Mo Xiao’s upset. She’s an amazing lady who’s been with him for years, I really don’t get what Hua Li has a problem with.”

Su Xiaosu interrupted, unexpectedly. “Feelings like that don’t come up just because you’ve been with someone for a long time. Especially you playboys, with a heart of iron!”

Lan Jue winced, and Chu Cheng openly laughed. “There’s wisdom in that. But there’s clearly something wrong between the two of them – it’s not that simple. It was pretty terrible of her to embarrass him that way when out with friends.”

Lan Jue motioned toward the table. “Let’s order. We’ll eat when they get back.”

Chu Cheng looked his way. “You think Hua Li will bring her back?”

“Yup,” he replied, without hesitation.

Chu Cheng raised a brow. “What makes you so sure?”

Lan Jue winked back. “Wanna bet?”

Chu Cheng waved a hand. “Nope. You’re a right bastard, and I only gamble when I’m sure to win. Alright let’s get some grub.”

Lan Jue was proven right a few moments later, and Chu Cheng was wise not to gamble on the result. It was only a minute or so before Hua Li and Mo Xiao returned to the table. Mo Xiao’s eyes were red like she’d been crying, but the chill in her expression was gone.

“I apologize. I’ve been too tired. It’s made me uptight and hard to be around.” Mo Xiao addressed the group. She said it with a demure smile, but it was clearly forced.

Lan Jue grinned back. “It’s no problem, of course. Let’s eat!”

The comforting food of home made for a fine meal. They partook of heavy meals and light snacks arrayed atop the table. Once they were done, they topped off with a plate of fruit 2

“A-Jue, are you afraid participating in the tournament as Zeus will cause problems?” Hua Li asked. Like Chu Cheng, he had his doubts.

Chapter 391: The Psychic Projection Helmet

Lan Jue scratched his nose. "It's fine. It's very unlikely I'll win, but it won't cause me any problems. These fiends... let them search. There have only ever been a few who know who Zeus is behind the mask. Escape as Zeus is also easier, if that becomes necessary." No matter who or how many of the Pontiff's men came, he didn't worry over it.

They exchanged small talk for a little while, then Hua Li and Mo Xiao left first. They still had preparations to make for the ceremony. Chu Cheng wanted to take Lan Jue out on the town, but he refused. The Jewelry Master didn't have any aspirations of becoming champion, but he still wished to take it seriously.

These sorts of large-scale Adept events were few and far between. It was very likely he'd run in to Talents from all over the spectrum, and some of the biggest names out there. It would undoubtedly be a good opportunity to polish his own abilities.

He'd already encountered quite an array of powerful Adepts since reappearing on the scene – including new Paragons. The Gourmet, the Bookworm, Bize and Aubert were all familiar with Lan Jue. All of them had been great motivation for the Monarch, pushing him toward a breakthrough of his own. He took great stock in the Clairvoyant's words from before, but not completely. After all, who could say what destiny truly held, or if there was such a thing? Still, becoming stronger was certainly his goal.

The next few days were spend training with Qianlin. He taught her even more about using his Discipline in combat. More and more they ere working like a cohesive unit. Lan Jue's own manipulations helped reveal some combat uses for Qianlin's Queen of Heaven powers as well. Aside from its inherent Protogenic powers, her support-based Discipline could be aggressive under certain circumstances.

Su Xiaosu was rarely seen outside of her hotel room. She spent her days

in silent contemplation, cultivating her powers back to their former glory. Lan Jue asked her several times about the prison hidden beneath the Citadel – about its purpose, and what happened – but she never answered. She just looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. She would shake her head and say nothing, like it was some secret burden she dare not share.

Lan Jue reluctantly let the matter lie. If she was unwilling to tell him, so be it. He'd already delivered her from tragedy.

He got in touch with the Skyfire Avenue. The Wine Master and the Pauper had returned by then, and he'd heard that the beggar had locked himself away. After his experience with the Gods of Wine, he vanished from the public eye, and no one knew how long he would be gone. Whatever it was, it had to be important.

He listened as the Wine Master told him about a present that was given after he'd left the Gods of Wine – a crate of aged wine. They were choice picks from their personal cellar, and though they were all several hundreds of years old they would still be magnificent.

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Three days before the tournament was set to begin, the Gourmet and his entourage arrived.

"You aren't joining the team?" The Gourmet asked in wonder.

At Lan Jue's suggestion the Skyfire Avenue team had booked rooms at the Intercontinental as well. They sat together in one of the hotel's grandiose event rooms discussing the tournament. Lan Jue leaned against the back of his chair with a beautiful girl on his knee, leaned against his chest. A contented smile was on her face.

Lan Jue spoke while stroking her hair. "Right, I don't want to participate as myself. There aren't many with my Discipline at the higher levels – really just the Driver and I. The less people know, the better. Zeus makes more sense."

"I'll help, daddy!" Jun'er declared fiercely from against his chest. He'd

persuaded the Pharmacist to bring her along, just to get her out. She was a natural choice for the team, and was the single strongest contender in their group under forty. She was very nearly at the peak of ninth level, and her powers were only barely understood even by the Paragons. Reputedly, no one had ever seen her employ her full strength.

Lan Jue continued to gently stroke Jun'er's hair. "Man, lucky me! I'll definitely win, now. Oh – I almost forgot. Daddy got you a gift."

The moment Jun'er called Lan Jue daddy, the whole of Skyfire Avenue's team broke in to beaming smiles of surprise. The Driver's cigar dropped right on to his very expensive suit, and the Accountant's jaw dropped so low you could fit a fist in it.

However, despite their various reactions not a word about it dared be uttered. The Pharmacist's glare was the very essence of bloody murder at anyone who looked like they might speak. Her imposing manner even gave the Gourmet pause.

"Really?! Whadja get me?" She tittered excitedly.

"Guess," he teased with a wink.

Jun'er thought for a moment. "Is it a stuffed animal?"

He shook his head. "Guess again! It's something you can use..."

"Oh! Bunny slippers!" She cried with a little shiver.

Lan Jue shook his head again with a laugh. "Nope. Let me tell you – it's a psychic projection helmet."

Jun'er blinked. "What's that?"

With a grin, he explained. "It's the newest technology from here in the Northern Alliance. My friend helped me find it. It turns images from the camera on top in to brain waves – right in to your brain. This will help you see in your mind what's happening around you. You can see your mommy and daddy!"

Jun'er gasped at the last sentence, and it was echoed by the Pharmacist from behind. She covered her mouth with trembling hands, and her eyes

threatened tears.

“Really daddy? Really?! I... I’ll be able to see? I can see you and mommy?” Jun’er’s voice trembled with emotion. Her tiny hands curled in to fists of Lan Jue’s clothes.

Lan Jue wrapped her in a hug so she wouldn’t fall. “Of course really! Mommy will help you try it later, ok? But you have to promise that you’ll only use it an hour at a time. Then you have to rest, alright? I promised you I’ll help you fix your eyes, and until then you can use this.”

“Thanks daddy! Thanks, I have the best daddy!” She cried out. She couldn’t wait, and the Pharmacist took her and the helmet away to give it a try.

Watching the mother and daughter go, the Coffee Master was the first to recover his wits and speak. “What’s all this, Jewelry Master? Since when have you and the Pharmacist been an item, and with a child that big! That’s quite a secret you’ve been keeping from us!”

It wasn’t unheard of, either. The loose organization of the Avenue meant that members knew very little about one another unless they had a close personal relationship.

The Pharmacist’s Hall of Supreme Harmony was one of the most successful enterprises on the Avenue, but she kept all her contemporaries at arm’s length. She had no friends to speak of.

“If you want to live a long and productive life, don’t breathe a word of your curiosity to the Pharmacist or Jun’er. It’s a sad story...” Lan Jue went on to briefly explain the situation.

Much to everyone’s surprise, the Coffee Master began to mutter. “I’m a handsome guy, right? Why didn’t she pick me? What’s so good about? All these women around you...”

Lan Jue reached over to rap his knuckles on the man’s head. “Cut the garbage. Now where do you think you’ll end up on the ladder?”

The Coffee Master chuckled. “I’m just here to participate. My guess is the Pharmacist takes it.

The Pharmacist had also joined in what was supposed to be the friendly exchange with the Western Citadels. The shock of her performance was still fresh in their memory.

“So are you just here to putz around?” The Gourmet Complained.

The Coffee Master’s response was quick and shameless. “Not with so many beautiful women in attendance. This is a grand Adept tournament, right? I hear the North’s women are molded in to picture perfect figures and I’d like to experience it for myself. I am a lover of beauty.”

“That’s enough,” the gourmet grunted indifferently. “What you appreciate doesn’t matter, but our standing does and everyone needs a target. If you don’t get in the top one hundred you’ll have me to answer to.”

“You’re going to punish me?” The Coffee Master asked incredulously. “You never said anything about this before!”

The Gourmet cast him a withering stare. “I just thought it up, what of it?”

Under the Paragon’s intense glare, the Coffee Master could do nothing but nod his head. “Fine. Of course it’s fine. Whatever you say. What’s the punishment, anyway?”

The gourmet shrugged. “It’s nothing significant. I happen to be in possession of occult knowledge, that could seal off a man’s... potency. Fail to break the top one hundred and you’ll see what that’s like for half a year. Not bad, right? And it leaves no lasting effects.”

The Coffee Master nearly fell from his chair. “What?! You’ll make me a eunuch?! You’re a monster! I’ll defect, I’ll turn traitor. I’ll –“

The Gourmet lifted his hand, and immediately it was wreathed in dark flame.

“- I-I’ll absolutely get in the top one hundred.” The jittery man finished.

The Infernal Vanguard nodded in satisfaction. “Good enough. Same goes for all you gentlemen. The ladies get a pass.”

The Coffee Master looked as though he wanted to burst in to tears. His own big mouth had caused this! He had no control, who wanted to talk themselves in to chastity belt!?

The Gourmet turned back to Lan Jue. "If you want to participate alone then that's your prerogative, I won't stop you. Just be careful."

Lan Jue answered with a resolute nod.

Chapter 392: Huan Xue and Davis

The whole of Planet Luo was getting more and more boisterous as the Great Adept Tournament approached. The participating Adepts themselves were a small number – including those in the opening and closing ceremonies, the Adepts counted in the tens of thousands. This number was infinitesimal compared to the millions of average humans who lived there.

It'd been so long since the last Adept tournament of this size that no one could even remember when the last one was. Many of them weren't even open to the public. You could watch these on the net, but the interstellar data delay meant it was often faster just to read news and watch highlights later. Those with means much preferred to come in person and see the action first-hand.

It was important to remember that there were significant differences between an Adept battle and a mecha competition. One of those differences was the arena itself; it needn't be large, but protection had to be in place for spectators. These competitions would be live field matches held at the North's largest stadium, the Luo Sports Arena.

The arena was capable of accommodating a hundred thousand spectators, and though the tickets were expensive the event was worth it. A competition like this came about only very rarely – this is what money was for!

Luckily Luo was a grand city, used to having a great deal of people. The surge in tourism was staggering, but the city didn't seem to have any trouble handling it.

Within the Conclave.

Two people sat across from one another like statues, separated by a table. Although they appeared to have been there for ages, they sat unmoving while manifestations of their aura swirled about. The waves of power exuding from them intermingled and separated over and over again.

They were a man and a woman. The gentleman was lithe, and even seated was strikingly tall. He was over two and a half meters tall with wide shoulders, and a black t-shirt was struggle to contain his barrel chest. Arms like sculpted granite rippled with muscle.

His aura had a distinctive metallic hue that played over dark skin. The power he wielded swirls around like he was the center of the universe, and the sounds of rumbling explosions could faintly be heard

The young lady, on the other hand, was precisely his opposite. She looked young, maybe in her thirties, with delicate and attractive features. Her small size was made even more dramatic when compared to the man. Her dark hair fell unbound down her back.

‘Beauty and the Beast’ was probably the most concise way to describe the scene, though not something they would ever say to their faces. She was anything but a conventional beauty, and the man not your everyday beast.

“You’ve improved, Huan Xue. Not even I can compete with you any more.” His face had a simple and honest smile of encouragement. Whether or not that was truly how he felt, however, only he knew.

The woman known as Huan Xue shook her head. “You’ve been trapped by the second bottleneck for many years, and I just reached this level. There’s no need for empty praise, there’s still quite a difference between us.”

This caused the man to chuckle. He ran a hand through his coarse hair that stood up like a forest of needles. “Your innate abilities restrain mine. If we were to fight to the death, it’d be one hell of a spectacle.”

“You find these sorts of comparisons amusing, Davis?” Huan Xue asked indifferently.

He laughed again. “Fine, we won’t discuss it. The Great Adept Tournament is almost upon us. I hear Skyfire Avenue’s competitors have already arrived. The new Paragon calling himself the Infernal Vanguard has come with them. They call him ‘the Gourmet’ on the Avenue.”

“Hm,” she answered with a nod. “I remember him. When he first got to Skyfire he was a broken man. Star-crossed in love. I would not have expected him to ever break through. Satan finally has someone to turn his paranoia on.”

“Do you think Satan will make a move?” Davis asked.

She shook her head. “He acts like a madman, but he’s actually quite meticulous. I much prefer dealing with him instead of that old fox, the Pontiff. At the least Satan won’t react before thinking. They learned that the hard way when they went to Skyfire for their little exchange. I’ll be interested to see how things turn out this time.”

Davis’ chair creaked as he shifted his weight. “We can go take a look if you like. I know you’re worried about it.”

The woman’s eyes hardened, and the air around her began to warp unsettlingly. Time slowed like wading through molasses, and even a change in facial expression felt like it took an age.

“Now that I’m done with it, I waste no further thought. When the tournament does begin, make sure you tell all of our people to be appropriate hosts. Leave no lasting damage. Our plans for the Avenue are too far along and too well hidden, so focus on our second objective. We have a foreign invader en route – and the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Davis looked at her in silence for a moment, then nodded his head.

Both of them closed their eyes in unison, and once more the aura of their power spread out to encapsulate them.

Where the Gourmet present he would know immediately that these two were the true power holders of the Conclave. The two most powerful Adepts in the North.

Davis was better known as the fourth most powerful Paragon of them all, and they called him the Terminator. Huan Xue was fifth among their number, and was called the Dimenstress.

Despite being in the early morning, life was already rousing on the

surface of Luo. Crowds had already gathered around the sports center, standing in lines for the gates to open. Many other milled about, looking for any opportunity to get tickets of their own.

Luo was a wonderful representation of Northern style. Over a thousand mechas soared overhead, responsible for keeping the skies safe. The ground security and ticket holders were all robots. Even though the sheer number of spectators was staggering, entrance in to the arena was orderly and safe.

The arena itself was a massive, octagonal structure that looked as though it were composed entirely of composite alloy. Whatever it was made of caused the building to glow different colors depending on the angle it was viewed from; red, yellow, blue and green all shifting from one to the other as people walked passed. Once inside, visitors were greeted by several massive columns of light that swept through the interior. Contestants, though, entered another way.

Application to join the tournament had long-since passed. The rules were that contestants had be under forty, and at least sixth rank. The conclave had come to these rules after a long period of discussion.

Originally, fifth level Adepts were considered as well. However, the organizers changed their mind when they found that they would have more competitors than they could accommodate. Even after they settled on sixth level, they still had more than three thousand six hundred people on the roster.

These numbers made the North's tournament the single largest gathering of Adepts in the history of humanity. A lot of that was a result of th prizes. With every victory, ones rewards improved. It was also an opportunity to improve themselves and show off their abilities – all of which could translate in to benefits.

For most Adepts, combat prowess was an important skill. However, with the prevalence of mechas and their strength in comparison, an Adept had to show off their strength to attract good opportunities. Naturally, the best off were those Adepts who were also accomplished mecha pilots, but if

you weren't than you had to prove you were stronger than them.

The number of Adepts was also in part due to the fact that no entrance fee was required. The combat rules helped, and the badges for victory were attractive flare.

For higher-level Adepts, the badges meant little. For those in the middle of the pack, though, they were practical advantages. Remember that these tournaments were very rarely held at all, and Luo spared no expense.

Lan Jue was there among the crowds. He was clad in a form-fitting flight suit, with his features hidden behind a golden mask. The golden wig and cloak he deemed a bit much, and left them behind.

A small fellow standing in line behind him gave Lan Jue the once-over. He couldn't suppress a chuckle as he spoke. "Hey brother, you here to participate in the Adept tournament? You know you're wearing a mecha pilot's outfit, right? There are no mechas here!"

The comment illicit a round of chuckle from those nearby.

Lan Jue didn't answer, and the short man felt slightest by the lack of attention. He patted Lan Jue's shoulder. "Hey guy, I'm talking to you. You deaf?"

At last, the Jewelry Master turned to face his accoster. An icy warning was in his eyes.

"Are you sure you're talking to me?" He asked in quiet tones.

The other stared right back. "What? I can't have a conversation? Who the hell are you, you think you're too important to talk to." He reached out to poke Lan Jue in the forehead as he spoke.

Before he could, though, his world became a swirling mess of color. Lan Jue stood in the center of it all, with his hand in his grip.

Lan Jue spoke softly. "There's no point in you joining this competition." There was a flash of electric blue, and the short man's entire body went rigid. The swirling coils of power around him erupted, and sent him flying backwards.

The laughter from the crowd stopped abruptly. They were all adepts, and they'd all felt the power he'd used to silence their little friend.

Certainly nothing to laugh at, they reckoned.

The air surged around them as a massive, humanoid-shaped mecha descended from overhead. "What's going on here," its stern robotic voice queried. "Who's fighting?"

A small contingent of robotic security drones had gathered as well.

"Check the recordings," Lan Jue replied dismissively. He stood in line, unmoving.

Two minutes later the gathered security dispersed. Records proved Lan Jue not to be the aggressor, so they had no authority to hold him.

Chapter 393: The Opening Ceremony

The hosts and sponsors of the games ensured that no violence occurred outside of the arenas. That didn't mean they barred people from defending themselves. The short man had started things by slapping his shoulder and poking at him – that earned a response. Of course Lan Jue would not get in to trouble for that.

The surrounding Adepts didn't dare trouble Lan Jue further. Some of them knew the short man, and knew that he was a seventh ranked Adept. Even still, he didn't even have a chance to use his Discipline against the masked man. Eventually he picked himself up off of the floor, and slinked away like a beaten dog.

The first day would have a staggering number of Adepts competing, so they had set aside a place designated as an Adept resting and waiting area. Once registration was complete, robotic assistants lead them to this waiting room and urged them to have a seat.

As they made their way through the corridors of the arena, Lan Jue couldn't help but sigh inwardly. The place reminded him quite a lot of the NEU's training facilities, just much larger.

The octagonal sports arena was capable of holding over a hundred thousand people. The open air battlefield itself was the size of ten football fields, and had been separated into several diamond-shaped fields. Each one was roughly fifty meters in diameter. Altogether there was a hundred of these small skirmish fields. It meant two hundred adepts could battle at a time. The stands were each equipped with a personal screen that let the viewer see the action up close. It was state-of-the-art, and despite the chocking throngs of people there was perfect order. Overhead, a cadre of mecha pilots hovered, keeping an eye on the situation below.

At the Western end of the field there was a raised dais different from the others. It stretched long, with seats enough for a hundred spectators. Clearly this was the VIP booth, as was evident by its perfect view of the arena.

After a little over an hour, all of the participating Adepts were registered. The ceaseless din of impatient people filled the waiting area. Lan Jue, however, stood with a firm dispassion for the goings on that swirled around him. A badge was pinned to his chest with the number 315.

“Hrrmmmmnn....” An electronic hum filled the air. The boisterous crowds were silenced as a blanket of darkness fell upon them – like the day had suddenly been extinguished.

Floodlights cracked as they switched on, sending beams of light piercing through the blackness in all directions. They swayed and rolled until settling on a single figure, suspended in air above the center of the arena.

He was dressed in black leather, and his physique could rival mountains. Tidal waves of oppressive force crashed against the awe inspired onlookers. It wasn’t focused, so the crushing asphyxiation they felt flow over them was thankfully temporary.

“Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen, fans and contenders, to the Conclave’s Tournament Arena.” The man’s thunderous voice boomed across the fields and bleachers.

Naturally, all the Northerners recognized the celebrity immediately. This was their pride and joy, fourth strongest Paragon, the Terminator! Outsiders didn’t need too long to guess for themselves who he might be.

“I offer you all a feast for the eyes, available live here and at home. You young fighters here for glory, show us what you’re made of. Let the whole human race see how strong you truly are.”

His were were simple, a few sentences only. But he said them with a fierce vigor and a booming voice, and that was enough to get the competitor’s blood boiling.

The Terminator had not been exaggerating. Everything that was going to happen on these fields were streamed live to all corners of the human Alliances. The proceeds would be used to help acquire the lofty prizes organizers had promised.

The lights peeled away and plunged them all in to darkness, but just for

a moment. The darkness fled before a radiant blue – though this was not the blue of the sky. This was a heavier blue, like the boundless depths of the ocean.

There was not a sound. Then, rolling in with the soothing color came a ululating cry. An enormous column of golden light sprang to life, stretching from the ground up to the distant heavens. Gradually, a sapphire-hued figure radiating cobalt blue light descended through the glimmering column.

The notes of this man's song were strong and clear, and the familiar strains of Sounds of Nature filled their ears. The silence of the arena was shattered. A hundred thousand voices rang out with cheers, like thunderous waves that crested and rose again and again.

The same word reverberated over and over; Poseidon! Poseidon! Poseidon!

Hua Li's face was a mask of bitter pain, like the face he'd shown at the loss of that little mermaid girl. The magnificent decorations from his earlier concert had been exquisite, but this time... this time he truly did look like the King of the Oceans.

His voice had a strangely alluring quality, almost magnetic. Listeners almost couldn't help but reach out, to offer comfort and companionship to this forlorn god. No one could escape the moving quality of his sorrowful ballad, a song that despite having no words resonated with the soul of every listener.

As the entertainer sang, a line of figures made their way on to the VIP observation deck. The Terminator stood at their head, and the newly minted Infernal Vanguard stood at his shoulder. Half a step behind them walked two more; Metatron, and Lucifer.

Neither Paragon from the Western Citadels chose to come. It wasn't expected that they would. They didn't have the luxury of the Avenue, after all, with so many Paragons to send as representatives. The Pontiff also had his own issues to deal with.

A cadre of government officials and famous Adepts trailed the four

mighty leaders. Though distinguished, those Adepts that walked with Davis were too old to participate in the games. None of them were any less than ninth rank.

The final notes of Poseidon's Tears of the Sea-God came to a close. However, he did not vacate the stage once the song was complete. His powerful voice, clear as crystal, sang acapella in deafening scales of emotion. The crowds howled back at the top of their lungs.

There weren't many who could boast seeing a Poseidon concert live. Gobi Entertainment would generally never allow a concert to be streamed across the galaxy as this one was. Here, though, was a blessing. One hundred thousand people screamed and wiped away tears as they stared at the superstar mere meters away. People at home were glued to their televisions and projectors to watch the first ever universally streamed Poseidon concert. With nothing but his voice, the Divine Monarch inspired a thunderous zeal in his audience.

To the normal man, Paragons were too separate for them to comprehend. They were living gods, hardly even human. But Poseidon was different. People would scrape and claw for a copy of his records. Now here he stood before them, the universal idol, and it was almost more than they could believe.

Eventually his singing ceased, and with an easy smile he bowed. Suspending in air, he turned to face the crowds in another corner and bowed again. He repeated this several times.

"I am honored and humbled to have been given the opportunity to preform for all of you today. I myself am an Adept – and certainly under forty! I wanted to join the festivities myself... those prizes are something else. But, I don't think I can honestly compete. I would be ruined before ever entering the arena. I do have a reputation to uphold, after all."

His voice was soft and humble, with a note of mirth. He gave the crowds and easy laugh.

"But I do hope there's one thing I can do while I'm here. I haven't cleared this with our sponsors, but I'm sure they'll indulge me. To

whosoever wins this grand tournament, I'd like to buy you a meal. You and me, one an one. I'll certainly have some questions on how to make myself stronger!"

Another round of cheers tore through the arena. Many of the spectators here and watching the stream had also seen Poseidon perform during the god battles. Though they were competing as mecha pilots, it had served to reveal Hua Li's skill. His availability and proximity, along with his self-deprecating words, only made the audience more excited for the likeable hero.

"I'm still talking because I'm waiting for my music. This is a real treat for all of you, a new and original song I recently composed. Here it is for all of, in commemoration of this momentous competition. I call it, Clash of the Titans.

On cue, the music swelled up to replace his introduction. The sound came low and rough like distant explosions. The floodlights pitched and rolled, and where they passed halos of radiant light swirled in feral eddies. The after image of the lights burned sharp edges in the eyes of onlookers as they swept across the skies.

Hua Li reached out a hand, and a flash of light responded. His trident appeared in his grasp, like constrained light that fought to be free. It's emanating luminescence washed over him, and where it touched his body became encased in golden armor. In the space of a breath, their gentle idol had transformed in to a terrible god of war.

His blue hair blew back behind him, and his hands gripped tight upon the trident with a white-knuckle grip. Bathed in light, he roared with his powerful voice, filling the arena with a warcry.

It was a roar to shatter mountains and overturn seas. The swirling halos of light seemed to flea before his call, moving outward in rippling waves. The sweet tenderness of his first song was forgotten, replaced by the blood-boiling call to battle.

He cried and swept his arms like a seasoned general commanding his troops. Images of a mounted host surging toward the enemies lines played

out in the swirling lights.

His voice grew louder still, and the armies vanished in the face of its power. In the distance a dark figure arose, bathed in an aura of poisonous purple. The two stared at one another from across the arena.

“This is the ultimate battle. Justice, standing against evil. The power of the gods permeates all things, so surely evil must fall. Light shall reign supreme. Clash of Titans! Clash of Titans! Witness the battle of good and evil, here on this stage where gods are made. We are the divines who mold worlds to our whim. Our splendor lights the heavens!”

Chapter 394: Big Uncle

The song was a tempest of emotion, bringing to mind images of two great armies meeting on the field. Poseidon brandished his golden trident, and where it passed waves of light burst outward.

“Come, you fierce gods of battle! Fight for glory and honor! Today you blaze hotter than the sun, and light up the sky with your radiance.”

The golden light restrained itself, until it was just hanging over the entertainer’s body. The trident itself remained a resplendent beam of congealed light, and launched to the skies like an arrow. It was a single line of pure golden light in a sea of soothing blue. The golden light spread like an infection. In an instant, that deep blue became a radiating light that blanketed the entire arena.

The blinding light slowly receded, until it vanished from sight. Overhead the audience was again treated to the crystal-clear blue sky of Luo City, and it’s happily burning sun. Enchanted though they were, the listeners began to cheer as they regained their senses.

Amazing... truly amazing. They were in shock.

A digital voice arose in the silence after Poseidon’s concert. “We will be commencing the tournament soon. The first round will be decided by lots. Competitors, prepare to meet your opponents.”

There would be no waiting. The competition would start right away, beginning with drawing lots. In the skies overhead pictures began to be projected against the backdrop of the blue sky. Each one represented one of the registered competitors, and in the end over three thousand faces hung in the sky.

The man known as the Terminator slowly rose to his feet. When he spoke, his voice cracked across the arena like a blast of thunder, without the help of any sound amplification equipment.

“Begin!”

As his voice rang out, the pictures in the sky began to flash and change.

They rearranged themselves over and over again in to orderly pairs. It only took a matter of seconds for the first round of fights to be set.

In the waited area, the badges pinned to each fighter's chest began to glow with a pale light. They projected a number before their eyes, different from their own – they were the the badge numbers of their challengers. They rose and filed out in to the arena to find their places. The computerized voice called out anew.

“Round One of the Cutting-Edge Grand Adept Tournament. Would the competitors please make their way to the arena grounds.”

Lan Jue's own badge illuminated; One thousand seven hundred and twenty four. Now he had to find the person that number belonged to. They were slotted to meet at arena thirty five. The final number was three – meaning they would go out with the third batch of fighters.

Each batch was about two hundred competitors. They would need fifteen batches to cover all of the contestants today.

The rules of this tournament had been expressed to them when they'd applied to compete. These were all Adepts, so they didn't have any problem comprehending the simple instructions. None of the fights would go beyond half an hour, and each one was closely monitored to ensure all rules were followed.

The fight ended the moment a fighter surrendered or could no longer fight back. It was absolutely forbidden to hurt anyone intentionally. In the event a fight was not over by the thirty minute mark, the results would be determined by a specially selected group of cross-Alliance judges. The final decisions would rest with them.

The sheer number of competitors was a blessing to sponsors, who no longer needed to worry about stunts to keep the action moving. They could move right through to the fights, and they did. Already the eyes of the galaxy were locked on them.

Transmissions rights and advertisements would earn enough to run a small planet for a year. The hype had been building for more than two months already, so the extravagant prices they'd promised had been

earned over time. Whatever costs they'd accrued would certainly be countered by the proceeds from the games. But even considering that cost was hard to fathom the surplus.

Although Lan Jue wasn't due until they called the third batch, he stepped out on to the field anyway. There were a couple familiar faces among the first group preparing to compete.

Three of the first group were representatives from Skyfire Avenue; the Barber, the Seamstress, and the Pharmacist. They stood upon their platforms and waited. Anyone not on their designated platform in five minutes would be disqualified.

The massive projectors flared, and a countdown hung against the clouds. It began at sixty, and began to drop.

"One minute until fights begin."

Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven...

The competitors were busy getting ready. They weren't permitted to use their Disciplines yet, but the time was spent adjusting ones internal energies and considering a plan of attack.

"... Five, four, three, two, one. Begin!"

At the computerized voice's command, two hundred Adepts burst in to action. All one hundred segments of the arena were suddenly covered in a shield. This was as much to protect the audience as it was to ensure one arena didn't unfairly influence another. They were practically on top of each other, so it was a real danger.

The shields stretched over the arenas, and out three meters passed the designated fight zone. If a competitor stepped out, or struck the shield, they would be disqualified. The dome was fifty meters tall at it's highest point, which was enough to allow Adepts full use of whatever Discipline they had.

"Boom-!" The Pharmacist was the first to silence her challenger.

There had only been a flash of golden light before her foe went

sprawling through the air. He smacked against the far face of the shield, and slowly slunk to the ground.

The shield flashed red, then disappeared. It meant that their bout had come to an end.

On the main platform, the gourmet was seated with a young girl in his arms. She bounced happily on his knee, shouting “Go mamma go!”

Jun’er pretty hair was covered by a metal helmet. Although her eyes stared blankly, they were alive with an indescribable joy. Her pure, jubilant cries were sweeter even than Poseidon’s. It certainly captured the Terminator’s attention.

The enormous man was so large he took up the space of two men, a mountain sitting on a chair. Thankfully there was only he the three of them in this section of the platform, or they’d be tight for space.

“Who is this child.” The Terminator looked at Jun’er in curiosity.

The gourmet answered with a gentle smile. “This is the Pharmacist’s daughter.”

“The woman who just finished her fight,” he confirmed to himself. “Very impressive. Strong.”

The Gourmet nod with a congenial laugh. He had to show respect for this old-guard Paragon. “Her Talent is unique. Even I don’t know what the true scope of her abilities are. It was hard to convince her to come, honestly.”

“Very well, let’s see how it plays out,” the terminator replied. “I hope she lasts a while.”

“My mommy’s the best, big Uncle 1! And my daddy, too! They’re both great. If mommy doesn’t win, then daddy will!” Jun’er began to bounce again in excitement.

The little girl’s words startled the Conclave leader for half a moment. It had been a very long time since anyone had called him ‘uncle.’ He felt... strange.

“What makes you think I’m not your grandpa?” he teased.

“No, you’re too young!” Jun’er tittered. “You’re really big, but I can feel that you’re not scary. Mommy told me that a person’s outside doesn’t always match their inside. I can feel your heart, uncle. You have a good heart.”

A child’s voice, especially a young girl, did not have great volume. However, it penetrated the din, enough so that those around them turned to look after hearing her strange assertion. Everyone, the Terminator in particular, wasn’t sure how to react to that. Metatron, Lucifer and the Gourmet were just as flabbergasted.

It was amusing enough for her to call the Terminator uncle. He wasn’t as old as the Clairvoyant, but he was no spring chicken. Because his Discipline was closely tied to his body, he was able to maintain the appearance of youth. In reality he was about as old as the Keeper.

What was more surprising was her brazen assertion of his goodness. She was only six, maybe seven, but she’d spoken like an oracle.

Before he was a Paragon, the Terminator has been known as the Cyborg Weapon. Could someone with such a name be kind-hearted?

Much to everyone’s surprise, the titan of a man fell silent. After a few moment he leaned his giant girth down and took Jun’er tiny face in his hands. “What’s your name, little one?”

She smiled up at him prettily. “My name’s Jun’er, big uncle!”

He beamed a smile at her. To any other creature it would look ferocious, but Jun’er smiled right back. The helmet allowed her to see through psychic projection, enough to react to a kind smile.

“Can big uncle give you a hug?” He asked with a wry grin.

She thought for a moment. “Okay. Mommy said I shouldn’t go with strangers, but I know uncle is very nice. You can hug me.” She stretched her arms out wide toward the Paragon.

He chuckled heartily as he picked her up, with no more effort than he

might a doll. “Well said, little one.”

The Gourmet made no efforts to stop him, and openly smiled at the two. The man was a Paragon, and he wouldn't dare harm a child. It looked like the two were destined to be friends, in fact.

The two together were an almost comical juxtaposition. Jun'er was almost lost against the giant man's body. She sat comfortably on his forearm.

“Can big uncle give you a present, Jun'er?” The Terminator thumbed the helmet as he spoke.

“Oh, I love presents! Other than mommy and daddy no one else really gives me presents. I like you, big uncle!” Jun'er wobbled precariously on the big man's forearm. She was still trying to take it all in; this new place, her new sight, and these nice people.

“Tomorrow, uncle Gourmet will bring you back. I'll get your present ready and give it to you then, alright?”

“Ok! Thank you uncle!”

The Pharmacist made her way up the platform among the others. She was a ninth level ninth ranked Talent herself, so she belonged among them just as much as the others.

She heard the two talk as she approached to take her back. Her heart was filled with gratitude and surprise when she saw the look on the big man's face.

Her little girl was going great on her first trip out. Even Paragons were making play dates.

Chapter 395: The Competition Begins

Lan Jue was the most excited of them all. Had it not been for his suggestion, little Jun'er would not have come. Ever since leaving the Avenue, her mother had recognized a difference. In the end the Jewelry Master had been right – locking a little one up is very bad for development. The more she learned of the outside world, the better.

There were drawbacks and dangers to using the psychic projection helmet. He'd discussed these concerns with the Pharmacist already. In fact that had been the reason why the young mother hadn't already tried it. She never even considered it an option before. When Lan Jue first asked if he could buy her one, she'd been reticent. However, Lan Jue explained that a child's mental and emotional growth was just as important as their physical well-being.

Until now, Jun'er had never experienced anything other than the inside of the Pharmacist's shop. It was truly amazing for this little girl, to experience the whole world opening up to her. The helmet only became dangerous if it was used too long, so if they regulated its use there would be no problems. It was an easy decision to make when you considered the benefits.

When Jun'er first used the helmet – when she saw her 'parents' loving looks, and saw all the richness and color of the world – she'd crowd copious, happy tears. She was almost like a different girl entirely. For more than an hour, she wandered around muttering 'I can see... I can see' before eventually falling asleep.

Now she was full of light and excitement, a child with a new lease on life. Her pale face was even turning a little ruddy as the sun kissed her cheeks. All of this meant that Lan Jue had been right. The Pharmacist's protection of her little girl had been absolute, and her atrophied figure underlined that.

The Pharmacist did not approach the stories Paragon to get her child. Instead she decided to remain behind, and sit in the seat provided for her

a few rows back. Now she was beginning to understand that if she wanted Jun'er to grow in to a healthy adult she would need to experience everything the world had to offer.

The Gourmet interrupted the unlikely friends. "Jun'er, you've been wearing the helmet for quite a while. Time to take it off now, sweetie."

"No! I want to see daddy fight," she replied fiercely.

The Terminator chuckled. "Which one is your daddy? What does he look like?"

She shook her head emphatically. "Daddy said that's a secret only he and I know. He said I can't tell anybody else. Only I know who daddy is."

This caused the giant man to erupt in great bursts of laughter. "Your daddy sounds like a very mysterious man! Very interesting... very interesting indeed."

The first batch of the tournament's initial round finished in short order, not even breaking thirty minutes. With so many competitors and the random draws, there were many uneven match-ups. A ninth level Adept didn't need more than a few seconds to finish a sixth or seventh level. Other than the Pharmacist, the Barber and the Seamstress. By twenty minutes, the second batch was getting ready to get on the field.

Once the first round of festivities was complete, robots flooded the area to help clear things away. They took the injured for recovery while the victors found they own way back to the waiting room. Each of their badges had an extra light, indicative of their victory.

After a ten minute break to reset the field, fighters from the second batch made their appearance. For those watching the stream, they were subjected to a round of advertisements.

They were just as quick as the first batch. Lan Jue didn't recognize anyone on the field with, and everything seemed normal. Of course it was difficult to get an accurate lay of the land down here among the milling competitors. With nothing to focus on, Lan Jue closed his eyes and simply allowed himself to get swept up in the energy around him. It was a

practice he engaged in a lot more recently after the first time he'd joined with Qianlin and felt the sensation of being a peak-level Adept.

Gramps would tell them 'once an Adept reached the height of his power, he must begin to commune with the powers around him.' Everyone had to find how they fit in the unfathomable patchwork of the universe, and discover the road to enlightenment. This process would not be a quick one; it would come like a supernova once one's accumulated understanding was sufficient.

Every Adept had to break through their personal obstacles to achieve Paragon. The first attempt was the most important, and had the highest rate of success. Someone who failed would find their chances diminished almost to nothing without some epiphany.

This was why Lan Jue did not let up, despite understanding the nature of protogenia. He tried every day to commune with the universe like he was told, to find that underpinning truth.

"Batch three competitors, take positions."

Lan Jue's eyes popped open, and he made his way to the field. He was in arena 350, against contestant number 1724.

By the time he got there his opponent was already waiting. He was a man with a dark aura and half made of metal. Even half of his head was man-made, and it made him look terribly ferocious. His eye had been replaced with a blinking orange substitute.

So this was 1724.

They stood at opposite ends of the small arena and eyed one another. Beside's Lan Jue's dramatic mask, he didn't look anything special. Clearly though, 1724 was a product of the North.

These sorts of Adepts were unique to the North, remolded humans who were neither machine nor man. The Terminator was testament to what the method could produce – although just what he did to reach such lofty heights was a mystery.

1724 slowly lifted a meaty thumb between them, held horizontally. His

orange eye glared at Lan Jue as the thumb waggled, and ultimately pointed down. 1724 smirked scornfully.

Lan Jue stood with his hands clasped behind his back. He didn't move a muscle, and showed no reaction to his enemy's taunts.

"Prepare to fight. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven..."

"... five, four, three, two, one. Begin!"

The moment the electric buzzer sounded, 1724 was bounding across the arena. With a feral yell he leaped, and came crashing to earth with his alloy fist.

"Phboom—!" A dramatic blast accompanied an invisible wall of force.

A seismic wave!

An important distinction of a remolded Adept was that their powers still came from their own core. Others who didn't were simply cyborgs.

Even the space between them shivered as the concussive force swept across the arena. The surrounding shield rippled in protest.

This was quite the foe. He was as strong as he was unique. Lan Jue cursed his luck – no lazy start for him, it would appear.

But that didn't mean he outlook was at all dire.

Lan Jue took a small step forward, and instantly a cloud of writhing lightning bolts appeared around him. The sea of disparate bolts linked together to form a protective net with Zeus in its center. As the seismic wave reached his shields they were scattered harmlessly.

"Hmph!" 1724 grunted in irritation. He launched from his crouched position, soaring through the air like a missile. He blazed a silver light and an ominous 'wenggg' sizzled through the air as a long whip snaked from the man's arm. It lashed out toward Lan Jue's face.

Vibration? Was this his Discipline? If so then it must be amplified by his machinery. The truth was something he'd likely never learn, since a Convert – as they called themselves – considered their construction their most important secret.

Lan Jue's right arm shot out to block the humming whip. It entangled itself, then began to glow a smoky white. The net of electric energy dispersed like oil from water. With a fierce tug, 1724 pulled himself closer.

A red light flickered on his metallic shoulder, then a moment later it opened to reveal a small weapon. No sooner was the barrel revealed than a beam of energy thick as a man's arm shot at Lan Jue.

The corner of Lan Jue's eyes tightened. This one was crafty! He'd kept his methods secret until an opportune moment, and here it was. He looked like a hand-to-hand fighter, but the whip was a feint. He just needed an opportunity to blast Zeus close range with his laser. The real danger was coming right at his nose.

He couldn't compete with the speed of light, there was no way he could effectively dodge the attack. The fraying net of lightning flared with power.

With an impotent puff his shields parted. The beam struck him at the right shoulder.

A shadow of anxiety crept in to Lan Jue's heart. He'd grown so weak. Although his improvement with Qianlin was quick, he was still only ninth level, maybe the peak of first rank. It was still a bitter loss, to drop from seventh rank. Lan Jue suspected the Convert was the peak of eighth level, but certainly not ninth. Where he at his real strength, the piddling laser would never have penetrated his shield.

Seeing his attack hit the mark, 1724 began his charge again. He dropped his shoulder and a boquete of spikes half an inch long sprang out, set to impale his foe to the arena floor.

Lan Jue cursed his rotten luck.

Chapter 396: Daddy's Back!

Lan Jue had no recourse but to lift his hand to block. Bang! His hand met the spiked shoulder piece to push it away, even grabbing one of the spines.

1724 stopped dead in his tracks in mid-air.

Lan Jue didn't give him an opportunity to react. The moment his grip tightened around the spine, an explosion of electric energy raced through the Convert's body. 1724 lit up like a purple holiday lantern.

Of course Lan Jue had been judging his opponent the same way he himself had been judged. Taking the laser blast to the shoulder was the only way he'd get close. Not the only way, of course – there were other methods – but he didn't want to reveal too much of his abilities in the opening round of the tournament.

Waves of diffuse electric energy poured from 1724's body as the current tore through him. The metallic half of his body was particularly susceptible. After a moment Lan Jue let the bulk of his Discipline recede to conserve energy.

With an imperious wave of his hand, 1724 was smashed violently to the ground. His metal construction sizzles, burned black from the electricity. The rest of him twitched uncontrollably.

Lan Jue brushed a hand along his right shoulder, where no trace of the Convert's laser strike was visible. It was foolish to assume his electric net had had but one layer.

"Competitor 310: Victory." The surrounding shields vanished and Lan Jue walked back to the waiting area like he was out for an afternoon stroll.

In the audience, Jun'er clapped her hands so ferociously she threatened to fall over. "Daddy won! Daddy won! My daddy's so strong!" She spoke to the Terminator as though she were instructing him of some truth.

The Paragon gave her a sheepish smirk. "Are you sure big Uncle isn't allowed to know who your daddy is? You can tell me..." There were a

hundred battle going on below him, and he couldn't keep his eyes on all of them. Jun'er wasn't using her own to watch, so he couldn't tell by her gaze. For all his knowledge and experience, the Terminator could not discover what he wanted to know in this moment – foiled by a little girl.

Jun'er tittered playfully. “Nope! You shouldn't ask people to talk about the things they aren't supposed to talk about, big Uncle.”

“Ehm...” The Terminator's guilty grin deepened, faced with a simultaneously amusing and irritating quandary. “You're quite the clever little thing.”

“I have to take my helmet off,” Jun'er announced. “Mommy doesn't let me wear it for too long. I'll be back tomorrow though, big uncle. Remember my present!”

The Terminator gave her a grandfatherly smile. “Oh, I won't forget. I promise.”

“Ok, I have to go now. Gourmet uncle, is mommy back?” Jun'er turned her face back to the Avenue's own Paragon.

The Pharmacist – who'd been carefully watching from a few rows back – rose to her feet and approached. Jun'er picked her out right away.

“Mommy you were great!” The little girl lung her tiny arms around her mother's waist.

The Pharmacist lifted her up in to her arms. She gave the Terminator an appreciative and respectful curtsy. “I'm sorry for the trouble, Your Majesty.”

The massive Convert answered with a smile. “No trouble at all. She's an adorable little one, we connected well. Her eyesight's been lost since birth, I imagine.”

The Pharmacist couldn't bring herself to talk, but nodded her head.

The Terminator nodded. “Medical technology can fix this, but there are significant risks. Find an Adept skilled in bio-electric Discipline that can help stimulate the nerves and tissue over the long term. I imagine it'll

have some good results. If there's some traction, a minimally invasive surgery might be considered – a specialty here in the North.”

The Pharmacist's usually stoic features broke in to a smile. Lan Jue was doing just as the Paragon recommended already. For such an illustrious Paragon to make the same suggestion, it must mean she was on the right track. The Terminator hadn't made any promises, but she knew that if she did bring Jun'er here she would get the best medical care the North had to offer. This man was more powerful than the Pontiff and Satan put together, and not just in Discipline.

This man, nor fourth among the ten Paragons, was once a military man. A marshal, in fact. Now the entire army was effectively under his command. Even the upper echelons of Northern politics didn't dare disturb him – only the President, and only on certain occasions.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty.” She curtsied again, this time lower and more formal.

“Bye-bye big Uncle!” Jun'er cooed, waving her tiny hand.

The Pharmacist hugged her little prize close and returned to her seat. The Terminator watched them go for a minute before returning his eyes to the field.

“Your Avenue has had a wealth of talent coming through lately, Gourmet,” the large man noted. “I couldn't learn much from the Pharmacist's fight either. Her cultivation method must have been a unique one. Limitless potential, though there are hidden scars that prevent her advancement.”

The Gourmet nodded knowingly. “That's probable. At her level of power she was tapped for a position on the council, but she refused. She was only interested in running her shop, and in fact she wouldn't even be here except that a councilor convinced her to.”

“I heard that the Pontiff and Satan brought their crew to the Avenue and Lost,” the Terminator continued. “I'd like to make a visit myself sometime in the future. It'll give me an opportunity to see my old friend one last time.” Of course he meant the Clairvoyant.

The Gourmet offered a congenial smile. “The Avenue would be honored to welcome you.”

“I know there was some trouble with an unreasonable visitor,” the Terminator said, his tone becoming somewhat more serious. “He’s been spoken to. I hope you can relay to the Avenue that the North has absolutely no intention of making enemies. We have other threats to consider now, that effect everyone.”

The Gourmet’s face hardened, too. “That is something I’ve been wanting to discuss with you. The Clairvoyant’s vision revealed that this could be a catastrophe never before experienced in all the history of humanity. The only way to survive as a species is to work together. The Citadels didn’t come to intimidate us, they came to talk with the Clairvoyant about just this. After that the Clairvoyant locked himself away. I suspect he has about a month left before he passes on. If Your Majesty has the time, I’d suggest sooner rather than later. You can come help see him off.”

There was a sudden, soft red light that glowed behind the Terminator’s eyes. “Is it really that serious?” As a Paragon himself, he knew to trust explicitly the Eye of Tomorrow’s visions.

The Clairvoyant had also been a special case. Most Adepts grew weaker as time wore on – like any living thing, their life force became exhausted. However, the Clairvoyant was precisely the opposite – his Sight was strongest the nearer he came to death.

The Gourmet nodded again. “It is. So we’re starting to prepare now.”

“Indeed,” came the big man’s emphatic response.

The tournament went on. Due to the sheer number of competitors, the first day was exclusive given to getting through round one. Lan Jue was done once his fight was finished, so he made his way out. Earlier he’d made plans to spend some time with Jun’er, which was why she was so eager to leave once his fight was over.

Lan Jue plucked his mask off in the bathroom and threw on a coat. Suddenly he was like anyone else – just another tourist. He left for the spot he’d promise to meet them.

A few moment later; “Daddy!” Jun’er’s clear voice rang across the street.

Lan Jue turned to the sound with a big grin plastered on his face.

The Pharmacist lead little Jun’er toward her ‘father,’ since she was no longer wearing the helmet. She’d been told Lan Jue was here by her mother, hence the excitement.

“Jun’er!” Lan Jue called. He trotted forward a few steps and took her by the hand.

“Daddy, you’re so great! You put your hand out and boom! You beat up the bad guys. He was a very bad man, I was a little scared. I thought he might hurt my daddy.”

He smiled and shook his head. “No way. Your daddy’s too strong for that. How could he beat me up, huh? You know your mommy’s even stronger! She beat up the other bad man in just a couple seconds, right?”

Jun’er giggled. “Mommy and daddy are both amazing!”

Lan Jue looked over to the Pharmacist, who was also smiling. Every day she could sense the change in Jun’er with this trip, and every second eased some of her own burden. Anyone from the Avenue would say that it had been many years since they’d seen her look this happy.

“Congratulations on getting to the second round,” Lan Jue offered.

She shrugged. “I don’t care much about this sort of thing. I just want to make Jun’er happy.”

“I thought I saw the Terminator holding her,” Lan Jue said.

This caused the Pharmacist to laugh. “I don’t know what happened. It looks like he and she really hit it off. She calls him Big Uncle. You should have seen everybody’s face.”

Lan Jue’s own features were not much different from what she described. It was quite the scene, a man of his lofty status and the little blind girl playing together.

“That’s a very good thing,” he assured.

“Let’s go home,” Jun’er offered as she leaned against Lan Jue’s shoulder. She looked a little tired.

This was the reason she so rarely left the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Jun’er’s mood had increased dramatically, but even a little excitement often tired her out.

The Morning Star, Su Xiaosu, had spent the entire day in the hotel working on improving her Discipline. Qianlin, meanwhile, had a seat in the audience to watch the tournament courtesy of Lan Jue. She had no interest in joining herself, especially since her Discipline wasn’t combat focused.

When they got back to the hotel, Lan Jue gave Jun’er back to her mother. “Daddy,” she said, “why don’t you stay in the same room with us? Are you busy?” The little one asked.

The question caught him off guard. After a moment, she laughed. “Alright, daddy will go with you. Nothing is more important than my little princess.” He felt like he was starting to get this father thing down. Jun’er reminded him of the possibilities. If Hera were here, their own child would be quite big too.

Chapter 397: Daddy Has To Go

The joy that poured out of the little girl was a font of positivity. She was like a sprite filling the area with happiness and excitement.

He followed the Pharmacist and Jun'er back to their room. The suite was quite large, as Lan Jue noted while Jun'er pulled him to the sofa for a story.

As had become somewhat of a custom, Lan Jue related his tale while carefully stimulating her ocular nerves with his bio-electric Discipline.

The Pharmacist smiled as she listened from beside him on the sofa. Whenever it came to story time she would sit and listen absent-mindedly, thinking about what could have been. She pondered on how life would be different in the man in her heart were here. He would hold his daughter the same way, and tell her stories of his own. That would be so perfect...

Before she would cry quietly at the painful thoughts, but over time she grew accustomed. The more they shared this family time, in fact, the more she enjoyed it.

The gentle current of electricity and Lan Jue's soothing cadence soon put the little one to sleep. She lay against his shoulder, her sweet features content. Lan Jue tenderly relinquished her to her mother, and followed as she put her to bed.

"Thank you, really." The Pharmacist whispered.

Lan Jue smiled warmly. He could see the depth of the emotion in her eyes. "Now I'm Jun'er's father. Even if your husband came back, it wouldn't change the fact. She's an angel and I adore her. I do it for Jun'er, not for you."

She nodded her head in understanding. "She's been so happy since you've come, and healthier too. This trip especially, she's often tired but 've never seen her happier. You were right, even if she can't see she doesn't deserve to live in a cage. I'm confident she'll only get better, and grow quickly."

"Well I should go," he said after a moment. "And don't worry, I'll keep an

eye on her through the tournament.”

She gave a thankful smile. “Great.”

“Daddy...” Jun’er’s tiny voice muttered from her bed.

Lan Jue moved to her side, and gently patted her hand. Her tiny fingers wrapped around his thumb and wouldn’t let go. She was having a nightmare.

“Daddy... daddy don’t go, okay? Stay with me and mommy. I miss you daddy...” Her tiny face was scrunched in sadness and concern.

The Pharmacist had been holding it together, but Jun’er’s pleas immediately caused water to spring to her eyes. She fought to keep the tears contained.

Lan Jue gently stroked her hair. “Daddy’s here sweetie pie, I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here with Jun’er.”

He glances toward the Pharmacist as he spoke. She was stepping out of the room to regain her composure.

The bed creaked as he tenderly lay down beside her. Like a kitten, Jun’er curled up against his warmth. Almost immediately her nervous expression melted away, and a look of satisfaction replaced it.

She dreamt for a while and Lan Jue waited. After some time he attempted to get up, but the effort nearly woke her. He had no choice but to stay. After the Pharmacist calmed down she poked her head in once or twice but said nothing. Eventually Lan Jue also succumbed to drowsiness, and himself fell asleep.

When he awoke Jun’er was no longer in his arms, and he was covered in a blanket. He sighed and stretched as the comforting warmth flowed through him.

He noted that he felt... released. His mood seemed abnormally easy. He hadn’t felt this since Hera died. Just as he was comforting Jun’er, she must be comforting him he thought. He sorely wished he had a little one of his own just like her.

When he stumbled out of the room he saw the Pharmacist carefully feeding Jun'er some fruit.

"Daddy!" Jun'er's sharp hearing picked out his foot steps right away.

Lan Jue gave the Pharmacist an embarrassed and apologetic smile, to which she mirthfully shook her head. He trotted over to Jun'er and placed her on his knee.

Jun'er stuck her sticky little fingers under Lan Jue's nose, clutching a piece of tangerine. "Eat some!"

"Aww thank you honey. Such a good girl!" He answered with a big smile.

"Daddy's so lazy. I got a long time ago and you were still sleeping!" Her accusation actually caused Lan Jue to blush in embarrassment. He coughed to try and conceal his embarrassment.

The Pharmacist couldn't help but laugh. "Daddy's just very tired, Jun'er. He still has a lot of things to do. You shouldn't tease your daddy so much!" She then turned her attention to Lan Jue. "You can go ahead and manage your business."

He nodded in agreement.

"Daddy!" Jun'er called. "You should come back early tonight and help me sleep again. I had such a good sleep!"

Ehm...

He wasn't sure how to respond. It was certainly an awkward situation. If he were to do as little Jun'er asked, how would the Pharmacist react?

He looked her way to see, and saw her own face reddening. She shook her head helplessly. "We'll have to see baby. If daddy gets everything done then he can come home early."

"Oh." She answered as her face fell.

Lan Jue wanted to say something to comfort her, but held his tongue. He and the Pharmacist were only friends, despite what Jun'er thought. The situation between him and Qianlin being what it was, he wasn't sure it was such a good idea she learn he was spending every evening in another

woman's room.

He bid them both farewell and left for his own room. He trotted down the hall in high spirits, but there was a hint of bitter sympathy for the Pharmacist and her plight. To be so young with an absent lover. He certainly knew how that felt.

"You're back." He was surprised to find Zhou Qianlin waiting.

"The competition is over for the day?" Lan Jue asked in surprise. He'd have guessed it would be a little while longer still before all the fighters finished.

She answered with a shake of her head. "No, they're still at it. I came back early since I'm not terribly interested in combat. Besides you've already finished your first round. Are you alright, by the way? I saw the Convert land a hit."

He smiled. "Relax, I've got a thick skin. I just spent the time looking after Jun'er, the poor girl."

Qianlin knew of Jun'er, and was equally sympathetic. When she heard about his role as the small girl's father, she encouraged him to continue.

"We should work on our Disciplines," Qianlin announced.

His smirk widened. "So diligent today. What lit a fire under you?"

"After seeing so many Adepts fighting, I feel like I need to at least match their strength. I feel like I'm getting close to a breakthrough," she mused.

Lan Jue's brows crinkled at her words, and he grunted. "Shit, if only I advanced so quickly."

Both she and he had both undergone Bize's 'extraction process,' but ever since then she'd been improving at light speed. If she did break through soon, it would mean she was already at eighth rank!

Her rapid advance wasn't just because of her protogenic powers. Lan Jue's bio-electric Discipline, and their combined cultivating efforts have all been tremendously profitable.

She blushed. "So are you going to or not?"

“Yeah, yeah of course!” He answered quickly.

**

By the end of the second day, the three thousand Adepts who signed up were weened to half. The second round looked like it would have around seventeen hundred participants. All of those were already winners, considering the prizes for making the cut. Now with each win their prize will get better, becoming even more outrageous the further up they climb.

The arena was a mess of people scrambling for seats. Scalped tickets were priced so high they would cost an average family their year’s salary, and yet they were being sold. The reduction in the sheer number of adepts didn’t appear to affect the audience numbers at all, but there was nothing for it. Safety concerns meant they couldn’t somehow increase capacity.

Lan Jue made his way back to the arena in his golden masked and waited with the others for his turn to come. Things were much more straightforward in day two. There were no fancy speeches or extravagant shows. When the time came, lots would be drawn and that was all.

The Skyfire Avenue combatants were nearby. Because of their illustrious standing and their shared origin, they were given their own rest area. Lan Jue was out with the ‘normal’ Adepts.

The numbers were a lot smaller, but the system remained the same. Two hundred Adepts at a time, one hundred arenas. Things would move a lot faster this time around, though.

There was a buzz, and the random draw began. Seventeen hundred pictures appeared suspended in the sky. With a maddening and dramatic shuffle, they arranged themselves in to pairs.

This time Lan Jue’s opponent was number 67 – a very low digit, considering, and it took him by surprise. The Pharmacist was number 66. Close call!

At his current level of strength he would have absolutely zero chance against the Pharmacist. More importantly, though, he didn’t want Jun’er to see her parents fighting! If it came to that, he would forfeit.

This time, though, it was 67 he was facing. He'd heard from somewhere than the first hundred were all seeded competitors – all of them were ninth level at least.

The opening round of fights had been rife with sixth and seventh level Adepts. His own eighth level opponent was an aberration that would be seen far more this time around – even far more ninth level foes. With his luck he'd fight a Paragon.

Particularly depressing was the fact that he was in the ninth batch this time, instead of the third. He'd be waiting here for quite a long time.

So be it, time to wait.

Chapter 398: The Cloaked Lady

In contrast to himself, the Pharmacist had excellent fortune. She was to compete with the first batch, just as she had yesterday. She was the only Avenue representative in her group.

However, there was another familiar face among the crowd. Sariel, Angel of the Moon. Lan Jue had paid close attention to the Citadel presence, and noted the lack of a certain Cherubim. It was no surprise, of course – the suffering Uriel had received in the Holy City was not easily cast off. Raphael was similarly absent.

Aside from Metatron, there were three other representatives of the Pontiff's Citadel in attendance. They were Sariel, High Inquisitor Constantine, and another in priestly cassock.

Lan Jue was surprised at Sariel's presence in the waiting room. Archangels could not be judged by appearance, and that went double for age. He didn't think she was so young, but her presence here meant she must fit the criteria.

As for their mortal enemies the Dark Citadel, there didn't seem to be any luminaries aside from Lucifer. However, Satan's men didn't have a uniform like their glittery counterparts so picking them out of a crowd was difficult. That didn't mean they were any less of a threat, though.

None of these familiar faces were preparing to go out on the field with the Pharmacist. But there was one he knew very well – unfortunately. Chu Cheng.

Today Hades was dressed in a traditional black tunic suit. It was a rare style these days, but fitting for him. It made him look tall and thin. The fiery blaze of red hair only added to his heroic persona.

With hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, Chu Cheng stood in the waiting area looking out toward the arenas. He paused for a moment, then like he hadn't a care in the world, began walking. Lan Jue didn't know if his pause had been for prudence or dramatic effect. His friend lazily chewed a toothpick while he half-heartedly moved toward the field.

Lan Jue had to admit that his friend exuded a certain dark charm. His dramatic appearance and laissez-faire attitude was like something out of a novel. He also wasn't without his own crowd of admirers. He was definitely a notable figure in the North, at his ninth level seventh rank standing.

He made a move to exit out onto the field, when suddenly a pair of robots barred his path. A metallic hand stretched out, wreathed with electric bolts of lightning and plucked the toothpick from his mouth.

"Contestants are not permitted to bring any weapon on to the tournament grounds," its metallic voice croaked. Chu Cheng's prurient grin fled at the interruption.

Hades' eyes went wide, and his face twitched. What a mistake!

A smattering of laughter echoed from the bleachers.

The audience had monitors which they could set to any portion of the arena that they wished. As there was some interest around Chu Cheng, it would stand to reason that there's be more than a few eyes on him. And now he looked like a complete idiot to all of them. The look on his face alone was tragically comical.

Lan Jue had also just turned his attention toward his friend. When the scene unfolded, he couldn't help but wince and fight back a cackle. I don't know him! He promised himself. I don't know him!

Chu Cheng rigidly huffed passed the robots and found his arena. His opponent was already waiting, and immediately struck him as unique. They were hidden beneath a cloak, so thick and wide so as to even hide their gender.

"Well you've got some shit luck, I'll tell you," Chu Cheng muttered as he approached.

His challenger said nothing.

"You know why?" His voice nearly cracked in rage. "Because I'm in a crap mood. That f-rhgmnm... that robot!" The last sentiment was delivered with a murderous glare toward the nearby metallic servants.

“Moron,” was finally the response.

Chu Cheng was struck dumb. Not because... well, not just because of the curse, but because of the pitch it was delivered in.

Crisp, melodious, smoky. Underneath that cloak was a gorgeous woman. Chu Cheng knew this from long years of extensive experience.

“You’re a girl?” Despite the disparaging words his eyes showed excitement. He almost buzzed now, eager for action.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

The call and buzzer started the second batch’s time in the spotlight.

The cloaked lady didn’t wait for Chu Cheng to finish gushing. Her first action was to leap up, piercing the clear blue sky like a hawk. When she reached the apex of the protective dome covering their arena, her trajectory began to drop. With a flourish, her cloak splayed open like a pair of great wings. A blackness crept out that plunged their section of the field in to darkness.

Darkness Element... Chu Cheng’s brain rapidly worked around the new information.

On the battle field, Hades was an entirely different man. His sharp eyes followed her inky shadow as it slithered through the darkness. His right hand lashed out and a raging column of fire spat from his fingertips. It split the darkness three meters from the woman’s nose, directly in her path of descend. If she didn’t manage to get out of the way, she’d be fried black.

She stopped in the air like she hadn’t been moving at all. Hovering in the blackness, she idly waved her hand. The motion summoned a sharp slash of red light to appear right in front of Chu Cheng.

He instinctively leapt backward to avoid the strike. He wasn’t expecting that! A cold sweat had broken out over his brow.

Darkness and Interspatial Disciplines! Not to mention this energy intensity!

She began to descend through the inky blackness, all the while rowing her hand. Each swipe caused scarlet fissures to split reality around Chu Cheng. He dodged, and where he dodged another appeared to cut off retreat.

Lan Jue watched closely from the waiting area. The Pharmacist's fight had been over about one second after the buzzer rang. Her opponent was an eighth rank, but had received a significant injury from the first round. His unfortunate condition and the Pharmacist's power meant an embarrassingly quick bout.

Chu Cheng, though? He had some kind of luck.

Lan Jue's snap judgement was that this woman was a representative of the Dark Citadel. It looked like his fellow Monarch's luck was no better than his own. No wonder they were brothers – misery loves company.

The unfortunate surprise Chu Cheng suffered made him play passive, but that was not to mean he was in a bad spot. He was Hades, a Divine Monarch and a ninth level, seventh rank Adept!

The last attack woke him up. His fiery orange flames darkened suddenly, and slowly licked out from his every pore. With him at the center, a raging bloom of fire exploded out in every direction.

Those crimson flames didn't release any heat, but where they met the dimensional scars the two cancelled each other out. Pockets of nothing remained where the opposing powers clashed.

Chu Cheng's narrowed eyes blazed. His right hand shot out again, and a meteor shower of crimson orbs blasted out in quick succession. However they didn't seem aimed at his enemy, and instead remained suspended in air.

The air around each hovering orb swirls and waved, like viewing the world from beneath the ocean. The effect stretched around him as well to create a bubble of undulating air fifty meters in diameter.

Her descent continued and all the while she called razor-sharp cracked around her enemy. Yet nothing landed. It was difficult to predict his

position in that wavy scene, and where the fissures appeared they were quickly snuffed out in plumes of flame.

The clash had attracted quite a lot of attention, not least from the main viewing platform.

Jun'er was among there, seated once more upon the Terminator's arm. This time, though, her head ware was different. This one was pink in hue, and fitted the shape of Jun'er's head precisely. It seemed a significant upgrade from the one Lan Jue had purchased. That one was clutched in her arms. Like any child, her attention was not where the adults were focused.

The Gourmet watched carefully, however, and gently nodded his head at what he saw. His nephew definitely had talent. He knew this power he used to be called the Hellfire Nimbus, which was specifically tailored to deal with Interspatial Disciplines. Adepts who used Interspatial powers required very precise control, and the heat created by the Hellfire Nimbus warped everything. Only two options remained; flee or hope one's Discipline was stronger than the Hellfire Nimbus.

The woman was surprisingly strong, but Chu Cheng's reaction had been quick and correct. Now they were moving in to another stage of their dance.

The cloaked woman stopped in the air with a flourish, then joined her hands before her chest. Suddenly the darkness around them congealed until it was thick as paste. It hardened and gathered until it formed in to a rapier, drinking in light from around the woman's grip.

Her control in air meant she had the power of flight; a sure sign of ninth level. This was confirmed with her ability to aggregate energy – another high-level skill.

Her attacks never ceased. Now her blade swept through the black, and with each swing beams of darkness came tumbling from the heavens.

If her Interspatial Discipline wouldn't work, than a stronger thrust right through his defenses would have to do. It would be a valiant clash of direct strength.

It was a pleasant surprise to have two ninth level Adepts facing off in only the second round. A lot of the audience woke up and fixed their eyes to the scene. The status of these two upped the stakes – a famous Northern playboy and a representative of the Dark Citadel, head to head! Both of them stood on a fine foundation, but it was the whole package that mattered.

Where the beam of light pierced the Hellfire Nimbus, swirling blooms of fire answered. It slowed visibly, but still encroached and did not look set to waver. It pushed on like it had a mind of its own, and a single-minded desire to cut Chu Cheng in two.

Chu Cheng bore no smile or mirthful expression now. His was a face of concentration. His right hand made a sweeping motion, and suddenly the fires around him changed. Everything about him, even his aura exuded a sense of impending doom.

The hellfire Nimbus erupted in to a shower of firey petals, but just as quickly as it flowed outward it turned back in. Implosive force draw the fires around the column of darkness. A firestorm revolved within the confined of their arena's shield, gathering together again in to the shape of a blazing lotus.

Chapter 399: Disgrace and Immolation

The ungodly friction of her dark blade and Chu Cheng's fiery lotus caused an ear-splitting screech. It was eventually the eminence shadow blade that gave way, shattering into oblivion.

Chu Cheng thrust a palm forward, and at his command the smoldering buds began to shed petals. These petals were black as the world around them, and sharp as razors. They sliced erratically through the air toward the cloaked lady.

She brandished the rapier in her grip, and executed a series of rapid swiped all around. Crescent-shaped waves of energy spread out like ripples, leaving behind them tails of opaque light. Still the petals came, though many were swept away by the waves. The cloaked lady dodged and weaved among them like a shadow – no, like a host of shadows, too quick to fix your eyes on. In truth there were, for several shadowy clones had clawed free from her and scuttled through the dark.

Metatron watched from the viewing platform. He turned his eyes to Lucifer beside him. In a voice flat with indifference he said “Well, it appears the deep pockets of our affluent colleagues have purchase another unholy masterpiece.”

“That is Dracula's daughter,” was the tepid response from the Dark Citadel's second in command. There was no attempt to hide the cloaked lady's identity, there didn't appear to be a need to. The two citadels butted heads often, and if they didn't learn about her now then it would be soon. She was strong enough now to get their attention.

There was a sniff from the Lord Archangel. “It's unfortunate! She's come across one opponent that may be more than a match. Unless I'm mistaken, that's the Northern successor to the Hades bloodline.”

While he spoke to Lucifer, his eyes slowly went to the Gourmet in the row ahead. Especially after the Gourmet's ascent to Paragon, no one was unaware of his history.

Lucifer didn't react to the taunt. He gave his Pontifical counterpart an

admonishing grin then returned his attention to the field.

Metatron smirked back, then followed his eyes to the cloaked woman.

The two where at the climax of their confrontation. Dracula's offspring had shown staggering speed and power, but the Hades scion had replied with power to match. Now as the petals fell and she weaved, another surprise ensued. The metal-looking petals dissolved in to lapping flames as they were destroyed. That was part of what made Hades dangerous – his powers were sinister.

This was where the gap between them began to show. The cloaked woman was blessed with two Disciplines, and even still couldn't match the superior Chu Cheng. After only this brief exchange, she was starting to look sluggish.

Chu Cheng curled his body in like he was preparing to jump. Then, with claw-like hands, he pulled his arms up over his head. The ground rumbled as a column of hellfire erupted from the earth, directly beneath the woman's feet.

She managed to leap out of the way half a moment before the fires consumed her. But while the attack didn't hit her, it did suck in the orbiting lotus flowers surrounding them. The column grew with every addition, until another flower, larger and more intense than all the others began to emerge. More than three times the size of its predecessors and bearing a crushing atmosphere of its own, it came crashing toward the cloaked woman.

Lit by the hellish fires, the cloaked woman let loose a bestial roar. Her whole body shook, and the cloak flapped as a pair of giant leathery wings sprang from her back. A sanguine cloud of red surrounded her, and set her shadow blade ablaze with crimson fire.

She took a step forward, then launched herself directly toward the enormous nimbus like she meant to face it head on. Chu Cheng watched with a dark grin, and when she began her approach he moved as well. Raising his hands overhead, a swirling vortex of fire and brimstone crackled to life before him.

Just as the crowd was wondering why he'd waste time with a short-range strike, the cloaked woman vanished from view. She reappeared moments later, right in front of Chu Cheng's vortex and that's when it turned a boundless grey.

This wasn't just power. It was forethought.

The cloaked woman's rapier grew impossibly sluggish, like it was trying to cut through molasses, or glue. Her interspatial powers seemed useless. The vacuum force of his vortex finally ripped her cloak away revealing a lithe and beautiful young woman.

She was as beautiful as she was dangerous. Tall, with dark tights covering and outlining her athletic figure. Her face was pale, and cold, but beautiful. Like gazing on an iceberg. Dark red hair framed her black eyes.

Chu Cheng reacted immediately. As soon as her face was revealed, his vortex weakened. As it did the woman took advantage, melding her shadow rapier back in to herself. A moment later her entire body turned in to a living blade, which she used to try and destroy the vortex holding her.

Chu Cheng released a gentle sigh, and motioned with his hands again. A second vortex appeared, adjacent to the first and rotating in the opposite direction. The two crashed into each other, and the resulting explosion sent waves of feral power tearing out in all directions. The blade-woman went sailing through the air, and the strike caused her to return to her human form.

When she hit the floor vestiges of the grey energy congealed in to shackles. They pinned her to the ground, stretching her catsuit even tighter.

Chu Cheng swallowed and offered a chuckle. "Come on. Look, we can be friends, right?"

The digitized voice called out Chu Cheng's victory.

He walked over and extended a hand to release the chains. They were his creation, after all. There was more to it than that, of course. He wanted to get his hands on her.

Impressive elasticity, Chu Cheng mused to himself as he looked over her outfit. He banished the shackles with no further delay.

SLAP!

The cloaked woman delivered a slap so hard it spun Chu Cheng in place. She looked as surprised she hit as he did. “Why didn’t you move?!” He was strong and experienced enough to have seen that coming, certainly.

“You’re so pretty that I forgot,” he said, rubbing his face.

“Pervert!” She glared daggers at him, and then without any further exchange soared in to the air and away.

All he could do was shrug his shoulders. “You can run sweet heart, but I know your number.” Every contestant had one, and hers was recorded on his badge. With a family as important as his, finding out more about her wouldn’t be a problem.

“Pretty, fit, fierce and strong... Not bad, not bad at all. Heh, now I’ve got me a target. A-Jue can’t steal all the ninth level ladies, can he.”

“Get the hell out of here.” A gruff voice interrupted his thoughts from a few feet away. When Chu Cheng looked he discovered a man who looked like he was in his forties. He looked quite a lot like Chu Cheng, though a sight more level-headed. Still, he didn’t need to be angry to instill the immediate sensation that he had to be listened to.

He was dressed in the uniform of the tournament judges. He had to be a powerful Adept, since the North would only ask those capable of stopping an issue to perform these duties.

“Erk...” Chu Cheng didn’t say a word, and practically ran from the arena.

“If you embarrass me in public again I’ll roast you,” the older man said, slapping him upside the head.

“Ah! Hey!” Chu Cheng cowered and rubbed his head. “Since when could judges hit people?!”

He stepped closer and kicked at him. “Right now I’m no judge, I’m your

father!”

This was indeed the head of the Hades Bloodline, Chu Cheng’s father – Chu Dong. He was a ninth level Adept, who all his life had been looking for his Path to protogenic understanding that never came.

Chu Dong looked up once his son scuttled off, and his eyes met the Gourmet seated atop the main viewing platform. There was something there between them, unspoken but visible in their face. Without a word or motion, Chu Dong turned and continued to watch the remaining fights.

Chu Cheng found the cloaked woman’s name quickly and without much effort. She was the legitimate daughter of Dracula and was a member of the Dark Citadel. Lina Lee. She came from the most storied vampire family to have ever lived. She was born with two Disciplines, with strength of Talent, and was widely considered the eminent successor to the Dracula bloodline.

There was only one Prince of Vampires, and that was Dracula. Like many titles it was not the name of a single person, but rather generational. When the old Dracula passed, another was crowned from the new generation. They would then be called Dracula. The bloodline had remained strong and unbroken for countless generations, peak of the world of vampires.

“Lina Lee, quite a sexy name,” Chu Cheng sniggered to himself. He continued to gather whatever other information he could find.

At last the second batch was called. There were more familiar faces this time, namely the Driver, Constantine, and Sariel. Constantine was lucky enough to be given a weak opponent which he dealt with in short order. Sariel was similarly quick in putting another win in her column. The Driver, however, had more of a challenge.

Lots meant who you fought came down to luck. Sometimes you came out ahead, and sometimes you didn’t. Chu Cheng encountering Lina was certainly an example of unfortunate placement. She was a ninth level Talent indeed, but thankfully only third rank.

The brunt of that poor luck obviously fell on Lina. The difference in

Discipline rank was too much for her to overcome, even though she had two Disciplines. Chu Cheng already had a grasp on his protogenic transformation in Hades. Although they weren't permitted to use protogenic powers in the arena, it still helped him tremendously in other ways.

The Driver's opponent was a Northerner. He was a young man, thin and small, who wore a curiously cone-shaped hat. The arms crossed across his chest were more interesting, composed of some pitch-black material. It made it impossible to tell just what sort of trouble this tiny man had installed.

Chapter 400: The Nine Taiyin Flares

The Driver and Lan Jue were cut from the same cloth; both Lightning-based, both dual-Disciplined. He was even stronger than Lan Jue in terms of cultivation, so he didn't fear a little competition. Even still, the little man from the North gave him quite a shock at the battle's onset.

Not a moment after the buzzer, he was soaring two meters in the air. That didn't mean anything, it was what happened next that gave the Driver pause.

He began to spin horizontally like a drill, furiously boring toward the Avenue representative. The Driver's mastery of lightning made him fast, but even so the little man's piercing charge was on him in a flash.

His black metallic arms were outstretched, and each one was adorned with five nasty-looking spikes. They were black as pitch, which made them very hard to see. He was still some distance away when his cutting aura began to hammer at the Driver's defenses. The subconscious shields protecting him shuttered and fell away under the invisible assault.

However, the Driver was one of the preeminent younger generation of the Avenue. This was not his first proverbial rodeo. He planted his feet, and an aura of crackling electricity sprang up around him. At the last minute he lunged to the side, narrowly avoiding his opponent's charge.

Speed was evidently part of this little man's repertoire, as he turned and bounded back the moment he hit the floor. In the blink of an eye he was tearing back the other way toward the Driver's back with the same tactic. In the same second, the Driver reacted. He stepped just out of the way, and in the space he vacated there hovered a condensed orb of electric energy. The challenger was going too fast – he couldn't stop himself from ramming head-long into it.

What followed was unexpected. Instead of an explosion, the crowds watched in shock as the smaller man drilled a hole clean through the orb. He pierced through it leaving behind a clear cavity, but too fast for the energy to ignite. He landed nearby, unscathed.

The Driver juked to the side again, and an explosion of crackling light erupted from him in all directions with a rolling roar. The smaller man, seeing his attacks fail, whipped around to face his enemy. His metallic hands shot upward, and the motion birthed a swirling purple tornado between them. It was a well-chosen tactic against the explosive power of lightning.

It just went to show that you couldn't judge a book by its cover. The man looked like a scrub, but he was a terror on the battlefield.

Thunderstorm and hurricane collided. A roaring blast punctuated their meeting that caused the shields to crackle in protest.

Chu Dong had appeared by the arena at some point. His job was to watch these sorts of encounters for fairness and safety. Most were settled electronically, but clashes at this level needed a peak Adept to make sure it didn't get out of hand.

The two two clashed and destroyed one another. The splintering bolts of lightning dispersed through the shields, and the tornado spun itself in to oblivion. The resulting tidal wave of energy that was released swept through most of the tournament grounds.

The smaller men leaped backward, summoning another hurricane around himself. The sharp aura around him was almost visible. This earned a dismissive grunt from the Driver denizen before he vanished. When he reappeared half a moment later, he was suspended in air behind his opponent.

Another sweeping blast of power raced across the field, but this time it was only the little man who found his power destroyed. Nine successive blasts followed directly on top of where he hovered. The concussive force eventually knocked him out cold.

Nine orbs of compressed electric energy detonated one after the other. The last one erupted in the shape of a curious symbol, which hung burned in the sky for a moment before disappearing.

This battle was over.

From their even start to the little man's crushing defeat, perhaps only a minute had passed. This was how the Driver won things, and most in the crowd hadn't even seen how he'd done it.

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Chu Dong, who'd watched from the sidelines, looked as surprised as he did interested. This fight had been even more impressive than his son's.

He knew that man – a ninth level first rank Adept. Despite his relatively lower rank, he was still a person of interest in the North. He had an intimate and masterful knowledge of wind, its destructive properties. He was a congenital Talent, as well. However, he decided to become a Bionic in the pursuit of greater power. Those arms of his were constructed of precious metals that resonated with his wind Discipline. It allowed him to resonate at high frequencies, and gave his strikes an incredible boost in power. He could reputedly punch a hole through a battleship's hull. He had come from an assassin organization, one of the best of their ranks. A defeat like this was unexpected, to say the least.

He hadn't caught a break. The speed he was famous for couldn't catch lightning. His powerful attacks were useless if he couldn't hit his target. Worse, however, was the fact that thunder always followed lightning. Two Disciplines were tough to overcome.

That final attack in particular was daunting. That wasn't normal lightning he'd faced, but had been infused with protogenic energy – well hidden beneath the rolling lightning. It had been the most explosive attack he'd seen in the games so far. He was curious what it was named.

Others knew. Lan Jue smiled behind his mask as he watched.

The Nine Taiyin Flares

It was an attack specific to the yin-biased nature of his Discipline. He also knew that what they'd seen was only the tip of the iceberg. Any more and they'd have to cart the little man out in pieces.

Lan Jue could see from the battle that the Driver had a firmer grasp on the properties of lightning than he did. There was an opposite for the

Taiyin Flares, as they was for all opposing forces. For those of a more yang nature, it was called the Nine Taiyang Flares. Lan Jue was cultivated to the point where those secrets should have been revealed to him, but his focus had been on mastering Taiji. The secrets of the attack still eluded him. He'd understood his teacher's thought process though. Once becoming seventh rank, mastering the Taiyang Flares would be easier with a Taiji background.

A helpless depression fluttered across Lan Jue's heart as he realized he needed to make that loathsome visit. It would be worth it to learn that attack.

He remembered the stories he'd heard, about how the Nine Strikes of Taiji and the Buddhist Mantras were the most powerful of these lost arts. The ultimate goal, though, was to combine the Taiji Nine Strikes and the Taiyang Flares. The near-mythical ability – called the Hammer of Supreme Yang – was a step on the path to Paragon.

The Taiyin and Taiyang Flares were exceptionally powerful attacks, and their explosive nature was harmful to the Adepts who used them. Only a Taiji master would be able to modulate the erratic flow of power, and drain the excess before it harmed the user. This was especially true for the yang-portion, and that was why an Adept had to be of only the highest caliber to be able to use it.

The thought of learning something new, something that strong, was an exciting prospect for Lan Jue. His power level would see a very sharp rise once that skill was learned.

The Driver probably only recently uncovered the knowledge as well. Both Taiyin and Taiyang Flares depended on protogenic energy. Learning it to perfection was one route to Paragon. The Driver must have chosen this as his Path. For Lan Jue things appeared more complicated, and he wasn't yet sure how to proceed.

The next batch passed in relative quiet. There weren't any clashes between ninth level adepts in this group. It didn't look good for the sponsors if their strongest fights were all at the beginning, so a lot of it

was by design.

It wasn't until the middle of the day that the final batch – Lan Jue's – was called to compete. Arena 8, against opponent 67.

When he got there, he faced his opponent with a helpless sigh. He knew Challenger 67 alright. It was the Barber.

Now Lan Jue was thinking his sour luck was a curse. How was he supposed to defeat someone on his own side? Still so early in the games?

It was in the rules though; none of the big names from the Avenue or the Citadels were to meet in the first three rounds. Of course Lan Jue wasn't representing the Avenue just this moment. There was always a chance he was going to run in to his own people, and here it was. Now his crappy luck dictated that he would have to take out one of his home's few representatives.

The Barber recognized his adversary right away, and his face fell. Lan Jue thought he had bad luck, but Barber sure thought it was he that got the short end of the stick. Thankfully he kept his piece, and didn't reveal Lan Jue's identity here on the arena floor.

"I'm sorry," Lan Jue offered.

The Barber sniffed. "So sure of victory, are we? Let's just see who comes out on top."

The Avenue councilman had been working hard to improve himself after the embarrassing loss to Lan Jue all those months ago 1. His effort had earned him a breakthrough, rising him to the second rank at last.

The Barber's challenge reminded Lan Jue of the situation he found himself in. Yes! He wasn't the seventh ranked powerhouse he used to be. Now he was first rank, and defeating the Barber would not be as easy as it had been the first time.

Still a grin came to Lan Jue's face, visible beneath the mask hiding the top part of his features. Now was a good opportunity for him to give his contender a little gift.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

The Barber disappeared with the buzzer, appearing again a few meters in the air. His Discipline was also wind, not unlike the Driver’s last opponent. His was purer, however, and it was by that power alone that he broke through to ninth level.

Chapter 401: An Informative Battle

The last time the two sparred Lan Jue walked away with the man's Harlequin Silver. Now he knew the ins and outs of the Barber's power well.

He was very skilled in speed and force. A solid mastery of Wind made the councilman even more dangerous. Considering the Barber's age, his future looked bright. He'd said during their last confrontation that there were no ninth level ninth rank Wind Adepts yet. Of course Lan Jue disagreed – his brother was living proof that there was.

Luckily for the Jewelry Master, the Barber was still unaware of his sudden drop in power. He would be hesitant to try and test Lan Jue's limits directly.

The Barber waved his hands, and the air became thick with condensed air. They were visible only by a shimmer, but where sharp enough to cut through bone. The wind blades filled the air, then fired toward Lan Jue like a hail of arrows.

There were different cultivation methods even among Adepts of the same Discipline. For example, the smallish guy from the Driver battle was specialized in wind-accelerated speed. The specialty lacked direct attack force, which was why he turned to machinery to help. Strength and control together made him a capable foe.

His decision was not a poor one, but there were consequences. A Bionic was no longer entirely themselves. Their blood was part machine fluid. Breaking through to Paragon became far more difficult once an Adept surrendered himself to the knife. In fact, in all the history of humanity the Terminator was the only one to achieve this. Through some unknown method, he joined his body with machinery to break through the barrier to super-human status. It had been reputedly as dangerous as it was mysterious.

The Barber did not possess the same comprehensive grasp of Wind that the other man did, his strengths lied elsewhere. In the future it was likely

the Avenue denizen would far outstrip that Northern contemporary.

Every Adept was faced with a choice; take the short path to power, or build on what you were given. The Driver's opponent probably came to a barrier he couldn't breach, and elected for help to overcome it. Most Adepts with adequate Talent didn't choose to become Bionics.

That was not to say there weren't advantages to making the change. At the very least, machinery and science could make them stronger almost over night. In the North they called it Stratified Refinement, and many low-order Adepts chose this path. For most they knew that advancement beyond a certain point was hopeless. The desire for strength was especially strong for these unfortunates. It was for most the best way, as the West's Fantascia Genetica was both expensive and uncertain. At worst, a failed surgery resulted in being maimed.

The wind blades joined together in a veritable tidal wave that covered the entire arena. It was a move to prevent Lan Jue from fully employing his terrifying speed.

He didn't have any illusions that he would beat the vastly stronger Lan Jue. His hope was that he'd be able to stick it out a little longer this time. He knew – or thought he knew – that Lan Jue was a seventh ranked Adept, and you couldn't feasibly overcome that at his level. The sour look on his face was due to that realization.

Dappled sunlight shimmered as the rain of wind blades covered the sky. Lan Jue was on the move. His advance wasn't quick, but steady. With a wave of his right hand there was a flash, and lightning condensed in to his trademark spear.

He thrust the weapon forward, then it blasted outward like a column of explosive energy. Every cutting slice of wind it encountered was dissolved. It carved a path directly toward the Barber.

The Barber paused. He half-expected Lan Jue to start with his overpowered Forest of Lightning, and had his next moves planned accordingly. Now the whole thing was scrapped – Lan Jue was taking a different approach.

A close-quarters battle, eh?

The Barber was as touched as he was stunned. For someone so far above his skill level to elect for a close-combat battle was clearly a way to give him face. This was more a friendly exchange than a competition.

The remaining blades of wind came fluttering back to the Barber's hands and fused in to a spear of his own. The cyan-hued weapon was surrounded by the sound of buffeting winds – the sounds of his elemental gathering to strike.

“Die!” he hollered, as the councilman lunged right for his adversary. The spear of wind became ten roaring beams of light sharp enough to cut steel. It cut at Lan Jue and all the areas around him. It was an imposing scene to run head-first in to.

With a grunt, Lan Jue tore his own spear through the air. Where it passed, a sizzling crescent of energy was cast outward. The Barber's thrusts and Lan Jue's sweep collided. A blast of energy resulted, that nearly knocked them to the ground.

It was important to remember that lightning was explosive, but it also had a tendency to spread. Wind, alternatively, had a powerful coverage and cutting force. Both were strong, at their level much of these battles came down to mastery, control and application.

The intensity of their collision continued for a long moment, with thunderous roars and stabbing light punctuating their meeting.

Meanwhile the Barber was focusing his concentration. He could feel himself becoming one with the tempestuous winds swirling all around. The fierceness of his earlier attacks was somehow softer – but no less frightening. Like a strong man behind a gentle face, these attacks could punch a hole through a man if they weren't careful.

Lan Jue faced the change calm as a spring morning. His spear of lightning thrust out again and again, sometimes disappearing entirely from view. Like his opponent, Zeus was resonating with his lightning element. There were benefits to this, of course – such as a tremendous increase in his Discipline's direct damage – but there was also an

increasing element of uncertainty. Lightning and thunderbolt Disciplines were inherently chaotic. One could never rely on them completely in the heat of battle.

Speed versus versatility. Wind against Lightning.

The two competitors forget the tournament. They forgot time. There was only their encounters, clashing again and again. It was clearly the closest battle yet of this second round.

“Time!” The buzzer called for an end to their exchange.

The two of them separated, eyeing one another. Lan Jue’s face was hidden behind the golden mask, the the Barber was all smiles. “That was excellent,” he exclaimed. “I surrender.”

He walked off the arena without another word, and without looking back.

Though no one could see, a small smile crept in to Lan Jue’s features as he watched his countryman leave.

Even though his abilities had dropped to second rank, it still wasn’t very difficult to win victory over the Barber. Aside from his two Disciplines, he also had a wealth of experience and understanding that Barber simply didn’t have yet. The Avenue representative had lead the pace of the battle, but that was a result of Lan Jue’s guidance.

An Adepts first order of mastery came from understanding their own element, and adroit use. Comprehension of one’s truth allowed them to know their place in the universe they lived in. From there, one could begin to trace the path of protogenia. That’s where the road to Paragon began.

Lan Jue felt that if the Barber spent time pondering their battle, the benefit to his journey would be significant. As for the Barber, though he didn’t say anything it was clear the animosity from before was gone.

Lan Jue allowed his spear of lightning to dim and eventually vanish, as he descended back to other arena from overhead. He, too, was quiet for although he didn’t not learn so much as he suspected the Barber did, it was the first time he’d had a serious fight since the reduction in his

Discipline. He was remembering a lot of the nuances to the rank he'd long since forgotten.

The situations were very different, between now and when he'd achieved ninth level the first time. Now he had the comprehension of a peak-ranked Adept, and that made the details of the rank clearer. Like watching a movie a second time, subsequent viewing revealed secrets you'd missed before. It would certainly come in handy during the process of recovering his strength. A strong foundation would make the breakthrough to Paragon easier. Their brief but illuminating exchange has been good, and he could feel the tendrils of second rank within his grasp.

It had come to the end of the second round. The one thousand seven hundred challengers had been whittled down to half. Around eight hundred remained to test their mettle in the third round.

Beginning from this point on, their tournament field would be undergoing some changes. The next leg of the competition was still elimination rounds, but the arenas were a sight larger. Fewer adepts would compete per batch to accommodate. The audience won by getting a better view of the action, whereas the Adepts now had more space to really let their powers flourish.

Lan Jue left the tournament grounds with the other competitors. Zhou Qianlin was waiting for him.

In terms of means of communication, Qianlin and Lan Jue certainly were not lacking. Through their blood bond, and the Soul Caller stone there was no need to call out. Once they were within a certain distance they could sense precisely where the other was.

"Alright, let's head back," he greeted. He took her by the hand and turned to go. He was in somewhat of a rush, with the looming promise of a breakthrough on the horizon.

What he didn't see was the Pharmacist, standing a few feet away. Jun'er clutched her mother's hand, and stared sightlessly in to the crowd. Luckily she didn't have her helmet on. Her mother had a look of disappointment behind her eyes. Then, as though remembering something, she gently

shook her head.

“Mommy, where’s daddy?” The little one turned her face up toward her mother.

She answered with a smile. You could hear in someone’s voice if they were smiling. “Daddy’s busy sweet heart. He’ll come back when he’s finished.”

“Do you think daddy will be upset if I use the helmet big Uncle gave her?” She asked, with a note of worry in her little voice.

Now the Pharmacist’s face bore a full, warm smile. “Of course not, dear. The helmet big uncle gave you is even better than your old one. It won’t hurt you as easily as the last one might. When daddy hears about it, he’ll be very happy.”

The helmet – brand new and top of the line, had been the Terminator’s gift to little Jun’er. He’d had it tailor-made with nothing but the best technology the North had on offer. Of course, nothing but the best would be provided to the Paragon’s request. Not only did it offer better quality, but it also was less likely to cause damage.

When they got back to the hotel, Lan Jue turned to Zhou Qianlin. There was an inquisitive look in his eye.

Chapter 402: Hades' Hospitality

Although Qianlin suspected something was going on, she didn't immediately ask about it. Her face reddened as she bit her lower lip.

Part of Lan Jue's insistence was for her benefit. He could have broken through the barrier to rank two alone, but wanted Qianlin to experience it as well. Differences in how quickly two people climb the ranks lie in how quickly they could strengthen their energy.

Adepts beneath the rank of ninth level ninth rank could envelope two people. Although Lan Jue couldn't directly improve her Discipline, he could help to strengthen her body. A strong temple was important for a strong Discipline.

The speed and strength of their combined powers was strong when they melded together – right to the peak of ninth level. He went rigid as the energy struck him like a flood, with shimmering electric purple light exuding from his pores. The pulses of energy evaporated his own clothing. This happened a total of three times before Lan Jue broke through completely to second rank.

Even though he and Qianlin were at the peak of ninth rank level when joined, he could still feel that their total power had increased somewhat since the last time. Their Disciplines were more vivacious.

It was important to remember that the peak of ninth level wasn't a point, so much as it was a plateau. When an Adept's power reached a certain point, there they would remain until they discovered the Path to Paragon. It was similar to the discrepancies in hand speed among God pilots. Any pilot with a hand speed over forty was considered God-ranked, but they were practically children compared to God pilots with hand speeds in the eighties.

Naturally, there were also differences among Adepts when they got to such lofty heights of power. The vast majority of peak-level Adepts remained there for their entire lives, never able to comprehend the secrets of protogenia. This was the strength of a solid foundation and unceasing

cultivation.

While the situation he was in wasn't ideal, Lan Jue didn't begrudge Bize her actions. By now he understood the reasons, and understood that in the end it had been the clairvoyant's idea. He suspected that everything he'd experienced since encountering Bize had been carefully arranged by the former Avenue leader. Even down to her taking their 'altruistic blood', and the change in powers it produced.

Having to go over ranks you've passed before certainly seemed on the surface to be a monumental waste of time and effort. The advantages came later, when the Adept reached his peak. With the benefit of a strong foundation, breaking through to Paragon would be much easier.

It only went to show how precise and pervasive the clairvoyant had been. The deeper he went down the rabbit hole, the more he saw the old man's gentle touch.

When it came to the Clairvoyant, Lan Jue was thankful for the old man's guidance. But he was also terrified. It felt like every step he took the Clairvoyant was watching. Although he didn't know how powerful the old man was in a fight, but his powers of prediction and control alone made him terrifying even compared to someone like the Terminator.

He remembered that his old teacher had been loathe to speak of other Paragons, but the Clairvoyant was mentioned on more than one occasion. He even recalled notes of admiration in the crotchety man's voice.

Everything was trending toward improvement. A year, that's how long it would take at his current pace to get back to where he was before the Bize incident. He won't be back where he started, however – he'll be in a much stronger position for future growth, at the very least. In three years, he'd probably reach the peak of ninth level. This was a speed comparable to his brother's, though not quite as fast.

The thought made him laugh. He wanted to be better than his brother, but of course it wouldn't be an overnight thing. He couldn't even remember how many times Lan Qing beat him when they were young.

The Dark Citadel's coterie had been set up in the Nice Hotel, a famous Western chain that spanned the Alliance. It wasn't as expansive as the Intercontinental where he stayed, but it had an 'old-world luxury' charm.

Lina sat in the hotel bathroom, sulking. Her hope had been to gain some attention during this tournament – to be noted. Her Discipline wasn't overly strong yet, but she was a third rank ninth level Adept at twenty-four years old. The jump to fourth rank was very close as well. Among the denizens of the Dark Citadel, she showed the most promise. Most importantly, it was all natural. She hadn't used any genetica potions or bionic installations to get where she was.

It hadn't only been Dracula watching her performance. With her tremendous talent, Satan was watching, too. He was, after all, on the look-out for a successor. He'd praised her on more than one occasion, and even gifted her several items to help with her cultivation.

But who could have imagined! Only the second round, and she runs in to that hateful playboy. Her loss had been as bitter as it had been unexpected. That was not to say she didn't know a fair amount about Chu Cheng and the contentious relationship his family had with Satan's.

The Lord of the Underworld and the Prince of Devils had always been at odds, regardless of who held the title. It was an interesting balance of power, where no one side could completely destroy the other. Both were Paragon-level Talents, perennial leaders of the world of darkness. So, their struggle continued through the generations.

Ever since the interstellar migration of humanity, the darker side of the Adept world had been growing strained. Darkness simply wasn't the prevalent force. This was not just shown by the presence of the Pontiff and his people, but the structures of government as well. If Satan ever had any plans to subjugate the West to his bidding, the path would be long and nearly impossible.

The result effected certain groups more than others. Vampires, for instance, could only drink the blood of animals and not humans. This contention, however, was what the world of darkness believed was

necessary to obtain strength. Even inheritors needed to prove themselves, and this was why neither Hades nor Satan would ever be wiped from memory. Satan's plan was to strengthen his lead and expel his enemies, not obliterate them.

"Bastard!" Lina raised her hand as though to hit something, but let her arm drop a moment later. Thinking about her loss was difficult, especially how it happened. The wretch had even dared to chain her down! When she'd been released, she couldn't help but take that cheap shot. She had to restrain herself from trying to tear him limb from limb.

Ding-dong. The doorbell interrupted her angry internal discourse.

"Who is it!" She asked impatiently.

"Room service," a voice from outside explained.

Lina rose and, with a frown, pulled open the door to her room. "I didn't order any room service."

She saw the man with the tray, but his face was covered by it. The tray's contents were also concealed by the large metal cover.

"People are iron, and iron becomes steel. You can only do that if you eat – even when you lose. Otherwise it'll start to affect your growth!" The man allowed the tray to drop, revealing his grinning face.

At first, Lina didn't know how to respond but then her anger swelled. It was the man from the tournament! He closed the gap between them, brandishing the tray. A blast of hot air struck her as the cover was removed.

As an Adept of some power, her reaction time was good. She took a step back, almost instinctually, as the hot air caressed her face. It wasn't until after her initial defensive reaction that she smelled the mouth-watering fragrance.

Chu Cheng sauntered in to her room and closed the door with the tip of his foot.

"Get out of here! Who said you could come in?!" Lina was starting to get

her senses back, but not before the guy had brazenly sauntered in to her room.

Chu Cheng, with helpless expression, placed the tray down on a nearby end table. The contents were revealed to be a salad and a couple steaks.

“Two t-bone steaks, medium, with Angus steak sauce and a Caesar salad. Ah right, and this.” With a theatrical wave of his hand, Chu Cheng produced a bottle of champagne and two fluted glasses seemingly from nowhere. He set them up beside the tray.

“I know you’re upset because of your loss today. For me at least, good food is the best comfort. If it’s that important to you, I’ll report to the judges and surrender. You’ll be able to take my spot and continue up the ladder. What do you think?” Chu Cheng asked with a smile.

“Who needs your charity,” she spat. Her words didn’t match her emotions, though, as the anger she felt was slowly beginning to subside.

The red-haired young man pulled out a chair for her to sit, in an old-world gentlemanly style. “You should eat, the food is starting to get cold. We can talk while we eat, alright? If at any point you don’t want to continue, I’ll get up and leave.”

The savory scents of the steak had already filled the apartment. He was right – in her anger, Lina had forgotten lunch. It hadn’t bothered her before, but the food was here in front of her now and her stomach had begun to grumble in response.

With a cold sniff, she plopped down on to the chair.

Chu Cheng elegantly moved to the side of the table, where he effortlessly popped open the bottle of champagne. Pop! The cork flew free from the bottle, but instead of tearing through the air Chu Cheng caught it in his fist. Holding the bottle by its bottom, he filled the two glasses. The happy fizz of the alcohol dispelled some of the chilly atmosphere.

“I have a friend who tells me that champagne is the only drink appropriate for singers,” Chu Cheng began. “He says it’s filled with the sound of music. There’s something about it that immediately puts people

in a better mood, and helps them forget their troubles.”

As he spoke, Chu Cheng handed one of the slender glasses to Lina. He smiled disarmingly, and tapped the crystal glass to hers. Ting! Came the pleasant sound.

Chu Cheng took a small sip, then put the glass back down on the table. He gathered up a napkin and silverware from the tray, then handed them to Lina before getting his own.

“It’s my pleasure to dine with such a beautiful woman, thank you.” He said.

Lina replied by sipping her champagne, then tearing in to the steak without another word.

Chapter 403: How Could You Be So Shameless?

Chu Cheng served her as a gentleman might. Lina Lee continued to hold her hold.

Sumptuous steaks were a treat for vampires. There was blood, but not a lot. Adepts in general had mighty appetites, and t-bone steaks were a fine remedy.

Due to the universal appeal of T-bone steaks, Chu Cheng did not sit idly by. He was never one to waste.

The bottle of champagne quickly vanished between the two of them. Lina's eyes had brightened, though Chu Cheng couldn't tell if it was the alcohol or the food. Her pale face now had a healthy pink glow, making her stunning beauty even more apparent.

"Hey." It was the first word she'd spoken since they started eating.

"Hm?" Chu Cheng gave her what he fancied was his most charming smile. He looked at her questioningly.

She looked back at him with her head canted to the side, an odd expression on her face. "I want to ask you something."

"Please," he said, "I'm an open book."

Genuine curiosity played on her pretty features as she leaned closer across the table. She fixed his eyes with her own. "I really want know... how you could be so shameless!"

The young gentleman's face froze, but for a tick at the corner of his mouth. "You're, ehm, direct. I'm, uh... at a loss for words."

She frowned at him admonishingly. "Loss for words. You have fewer scruples than a thieving leper 1. Don't be coy, I know your game."

Chu Cheng's face relaxed in to a lopsided grin. He looked at her with a raised brow. "Fine – you're right. I am shameless. But tell me, how much is pride worth per pound, hm? I have a good friend, Lan Jue. He said, 'A man

who does not feed his pride is invincible.’ This is true in pursuing women – you must be shameless. Either you succeed or you don’t, so to me there’s always a fifty-fifty shot. And for a woman as amazing as you, the chance to live that life is worth my pride. Tell you what, give me a chance. We’ll just chat, straight up. What do you think?”

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Lan Jue, having just broken through to the next rank, sneezed suddenly.
2 He furrowed his brow, and rubbed his nose.

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Lina’s gave him a flat stare. “Who knows how many women you’ve fed that line to. None of it is going to work on me. You playboys are slime, I can’t think of anyone I hate more. I could see you were trash from the moment I laid eyes on you. You’re a pig³, now get out.”

As she spoke, she got up and waved him toward the door like a fly.

Chu Cheng looked to her clean plate, then to her frigid expression. With helpless expression he rose to his feet. Though his face bore a forlorn expression, he said nothing. He set about carefully piling the dirty dishes and napkins back on to the tray and even wiped the table down. He set the lid back on the tray, took it up, and finally walked to the door.

As he passed her, Chu Cheng offered a slight nod. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you.” With that said, he walked around Lina and left without looking back.

A sudden and inexplicable chill raced through her as she watched him leave. This cheeky shit, she thought. Shouldn’t he be a sticky sleeze like all the others? Instead he left without any fuss. Almost as though he really didn’t have any ill-intent.

Those steaks had been delicious. And juicy. After she shut the door, Lina realized the anger that’d burned at her was gone.

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The last two days of competitions was the most watched stream in all

the Great Alliances. Each round, each match left an impression on the audience.

After the fights were finished, analysts looked over the fights and hand-picked which ones to rebroadcast. Several were already emerging as classics, with views in the millions almost right away. Surprisingly Lan Jue's fight with the Barber was not the most viewed, but in fact was Chu Cheng's.

In terms of valuable content for Adepts, the Lan Jue's fight was full of excellent footage. The common viewer, however, sought drama. A fight between a man and a woman never failed to draw eyes, especially when the woman looked like Lina. The drama of her hidden appearance, then Chu Cheng forcing her to reveal her gorgeous frame and figure – it was so perfectly watchable as to be almost scripted.

Chu Cheng was also a draw, representing the North and the Great Conclave. As he'd been unfortunately reminded by his run-in with the robot earlier, there was no shortage of screens trained on him.

It didn't take long for the sweeping banners of their faces to be plastered all over the web. There were conversations about other fighters, pictures as well, and they rose and fell in popularity too. With so much to see, the adoration of the crowd was fickle and hard earned.

However, when the tournament organizers took this opportunity to have the crowd pick their favorite losers, Lina was one. The other was the Barber, who unfortunately fell second to the vampire heiress.

She was a true femme fatale.

Lina was stunned by the news. To lose so badly, but be voted back in by the people was completely outside of her expectations. It was a very pleasant surprise. The loathing she felt for Chu Cheng eased – just a little bit.

The competition entered its third day.

The original three thousand plus competitors had since been whittled down to a little over eight hundred. Lan Jue found the waiting area

considerably less stuffy.

Meanwhile, the tournament field was changing once again. One hundred arenas were reduced to fifty, and their breadth increased in kind. All the shields were reset to adjust for the changes.

Lan Jue needed no time to recover or adjust after breaking through to second rank since he'd done so already. He'd spent his night playing with Jun'er until she fell asleep, then returned to Qianlin and continued their cultivation.

A few snobbish Adepts wandered the waiting area loudly boasting, but most competitors concealed their excitement behind a calm face. Most were quite pleased with themselves having already earned fine rewards. For each round they climbed, things would only get more extravagant.

Lan Jue stood by himself in a corner, silently hoping his luck would change before they drew opponents. His last two encounters were far more difficult than they should have been if one considered the odds. But even if he did run in to someone his own strength, he always had an ace up his sleeve.

Lan Jue was no longer escaping attention either. So far, his fight with the Barber was the second most-watched recording in the net. Expert commenters were lauding it as very educational. Many already begun to suspect the masked man was the Divine Monarch – Zeus.

A great deal of Zeus' fame was due to Thor. He was a famed pilot, but no one had ever seen him in contest as an Adept alone, without his storied mecha. It was for this reason his fight was second only to the crowd-pleasing Chu Cheng battle.

There were others, of course, who had already captured the imaginations of the crowd, though they were not yet so flashy. Among them were powerful as a thunderbolt Pharmacist, the seemingly invincible Constantine, and the strikingly beautiful Sarel.

The decision to restrict competitors to forty or below proved inspired. These young figured quickly became heroes in the eyes of the audience, and especially for the youth. It seemed evident the experience of these

games would resonate in the lives of generations to come.

The viewer numbers continued to climb as the tournament continued. So far, they still hadn't reached the vaulted heights enjoyed by the Star Alliance and Divine Monarch fight, it was important to remember that these were still the preliminaries. When it came time for the finals, things would be drastically different.

Lan Jue was told all about the Terminator and Jun'er. He found it quite funny. The enormous man, feared for his power, was a giant teddy bear to a little blind girl.

And calling him Uncle, like those two were anywhere near the same generation? Hilarious!

Hilarious, but only very quietly. Making his mirth known to the Terminator would be asking for a very complete and painful demise.

"Selection has begun." Once more, the tournament system began assigning opponents. Eight hundred faces appeared in the sky over the arenas and began to arrange themselves in pairs.

Silent prayers filled the hearts of the Adepts. Now that they were coming closer to the semi-finals, they knew most of the weaker competitors had already been eliminated. Chances were the person they faced next would be a true challenge, nothing less than eighth rank.

Lan Jue watched calmly from his corner. He didn't want to face a powerhouse, but if he did than so be it. He didn't mind much leaving the ranking lower than expected. He'd come mostly just to participate, hoping for no higher than the semi-finals. Already it was proving to have a very positive effect on his cultivation.

As if to spite him, Lan Jue saw his opponent. Now with so few competitors, the portraits above were much larger. Such strange luck he had, when things went well they went great, but when things went bad... well, you fought Lina.

He couldn't believe it. He'd watched the fight between Chu Cheng and Lina, and it was quite illuminating. Although Chu Cheng had won, he'd

had to show some real muscle to do it. Lina was a third rank, but her dual Disciplines made her a double threat.

Chapter 404: Zeus vs. Lina

Lan Jue was in trouble. Even returning to second rank wasn't going to assure him of anything against Lina. Winning this fight would not be an easy thing.

His opponents were getting stronger one after the other! At this rate he'll be fighting Constantine next. He fault like he wanted to cry but couldn't shed a tear. Well, if this was to be the way, then this was the way.

At some point Chu Cheng had slithered near unnoticed. He didn't fear speaking openly with Lan Jue. Most people – especially in the North – knew that Chu Cheng was Hades of the Divine Monarchs.

“That's some stellar luck there, brother! You've got my woman!” He clapped a hand on to Lan Jue's shoulder.

“Your woman' already, eh?” He gave Chu Cheng a skeptical look behind the mask.

The red-haired scoundrel chuckled. “Hey I learned from the best, am I right? Victory was easily won. Now I'm telling you, if you hurt her I will write you off for the rest of our lives. That woman is your future sister-in-law.”

Lan Jue snorted. “Do you think if my sisters-in-law and I linked hands we could make a circle all the way around the field?”

“I had no idea Big Brother was so popular with the ladies,” Chu Cheng cooed.

Lan Jue looked like he wanted to vomit. “How could you be so shameless.”

Chu Cheng gave an irritated sniff. “Lina asked me the same thing yesterday. What's the point? Pride isn't something a woman can hold, something to comfort her. Look at Big Brother. Anyway, you better be careful. Don't hurt her.”

“Hell, then how about you ask her to go easy on me,” Lan Jue lamented.

Chu Cheng looked like he was choking. “And you aren’t shameless? A Divine Monarch even I have trouble trouncing sometimes and you’re asking for protection from a woman? No courage, man. I’m ashamed to call you brother.”

“Ugh,” Chu Cheng squared his shoulders. “Now get ready, you’re early, right?”

Indeed. Lan Jue and Lina were in with the first batch. Their time in the spotlight was nearing.

Chu Cheng’s face split in to a sinister smile as he watched his brother-in-arms leave for the arenas. He wasn’t an idiot – he knew Lan Jue’s Discipline had taken a hit. How much, he wasn’t sure, but he’d seen Lan Jue’s last fight. He looked like a match for Lina.

Kick some ass, girl. Spank the crap outta this guy. Chu Cheng had no trouble cheering for his compatriot’s opponent when she was a beautiful vampire princess.

Lan Jue and Lina stepped in to opposite sides of the arena at the same moment. Dracula’s heiress was not covered in the thick black coat from the day before. Today, her full figure was on display with a form-fitting cat suit. Her dark red hair fluttered at her back, flailing like tendrils of fire behind her cold face. Her sharp eyes were pinned to him, like a predator eying its prey.

Lan Jue gave her the slightest nod of acknowledgement.

In appearances, no one of the Divine Monarchs could come close to Hua Li’s famed good looks. Lan Qing and Lan Jue looked similar – as brothers do – though the elder sibling had a much less hospitable face. He was like a robot, programmed to be as grim as a paranoid android and that meant the exciting element of chaos wasn’t part of his charm. Lan Jue had the grace of a gentleman, with fine looks and temperament. He wasn’t as handsome as Hua Li, but his heroic façade earned some heated looks.

Chu Cheng and his brothers had their differences, but he wasn’t counted any less. In terms of looks he was considered right there with Lan Jue and Lan Qing. His appeal came in uncertainty and juxtaposition.

Although he was a descendant of Hades, he was a fiery and manly youth. That was, until he employed the Hades power, which was gloomy and cold. He was the proverbial wild card.

Lina Lee couldn't see the small smile behind Lan Jue's mask, but she returned his greeting with a nod of her own.

"Three, two, one. Begin!" The familiar buzzer rang, and another round of fights began.

Once more Lina was the first to react. This time, however, she didn't choose the high ground. Instead she raced along the ground at incredible speed, appearing a short distance from Lan Jue in the blink of an eye. She waved her hands through the air. Time seemed to stutter, and cracks appeared in reality all around Lan Jue.

He couldn't afford to be careless against someone so close to his own power. Like him, she also had two Disciplines so it was not an advantage he could depend on. He still had the advantage of experience, though, both in combat and in Discipline mastery.

Dazzling flashes of purple preceded the flashes of Lightning that tore through the air around Lan Jue. It was a forest of terrible lightning that consumed everything in ten meters around him. A Forest of Lightning, on a small scale!

Lightning's explosive power was hard to contest, and under the thunderous assault Lina's advance failed. She skidded to a stop when she saw her interdimensional tears dissolving away.

The Vampire Princess reacted. It was clear she had absorbed the lessons of her last fight with Chu Cheng, for once again her shadow blade appeared and she joined with it. In the face of his Forest of Lightning she did not flee, but as the weapon of shadow pierced right in to its center. A hazy aura of black was the only thing protecting her from the chaotic storm. Where the blade went, a trail of darkness followed, and in its inky wake time rippled like water. Before long an odd and unsettling bubble had begun to form around her. Like a surgical strike, the shadow blade pierced straight through, right toward Lan Jue.

What the... So aggressive.

Lan Jue hadn't expected her to pull out such a strong counter attack right away. In the time it took for his face to fall in to a scowl, he had retreated to give himself some room. Almost instinctually, his hands sprang up and bolts of lightning congealed between them. Lan Jue leaned to the side and brought up the newly-formed spear of lightning to deflect the shadow blade away.

Out in the bleachers, Qianlin carefully watched the battle from a good seat. She had been surprised to discover Lina Le would be Lan Jue's next opponent. It was fortuitous, because the two of them had discussed her fight with Chu Cheng the day before. They carefully analyzed her style, Disciplines and weaknesses.

Who would have thought he'd have such sour luck! Yet here she was, a powerhouse... but not invincible.

Qianlin wrung her hands as she watched. This was the first time she was really feeling regret. She blamed herself for Lan Jue's drop from seventh to second rank. If he were at his true level of power, this woman would be no problem. But now...

Bang! Sparks flew and the black blade and shimmering spear met. Lina had him on the defensive, and was mitigating her power. Lan Jue, meanwhile, was simply trying to maintain. She had the upper hand.

He stumbled back with a gasp. The spear in his hand had dimmed, and was growing darker still as a strange, infectious darkness consumed it.

Both of their weapons were the result of condensed Discipline power. His weakness allowed her power to infect his own – another indication of his poor prognosis. The front of his spear turned black and fell away.

Lina hung in the air for half a moment before plunging back toward her foe. The air filled with the thick scent of blood, a distraction that occurred just as the shadow blade vanished from view. Lan Jue felt his back tighten – in the same moment that impossibly sharp blade of shadow appeared behind him.

For a split second the audience saw two Linas; one in front of her opponent, and one behind. They came at Lan Jue from two angles, cutting a deadly cross with him in the middle.

Chu Cheng wasn't among the first batch of contestants, so he carefully watched the battle from the sidelines. He winced as he watched the scene unfold. "Ferocious," he muttered appreciably.

Despite the violence of her assault, the strike would not land. She cut right through him like paper, before his image shimmered and vanished.

An electric clone, to get him out of that tight spot. He appeared away from her pincer trap, safely across the field. Spots of golden light grew in his palms, then exploded toward the two Lina images.

The two vampire princesses melded in to one, and the shadow blade slowly pushed itself out from inside her.

Ba-bang! Two deafening peals of thunder caused the arena's force shield to shudder. It was Lina's time to be on the back foot, because she had overestimated her abilities. She thought she could dodge, but obviously could not. The result was a bolt of lightning right to the gut that swallowed her up in a blast of electric light.

She felt all the energy inside her scatter, like a panicking crowd. She'd used an interdimensional shield to protect her from the blast at the last minute, but it still had an effect. She was quickly losing her lead.

Dodging the blasts individually was not a problem for Lina. Lan Jue's genius was in positioning; he'd used the blast to isolate her means of approach, so that she had no choice. She could dodge but that would give Lan Jue the space and time he needed to press the attack. She went for the most direct approach, and suffered for it.

Lan Jue blasted forth a third ray of electricity. This one looked thicker and more robust than the first pair. He then leaped to the side, rushing for the far end of their arena and putting more distance between himself and the vampire.

"Well are you a man or aren't you?! What are you running from!" Lina

hollered after him. The offended Lan Jue sobbed inwardly at the injustice. She certainly shared Chu Cheng's biting commentary.

Although Lan Jue bemoaned the curse, he was not still. His electric spear was back and strong as ever. He turned to face her, and instantly his persona changed.

The calm, almost gentle aura he emitted was gone, replaced with a berserker rage. The roiling bolts around him flashes and began to shimmering with golden light. His majestic appearance was so strong as to cause Lina to stop in her tracks. She dodged his third blast, but did not approach further.

This aura... Disgusting! Lina's eyes narrowed in loathing as she stared at her foe.

Lightning – especially yang-lightning – was a manifestation of Upright Qi 1. It was anathema to the yin-evils of the darker Disciplines. Unfortunately for Lina, that was precisely what category her powers fell in to. In that way, his Discipline was already a restraining force on hers.

Lina, though, was also possessed of expansive combat experience. She knew that the fight would be more difficult against someone whose Discipline counters hers. She also knew how to react.

Chapter 405: Experience Prevails

The dark aura dispersed like a fog before hurricane winds. The shadow blade in her hand also changed, becoming a thin silvery rapier. The whole of her actually seemed transcendental, sort of separate. The oppressive threat of her aura was missing.

Darkness turning to dimensional Discipline!

A knowing smirk spread across Lan Jue's face, hidden by the mask. Things were turning out just like he'd hoped.

He thrust forward with his spear, but slow enough to make the motion obvious. Shimmering electric light converged on the tip of his spear. It was taken from all around, gathered from out of thin air. When enough of it had come together, a massive dragon of writhing lightning exploded toward the Vampire Princess. The golden lightning serpent seemed to roar as it burned through the air.

Even just the pulse of energy released by the strike felt staggering powerful. The air around him warped and shimmered. The figure of Lan Jue vanished as it was consumed by the lightning dragon.

Lan Jue was very familiar with Dimensional Disciplines, thanks in part to his time with the Wine Master. The difference in power between the Paragon and Dracula's heir was too wide to calculate, which allowed Lan Jue to unravel some of her peculiarities. Any bit of information was valuable in such a fight.

Lina had begun the fight with joining her two Disciplines together, resulting in a finely honed offense for him to contend with. Luckily for him the process took time, and she was just beginning to understand how the two fit together. In this way Lan Jue was much further ahead than she was.

He was starting to come up with a plan.

Lina began to furiously wave her rapier. Each swing came with a tearing whistle that pierced the air. A hundred thousand tiny tears appears

around her as the blade split reality in its wake. The lightning dragon smashed in to her hazy shield , resulting in a teeth-rattling explosion.

In the midst of that fiery abyss, she could see him. Lan Jue's outline was visible against the fires and electric light, but was moving before she could react. He was airborne again, but only until he changed in to a bolt of golden lightning. With a crack of thunder, he launched himself directly at Lina.

Boom! Lina staggered backward a few steps, and Lan Jue reeled backward. His retreat shifted effortlessly back in to a charge. He needed no time before racing right back toward his foe.

He's so fast! Lina was fast, too, but found herself struggling. Although she was able to ward off his attacks as they came, each one wore her down by degrees. She was starting to fall behind.

Chu Cheng – watching from the sidelines – smirking in spite of himself. “Audacious,” he said in appreciation.

Lan Jue's strategy was simple and direct; play his strengths against her weaknesses.

Despite Lan Jue's drop in actual power, he still had the benefit of knowledge. His mastery of the lightning and thunderbolt dual Disciplines was well beyond other Adepts of this rank. This included Lina, and her Shadow-Dimensional Disciplines.

When considering just pairing, shadow and dimensional powers were stronger than lightning and thunderbolt. However, all of them were the peak of pure elemental power.

But this revealed another problem. The Disciplines were too strong. Individually they were prosperous and worked alone. There was no correlation between her two powers, which made finding a way to merge them effectively a difficult and lengthy process – maybe even impossible. Lina wasn't there yet. This wasn't a joining of her powers she used now, instead they operated in unison.

In this regard Lan Jue was leaps and bounds ahead of Dracula's

daughter. Lightning and thunder were natural allies making their merger much easier. Along with his experience, it gave him an edge.

The strategy he was using now required his two Disciplines to be joined. Lightning's speed and thunder's explosive power – together called Thunderbolt.

This had been the Driver's tactic as well. Lightning first, accompanied by Thunder. Together there was impact force, explosiveness, and kinetic lethality. The three traits made Thunderbolt a destructive force that was hard to match.

Lina was experiencing the totality of what that meant just that moment. In a rush she'd allowed her control to slip and her interdimensional powers took over. There was no chance of merging them now. Under constant assault from Lan Jue's speed-of-light attack she retreated, step by step. Every second drained her, and took away any chance of fighting back.

Lightning was the fastest human-based Discipline there was. That was underscored by the unending, torrential rush of Lan Jue's attack.

Spectators saw the arena become enveloped in golden light. Lan Jue was gone, but the dramatic figure of Lina was cut against the column of golden lightning. She valiantly swiped and slashed, but was still retreating. It looked as though she were nearing the borders of their ring.

"You want a fight?!" Lina roared and bit her tongue, filling her mouth with blood. She spat, leaving a vibrant red streak against the silver light of her sword. Instantly, the weapon burst in to crimson fire. She bore her burning weapon high overhead, and the tournament field was suddenly flooded with an aura of defiant strength. With the whole of her powers behind her, Lina pushed back.

The world around them became a nightmarish world of blood red. Horrific, ripping waves of energy were so strong they warped reality around them. Through the bloody haze, an arcing boomerang of intermingled shadow-dimensional power screamed his way.

It aimed to cut directly through the golden ray, but the ray changed, ever so slightly. Its trajectory shifted just a few centimeters – enough to allow a

single, slender bolt to slither passed.

Lina was exhausted. Her last-ditch effort had failed. Her grim face was starkly lit by golden light as Lan Jue's attacks overwhelmed her. The ring was consumed by a booming explosion.

"Winner: 315."

Lan Jue stood on the field, his clothes sticky with sweat. If only she knew! If Lina hadn't had gone off half-cocked like she did, there was a good chance she could have won. It would have even left a mark. That final blast of power was lethal. The ancient power of blood joined with Discipline... she didn't want to win, she wanted to kill him! If that had landed even years of bed rest wouldn't have seen a full recovery. Determination was putting it lightly!

Lina lay on the floor, drained. His parting gift had been that final bolt of lightning, which leached away what remained of her exhausted Discipline. She got to her feet, but just barely. She fixed Lan Jue with a murderous glare, then on shaky legs, turned and left.

Lan Jue rubbed his mask. Damn, what did I do to earn that kind of hatred? If looks could kill...

What he didn't know was the emotional state Chu Cheng had put her in. She was confused, angry, embarrassed. This masked man couldn't know how hard it was for her to show up today and compete. He definitely didn't know her secret desire to face Chu Cheng again. Her dreams of redeeming herself by humiliating Chu Cheng were dashed by this stranger. He'd stolen revenge from her.

Lan Jue had no idea. Chu Cheng, though, had an inkling.

Hade's descendant trotted after Lina. It was fine, he assured himself, since his fight wasn't until later. He couldn't give up an opportunity like this.

"Lina... are you alright?" He swept around her to block her path.

"None of your business." Lina slapped his hand away and walked on.

It wasn't hard for Chu Cheng to see the bright red streak of blood on her pale face. He wanted to say something but she didn't give him the opportunity. He could only follow.

They proceeded to the exit of the arena, where Lina slipped out through a gate. Chu Cheng attempted to follow, but was blocked by a robot attendant. "Competitors who leave the arena grounds will forfeit their match!"

Chu Cheng froze in his tracks. Lina looked back just long enough to shoot him a glare full of loathing before stomping off.

A few steps later she heard something from behind her.

"I forfeit."

Lina suddenly felt like her body was very light, as though a gust of wind could blow her away. There was a yelp of surprise, then a pair of strong arms were holding her up by her waist. She looked over to see Chu Cheng's concerned and handsome face looking down at her.

Did he really forfeit?

Her wide eyes searched his for a minute before she blurted out, "Idiot! What are you thinking, giving up? You represent the Northern Alliance! You're as thick as alpaca manure!"

"It was for you," Chu Cheng answered. He smiled then said, "I guess being thick is worth it. The North has a bunch of other strong Adepts to take my place – they don't need me. You're hurt, let me take you home. The tournament doesn't matter."

With that, he took a long step across the boundaries of the sports arena.

Lina felt... complicated. She just watched the man give up his chance at fabulous riches, and at his power maybe even the top spot. He really didn't want all of that?

As they walked on, Chu Cheng began to relay a story. "Yesterday, after I left, I thought a lot about what you said. And you were right... I'm a shameless playboy. I've been with many women, and I've enjoyed every

moment. When I was with them I was happy, I loved them. When I was young I always yearned for that perfect, beautiful thing. I would accept nothing but the most beautiful woman. I tricked myself in to thinking it was charity. But as time went on I began to notice things. When the infatuation and excitement would invariably go, I could see that a beautiful face didn't always mean a beautiful soul."

"I was lost, but gradually I began to understand what I really wanted. Now I won't deny my love for beauty hasn't diminished – that exists in the hearts of all men. Still there needed to be more. I needed to see the goodness of them, the beauty of their heart and not just their bodies. Only that kind of woman could I ever love forever. I've experienced a lot... seen it all. Maybe tomorrow you'll leave and I'll never see you again. Maybe we'll get married in a whirlwind ceremony. Either way, that's tomorrow. It starts now, if you give me a chance. Let me get to know you, because I need someone to cause trouble with long term. My playboy days are over."

"But, I'm in the West," she stuttered, "and you're in the North. Then there is the little matter of our family's mutual hatred."

Chapter 406: Spoiled Goods

Chu Cheng laughed in surprise. “Before I’d have no way to answer your concern. Now, though, this isn’t a problem. You’re right – I am a descendant of the Hades bloodline. However my uncle had already broken through to Paragon. Eventually we’ll have someone to contend with Satan himself. If I get Paragon, then the prince of devils will not be leading the Dark Citadel for long. Your family has always followed strength, so our enmity isn’t with you – it’s with Satan and not his brood. There exist no conflict between our dark families, and I hope that if we should wrestle control from Satan, then Dracula will follow the Dark Citadel as he always has.”

Chu Cheng was certainly chasing a dream, whether it was what he said or simply to spend time with Lina was hard to say. Inwardly he chuckled – he may have lost the tournament, but it wasn’t for nothing.

Lina sniffed. “Anyway, I’m not interested in spoiled goods.”

“Spoiled.... Spoiled goods?” Chu Cheng looked at her with wide eyes. “You’re calling me defective?”

She smirked at him. Although she was clearly hurt and tired, the smile still bore a vibrant, devilish charm. “By your own admission you’ve had many women. How could something so thoroughly used not be broken down? I come from a noble house, and have no interest in poor quality. Let me go, I’ll walk myself home.”

Chu Cheng’s heart lurched. His heartfelt and protracted speech had been for nothing. It was like a slap to the face – this chick let it go in one ear and out the other! Not everything he’d said was a lie. In fact a good chunk of it was totally genuine. It didn’t have the desired effect, though.

“Never mind. Even if you aren’t interested the least I could do is send you home.” Chu Cheng sighed.

“Then can you take your hands off my ass?” She snarled back. “I don’t want to have to chop it off.”

“Heh.. ehm, habit. It’s a habit, my bad. I’m sorry.” The unfortunate truth was it really was his habit. The ultimate goal of putting his arms around a woman, presumably.

No wonder she wouldn’t give him a chance. Righteous words, sure, but idle hands...

Chu Cheng didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He reeled back like he was shocked. She wouldn’t have to worry about cutting her ass off if he cut these devil hands off, first.

Chu Cheng walked with her to the entrance of the Nice Hotel 1. He looked at her, full of sincerity. “I’m sorry to have caused you trouble. I promise I never had any ill intentions. I hope that the next time we meet, I’ll have bested Satan and gained control of the Dark Citadel. Maybe even we’re still unattached, we could give it another shot. Goodbye.”

With that said, Chu Cheng began the lonely walk back. He might have been an... amorous youth, but he didn’t mean any harm. The lady had clearly expressed her disinterest, and he wouldn’t press her. In this regard, he kept to a very strict moral code.

“Hey!” Lina’s sharp voice challenged from behind.

“Hm?” Chu Cheng stopped, and half turned to look back at her.

She looked at him for a moment. “I’m hungry, and I need to have these wounds looked at. Go get me something. There wasn’t any command in her voice, more like one would address an old acquaintance.

Chu Cheng’s eyes lit up. In his experience, half the battle was getting passed the door.

“Only because you gave up the tournament for me,” she quickly added. “That’s the only reason you get to hang around, right, so don’t get any ideas.”

Chu Cheng pressed his right hand to his breast, and delivered a very gallant bow. “It’s my honor,” he said with a smile.

Lan Jue saw Chu Cheng chase Lina out of the arena as he left the field. He saw his friend step out and forfeit with his own eyes. He caught Chu Dong's expression out of the corner of his eye. No doubt he knew what his son was up to.

Lan Jue wanted to help his friend, but that was out of the question. He was done, but the Pharmacist was still here. She waved at him as he left the ring. Lan Jue made his way over to where she stood, stopping a few feet away. There was nothing preventing contestants from watching other fighters from the sidelines.

"What up?" Lan Jue asked.

Frowning, the Pharmacist asked, "What's going on with your Discipline? Yesterday I thought that business with the Barber was on purpose, but from what I saw today I can't help but suspect something. Otherwise, you wouldn't have had such a hard time."

"No big deal," Lan Jue assured. "I did drop a few ranks, but we'll talk more about it later." It was important to remember that he was Zeus here. It wouldn't do for the famous ex-mercenary and Divine Monarch to be seen speaking at length with an Avenue woman. The Pharmacist recognized this as well, and said nothing further.

On the VIP platform.

The Terminator held Jun'er, and they both watched the fights from their overhead vantage. He explained events to her as they unfolded. To have a Paragon as a personal narrator was a blessing little Jun'er couldn't even begin to appreciate.

"That was an interesting fight, that one. The masked man is very smart, and has great control over his power. He wasn't as strong as the girl, but his use of Discipline was shrewd and ruthless. He never gave her a chance to catch her breath. At the end she managed that final gasp, but it was her relative inexperience that lost her the fight."

"Mmm, hmmm." Jun'er thoughtfully nodded her head as though carefully considering the giant man's words.

The Terminator continued through a bemused grin. “After all that all you have to say is ‘mm hmm’? Tell me, Jun’er... you’ve seen three days of the tournament. Who do you think will win?”

“Mmm, let me think,” she muttered. She shut her eyes tight and pondered.

The Terminator couldn’t keep the ghost of pity from showing on his face, just for a moment. What was the difference if she had her eyes opened or closed?

A moment later, however, his pity turned to shock. Jun’er was different as well.

As she closed her eyes, a small but distinct pulse of energy arose. It burst outward like a ripple on a lake. In its wake was a strange field of energy that looked... almost like a Paragon’s Domain.

For this little girl, with no perceivable Discipline, to reveal such a power was inconceivable. Domains were pure protogenia, so how was it possible this child could do it?

The little pocket dimension vanished as quick as it had come. Her eyes popped open, but she looked drawn.

“Hard to guess, but they were familiar... maybe mommy or daddy. That’s gunna be the winner.” Jun’er tittered as she ‘looked’ out over the field.

Chapter 407: Jun'er's Discipline

The Gourmet was just as taken aback by Jun'er's sudden change. The others were unaware – her brief power had been weak enough so that only he and the Terminator in the first row could see it.

Just like the Northern Paragon, the Gourmet's expression was strange. It matched the peculiar thought that tickled at his mind.

In a sweet voice, the Terminator spoke to the little girl. "Jun'er... can you see what's going to happen? If you really think hard, can you know what's in the future?"

Jun'er canted her head and thought. "I guess so. But I can't tell if it's real or not. I didn't used to, but it started ever since I started weapon daddy's helmet. Since I could see what was happening outside, maybe I could start seeing what was going to happen."

The Gourmet looked at the Terminator, his eyes sharp and full of unspoken meaning.

Jun'er, perhaps sensing something, snickered girlishly. "You don't need to be scared, Uncle Gourmet. Big Uncle wouldn't hurt me, he's a good man."

The Terminator heaved a sigh at her words before handing the child back to the Gourmet. He shook his head with a rueful chuckle. "The Avenue will be the Avenue, I suppose. As leader of the Conclave the last thing I want is for Skyfire to have another Eye of Tomorrow, but from a human perspective there is no better news. Especially since..." he trailed off.

The two old Paragons had exchanged only a couple words with the young girl, but it was clear to them her Discipline had awakened. She was an Adept with an amazing and rarely encountered gift of prediction – just like the Clairvoyant.

More importantly, Jun'er was only five or six. For her Discipline to awaken so early meant it was destined to be strong. With the Avenue's

help, it was certainly not unthinkable that little Jun'er would grow to become another Clairvoyant!

This was precisely the reason why the Gourmet was nervous. They were in Northern territory against an enemy they maintained a cold war with. The Terminator was staggeringly powerful and on home turf – there would be little chance the Gourmet could protect Jun'er if the big man really wanted to hurt her.

It was an irrational fear, though, as he well knew. The Terminator wouldn't hurt a small child, by virtue of his reputation alone.

The Gourmet was still agitated as he embrace Jun'er. There was a lot to consider. An awakened Discipline meant years of careful training and great expense of time and resources. However things might be different for the young seer, since the Clairvoyant was still alive in his state of suspension. With his help and guidance, it could save her untold amounts of effort. The Clairvoyant would be passing soon as well, and would need to find a new owner for the powerful Astrum he bore.

That was getting ahead of the situation, though. An Astrum had to resonate with an Adept's Discipline before it could be used properly. If that turned out to be true though, then this little girl's future was limitless. This instantly made her priceless to the Avenue.

The Gourmet struggled with the desire to bring her back to Skyfire immediately. For every day they delayed, the Clairvoyant could pass and all that potential wasted. The loss would be catastrophic.

The Vanguard could no longer pay attention to the splendid display of Discipline below. All of his thoughts were now on the small girl in his arms.

Jun'er somehow knew. She looked at the Gourmet, then to the Terminator. Her lips were pursed in admonition. "What's wrong with you two? You're acting weird."

The Terminator smiled at her. "It's because of what we saw you do. You can relax, Gourmet – we wouldn't dare do anything to the little one. When you leave I'll have a small contingent of ships lead you safely from the

system. We'll make sure Jun'er remains safe and happy. Humanity needs unity now, not conflict."

The Gourmet allowed himself a relieved sigh. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

The action continued below. The Pharmacist was part of the day's second batch, so it was her turn to enter the arena. Her opponent was no slouch, this time.

He was tall and stocky, and where he stood reality seemed to warp around him. He was like a black hole that drew in all, and it felt like things were collapsing around them.

"Absorption Discipline," she muttered.

Her foe gave her a thumbs-up. "Good eyes. They call me the One Who Eats the Sky. I'm looking forward to an illuminating fight."

"The One Who Eats the Stars? That's certainly a mouth full. Clearly we aren't afraid to boast." The Pharmacist's face was cold and hard. She'd learned from Lan Jue that the Star Alliance team had been led by the Clairvoyant. This man's name offended her.

"I suppose we'll see if it's a boast or not in a second," the man arrogantly replied.

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

The Pharmacist thrust out a hand, and a beam of golden light fired out. In this way she'd begun the same way as her last two fights. It was an attack like a blitzkrieg, full of force and grandeur. It made the whole arena shake.

The Star-Eater knew his opponent before they'd started, as all the competitors did. Knew, however, was used loosely. What he did not know – nor anyone for that matter – was what her Discipline actually was. The anxiety ate at him, and it made refining tactics difficult.

What he lacked in knowledge he made up for in self-confidence. His power had spiked ever since breaking through to ninth level first rank. His

Discipline was also uncommon, which threw a lot of his foes off.

He spread his hands, and between them a small black hole was birthed. The Pharmacist's screaming ray of light was swallowed right in to it and disappeared.

The One Who Eats the Sky grinned at the Pharmacist, and then he shoved his hands out with a grunt. At his action the hole grew, and with it the vacuum force that surrounded it.

The Pharmacist seemed mostly unfazed by the counter, except to curl her mouth down in a disdainful frown. She brought her hand up in a sweeping motion, and from within the black hole a light twinkled. Impossible as that was, the light grew until the hole split cleanly in two.

Chapter 408: The Future of Skyfire Avenue

The dramatically-named He Who Eats the Stars had sharp enough eyes to see what the Pharmacist had done. It had been a sort of dagger, dark gold and about seven inches long. Seven jewels were affixed to it, and they each glimmered with a strange light. The brightest was the first one, and with the dagger moving so quickly it almost looked like nothing more than a streak of light.

Right now, it was stopped in place about an inch from his nose. The air around him sizzled and a hundred thousand tiny daggers shimmered almost invisible in the air around him. He couldn't move, he could hardly breathe. Any wrong move and those daggers could fall.

He took gasping breathes, and in a quavering voice said, "I-I concede!"

The Pharmacist lifted her hand, and the golden dagger obediently returned to her grasp. She walked away from the arena without a word.

Another pair of eyes were carefully studying the fight. Constantine watched from the sidelines, quiet. As representative for the Pontiff's Citadel he'd been given an important task – win champion for the glory of the Pontiff.

The recent losses suffered by his compatriots lately was far too bitter, both in cost and reputation. The infiltration by Jue Di's apprentice had undermined their authority terribly. It was just the people of the Holy City who were grumbling, but skeptical tones were coming from the Western government as well.

Right now, the most important thing was to recover their standing among the Adept population. If he were able to come out with the crown, not only would the Pontiff look better but the earlier problems would quickly be forgotten. This was why his master made him come. He even let him bring the Spear of Fate. He knew his objective.

There weren't very many who could stand up to Constantine, as far as he

could tell. But the Pharmacist was one of them – probably the strongest of them.

He remembered the Pharmacist from when they met on the Avenue. She had left quite the impression. She looked so young, but commanded incredible power. The likely reason for that was evident by her abilities. She used skills passed down from Former Era China... skills that were most famously used by the second strongest Paragon alive, Celestial Master Qian.

Celestial Master Qian was the oldest known Paragon – he'd drawn breath for hundreds of years. Whether he was still alive was a matter of debate, but if he was that made him over four hundred.

Jue Di was considered strongest, but he and Celestial Master Qian had never really fought to see who was strongest. The reality was that no one really knew just how strong he was, many still thought that he was never second to begin with.

It was customary to remove a Paragon's name from the lists if they hadn't been heard from in over a hundred years. The cut-off was drawing near for Celestial Master Qian. If he didn't show himself within the next three years, then his name would be stricken from record.

Constantine was even more sure of his estimations once he saw the dagger. The Flying Daggers – was that not a skill old-time cultivators mastered? The story went that during a time of great prosperity for these hermits, their numbers swelled so high they could have swept across the world and taken it for their own. They were the strongest living beings on the planet. Jue Di was said to come from Former Era China, too. The Taiji skills he employed were likewise remnants from that time.

If he was right, then this was going to be a tricky fight. He wasn't scared of her, especially not with the Spear of Fate. If the two of them ended up on the same field, it would be a toss-up who came out the victor, from what he could see. They'd have to see when they got there.

He did have to be careful, though. His people were already in trouble with one of Jue Di's Disciples. He wouldn't want to provoke one of

Celestial Master Qian's. That would prove messy. The Pontiff was strong, but even he couldn't win a war on a dozen fronts. The most important thing for him was to find a way to deal with the situation, otherwise the Pontiff would never know peace.

But not now. Now he had a job to do. The thoughts that troubled him passed away as he focused on the present. The first thing was to make the Citadel's name mean something again.

The Pharmacist walked away without any word or action. There was no honor in boasting over the defeat of a first rank contender. Like any other fight, she made her way back up to the VIP viewing platform to retrieve Jun'er.

When she saw her daughter in the Gourmet's arms, instead of with the Terminator like the last few days, she knew something wasn't right. Her eyes hardened.

The Gourmet, seeing the look in her eye, immediately shook his head to warn her off. Nothing's wrong, the motion said, relax. And she did as she walked to the Gourmet's side and took her little one back.

"Thank you so much, Your Majesties, for looking after her." She bowed politely to the two Paragons.

The Terminator smiled at her. "You have quite the extraordinary daughter!"

"Huh?" She didn't understand. Perhaps he was joking? "You're too kind, Your Majesty."

The Gourmet rose to his feet. "I'll explain later," he said. "Your Majesty, we'll be heading back first." He shot the Pharmacist a dire look then motioned for them to go. He followed behind protectively.

The Gourmet had a lot on his plate, and found it difficult to think of much else. Jun'er predictive powers were very important for the Avenue, and word had to be sent back right away. A reliable method had to be sought to bring the little one safely back. He also had to let the Clairvoyant know – he would tell them what to do about her future

lineage.

The Terminator didn't stop them, or make any effort to complicate things. If he were in their position he would do the same thing. The reason the gourmet hadn't left upon immediately discovering her abilities was because the Pharmacist was still fighting. Now that her day was done, they had work to do.

Behind them, Lucifer and Metatron watched . They hadn't seen what happened, but they knew something was going on. What would make the Gourmet take Jun'er back all of a sudden? What would make them so quick to leave? It was incredibly disrespectful to their host, the Terminator. However the Paragon didn't seem bothered by it. Curiouser and curiouser, they thought – could the East and North be this close?

By the time the three Avenue denizens left the sports arena, Lan Jue was waiting for them. He had already changed his clothes, and removed his mask. Qianlin remained inside to watch the fights, so as not to confuse or trouble Jun'er. It was very good for her to watch these powerful Adepts compete, since she'd just started to study combat herself.

Upon seeing the gourmet accompanying them, Lan Jue also had an inkling that something had happened. He didn't say anything at first, and greeted them warmly.

“You're so great, daddy!” Jun'er swung her arms wide as Lan Jue picked her up, then draped them around his neck.

He smiled and bounced her a little on his waist. “So are you! What brings you out here, Gourmet? It seems wrong to leave so early... did the Terminator go as well?”

The Gourmet looked at him and shook his head. “Not here.”

His suspicions were confirmed. The Gourmet's discreet bearing meant something had indeed happened. He didn't press the Paragon any further as they returned to the hotel.

The Gourmet's station was enough to demand the Presidential suit, which they now inhabited. They filed in, and he shut the door behind

them.

His eyes became a boundless grey, and in that instant the whole room was submerged in a murky aura. Everything was muted, colors and sounds – Nether Isolation. Anyone passing by from outside would get the distinct sense of death hanging over the room.

Lan Jue's face was grave. "It's this serious?"

The Gourmet nodded adamantly. "It concerns the future of Skyfire Avenue."

Jun'er knew it, too. She was calm on the outside, and sat quietly on the sofa. Her eyes said something troubled her, however.

The Pharmacist was less reticent to speak. "What in the world is all of this about, Gourmet? Why are you and the Terminator acting so strange?"

This caused the Infernal Vanguard to sigh. "You should thank your lucky stars Jun'er and the Terminator got on so well. All of this has to do with her. Unless we both were wrong – and I don't think we are – then Jun'er's Discipline has awakened.

Awakened?

Both the Pharmacist and Lan Jue were stunned at the revelation, and pleased. Both their faces bore smiles of delight. An awakened Discipline at five years old meant she would be very strong.

The Pharmacist immediately went to her daughter and gave her a hug. "But that can't be the reason for such a big reaction from the two of you. There isn't any Discipline that would make you so skittish."

The Gourmet fixed her with his gaze. "What if it was a prophetic Discipline?"

Lan Jue's eyes nearly popped out of his head. The Pharmacist looked at him with her mouth hanging wide open.

"Pro.... Prophetic? So, like the Clairvoyant's? Wha-..." The Pharmacist trailed off. Now she understood why the Terminator and the Gourmet were acting so strange.

Truly prophetic beings were very rare in the realm of humanity. Exceedingly rare, but possible. The ones that did appear were usually half-prescient, like those who could commune with the spirit world. Fully prophetic abilities never really awakened before the age of twenty.

Jun'er wasn't even six. If this was a full-prophetic Discipline awakening within her, it was completely unprecedented! By comparison, the Clairvoyant had been ten when his Discipline awoke.

Chapter 409: Extreme Focus

Jun'er was as much a part of the Avenue as any councilor. The Clairvoyant had founded the organization, so it was an undisputed fact that diviners were a hot commodity there.

The strong were rarely awash with friends, but the Avenue was in a particularly sour state. Though they had their five Paragons, they knew that things would get much more difficult for them once the Clairvoyant passed.

That's why it was so important to get her back. For someone with powers similar to the Clairvoyant's – maybe even stronger than the Clairvoyant's – was phenomenal, especially now. In twenty years, those powers would develop to great heights within Jun'er. If they were lucky enough to have the Clairvoyant train her, then it was almost assured the Avenue would have another Clairvoyant leading them in to the future. More than that, she would lead humanity in to prosperity.

“No wonder the Terminator's face looked so strange. That's why you were holding Jun'er yourself.” The Pharmacist's own face changed as understanding of the gravity dawned on her. She had never thought something like this would happen, and it took her entirely by surprise. She desperately wished Jun'er's awakening had happened on Skyfire where it was safe. Right now they were surrounded by foreign Adepts with aspirations of their own. If word of the little one's powers got out, the journey home would be fraught with lethal dangers.

Lan Jue's first reaction was to get on his communicator. The Gourmet was punching a number in to his own at the same time.

“Mika,” Lan Jue said to his wrist, “get the girls and take Zeus-1 to Luo City, as fast as you can go.” Lan Jue had first wanted to have Xiuxiu accompany the Gourmet to the tournament, but later changed his mind. Qianlin's presence and their ability to meld meant he didn't need her. Now he was calling all of his Amazons, an act which showed just how grave he saw this situation.

“Wine Master.” The Gourmet spoke in another corner, huddled over his communicator. “We’ve run in to a situation. Don’t worry, it’s a good thing. Find a way to let the Clairvoyant know that Jun’er divination Disciplines have awakened. It would be best if you told him yourself. The trouble is that out here, I’m not sure I could protect her adequately.”

The other side of the line was silent for what felt like a full minute. After a time the Cosmagus’ voice answered. “Alright, as fast as I can. Do not leave Luo if you can help it. Anyone who means you ill is far less likely to act under Conclave and government supervision. Wait for me to get there, then we’ll figure out what to do. Participate in the tournament as normal but protect that little girl with your life. I’ll go tell the Clairvoyant now.”

“Very good.” The Gourmet cut the connection.

A tense atmosphere hung over the room. Jun’er, the focus of this storm, sat upon the couch with a small smile.

The Gourmet then went to her and kneeled. “How do you feel, Jun’er? Do you feel like you’re safe?” Behind the words was a deeper question. The Gourmet knew that diviners were keener than anyone, and their read on a situation was invaluable especially when it concerned themselves. And although Jun’er was only five, this was not a hindrance – in fact, it may be helpful. Visions were never common sense, they came as feelings or ideas. A child was more connected to this, and at a time when their latent energies were richest it made these sensations clearer.

Jun’er’s pretty face beamed at her uncle. “Of course I’m safe, uncle. Mommy and daddy are here. They’ll get me home.”

Her genuine words brought a smile to the somber old man’s face. “You’re a good girl. We’ll all go home together in a few days when the tournament is over.”

“Thanks uncle Gourmet!” Jun’er giggled sweetly.

The Pharmacist took up her daughter and hugged her tight. A light flashed through her eyes but it wasn’t fear. It was a dark, dangerous light.

“At least the Terminator didn’t seem keen on doing anything,” the

Gourmet offered. "Right now he's the only one outside of us here who knows. Metatron and Lucifer suspect something's going on, but they don't know what. All we have to do is keep up appearances until the tournament is over. Then the Wine Master will come."

Lan Jue quietly replied. "But we can't afford to let down our defenses, even for a moment. This concerns the fate of all Adepts, so I'm sure the Terminator will discuss it with his people, even if he doesn't share the news with outsiders. Eventually that information is going to get out. We have to remain cautious and vigilant."

The Infernal Vanguard nodded. "I'll keep a tracer of Jun'er. If anything should happen, I could be there in an instant. It might be uncomfortable, but I need you to move her in with the Barber and Beautician. You can look after her together."

"I don't want to do that," Jun'er complained from the couch. "I want to stay with mommy and daddy!"

The Gourmet looked from the little girl to her parents. Both of their faces had begun to turn red.

"It's ok sweetie, you don't need to worry. I'll be right here to protect you. I'll just forfeit the tournament and stay back to look after her, it's fine."

"That won't work," the Gourmet said with a wave of his hand. "For us, our strength is front and center in minds of the galaxy's Adepts. We have to keep up appearances. You, though, can get in the dark places with your face hidden. With me Jun'er will be safe, unless the Terminator and the Cosmagus come in to conflict. The crotchety old man was right, we just have to stay here and ride it out. No one would dare openly accost us here. No battleships, no angry Paragons, and nothing to worry about. Even if the Pontiff and Satan hear about it, they won't have time to react. News needs time to spread and the Wine Master is already on his way."

Lan Jue nodded thoughtfully. "It sounds good. Should we bring Jun'er to the tournament tomorrow?"

The older man nodded. "We can't show them anything's wrong. I'll look after her, and the Terminator would never let a little girl get hurt. The

arena is the safest place to be right now.”

Lan Jue looked at the Pharmacist, and she nodded her approval. With their conference concluded, Lan Jue lead the Pharmacist and Jun’er back to their room.

“Mommy... daddy... am I causing trouble?” Jun’er quietly asked.

Seated on their hotel room’s couch, Lan Jue gave the little girl a sad smile pulled her up on to his knee. “That’s impossible. Jun’er is the best little girl in the whole universe. You’re the opposite of trouble little one. One day you’re going to do great things. You’ll be even greater than your mommy and daddy!”

She tittered and wriggled on his knee. “Then I’ll be able to take care of you and mommy, right?”

He nodded emphatically in response. “That’s right! You don’t need to worry about anything at all, sweet heart. Mommy and daddy will protect you. We’d never let anything bad happen to you. The only way they’re getting to you is over our dead bodies.”

His tone was soft, soothing, but what Jun’e couldn’t see in his eyes was clear as day to the Pharmacist. He wasn’t just talking, this was a solemn promise. It was only there for a second, but it definitely left an impression. A moment later his eyes were warm and comforting.

“Alright, we’ll that’s enough of that. You don’t need to worry either. With so many of us here even the Western military wouldn’t dare.” The Pharmacist’s estimations were calm, something which impressed Lan Jue.

“So should we talk about your thing?” She asked.

“My thing?” Lan Jue asked. He suddenly remembered, though, that she’d asked about his loss of power before.

“It’s nothing,” he assured her. “A strange and very rare ability reduced by Discipline to the first rank. I’ve already started to climb back to where I was. Guessing by the trend so far, I should be back to normal in a year.”

The Pharmacist’s hand shot out o feel his pulse without a word. Lan Jue

did not react or pull away because he trusted her, and Jun'er was still on his knee.

Her hands were strong, and coursed with power. With the slightest pinch to his wrist to read his pulse, his whole body began to feel numb. The strangely sharp powers of the Pharmacist entered him through her fingertips, and spread everywhere until no aspect of his health was hidden from her.

After about a minute she left his hand go. Her brows were scrunched in consideration. "I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. Your blood and qi are exuberant, better than an ordinary man's... in fact better than most seventh ranks. Your meridians are flexible and healthy, and your Discipline is vibrant. It reveals an exceptionally strong foundation. All this being the case, how in the world could your Discipline have collapsed so dramatically? Did you do it on purpose to redo your cultivation?"

"Redo cultivation?" Lan Jue was curious. "Are there really adepts who choose to do that?"

She answered with a nod. "It's rare, but not unheard of. Some Adepts feel that their Discipline may grow too fast. It becomes difficult to control and influences their abilities. It's a secret art that only those who trained in the styles of ancient China possess, someone like me. It's usually of great benefit for those who are finding it hard to break through the bottleneck. This gives them one chance to stabilize their protogenic realm enough to break through to pull Paragon status."

"But from what I can remember from your earlier displays, you didn't need it! Your Discipline was stable, clearly carefully trained. Your Talent is powerful, and better still there are two aspects. You even have an idea of protogenia with your Ascension. You were practically a golden child. You already had a sixty or seventy percent chance of success. You have more Talent than anyone I've ever met. To go back and do it again when you're already so far ahead makes no sense, it's almost crazy. But I guess I admire your nerve."

Chapter 410: The Four Degrees of Paragon

In Lan Jue's estimation the Pharmacist's power was only matched by her tragic story. Through all of this, though, she persevered. More than that, she saw the situation with clarity and calm.

Lan Jue's face spread in to a sheepish smile. "It wasn't intentional, the result of a change to my Discipline. I suppose telling you about it won't hurt anything..."

Over the next several minutes he recounting Qianlin's run-in with Bize, all the way to the God of Wine antics on the Burrows. He included the Clairvoyant's plans, as well as the method they would use to recover his Discipline. He also explained their ability to merge and summon one another.

The Pharmacist grew ever more curious and surprised as he explained. "Well that explains it, the Clairvoyant's touch as always. I can confirm that your situation is similar to the process I described. Qianlin has turned out to be a costly compatriot, but you're the one profiting most from another's expense. The Queen of Heaven powers are incredibly rare, and it's even rarer to see the Mystic Raiment in use. One of its limited uses was to make sure you lived. As for your reduction in rank, I don't think that was the intention but a result. There's only one reason that might have happened, and that's likely that the impurities were being removed from your Discipline. Rank one was where landed with nothing but pure Talent, and this foundation will help your cultivation going forward."

This was the first Lan Jue was hearing about this, and with surprise in his voice asked, "Really? I haven't felt like the intensity of my powers are any stronger."

"That's simple," she explained. "Think about it. Your Discipline dropped dramatically, of course everything feels weak. But don't be impatient, you'll feel it clearly once your Discipline returns to its former strength."

"No Adept has a naturally pure Discipline. In fact, becoming a Paragon is one process by which an Adept purifies it and leaves the vital essences

behind. Once these impurities are removed, the Adept is able to sense even the slightest changes in the universe around them. That moment when they break through to Paragon is the moment of their ultimate success, when that purge and union are complete.”

“Another way to look at it is how it will affect your journey. You’ll probably find it easier to reach Paragon since your Talent has already been tempered. Your bottleneck will be less severe as well, but the benefits don’t stop there. Now with your Talent in a more stable state, and once your Destiny is realized as a Paragon, and your protogenic mastery solidifies, you’ll be much further along than others. Your level of comprehension will be better than most Paragons when they started.

Lan Jue nodded. “It sounds like you know the world of Paragons very well.”

“I know a little,” she confessed. “You probably already know that Paragons are separated in to four degrees, similar to Adept levels. The difference in power between Paragons from one degree to another is a vast gulf, even though it’s hard to tell when even the lowest degree Paragon can obliterate a star ship. The Gourmet said that if the Terminator wanted to do something there wouldn’t be anything he could do to stop him. Each of these stages have been given a name to describe them: First degree is called the Realm of Protogenia, the second is Reflection of Heaven and Earth, third is Nirvana, and fourth degree is named the Boundless. Each one is a reality in and of itself.” 1

Although he was one of Jue Di’s disciples, the great master had never explained this to them. At the time they weren’t anywhere near their bottleneck – the information was useless at the time. The Pharmacist was rectifying the holes in his knowledge, which he appreciated. Now at least he knew what to call them.

She went on. “Of the ten Paragons, it’s suspected only Jue Di has achieved the Infinite, or maybe the upper reaches of Nirvana. My own teacher, Celestial Master Qian, is unlikely to break through Nirvana. If he did he’d live for at least another two hundred years. As for the Clairvoyant, he had the Talent and power to reach the Infinite, but he expended a great

deal of energy in guiding humanity and the cost kept him from advancing.”

“Next beneath them are those who’ve reached second degree, the reflection of Heaven and Earth. The Terminator and his partner the Epochrion belong to this realm. The rest are at various places in first degree. The Pontiff and Satan, for instance, are at the border with second degree. The Wine Master and the Keeper are in the upper reaches. The rest like the Gourmet are still at the beginning of their journey in understanding protogenia. The goal of first rank is to make one’s domain stable.”

Lan Jue felt like the door to a whole new realm of understanding had opened. The most important revelation, however, was confirmation that the Pharmacist was a disciple of the Celestial Master.

“So you mean to say the Celestial Master is still alive...?” He couldn’t help but ask. The Pharmacist was still young, so the Master couldn’t have been gone for any more than ten years.

However the Pharmacist answered with a shake of her head. “I don’t know. I’m not actually a direct disciple. When I was still an infant I came in to possession of a jade pendant. Somehow master had imbued it with his consciousness, to pass his knowledge on to another. From that I learned his cultivation methods, and the eternal wisdom of the Dao. This knowledge helped bring me to where I am now, even influenced the kind of person I am. But I have never actually met him.”

A bitter smile crossed her features as she explained. She spoke about him like she would her husband.

She heaved a somber sigh, and held Jun’er close to her chest as she went on. “The pendant went on to reveal that the old master left for another realm – the secrets of the Infinite. He would say that the one who achieved the Infinite would be capable of communing with the universe. They would be an integral, irremovable part of reality. To me this means that even though Jue Di is the strongest Paragon in combat prowess, it doesn’t necessarily mean he will achieve the Infinite.”

Lan Jue shook his head. "I had no idea about any of this. And since you're being forthcoming it's only fair that I do the same. I am a disciple of Jue Di. We called him grandfather, he raised us when we were young."

The Pharmacist smiled. "I know. I've known it for a while." At the Hall of Supreme Harmony, when he encountered the sanguine-Adept. That was when she learned of his abilities.

The two looked at one another in silence for a moment. They could feel the barriers between them falling away as their secrets were revealed. He smiled back. "Thank you for telling me so much. I understand a little better what I need to do."

"All of it was to tell you how good your prospects look. With your Talent, your foundation and the state your Discipline is in, things are looking very good," the Pharmacist claimed. "The mystic raiment and purification have prepared you better than perhaps anyone for what's to come. So long as you keep cultivating, you will achieve Paragon. From what I can see, third degree is a high possibility. Fourth degree, I don't know. Perhaps no one does."

Lan Jue was starting to glimpse the great lengths and tremendous cost the Clairvoyant had expended. It was thanks to the old diviner that he had such a future!

"I won't let anyone down. I hope that day comes soon," he said.

Jun'er, who had been silent for a long while, finally spoke up. "Yes! So you can protect mommy and me!"

Lan Jue laughed, deep and genuine. He took little Jun'er from her mother's embrace and gave her a peck on the cheek. "That's for sure. I'll do anything and everything to protect my little Jun'er."

The Pharmacist felt a flood of warmth and appreciation fill her. "You must remember not to use any unnatural methods to increase your Talent. I was considering a pill that would return your Discipline to normal, but from the looks of things you won't need it. All of these outside methods are inherently impure, so they'll render all of this pointless. Do it the right way, step by step, and you'll realize this potency."

“Ngh.” Lan Jue grunted in determination. The Pharmacist had given him confidence today.

He stayed to eat lunch with Jun’er, and eventually coaxed her in to falling asleep. He then returned to his own room, where he was surprised to find Su Xiaosu waiting.

“You’re back, Master,” Su Xiaosu called out as he entered. She shot to her feet and bowed.

Lan Jue chuckled nervously. “Cut it out, it’s weird. Do you feel better?”

Su Xiaosu smiled at him. “Luckily Master was able to grab that gem. I’m about eighty-percent back to normal. I’ll have to spend time nourishing my Core before I’ll be back to full power. I’ll get there.”

“Eighty-percent is pretty good, let’s not be hasty.” For her that meant Su Xiaosu was back to about ninth level fifth rank – pretty damn strong.

“I’ve been thinking a lot these last few days,” she confessed. “I think there’s something I need to tell you, but you have to promise not to react hastily.”

Her wrinkled brow and nervous expression set Lan Jue on edge. “About the dungeon?”

Su Xiao su only nodded.

Chapter 411: Secret of the Pontiff's Citadel

“The Pontiff's Citadel certainly looks righteous on the outside, even lead by a Paragon represented by the Holy See, but there's a lot of filth underneath that glittering veneer. It's one of the reasons I left.”

“Ever in search of greater influence, the Pontiff's men will often go out among their flock and choose young children. They tell their family that their sons and daughters will be raised by the church, but that's not the whole truth. Eventually what was really happening started to get out so they passed them off as ‘bishops’. Do you know why the West has genetic potions and the North experiments with machinery? All of that is because we can't compete with the East's Adepts. Adepts are needed in every level of government and military now, and you can't grow strong without them.”

“So to increase their influence and strength, the Pontiff's Citadel passed down a special decree to the inquisition; a new task, to collect orphans. Under the guise of adoption the inquisition would bring them back for training. It starts with a genetic test.”

“The West has experimented with acquired Talent for many years. They have more experience and infrastructure for it than anyone else. Whether or not you get your Discipline from birth or have one created for you, it has to agree with your genetic make-up as I'm sure you know. So they test them, to know what their Disciplines will be once the process is complete, and likely how strong they will become. They can even tell more or less the age the powers will awaken. Through this process about eighty percent of the children are filtered out and given to an orphanage. You can see, then, why they want to keep that quiet. Many of the clergy who remain and work in the Citadel started as orphans, but...”

Her face darkened, “Those kids who get thrown away are the lucky ones. That twenty percent who pass their test stay, and live a miserable existence. They stop being children, and become experiments.”

“Faith is one of the biggest differences between the West and the North.

Here they have a wide range of ideologies that are followed, but in the West people follow the Pontiff, with a smaller group believing in Satan. The Dark Citadel is marginally better in their process. They choose their most fervent followers and subject them to doses of the fantascia genetica. They always seem to have enough willing subjects.”

“The North is even more systematic. There are many who choose the path of the Convert to gain more power, and the North accommodates. If their tests are passed, the new Convert will see their strength spike dramatically. If they fail, they can eventually recover their Talent like you are. The Pontiff’s Citadel is especially lacking in this area.”

“Their faith is based on love, but these genetic experiments are not. They’re dangerous, and the faithful would never accept them. They can’t even request it of zealots, because it runs so counter to what they claim to believe. It would shake the faith of their followers – the faith their power is built on. Still they have to progress, to ensure that the balance of power between themselves and the Dark Citadel remains at least even. How else do you think they keep coming up with such gifted followers, all curiously with Light-based Talents? They pump the next generation with enough drugs to turn them in to super soldiers. Crueler than anything the other organizations can dream up.”

Lan Jue knew where she was going with this and interrupted. “So all those people in the cages were the Pontiff’s ‘experiments,’ or they were about to be. And you...”

She cut him off with a pained smirk. “That’s right. I was one myself. Of that twenty percent that get chosen, only ten percent make it to the end of these trials. The rest die in the process. Once you graduate through the program they brainwash you in to their religion and make you forget everything of who you used to be. I’d forgotten myself, but I remembered it all when they dragged me back there. My memory got clearer with each rank in power I lost. It was like watching a terrible movie you couldn’t look away from. Every agonizing moment came back. I’ve been.... struggling with this since we left the Citadel. But I’m a little better now.”

Lan Jue’s face was an ashen grey as he listened. Qianlin, who had been

listening silently, was red with indignation.

“How... how could they do that? To children?! Those poor orphans have already suffered terribly, and then...” She couldn’t even find the words to express her wrong that felt, and curses weren’t her style. Her chest rose and fell with every angry breath.

Xiaosu just smirked. “Now you know how wicked our ‘benevolent’ Pontiff really is. They put the scary-looking Dark Citadel to shame. Master, if you really don’t want me with you then I’ll go. I’ll find somewhere to hide and recover, and I won’t bring you any more trouble.”

The trouble she mentioned was real. The Pontiff’s Citadel may not know she has all of this information, but she was a former asset and has seen the dungeon. Her continued existence was a terrible risk.

Lan Jue waved a hand almost in irritation. “You’re coming back with me. You think I’m scared of a little trouble? Figuring out what to do with this information will take time. Relax, before long that torture chamber will be rubble.”

This was very important news, and much bigger than he could handle on his own. What still puzzled him was how they reacted when they thought he was a disciple of Jue Di. That’d saved him up to his discovery of Xiaosu. At that point their fear become the rest of the galaxy finding out what they were really up to.

Xiaosu immediately interjected. “Master I said not to be hasty! By now they’ve broken it all down. There would be nothing left to incriminate them.”

Lan Jue nodded his capitulation. “You can take it easy, I won’t do anything rash. No decision will be made until we get back to Skyfire Avenue.”

He couldn’t stop the Pontiff’s despicable actions, but that didn’t mean there weren’t others who could. What they were doing was worse than monstrous, and if their true face were revealed they would have hell to pay.

Lan Jue felt strange, like the air around him sizzled. There was a strange hum perhaps only he could hear, of the Arrow of Compassion resonating with his Discipline. It set him on edge.

What was the saying? The darkest shadows reside behind the brightest light.

The former mercenary was already forming a plan, but now was not the time to act. He showed Xiaosu out when they had finished, and turned back to the clearly upset Qianlin.

“If we want to stop this travesty, then the first thing we’ll need is power. Ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

Beside his fights and looking after Jun’er, Lan Jue spent as much of his spare time as possible cultivating his Discipline with Zhou Qianlin. These games were stimulating, and the pressure helped improve their training.

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After three days and three rounds of elimination, less than four hundred combatants remained in the tournament lists. At this point, there were no lucky standouts left – all the rest of these fighters were strong and hardened. Statistically no one they would meet from this point on would be below eighth rank.

Like the last round, there was a ‘resurrection’ vote to see who would live on in to the next round. As the vote went on, information began to trickle out.

The handsome and gentlemanly Chu Cheng has given up his place in the running to save the beautiful Lina Lee. Lina was defeated in battle against a lightning-based Adept some suspect to be the Divine Monarch Zeus. Wounded, having lost by the skin of her teeth, Lina Lee was met by Chu Cheng who valiantly gave up his chances at glory to help her tend her wounds. They have since become good friends – a true Romeo and Juliet tale!

The reports came out with recordings of Lan Jue’s fight with the vampire

princess. Towering images of Chu Cheng leading the bleeding Lina from the arena was plastered on every screen.

The news catapulted their fight to the most watched fight of the third round. This time, though, the doughty hero saves the battered heroine from the villain.

It was an underdog's tale that captured the hearts of most viewers. Zeus faced quite a lot of criticism for his scandalous deeds on the net, while Chu Cheng earned a second chance at the crown.

Why not Lina? Because she'd lost twice, and the chance was no longer available. If a fighter lost their resurrection match than they were finished. If they didn't do it that way, then the people would simply keep voting back their favorite people. Imagine if someone like Poseidon were to participate.

The rabid fans would have been surprised to discover all three of these heroic souls together now, out for dinner like friends.

Lan Jue was quite surprised and not a little impressed with Chu Cheng when he showed up with Lina. He had skills, he had to admit! Not two days and Lina was out with him. The man was on another level.

Chu Cheng was clad in a blood-red suit today with a clean white shirt beneath. It was an aesthetic vampires could really appreciate. A white handkerchief peeked from the hem of his pocket and a black tie slithered down his chest. All in all he was the picture of classical charm.

Those of a particular bloodline always thought of themselves as nobility. How noble they were was a badge of honor, a sign of quality. Part of this was making sure that one's outward appearance displayed that. Lina Lee showed off her own superiority with a long purple night dress. Her face was pale, but otherwise she looked in fine shape.

Chapter 412: The Nightclub

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin rose to their feet as the other couple entered. Qianlin was fetching in a simple white gown. The pelagic pearl twinkled prettily at her wrist, and on her neck the Soul Caller gem glowed with its own light. There wasn't much to the outfit, but that was to her benefit, and allowed her natural beauty to shine. Lina was sure she was quite pretty, but Qianlin's beauty was something almost supernatural.

Her hair was raven black, framing crystal blue eyes. Her skin was a flawless cream. She could easily be mistaken for a sculpted masterpiece. Lina, even being a woman, enjoyed looking at her.

Qianlin greeted the vampire princess with a warm smile and a nod. Lina was not so dismissive to women as she was to men, so she answered with a friendly smile of her own. There was an air of haughtiness around her, but it wasn't disdain.

"Here, let me introduce you." Chu Cheng stepped forward and signaled Lan Jue with his hand. "This is my very close friend, Lan Jue, and his girlfriend 1 Zhou Qianlin."

Chu Cheng swung his eyes back to Lina, and they could see the tenderness in them. It was like he was looking upon some delicate treasure.

"This is Lina Lee. She's from the West."

Lan Jue smiled. He was suddenly reminded of the conversation he had with Chu Cheng before they'd arrived. His old friend threatened to have him hung if he showed up dressed nicer than He. Tonight Chu Cheng had to appear the hero.

That was why, today, Lan Jue had chosen to come in a pair of white ninth pants 2, with a long-sleeve blue sweater and blue leather pants. Refreshing and simple.

"Hello, I'm honored to meet you." He extended his hand to shake in the Eastern fashion. In the West they often preferred to kiss hands.

Her eyes grew sharp. “The same Lan Jue that’s always giving you those bad ideas?” She asked. Chu Cheng was unpleasantly surprised by her open challenge. He’d hoped she would keep that little fib quiet.

Lan Jue, certainly confused, looked questioningly at Chu Cheng. The apologetic smirk on his friend’s face said it all, and all he could do was nod. “I... guess that’s me.”

Her brows furrowed. “And where have we met before? You seem familiar.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever met,” he said, absently rubbing his nose. “Qianlin and I are just here on vacation to see the tournament. I’ve never been out this way before.”

Lina didn’t press it. Instead she offered a smile. “I’ve happy to meet you as well. I know your friend here exaggerates terribly. You didn’t even try to defend yourself when I called you out – I can tell you’re a good friend, and a better man than this guy.” She jabbed a thumb toward Chu Cheng.

Under attack, Chu Cheng’s eyes went wide. “Don’t fall for it, Lina, this guy and his false halo.”

“All I’m going to say,” Lan Jue quietly interrupted, “is that the eyes of the masses are sharp.”

“Don’t give me any shit,” she said, fixing Chu Cheng with a hard stare. “I know your type. You’d take a knife for a friend but put two in a woman. I knew you were no good the second I set eyes on you.”

“I-...” Chu Cheng sputtered stupidly at her, blindsided by the situation.

Lan Jue couldn’t help himself, he shot Lina a big thumbs up. “At long last A-Cheng makes a good decision! My deepest respect, Lina. You have a discerning eye.”

The vampire covered her mouth and stifled a laugh. She shot the beaten Chu Cheng a sideways glance, full of mirth at his expense.

A cruel look came over his companion’s face. “I thought we were brothers? You know, just mess around a little bit? Don’t make me start

letting things slip.”

Lina interrupted again. “What? That he’s Zeus? Jewelry Master of Skyfire Avenue? Or what about his lightning and thunderbolt Disciplines? Oh, or maybe that he’s the one that beat me this afternoon.”

“You know?” Chu Cheng looked at her slack-jawed.

She cast him a dismissive sideways glance. “You men are such smug bastards. Always underestimating the intelligence of women. Most people guessed you were Zeus already, and you think I wouldn’t do a little digging in to who beat me?”

Chu Cheng sighed. “I’m sorry, you’re absolutely right. Lan Jue, I’m starting to understand why you never take advantage of these powerful women following you around. I just can’t compete with ladies this smart! I pine for the ones with big tits and no brains.”

“Having regrets?” Lina cooed, fixing him with a smoldering look. “Go on then, now’s your chance.”

Chu Cheng huffed in irritation. “You think you can just own me, woman?! We live in a nation of laws!”

“Alright, alright you two,” Lan Jue scolded. “Save the flirtatious banter for when you go home. The waiters have been waiting, let’s order.”

Lina was instantly all graceful smiles. Chu Cheng put his acting talent to work, also suddenly the charming gentleman.

Northern food was defined by its lavish cuisine. Huge steaks were a common sight dinner, or plates of giant oysters. These were paired with bottles of red or white wine and a hefty salad. That was traditional fare up here.

The meal was amusing. Chu Cheng and Lina would occasionally trade barbs or bicker over some comment. Their war of words kept things fresh and entertaining.

Lan Jue and Qianlin exchanged bemused glances, and ate quietly as the others bickered. Despite the sharp exchanges and long diatribes, though,

they all finished at the same time.

“Let’s go.” Lina rose to her feet and stretched, causing her dress to outline her fine figure.

“What are you doing?” Chu Cheng asked, looking at her.

“We’re off to a club for round two!” She said matter-of-factly.

“You guys have fun,” Lan Jue quickly said. “We won’t be going out.”

Lina rolled her eyes at him. “I figured you for the boring type. How often do you come up to the North, huh? If you only think about the tournament then it’s a waste of a trip. Northern bars are quite a lot of fun, but we need more than just two. Come on, let’s go!”

She had wandered over to Qianlin’s side by now and pulled her to her feet.

Lan Jue slowly drew his eyes to Chu Cheng. “You’re in to slave drivers now then, yes? Some kind of masochism thing?”

He could almost see his friend’s face tic. “I’m starting to have second thoughts. It’s like I threw myself in to the net on this one. But come on, a little fun never hurt anyone. It’s good to relax from time to time.”

Luo had a district set aside for entertainment. The streets were lined with bars and rooms with red lights. No one lived here so the party just kept going. Under Lina’s direction they went to the biggest nightclub they could find.

The sun had gone to sleep by now, and the nightlife was beginning to kick up. The bar was already beginning to fill with revelers. Giant speakers thumped raucous house music that was loud enough to wake the dead.

Sturdy gentlemen tasked with maintaining order stood at various parts of the club, while women in scanty bikinis milled around serving drinks. They were surrounded by the sounds of celebration, with cigarettes and wine and pulse-pounding music. All of it swirled together in to that unique nightclub atmosphere.

As they pressed further inside with Lina in the lead, the scene unfolded

before them in strobe flashes and laser light. Clearly it was not Lina's first time here. She spoke few words with a bouncer, and a moment later a scantily-clad woman lead them to the second floor.

This upper level was marginally quieter than the ruckus below. It was still a party atmosphere, but there were significantly fewer people. Arced booths were set against a glass wall that gave patrons a chance to look over the chaos below.

Lan Jue didn't have much love for this sort of place, but at least he found the second floor more palatable. It didn't have the pressing crowds of the club below.

"Hey!" Lina called to Lan Jue. "You guys order drinks!" She yanked Chu Cheng out of his seat at gave him a commanding look. "We're gunna go dance."

He could only sigh. "Alright." He removed his coat and placed it on the cushions before following her to the dance floor.

When they were out of ear-shot, Qianlin leaned in close. "You don't like these places, do you? Should we stay for a while then go?"

Lan Jue laughed. "No, it's fine. I just prefer something quieter. Since we're here, let's enjoy it. Lina was right, too. We're always cultivating, and you just finished that rough training. We need to relax a little. Despite its flaws these places really know how to get you excited. If you want to dance I'll go with you."

She timidly waved her hand. "I can't dance, and there's so many people. I'm happy just watching. Look, they're down there."

Their booth was suspended directly over the dance floor 3 below, giving them an unobstructed view of the writhing masses. It was oddly shaped, with a dais in the center hosting a couple alluring dancers.

They could see Lina pulling Chu Cheng along behind her on to the floor. She had already begun to sway and move with the rhythm of the music. Certainly not one to be bent by rules, she pushed to the dais and let out a scream so loud even the music couldn't completely drown it out.

Just as eyes were drawn to her she leaped up on to the dais.

There were unspoken rules to these places, one of them being that the platforms were off-limits for normal guests. If you had the balls to jump on one, you better dance better than their professionals, otherwise you'd be booed out of the place.

Chapter 413: The Dance Battle

The moment Lina leaped on to the dais in her form-fitting purple dress, all eyes were on her. Almost right away a pair of colored lights swung over to her. The DJ certainly had an eye for entertainment.

The dancers were professionals. They needed to be, since the establishment was among the most famous in the North. It was indeed a rare site for anyone to have the gall to jump up on stage when their competition was these beautiful women. Today, however, someone had the courage to do just that. Everyone looked at the brave woman, and her enthusiasm brought the energy of the club to a fever pitch.

She was like a woman possessed. As the music thumbed and the tempo rose, she shot her right hand in the air. Her purple dress melted away like water, revealing a leather cat outfit beneath.

The top only just barely covered her chest, leaving her shoulders exposed. Hot pants concealed her charms below. The pallor of her skin clashed dramatically with the shiny black clothing. Screams and whistles cheered her on as she flailed her head of fiery red hair.

She jabbed a finger at the DJ, and he immediately responded with a change of pace. The steady thud gave way to an explosive cacophony of heavy metal music.

She swung her arms out, and the dancers on either side were forced to back off. Lina planted her foot on the dance floor, then swung herself around in a circle. Policy at the club stated that dancers would have money deducted if they were shown up by the customers 1. These ladies weren't having any of that, so they danced all the harder to try and show her up. When she started spinning, though, they knew they didn't have a chance.

She looked like a ballerina – a stunning princess spinning effortlessly on the tip of her toes. All throughout her arms swam through the air in fouette turns 2. It was a feast for the eyes of every patron there.

This style of dance wasn't typically paired with this sort of head-banging rhythm, but the turns were so fast and so violent that she was actually

keeping up with the screaming beat.

Then, when the beat dropped, she stopped the spin and dropped right to the ground. She kept herself aloft on one hand while her legs swung around in a wide, windmilling Thomas flare 3. They were perfect, quick, and rhythmic.

Her long legs swung through the air over and over again, and each swing caught the beat of the music. Her legs were a blur that reached three meters high at the apex.

Her form wasn't as clean as the dancers, but she made up for it in raw energy and good looks. The fervent rush that poured from her in waves made the dancers look like timid wallflowers.

The energy in the club rose with each spin, each thump of the bass. The appreciative cries didn't let up. Young men and women got caught up in the moment and began to writhe around the base of the dais with their new heroine.

Her image vanished and came back, frozen in the half second that the blinking light caught her alluring form. Each half-second interval saw her in another tantalizing twirl, spin or dip. It almost made her look like magic, some sort of playful interdimensional sprite there for their entertainment. She was their queen of party.

Chu Cheng stood beneath her shadow at the base of the platform. He looked up with eyes full of awe and desire. He was himself a fun-loving person, and this madwoman kicked it up to a whole new level. His eyes veritable blazed in the flashing lights. He didn't dance with the others around him, and in fact created a small empty space around him with the radiating force of his Discipline. No one dared draw near within a three meters radius while Chu Cheng watched. He would clap from time to time, or nod his head, completely absorbed in the scene.

The music stopped, and as silence hung over the ground the lights on Lina intensified. She stopped, and pointed her finger to a spot below the platform. With a turn of her hand the finger curled in, beckoning her target forward.

A single spotlight pierced the dim club interior, blanketing Chu Cheng.

She pointed to the spot in front of her on the dais. Her lips were turned in to a scornful frown, an expression that said she doubted he had the guts. His response was to burst in to bemused laughter. The cries of the spectators grew louder as they realized what was happening.

A dance battle!

This was the most exciting thing that could happen in a night of clubbing as far as the patrons were concerned. They had seen how skilled she was on the floor, and now they were curious to see who she felt had the chance to upstage her.

In their second floor booth, Qianlin and Lan Jue watched the exchange.

“She dances so beautifully!” Qianlin exclaimed.

Lan Jue smiled. “Why don’t you go show her how it’s done? I’ll go down with you and make sure no one gets near.”

She vehemently shook her head. “I’ll appreciate from here, thank you. I wouldn’t dare show off my modest skills. But what’s going on? It looks like Chu Cheng is going to get up on that platform too.”

“It’s a dance battle,” he explained. “She isn’t convinced about Chu Cheng yet, so she’s testing him this way.”

Qianlin bit her lip. “Can Chu Cheng dance?”

He grinned at the two of them down below. “They call him the Prince of Luo Nightlife for a reason. Being a playboy like him is not an easy lifestyle to maintain. He needs a wide array of abilities. A woman is a multi-faceted thing, and he needs to shine on all surfaces. He told me once in a rare display of honesty, that when he does settle down it’ll be with a woman who likes him for him. All the rest of this is just for show.”

Lina’s chest heaved as she caught her breath. She wasn’t completely recovered from the beating she’d received at Lan Jue’s hand. The extra exertion didn’t help. She had to rely on her Discipline in the end for her big finale.

Chu Cheng's long legs brought him up on to the platform. He faced Lina with a smirk on his face, but he was the one out of place. In his suit, button-down shirt and vest he looked like he'd gotten lost. Silence prevailed as the two faced each other.

Chu Cheng took a step forward, his footsteps ringing in the stillness. "A dance battle?"

She looked at him, cold as ice. "Win and you take me home tonight."

Chu Cheng laughed, and his mannerism was like a fox on the prowl. He lifted a hand to slowly loosen his tie. He yanked it off, a sharp snap in the air quickly following as the fabric whipped away. He then gently laid it around Lina's neck. He then removed the vest and opened the top three buttons of his shirt revealing the line of his pectoral muscles.

He took a few steps back, extending the distance between himself and his challenger. Then, his boisterous voice shattered the calm.

"You told me today that I was a playboy. You're. I was. But if you'd done your homework then you know that being a playboy isn't just about money. That's not a playboy, just a glutton – and that's not me. My aim is to be the ultimate man. Whatever vice or pleasure you can think of, I've done it. I'm about to prove to you that you will never meet another guy like me."

As he spoke he placed his right hand against his chest and spread his legs.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum! A rhythmic drumbeat like the beating of a heart shuddered through the crowd. Chu Cheng's hand tapped against his chest to the beat, like it was his own heart making the noise. All lights extinguished but the single spotlight over his head.

Now this dance platform belonged to him.

Each bone-shuddering thud from the giant speakers saw Chu Cheng's face change a little, like he was falling in to a trance. His face was bitter sweet, as though looking on the face of a loved one.

A single, gentle, tungsten light illuminated Lina Lee. She looked like

she'd stepped out of a dream.

Chu Cheng launched himself forward suddenly with two long strides. His arms swung open like he wanted to grab her in a hug.

She frowned, taken by surprise. But he stopped half a meter away as the sounds of graceful music rose around them. He began to rock to the music.

Lina's dance had been raw emotion, violent and loud. Chu Cheng's, by comparison, was more refined. It didn't have the explosiveness of heavy metal, but the notes made the listeners move almost without thinking.

This wasn't just a dance. This was a story.

Lan Jue didn't lean over to watch the dance – he'd seen Chu Cheng's mating wiggle too many times to count. Thankfully his communicator rang, giving him an excuse not to watch. Using his Discipline to help reduce some of the din around him, he answered the call.

"Hey A-Li, what's up man? 4 " He greeted.

"Chu Cheng's a right bastard." Hua Li's voice answered on the other end. "You know you're the villain of the whole internet now, by the way?"

"Eh?" He helplessly sighed. He hadn't been following the 'controversy' over the forums.

Hua Li told him all about it, interspersing a healthy dose of humiliating laughter. Lan Jue joined him. "This guy, he'd sell one of us in to slavery if it earned him a night with a pretty girl."

Hua Li cackled. "Chu Cheng will be Chu Cheng, right? Where are you at, let's get together and give him shit."

"I came with that fool to the Crescent Moon," Lan Jue muttered. "He left me up here so he could get a shot at Lina. Wait a while and we'll go find you."

Hua Li's voice raised an octave. "Eh? You're there? I'm right around the corner, I'll be there in a second. Chu Cheng is a snake – luring the poor girl in to his lair. Looks like this one's already another notch on his belt."

Lan Jue laughed. “Not this time. The lamb lead the wolf to its own den. Except the lamb is actually a lioness. He’s strutting around like a peacock right now, you might catch the end if you hurry.”

Qianlin had been quietly listening the whole time. She spoke up suddenly. “Chu Cheng’s ‘den’, hm? But she’s the one that brought us here!”

Chapter 414: Compensation

Lan Jue gave her a conspiratorial look. “You didn’t see him hiding behind me when we came in? He was hiding his face – he didn’t want anyone to recognize him. Lina may have brought him here, but Chu Cheng’s in his home court. He was just playing innocent to lure her in to his trap. Why do you think everything was so quiet, so well orchestrated when he got up on stage? Everyone knows him here, even the boss is his close friend.”

Qianlin’s face reddened. “It looks like Lina was right,” she said quietly. “He’s a less than reputable guy.”

Lan Jue laughed. “And me? He and I have been close friends for years, and several of those questionable skills I’ve learned myself. There were times he and I painted the town. I guess that makes me just as disreputable.”

“It’s not the same,” Qianlin assure. “You aren’t as bad as he is.”

He looked back at her with a brow raised in surprise. “How’s that?”

Her face broke in to a suspiciously sweet smile. “No reason. I guess I just have faith.”

“Heh, that makes one of us,” Lan Jue said helplessly. “I was a young, full of piss and vinegar once. I partied irresponsibly like my friend does. I was a playboy, too, in several senses of the word – not nearly so nice as you may think.”

Qianlin’s face fell. “It sure sounds like you’re trying to talk me out of hanging around you.”

“Not at all,” he assured hastily. “Just sharing a bit of my past.”

She was immediately all smiles, as much an actor as Chu Cheng. “That’s enough of that. I don’t believe any of it. If you were a womanizer then why haven’t you done anything with your amazons? They are all beautiful girls who certainly wouldn’t say no. I’ve seen the way they look at you. To me, this is proof that you’re a good man.”

“The... ehm... situation we found ourselves in when we first met shows you like women, so that’s not it. The scars you bear for my sister have never healed, and no playboy could have that much passion for a single woman. Whatever you did in the past isn’t important, because I can see you for who you are now. I’ve thought a lot about it, and I think I know what I should do.”

She moved closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder.

Lan Jue dramatically knocked the heel of his hand against his forehead. “Alright, yes, fine – you got me. But the most detestable thing is to see that cake, but be unable to eat it!”

Qianlin laughed. “I guess we’d better work hard at cultivation. Oh, look at Chu Cheng! He really can dance!”

The Hades descendant was just getting to the meat of his dance as floodlights picked him out from the darkness. It was a story of sorts, like a young man courting a girl on campus for the first time 1.”

It was a story expressed through his flailing limbs and swaying hips. Boy meets girl, boy falls in love, and the chase begins. Through hardships and trials he wins the girl’s affection, however her family encounters tragedy. Never once does the boy leave her side. He spun his yarn beneath the lights, under scored by the moving music. Lina was a prop in his show – a show that would give Hua Li a run for his money. Every motion was a word, every step a sentence.

At first, Lina reacted to him with scorn. Who danced like this at a night club? However as the story unfolded, and as the whole place seemed to come around him to tell the tale, she realized she was no match for Chu Cheng. He was a professional, and she was an amateur who knew how to use her Discipline for effect.

This fictional girl’s family survived whatever calamity had befallen them, but the boy began to succumb to exhaustion. Chu Cheng seemed to slowly buckle while keeping to the rhythm. Each chord was a death kneel as he theatrically collapsed to the ground. The control he had over his body confessed years of training for this sort of thing.

Although he had slowly succumbed to collapse his eyes never left hers. They were full of forgiveness, love, but most of all despair. Though Lina knew this was just all for show, she couldn't keep the moisture from welling up in the corner of her eyes.

Chu Cheng shot to his feet, his face suddenly devoid of that sad expression. An easy smile took its place as he bowed in gentlemanly fashion toward Lina. But before she could even react, his head dropped down to his stomach

The sudden unexpected change caused Lina to scream in terror. "Aaaahhhhh!!!"

The crowd erupted in a fit of laughter, and Chu Cheng's head inexplicably rolled back in to place.

Realization dawned on the vampire princess, and she realized his clothing must have had some sort of wire or hook. The illusion was created when he squatted and the clothing remained in place.

"Oh you're really going to die, now!" She indignantly punched him in the chest.

"Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng!" Cries of adulation surrounded them.

Only an idiot would be unable to see, now, that Chu Cheng was a cherished member of this establishment. Lina was no idiot. She turned in a huff to leave, but Chu Cheng shot out a hand to grab her. He pulled her close, and the two of them began to rise off of the platform toward the second floor.

"You made a bargain," Chu Cheng softly said in to her ear. "Tonight, you belong to me."

Lina craned her head back to look at him. Traces of red had begun to creep in to her cheeks.

They eventually returned to their private booth looking over the dance floor. With one arm wrapped around Lina, Chu Cheng waved at his fans below. Another round of fervent claps and cheers replied.

The playboy turns his face to Lan Jue, who was also clapping in appreciation. He feigned modesty, saying “Listen to them laugh at how terribly I did.”

He shot his friend an enigmatic grin. “All hail the prince of nightlife! Quite the show, sir. Quite the show.”

With a gasp, Chu Cheng wagged a finger. “You mustn’t besmirch my good name, A-Jue!”

Lan Jue sniffed derisively, and lifted the communicator on his wrist for emphasis. A projected array of some of the... less than kind commentary about Zeus appeared before him.

Suddenly the wild youth’s countenance changed. “This-this has nothing to do with me.... Alright, fine yes. I spread the rumors, but you’re wearing a mask! It doesn’t matter. Oh damn, you have no idea how much shit I was in at home. I’m out because pops would probably fry me to a crisp if I went back.”

Lan Jue allowed the projection to dissipate, then took a sip from his champagne glass. “There’s always a price when punting off the blame, A-Cheng. I wonder what the prince of nightlife is willing to pay?” The table before them was arrayed with a spread of fruit, and a bottle of pink Don Perignon. This was Chu Cheng’s domain, so of course none of this came at any cost to them.

Sincerity lit up his friend’s face. “Name it. So long as it’s in my power to provide.”

“A 1966 Cohiba cigar, Luis XIII brandy... though I guess Hennessy would do in a pinch. A 1929 Cognac Tesson would be ideal, and perhaps a 1990 champagne Krug? Deliver that and we’re even – in the appropriate interspatial containment apparatus, of course.”

Each biting word saw Chu Cheng’s face darken.

“This is robbery!”

“I’ve never taken a thing that wasn’t owed,” Lan Jue said. “If you don’t want to pay the price then that’s your prerogative. I’m sure there are no

small number of journalist who might like to learn more about us. That I am 'that' Zeus. That you are 'that' Hades. Perhaps we conspired together to deceive this poor girl. I mean, according to everyone I'm already a bad guy, so screw it I guess."

"Ruthless," Chu Cheng breathed through a depressed frown. "How did you even know I got the Tesseract? Are you spying on me?"

Lan Jue's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "You do?!"

"Oy! Do what?! Finders keepers?" A voice sounded nearby, someone trying to make their voice as low as possible.

Lan Jue turned behind, and laughed as he saw the culprit. It was his accomplice.

Hua Li looked like he often did when out in public. He was wrapped up in more layers than carnival clown, with a hat glasses and a mask to match his track suit. It was a very sort of hip-hop style.

He plopped down in a seat beside Lan Jue. "So what do you really have, eh?"

"A bottle of 1929 cognac Tesseract," he answered with a smirk. "He said he'd be happy to share it with us. A-Cheng's really quite generous."

"Excellent! I do prefer a nice glass of brandy." Hua Li rubbed his hands together. "So break it out big guy! Might as well drink here right? I haven't been in your realm for a while – I see it's still a good time."

"Two damn bandits," Chu Cheng complained.

Hua Li blinked at him. "Oh, bandits? Take a look at yourself there, buddy. You slander your brother and gripe over a bottle of liquor to settle it. You're a shameless bastard.

The playboy swung an angry glare Hua Li's way. "You're the shit that sold me out!"

Hua Li shot back with a wide grin. "Whatcha gunna do about it?"

Chu Cheng was in his face almost right away. "What am I gunna do about it? Maybe I'll just take off these sunglasses and this hat, huh? Oh

my god, people, look who's here?!"

Hua Li almost crumpled in on himself. "Let's not be hasty!"

"Yeah! You didn't think of this when you sold me down the river, did you!" Chu Cheng accused.

Chapter 415: Dance of the Three Monarchs

Hua Li huffed, then produced two pipes from his clothing and gave one to each of his friends. “The trials of the good always go unsung. Here you are threatening me and all I want is to lift my brothers up.”

They were odd aluminum pipes that ere half yellow, and half black with small white dots. The sight of them immediate put a smile on their faces.

“It’s all good, reparations have been made. Getting your hands on a 1966 is pretty incredible. You’re the one who gave Lan Jue the one from before right? Why is it you never treat me so well.?”

“You?” Hua Li scoffed. “It would amount to reckless waste. Lan Jue is a man of taste – you’d probably use it to pick up chicks.”

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,” Lina interrupted. She looked expectantly at Chu Cheng.

He looked back as he answered. “Ah, yes. This is another brother of ours, Hua Li. Since you know Lan Jue so well, do you want to take a crack at him?” A moment later he shot an accusatory finger at Hua Li. “And don’t take off your mask.”

“Ah! You... you’re Poseidon?” He underestimated Lina, who immediately sussed out Hua Li’s identity after the Lan Jue hint. Suddenly excited, she barreled onward. “Can I get an autograph?”

Chu Cheng’s face fell – this wasn’t the reaction he’d hoped for. “This is why handsome guys have no friends,” he complained. “Hua Li, I love you brother but sometimes I want to pinch your face off. Stop coming around here, alright? This happens every time. I never get to have fun when you’re around.”

Hua Li pulled a pen from his pocket as though he’d done it a million times, plucking a napkin off of the table. He scribbled his name and handed it to Lina. “If you want that cigar you’re gunna have to deal with it.”

“Don’t forget the cognac,” Lan Jue warned. “If you try and sweep it under the rug you won’t like my reaction.”

Chu Cheng’s voice turned bitter. “You guys are mean as hell. I’ll send someone to deliver it. But we can’t just drink it – let’s stir some stuff up! We never get to hang out.”

Hua Li deflated. “Dance? I dance so much I wanna puke.”

“So what,” Chu Cheng challenged. “Here we are, three brothers together again. Have you forgotten the trouble we used to get in to? When did you get so old, A-Li?”

Hua Li dragged his eyes to Lan Jue, who shrugged indifferently. “If he wants to dance then why not. Just be careful not to encroach on his majesty’s domain, I guess.”

This earned a chuckle from Chu Cheng. “I like a little competition. You’re in for a treat Lina – you get to see what it means when the three of us start raging. Waiter! Call the DJ over, and tell the Red Rat to come by as well.”

A few moments later a middle-aged man in a suit came bowing and scraping. “Master Chu, what can I do for you?”

Chu Cheng looked pained. “Go fetch the 1929 Tesseron from the house. Ah, the injustices I suffer. Go.”

“Sir.” The ‘red rat’ shuffled away without another word. He knew precisely of what his master spoke, and what it cost. However now that the master was entertaining friends it was important to give him face. No hesitation would be tolerated. They would have a treasure to drink while they enjoyed the night, that was certain.

The young and talented DJ appeared in the spot Chu Cheng’s man vacated. “Brother Cheng! What’s up? You still plan to keep this party bus rollin’?” It was clear the DJ and Chu Cheng had a familiar relationship. How else could his earlier dance have been so well choreographed?

Chu Cheng approached and whispered a few sentences in to the young man’s ear. The younger man offered a knowing nod, then left without a

word.

Qianlin looked toward Lan Jue with a curious expression. “Are you going to dance?”

Lan Jue plucked the 1966 Cohiba cigar from its tube. Carefully, he snipped a bit off the end, and lit the other end with a lighter.

“I can try I suppose. It’s been a long time. We’re all having a good time so why not?”

Hua Li smiled. “I think it must be more than seven years since we’ve last got together to cause some trouble.”

A sentimental look crossed Lan Jue’s face. “Sounds about right.” That was when he first met Hera. There was no more need for him to go out trawling the clubs after that.

Now Hera’s spitting image sat right next to him, but even though she looked the same everything was different. He wasn’t at all like the man he’d been seven years ago.

Lan Jue plucked the cigar from his mouth, and as if on cue a low buzz rumbled from the dance floor below. It was followed by the DJ’s voice, altered by computer to sound like an android. His rousing voice called out to the crowd.

“Today is your lucky day people! Our very own dance god of Crescent club, Chu Cheng, is gunna show us all how it’s done again. But this time he’d brought along a couple buddies who’re just as badass on the dance floor. I can promise you guys are not gunna forget what you witness tonight. We’re calling it the Flight of the Monarchs!”

Clunk! All the lights shut off, plunging the club in to darkness with the DJ’s final word. The three Monarchs rose to their feet.

There was a sharp snap, and a ball of fire was born. It roiled like a small angry star in Chu Cheng’s palm. The sudden light drew every eye.

“Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng!”

With a wave of his hand the ball of flame raced out to hang over the

crowd. Chu Cheng himself rose in to the air and followed. Just as he reached the ball's location it exploded, reforming in a great phoenix that hang over Chu Cheng's shoulders. Squeals and screams ensued. Even if they didn't know Chu Cheng this would solidify him as a legend.

The screeching phoenix descended toward the dance floor. Behind it there appeared another light, this one blue. An orb of water like a planet orbited overhead, and as they watched the crust slowly solidified in to a dazzling mother-of-pearl.

Hua Li soared through the air and settled upon the orb, allowing it to bring him slowly to the dance floor as well. The flashy gentlemen occupied either side of the platform.

Red versus blue. The glimmering lights clashed and set the stage ablaze with color. Though no further illumination was needed beams of light covered both, matching their respective element.

The atmosphere buzzed with anticipation. BOOM! A crack of thunder took everyone by surprise, and a golden bolt of lightning struck the platform dead center. All three colors blazed bright as a supernova.

The massive speakers exploded with electrifying rock music. Three figures flashed gold, red and blue upon the stage as they broke in to synchronized dance. 1

The three men all danced the same steps, but with vastly different feeling. The thudding music and dramatic light set the atmosphere of the club ablaze. The excitement was almost oppressive.

Lina was no stranger to the spotlight as she'd shown. She even used her Discipline to spice things up as they did. However she could only stare with disbelief at what she was watching. Compared to them she was like a child.

These guys...

Zhou Qianlin wasn't any better. Her face was a picturesque expression of embarrassment and excitement. She stood next to Lina at the banister near their booth and, just like the crowd below, shouted their approval.

It was a unique experience for Qianlin – the first time she'd visited a place like this. It was a true shock to see Lan Jue's wild side.

Chu Cheng writhed like a demon, lit all around by columns of fire. Hua Li flitted through a mist of twinkling water like a sprite. Only Lan Jue's moves were a marriage of strength and beauty. Every thrust of an arm and swing of a leg brought a contrail of sparks in its wake.

The three auras of their Discipline battles incessantly around them. Each clash elicited a violent firework display which would dissolve only to be reborn again. It was similar to what Lina had done, just dialed up to a thousand.

Eventually the raging flood of music subsided, and with it the lights around the three men. Once more the floor was cast in to darkness, but where before there was silence the screams now threatened to bring the roof down. The DJ hadn't been lying – they wouldn't be forgetting this night for a long time to come.

When the lights came back on the dance floor was empty. Chu Cheng, Hua Li and Lan Jue stood by the railing on the second floor with glasses of champagne raised to the spectators below.

The crowd went wild.

A big grin was plastered on Chu Cheng's face. "It's been a long time since I've had this much fun. I gotta say, this makes me happy. Come on Hua'Li take that mask off – aren't you suffocating?"

Hua Li bumped his friend's glass with his own. "Say something useful from time to time, would you?"

Qianlin shook her head and laughed. "Who knew you were such a party animal!"

Lan Jue winced just as Chu Cheng burst in to loud guffaws. "No doubt, party animal is right! When he was younger it was like taking a beast out on the town."

"Shut the hell up!" Lan Jue was ashamed to irritation, as his face betrayed.

Hua Li didn't react, only turned his head away and pretended like he couldn't hear anything.

Champagne is a drink for celebrations, and it put people in the party mood because the carbon dioxide brought the alcohol right to the head. In a place like this champagne was the drink of choice.

It took the five of them no time to put down several bottles. By the time the Tesson arrived they were well in to the drink. When Hua Li expressed only tepid interest Lan Jue decided to put it away for another time. Just as Chu Cheng was about to beg for a sip or two, the DJ's excited calls came from below.

Chapter 416: Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng!

“It’s coming up on the witching hour ladies and gentlemen!”

At some point three young women in leather miniskirts had come on stage. As the dance music resumed they swayed with the hypnotizing rhythm.

Qianlin gave Lan Jue a curious and uncertain look. “The witching hour?”

Lan Jue chortled and shot a glance Chu Cheng’s way. “It’s about time to call it I think. It’s late and we have fights tomorrow.”

“I heard that! We three respectable gentlemen would never be involved in something so base as the witching hour.” It was a fine phrase, but from Chu Cheng’s mouth it took on a very different flavor.

Lina looked from one to the other in curiosity. “What’s so special about midnight here?”

Chu Cheng almost tripped over his own tongue to answer. “Nothing! Nothing. We should go.” He grabbed at Lina’s hand to pull her toward the exit.

A flash of light caught their attention and pulled the girls’ eyes to the stage. There they saw the three women had removed their outer garments and were clad solely in leather bikinis. They swung their dresses over their heads to the excited cheers of the spectators below.

Lina – a veteran of establishments like these – suddenly understood the premise behind ‘the witching hour.’ Her eyes popped out of her head.

“Strippers? What sort of place is this?”

“It’s art!” Chu Cheng fumblingly explained.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” The DJ’s dramatic voice boomed through the club. “Lemme know! Who do you think our lovely ladies should enlist to help them... hold their clothes hm?”

“Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng! Brother Cheng!”

The thundering dance music was changing now to slinkier tunes, things more suitable to the idea of the witching hour. Chu Cheng's face froze.

The look in Lina's eyes was one of piercing ridicule. "I guess so! Such lovely bedroom art." She punctuated the sentence by turning and stomping off.

"Lina!" Chu Cheng ran after her. "That was before. Look, let me explain."

Hua Li and Lan Jue exchanged a knowing look. The famed entertainer sighed. "How many times have we watched drama like this? It's the same every time. I guess you can't teach a dog not to eat shit. 1 The boy's gotta learn to change his nature!"

Lan Jue just shrugged. "It's a difficult life he lives. Who knows if this relationship of theirs will last the week. But this time he's pretty passionate. This is a vampire princess here – not your run of the mill girl. That's a whole new level of challenge and excitement that money can't buy. I hope A-Cheng realizes how special the opportunity is, though."

Hua Li chuckled. "Shit who cares. The longer he remains occupied with her, clear or not, the less time he's spending as a scourge to the young flowers of our species."

"Ugh, men!" Qianlin looked at Lan Jue, appalled.

"Time to go!" Lan Jue's tone was brisk and energetic.

Chu Cheng had chased Lina out of the club in time to see her stop a taxi. He couldn't let her go – victory was so close!

He rushed toward the car and jumped in right beside her.

"What are you doing?! Go have fun with your dancing girls!" She spat.

He chuckle apologetically. "Please, those girls have nothing on you! I said that was all in the past, right? You're the girl in my heart now, there isn't any room for anyone else."

"Screw off! This bullshit won't work on me." She viciously slapped away the arm he'd tried to snake around her waist.

His sheepish expression grew bleaker still. “It was your idea to come out and have a good time, but you’re still unhappy. I didn’t even want to come back to this place!”

His words eased some of the tension in her face. After all he was right, wasn’t he? It had been her idea and her choice of location.

The taxi driver chose this moment to cut in. “Brother Cheng? Which hotel am I bringing you to tonight? Got your hands on a spicy one tonight!”

Chu Cheng’s face scrunched tight like he’d been punched in the gut. Lina stared at him with wide, hard eyes. A loud smack rang through the interior of the cab and Lina left with Chu Cheng rubbing his face. He cast a hateful glare toward the driver.

“D-did I say too much,” the dimwitted man asked.

The corners of Chu Cheng’s mouth twitched. “Do you think you could possible just live life as a mute? This is karma or something – some sort of dark retribution. Just take me home.” It was time to retreat and like his wounds – pursuing her any further would only make things worse. In his experience he knew any chance of a happy night of cuddling was practically zero. This was the danger of a life lived in dark alleys and smoky clubs. Sometimes you run in to vengeful ghosts, and your night turns out just like this.

Thank goodness for small victories, though. No news of their altercation would get out since no one had been there to see it. He maintained his image as the great knight, and the masked man was the villain.

So it was that when Chu Cheng showed his face the crowds cheered and hailed. For Lan Jue, though, he received nothing but boos.

The two young men stood side by side. Chu Cheng was loving the attention, so saw no need to hide himself away in the Adept resting areas.

“I should choke the life out of you,” Lan Jue muttered with a tired anger.

The originator of his misery chuckled. “Take it easy man. It is what it is, right now it’s best to just go with the flow. We’re in the same boat anyway,

you know Lina ran off somewhere and probably isn't coming back."

"Oh please. Get the hell away from me, you stink like hormones. Don't put me anywhere near your boat. I'm not even in your ocean. For you this whole thing is warranted. I'm just suffering for your sins." Lan Jue whined.

"Fine, alright – it's my fault. If we happen to run in to each other on the field I'll let you win, alright? How about that – we're even." Chu Cheng hastily buried the issue.

As if on cue, the sorting process began. The sound like flicking playing cards filled the air as pictures soared overhead.

After three rounds the challenger pool had been whittled down to over four hundred. Elimination rounds were to proceed that would reduce this number by half again. But whether or not they moved on now, everyone present was a winner in regards to the richness of the rewards they'd earned.

The pictures in the sky above swiftly organized themselves in to pairs precisely as had been done the three days prior. At this point Lan Jue had stopped holding up hope for some luck, especially considering his match history so far. That was why when he saw his opponent he was pleasantly surprised – at least it wasn't a friend of his.

More than those of his Avenue or acquaintances, there were also the true powerhouse enemies like Constantine that he was really afraid of running in to. In a case like that he'd be forced to pull out all his tricks, and even then the chances of victory would be slim.

The Pharmacist was also in that category, and running in to her would be an even more bitter tragedy. Even for Skyfire Avenue standards she was stunningly strong. Also, how could he possible fight her when Jun'er was watching in the audience? At that point he'd have no other option other than to forfeit.

He thanked his lucky stars that wasn't this time. His opponent was number 122. If he were bold enough to ask for better luck than it was possible this unknown opponent could be one of the few remaining eighth ranks.

The Tournament was moving along well. Five rounds would see it complete and they were three in. The enormous press of Adepts had dwindled to a select few, but that didn't diminish the energy. With every new day the fights became more splendid.

To highlight and capitalize on this every fight was extended from thirty minutes to sixty. Contestants were given a full hour, to give everything in them for victory.

Lan Jue was with the second batch today. Chu Cheng was with the first, and he drew the short straw today. His adversary was Sariel, Archangel of the Moon!

"Dayumn look at this hotty." Chu Cheng, clearly, wasn't aware of his bad luck.

"This is one of the few good ones. Don't hurt her." Lan Jue implored.

"Don't tell me there's something between you two?" Chu Cheng couldn't keep the curiosity from his face.

He answered with a shake of his head. "Not in the least. She helped me once, and of all that mess in the Pontiff's Citadel she's one of the few that leaves me with a good impression."

"Fine, fine, whatever. Look the vampire princes didn't work out so how about an angel as my next one eh, whadda ya say? Ngh, and what if those two ever met. Ooh baby that's a fun image. Darkness on the left and purity on the right, different temperaments, different styles... the thought makes my mouth water."

Chu Cheng was getting carried away, but the look he saw in his friend's eye caught the words in his throat. It was pity! How could he not be praising him for his vivid imagination!

SMACK! Something hit Chu Cheng so hard he went reeling.

He spun around with a curse on his lips that died the instant he saw who hit him. Those angry eyes were cast down meekly.

"Dad, you're a judge! You can't go around slapping people." He cowered

obsequiously before the ice-cold glare of Chu Dong.

Chu Cheng's father said nothing. He only slowly lifted his finger and pointed it directly at his face. There were no words but the look he gave his son promised there would be literal hell to pay. A man like this kept his promises.

Chu Cheng looked like a terrified child. "What did I even do to deserve this? That really hurt dad, ow! Help me see if there's a bump."

"Karma's a bitch." Lan Jue gloated. "You're a skirt chasing bum. Consider this a reckoning. If I were your dad I'd beat the shit outta you so you don't bring disgrace to the family."

"I'm not your friend anymore!" Chu Cheng shrilly exclaimed.

Lan Jue's spine straightened in righteous indignation. "Excellent, get right on that! I won't bother with you or your baggage any more. And let me tell you something else! You better pray she beats you senseless because if I meet you in the next round – uncle.. uncle hey! Where are you running so fast!"

A few seconds later Chu Cheng was rudely deposited on his side of the assigned arena. His impassive opponent, Sarel, stared at him from the other end. She displayed no mirth at his misfortune not offered disparaging words. She was all silent determination.

"Three. Two. One. Begin!" The sharp buzzer sounded, and the fourth round of the Great Adept Tournament began.

Chapter 417: The Dark Mage

Sariel's face changed a little when she saw her opponent for the first time. She didn't look happy. Of course the Pontiff's men had dossiers on members of the Great Conclave, and Chu Cheng was no exception. She knew who he represented and had watched his fights. Sariel had faith in her abilities, but she also knew her limits. This would be a difficult fight.

In another arena not far away, another person Lan Jue was familiar with was preparing for battle. The Coffee Master was clad today in white trousers, a white shirt and coffee-colored trouser straps. His opponent was an ominous looking old man who looked to be fifty or sixty years old. The rules were quite strict about age restrictions, but even then the Coffee Master wasn't sure this man didn't cheat his way in.

He bore a dark scepter in his hands that was capped by a midnight blue gemstone. A faint light surrounded it.

The instant the buzzer sounded the craggy old fighter lifted that scepter in to the air. He called out a litany in a strange and monstrous voice. It was like nails scraping the inside of one's skull, and the words resonated over and over. Each poison syllable saw an orb of blackish-green energy belch from the stave and race toward the Coffee Master.

"Dark magic!" the Coffee Master picked out his opponent's powers right away. The story was that Adepts with supernatural powers like this sold their souls to powerful demons in exchange. In fact, even the Dark Citadel was reticent to deal with these sorts – they felt their foray in to necromancy was filthy.

The revelation also explained his strange appearance. For these Adepts powers were earned through sacrifice – of both their body and soul. The ultimate goal was immortality in the form of an immortal Lich.

Contemporary knowledge recognized Liches as their term for Paragons. If any existed at all, however, they kept themselves well hidden. The moment a Lich revealed itself, every one of the remaining Paragons would make it their mission to hunt them down.

Liches were the embodiment of destruction and death. Anywhere they went, they left a trail of desolation. Pestilence, disease, and all other manner of curses were inevitable when they appeared. So it was that the presence of a Lich became a problem for all humanity.

This one wasn't a Lich, likely still a ways from it based on cursory judgment. However, he was a representative of the Dark Citadel. It meant he was quite powerful indeed.

The Coffee Master couldn't afford to be careless. His first reaction was to launch himself in to the air and tear like a missile toward his foe. Graceful and elegant off the field, once the fight started the Coffee Master was like a wild animal.

However one of the black-green orbs caught him en route. Immediately he could feel the strength leeching out of him.

Curse of Weakness! The attacks of these mages afflicted one's spirit, stemming from black occult powers. The Coffee Master had a fair amount of battle experience, but his real expertise lie in mecha combat. It was widely accepted that when it came to one on one Discipline battles, only the Accountant was worse than the Coffee Master.

The fact that he'd made it here to the fourth round spoke volumes to his luck, especially considering his lower rank in ninth level. It looked like all that luck was about to run out.

The Coffee Master bit firmly down on his tongue. The pain sharpened his mind enough for him to descend and land on his feet. When he straightened his body had begun to swell. His shirt ripped, his pants tore, and the skin beneath was thick with corded muscle.

On the VIP platform the Gourmet watched with a slight frown. Must he always go straight for this madness, the Gourmet silently chided.

The Coffee Master, of course, was not mad. His Discipline was called Berserker. It's function was to rapidly and tremendously increase his musculature. So, even though the Coffee Master wasn't as strong in a duel as other fighters, you would be hard pressed to find someone who could take more punishment.

The violent change dispelled the weakening curse. In the blink of an eye the Coffee Master was a few steps in front of the mage with his enormous meaty fist flailing through the air.

The elderly necromancer never moved. His dark eyes like vipers simply watched him come.

He moved the scepter, just the slightest bit. A dark light sprang up around the wild Avenue Adept before we went running off to the side. He'd completely lost control of his body.

Curse of Confusion! It was a high order necromancy ability, specifically suited in combat against a close-ranged fighter like the Coffee Master.

Wordlessly he cursed his situation – he didn't know how to proceed. His Discipline instantly shot all aspects of his physicality in to the stratosphere; strength, endurance, energy – everything was greatly empowered. At the ninth level he was even stronger than most mech suits. Of course for everything there was a counter. For ones such as him who relied on close combat and strength, a mage steeped in battlefield control was a true nightmare.

The Coffee Master knew enough to know when he was in trouble. This would be payback for his former good luck. Statistics demanded that he would come across a true challenge eventually.

The Confusion Curse forced him to race far from his target. All the while the old man stood unmoving from his spot. The incantations ceaselessly filled the air with unsettling calls. As the audience held their ears and watched a pale purple aura pulsed wildly out from his scepter.

A single beam of toxic light shot out from the necromancer's gem toward the Coffee Master. The light itself appeared unremarkable, but it was often the innocuous that were most dangerous. The audience couldn't feel the soul-devouring energy hidden in the depths of that light, but the all-pervasive sense of dread that swallowed them up stopped the breath in their throats.

Death Ray! The strongest and most terrible necromantic curse!

The Coffee Master, under the effects of the curse, couldn't avoid the inevitable. The beam struck, and where it landed a rippling violet light spread out. He collapsed upon himself, like a corpse.

The body lurched. It shook and rocked, and a disgusting rip sounded around the arena. The Coffee Master pulled himself out from underneath layers of dead muscle with gasping breaths. "I concede!"

The mage was clearly stunned at this last-minute revelation. The Coffee Master had saved himself by hardening and shedding a shield of muscle. Having won victory, he ceased his dark curses.

As for the Coffee Master, he cast a hard glare toward his foe then stepped out of the arena. This was a competition and not a life or death struggle. He only came here to do well enough to save face, and he had. The rewards he would be bringing home were also a nice parting gift.

Their fight had been fast. By contrast, the fight between Chu Cheng and the Angel of the Moon was just getting started.

Fierce columns of fire belched within the arena, although Chu Cheng himself appeared especially calm. Roaring flares of pitch black flame continuously raced toward Sariel.

The young woman had always been beautiful, but with her wings spread wide and bathed in holy light, she was a vision of heart-aching purity. The light was silvery and ethereal, giving illumination to the origin of her name. Overhead its source was spied to be a crescent moon suspended in the air a few meters above her head. The beautiful light had a purpose, to strengthen her coming onslaught.

Like the other Seraphs, Sariel's weapon was the congealed energy of holy light. Its piercing white light beamed outward to cut the flaming attacks away. The holy light shone fiercely against the hellish fires of Chu Cheng's assault. This was a battle of dogma, diametrically opposed beliefs.

On the outside it looked as though they were neck and neck. Neither could break the stalemate. However, keener observers and especially Sariel understood the tactic. Consume energy.

Chu Cheng was seventh degree, and herself sixth – a difference of a single rank. Still she couldn't sustain against the full strength of Chu Cheng's offense. The tack he took now was a guarded opening move. His violent and expansive display seemed silly in a battle of staying power but the idea was to leave nowhere for Sarel to turn.

She didn't puzzle out his other objective, however, which was one he'd cooked up after Lan Jue's warning. Let her stay a while and win with dignity.

But how could this pity be something Sarel could approve of?

A glimmering crescent moon emerged between her eyebrows. Her six majesty wings beat in unison to send her soaring back several meters. The space she vacated was immediately consumed in hellfire, which burned and roared after her like a hellish serpent. She brought the blazing sword high overhead, a ringing prayer simultaneously cast from her lips.

Her melodious prayer rang through the arena like a church choir. The rousing devotion set the holy light around her ablaze and a great pulses of energy beat back the waves of black fire.

The moon suspended overhead grew and grew until it was a full moon. The white light blazed with the power of a sun and flooded her with intensity, so fierce in fact that the white burned away to shimmering silver. Under the sudden and sensational increase in power, Chu Cheng's hellfire was beaten back.

The Hades successor looked on in shock. This was a last stand – what was she doing?!

In the audience Metatron ever so slightly nodded his head. On paper Sarel was among the weaker Archangels. She was of few words, almost timid. But Metatron knew there was much more to her than that.

Chapter 418: A Monarch's Bane is a Woman

Metatron knew Sariel to be tough. She'd shown it after being selected for genetic experimentation. The harder they pushed her the faster she bounced back. She was fearless, and indomitable. Where others cracked she stood firm, ready to die for what was needed and take the enemy with her.

But this was a competition, not a fight to the death. He admired her determination – and who could say? Perhaps she'd work a miracle and remove the Hades heir from play.

The disgrace the Pontiff's Citadel had recently suffered was a fresh wound. Metatron had continued to ruminate over it, eventually coming to the conclusion that these foreign foes must have had help from the inside. Furthermore only someone with significant trust could provide useful information, or even be effective in helping them get in. Sariel was on his list, but his suspicions were eased upon seeing her fervent drive to earn the Citadel honor.

The Terminator watched carefully from the front row of the platform. His face was a mask of indifference. The sudden divide between he and little Jun'er was plain as day but there was nothing that could be done. The very special child had become invaluable overnight, and he didn't want to do anything that might make his guests wary. He also greatly respected the Gourmet for remaining here in the face of this new information. It showed real character.

Chu Cheng's eyes narrowed, fixed upon Sariel. The holy light surrounding her grew brighter with each passing moment. He lifted his own hands in response and pressed his palms outward. A pale grey aura appeared around him like a host of spirits, and the sea of flame around him saw all the color bleed away. They flashed and flared in mono-color, and the increased forced Sariel's cocoon of holy light to begin retracting once again.

This was pure Hades Hellfire. Even an amateur could tell at a glance that Chu Cheng had the advantage in energy manipulation. There was a reason he was considered a natural talent with potential greater even than the Gourmet. Like Lan Jue, he'd already had a wealth of experience commanding the protogenic powers of the Hades Ascension. Because of this he had been blessed with a natural understanding of his powers that went far beyond your average Adept. Sariel was simply outclassed.

Sariel grunted. The silvery light around her imploded toward the blade in her grip. Streams of silvery energy swarmed together to infuse the blade with potency. The full moon that hung over head descended and shrank until it took up position behind the Angel of the Moon. She blazed so brightly that she looked like a silver seraph statue that threatened to blind the eyes.

A strange smirk crossed Chu Cheng's face as the image of a school girl in a tiny skirt tittered "On behalf of the moon, I will right wrongs and triumph over evil, and that means you!" All she had to do was throw that quote out and he'd laugh himself out of the arena.

Sariel wasn't aware of Chu Cheng's lascivious thoughts. She continued to gather energy until it seemed as though she might burst. And then, without warning, she blasted forward like a silver lance. The burning light pierced right through the gray flames, right for the center of Chu Cheng's chest.

Ding! Chu Cheng was pushed back a step and the ringing sound resounded across the arena. His right hand had risen just in time to ward off the deadly strike from Sariel.

Chu Cheng looked down upon her with eyes of smoldering grey. His aura was thick and bleak, like a choking manifestation of death. She could feel something in the aura around him, some terrible and indescribable beast that hungered for her.

She'd managed to knock him back, but where she should have retreated she discovered nothing but a world of grey. The light around her was gone, and with it her immense speed and strength. She wanted to wave and slice

with her blade but it was impossible, a crushing wave of silvery fluid like Mercury crashed around her. It seeped in to her every pore.

This... was...

Sariel's pretty eyes were wide in alarm. She tried to react but a boundless expanse of grey stretched out ahead drawing her attention. She could feel something lurking, unseen – a terrible presence. Her right arm had been the one knocked away, and it was over her right elbow she felt that presence descend upon her.

Ding! The sound of ringing steel was heard again, but this time it was Sariel who was knocked back. She could feel the penetrating energies grow ever stronger, and the light of her holy weapon dimmed considerably in response.

She had spied Chu Cheng's weapon, briefly. It was a dagger that he held upside down in his right hand. The base of its hilt was home to a strange grey gem. That was what had saved him from her last strike, and what had nearly ended her just now. What she couldn't figure out was how this clearly empowered weapon was not releasing any sort of energy or aura.

Tendrils of errant grey power congealed to form an enormous blade of air. It pointed directly at the lunar angel's chest. She was frozen in place, unable to move, unable to resist.

A buzzer rang. This fight was finished.

The grey light melted away from around Chu Cheng, and fled from his eyes. They sparkled as he gave his opponent a pleasant smile. He even offered a polite bow before leaving the ring.

Lan Jue's shocked expression was only partially hidden by his mask. He must be really scared of his dad, he thought. He fought like a different man! He was beginning to suspect a doppelganger until Chu Cheng came back and opened his mouth.

“What do ya think? Sexy stuff, am I right? And I was a perfect gentleman – totally left an impression.”

Lan Jue sighed helplessly. “It would have been if you could shut up about

it. What's the point anyway, it's not like Sariel's gunna go tip-toeing to your room because you bowed once. I'd give up your hopes, brother."

"You understand nothing," Chu Cheng disdainfully instructed. "A bird in the hand is worth more than two in the bush. Lina was definitely watching that, and I'm sure that when she was reminded how awesome I am she started to think twice about this whole running away from me thing."

Lan Jue couldn't stifle his laughter. "Here I thought you'd already climbed that mountain last night."

His friend looked depressed. "Don't even bring it up. I'll tell you all about it after your fight. It's about time for you to get out there."

Lan Jue stepped out to the open field, and even before he got to the ring a chorus of boos had begun to follow him. Sometimes, he thought, being a man sucked. If his opponent yesterday hadn't had been a beautiful woman than he wouldn't be suffering today.

He silently whispered a prayer that he'd be spared a female opponent this time. The picture of 122 used during pairing hid their identity hidden beneath a helmet.

However, the mystery was revealed when he entered the ring and got a closer look. Indeed, one often came upon the misfortunes they fought to avoid. 122 was a woman.

Female Adepts were not a rare thing, but the higher echelons were largely male. Even here at a tournament like this, coming across a strong woman was relatively rare.

This woman was clad in bright yellow leather that shone distractingly in the light. Unlike the profile picture in the sky above she wore no helmet. She was revealed to have short pale-green hair which hung to her shoulders. The combination made her look like a valiant steam-punk heroine. She wasn't a very beautiful girl, but she did have a certain charm. 'Dynamic' was perhaps the word Lan Jue felt best described her.

She bounced from foot to foot over by her end of the arena. The vivacious young girl hopped in circled to warm up.

Lan Jue shook his head, and made an internal promise: I will not be called a woman-beater!

She flashed him a dimpled smile, full of sweetness.

He nodded back.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

Her pretty smile never left as the buzzer sounded. The girl almost skipped forward, seemingly in to rush to make her way over to him.

Lan Jue watched her carefully, then raced off obliquely with a start. Not half a moment later the spot he stood upon erupted as a giant spike of stone leaped out. The spike pierced a good three meters in to the air, with a peak sharper enough to impale him if he hadn't moved.

The sight of it made Lan Jue's face go pale. Even with his body's natural resistance that would have hurt. Now was this an appropriate way for a sweet young girl to act?

Great cries of regret sounded from the audience. They were upset she hadn't run him through with her opening attack. Lan Jue's face twitched in irritation. She's trying to kill me! Where's your humanity?!

122 pursed her lips, also looking upset that the attack hadn't landed. She answered by forcing a second massive column of stone to erupt from the earth.

Lan Jue leaped up in to the air to avoid it. Battling an earth-based Adept on the ground was a bad idea. It was a Discipline one didn't encounter often, and she had pretty masterful control. Although her contestant number was on the higher end for this round, her Discipline was still a very respectable ninth level first rank.

At this point, Lan Jue didn't even have anything to say about his lack of fortune.

“Hey!” The girl in yellow jumped up, and came crashing to the ground with both feet. Light as she looked, the whole arena rumbled from the impact. A shuddering booommm filled the air.

The two spiky columns from before shook then shattered, sending shards of stone thick as a man's arm tearing through the air. They converged upon Lan Jue's location, but this time he didn't dodge. Instead, a shuddering aura of electric energy pulsed out with him at its center like a lightning grenade. Feral arcs of lightning blasted outward to envelope the entire ring.

Forest of Lightning!

The jagged stones were turned to dust as they encountered the lightning storm. He was a rank above this girl and possessed two Disciplines, so he had the advantage in terms on energy stores. He abused that advantage by using such a powerful attack so quickly.

The girl was also lost in the roaring wave of electricity. However, she was save from it beneath a gleaming orb of yellow light. She remained a single calm speck in the chaos of electricity around her. Earth was going to be a problem – it was naturally a counter to Lightning.

122 pressed her hands together in the shape of a heart. A yellow light was birthed and began to grow stronger between her fingers. The moment she saw an opening in the lightning storm she shoved her hands out with a cry. A beam of yellow light fired off toward the sky.

Lan Jue didn't press the attack after using the Forest of Lightning. This was such a good opportunity to try his hand against a range of Disciplines, so he was in hurry to finish the fight. The more he pressed himself against powerful foes, the faster he would grow in strength.

Chapter 419: Pressure; the Core's Catalyst

The roaring forest of lightning eventually restrained itself. The origin of that terrible attack – Lan Jue – shimmered as the last bolt of lightning faded. He looked at the dark yellow light where his opponent stood.

122's aura of protection extended about two meters in all directions. However, with the onslaught finished the manifestation of the girl's power explode every which way like a sudden sandstorm. It covered everything in a rich mustard yellow, and even she vanished so as to be indistinguishable from the dirt of the arena floor. Everything was flooded with the Earth element, which deepened its color even further 1.

The young girl's perky and playful persona had vanished along with nearly everything else. Even the audience could feel the waves of energy pouring from the ring. However, Lan Jue did not react. He remained suspended in the soupy yellow air while errant tendrils of electricity coiled around him. The audience could spot him through the haze, but if they didn't know any better they might mistake him for a spectator. He didn't move or react, just... floated. They would all be running if they could feel the crushing pressure he felt.

The tension came from both the sky above and the earth below. It squeezed him from both directions and left him with nowhere to go – the turkey slice in a very unfortunate sandwich.

Not bad! Lan Jue mused. Thankfully the girl in yellow didn't appear capable of reading thoughts, or she'd have crushed him in to dust for his unspoken insolence.

It was true, he felt pretty great. It wasn't because of his clear domination of the fight, but indeed because he could feel... something. It seemed like the Pharmacist was right – having to fight his way back to his former power levels had helped strengthen his foundation. He doubted there were many at his current rank that could boast the same.

What Adept would willingly give up their Discipline, even for the promise of future success? Not many. There was maybe only one in a

million with that kind of resolve and mental fortitude. There was a great deal of guess work on the process, and he was lucky to have only dropped to first rank. Not many could afford the risk.

Lan Jue's case was different. It was like fate had determined this course for him. It was the only explanation for how he ended up in this situation. He knew the Pharmacist was right because of the differences he felt – differences he hadn't noticed until she had explained it to him. Now it was unmistakable, and present every time he trained with Qianlin.

The makeup of his core had undergone subtle changes since the binding. Before, he could describe his core as a solution of condensed electric molecules. Now it was as though someone drained away the fluid, and all that was left were those pure molecules. He felt purer, more stable. It wasn't an obvious change, easy to miss, but now that he knew where to look he could always see it.

He could see how this effected his max potential. He was stronger than before, more capable. As with anyone else's cultivation process, however, progress came through bitter training – or, bitter experience. This sort of motivating discomfort was best when it came from combat experience, and could only really be obtained through combat against someone roughly one's own level.

This girl was weaker than he, but her Discipline was unique. Earth-type Adepts specifically had very powerful defenses and had a stronger crushing force than any other power. There was nowhere to run, so Lan Jue had no choice but suffer the pressure directly.

In a real fight Lan Jue couldn't have stood around like this. The idea would be to prevent your enemy from having any opportunity to counter attack. However, Earth Adepts were known for their relatively slow nature, and Lan Jue's advantage in the area didn't need to be affirmed.

But why not abuse it? Because he liked when his enemy pulled out all the stops. This girl was showing her true strength, and that was what Lan Jue appreciated. He was a little busy, but if someone were to ask how he felt in that moment, he'd have a simple answer; perfect.

The whole ring began to shake. The girl fixed Lan Jue with an imposing glare, likely biding time. Earth Adepts were slow, but if they had time to prepare an attack than it made then infinitely more dangerous.

The man suspended in air left the girl with a very strange impression. She'd never met Zeus but knew him by reputation. She expected, considering his status, to lose quite quickly to the Mercenary king. However, instead he had allowed her to employ her full strength. Could he be that self-confident? Did he think he could shrug off everything she had to throw at him?

122 clenched her jaw as the thought of his suspected conceit wormed through her mind. Somewhere deep in her chest her Core flared, but all Lan Jue saw was the sudden and violent expulsion of her Discipline. That familiar crush resumed, stronger than before. He could feel his bones creaking.

Still he did not move. In utter stillness he focused on the changes in his own Core. As the outward pressures increased he watched the blue-purple energies condense in to a gloriously shimmering gold. The pale force encompassing it did not change, though its color dimmed the golden power that tried to expand outward.

The interior of his Core also seemed different. He'd since felt the purity of his Discipline compared to before, but now it seemed even more concentrated. Like it was morphing.

Yes, that's what it felt like! Lan Jue was overjoyed – losing this fight would be well worth it. If he was right, then the benefits of these changes would be reaped when he got back to the Avenue.

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Qianlin sat within the audience, far from the arena. Still she could also feel her own Core reacting through her connection to Lan Jue. As he was suffering the effects of 122's Discipline, so was her own Core. The changes were smaller and more subtle than Lan Jue's, but were noticeable nonetheless.

The Morning Star sat beside her. She was caked in make-up and hidden

beneath an enormous sunhat to hide her identity. Large, dark sunglasses hid most of her face. In all it resulted in a near complete transformation from pirate queen to little rich girl. The Pontiff himself could walk right by her and be none the wiser. Metatron sat a few dozen meters away and hadn't the slightest idea.

Now that her Discipline had returned mostly to normal, she had no more desire to be cooped up in her hotel room. Today she decided to join them at the arena for the games. For your average attendee finding tickets at this point was as likely as turning in to an alpaca. But they had the advantage of being friends with Chu Cheng.

Xiaosu darted a glance toward Qianlin. Now that they were so close she could feel the waves of energy coming off of her. He spotted her eyes, which although open were staring blankly straight ahead.

What was she thinking?

Xiaosu turned her eyes back to the tournament grounds, and continued to wonder why Lan Jue refused to fight back. Her guess was her new Master aimed to goad his opponent in to using all of her power. Once she was drained and committed he would turn it around to finish her.

Boom —! The building anticipation reached a fever pitch as her attack finally burst forth.

It started on the ground. Towering obelisks of stone clawed upwards. They pointed at odd angles like a mouth of rotten teeth. Yellow light poured from their jagged crowns, each of which pointed squarely at Lan Jue. He could feel the gravity around him begin to change.

122 wasn't a gravity Adept, but her Discipline was earth. Gravity was a result of mass, so she had a certain measure of mastery over it as well. If her eventual destiny was to reach Paragon, than gravity manipulation would be a staple of her personal Domain.

None of this was a surprise to Lan Jue, even as the crushing force of gravity increased. The air around him warped oddly as though viewed through a veil of heat. Flashes of earthy yellow blinked and vanished all around. He first heard the whistling, which turned in to a roar as boulders

the size of watermelons came screaming toward Lan Jue from overhead.

The first few in sight weren't overly large but larger ones – many over a square meter – quickly followed. It was a meteor shower that encapsulated the whole ring. Lan Jue had nowhere to go.

The falling stones and reaching stalagmites gleamed with a yellow aura. The force of pure earth elemental energy was empowering them. Common knowledge stated that Earth Adepts, if given enough time, could shatter planets. Lan Jue felt that to be an accurate assessment. Up or down, nowhere was safe.

This was punctuated when suddenly the stalagmites ripped themselves from the earth, and launched at Lan Jue like terrifying javelins.

He had nowhere to go, instead dodging the spikes and boulders as they came. He was so quick that he could barely be seen slinking through the tiny gaps between the stones. But with every stone he sidestepped, he could feel the gravity getting stronger. It made him sluggish, and slow.

A meteor the size of his chest howled by when suddenly gravity changed again. He spun out of control just as another stone came right for him. He couldn't dodge – this one he'd just have to power through.

That wouldn't work. Instead he fluidly pushed both arms out as the boulder came. It forced his body out of the way and sent the boulder spiraling. This was a benefit of his Taiji skills, which conditioned him to use gentleness against force for defense. He didn't even need to use his martial abilities.

Chapter 420: Weeding Out the Stragglers

Lan Jue was beset by danger, suspended alone in the air. He looked destined to be impaled on the great earthen spikes.

The stalagmites picked up speed and tore through the air like ballista bolts. They closed the gap between their target and the tumbling meteors that were crashing down from overhead. He had nowhere to hide.

Once the danger from below was more apparent, Lan Jue responded by moving even faster. He moved left and right and in between with the speed of a lightning bolt to evade the threats. On occasion the increased gravity would get the better of him and a meteor would find its mark.

Those that he couldn't avoid were deflected, just as he'd done before. The point was to take as little damage as he could from these errant boulders and spikes. Still they kept coming until the boulders blotted out the sky and those terrible spikes hid the floor from view. Lan Jue could only be seen as a bolt of blue light flitting between the cracks. This was possible the most stunning fight of the tournament up to this point, as was evidence by the fact that almost the whole audience had their eyes glued to their ring.

"Smash him! Smash him! Smash him!" The cries swelled to a cacophonous chant as the spectators cheered 122 on.

122 watched him from the ground, a dignified and imposing expression on her face. The meteor showers and earth spikes were her most practiced abilities. Her concentration was honed to a laser focus, bringing all of her power to bear against that single dark spot in the sky.

Where she struggled was in finding a way to lock the speedy bastard down. Every time she thought she had him dead to rights he'd find some way to slither out of it. She had every advantage but it wasn't enough, and the longer this went on the darker the outlook became.

Lan Jue was focused entirely on evasion. He was spending a great deal of energy in the process as well, but it was all worth it to force 122 in to this position. At the very least her doughty attacks served to make him

stronger!

For ten minutes neither earned the upper hand, but even so the audience knew what the result would be. 122 was outmatched, even if she was holding him off for so long. In the end the chances of her coming away victorious were slim.

Perhaps she knew it, too, for the staggering hail of meteors lessened. The spikes spat from the earth below came slower as well. Lan Jue could also feel that the gravitational anomalies pulling at him had begun to ease. Just in time, he thought. His clothes were torn and dirty – the result of repeated run-ins with the focused meteor field he'd survived. Although she didn't know it she'd had him against the ropes. Any faster and there wouldn't have been much for him to do but get knocked around like a rag doll. He had suffered some injuries though none were serious – but only because the explosive nature of his Discipline and his Taiji training had spared him a very dismal fate.

More important than any of this was the continued adjustments to Lan Jue's Core. This had been his goal the entire time, and the result of this competition was a distant secondary concern.

Suddenly the yellow haze and pummeling rocks subsided.

Eh? Why'd she stop? Lan Jue pondered. He stopped his erratic flight patterns and looked down at her. Her chest heaved from the effort... but there was something more. Her red-rimmed eyes were thick with tears when, suddenly and with a shrieking voice she cried, "you bully!." She ran from the ring choked with sobs.

He watched her go, flabbergasted by what just happened. She had tried to flatten him with an unending cascade of rocks the size of his head, and he was the bully? What the hell?

"Lowlife! Lowlife! Lowlife!" The crowd had settled on a single curse to call in unison. Few could hear what she'd said, but there were screens in front of every seat that showed the tears streaming down her face.

It was a possibility and a potential problem with any fight between a man and a woman. Sometimes the women cry, and when they did who

would side with the man?

Others decided more choice curses were more appropriate, and screamed them liberally at him. Somehow he'd become persona non grata out here.

Meanwhile, the Gourmet had his hands pressed firmly against Jun'er's ears. He had to be careful that these overenthusiastic fans didn't corrupt her young mind.

Lan Jue wordlessly left the ring and made for the relative safety of the waiting area. Contempt was in the eyes of many a spectator as he trudged away. He even earned a strange look from the Pharmacist as she walked out for her own fight.

"Were you making fun of her on purpose?" She asked, the slightest note of disapproval in her voice.

"What?" He asked quickly. "You'd told me before about my Discipline, and about how retraining made it more stable. I was just testing out the theory, and it ended up being true. But in order to get there I needed to be pushed. I was hoping to get some help from the girl to help me improve! So why the hell is everyone cursing at me?"

She just shook her head. "You fail to understand them. They don't know how strong she was, or what kind of pressure you were under. All they saw was your determination not to strike back. You forced her to use everything she had and beat her without a single punch. Can you think of any better way to shame an opponent? The girl thinks you're looking down on her – not even worth really fighting. The audience sees it as cruel teasing."

Lan Jue stared at her, entirely dumbfounded. "This is a travesty!"

Worse, his assertions could only be told to the Pharmacist because no one else would believe him. His only course of action was to flee the contemptuous glares of the crowd. He could still hear the curses as he left to change, persisting until he came back some minutes later without the mask or uniform.

Was he just pissing off everyone he came across? He felt completely powerless – luck was actively working against him. Could this be a flaw in his own character?

He had originally wanted to stay and watch the fights, but after the shaming he just experienced the best course of action was to flee.

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The fourth round concluded without any notable upsets. The highlights were widely available on the television. The on-demand options were more telling, with Lan Jue's fight topping the charts. Reports flooded the screen with images of the young girl's teary eyes. What followed was a tirade against the 'monstrous' actions of Zeus.

Perhaps unexpectedly the resurrection vote for this round didn't go to 122. Instead Chu Cheng's opponent, the stunningly beautiful Sarel, was called back to compete. Meanwhile the media had chosen a pithy nickname for Chu Cheng – the Dark Gentleman. Of course where there was a hero a villain was needed, so Lan Jue filled that vacuum. And once the populace had an idea in their head, changing that was near impossible.

Lan Jue's singular blessing was the mask that concealed his identity. He praised his wise decision to wear, because otherwise the lynch mob would already be breaking down his door.

Chu Cheng – perhaps wisely – wasn't answering his calls. He was like a horseman of the apocalypse, and gone without a trace when trouble came knocking. That was brotherhood for you.

Really, though, none of this bothered Lan Jue too much. If he concerned himself with the opinions of others than he'd have lost his mind years ago.

The next few days saw his fortunes experience an upward swing. Though not of his opponents were weak, they also weren't outside of his capabilities. Meanwhile the contender pool kept shrinking. Round five had more than two hundred Adepts brought down to one hundred and eighty, round six dropped that to ninety five. Round seven finished with forty-

eight Adepts and going forward from here, no challenger would be less than ninth level.

The Avenue had a strong showing. Aside from the Pharmacist, the Driver, Bartender, Barber and Beautician had all advanced to the eighth round. Lan Jue and Chu Cheng were also still in the running. Sariel – thanks to the resurrection vote – was there too, with her compatriot Constantine. The necromancer who had defeated the Coffee Master was also still in contention, and several other notable young Adepts. A few surprising exceptions did exist – unknowns from the West and North – but they were few.

Now they all waited for the eighth round of fights to begin. This would be the final elimination round before double-elimination began.

The twenty four Adepts in that round had two chances to get in the top sixteen. First they'll fight, then the winning twelve will advance as the losing twelve fight for a second chance.. The losing six are gone from the tournament and the winning six are voted down to four. Those final winning four then join the original winning twelve competitors to advance to the next round – group battles. If the losing two are not voted out by a margin larger than ten percent then they are also permitted to join the groups. In that case it would be two groups of five against two groups of four.

All of this meant that round eight was very important. The winners here had a real shot. The prize for reaching the group battle stage was an A-ranked power gem, and not a common one either.

Lan Jue had tried very hard to remain aloof, indifferent and invisible through rounds five six and seven. The curses had largely vanished by the eighth round since his last few opponents had all been men.

Chu Cheng was the darling, a representative of the North who was both gentleman and warrior. He was as powerful as he was noble, and suddenly the dream boy of no small number of young ladies.

Woe be unto any of them who learned of his other persona, as the Prince of Nightlife!

Chapter 421: Chu Cheng's Tough Break

All of the remaining competitors were gathered in to a single waiting area. It was much finer than the one from before. Where hard seats were the high prize in the first few rounds, now each of them had a personal sofa to lounge on between fights. A side table was also provided with fruit and drink.

While contestants were enjoying their upgrade, the field outside was being adjusted for the rounds to come. Now, the field was only separated in to four rings. Eventually it would be the whole field used as a ring, and that's when the fights could get really spectacular. The Terminator and The Infernal Vanguard were rumored to be personally narrating the fights and offering their input.

"So who's ass do you think you're kickin' today," Chu Cheng said. He was draped over a nearby sofa.

Lan Jue looked straight ahead. "You," he answered softly.

Chu Cheng shook his head in disappointment. "This guy... how could your heart be so full of the lust for revenge, eh?"

Lan Jue pinned him to the furniture with a frigid glare, but said nothing.

Chu Cheng chuckled sheepishly. "Alright, alright. So I may have besmirched your name, ok... but you're wearing a mask! No one knows who you are, you haven't lost anything. I handed over that damn fine cognac without a word of complaint, didn't I? Anyway, I can't complain with all these young ladies suddenly so interested in who is Chu Cheng. What do you say, huh? After I get eliminated I find a good girl to love, settle down. But with the adoration of the crowds I don't think it's necessarily fair to deprive them of me. Needs of the many weighed against the desires of the few, right? What do you think?"

Lan Jue gave him a thumbs up. "You're definitely a rare individual."

Chu Cheng lifted a brow. "Am I?"

"Oh yeah," Lan Jue assured. "It's almost impossible to find anyone else

with their head any farther up their own ass.”

Chu Cheng huffed indignantly. “Watch your tone. Big brother here will kick the shit out of you if we do get matched up.” Chu Cheng was, of course, aware of Lan Jue’s drastic reduction in Talent.

Lan Jue patted his head in irritation. “Alright, hope you mean what you say.”

Chu Cheng broke in to a sudden and easy smile. “Ah screw it, right? We’re brothers, not barbarians. I do find myself in a quandary, though. There are a whole lot of people hoping for me to win, but I’m gunna have to go through that tomboy from the Avenue to do it. Ugh, and Constantine. I’m not worried about any of the others – no offense. Oh right, and there are a couple sleeping giants among us from the Conclave. Be careful if you run in to them, they’re strong and people don’t know it yet.” He delivered the last sentence with a serious stare.

Lan Jue’s eyes inadvertently swept the waiting room, searching for these mysterious Adepts. He spotted one, a tall man who looked like a copy of the Terminator. His skin was a rich brown, bald, and with no outside evidence of mechanical assistance. He was surrounded by a distinct aura of danger. From what he could gather watching earlier fights, this one’s Discipline was Force. However, his Discipline was so strong that his Talent could affect the atmosphere around them. So far no one had lasted more than three minutes against him. His Force pummeled them long before then.

Lan Jue was more suspicious of the other one, though, someone who stood in stark contrast to the Hulkish man. She was a woman, in a long white dress with a veil obscuring her features. She was elegant and classically beautiful, all but for her eyes. They were a myriad of colors, which were hard to see with her smaller eyes. When her eyes widened, though, they shone brilliantly with the full spectrum of the rainbow.

Her earlier fights had been quite strange, and in fact many of her opponents weren’t even sure how they lost. It would just... end. Lan Jue had payed very close attention to her in the last few rounds. Her weapon

was a long sword which she wielded with an almost ethereal grace. Her victories had all been easily – and mysteriously – won. She was alluring and dangerous like a succubus, and the only way he'd really understand her powers was if he had to fight her. He wasn't in any rush to do so, but the longer her stayed in the running the more likely it became.

The Avenue still had five competitors in the games, excluding Lan Jue. The Dark Citadel and the Pontiff's Citadel had three each. The North had a slight advantage, with six still in the running. The remaining few were unaffiliated.

"It's about that time," Lan Jue muttered. He took a glance at his communicator.

Chu Cheng didn't answer. His eyes were closed as he silently meditated. Many of the other Adepts were likewise quiet as they time neared. Who they would fight wasn't under their control, but a result of fate or luck. Who knew if the next fight would see glory or defeat? They couldn't be sure, even the strongest of them. They could only hope for the best.

"Elimination, Round Eight. This will be the final elimination round of the tournament. Winners will proceed to Double-Elimination. Pairing will now commence."

Forty-eight enormous portraits appeared in the sky. With so few now, details were far more readily discerned. The audience no longer needed to read help menus to see more. After a moment they began to flit back and forth across the cloudless blue sky, arranging themselves just as they'd done seven times before. Every eye in the waiting room was open now, glued to the results. Who would be their challenger? Where they going to be able to make it to the next one? A lot of that rested on those pictures overhead.

Those like Constantine were anxious, too, because there did exist a chance that he'd have to face the Pharmacist. Before, with so many fighters, the chances were small. Now, however, there existed the very real possibility that he'd have a stroke of bad luck. Out of all the people staring up in that room, only the Pharmacist seemed completely at ease. She held

no stock in victory or defeat here, cared not for prizes or reputation. Her single hope was that she wouldn't have to face off against Lan Jue.

Gradually the pictures stopped moving. Chu Cheng's face immediately darkened in despair.

It was important to note that no more resurrection votes would be held.

Lan Jue looked up, and his lips revealed a small smile.

Both he and Chu Cheng would be facing off against female fighters. Lan Jue smirked at the image of his opponent; Sariel.

Sariel was sixth degree, but to Lan Jue it was a fine result. She wasn't going to embarrass him with how strong she was, and she wasn't an Avenue representative. This wasn't a dream pick, but it wasn't a nightmare either.

Chu Cheng, on the other hand, had been forsaken by luck. He had been paired with the one person he had hoped he could avoid, the strongest competitor in the tournament, and the one heavily favored to win; the Pharmacist!

Like hot oil and water – that was going to be fun to watch.

Lan Jue looked at Chu Cheng, almost with pity. His friend's face was frozen in shock at first, but eventually hardened in to a cold scowl. Proudly, he said "Ninth level ninth rank, so what? Two ranks, that's all – not insurmountable. I mean you took out the Angel of War, right? Similar situation."

Lan Jue's response was calm and measured. "First allow me to express my congratulations. You deserve to get kicked out of the tournament by a woman who totally emasculates you. Next, it's important to clarify that I beat Michael as a mecha pilot, not an Adept. Michael is far more deadly with his own hands than behind metal ones. The only reason I came out of that alive was because I chose the means of battle. And last, if you're expecting the Pharmacist to be as strong as Michael you're in for some serious disappointment. She's much... much worse."

Chu Cheng swallowed hard. "Really?"

Lan Jue burst in to laughter, rich and loud. His face was covered, but Lan Jue didn't need to see it to know he was gloating.

"Shit, what kind of brother are you?"

He shrugged. "That's what brothers do, right? Talk shit, poke fun."

Chu Cheng, clearly anxious, pressed him. "Come on, tell me about her Discipline. What are her strengths? You've gotta help me find some angle _"

"Nope!" Lan Jue said, even before Chu Cheng could finish.

"Why?!" Chu Cheng whined. "What, who's side are you on anyway?"

Lan Jue shrugged. "Hers. She's the mother of my child."

"Holy shit on a lightning rod!" Chu Cheng's eyes almost rolled out of his head. "Y-yo-you..."

Lan Jue smirked. "Go on – you two are first up. Don't make a fool of yourself."

Chu Cheng shot Lan Jue a look full of anguish and said, "You really aren't going to root for me? Not even well-wishes?"

Lan Jue was silent for a moment, but that loathsome smirk spread wide on his face again. "Of the four of us, only my brother is strong enough to compete with her. He would have to fight harder than he ever has to come out on top. Her talent and training is comparable to ours, and she's been at the peak of ninth level for longer. Her emotional baggage has kept her from immersing herself in the world of protogenia, but that's her final hurdle. So tell me... do you think you have a chance?"

Chu Cheng felt the cold tightness of impending doom in his chest. He knew Lan Jue, and knew that he wouldn't say something like that lightly. If that was how he really felt, then there wasn't anything he could do about it. This was as far as luck would bring him.

"Let's do this!" Chu Cheng shot to his feet without any further hesitation. He took off to the ring with long, eager strides. He knew what was coming, but losing wasn't the end of the world. He had to show the

world that he wasn't a coward.

Lan Jue watched his friend go with his determined stride, and silently praised his strength of will. Even knowing he was outmatched, Chu Cheng didn't let that shake his confidence. This guy wandered round with a flippant look on his face but really, it was clear at least to Lan Jue that Chu Cheng's determination was legendary.

Chapter 422: Mommy Must Win!

Talent existed everywhere; as humanity spread so too did their capabilities. However, finding a Talent that was strong, dedicated and gifted was a rare thing. Chu Cheng's Talent was the best in a generation, but he got to where he was today – with hopes that surpassed even the current Hades family Paragon – through quiet, hard work.

To most he was the Prince of Nightlife – they knew him by that persona. In reality that was just how to let off steam, to keep his sanity in the face of a strict household and high expectations. Really he was in fabulous shape, and still with potential to surpass the Gourmet.

The Gourmet abandoned the Hades title when he achieved Paragon. It was a misconception that the Gourmet gave up calling himself Hades and all the power that would afford him because of his old grudge. Really it was because he knew what his nephew would one day be capable of. With this in mind he passed up the opportunity so that it would be available for the next generation.

Right now he was walking toward the ring, where his opponent the Pharmacist would meet him. Under the hopeful stares of the audience each step became more determined than the last. He stood tall and defiant in the face of what was likely certain failure. From their angle in the waiting room Chu Cheng looked tall as a mountain by the time he reached the ring.

The Pharmacist was much calmer by comparison. In fact there was little difference between her now and when she fought yesterday. She walked up to the ring and entered without any change in expression. It was like all of this was occurring in the back of her mind. She had chosen to appear today in very traditional Chinese garb – a qipao. It was her normal uniform, actually, though the color differed day by day. Today it was silver, like the light of the moon, and embroidered with plum blossoms. They were fine clothes, but were only meant for those women with excellent figures. The form-hugging shape of a qipao was a dangerous choice for women otherwise endowed.

The Pharmacist had a daughter, but it didn't appear to have affected her shape – in fact she was almost flawless. Her long black hair had been wrapped in to a ball and fixed to the top of her head, adding to the classical undertones of her outfit. Altogether she appeared cool, calm, and collected – the gentle flowing river that had the ability to carve through mountains. Just looking at her lent the viewer a sense of tranquility.

She stepped in to the arena – no, she floated. Her feet and legs never moved, and instead she was delivered to the arena on a cloud of golden mist. It swirled beneath her feet without any indication of heat or mist to keep her aloft.

Chu Cheng walked in on the opposite side without any sort of display. His feet carried him to the ring with determined steps. The only indication he was preparing to fight was his invisible but powerful aura.

The Terminator watched from the VIP platform with a barely discernible smile on his face. He turned ever so slightly to the Gourmet while never letting his eyes stray from the ring. “Finally, a fight with some weight. Tell me Jun’er, who do you think is going to win this one – mommy or the red-haired man?”

“Mama!” She said without a hint of pause.

The Terminator grinned and looked her way. “Is that a feeling or just what you hope?”

The little one shook her head. “I don’t need to feel it. The red-haired uncle was really showing his power when he walked in, so he’s scared of my mommy. If he’s worried before the fight even started than he’ll definitely lose to mommy.”

The Terminator looked at her with surprise in his eyes. He shot a wordless glance with the Gourmet, though the look in each Paragon’s eyes was enough to share their thoughts. Indeed! This was as plain as day to the experienced fighter. But a six year-old? That was an inhuman level of comprehension for her age. Chu Cheng’s reaction clearly showed him to be in the inferior position. It wasn’t a display of force that made him do this, but instead fear. He was worried that he wouldn’t have the ability to

call forth his full power once the fight began. It might be over too quickly. In this way he showed his weakness.

The Terminator heaved a long sigh. “How wonderful if this little treasure had been born in the North. The Avenue is incredibly lucky!”

The Gourmet offered a smile. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“How long before this one’s finished,” the Terminator asked.

The Infernal Vanguard thought for a moment. “Difficult to say,” he began. “Chu Cheng is weaker, but he has his heart set on victory. The stress of it may even be sharpening his will and focus. The Pharmacist may have more power cultivated, but that young man’s potential is staggering. There’s much more to him than meets the eye. How long this fight continues, and the winner, will be determined by how much of that potential is brought out today.”

This caused the Terminator to chuckle. “I suppose this is a complicated fight for you.” And of course it was; one competitor was his nephew, a representative of his family. The other was a leader in the Avenue delegation that he lead.

The old cook laughed in spite of himself. “No – on the contrary this makes me very happy. An Adept can only improve and learn more about their powers through combat with opponents that challenge them. This fight should be of great benefit to Chu Cheng. The timing is right as well, because the benefits would not be so great if they’d met during the later rounds. He’s got one chance, and that is a motivating factor to make him pull out all the stops. From what I can see the Pharmacist will likely win, but Chu Cheng won’t be a push-over.”

The Terminator smiled and nodded thoughtfully. “Very well – let’s see what happens.”

They weren’t the only ones with eyes on that ring. Forty-eight fighters remained with four rings on the field. There would be six batches today, and this was the first. There was no better way to start the day’s events than watching two powerful foes compete.

They were not, however, the only interesting fight. The Beautician was also fighting in the first batch, and against the Dark Mage that had kicked out her compatriot, the Coffee Master. It promised to be an interesting fight; she was a master of illusion and he commanded terrible arcane curses. They held powers in a similar occult base – it would be difficult for either to win the upper hand.

“Three, two, one. Begin!” Once more the unfeeling, digitized voice called for the fight to commence. The audience reacted with silence as they held their breath, waiting. The statistics were trickling through the news wires as well – ninety-five percent of viewers in the audience had their eyes fixed on Chu Cheng and the Pharmacist. It was unfortunate, many thought, that the fight wasn’t going to have any commentary. Because this was still in the elimination portion of the tournament, they would have to wait to watch the recording on demand if they wanted a run-down. No matter what happened in the fight, it was almost a given that it would be one of the highest-viewed fights of the tournament – maybe even first place.

The Pharmacist watched him with calm eyes. Nothing on her face betrayed trepidation over the coming competition. Chu Cheng, though, bore a hard and resolute expression that was marked different from his earlier fights. Without his characteristic apathetic demeanor he was like someone else entirely. The Prince of Nightlife was gone.

Lina was present in the audience and watched from one of the forward rows. She wasn’t on the VIP platform with the other powerhouses, but she was close – close enough to see the rings well. She muttered, mostly to herself: “If he wins this, I’ll give him another chance. He’s like a different person.”

She wasn’t wrong.

The second the word ‘begin’ echoed through the ring, Chu Cheng’s eyes drained of color. The pale grey orbs were possessed of a haunting power that spread over him. It wasn’t fire, or rage, but an unsettling stillness like death itself that covered him. Where he stepped the earth turned grey and lifeless, a meter in every direction. He left a trail of oblivion with every stride that took him toward the Pharmacist.

For half a moment that iron calm in the Pharmacist's eyes gave way. Still she did not move from her spot, the same as her other fights.

Chu Cheng continued his charge unimpeded. He raced ahead straight and deadly as an arrow. The grey power that trailed after him followed in his wake like a creeping cloud of death.

He approached, closer and closer. The Pharmacist finally reacted with a wave of her hand, which birthed a beam of golden light. The two opposing powers met in the space between them.

Clang! The staggering clash struck Chu Cheng head on. His forward charge was stopped short like he'd hit a wall while golden light bounced back and swung around for a second strike. Like he'd seen before, this was her golden dagger attack.

He recovered quickly and started to move again, faster this time. Already it looked as though he were throwing caution to the wind in favor of pure attack force. Astute observers might be able to see the faint grey figure at his back.

The golden dagger struck again. Bang! The strike was so strong it felt like it was rattling Chu Cheng's bones and he stopped again. It swung around for a third pass.

Now, surprise was written clear as day on the Pharmacist's face. Her right hand swung up and her fingers waved like shoots of grain in the wind. The dagger reacted by exploding with light, and suddenly ten thousand cutting waves of energy were headed Chu Cheng's way.

The Hades successor stopped on a dime. His pause was strategic and allowed him to miss the majority of the Pharmacist's powerful attack. It was only for a half second before he was moving again, even faster. The ghostly specter at his back was still there as well, even larger than before he stopped. It completely encompassed Chu Cheng.

ζ

The VIP Platform.

The Terminator knowingly bobbed his head. "No one knows like family,"

he said to the Gourmet. “Not bad at all. Chu Cheng has a much deeper comprehension of the Hades bloodline than he did before. He’s been given guidance, I assume?”

The Gourmet nodded, though his eyes never left the ring – fixed firmly on his young nephew. A real fight was the only way to determine just how strong an Adept’s Discipline really was, and just how much they understood.

Chapter 423: Hades' Falchion

Once, the hopes of the Hades family had rested on the Gourmet's shoulders. Love shattered those hopes. Now, all these years later, it wasn't anger that stopped him from going home. His shame was too great. It wasn't until he heard Chu Cheng's explanation, and after years of his own self-examination, that the Gourmet began to faintly understand his role in the lives of others. And even though there had been no attempted apologies from his family he didn't mind. Even now, as a Paragon, he didn't have the power to go back to a life with them. He'd lost that opportunity and desire long ago. Now Chu Cheng wore the mantle of the Hades legacy. He would go far, and help bring the Hades family back in to control of the world of darkness. That had been the Gourmet's task once, but now it passed to him.

The rain of dagger strikes weakened. It was a deadly assault, but hard to maintain. Chu Cheng prevailed through it and came out stronger. His nefarious presence was so intense the audience feared it'd split the ring's force field.

Chu Dong found himself by the ring, injecting his power in to the gemstones that managed the shields. Much like the Gourmet, he was completely absorbed in the fight. Whereas the Avenue Paragon was tied by blood, Chu Dong was the patriarch of the Hades bloodline. No one had more stake in this fight than he did. What the Paragon saw he did as well, and clearer. He knew his son's capabilities very well, and although he didn't show his rascal son a lot of outward affection, Chu Cheng was his pride and joy.

He was aware of his son's antics, of course. How could he not be? But where many just saw a playboy squandering his life, Chu Dong knew just how much blood sweat and tears Chu Cheng put in to his cultivation practices. He was permitted to relax because he earned it. One iron fist and one helping hand, that was Chu Dong's way, the way that he had learned from his father. In reality Chu Cheng hadn't ever done anything to really let them down, so he turned a blind eye to a lot of his childish

forays.

From the sidelines he carefully analyzed the situation. When his son had first been set against the Pharmacist, his face had drawn tight in despair. Now, though, he saw the opportunity.

He'd watched his son walk to the field and he couldn't help but break in to a wide smile. He saw how proud and valiant he looked, ready to face the challenge. The Hades patriarch was satisfied; his son was a mighty representative for their family. Their future would be bright.

Now again he smiled and watched as the power of the Hades bloodline threatened to break from the ring. There was still anxiety, for he knew that this woman was the strongest opponent his son had ever faced. He didn't know how strong she was, or precisely what her powers were, but she was certainly a daunting foe. How hard she pushed him would affect how quickly he could comprehend protogenia, he was sure.

Now was his time to strike! He could feel Chu Cheng releasing ever greater waves of power that threatened to sweep him up as well. Just when it seemed like the ring couldn't handle anymore, Chu Cheng's body went transparent, like he was carved out of crystal. The grey mist that surrounded him became clear as he pierced the net of blade strikes and immediately appeared in front of the Pharmacist.

It was so fast and fierce that only a few spotted the short sword in Chu Cheng's hand. Its blade looked like grey crystal that had been carved to a razor's edge. That weapon housed his focus, and his determination. His will made real.

The Pharmacist stood still as though she did not see him before her. The golden dagger was still. In all her previous fights she hadn't needed to move, and relied on the speed and power of the golden dagger to win the matches for her. This fight was the first time anyone had gotten close enough to be a threat.

CLANG! A squealing cry rang out, a hundred times louder than their first encounter. Chu Cheng's crystal-grey figure went soaring away, and the force of their collision separated the falchion from his hand. The

sword buzzed hideously as it was separated from its host, and Chu Cheng quickly thrust forward to get it back in his grip. It was the only thing between him and obliteration. A streak of fresh red blood ran down his grey hand.

Although most weren't able to see what exactly had happened, Chu Cheng sure had. It shocked him.

From the moment he'd learned his opponent was the Pharmacist, he'd been building power. Lan Jue's words had inspired his fighting spirit, and he was determined to put as much of his spirit and will in to the fight as possible. He would hone his will and bring it to bear from beginning to end.

Were one to give an Adept's energy levels a numeric equivalent, then it could be said that employing even seventy percent of one's energy in a fight was difficult to do. One hundred percent would require unparalleled levels of will and concentration. A hundred and twenty percent would need outside help.

Chu Cheng had never felt stronger when he delivered that blow. But despite that he had only succeeded in making the Pharmacist sway. She didn't even lose her footing and he was blasted away.

Why that happened, only the two Paragons and the Pharmacist herself knew completely. The result of the discover was clear in the Terminator's blank expression and the shocked look in the Gourmet's eyes.

The dagger had been very quick to act in her defense, but the Pharmacist's tranquil exterior never cracked. It was in that fraction of a second when he appeared before her face that she moved, just a little. She opened her small mouth, and from it a piercing light shot forth. What in the world that power was even they didn't know, they were too far to see clearly. It was this light – not her dagger – that had repelled Chu Cheng.

At last, the faintest hint of respect shone behind her cold eyes. Vestiges of that grey power flickered around her like specters clawing for her soul. Her golden dagger shuddered and swiped the air, sending eight sharp crescents spiraling through the air that cut the grey tendrils to pieces.

Chu Cheng came to ground, staggering for half a step before regaining his footing. He took a deep heaving breath and stared at his opponent with eyes like grey whirlpools. He slowly extended a foot and placed his toe against the ground. The entire ring immediately felt lifeless and cold.

He was off again like a beam of light. His charge looked just the same as his last failed attempt. In no time he was within striking range of the Pharmacist again. A flash of dull grey, aimed right for the center of her throat.

Her dagger flashed up and clashed with the falchion, but the moment they collided all the light drained from it. The Pharmacist's dagger was infected with the same grey that choked the ring.

Chu Cheng stopped, and an ashen figure separated itself from him. It looked exactly like he did, like his soul had torn itself from his body. Chu Cheng's living self was close on its heels as the spirit dashed toward the Pharmacist.

She watched them come. Then, just before the moment of impact, the power within Chu Cheng bloomed outward by half again as much, and his cloudy sword released a shock wave of energy.

Her right wrist flicked, and the corrupted dagger vanished from view. It reappeared a moment later in her hand, as bright as ever. A strange, feral cry like dragons could be heard filling the skies while under an explosion of golden luminescence the dagger grew in to a long sword. All of this happened in half the time of a lightning strike.

She thrust out with her sword, and the point of her weapon met with the glinting ashen point of Chu Cheng's.

The shuddering, bone-crunching crash resulted in the Pharmacist being pushed back half a step. However the grey light that was his power seemed drawn to the golden light released by her weapon. It looked as though her sword would swallow up the grey light around them.

A strange shine flickered behind the Pharmacist's eyes. It was like they were covered in some strange reflective energy. Then there was a blast of intensity and another thunderous dragon's roar as her sword shuddered of

its own volition.

Her weapon wrenched itself free of her grip and began to twist. It warped until it was the massive figure of an ancient Chinese dragon. Chu Cheng's weapon was caught between its teeth. In the same instant she moved to avoid him, for the first time that anyone had witnessed. Seven steps, but they were strange and gave the onlookers an uncomfortably illusory sense. In a blink seven Pharmacists were in the ring.

Chu Cheng lost his target but did not stop in his forward charge. As waves of pure death poured outward, he lifted his head and bellowed a terribly cry. His challenge hung in the air even as the man himself suddenly vanished. The grey sword remained, though imbued now with its bearer's power. It grew enormous, and flailed with a life of its own. A terrifying aura followed it, borne by an almost invisible grey hand.

Chu Cheng's living weapon wrenched itself free and cut through the air like it was slicing the boundary between life and death. All the ended lives in all the history of man flashed in its faceted surface. Heaven and Hell were at war were the blade sang, here before everyone's eyes.

The seven Pharmacist that had spread out at either side vanished, leaving just the real one, right in Chu Cheng's path. A smile spread across her pretty face. Her golden blade fractured in to a host of blazing motes. They gathered and pressed in to one another to form a shimmering starburst. Lights from the vanished copies arranged themselves before her in the shape of the Big Dipper. The world around them turned upside down, but the Pharmacist remained calm like a sage in the midst of the turmoil.

Chu Cheng's sword had no way to approach, leaving them at a temporary stalemate.

The Pharmacist lifted her hand again and paced her palm against the swell of her chest. Her soft lips fluttered as she repeated a mantra, saying it again and again. The seven stars swelled larger with every syllable and congealed in to seven separate golden blades. But that lasted only a moment before they gathered together to form one as large and imposing

as Chu Cheng's. Once again the two swords met point to point in the blinding glare of the Big Dipper.

Chapter 424: Big Dipper Godblade

Ting-!

The resulting explosion caused a spider web of cracks to appear in the ring's shield and then explode in to a shower of shimmering sparks. The audience watched the golden great sword pierce through it and speed off into the heavens. Another roar, then suddenly a five-clawed dragon emerged from the roiling clouds above. Its limbs each bore a shimmering star, seven across its whole form, and where it moved the clouds parted like the sea. The sense of majesty it exuded was dumbfounding.

Booomm—! Chu Cheng's body went sailing out of the ring. The dragon curled and swam above, partly hidden in the clouds. The blazing golden greatsword, however, was ever visible. Even Chu Dong – himself the peak of ninth rank – took several uneasy steps backward. Once he regained his composure his eyes immediately shot to where his son had flown.

As the explosion of golden light receded it became seven beams of rainbow-hued glare. They each raced toward the Pharmacist and converged at the top of her head. From there they delved deep in to the Adept's body and vanished. Subtle flashes of golden light shone in her eyes, but silence was the prevalent scene. Her qipao fluttered though there was no breeze and she stood as serene as a goddess, hands clasped at the small of her back. Her pale face was offset by blushing cheeks².

No one waiting in the resting area was enjoying their fancy new sofas. Long ago they had forsaken them and stood to watch the breathtaking clash. The young upstart Chu Cheng had already displayed a level of power few would have thought him capable of. His last attack had the power of a peak-level Adept behind it. Yet still he'd lost and didn't even leave a mark on his foe.

This was the Pharmacist, representative of Skyfire Avenue, and even her own people watched with wide eyes and opened mouths.

"Is she even human?" The Barber slowly shook his head in disbelief. He used to think he was strong, but then he lost to Lan Jue and now this. She

was a ninth level adept, like him! Not a Paragon. How was there such a difference between them?

The Accountant had long since been stricken mute by the dramatic scene before him. All he knew was that if that sword was pointed his way, he'd have to bequeath everything he owned to his dad because he'd be dead meat.

The great quaking blast of power reached all the way to the VIP platform. It was silent as the grave. Both Metatron and Lucifer watched with expression dark and gloomy. They were a hair's breadth from Paragon, but they knew they couldn't beat her in a fight.

The Avenue was a whole lot more frightening than they'd originally thought.

The Terminator let out a long breath. His eyes swung to Jun'er, who was vociferously celebrating her mother's victory. He couldn't think of what to say. And the Gourmet? He looked as stunned as everyone else. If he weren't a Paragon, he asked himself, could he face her toe-to-toe? He didn't like the answer.

This was the first time ever the Pharmacist had revealed her true strength. Even against powerful foes from the Citadels, she had never needed to resort to tipping her hand.

Chu Cheng, beaten and bruised, struggled back to his feet. Rivulets of blood flowed from his nose and mouth, but his eyes were bright. He liked it.

Chu Dong came quickly and looked over his son. Only once he was sure there wasn't any lasting damage did he heave a sigh of relief. "Failure is the mother of success," he said, "don't worry about it." It was a rare word of comfort from the man.

However Chu Cheng hardly noticed. His eyes were glued to the Pharmacist, he had since floated down and away from the ring. "Goodness gracious," he hummed. "That right there is the woman of my dreams."

Smack! Chu Cheng's face whipped back toward Chu Dong after his

father slapped it back around.

The Pharmacist slowly made her way back to the waiting, clearly in no hurry. The eye of every Adept followed her, but she acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. She took a seat, instead of leaving immediately as she had always done before.

Lan Jue made an effort to keep the shock he felt out of his expression. The whole fight was still roiling in his mind, and now finally he thought he had an inkling as to what her power was.

Legend told of the Big Dipper Godblade, which was less an actual weapon than it was the apex of Celestial Master Qian's martial knowledge. He couldn't be sure whether that distinctive golden sword was real or just condensed energy.

What incredible power!

There were still other fights from the first round yet to finish. The dramatic finish to the Pharmacist's fight had been a major distraction. In one case they had to pause the fight, and resumed once Chu Cheng and the Pharmacist had finished. Though the Beautician fought valiantly, in the end she was just not enough to match the Necromancer's curses. Perhaps she just didn't want it enough, but whatever the case the Avenue had one less horse in the running.

The Coffee Master, Beautician and Barber had seen defeat, but that was to be expected considering their relatively lower ranks.

The first batch was done, but the audience still remained quietly in their seats. They were still stunned – maybe even frightened. The vision of that coiling dragon and golden sword were burned deep in to their collective memory. They were suddenly very aware of the force shields around the rings, and very grateful. That woman's power was beyond imagining, enough to shake the pillars of heaven!

Chu Cheng tenderly walked the distance back to the waiting area. No one in the audience looked down upon him for the loss. His strength was proving in the Pharmacist's response. No one before had made her resort to such frightening attacks. He gave the imposing woman a thumbs up as

he limped passed, and his eyes were full of praise. She acted like he didn't exist.

"You're full of shit," Chu Cheng wheezed.

"Oh? How's that?" Lan Jue asked.

His companion sniffed. "My ass she's your baby momma. That other stuff you said was right on the nose. She is at least as strong as big brother – and when I saw those seven stars gather and come right for me, she was even scarier than him. Lan Qing's fear is ominous, like a net slowly closing around you. He is a terrifying strategist. There's no escape – you helplessly deliver yourself right in to his hands. But the Pharmacist, damn... that's straight domination. No tricks or fanciness, just straightforward, in your face superiority. You expect me to believe she'll let you in that dress? Having a kid at her level definitely has a negative effect on breaking through to Paragon. So whatever, you lied to me, but don't spread that nonsense. Otherwise you better be careful."

Realization dawned on Lan Jue as he listened to his friend. Yes, the sacrifices that she made to give her husband a child were great, and showed how deeply she cared for him. There was a dark envy in his heart, but she had lost her love as well. If he were still alive they would be a loving, happy family.

Chu Cheng, confident he'd exposed his friend's lie, let the silence extend for a moment. He spoke again after a second, his voice thick with pride. "I may have lost the fight but I didn't lose the people. If you don't believe me check tomorrow's headlines. Your brother here will be plastered all over the front page. Now that I've fought the Pharmacist I'm convinced she's going to win it, I'm putting my money on her. Constantine ain't got shit on her."

"Aren't you hurt," Lan Jue asked dryly. "How about you sit quietly and recover. It's time for my fight."

The second batch would be where he was to face off against Sariel. Lan Jue rose to his feet and left for the rings. Watching the fight between Chu Cheng and the Pharmacist had been an inspiration. Both her power and

Chu Cheng's grit had lit a fire in him. The tournament restricted the use of protogenia, so all of that power had come from just his friend's Discipline. Had you asked Lan Jue yesterday, he would never have thought it possible. His brother's potential was a point of pride.

He thought about Chu Cheng's three consecutive strikes, and wondered if he'd be able to stop all of them. That sword he'd used sure wasn't any ordinary sword – he figured it was the Hades family Astrum. That's the only explanation as to how it almost broke the Pharmacist's defense and corrupted her weapon. His grey falchion was the factor that forced her to reveal her true strength.

But what about him? Lan Jue absent-mindedly fiddled with a spot against his chest.

He made his way to the ring and was silently grateful to Chu Cheng. The audience was still processing the fight and didn't have the energy or attention to fling curses his way. Things had gotten better as time went on, but he still heard the jeers and hisses every time he stepped out on to the field. His protest was to continue climbing the ladder.

Sariel flew into the ring on great, majestic wings. She had an absent-minded expression on her face, but that wasn't odd. When competing at their levels, an Adept had to possess an intimate understanding of themselves. They were always turning their perception inward.

Watching each other recently meant that both he and Sariel knew what to expect and were preparing accordingly. This was going to be a good fight.

Chapter 425: Zeus vs. The Angel of the Moon

The last time Lan Jue had encountered Sariel they were on the same side. Now they were opponents – it was strange. Sariel did not feel the same, however, as she didn't know this masked man was the same one who had terrorized the Pontiff's Citadel. Lan Jue was perfectly happy with the arrangement, as he didn't want to bring her any trouble. He acted as though he didn't know who she was.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

Sariel's wings brought her in to the air. As she hung there above him, the Seraph's power surged out in a golden wave of light. Lan Jue answered with vigor, in contrast to the strategies of his earlier fights.

There was a flash of electric light and Lan Jue appeared before the Angel of the Moon. There was nothing so fast as lightning, and Sariel didn't even have time to summon her holy sword. She could only thrust her hands out in hopes they would deflect his attack.

Lan Jue reached out two barehanded, and a point of light was spat from each fingertip. The ten twinkling dots gathered together in a strangely specific order. Voracious Lightning! It was a skill even Chu Cheng'd never seen before.

Sariel wasn't Lena. There was quite a power discrepancy between them, not to mention their diametrically opposed Disciplines. Zeus' lightning-based powers were especially forceful against the vampire's Dark Discipline, but were notably less so when faced with Light Adepts. In addition, she was also several ranks higher than he was. Winning this fight without some sort of secret weapon would be next to impossible.

The Angel wasn't frightened or alarmed by the lightning attack. Ten tendrils of pure white light slithered from her own fingertips to cut off and reflect Lan Jue's attacks away. A crescent moon was revealed a few meters above her head with a single silver light shining down upon her. The light

was serving as a shield.

“Boom-boom-boom-boom....” The careening orbs of lightning erupted one after the other in fierce blooms of light. The special quality of these strikes was their ability to devour outside energy. Explosions spread their influence farther.

Sariel right away felt a strange sense of detachment with her energy. She beat her wings and rose higher to escape. This encounter had her on her back foot. Her knowledge of Zeus was extensive, as was all of the Archangels in the Pontiff’s Citadel. After all, they had long-held plans to deal with the troublesome Mercenary. All of them were aware that he had this ability. It was used to catch his enemy off guard, not only with the explosions but the sudden loss of energy afterward. A fighter’s body suddenly felt drained, and sluggish.

There were drawbacks, though, as a miss meant a great deal of wasted energy on Lan Jue’s part. The Voracious Lightning didn’t do much if the attack didn’t land straight on. The cost to Lan Jue was great, in part because the skill covered a large area. Sariel felt like he’d managed to deplete some of her energy, but guessed that it wasn’t as much as he’d spent performing the attack. Pros outweighed the cons, so why did he make that choice?

Lan Jue made no move to chase her through the skies. Instead he pressed his hands together before his chest. The air crackled ominously before the whole ring erupted in to a web of screaming electricity.

The Forest of Lightning!

In no longer than the time it took to gasp, lightning covered every inch of the area, including Sariel and her shield. The rays of godly light that emanated from her ceased as she focused on keeping her shield intact.

Lan Jue turned his hands over until they made a circle in the center of his chest. Spider-web bolts of lightning raced along his arms and hands, joining together between his palms to create a roiling orb of electric power. Thick bolts of purple and blue snaked along the outside of the ball, but the core of it was pure, tumultuous golden energy.

The blaze of holy light filtered through the lightning as Sariel finally summoned her righteous blade. She held her position suspended in the air, ready. When there was a break in intensity, she was prepared to launch forward in an all-out assault. However, Lan Jue had different plans, for as the first wave finally extinguished a second enormous Forest of Lightning attack swept her up again.

The angel looked around her in disbelief. Could he really have so much energy that he could use this attack twice? The most current intelligence put him at rank six or seven, the same as her. It made no sense that he'd have so much energy to waste.

Obviously, the discrepancy in total energy between ranks was most obvious in a fight. However that was only part of Sariel's mistake. Her first was trusting in the Pontiff's information about Lan Jue. She also knew that he had been strong enough to defeat Michael, which meant she started this fight behind. Still she wouldn't have thought he'd come out of the gate so intense. Her final, and perhaps biggest mistake, was failing to see passed the intensity at the actual strength. If she did, she would see that a sixth ranked Adept would be quite a bit stronger.

In the back of her mind somewhere she noticed, but she never thought to question why he felt weaker than expected. Perhaps it was a diversion, or some other sort of trick. As a precaution she chose not to rush in.

Lan Jue's condensed orb of lightning was released in to the flood. Where it passed, the forest of lightning was devoured in to it, empowering it. A tail of ionized air gushed passed, propelling the orb toward Sariel.

Boommmmmmm! The grand-shaking rumble drowned out all other sounds. Sariel put all of her power behind maintaining the shields against the orb. She knew this one, another special attack unique to Zeus; Thundercharge.

The Thundercharge hit with enough force to make her shield sputter. It was weaker than he was capable of before, and Sariel felt it. His power was explosive but not as terrifying as she was lead to believe. Was he holding back? Sariel's mind raced with uncertainties.

Lan Jue used the cover of his attack to retreat. He stopped at the far end of the ring, while Sariel suddenly found herself in a very unenviable position. She could pit her hopes on her shield which was strong, or evade. She could not do both, for though durable her shield restricted movement. It's strength was greatly reduced while she was on the move. No... there was only one option, and that was the Rite of the Holy Spirit. It would render all her previous effort pointless, but it was that or defeat.

The moon over her head blazed with ethereal silver light. Sariel's massive wings beat against the air and sent her soaring toward her foe. She steeled her resolve with the knowledge that Lan Jue must be near spent. Two rounds of his forest of lightning, the Voracious Lightning orbs and the Thundercharge could only mean he was almost drained.

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Metatron's enigmatic gaze was fixed on the fight. His organization had a keen interest in Zeus, in no small part due to his insistence on protecting the Stygian Succubus. The refusal could only mean he stood against them, and was deemed an enemy. They knew he was a member of the Avenue – their 'Jewelry Master' – which made it curious that he had chosen to participate as Zeus rather than with his fellows.

There had been more interesting fights earlier in the tournament, and Metatron had assumed there was little more to learn about Lan Jue that they hadn't already discovered. The times he had chanced a gaze, it looked like Zeus was mostly toying with his opponents. However, something seemed strange this time – off. It drew his attention in a way his other fights hadn't. He knew Sariel like she was one of his own children, in fact it could be said he taught her everything she knew. It also meant that he knew how much punishment she could take. From what he knew of Lan Jue's skills, the result of their clash should have been radically different.

“When did Zeus become so weak?” Metatron muttered to himself.

Lucifer chuckled softly at his side. “Maybe he's luring her in to a false sense of security!” Lucifer certainly bore no love for Lan Jue, but his hatred for the Pontiff and his crew outweighed everything. He didn't hesitate to

wish the worst on Metatron's people.

The master Archangel shot his dark counterpart a flat glance. He didn't respond, although he was ever more curious for an answer.

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Pulsing waves of holy light flung out from Sariel, and met with Lan Jue's Forest of Lightning. The Mercenary and jewelry salesman stood with his feet planted and a golden spear of lightning clutched in his hands. Sariel restored her focus to her shield, which she knew now to be enough to protect her.

Tendrils of vicious lightning struck all around her but could not penetrate her defenses. She pierced through the undulating sea of electricity on a collision course with Lan Jue.

He smirked. Lan Jue didn't advanced or retreat, but there was a flash and suddenly he appeared on the far side of the field. The alternative storms of electricity helped him move. The air was charged, and helped conduct him across distances quickly and unseen while transformed in to lightning. It was like a temporary, small-scale Domain of his own creation. It sure cost him to maintain, though.

Sariel paused as she lost her target and looked around to find him. She was protected from the unceasing attacks from the lightning, but every moment she was out there she was spending energy. Sariel had so many questions, but the fight was first.

She charge ahead again, but just like before Lan Jue vanished as she came near. What was the point of this? Why was he running?

Ariel wasn't the only one confused. The excitement of the fight was beginning to wane, and the audience had begun to sense something was strange too. Muffled conversation fluttered through the bleachers.

Chapter 426: Battle of Attrition

What sort of strategy was this? Neither one ever actually collided with the other. One simply covered the area in a massive draining area-attack, and the other darted around at full charge while evading the lightning. Both of them were hemorrhaging energy.

“This isn’t right. Zeus’ attacks are far weaker than they should be.” Metatron muttered.

It was loud enough for the Gourmet to hear, and he furtively smirked to himself. They were already late in their discovery, and there was no way for them to alert Sariel from up here. Metatron was among only a few members of the audience who understood the tactic – force Sariel to waste her energy. In a pure contest Lan Jue was a great deal weaker than Sariel. The difference between a second rank and a sixth was more than considerable. This was true even despite his dual Disciplines and the benefits of re-cultivating. If he wanted a shot at winning, it would be from draining his enemy and striking when the time was right.

However, it didn’t look like this was the case. Outside observers could tell that Lan Jue was spending far more energy than Sariel was. In reality, though, Lan Jue still had the skills from before his fall to second rank that made them efficient. There was also the special gift he’d gotten for surviving the bug attack on Taihua – the Phylactery Stone!

Even Lan Jue didn’t know how much energy the Phylactery stone could hold. The tournament didn’t prohibit the use of weapons or power stones, banning only mech suits. This stone was also unique in that it was bound to his blood and body.

These rules were specifically implemented for Converts. A lot of what made them powerful Adepts were installations such as these. Aside from the fact that they could only be removed by hacking off a limb, the reduction in power would cripple them as Adepts as well. They couldn’t be expected to compete in a situation like that. Other banned materials were filtered out with scans when they’d first entered the arena to sign up.

The Phylactery stone would not be a problem, especially since it had long since joined with his left hand. In peaceful times he had developed a habit of infusing the gem with energy every day. No matter how much he put in it, though, the gem never seemed satiated. Using it felt equally bottomless, and that cache of energy was what fueled his steady stream of attacks.

How could Sariel know about this secret weapon? She hadn't, and the result had been dire. From the start she had been forced to waste her own precious energy by protecting herself from him. She was playing to his tune. After fifteen minutes of fighting, Sariel guessed she had no more than sixty percent of her stamina left.

It's off! Sariel was beginning to get the idea that something was wrong. From what she knew of Lan Jue he should have been exhausted by this point! However from what she could see, he could keep this up for the rest of the fight. This was not normal. Sariel still couldn't fathom the truth, but few would. The situations surrounding Lan Jue's drop in power were unthinkable for most Adepts. But whatever the mechanisms she saw the result; if she didn't try to end this now with all of her remaining power, than her loss would be a slow and shameful one.

Sariel stopped her fruitless chasing, and thrust her holy weapon toward the heavens. The crescent moon that followed her transformed, just as it had in her fight against Chu Cheng. Soon it was full and glorious, releasing piercing rays of silver light. She became more imposing with each pulsing wave of light, and the six great wings at her back shimmered with pure white light.

Lan Jue's face was lit stark against the encroaching waves of light. He wasn't surprised or alarmed – he figured this would happen sooner or later. Even getting Sariel down to her current level of fatigue was difficult. The burst meant there was nowhere to go, and just like he'd left her no room for escape, now it was his turn to face the strike head on.

His shimmering spear of lightning vanished without ever having been used. As the sweeping lunar power grew ever closer, Lan Jue pressed his palms to the sky like he was supporting it. Again he summoned his Forest

of Lightning, stronger than last time. Individual tendrils of gold appeared in the sea of purple electricity, and soon began to spread. The ghostly remnants of protogenia flickered in that power. Soon the entire ring was lost in a sea of gold and silver. Their clash was so bright not even the Paragon's eyes could pierce through.

Sariel could feel the power increase, but there was no other choice. Whatever came, her only chance lay in a head-on confrontation. She held her sacrosanct blade aloft with both hands as a sweet and piercing call rang from her lips. The moon above descended to join with the lunar angel. Imbued with the power of the moon, she brought her weapon down in a brazen chop. From outside the spectators could see a milky-white dragon cleaving through the sea of gold toward Lan Jue.

Sariel had pulled out all the stop to try and lock Lan Jue down. Even if he dodged, it would set him up for a fierce counter-attack.

Trickery became a lot harder when Adepts got to the higher echelons.

Lan Jue stood in the center of the roiling lightning with his hands pressed together before his chest. The electric power around him sizzles and congealed until it produced an elemental essence shield around him. He watched as the powerful eminence of Sariel's holy weapon came barreling his way, and then moved. Eight steps, strangely paced and specific. Beneath his feet the faint image of yin and yang appeared. Lan Jue threw up his hands and an arc of intertwined black and white raced out to meet the danger.

Boom—!

The ring's shields quivered. The tournament organizers had learned from their mistakes, so this time there was a team of high-level Adepts continuously strengthening the shields as they fought. Even with their help, though, it was a full ten seconds before the shields returned to stasis.

Eventually the blazing lights inside also dies away to reveal the scene. Lan Jue stood where Sariel had sent out her attack. Sariel, likewise, stood where he had made his defense. The two had changed position.

Lan Jue stood calmly. The air around him was charge, and tendrils of

lightning burst to life then vanished. He seemed perfectly fine.

But Sariel looked pale, even more than usual. She looked at Zeus with wide, bewildered eyes.

Chapter 427: Th-this...

She'd seen it. The angel knew that her opponent was using the powers of Taiji. His mastery over the skill allowed him to face her strike and deflected it to the shields.

Zeus was just this kind of person, completely different once he put on the mask. But the Zeus she knew was powerful – strong enough to survive a confrontation with the Angel of War, Michael. Why, then, was the energy he released today so weak by comparison? None but her saw, for the golden lightning hid everything from the view of the audience.

Lan Jue lifted his right hand, which crackled with faint arcs of golden lightning. The air felt charged, moments away from another blast of his Forest of Lightning.

“Do you want to continue?” He asked.

Sariel shook her head and sighed. She fixed him with a look. “I forfeit.” It was the right choice, she was already down to forty percent of her power, much less than she'd need to face Lan Jue and his Taiji mastery. There was no path to victory for her.

Lan Jue smiled a small smile, and nodded. Sariel – representative of the Pontiff's Citadel – was removed from the tournament lists.

Despite the theatrics, few were surprised by the fight. After all, Zeus had a reputation that probably served him better than his Discipline did. His hatred for evil was legendary, as was his status as king of mercenaries and one of the Four Divine Monarchs. Defeating Sariel wasn't any great accomplishment for him. The same was true for all of his previous fights as well. People would have been much more animated if Sariel had won.

Lan Jue knew he'd won victory only by the skin of his teeth. He had only just managed to deflect Sariel's attack, but only by joining his dual Disciplines and Taiji skills together. If he hadn't, then he most likely would have lost to Sariel due to her superior rank. This was also just a friendly competition. In a life or death confrontation, who knows what would have happened. He wasn't without a contingency plan, but he was

saving that for when there was really no other option.

Man! Being second rank was a real pain in the ass! He longed for those passed days when he could tangle with the best of them.

Chu Cheng's voice called to him. "You're down-right insidious."

Lan Jue answered with an impatient sniff. "I think you meant 'clever!' Anyway, how much can I trust the advice of someone who got trounced so badly? You lost, go home and rest."

"Let's go." It was another voice that answered from somewhere behind Lan Jue. Before he could even turn around, a hand had him by the crook of his elbow and was pulling him away. Chu Cheng, who had wanted to answer with some snide remark, now only watched with his mouth hanging open.

He wasn't alone, either. Every Adept around looked at them with the same stunned expression. Lan Jue jumped at the unexpected contact, and had his complaints silenced when he saw it was the Pharmacist who had grabbed him. He nodded wordlessly and followed her.

The second round had just finished. The ruckus from the audience didn't start to swell until Lan Jue had already been dragged a few steps.

Th-this...

It wouldn't have been such a big deal if this had occurred before her fight with Chu Cheng. Now, though, she'd captured everyone's attention with her power. Then, first thing she did after her fight was drag Zeus from the resting area. Could this mean they were a pair?

The dragon lady swept her eyes over the crowd, and just like that they all fell deathly silent. Where her gaze fell, a chill followed. She didn't look at any one person, but the whole audience felt like she was staring right in to their soul. It was unsettling, to say the least. When her face pointed their way, whole sections busily tried to look everywhere but at her. There weren't any more jeers directed at Lan Jue.

Suddenly is struck Lan Jue. He knew what she was up to; taking care of him! It was certainly a strange sensation, being protected by a woman.

Strange, but heart-warming. Lan Jue and his brother had been orphans ever since he could remember. He had no memory of his parents, only the old instructor who took care of them. Since he'd never had a mother, he never felt this sensation before. Perhaps that was why he had such a soft spot for sensitive, compassionate women. It's why he loved Hera.

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Su Xiao Su shot a sideways glance to Qianlin, seated beside her. She looked a little pale, but otherwise perfectly composed.

"Aren't you jealous?" Xiaosu asked. "What are they doing?"

Qianlin answered with a smile. "Jealousy is the most pathetic and self-abasing reaction a woman can have. If it means he no longer loves me and has an interest in someone else, then I must not be charming enough. Not enough to keep him." With that said, Qianlin rose to her feet and left. Lan Jue's fight was over, there was no other reason for her to here.

She was a smart girl. She knew what the Pharmacist was doing.

Lan Jue had already told her about the situation between him, the Pharmacist and Jun'er. There was nothing for her to be suspicious about. That didn't mean she wasn't adversely affected by the image of her pulling him out in front of the crowd. She had faith in her estimations.

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The Pharmacist didn't retract her hand until they were out of the sports arena. Only then did she give him a little space.

"Thank you." Lan Jue's appreciation was sincere.

She smiled. "You should."

"Big sis-!" The words came out before he could stop them. The Pharmacist's eyes slowly went wide.

"You..."

He shook his head. "I don't know... I just, suddenly had to call you that. Like a protective big sister."

The extraordinarily powerful woman snorted a laugh. “How old are you? Who says I’m your elder?”

He coughed in embarrassment. “Really not important. It just blurted out.”

“It’s not so bad having a younger brother,” she mused with a grin. “Of course you mustn’t speak like that when Jun’er is around. I’m counting on you to keep up appearances.”

He smiled reassuringly. “Never around Jun’er. Going from father to uncle is a demotion, don’t you think? Unless...”

“Unless what?” She asked.

He looked at her again with that sober gaze. “Well, unless her real father comes back.”

There was a visible jerk from the Pharmacist. Her mouth turned turn at the bitter memories. “If that day were to come, I could die and meet the afterlife willingly.”

Chapter 428: Self-Confidence

“I’m sorry,” Lan Jue apologized. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

The Pharmacist offered him a reassuring smile, and waved a hand. “Let’s go. Change your clothes and get rid of that mask while I get Jun’er. I’ll meet you at the arena gates in a little bit. She’s upset when you aren’t there in the morning, you know.”

Lan Jue chuckled helplessly. “I wish she was really my daughter!”

“You’re not lacking for willing girls,” the Pharmacist dryly remarked. “Your relationship with Zhou Qianlin seems to be going very well.”

Lan Jue shook his head, in part to hide the loneliness in his eyes. “Some things aren’t so easy to forget. I think you know that as well as I.”

She sighed. “Misery loves company. Get going!”

The final elimination round was the last chance for the Adepts to get in to the finals. The fights were far more dramatic – and dangerous – than those that had come before. Skyfire Avenue still had a very solid presence with the Pharmacist, Seamstress, Driver, and Bartender in the running the first twelve. The Pontiff’s Citadel had only Constantine while the Dark Citadel was represented by the necromancer and a tall lycanthrope. The Conclave had four after Chu Cheng’s defeat, the same as the Avenue. The remainder were unaffiliated.

Tomorrow the tournament would begin the Double-Elimination rounds. Winners would advance and the losers would fight again for their second chance. That would take the whole day, and the final day of the tournament before they got in to the finals.

Reports of the day’s events trickled out, in the end proving Chu Cheng’s prophecy to be true. Indeed, everyone was talking about his fight with the Pharmacist. Lan Jue’s own encounter with the woman was also widely speculated about. The Pharmacist and Zeus an item? Her presence had been such a deterrent to the crowd’s mocking cries against Lan Jue that the media didn’t even report on it. This was for good reason, too. Everyone

had seen how strong she was in that fight – near enough to Paragon that making her upset was phenomenally unwise. Many experts agreed in interviews through the night. Who would dare pick on a potential Paragon’s lover? This wasn’t even considering Zeus’ own considerable strength.

Lan Jue spent the afternoon with Jun’er, taking her and the Pharmacist around town to sight-see. Together they didn’t need to fear anything short of a direct Paragon confrontation. Keeping Jun’er cooped up was the opposite of what they’d brought her here for. The Terminator seemed to be precisely what Jun’er had said – a good man.

Jun’er was still small and frail, and an afternoon of activity absolutely wipes her out. A simple dinner and Lan Jue’s soothing bioelectricity put her right to sleep.

“Go on,” the Pharmacist said, taking Jun’er in to her arms. She smiled at him. “You have people waiting.”

He could feel that the two of them had grown closer after today’s fights, more open. Lan Jue could feel their relationship changing from one of convenience to a genuine friendship.

“Well then I’m off, big sis,” he said with a smirk. The Pharmacist lead him to the door after putting Jun’er down and covering her in a blanket.

“If that scene in the arena upset your friend tell me, I’ll help you explain.” The Pharmacist offered.

Lan Jue smiled back at her. “I will. Sis is so pretty I’m not convinced Qianlin won’t be a little jealous.”

“You’re already so popular. If I remember correctly you have a gaggle of young girls following you around already. Make sure you handle that carefully. You don’t want things between a man and a woman to grow complicated, otherwise you’re just asking for trouble.” The Pharmacist advised.

Lan Jue shook his head, looking distressed. “Mika and the others are just friends, I treat them like little sisters. If it weren’t for their special set of

problems, I'd have had them leave a long time ago."

The young mother gave him a serious look. "If you treat them like sisters than they will see you as an older brother. Whatever relationship you have with those girls, you'll want to make sure you deal with it or you'll regret it."

He nodded. "I know, I have to really think about it. It gives me a headache. But I saved them and promised protection, I can't just throw them out now."

The Pharmacist smirked. "Your problem, but I'm sure you'll find a solution. It's not something that will be solved in a day or even a month, I was just offering council. You should start thinking about it now, though."

"Got it."

Lan Jue wished her goodnight and returned to his room. He quietly pulled the door open and stepped inside.

"You're back!" Qianlin smiled at him from the sofa in a pair of white pajamas. She was curled up with a throw pillow and a magazine. She greeting him with a wave.

"Hey," he answered with a nod.

She unfurled from her perch and took his coat. She returned a moment later with a cup of warm water and directed him to the sofa, where she gave him a gentle neck rub. Very much like a wife would for her husband.

"Qianlin, about today..." Lan Jue wanted to explain the situation, but felt Qianlin press a finger to his lips.

"No need to explain," she chuckled.

Lan Jue felt relieved and appreciative. "You trust me that much, huh?"

She smiled. "Not just you, I trust myself too. If a girl steals you away it means I wasn't enough of a catch, or you don't like the kind of girl I am. What's the point of forcing things? I know that even if there were a hundred women around you, you'd still be with me."

Lan Jue turned around and looked at her. He'd learned that she was soft

on the outside with a core of iron, but he didn't know she felt like this. She gave her a thumbs-up and a sigh. "The Pharmacist herself has lived a bitter life, what she did today though was to help me."

Qianlin nodded. "That what I guessed. I'm sad I couldn't be the one to help you. I really envy her strength – she's something else."

This earned a chuckle. Lan Jue's voice grew authoritative. "What are you waiting for, then? Let's get strong!" He wrapped an arm around her waist leaned in. Qianlin just felt the warmth of his lips for a split second, before dissolving in to radiant white light.

Lan Jue sighed as he felt the power flood through him. There was less and less resistance each time they joined, like she was water that flowed through every part of him. If only she were her, he thought, things would be perfect...

He sat cross-legged on the floor and began to meditate.

The cultivation he'd undergone in the last few days had served to firm up his Core considerably. The impurities within continued to be filtered out. In addition to this, he could feel the joining between him and Qianlin become more complete the more they did it. Their integrated powers were purer, and easier to command. Even when they were separated, he could feel a piece of her somewhere inside.

Lan Jue had had the unfortunate luck of facing ever-stronger enemies in the last few days of the tournament. It did, however, serve to help him get used to the limitations of his current rank. He was still pretty strong and ninth level second rank despite the considerable drop from seventh, but his Discipline sat on a much firmer foundation now. The Pharmacist's explanation had helped ease his nerves, and now he was confident all he needed was time. This didn't mean, however, that he could take his cultivation practices easily. Progress was only one by dutifully sensing one's place in the world, and learning the subtle presence of protogenia.

Lan Jue felt the path forward was clearer now than it had been when he was seventh rank. Sometimes it felt like he was being swept along by a current. He felt positive that when he did finally encounter his bottleneck,

he would break through to discover his Domain.

They spent the night like this. Before they knew it, the light of the next morning was filtering through their window shades.

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Each passing day of the tournament made the spectators more excited, especially thanks to the extensive news coverage. Now that things were coming to a close, these last few encounters were sure to be something to watch. They were all looking forward to the next phase of the entertainment; round robin.

There was of course still interest in the Double-Elimination events of the day. The fights were certain to be hard-fought, especially considering the astronomical rewards at stake. But aside from all the tactile rewards, everyone wanted to be a winner. Those who earned their place in these final twenty-four contestants were truly heroes of the people, and exceptional talents. None of them would fall easily to defeat, and were ready to face the increasingly steep odds.

It wasn't only Lan Jue who felt himself become stronger from the ordeal. It was a similar situation for many. It was very rare that an Adept would have an opportunity to test themselves against such strong and varied opponents. The benefits were especially important for the great Adepts organizations, and each would gather together at the end of the day to discuss what they'd learned and analyze the competition. Ten days of this meant that very many Adepts had enjoyed various levels of growth. Those that had already lost also remained to see what they could learn from watching more fights.

This tournament was a great benefit for the entire world of Adepts, and humanity as a whole. Now the next stage was set to begin. Twenty-four pairs of eyes rose to the sky.

Chapter 429: Ji Mu, the Wolf King

Twenty-four enormous portraits were painted in the sky over the arena. The Pharmacist stood beside Lan Jue now, and no longer with the Skyfire delegates. She needn't hide her affiliation with him after yesterday's display. They stood shoulder to shoulder, with their eyes raised.

Some in the audience had guessed their relationship was close, and this confirmed it. Although, they couldn't know the whole truth of their partnership.

The Citadels and Conclave could guess that Zeus was part of the Avenue if they didn't already know, though they were at a loss as to why he would try to hide the fact and enter in to the tournament unaffiliated. In fact his whole demeanor was clearly low-key. Each fight he only used enough power to get the job done, appearing to actively hide his tactics from view. The deceit put his opponents on edge. He was also strong by association, because surely the Pharmacist wouldn't be caught out with a weakling. No one was particularly interested in facing off against Zeus in the coming round.

"Match making has begun!" The Terminator's rumbling voice boomed through the whole arena, without the aid of any amplification equipment. These last days of fighting were when the true strength of the Adept world would be displayed, so he would narrate them personally for the benefit of the audience.

Silence fell in the wake of his announcement. All eyes were skyward. Twenty four pairs were fixated. As they looked on the portraits arranged themselves in to a circle and began to spin in a clockwise direction. It picked up speed until everything was a blur, and no one would guess which portrait was which.

The Pharmacist remained as passive as she always had been, as though none of this made any difference to her. Lan Jue was similarly at ease, and the two of them projected a powerful image of self-confidence.

The pictures stopped. The matches were made!

The reaction of the crowd spoke volumes as every eye went wide. There were even a few gasps from the audience. It was expected that there would be powerful matchups, but what they saw left them stunned. Twenty-two sets of eyes swung right to Zeus and the Pharmacist.

She had a strange look on her face. It was hard to tell behind Zeus' mask, but his reaction could be imagined. The two exchanged glances and the Pharmacist answered his concerned look with an enigmatic smile.

Their pictures were right there in the sky, right next to one another: The Pharmacist vs. Zeus.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh and a chuckle. "So I guess I'll have to make it up against my next opponent.

The Pharmacist said nothing, but her mirth was shown in the slight raise to her brow.

Laughing after getting paired against the Pharmacist? They would think he was crazy, except that everyone had seen how close he and she were yesterday. It was worse than they thought, though. For those two, this was the worst result.

This was proven when, before they even looked toward the ring, the Pharmacist indicated that she would abstain from the match. In the round robin tournament each fighter had two chances, so it made the most sense for her to forfeit and she knew it. It kept the illusion of Zeus' strength and she didn't need to worry much about winning her next fight, whoever it was.

Lan Jue made out like a bandit. He avoided a very mean fight, was automatically in the quarter finals and earned an a-ranked power gem for it. Any remaining weaker Adepts in this group like him, though, could no longer hope for luck. Nothing short of total commitment to a fight would win it from here. After all, as this unfortunate event had shown, anyone could be unfortunate enough to run in to the Pharmacist. Their chances at washing out then were astronomical.

In the end, the matchup was a boon, assuring both of them would advance to the next round.

The Seamstress' luck had reached its end when she was paired against Constantine. She also forfeit before the match began, allowing Constantine to move on. It was a wise decision, since it would be pointless to waste time and energy on a hopeless fight. Constantine and the Pharmacist were on an entirely different level from the rest of them and they knew it.

The fields had been rearranged again, this time to create two large rectangles. The twelve fight for today would be separated in to six batches. The first batch concluded in moments without a punch thrown. They went right to the second batch.

One of the fights was the Bartender, the one he'd first known as Bahamut during the god-ranked battle. He knew his Discipline to be the conflicting elements of ice and fire. The Dark Citadel's lycanthrope would be his challenger. The second fight was between a Convert specializing in close combat and the Necromancer.

The fighters took up positions, and began when the buzzer sounded.

The second batch was under way!

Lan Jue heard the Pharmacist mutter to him from his side. "This will be a hard match for the Bartender."

"Oh?" Lan Jue answered. "Is the lycanthrope that strong?" He'd focused on his own business in this tournament, since he hadn't come as part of the Avenue. He didn't have all the information needed to make a fair assessment.

The Pharmacist explained. "Our intelligence tells us he's a powerful acquired Talent named Ji Mu. He took to the fantascia genetica particularly well, well enough for them to call him the Wolf King. He's one of the new generation representing the Dark Citadel. He doesn't have the power or potential of the vampire princess, by comparison, but he is very strong. Seventh level eighth rank, the peak of ninth level when he transforms. His specialty is close-combat, and his technique is said to be flawless. Speed, attack, defense and energy are all far above average."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed as he looked over toward the Bartender. For

the Pharmacist to call praise the man so much, he likely couldn't defeat the Wolf King himself. If he were seventh rank he'd be begging for a round against him, but as he was now it would be a very unfortunate meeting for him.

The Pharmacist continued. "The Bartender's potential is impressive; A dual-Discipline Adept with a very rare pairing of ice and fire. He's third rank, and strong, but stuck. His two Disciplines put him at around the power level of a fifth rank, but he can't advance until he's got some idea of his Path forward. If he doesn't he'll be stuck forever. At any rate, he's going to have a hard time defeating this Wolf King.

"The second fight won't have any surprises, I think. The Necromancer's name is Jiang Yuan, a seventh rank who was improved with genetica. He is a master of dark curses and our intelligence says he has some notion of protogenia – meaning he can turn in to a Lich and use Eldritch Hexes. Don't look down on him for being a rank lower than Ji Mu, we haven't seen his full strength yet. We suspect he's the ace in the hole for the Dark Citadel. The Convert isn't bad, but not even as strong as that Chu Cheng. He doesn't stand a chance against the Necromancer. He'll have to hope for more luck next time."

Lan Jue was happy to have some understanding of these two new faces from the Dark Citadel. Just in time to see what they can do.

Bartender vs the Wolf King!

The Bartender was as much aware of his poor standing as the Pharmacist, but he didn't concede. Lan Jue wasn't the only one who hoped to use this tournament as an opportunity to get stronger.

At his level of third rank his Disciplines of ice and fire had begun to intensify, but were still very difficult to join. They weren't pure elements either, but magical manifestations of them. He could use one to compliment the other, and that was what had got him to this point. However, it looked like that was no longer enough. He needed more power and experience, he needed to get stronger, then he could continue along the path of understanding.

The Wine Master had told him once that his way forward was to feel the changes in his powers in the midst of combat. The stronger the Adept, the stronger the catalyst needed to break through.

Ji Mu's cold, hard eyes glared at the Bartender. He kept him fixed with his gaze, until those eyes became a feral golden yellow. His already powerful form swelled further, transforming in the space of a breath in to a giant humanoid wolf.

His limbs were thick as tree trunks. Snarling lips were the only things not covered by coarse crimson hair, and a palpable aura of blood lust followed him. It was visible in the air, a vibrating mist of red.

There was a snarl and a flash of red! The Wolf King moved so quickly his afterimage remained. In no time at all he was face to face with the Bartender.

Chapter 430: Second Metamorphosis, Silvermoon Alpha

“Raaaaagghhh!” The Wolf King Ju Mu raced like a lightning bolt right for the Bartender. The primal roar shook the Avenue fighter, and in the blink of an eye the Avenue fighter found himself face to face with an enormous red wolf’s jaws.

So fast! Surprise flashed through the Bartender’s eyes, and he retreated as quick as he could. As he went back, his arms went forward and the ring filled sound. A roar, like twin dragons.

Two powerful beams of light erupted from his palms, one blue and one red. The blue light was surrounded by a hazy mist of crystals, while the air around the red beam warped under intense heat. Two conflicting powers, both equally bleak for his enemy. It was like being caught between magma and glacier.

Boooooooooom–!

The explosion was followed by a deluge of energy. It struck Ji Mu so hard the dark pupils in his yellow eyes contracted. The force penetrating deep to his qi and blood.

But he was a shifter! Adapting was his specialty. A dark crimson aura spread out from the surface of his body, and it made him look even darker and more feral. He paused for just a moment to dodge the beams, then raced forward once again. He swiped, revealing terrible claws aglow in golden light.

The Bartender narrowed his eyes but stopped the retreat. He couldn’t go any further back or he’d be against the ring’s far border. That was a bad position to be in. He crouched, and the raging powers separated to either side of him. A pair of great dragons – one red, one blue – could faintly be discerned weaving in and out of reality behind him.

The Wolf King’s swipe came tearing through the air, and the Bartender threw his arm out to meet the blow. Clang! Those golden claws were held

fast against the Bartender's forearm, caught between dense dragon scales. They emerged from his skin, protruding several inches and capturing the blade-like claws between them. The Bartender took advantage and launched them both toward the sky. He began to spin as the dragon cries grew louder and more agitated.

The higher they rose the stronger the Bartender's influence became. An aura of swirling red and blue surrounded the wolf's claws first, then spread over all of Ju Mu's body. His had was cramped like it'd be electrified, latched firmly to his enemy's arm. He was swept up with the Bartender, powerless to extricate himself.

The two diametrically opposed powers seemed to work as one, attempting to drill in to the Wolf King's body. The energy itself was frightening, bringing with it an ominous aura of doom. Ji Mu was more than surprised. When he first met the fighter, he knew that the Bartender's gifts were greater than his own. However, he thought his rank advantage would more than cover the discrepancy. In this moment, though, the Avenue representative felt unstoppable and indestructible. His attack hadn't even left a mark.

Surprised or not, it didn't slow him down. He urged his powers outward and expelled the infectious powers from his body. He tore at the Bartender with his free hand and struck him. There was a muffled clank, and the attack leveraged the Wolf King free to fall to the ground.

The Wolf King had been taken by surprise, but the Bartender was no less startled. The ability he'd just used was called Rise of the Twin Dragons, and it turned the explosive nature of his Discipline inward. The implosion doubled his power for a short time and made him nearly invulnerable. The only attacks that could penetrate his defense had to surpass his own strength three times over.

It was one of his most powerful and effective tricks, one that required a bit of protogenic knowledge to master. And yet, the Wolf King was far less affected by it than he'd thought. The beast even had the strength to purge the dual Disciplines beforehand. Instead of continuing to join as the Bartender's powers were meant to, the Wolf King shattered them.

However, the Bartender hadn't relied on luck to get so high in the tournament ladder. His reaction was quick as the lycanthrope's.

The sound of screeching dragons never ceased. Before the Wolf King's eyes the Bartender stretched and grew, warped in to a two-headed dragon seven meters long. The scaly mythical beast was split evenly down the middle, one half red and one half blue.

Icefire Wyvern, metamorphosis!

Ji Mu's pupils contracted. He'd never met an Adept with this Discipline before, but he could tell right away that he was very strong. Few in the West were a match, he reckoned.

But natural talent didn't always mean superiority. The greater an Adept's potential the more difficult progress became. This was especially true when breaking through to new ranks, and it was often discovered that these Adepts rose quickly, but could spend years at later ranks caught in a bottleneck. Ji Mu knew that true power came from only one road; talent, dedication, and understanding. Without one, you could never grow strong.

The Wolf King's clawed feet dug in to the earth, and he thrust his chest out as he thrust his head toward the heavens.

"Aooorghouuuuuuuu!"

The bone-chilling howl rang through the air, and everything beneath the ring's force shields darkened as though night had fallen. A full moon appeared above the crest of Ji Mu's head, and its silvery light fell over him like a blanket.

"A second metamorphosis!" Lan Jue gasped from the waiting area.

A second metamorphosis like this was a sign of mastery for beast-class Disciplines. Only Adepts who've reached ninth level sixth rank could employ it, for the power almost evolved the Adept in to another form. It filled their blood.

Lan Jue had met one once. The Adept's power awakened in the form of an ancient beast that turned him in to a veritable nightmare on the field. As he looked on, Lan Jue watched the blood red Wolf King grow even

larger. Soon he was even more imposing than the Icefire Wyvern, stretching over eight meters long and five meters tall on all fours. He crouched like a small mountain, and as they looked on the color bled away from his fur. The once red wolf became silvery-white, its eyes as well. Ji Mu's form exuded a majestic and intelligent grace.

Still crouched, the crowds could see something pressing out from beneath the wolf's shoulder blades. It swelled until, with a piercing rriip, Ji Mu's fur parted and spat a pair of fully-formed wings.

The first batch had ended without any action, and was a great disappointment to the audience. Now they watched with wide eyes, for it was clear these Adepts were pulling out all the stops.

Two orbs of ice and fire were spat from the maws of the Icefire Wyvern. He'd seen the transformation, but at this point his only option was to forge ahead.

The long lupine face gave the wyvern a mockery of a grin. His enormous front legs waved and a flash of silver shot out. Moments later the Bartender's orbs erupted without warning, too far to cause him harm. Below the great silver wolf's wings beat once, and he rose high in to the air.

He was too fast to see. When he reappeared Ji Mu was hovering over the Bartender, bearing down on his prey.

"I concede!" The Bartender's voice cried.

For a moment the scene froze. The Bartender's cry had stopped Ji Mu just as his razor-sharp talons were at his back. In a flash the silver wolf was back on the ground.

Lan Jue, watching from the sidelines, was distracted when he noticed the Pharmacist from the corner of his eye. Her lips were moving as though she were speaking, but he couldn't hear what she was saying.

She was projecting her voice? Could the Bartender really hear her from this far and through those shields?

The match was over! Ji Mu, the Wolf King, emerged victorious. The

audience were somewhat disappointed that the final clash never commenced, but the drama of their transformations was plenty entertaining. For most of them it was probably the first time they'd seen a second metamorphosis.

The Bartender left the ring with a sour expression. He looked once at the Pharmacist and nodded, then instead of leaving went to his sofa and watched. Tactics and knowledge came in to play now, as these duels were all between powerful contenders. He had to see what he could learn from the other fights.

Jiang Yuan the Necromancer was nearly finished in the other ring. The Convert was strong, but he couldn't penetrate Jiang Yuan's control. His curses tormented him with sluggishness, weakness, preventing him from affecting any sort of real damage. Ji Mu was strong, but it was a shadow of Jiang Yuan's true strength. This was proven with his leadership position in the Citadel, and his presence here as their trump card. His current opponent wasn't enough to make him tip his hand, however.

"Did you know about the second metamorphosis?" Lan Jue asked the Pharmacist beside him.

She nodded. "The Silvermoon Alpha, a rare and powerful evolution. He has exceptional strength and speed, and wings for flight and heightened maneuverability. That's just part of it, though. The worst, is he's practically invulnerable to the six elements."

Lan Jue grunted in appreciation. Water, fire, earth, wind, light and dark... he was empowered against them all. Luckily for Lan Jue things like time, space, and lightning Disciplines didn't fall in to those categories. They were either composite elemental powers, mystical or occult. None of this helped the Bartender.

It was no wonder the Pharmacist convinced him to concede when one knew the breadth of his power and defense. With the added hurdle of their rank discrepancy, the Bartender hadn't stood a chance. Even if he'd suddenly broken through to sixth rank and gained more control over his powers, his chances wouldn't have exceeded fifty-fifty. The Wolf King was

too strong, much stronger than he could have known.

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Metatron sat on the viewing platform with a dour expression. Ji Mu and Jiang Yuan... everything the Pontiff's Citadel knew about them was terribly wrong.

Chapter 431: Quarter Finals

Seated beside Metatron, Lucifer was the very picture of calm indifference. He watched the fight with a detached look, as though this was nothing important. Ji Mu and Jiang Yuan's advancement to the round robin phase was a great display for the Dark Citadel. For the two fighters, however, now was when they started stretching their might. Getting here was a great achievement.

The Pontiff's Citadel only had Constantine left to represent them in the tournament. He was a powerful symbol and a terrifying Adept. But who knew how strong Satan's secret warriors really were? They hadn't seen the breadth of their skills yet.

Skyfire Avenue wasn't in the best position either. The Pharmacist, Seamstress and Bartender were all in the losers bracket already, making the Avenue's chances at being washed out uncomfortably high. If they were unfortunate enough to be paired against each other, then a loss for their team was inevitable.

Lan Jue knew the next set of fighters. One was the Conclave representative, the one the Pharmacist had told him about. He was called Titan. Another was an old friend of Lan Jue's, and one of the few remaining Avenue survivors – the Driver, also known as Thunderclap. He took a minute to appreciate the fact he didn't have to face him yet – or either of them, in fact.

The fights got under way!

The Driver's opponent was from the West. He wasn't a member of either Citadel, but like many from that part Alliance, he was a shifter. It was clear by his aura, which flared drastically when the digitized voice called for the fight to start. A feral roar filled the ring as the Conclave's man quickly warped in to a three-meter tall baboon. His whole body was covered in coarse, purple-black hair. He beat meaty fists against his chest, then rushed at the Driver.

The god-ranked mecha pilot and Avenue representative watched him

come with an arrogant expression. He stepped forward, then was off like a meteorite. The two collided in the middle of the field.

Boom–! The thunderous explosion followed a blinding pulse of light. The shifter was left tumbling through the air. Although his body was covered in a strong field of purple energy, it wasn't enough to completely protect him from the Driver's electric blitz.

Now it was time for the Driver to show his skill. Criss-crossing streaks of lightning bounced all throughout the ring, so thick they hid the Driver's form from view. The bolts of electricity arced through the distance between him and the baboon before viciously blasting at the shifter over and over again. Number 32 – the baboon's competitor number – couldn't do anything but hop around and try to avoid the Driver's assault as best he could. In the face of the Driver's fierce onslaught he was stuck. It didn't take him long to realize this, so he forfeit the match. It was the proper decision in this stage of the tournament. There was no sense in breaking oneself against a clearly superior opponent if another chance remained.

Titan's fight was even faster than the Driver's. The Convert was like a younger version of the Terminator. He'd walked in to the ring with an expressionless face, but rushed fist-first at his enemy the moment the match began.

The loose fist seemed imbued with crushing power, and the whole arena could feel the shock of the collision. For a moment, it was like all the air in the arena was condensed to a single point, then exploded. Titan's opponent found himself right in the blast radius.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Three times Titan struck him with those sledge-hammer fists, then the fight was over. No tricks, no strategy – straight steamrolling. Titan didn't seem any worse for wear after the brief fight. It was the most overpowering display they'd seen yet – and Titan's opponent was a fifth rank! But to him that didn't mean anything, apparently.

He left the ring just as he'd entered, without any emotion betrayed on his face. He walked lazily to his sofa in the waiting area and sat.

“Pure physical power... that's a problem.” Lan Jue muttered to himself.

Adepts like him were rare, since the levels and kind of power he was using weren't a staple of normal human capability. His body had to be fundamentally altered so it could withstand using such power. Otherwise his attacks would more likely destroy himself, rather than his enemies.

Without question, Titan had had to undergo some drastic changes to get where he was today. Now he could control levels of power the human body wasn't meant to produce. It made for staggering explosive force. Lan Jue figured the man could probably rival an attack-class god-ranked mecha all by his lonesome. He wasn't a man, he was a living weapon!

About the only way to survive his attacks was to have power enough to block them. And who had that kind of power? Even an Adept his own rank probably wouldn't have the strength to withstand his blows. He was a peak level Adept! Only a Paragon could stand in his way.

Lan Jue stole a look at the Pharmacist beside him. For the first time since the tournament began, he could see excitement in her eyes. She was looking forward to testing her strength against Titan.

It was difficult to imagine what might happen if these two terrifying fighters were to meet. Lan Jue could understand that. If he were the Pharmacist he'd be excited as well. But if he had to fight Titan as plain old Lan Jue? That was different.

All the fights had been fast, the next was no exception. It was the pretty young girl the Pharmacist had also told him about, the one from the Conclave. Her name was Yan Ningya. Unfortunately, her opponent had been another from her own group, so she was forced to forfeit.

The remaining fights followed expectations. The remaining fights were won by obviously stronger opponents. The one outlier had been the Pharmacist, who gave up her spot in the first round of winners to help give Lan Jue a chance.

Now it was time for the losers to get their shots in. In an hour, the high-stakes battles for a spot in the next round would begin. There wasn't any reason to hold back now, so the fights promised to be quite a display.

The Pharmacist handily defeated her challenger. With her strength, she

wouldn't have to worry about being voted in to the next round. Her fellow Avenue fighters, though, experienced things differently. The Bartender lost his second fight and was thus removed from the tournament ladder. The Seamstress won her fight, but ultimately failed to be chosen in the votes by the public. At last the final sixteen were chosen, and the next round was set.

The Avenue still had the Pharmacist and Driver as emissaries. The Great Conclave boasted the most with three; Titan, Yan Ningya and a third Lan Jue wasn't familiar with. The Wolf King Ji Mu and Jiang Yuan the Necromancer demonstrated the Dark Citadel's power, while the Pontiff had only Constantine to bear his banner. The two Citadels together rivaled the North, and that meant Skyfire Avenue was the least represented of all the Alliances. However, this did not take Lan Jue's presence in to account, even if he did need the Pharmacist's help to climb the ladder.

Now that the sixteen contestants had been chosen, the Terminator slowly rose to his feet upon the main viewing platform. The area was so large that he got lost in the chaos when seated, however when he stood it caught everyone's attention. The air thickened as a quiet but clear indication that he desired everyone's focus.

"To maintain fairness through the final stages of our tournament, future fights will be determined by random drawing. No fighters will be seeded. Where they end up is where they end up. Tomorrow we will continue, with a single batch every day. Winners will receive three points and losers will get none. In the event of a draw, the competitors will receive one point each. By the end, competitors with the highest points will be entered in to the semi-finals."

It was a strange sensation, to have their fights analyzed and announced by a Paragon. This wasn't just about the attention. It was about glory, and profit.

Sixteen pictures appeared in the sky.

"I, the Terminator, swear upon the truths of protogenia that the

selection process is equitable. Begin selection!” No one questioned the Terminators assertions. A Paragon’s word was enough.

The portraits began to move, slower than they had before. Lan Jue had his eyes fixed, but his prayers weren’t for victory. To him the champion title meant little. He just hoped the group he was selected to fight in was strong. He was eager to reap the benefits of tougher opponents for his Discipline.

It was a pity, Lan Jue thought, that his brother hadn’t come. Lan Qing hadn’t offered any explanation as to his absence, but Lan Jue thought he might have some idea.

For one, if the North was worried over the encroaching alien threat than the Eastern military must be in chaos. Second, Lan Qing was a high-ranking military official. Who could ensure his safety, deep in Northern territory? Not coming was the right decision.

But he was an ambassador of the Divine Monarchs. His glory was their glory. The next few fights would be crucial, and he had to careful not to tip his hand too early.

Not the Pharmacist! If there was one person he desperately wished not to be paired with, it was the her. He’d never sparred with her, but now was not the time. She was the best hope for the Avenue, and he wanted her to win. Lan Jue still wasn’t sure what he would do if it came to that, if he would have to pull out all the stops.

There was a flash and the pictures stop moving. The fighters had been moved in to their combat groups.

The sixteen remaining competitors looked up, and faces began to change. Some were happy, others less so. After so many days, they all knew each other well. Well enough to know by a picture whether they were screwed.

Chapter 432: The Group Situation

The flashing stopped. One, two, three, four; four golden numbers appeared around clusters of portraits each. These were the groups for the next round.

Group One: Titan, Ji Mu, Bing Yu, Zeus

Group Two: The Pharmacist, Jiang Yuan, Chi Tianjiao, Qian Bian

Group Three: Yan Ningya, the Driver, Cao Shuiqin, Jun Yongye

Group Four: Constantine, Xuanyuan Shishi, Windshadow, Blackmoon

Lan Jue's face was hidden beneath the mask, but the pupils of his eyes contracted when he saw who he would be facing. He couldn't stop his eyes from turning to the mountainous man who sat nearby. This wasn't the worst group Lan Jue couldn't gotten, but it was close.

Defeat was a real possibility, with the Wolf King and Titan as his opponents. However, the tide of competition had washed away all but the strongest challengers. He wasn't the only one bemoaning his luck, to be sure. In fact, none of the Avenue denizens had to fight one another, so the end result was good for them.

The Terminator's thunderous voice filled the arena. "The groups have been chosen. We will have a day of rest for our fighters to prepare. Afterwards, the tournament shall resume."

The news was a clear shock to several of the competitors. Others were clearly careful to hide their reactions from their peers. Giving them a day was giving them time. Time to study up on their foes and develop strategies. Members of a group were at an advantage since they had access to a pool of knowledge to help hone their approach. Whatever the case, the quarter-finals were sure to be spectacular. They would have to fight for every inch, and use every advantage.

Only the best from each team would advance to the semis. Each competitor would have three tries max to advance, so they had to fight their hardest for each point. Any loss might mean the difference between

getting to the semi-finals or going home.

When Lan Jue got back to his hotel room, a message was waiting from the Gourmet. There would be a meeting tonight to discuss the tournament, so the afternoon was left to him to prepare and research. Research was precisely where the Accountant would thrive. With his intelligence, skill set, and the wealth of the Avenue's knowledge behind him, they would be swimming in data.

Lan Jue did not spend part of the afternoon in cultivation, and with research handled he elected to take time with Jun'er. They wandered and played while she wore the helmet, happily taking it all in. With her discipline yet to fully reveal itself, she looked like any other happy child.

When the sun came down they went back and had dinner with the Pharmacist. Afterwards, they all went to the conference room the Gourmet had rented out.

By the time they got there, everyone had already arrived and were locked in intense discussion. Most of it as the Accountant, who was veritably vomiting words on anyone who would listen.

"It's not that simple with Cao Shuiqin. She's listed as only sixth rank, but all of her previous fights and the data I've dug up suggests she's much stronger-Hey! Why hello there gorgeous lady!" the Accountant stopped when he spied Jun'er. He hopped over with an impish smile.

Jun'er returned the devious smirk. "Hello Uncle Accountant."

He went on with sweet countenance. "Call me Big Brother, I've told you a million times! I'm not old like your father."

Lan Jue grinned at the banter, then muttered something to him under his breath.

The Accountant's eyes went wide. "What?" He balked. "No way. You're messing with me."

"Would I joke about something like this?" Lan Jue asked coolly.

"Right," he answered. "My mistake. Well let's get to work! Time to plan

countermeasures. I've been busy all afternoon – I am such a reliable guy. So hurry up, stop loitering about. We're all here so let's get started!"

The others looked curiously at Lan Jue. They were keen to know what the Jewelry Master had said to get such a response from the Accountant. Of course, Lan Jue failed to explain and left it at that. He walked to a seat and fell in to I, placing Jun'er on his lap.

The Gourmet nodded at the Accountant, indicating that they would start. "Tell them what you've learned. Focus on the members of the other teams."

"Very well." The Accountant's persona shifted noticeably. His usually irritating and abrasive nature was replaced with a scholarly air that surprised everyone in the room.

His eyes went first to Lan Jue. "The quarter-finals consist of four teams, and the contestants are all formidable fighters. We'll start with group one. It consists of Titan, Ji Mu, Bing Yu and Zeus – our Jewelry Master."

The group grew quiet. Everyone wanted to learn more about Lan Jue, even those who weren't participating in the Tournament. The fact that he rose so high made him an outstanding Adept, and young. Those who weren't fighting could still watch, and having background information would make it more interesting.

"I've also made my determinations who I think will advance." He stopped and gave the Lan Jue a quick look, then went on. "Titan will be the winner from the first group."

"I looked around for a long time but could only find a little information about him. Most of it has been deleted or misplaced, so the information I have had to be pieced together."

"He's stronger than the Jewelry Master?" The Driver asked.

The Accountant nodded without the slightest hesitation. "Unless he has any more tricks up his sleeves, I don't think he has any more than a fifty-fifty shot."

The Accountant's certainty surprised the Avenue delegation. Although

he was ordinarily full of hot air, in these matters he was deadly serious.

Lan Jue nodded. "Alright, go on."

The Accountant obliged. "From what I could gather, Titan is the Terminator's own disciple and the single successful result of a program to build potential Paragons. His specialty is physical force. Ninety percent of him has been replaced with high-tech machinery. Everything except his brain is made from metal. And he's a ninth level, ninth ranked Talent. It's very likely that, at his level, he has a fair knowledge of protogenia. Since its use is forbidden in the tournament, you can expect him to use the full force of his Discipline."

"If I had to pick a single person I thought would win the championship, it would be him. A lot of people look down on his Discipline as simple, but that would be a mistake. Any power trained to perfection could be terrifying. I did some basic calculation after his last fight, and the power output he displayed was twice the stopping power of a loaded mech suit. I only had my eyes to gauge, but I suspect he used about a third of his entire energy stores in those attacks. Remember, that all of this is without considering that he may have some other hidden functionality we aren't aware of. Direct force isn't going to work against him, so you only have two paths to victory. The first is to outlast him. The second, is to focus all of your power in a single point, at a single moment, and hope it's enough to penetrate his shields. From there the target should be either his head, or his Core located in his chest."

"It's fair to say Titan isn't even really human anymore. He is a product of the North's technology machine, and it's clearly much more advanced than anyone had imagined. I actually managed to hack in to their military supercomputer. I only had three seconds before they found me, but I managed to find something. The amount of money they put to their Paragon-building program was enough to build a mothership. This is much larger than their human-weapon programs from the past 1."

"I also managed to come across an interesting bit of information, from three years and seven months ago. It said they'd successfully concluded research on something called 'ferrocytotropism'. In short, it's designed to

attract iron from the body to replace the cell membrane's phospholipid bilayer. It also slows their metabolism, but the trade-off is incredible strength and resilience. My estimations put them at two months passed launch of this program now. I think all of these are connected."

The Gourmet face was grave as the Accountant gave the report. If this was true and the North had found a way to manufacture Paragons, it would be an historic event. But while it would be a tremendous leap forward for 'humanity', it would almost certainly also spell ruin for the West and East. If there came a day when the Northern Alliance was able to reliably create power like this, no one could stop their domination. Unification would be inevitable, and weapons of mass destruction would freely roam the galaxy.

Chapter 433: Daddy Will Win It!

The Accountant broke in to laughter. “Don’t worry everyone. Current estimates put their success rate at zero-point-zero-three percent. At present, the idea of mass producing Paragons is impossible. A Paragon Is a special entity whose body, will, and energy have all coalesced in to a complete whole. It’s almost inconceivable anyone could have the technology to replicate that. But even with occasional success they are still hemorrhaging money. It would be hard to justify spending it on this program instead of upgrading their naval fleet. So, it is my estimation that Titan is an exception rather than the rule. In fact, I suspect he’ll never reach Paragon – that’s why the North is revealing him to us now instead of after he’s broken through.”

The Accountant’s assurances eased some of the hard faces in the room. He went on.

“His strength is nonetheless unquestionable. The only thing I don’t know is how much punishment he can ultimately dish out. I’ll need more information, so I’ll continue my analysis as the tournament continues. The only advise I can give you, Jewelry Master, is pray you don’t meet him in the first round. I’ll need time to find his Achilles heel.”

Lan Jue remained impassive as the Accountant explained. “Very well. Pressure is motivation. I’m not interested in winning, just doing my best in each fight.”

The Gourmet nodded sagely. “Well said. I hope that the Pharmacist and Driver share your philosophy. Whoever takes the crown is not important, but the safety of everyone from the avenue is. After that the aim should be to learn what we can. Go on, Accountant.”

He obliged. “Next, Ju Mu. You’ve all seen him in action. He represents the Dark Citadel, and was one of their surprise additions to the tournament. He is a ninth level eighth rank Adept, given the name the Wolf King. The data on him is also somewhat thin, but we know he is a genetically modified Talent. When he achieves his second metamorphosis

his speed, strength, and defense are all improved. There are indications he's also holding on to some tricks we haven't seen yet. Unfortunately, he's been paired with Titan, and I judge his chances at beating the Convert to be pretty low. He doesn't have a way to overcome Titan's overwhelming force."

The Bartender – his expression sour – said, "You said it, the Wolf King almost certainly has some more up his sleeve. Are you sure his chances are so low?" He'd just lost to Ji Mu, and if the Wolf King wasn't strong enough to beat Titan than what did it say about him?

The Accountant shot him a look of irritation. "Did I say it was certain? Of course there's a chance he could win, but if he does it will be by a small margin." It was clear he stood by his analysis.

"Well let's hope they meet in the first round," the Bartender growled resentfully.

"It would be the best situation for the Jewelry Master," the Accountant answered, his brows furrowed. "If they tired each other out, then he might have a chance at the semi-finals."

Lan Jue sat silently, though his expression looked a little uncomfortable. The Accountant gave him a knowing look then went on. "The third person in group one is named Bing Yu. We know a little more about her. She's an older, attractive woman. About the Jewelry Master's age."

"Daddy, why is this man so bad?" Jun'er interrupted. "He's always saying mean things."

Lan Jue smirked. "It's because he's sick, baby. He's what we call a 'tight-butt', and is in desperate need of someone to help him ease it out."

"Ahem! Jun'er, I wasn't talking about your daddy. I'm just trying to explain! You should convince him to forfeit, Jun'er – these next fights are going to be really hard!"

Jun'er, clearly annoyed by the suggestion, answered. "You're a liar! Daddy's definitely going to win the competition!"

"Hehehe!" The Accountant broke in to laughter. "You're definitely your

father's daughter. I hope it all turns out well, but reality is cruel little one. He's going to need to give it all he's got."

Jun'er swung her face to Lan Jue, then to the Accountant. "Daddy will be the winner."

The Accountant gave her a tolerant chuckle. "Yeah, so how about a bet? If I lose and your daddy wins then you can kiss me. But if he loses then I get to kiss you!"

"I will literally murder you." The Pharmacist looked at him with a pair of cutting, angry eyes.

"Ehhh..." The Accountant blanched when he suddenly remembered the young girl's mother nearby. He quickly added, "pretend I never said anything."

"I'll bet you. I real noble doesn't go back on their word." Jun'er's tiny but resolute voice called attention back to her.

The Accountant didn't know how to react. The Pharmacist was likewise surprised. "Jun'er, honey, enough," she chastised.

The girl's voice rose an octave. "I won't! Daddy will be the champion! And if I lose then I will give you a kiss. But if you lose then you have to be my daddy's sidekick. Whatever daddy needs you to do you have to do. Are you brave enough?"

Her audience watched in speechless amazement. She would not be dissuaded.

A nervous chuckle escaped the Accountant. "Alright, alright you clever little thing. You've got a bet with your big brother. Better wash your cheek for that kiss you're gunna owe me!" He found himself in an embarrassing situation, but thought little of it. She was just a kid.

Jun'er sniffed in acceptance then snuggled back in to Lan Jue's arms.

The Avenue delegation was a sea of smirks, all but for three. The Accountant didn't notice anything funny. The Gourmet had a strange, enigmatic look in his eye and the Pharmacist was contemplative. Lan Jue

looked bewildered. 1

Even with all his intelligence, the Accountant couldn't know that Jun'er's insistence could have been a prediction. Had he some inkling, he'd be wise enough to know the dangers of betting against a psychic.

The Gourmet and the Pharmacist silently pondered the meaning of what they'd seen. Surely it meant her powers were quite strong already, if she could see something so clearly already. She was already outstripping the Clairvoyant when he was her age.

For Lan Jue, the prediction didn't matter. He would put as much of himself in to the fight as possible, but failure meant disappointing Jun'er. That could not be allowed to happen!

"I'll continue." The Accountant said. "Bing Yu is from the West, and as her name suggests, her Discipline concerns ice. She has an impressive reputation in her Alliance that is especially telling, since she is not affiliated with either Citadel. Whether or not she's used genetica to improve her skills isn't clear, but she's a ninth level seventh rank nonetheless. They call her Absolute Zero. Ice Adepts are strong in general, but she began to realize protgenia when she was only third rank. Since then her progress has been practically light speed – real potential to become a Paragon. She's no less powerful than the one the Pharmacist fought, Hades."

The Accountant's words were specific, chosen to illustrate to Lan Jue precisely how strong she was.

The Barber huffed. "You're in the group of death, here. There aren't going to be any weaklings."

The Accountant shoot a glance at Lan Jue, then chortled. "The best situation for our Jewelry Master would be to encounter Bing Yu in the first round, then Titan last. If Ji Mu and Titan rough each other up, he has a chance. But that being the best option doesn't mean it'll be easy. I'm sure the Jewelry Master knows enough of his own abilities to craft his own defense, much more than I. Anyway, his group isn't even the worst."

The Barber blinked, openly stunned. "What, you mean the Pharmacist's

group?” The strength of their resident drug pusher was evident to everyone, and everyone suspected she was going to be the one to walk away with the crown.

“No.” The Accountant shook his head. “There’s nothing special there – b-barring you, Pharmacist, of course. You’ll need to watch out for the Necromancer, Jiang Yuan, because he’ll try to restrain you in various ways. But I’m certain your skills will triumph over his. You’re our hope for the semi-finals.”

The Driver glowered at the Accountant. “You’re one hell of a downer, do you know that? The Jewelry Master’s right, you should see the doctor for that tight ass of yours.”

The Accountant immediately adopted his well-practiced, victimized pout. “I’m giving a presentation! Gourmet, you should take responsibility for the content. I’ve been busy all afternoon and look how they treat me!”

“So give your presentation and stop sniveling over every asinine comment. Go on.”

“I’m really not trying to say anything about your abilities,” the Accountant said earnestly. “In fact, the worst group is yours! Altogether your group has the highest destructive rating. It makes your chance of success... ehm, remote.”

“Eh?” The Driver gave him a skeptical look. “There’s no one of any note, no one with a reputation. That Yan Ningya might have me break a sweat, but the others haven’t displayed anything in their last fights to make me concerned. What could you come up with that I missed?”

That smirk spread across the Accountant’s face again. “There are many people in this universe who appear as sheep but are truly wolves, my dear Driver. Your group is proof. You think Yan Ningya’s strength is something to sniff at? That’s exactly why you can’t see it. I managed to get in to a Conclave supercomputer to look for clues, and the clues lead me to a surprising discovery. Yan Ningya is as high up the chain of command as Titan, according to Great Conclave internal correspondence. As we all know, a Conclavian’s rank in their organization is directly correlated to

their ability. What does it say that she doesn't take orders from Titan? Wore, that's about the only information we have on her. From what we could gather, her Discipline is time-based. That's rare, about as rare as ... oh, I don't know, predictive Disciplines. In fact the only information I could dig up about any notable time Discipline was the Clockmaker. A member of the Avenue for a while, but a Northerner – now known as the Paragon Epochrion. That leads me to one conclusion; Yan Ningya is either the student or disciple of Epochrion.”

Chapter 434: The Accountant's Analysis

The Driver's countenance changed after hearing the Accountant's explanation. His self-confidence, however, did not recover.

Lan Jue was also surprised, but for a different reason. The Northern Paragon came from Skyfire Avenue? The Clockmaker?

Now that he thought about it, there was always a shop on the Avenue that never opened its doors. It didn't seem to have a proprietor. It was just a bit down the Avenue from the Gothic Winery, and he could remember seeing clocks in the dark windows. He asked the Wine Master about it once, but the Paragon only shook his head, and said nothing.

It would make sense that the empty shop belonged to this absent Clockmaker. The same person who became one of the leading figures in the North. At her current rank, she would have been the second most powerful Paragon in the Avenue at the time! Imagine how strong they would be today if the Epochrion had stayed.

The Driver looked unsure after his opponent's history. He looked towards Lan Jue. "Do you have time tomorrow?"

Lan Jue nodded.

Neither explained further.

Lately Lan Jue had spent his time training with Qianlin, so he hadn't had the opportunity to discuss the ying-yang aspects of their Disciplines. His reduction in power meant that the benefit to the Driver would be small, but it appeared his friend could no longer wait.

The Gourmet turned his attention to the Accountant. "What about the other two? What's their story?"

The Accountant nodded. "The other two are Cao Shuiqin and Jun Yongye. Where Yan Ningye's power is on the surface, these two are insidious. When I said wolves in sheep's clothing, I was talking about these two."

"First I'll discuss Cao Shuiqin, an unaffiliated Eastern Adept. She comes

from a mysterious family I've only been able to learn a little about. They're apparently based on our mother planet, Earth. They call her 'Heartstrings,' because that's how she plays people. Ninth level sixth rank, specializes in sound. She's cultivated her abilities to the point where she can command aspects of spirit and physics in offense. None of her former opponents have lasted long enough to let her finish her song. Her energy stores look smaller, but make no mistake that she's very dangerous. Your strategy should be to blitz, Driver. If you can overwhelm her with your Thunderbolt Discipline's speed and explosiveness, then you can beat her. If you let her play her song, then you're chances are slim to none."

The Driver didn't contest the Accountant's dire tone this time. He silently nodded his head, and pondered the limited data they had on this Cao Shuiqin.

But the Accountant wasn't finished, and his face grew darker still. "She is strong, but her powers are erratic. At least we know more or less what she's capable of. That other one though, Jun Yongye, is an enigma. His Discipline is strange. It manifests somehow with a wooden sword, very simple and nothing special. However, none of his opponents seem to make it past a few minutes. I asked around and none of them even seemed to know why they lost. It's likely that his swordsmanship has its basis in ancient martial technique. Evidence puts his Discipline at ninth level seventh rank, more or less. I suspect that he's already managed to completely fuse his martial technique with his Discipline. I suppose we'll know how strong he is if you face him in the bring. His nickname is a clue, though; Blademaster – White Blademaster, on account of the white coat he prefers."

Now that everyone had a clearer idea of the foes they faced, there wasn't a smile in the room. They'd come to the North with the expectation of making a big impression, but that didn't seem practical anymore with this new knowledge and the groups they'd been placed in. They stood on footing much weaker than they'd anticipated.

The Accountant didn't skimp on the last group either, going in to great detail concerning the information he'd been able to uncover. By

comparison, they were weaker than the others and didn't stand out. It was the others he advised caution for.

Once the information had been delivered, the Avenue delegation sunk in to a contemplative silence. It was late at night, and Jun'er had long since fallen asleep. The Pharmacist took her to the bedroom within, while the Gourmet dismissed everyone but the three participating in the tournament.

The Gourmet looked toward the Accountant. "Is there any chance you'll find out more tomorrow?"

The Keeper's apprentice shook his head. "Doubtful. I spent all day today trying every trick I know. I've poked around in more than a few places I shouldn't have, so cyber security is probably ready for me. It'll be better for everyone to just rest and relax, I think. At any rate I'm confident the Pharmacist will make it to the semi-finals, with a shot at champion. Things are much more difficult for The Jewelry Master and the Driver. And Jewelry Master... now that it's just us here, I have to ask. Did your Discipline get weaker? By a lot, if I'm not mistaken."

Lan Jue's brows rose. "Why do you ask?"

The Accountant gave a dismissive sniff. "How else would I determine your odds so low unless I suspected you were weaker? All truth is in the data; I analyzed all of your fights and none of your abilities revealed a strength above third rank. There was one exception, when you hid your actions from the crowd. What happened only you and Sariel will know. Other than that aberrant variable, all evidence indicates an Adept who is ninth level third rank – so what happened? Internal injuries? If it is you should consider forfeiting, Titan is a dangerous adversary."

Lan Jue secretly admired the mousy man. He wasn't the most reliable team member, but no one could read a situation better than he could.

He awarded the Accountant with a slight nod. "You're right. Because of unforeseen circumstances, my Discipline was reduced to ninth level second rank. The fact I'm in the quarter finals is a miracle, as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to give my all in the next fights no matter what,

that's the only way to get back in touch with my Discipline. You don't need to say anything else about it, I've got things under control."

The Driver looked at him with a flabbergasted expression. "Your discipline dropped that much! What could have caused that? The only thing I can think of is Kundalini syndrome, that sometimes happened to the ancient martial fighters. You..."

Lan Jue chuckled and shook his head. "It's not Kundalini Syndrome. Call it a coincidence... or I guess more accurately a cultivation method. It's not as bad as it might seem."

"Alright," the Driver replied. "But these next fights..."

A smile spread across the Jewelry Master's face. "A loss isn't always entirely a loss. I have my methods, you all can relax. Even if I run in to Titan I'll put on a good show. You'll all see who walks away."

"Judging by that reaction you definitely have something hidden up your sleeve," the Accountant accused.

The Pharmacist's firm but tepid voice interrupted. "Don't forget your wager with my daughter."

The Accountant's face twitched. "Wait a minute, you were serious? Jun'er's just a child, she doesn't even comprehend rule of law."

The Pharmacist's eyes never wavered from him. "I'll remember everything that just happened. If you dare break your agreement with my baby girl, you'll wish you'd never have met me. Even the Keeper wouldn't be able to save you."

His face went a ghostly pale. "Y-you... Why does it feel like I've stumbled in to a trap?!"

"You made a promise, what's this trap nonsense," the Driver said in irritation. "The bet was your idea anyway. If there was any trap you built it then fell in to it yourself. Now we were all witnesses, so you better pay out if you lose. Enough – is there anything you've been holding out on saying?"

The Accountant looked at Lan Jue, huffed, then spoke. "Even if I did why should I tell him. Anyway who knows what will happen. I don't have enough data to determine who will move on to the semi-finals with any reliable accuracy."

"We should bet as well," the Driver said. "I think Lan Jue will reach the semis."

"We should bet on the Pharmacist," the Accountant parried. Carefully of being fooled again, he wanted to be cautious.

"Enough of this pointless talk," the Gourmet interjected. "Do you have anything else that'll help?"

With a crooked smile the Accountant shrugged. "I've told you everything I know. The only thing I can add is to take care of yourselves. This is especially true for the Jewelry Master. Ji Mu and Titan hit like ballistic missiles. If the judges don't see something in time, it could be a danger to your life. As for you, Driver, do the best you can. With luck and care you have a chance."

There was a flash in the Driver's eyes. "Good! Then I bet you I won't come in dead last! Whadda ya think?"

"A bottle of whisky," he countered.

"Deal!"

Lan Jue sighed inwardly. The Driver was certainly a personality, but it looked like he bit off more than he could chew with that bet. Even Lan Jue's own faith was shaken.

Chapter 435: Lightning is Male and Female?

There was a faint glimmer of light in the room, somewhat ominous. “If there’s nothing else I’ll continue with my meditations. Come find me tomorrow, Driver.”

The other quarter finalist nodded in response.

The constant stress of the tournament continued to aid his cultivation efforts with Zhou Qianlin. Their unions were smoother, and the pressure helped to hone his focus. Going through the ranks again caused him to notice things he’d missed or didn’t understand the first time. He felt like a novelist who felt one way when writing the first draft, but had matured by the time editing was done. In the China of the Former Era, a great novelist of the Tang family said ‘every edit is a revelation. If one wishes to write a great piece, one must be dedicated to persistent self-reflection and adjustment.

Lan Jue’s situation was no different. It was bitter, to feel like you had to start over. But the benefits were obvious. As if to underscore his point, both he and Qianlin felt their Disciplines advance after a night of meditation. Qianlin’s famously fast advance through the levels had slowed significantly since reaching ninth rank. However, with Lan Jue’s help she was still much faster than anyone else.

She’d been pressing against the boundary of ninth level second rank for the last few days. Her mastery over Lan Jue’s thunderbolt Disciplines had also improved. The environment was appearing to have a transformative effect on her own abilities. The Pharmacist had mentioned this in her discussion with Lan Jue before. It was a sign that they were on the optimum path.

The Driver came knocking early the next morning. Lan Jue and Qianlin had just finished their breakfast.

“Early enough?” Lan Jue remarked dryly.

The Driver huffed. "I don't have time to sit on my ass. I believe every word the Accountant said last night, so forgive me if my opponents have me a little stressed."

"This is pretty unlike you," he answered. "With talk like that how do you have any hope of winning? Confidence and determination is what will help you rise to the challenge."

"Or maybe it's because my defect has started to affect my mood," the Driver revealed.

"Eh?" Lan Jue regarded his friend with surprise and concern.

The Driver's voice grew somber. "You must already know that I'm stuck in a bottleneck. Each one is different, some big and some small. But this has been the worst block I've ever come experienced. I haven't been able to budge from the peak of seventh rank. If I could only break through, I have the perception of a ninth level ninth rank Adept. I may even have potential to become a Paragon. I'll never get there if I can't get through this bottleneck, though. It was too sudden, and too intractable."

Lan Jue nodded reassuringly. "Whatever the case, I'll do whatever I can to help." Their Disciplines were two sides of the same coin. Thunderbolt and lightning 1, one yin and one yang but otherwise mirrors of each other.

The Driver fixed him with a look. "In truth the bottleneck has to do with you. Usually, these bottlenecks appear to force an Adept to achieve greater levels of control over their energy. For those like us who have practiced for many years, those blockages are easily overcome. However, this is different. The bottleneck I'm suffering has infected my Heart meridian. It started after the god-rank battles, when you absorbed my Discipline. There was a sense... something there that I could feel, but not clearly. It's been nagging at me and affecting my Talent ever since. I've tried to tell myself to let it be, but my mind keeps returning to whatever it is. It's come to taint my cultivation; I can't focus, and I can't feel what I need to break through to the next rank."

There was a glimpse of something in Lan Jue's eyes, and a smile spread across his face. "Got it."

“Got what,” the Driver asked.

Lan Jue smirked at him. “You should be thanking me, actually. I went through the exact same process myself once. That sense you feel as a type of protogenia that resonates with you. That’s why it has such a powerful effect on your heart. You should know that the earlier you experience the more effect it has on your future development, too. For instance, if you’d only started to sense protogenia when you were at ninth rank then your chances for breaking through to Paragon or no better than twenty percent. However, you’ve got an early start, which means your chances have increased significantly.”

The Driver’s eyes lit up. “Protogenia? That’s actually what I’m feeling?”

Lan Jue offered a sagely nod. “We’re both lightning-based Adepts, yin and yang – the basic energies of all the universe. Part of this understanding lives within you, you only need to cultivate a deeper understanding. So, in a way you’re right – your bottleneck does have to do with me. If your goal is to break through to seventh rank, then your path must include developing a knowledge of protogenia. When you’ve put your feet on the Path, then you’re ready to continue. Then you’ll be ready for the journey to Paragon.

The Driver nodded in understanding. There was a strange look on his face, though. “I guess that means I owe you. So when can we start cultivating, so I can understand the Path? And with your discipline so reduced, do you think it will have an effect?”

To this, Lan Jue smiled. “You’re in for a bitter surprise if you’re worried about my Discipline.”

“Oh yeah?” The Driver asked.

Lan Jue chuckled. “I’ve had more than a few fine whiskies of yours. I’ll show you what I mean. Qianlin, let’s go.”

Qianlin had been quietly listening, interested in their exchange. Lan Jue’s sudden call caused her cheeks to redden. He knew what Lan Jue planned to do.

As she moved in close, Lan Jue wrapped a hand around her waist and leaned in. He pressed his lips to hers.

“I-I could come back...” The Driver’s awkward reaction to their kiss was amplified when Qianlin dissolved in to a flash of light and vanished in to Lan Jue.

Lan Jue lifted his right hand, and a bolt of lightning leapt from his fingers. It raced through the room, charging the atmosphere and masking their presence. Once they were hidden from prying eyes, he allowed the full extent of his powers to reveal themselves. The Driver was stunned to feel the tempestuous flows of Lan Jue’s Discipline as it flooded the room. Somehow, the Jewelry Master was suddenly so much stronger than he was.

“This...”

This was Lan Jue’s biggest secret; the power he wielded when he and Qianlin joined. Still, he shared it with the Driver, for two reasons. The first was their personal relationships – they were friends. Second, he trusted the clairvoyant’s visions. Both he and the Driver had been the subject of the old Paragon’s visions. He couldn’t have seen it wrong, so he didn’t feel there was anything he needed to hide.

“Are you still worried about my Discipline?” Lan Jue regarded his friend with a self-satisfied smirk.

“The change in your discipline had something to do with her,” the Driver mused.

Lan Jue nodded. “We underwent a very... interesting experience, too complicated to explain. When we’re together, my discipline returns to normal or improves. When we’re apart my discipline becomes weak.”

The Driver’s expression adopted a pensive tint. “You shouldn’t have told me.”

Lan Jue laughed it off. “We are among the ‘strongest under heaven’, right? That was the idea of Deimos’ team. If I don’t trust you, then who can I trust? Remember that a single man’s power is finite. You’re my brother in arms, and if I don’t tell you the truth then how can you watch

my back in a fight?”

The Driver nodded again, his lips tight and face resolute. “Right!”

It was a simple response, but Lan Jue could see a subtle difference behind his eyes. Men didn’t need words to express themselves among other men.

“So,” Lan Jue asked, “shall we get started?”

The Driver nodded emphatically.

The two Adepts made their way to the center of the living room and folded their legs beneath them as they sat. They didn’t touch, only allowed their Disciplines to emanate freely from their bodies. Their eyes were closed, but the room flashed erratically with the manifestations of their Talent.

The differences in their powers became clear as the lightning raced around them. Lan Jue’s Discipline was sky blue, sometimes a vibrant purple. The Driver’s Discipline appeared as a deep blue, almost black. That was a product of their yin and yang nature, but the explosive properties of the lightning Discipline were precisely the same for both of them. Gradually they were brought under control, and brought in to contact.

K-cha!The feral tendrils of power clashed and released a spider web of lightning overhead. The charged atmosphere caused both men to shake slightly.

The Driver opened his eyes, brows furrowed. “A mountain can only have one tiger!”

Lan Jue smiled. “True, unless one is female.”

“Who are you calling female?!” The Driver barked. Lan Jue chuckled.

“Stop screwing around. I’m talking about the lightning, not you. Pay attention to their reaction, feel the changes. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Got it.” The Driver was concerned with breaking his bottleneck, not the intricacies of energy gender. He nodded and focused on the swirling

powers around them.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, folded his hands in to an oval in his lap. A short while later, another sensation crept through to join with the others, something strange and subtle.

Flashes of white and black flickered through the room. This strange power helped to constrain, and condense the electric energies. Lan Jue's own sky-blue tendrils of electricity were drawn in to the milky depths of the white power. Likewise, the Driver's Discipline was innately drawn to the darkness. Once joined by Lan Jue's Taiji mastery, the two opposing electrical forces began to gather.

Although the Driver had his eyes closed, he could feel the ebb and flow of the universe. Whatever skill it was that Lan Jue commanded was like a vortex that swallowed everything up, including his Discipline. Now that they were bound to either yin or yang, the two Disciplines were separated as though by a moat. There appeared no way for the two to interact.

Chapter 436: Conciliation of Yin and Yang

The Driver had never felt this sensation before. He could feel every minute shift in his body. As if in response, his Discipline flared even more vibrantly. There it was again; that strange, elusive sensation he'd faintly perceived months ago. It was elating, to feel himself come to grips with something that had tormented him – something intractable.

Lan Jue was also attentive, but his focus was the integration of the two energies with his Taiji manipulation. The subtle but powerful attraction of the yin-yang energies were strong enough to bring the thunderbolt Disciplines in line. The longer this was maintained, the closer the two opposing but similar powers became. His control was much improved over the last few weeks, both from his prolific use in the West, but also his empowered Discipline. He analyzed every shift to deepen his understanding, and he was beginning to grasp its secrets.

When the two pure forms of their thunderbolt Disciplines clashed, it was just as the Driver has said; a mountain is only big enough for one tiger. However, when the unifying powers of Taiji were added, it fully activated their yin-yang aspects. In the Spiraling Taiji power they joined, to spectacular results. Even these small demonstrations of their Discipline were capable of generating great blasts of light when they met. The flashes were a myriad of colors, and it felt as chaotic as it did innocent. The energy flooding the room surged to a new level.

Their dual powers were forced closer and closer, condensing until it took up the space of acorn – a third of when they started. But despite its lack-luster appearance, Lan Jue was nervous. It was even more worrisome when he discovered it more difficult to differentiate the changes. At ninth level ninth rank, it was quite frightening to encounter an energy he couldn't understand.

With careful guidance, Lan Jue guided the powers toward himself. He knew immediately that if he consumed these powers in to himself it would be of tremendous value, and so he carefully sought to use himself as a conduit. However it was dangerous, for even as he did so the power

increased. The stronger it got, the more frightening the dangers of a misstep. He began by simply interacting with it, feeling it, before he dared take it in.

Then...

Boom-! There was an explosive rush, and a thunderous crack. Lan Jue was thrust against the far wall like he'd been struck with an artillery round. He struck so hard cracks slithered through the plaster. The whole room looked like the aftermath of a tornado. The furniture was smashed, and the Driver had also been flung against the wall. Thankfully, he'd only suffered the blow-back from Lan Jue's encounter. If not for Lan Jue's forethought in shielding the room, the blast would probably have taken out half the floor.

The shields were not enough to stop the building from shaking, though, or the shuddering blast. As they were recovering, a cadre of hotel security were rushing for Lan Jue's room. He couldn't wait – the moment he came to his senses, he leapt from the room to the gardens below.

Burnt almost black, he lay smoldering against the cool grass. No rushing it! He panted and groaned, and it felt like every bone in his body hurt.

Protogenia... no doubt about it. Lan Jue bitterly mused.

He'd done all he could at this point. Anything further was far too frightening to attempt again – not until they could make certain the correct path.

However it was not a total failure. In the moment before the explosion, he felt as though he were on to something. There was a resonance between his power and that explosion. Although it had been slight, he had trained himself to recognize these small changes.

To say the blast had hurt would be an understatement. Thankfully he had been joined with Qianlin at the time. In the instant the blast was released, he was filled with a protective warmth. It had spared him from any real damage – just residual pain and some bruising.

He couldn't stay hidden forever, and eventually Lan Jue was found.

However it was the Gourmet, not security, who caught up with him first. It wasn't any surprise, since the entire Skyfire delegation had been staying at the same hotel.

The matter was eventually settled by the Avenue Paragon. Lan Jue would be responsible for all repairs, and the Gourmet would work to ensure things remained quiet. The Hotel would receive remuneration immediately and they would promise not to cause any more trouble. Another offense and they would be removed from the hotel.

They were given another room, and then finally Lan Jue and the Driver had a minute to take in what had happened. The two burned and stricken men looked at each other.

"What the hell were you doing?" The Driver's clothes were in tatters, but he was still better off than the charbroiled Lan Jue.

The Jewelry Master coughed. "I just wanted to see what would happen. I was curious to see if we could use our combined Disciplines to help with the cultivation. But then..."

The Driver rolled his eyes so hard they threatened to pop from his head. "Are you a moron? You never learned how to cultivate? When the yin and yang energies of thunderbolt Disciplines join it's almost at protogenic levels. What made you think we're capable of handling anything like that at our ranks? I'm pretty damn sure you're psychopathic."

"Heh... I mean, no harm in trying? And it wasn't all bad." Lan Jue offered helplessly.

"I had it, after so long – and then you blew the room up. Joining our Disciplines to cultivate is already incredibly beneficial, what more could you want? Curiosity killed the cat."

A sheepish grin was plastered on the Jewelry Master's face. "Alright, I mean I wanted to tell you about what I discovered in the explosion. But, I guess if you're upset then I don't have to. We can just focus on the incredibly beneficial unification of our Disciplines."

The Driver gave him a dark look.

“Why are you eyeing me like that?” He sounded anxious.

Suddenly his friend changed tack, as suddenly as the breeze. “I’m sorry, my friend.”

“Hack-Kha! Hchcha!” Lan Jue choked on a mouthful of spit. He certainly wouldn’t have expected the gruff and aloof Driver to suddenly become so earnest!

“Hahahahaha!” The Driver burst in to a fit of booming laughter.

It began to dawn on the mercenary king that perhaps he’d been taken in. “You’re looking for an ass-kicking.” Lan Jue half-heartedly threatened.

“You just blew me up, you deserve it,” the Driver countered. “Now we’re even. So stop stalling and tell me, what did you find?”

“It’s hard to say,” Lan Jue confessed. “The blast had some sort of effect on my Core. There was something there, an influence on the energy throughout my entire body. It felt like an evolution, an enlightenment.”

The Driver’s expression became thoughtful. “So that would mean that when our powers joined, they were capable of perpetual increase. That is the influence of protogenia, and if that’s the case then there is much we can learn from this.”

Lan Jue gave him a flat look. “Didn’t you just say we shouldn’t try it?”

A shrug answered his question. “Why not? The blast didn’t kill or maim you did it?”

Lan Jue chortled. “As much as I’d enjoy watching you burnt to a crisp, I have to warn you that I only survived because my Discipline is at its peak. I also have the benefit of internal protections that blocked most of the explosion’s power. I can’t promise you won’t get hurt. If we do continue, you have to take that in to account.”

“We should wait,” the Driver conceded. “We’re in the North after all, so perhaps it would be best to proceed when we return to the Avenue. The Wine Master may be able to lend us a pocket dimension in his Reaper Arena that would be suitable. Comprehending the secrets of protogenia

doesn't happen overnight anyway. For now it's enough to feel their combination. We can save whatever piece of the puzzle the explosion holds for later."

This earned an uncertain shrug from Lan Jue. "Subjecting ourselves to that abuse may not be the best course of action."

The Driver gave him a challenging sniff. "It's a chance Adepts would kill to have. Don't keep the knowledge all for yourself. How can you still doubt? We should find a name, too... we can't keep saying 'the unification of yin and yang thunderbolt elemental Discipline lightning.' It's a bit of a mouthful."

Lan Jue thought for a moment. "Purebolt. What do you think?"

The Driver answered with a nod. "Catchy. Purebolt it is. So tell me honestly, how much do you think you can control it?"

The mercenary king spread his hands. "How should I know? I didn't even get to try. We're talking about protogenia, if we could control it then we would have the power of a Paragon. Don't you remember how strong the result was during the God battles.

"It looks like we still have a long road to tread." The Driver nodded. "Let's get on with it then. Right now it's just sensing, no more fireworks. Otherwise we're going to run out of places to sleep."

Lan Jue laughed. "The only thing in danger of being exploded is you. Let's go!"

The conditions were replicated. The Taiji energies brought Lan Jue and Driver's Disciplines in to itself and joined them. As they watched they came to understand Purebolt as the true form of lightning, uninhibited by limitations of yin or yang. They made sure to carefully restrict how much energy they put in.

It was a busy day for all challengers in the quarter-finals. Some were lost in meditation, others were studying opponents. Every one of them had their own methods of preparation, but the one thing they all wished for was time.

The quarter-finals of the Great Adept tournament, where the future of the Adept world was on display, was underway.

By early morning all of the arena's seats were occupied. Members of the galaxy's great organizations of government officials crowded the VIP viewing platform. There was also a new face among them.

A new, gorgeous face.

Chapter 437: The Quarter-Finals Begin

Her figure was hidden beneath an aquamarine dress, and her hair was tied in to a high bun atop her head. She was so captivating some men forgot to breathe, and she sat in the front where everyone could see right beside the Terminator. She looked frail beside the towering convert.

Mo Xiao was respectful and demure, seated quietly with her hands folded in her lap. She watched the crowds with a small, humble smile on her lips. The Terminator exuded a stately calm. The din of celebration didn't seem to affect him, as though he hardly noticed it at all. Those who peered his direction would quickly flinch and avert their gaze. A pressure fierce enough to flatten you was felt whenever someone stared too long. It wasn't by design, but rather a result of the Terminator's staggering power. His effect on reality was uncomfortable for most.

The Gourmet sat with the Pharmacist, holding Jun'er in his arms. The little one called to her enormous friend happily when she saw him. The Terminator reacted with a pleasant smile.

"Ah, Jun'er," he said. "Do you think your mother and father are going to do well today?"

Jun'er's response was without hesitation. "Of course! Mommy and daddy are going to do great. Daddy's going to win the whole contest!"

The Terminator gave her a surprised and amused expression. "Because they're your mommy and daddy, right?"

"Nuh-uh," Jun'er said firmly. "Daddy will win the tournament."

The Terminator fought to keep his expression placid, but sometimes the absence of something was more telling. Mo Xiao, who had been watching the screen before her, interrupted.

"Your Majesty, we're streaming live to more people than even the God-Team Battles."

"Mh." The Terminator nodded thoughtfully. "You've done a fine job."

"You're too kind," Mo Xiao hurriedly replied. "I'm very much looking

forward to today's contests. These are the best of the next generation. Do you have your hopefuls for the semi-finals?"

It was a clever ploy. He was unlikely to commit to his choice for champion, but the top four were a possibility. Just that instant the cameras went live, and the feed connected to hundreds of millions of viewers. All eyes were pointed at them.

The Terminator gave her a coy smile. "Oh, I don't know. Tournaments like these are full of surprises. It's in the nature of Adepts to keep their best tricks close to the vest. When you're competing at these levels, it's not just strength that determines the victory. A winner must have strength of will, resolve, the ability to exploit opportunities... these are what make a champion. But more important than all of those is actual battle experience. An Adept's true mettle is proven on the field, when the full breadth of their training comes to bear. All the things we know on paper don't mean anything, that's why I'll be looking for details, secrets and strategies."

Mo Xiao nodded her head. "Well said," she replied. "I suppose we'll just have to see what the future holds in store." She didn't wish to push the Paragon further. They would learn more of his thoughts when he chose to share them.

The lights over the arena dimmed, giving the illusion that dusk had fallen.

A single beam of light shot down from on high, painting the center of the arena in silver light.

"Quarter-finalists, please enter the field."

The audience felt their pulse pounding, their hearts racing. Cries of anticipation rippled among them as they waited.

Sixteen figured walked in to the light, separated in to groups of four.

Titan led them across the grounds, basking in the cheers from his countrymen. Lan Jue walked with him and the two others that made up their group. From what he'd heard, the Accountant's analyses had been

spot-on, as always. Even the organizers weren't giving him much of a shot. He had time to think about it while tournaments droids arranged them on the field.

Going forward, the field would no longer be shared among contestants. Each fight had full use of the battleground. They would also be the sole focus of the crowd. They stood now in the center of the field, beneath their excited gaze, each one different but important. Somewhere among those sixteen young Adepts, there was at least one future Paragon. Literally anything could happen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, join me in welcoming our mighty contestants back to the field. Fighters, I speak for all of us here and watching at home when I express my gratitude for your magnificent exhibitions these last few days." Mo Xiao's sweet, ringing voice called from the stands.

The applause shook the entire stadium. Cheers erupted from all sides, and some viewers clapped with tears in their eyes for one simple fact; at last there would be live commentary! They wouldn't have to rely on day-after replays.

Mo Xiao made a great show of respect in turning to the Terminator. "Your Majesty, is there anything you'd like to say to our brave contestants before they begin?"

The Paragon smiled pleasantly down at the sixteen Adepts on the field below. His deep voice thud in everyone's chest. "I urge each of you to pour everything you have in to these fights. Do not hold back for fear – I will intervene if necessary. Now is not the time to hold back."

Mo Xiao's eyes lit up at the promise of drama. "Personal protection provided by a Paragon. Who could ask for more! I'm sure we'll have some incredible demonstrations of Talent today."

The Terminator's assurances were as much for the crowd as they were for the contestants. It meant that they didn't need to worry about losing control and harming their foe. The Terminator would prevent that, thus allowing them to do whatever it took to win.

Mo Xiao's smiling face swung back to face the camera. "Very well, we

won't delay the audience's wishes any longer. In just a moment the Great Adept tournament will continue in to the Quarter-Finals. We will be treated to eight spectacular fights today. Friends, let's see who will be the first to fight for a spot in the semi-finals!"

Four gigantic images appeared suspended in the air: Titan, Ji Mu the Wolf King, Absolute Zero, and Zeus.

Mo Xiao went on. "Allow me to introduce the first battle group. The first contestant – Titan. He hails from the Northern Alliance, and commands the Discipline of Force."

The Audience erupted. Great cries of admirations swept through the audience like a wave. Titan took a step forward and waved to his adoring fans.

"Titan is the disciple of the Conclave Paragon leader, the Terminator," Mo Xiao revealed. "I'm sure we're all aware of how incredible this young man is. Personally, I hope we get a chance to see him in today's fight."

"Our second contestant is Qi Mu, a Western Adept known as the Wolf King. His Discipline is metamorphosis."

Qi Mu took a step forward to stand shoulder to shoulder with Titan. His expression was hard and cold, with a dark light in his eye.

"Third, allow me to introduce Bing Yu. She is the only female in this battle group. Also from the West, she is a young Adept with mastery over the element of ice. They call her Absolute Zero."

Bing Yu was small but exceedingly well formed, as revealed by the skin-tight cat suit she wore. She had long locks of ice-blue hair that hung freely at her back. Her eyes were also blue, and sparkled like diamonds in snow against her pale skin. Just looking at her imparted a sense of bone-chilling cold.

She walked forward to stand beside Ji Mu. She made no motion, and bore no expression.

"The fourth and final contender goes by the name of Zeus! He is also called the God of Lightning. A very aggressive name that hopefully hints

at a very aggressive performance. His powers; Thunderbolt.”

Lan Jue’s brows furrowed, hidden beneath the mask. Why does Mo Xiao always have to pick me out, he complained to himself. I didn’t do anything to offend her!

“The contestants for today’s first battle will now be chosen.”

The digital portraits began to flicker, then swirl. They danced around each other as though caught in a tide. In contrast to earlier rounds, this process was much faster.

The pictures now had numbers above each. Titan was one, Ji Mu was two, Bing Yu had three and Lan Jue was four.

In accordance with the rules, the fights would be one against two, and three against four. Then, round two would be one against three, two against four. The final round would be one and four, then two and three.

For today that meant the first match would be fought between Titan and Qi Mu. Lan Jue would face off against Bing Yu. It was the Accountant’s best hope, and it had come to pass. At last his luck looked as though it was starting to turn.

“The matches have been chosen. We shall proceed to the first match; Titan, versus Qi Mu the Wolf King! Potential champions, please prepare for battle. We invite the rest of our contestants to wait in the rest area.”

Titan turned to face Qi Mu. The Wolf King looked him right back in the eye.

In respect to the average human these two men were beasts – especially Titan. He had the same imposing demeanor of his master, the Terminator. As the two stared each other down, the crowd went wild, rattling the beams of the stadium itself. There was a thunderous boom! The match was going to begin!

Lan Jue followed the other adepts back to the resting area. No one could see his expression beneath the mask, but even so he kept it calm. In truth, it didn’t matter who he was paired against. Fighting a powerful foe later would only delay his development.

He could suddenly feel a child run up his spine, as though a pair of ice-cold eyes were following him. When he turned his head, he met Bing Yu's chilly gaze.

Chapter 438: Titan's Power

Lan Jue nodded acknowledgement of Bing Yu. The woman known as Absolute Zero said nothing. She left without engaging him further – hostility was a normal reaction before a contest.

The waiting area had undergone another makeover, with even more luxuries than were provided earlier. No expense was spared for their comfort. Lan Jue took up position beside the Pharmacist and faced the field. Although he wasn't participating in the first fight, he didn't want to give up his opportunity to watch from the sidelines. It would undoubtedly help him in the games to come, if he got that far.

The Pharmacist smirked as he sat beside her. "Aren't you the lucky one!"

"So it would appear," Lan Jue replied. "Maybe Qi Mu will surprise us all."

The Pharmacist's brows rose. "Remember that in your next fight. Surprises go both ways. If we do see something this fight, though, it will help you quite a lot."

He nodded. This was part of the reason why the Accountant had mentioned this pairing as the best situation. His best chance was against the next weakest person, after himself.

Only one person was going to make it through the group phase, and that meant that every fight was a life or death struggle. He had to win to advance, that was the only way. Even one loss would prevent him from getting the points he needed.

Even in the first fight there was no holding back. Especially with how strong Titan was, the Wolf King would need to use every trick up his sleeve to earn victory. Lan Jue was anxious to see how strong Qi Mu was, and how much punishment he could take. He needed to know for his own fight with Qi Mu later.

It was an advantage that didn't always apply, though. If he had been the first one to fight Qi Mu it would have been him giving it all he had. Later in his fight against Titan, it also wouldn't matter how well he knew his

enemy. Zeus was going to have to dig deep no matter the circumstances.

But he wasn't interested in riches, titles or reputation. His goal had always been only to better himself. The greatest gains came through the greatest tribulations, he knew, so he would fight his hardest for that reason alone. Progress through conflict. He was no different than the others here, young and talented Adepts who represented the great potential of the future.

His three year lapse in cultivation was not entirely a bad thing, either. It gave him time for the dust to settle, to absorb all that he had experienced. This was like a new start, and his road ahead looked blessed. It motivated his Discipline to keep improving.

Only Titan and Qi Mu remained on the field. The two commanding Adepts slowly separated, each going to one side of the ring. There, they waited for the match to begin. Titan seemed hardly motivated, whereas a sharp and dreadful light blazed in Qi Mu's eyes.

Pressure was motivation. Qi Mu felt it as clearly as Lan Jue did. The fear and uncertainty had awakened his lust for battle.

Several dozen beams of light sprang to life with an electric buzz, cleaving through the air to meet at a point a hundred meters over the center of the ring. In the place where they met, a brilliant golden light bloomed to form the force field. It filtered down to encompass the battlefield, and only then dimmed in hue. Once it was in place, it could only be faintly seen. The audience could hardly notice it.

For the contestants it was different. All the sounds from inside could be heard by the audience, but for the fighters themselves, they were cut off from everything outside of their bubble. It was like their own world, completely isolated. The shield's had clearly been upgraded for the quarter-finals, to prevent the chances of having them shatter mid-contest.

Mo Xiao's voice called all eyes back to the viewing platform. "Your Majesty," she said, addressing the Terminator, "what are your thoughts on the coming battle?"

The Paragon turned to answer. "Titan has trained in pure force. This has

restricted him to a single path – direct. However, if a challenger seeks to win he has to at least meet Titan’s own energy levels and surpass them. Qi Mu is from the Dark Citadel, and is undoubtedly a formidable opponent. His abilities appear more balanced, but in reality he has also specialized more in strength. This is pure force against an impure imitation. The result comes down to simple common sense.”

Mo Xiao was somewhat taken aback. She hadn’t expected such an in-depth answer, nor his matter-of-fact assertion that his disciple would win. However, she was a professional and recovered quickly. “Right to the heart of the matter, Your Majesty! Let’s see what comes.”

The monitors in front of every spectator’s chair lit up with a clock face. The numbers flashed tantalizingly as a digitized voice began the countdown.

“Three. Two. One. Let the battle begin!”

“Aaaaahhh!” Qi Mu let loose a roar that drowned out the cries of the audience. In a blink his human form was lost beneath coarse fur and gnashing teeth. He dropped to all fours, bristling with murderous intent when a copper-gold light spread out from between his shoulders. The Wolf King grew larger, more regal as he immediately entered in to his second metamorphosis.

His choice was clear and correct. If he wanted a chance to put the whole of his strength to use, he needed it immediately. Restraint would win him nothing, and to prove that he raced forward like a golden bolt right for Titan.

The Northern contestant stood for a moment and watched the wolf come. The audience stared wide eyed and with baited breath, as Titan lifted one meaty leg. He slammed his foot forward one step to the gasps of the crowd. To them it was like watching a lofty mountain uproot. And then, the convert threw his whole body in to a straight punch!

“Wrrrummmm–!” The audience could see the force field flicker, and hear it crackle in protest. For a moment the whole stadium rumbled beneath their feet. Qi Mu stopped in the middle of his blitzkrieg, followed by a

deafening screech.

The Wolf King immediately stopped his advance, and curled in on himself. The thick fur of his back stood straight, and he hugged in tight like a porcupine. When the inevitable shockwave of Titan's punch finally arrived, he was thrown across the field like a football to smash against the far side of the force field.

Bang! Qi Mu struck the invisible shield then rebounded back toward Titan, even faster than before.

"What an ingenious defense!" Mo Xiao exclaimed.

Qi Mu was the first one since the start of the tournament to actually survive Titan's punch. It was a cleverly devised plan that showed the Dark Citadel had done their homework.

The Terminator had been right in that no one could match Titan blow for blow in terms of direct force. However, balance had its advantages. At least in regards to agility, the Wolf King was clearly superior. Qi Mu used the benefits of his strength, leverage and tactical knowledge to give himself a chance. If he relied on speed and strength, he could dance circles around Titan. Qi Mu fired toward his enemy like a bullet. His right hand shot out as he passed, golden claws bared and set to tear the Convert's head off.

Only seconds had passed between Qi Mu's initial charge and his counter attack. Titan hadn't even retracted his hand before those golden claws arrived.

At the last moment Qi Mu's claws dropped, going right for Titan's eyes.

The Terminator's student had skin harder than titanium, but his eyes and his brain were his weak point. Qi Mu's strategies must have taken this in to account. Going for the eyes was deliberate.

However, even though Titan could see the strike coming, he didn't move. Like an indomitable mountain he remained rooted in place. His arm was still recoiling, but changed direction and swept outward toward his encroaching foe. His hand splayed out wide as though to swat the wolf

away.

Qi Mu unfurled as he approached, summersaulting through the air to avoid Titan's sweep. His vicious claws sliced through the air, still aimed for their target. It was an incredible display of skill, lauded for its clean execution despite the wolf's towering figure. It took the spectators by surprise.

Qi Mu did not completely avoid the convert, though. His enormous arm swung with such force that a sonic burst followed and knocked Qi Mu off course. It looked as though his clever riposte would be avoided.

But just then, there was a sickening series of pops. The Wolf King's arm stretched unnaturally before their very eyes, still groping wildly for Titan's face.

Qi Mu had studied extensively, considered a myriad of possibilities he may encounter in the fight. He also knew his limitations. A window of just a few moments after the match's start was all he had. He hadn't started with any jukes, tricks or feelers. It was do or die. Qi Mu's previously unused left hand reached out to slap the ground as he came to it, moments before his other arm started to extended unnaturally. Because of this everyone was focused on the claws, and were stunned when he suddenly shot up and changed direction. It was enough to land the blow, but he missed Titan's eyes. His claws raked violently against the Northerner's back.

Titan swung around from the force of Qi Mu's swipe. The attack ripped away the clothes from his back, revealing the dark skin beneath. Five long, indented grooves appeared down his spine.

But that was all. For all of Qi Mu's planning and execution, the best he could muster was still not enough to best Titan's defense.

Chapter 439: Third Metamorphosis vs. Fiend-crusher

Titan launched through the air, stopping a hundred meters overhead. His big hands splayed wide, and he pressed them down toward Qi Mu below. The motion looked almost tender, but also natural. That telling buzz vibrated the stadium again, louder this time.

Qi Mu felt it immediately, the crushing sensation starting at the top of his head, like a mountain had been dropped on him. Unlike earlier, when the blast had caught him in the air, there was nowhere for him to retreat.

The Wolf King dropped to his haunches, then leapt right toward the oncoming surge. He stretched his arms high overhead, and those ten razor claws fused in to one. He pierced the air, and began to spin like a top. He planned to drill right through Titan's attack.

Everyone pressed their hands to their ears when a grating screech like steel on steel lashed through the arena. Flashes of red surrounded Qi Mu momentarily as the invisible force swept passed. The stadium rumbled as suddenly two massive palm prints appeared in the arena's alloy floor. Titan hovered over the crowd like a Buddha.

But Qi Mu was still coming. The thick fur covering him had become a brilliant, piercing gold like a true Wolf King. Piercing Charge – that was the name of the skill. Although Qi Mu's advance had slowed after fighting through Titan's thrust, he still covered the distance quickly.

The golden wolf appeared for half a second in front of Titan, then swung around to his side. Razor-sharp claws lashed out again, joined together in a single jagged weapon. To this, Titan answered by side-stepping, and pressing toward the Wolf King with an open palm. It was a simple, but well-executed and effective dodge.

The audience could clearly see that Titan was no match for Qi Mu's speed. However, the Wolf King had to work much harder just to earn a chance to land a blow. The convert's simple and direct abilities made it

easy to quickly respond, as well.

Qi Mu dropped in to a squat and bounded off again before Titan could hit him. He spun around, then rushed again at Titan with the Piercing Charge.

Titan grunted and thrust his left fist in to the air. Immediately he, too, crouched. He was using his force ability to make himself faster. Qi Mu was lined up to have the attack land, but Titan's sudden power boost allowed him to move just in time. The Wolf King struck the ground instead and lifted his head in time to see Titan's palms pressing toward him. Qi Mu could feel the air displace as another explosion of force headed his way.

Mo Xiao's narration continued. "It looks like Qi Mu had found a way to get around Titan's powerful attacks. However, this has certainly got to be strenuous. He will be expending more energy than Titan, certainly. If he doesn't find an opening soon, then he's going to put himself in a dangerous position of weakness." Mo Xiao's tone was carefully crafted to give the Dark Citadel face.

Titan's tactics were as simple as they came. Keep your distance, and pummel them with fists and palms. His bursts of pure force were the perfect area-of-effect, long-distance attacks. Your only choices were to deflect it, or take it head-on. Titan didn't even worry much over Qi Mu's 'Piercing Strike,' because every time he got close it gave Titan an opportunity to land blows as well.

Even the audience could see that if Qi Mu didn't change the battlefield situation soon, he would lose due to the excess energy consumption.

Just then, an unsettling red light appeared in the depths of Qi Mu's eyes. A corona of radiance flared out around him. He doubled up, and the massive lupine figure appeared to shrink. The thick fur on its body burst in to crimson flame.

"A third metamorphosis?!" Mo Xiao cried.

What did a third metamorphosis mean for shapeshifters? In a word: Protogenia! Only Paragons were capable of this next-level transformation – so how was it that Qi Mu was able to achieve it?

“It isn’t a complete transformation,” the Pharmacist said, as though she’d read his thoughts.

The undulating crimson slight spread all over Qi Mu’s diminished body, until he was entirely covered in the sanguine light. Titan’s incoming wall of force swept harmlessly passed, burning away around the Wolf King.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. There was a moment where the wolfman was still, but in the space of a breath he’d appeared beside Titan. No one had even seen him move – he was just gone in one moment and beside the convert in the next. Claws groped violently for his chest.

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In the viewing area.

The Pharmacist spoke quietly to Lan Jue at her shoulder. “This has got to be Qi Mu’s big secret. He can’t afford to lose, so he won’t hold anything back. However, this has got to be the result of some form of overload. Your luck is definitely looking up. If you’d have fought him first I’m sure you’d have lost.”

A mirthful smirk spread on Lan Jue’s face. “So then you’re saying that without the third metamorphosis, I have a chance?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You may have more tricks than he does, but not by much.”

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Titan fell back seven or eight steps in the direction of where Qi Mu had been. He clutched at his chest, where great indentations had appeared from the wolf’s claws. For the first time ever in the tournament, Titan didn’t have the upper hand.

Qi Mu’s eyes flared red like a pair of rubies. In the same instant Titan made his escape, the Citadel’s representative bounded forward claws first. He was precise, and he was calculated. Titan was not a man, so the tactics of a man did not apply. The brain was the only option.

Suddenly, a change overcame the convert. Titan’s calm expression

shifted, and his impassive eyes lit up. The dents from where his alloy chest had been damaged by Qi Mu, suddenly popped back in to shape. An iron-grey aura poured out from him in all directions.

A defensive ability? On top of his overwhelming attack, he could make himself even stronger?

He pounded his left foot against the ground. The whole of the arena quaked as though the great dragon of the earth rumbled beneath. The aura around him flared and hardened, quickly changing from grey to tarnished gold.

“Dong—!” Qi Mu’s clawed hands banged against Titan’s shield. It was like striking a six-inch thick sheet of iron. The reverberating hum set the wolf’s whole body shuddering, and forced him back several steps. The resulting shock wave pummeled through the ring, bouncing off the force field and making it crackle.

“Impenetrable Defense!” Lan Jue and the Pharmacist exclaimed in one voice.

Impenetrable Defense was a skill used in ancient Chinese martial arts. It was the pinnacle fortification, and completely unbelievable that this Northern Conclave convert was able to employ it.

The bloodwolf’s offensive was instantly stopped, and Titan reacted with a straight punch right at his foe. It was a wildly different punch from before, full of a strange sort of detached kindness. It was a stark contrast to the explosion that threatened the force field from earlier. He looked almost at peace.

Titan lashed out again with a fist that had become solid gold. A rush of invisible energy followed his arms. From behind, the shadowy image of a figure was faintly visible, and the sounds of chanting wafted on the breeze.

Qi Mu could feel like reality around him was imploding, crushing inward like a prisoner in an invisible cage. He had nowhere to go, and that golden light was fast approaching. Qi Mu brought both arms up to ward Titan’s attack as it came tearing through him.

Boom—!He went sailing through the air, wild and uncontrolled – clearly this wasn't a ploy to diffuse Titan's attack force. It was confirmed once he slammed violently in to the far side of the force field. He fell down to the ground with a crash.

"Fiend-crusher fist!" Lan Jue inadvertently cried out again, just loud enough so only the Pharmacist would hear.

Impenetrable Defense, and the Fiend-crusher Fist! These were undoubtedly skills earned from mastery of Mahayana Buddhist martial arts! From what he could see, Titan had merged this ancient practice with his Discipline to allow him to use empowered versions.

It looked like his trump cards outplayed Qi Mu's.

It was a fantastic display, and only the first round. Lan Jue's lust to test himself only increased as he watched the contest. Zeus didn't fear Titan, and he had tricks of his own to employ. However, it did seem that some of his more coveted secrets may need to be revealed. After all, how could he – an Easterner – lose out to a Northerner in the realm of martial arts? The resolution in his heart began to show in the hard light of his eyes.

The Pharmacist noticed, and regarded him with surprise, but said nothing.

Qi Mu clawed himself back up from the crowd, breathing raggedly. The red light that had surrounded him had dispersed, but quickly recovered after a moment. His seething red eyes fixed Titan with a glare, a smile spread his lupine face, revealing bestial teeth.

"I concede."

Titan said nothing, made no display of pride or strength. He only nodded, turned, and left the ring.

Chapter 440: The Weakest...?

It was over in a matter of minutes. It was so fast, in fact, the audience could only stare dumbfounded as the contestants left the ring. What an incredible confrontation! Every clash, every move was epic and the memory hung over the arena. Titan and his god-like power was especially stark in their minds. A moving mountain.

Mo Xiao heaved a long sigh, then turned to regard the Terminator. "You spoke true, Your Majesty; pure force won out in the end."

The Terminator smiled, but he did not take the opportunity to gloat. Nor did he offer any further explanation. He was, of course, interested in maintaining the secrets of his organization and his people.

The first round of the quarter-finals had come to an end and the field was reset for the next fight. Bing Yu arose from her seat in the waiting area and, without even glancing in Lan Jue's direction, left for the ring. Despite her strong face, Lan Jue spotted her stiff gait – the last fight had shaken her nerve. It was beginning to look like Titan was going to dominate the psychology of this group.

Lan Jue stood. "Good luck," the Pharmacist offered.

He smiled back at her. "I'll be meeting you in the finals." His swaggered out in to view of the crowd.

She watched him go with a little surprise in her expression. The Jewelry Master had just witnessed Titan's power and still had the gall to predict his victory. Did it mean that he had some plan to beat the convert? If he did, that would be fantastic.

Lan Jue arrived at the ring, then floated up to enter. It was no display, just simple and straight forward. No one could see his face beneath the golden mask – all they could see was the famed Mercenary King, alone in the ring with his opponent.

"What do you think will happen this time, Your Majesty?" Mo Xiao asked the Paragon.

The Terminator's response was placid. "If every fight was as clear as the last, there'd be little to keep the audience entertained. Luckily, I can't tell what will happen in this round."

Mo Xiao replied with a pretty laugh. "Well said, well said! The Westerner – Bing Yu, known as Absolute Zero – is an ice Adept. Her Discipline is considered one of the most potent. Lan Jue has dual disciplines of Thunderbolt and Lightning. Both of them are Adepts of an elemental Discipline."

"So who do you suspect will come away the winner," the Terminator asked.

She hesitated for a moment. "Zeus, I think."

"Why do you figure?"

Mo Xiao's pretty face was split by an impish grin. "Poseidon and Zeus are good friends. I'm simply going for the name I know!" Her sheepish demeanor was endearing, and caused the crowd to laugh affectionately. But Zeus was a Divine Monarch! He had as much of a chance to win anyone.

"We'll have to see what tricks he has yet to reveal. Zeus is the weakest of all the quarter-finalists. It makes him a real underdog, and I am rooting for him to perform miracles."

"Weakest?" Mo Xiao was not aware of Lan Jue's sudden and dramatic loss of power.

"Let's just wait and see what happens." The Terminator left it at that.

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Lan Jue stood at the far end of the arena. Bing Yu glared at him from the opposite side. The air crackled, and flecks of ice hung around her. She didn't say anything, but it was clear from the buzz of her aura that she was like a beast just waiting to pounce.

Lan Jue took a deep, calming breath as he looked right back at his foe. He had quite the task ahead of him; she was not weak, but he couldn't

reveal all his secrets in the first round. How could he win the upper hand in later fights then? At any rate, stress and pressure were what improved his Discipline. He was determined to rely on nothing but his own rank two skills to win.

“Fight!” The electronic buzzer and voice called the second round to action!

Bing Yu’s right hand shot out, and immediately a soupy fog billowed out from her. It encroached in suffocating waves, right toward Lan Jue. Absolute Zero vanished from view.

Lan Jue’s eyes widened. His hand shot out, too, belching a wild nest of blue and purple lightning. They formed a protective mesh directly before him.

A series of blasts ensued. From within Bing Yu’s enigmatic mist, great icicles came hurling through to cut away at his netting. Lan Jue could still feel waves of icy power pulsing from deep within the mist. From what he could sense, Bing Yu might as well be the mist – he couldn’t pinpoint her location.

He kept his cool. Both hands rose, now, and pressed forward as though shoving something away. A shock wave composed of writhing lightning blasted out to where he pointed. Soon it consumed the entire battlefield. It was quite a feat, since the coverage area was so much larger than it had been. It surprised the audience to see Zeus’ Forest of Lightning cover so much ground.

The fog danced between the bolts, and where they touched the snow-white mist became hues of blue and purple. From outside it made the whole arena look like an enormous, dazzling opal. The lightning continued to flash, and somewhere in between the blinding flashes, Lan Jue’s form vanished. This was an ability he hadn’t used in his fight against the Angel of the Moon. It was nothing the contestants and audience had yet to see him do.

Great blasts of thunder tumbled over one another again and again, while mists surged and lightning raced. No one could see anything but violent

flashes of light and shifting colors. Their clash continued and intensified until, with a shuddering boom of thunder and a flash of light, two figured appeared again within the ring.

Lan Jue hovered in the air. It was hard to tell his condition simply by looking at him. Bing Yu was on the ground, surrounded by a flickering oval of blue light. The orb itself was glimmering and faceted like an ice crystal. Her eyes had become a brilliant shade of blue, and in her hands she clutched a navy-hued spear three meters long. It's sharp point never wavered from Lan Jue's direction.

Everything leading up to this point had been the two fighters testing each other out. Now it was time to make their move.

The blue lightning that surrounded Lan Jue gradually changed to gold. A fine net of electric threads hung over him that made him blaze like a sun.

Bing Yu sniffed derisively. The lights that infected the ground beneath her feet flashed. The air around her condensed in to another volley of icicles she sent flying Lan Jue's way. She thrust the butt of her spear in to the ground.

As the icicles passed, they filled the air with frozen blue contrails. It all converged on Zeus, surrounded by a mysterious white aura.

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"The temperature in the ring is dropping." Mo Xiao suddenly exclaimed. A digital thermostat was plastered on the viewing screens. She was right, the thermostat read the force field's internal temperature as negative eighty degrees centigrade and dropping. Although Adepts had increased resistance to climate changes, it was all within reason. If it got too cold too fast, of course it would be crippling for a fighter.

She had earned the name Absolute Zero for a reason.

Lan Jue came crashing towards her like a golden bolt of lightning. He blazed like the surface of the sun. Bing Yu's icicles melted away long before they could do Lan Jue any harm.

She didn't hesitate, and she had no fear. The moment Bing Yu saw Lan

Jue approach, she tapped in to her power and began to grow. Taller and taller she rose, as a crystalline figure appeared behind her. It looked precisely like she did – like a self-portrait in ice. The spear in her hands glowed with inner light until it blinded the eyes. A bolt of condensed power launched from the spear's top toward Lan Jue.

Boom–!

The explosion blasted through the arena like a tempest, followed by a light snowfall. The light from Bing Yu's spear was gone, but so was Lan Jue's shield. Just then, however, lights erupted from the ground below Bing Yu, and quickly enveloped the defenseless Zeus.

Ice Prison!

Lan Jue grunted. Without any motion or word, his body began to spew feral coils of electricity – another Forest of Lightning, but this one made of gold. He lightning rose to a thunderous crescendo, and once again Lan Jue vanished in the flashing lights. Bing Yu's ice prison had no effect.

A faint light of understanding dawned in Bing Yu's eyes as she realized Zeus' explosive display wasn't an attack, but a retreat. She could also feel that, although strong, the energy behind Zeus' attacks didn't compare to her own, a fact which gave her confidence in her determination. Bing Yu had done her own research before the fight, as everyone had. She'd watched the videos, studied the footage. This man they called the God of Lightning was clearly the weakest one in their group.

She made her move. The spear she bore lashed out like a lightning bolt, piercing the air in the direction of Zeus. A blizzard roared from the end of her weapon, swirling like an angry beast to devour him. At these extreme temperatures, every snowflake was a razor blade at a hundred miles an hour. The deadly blizzard raged through the lightning storm, sweeping over everything. Just like Bing Yu's eyes.

The battlefield had already frozen at negative one hundred degrees. It had even begun to influence the actions of the lightning itself, making it sluggish.

Slowly at first, everything began to get pulled together, drawn to a

central point on the field.

Bing Yu's response was to launch herself in to the air. There, she thrust her spear forth, and it belched another beam of icy-blue light. The power flowing from her spread out from her pours, making her skin as blue as the light.

And then it all stopped, as sudden as it had been violent.

The lightning that had been coiling together fired in a single raging column, directly in the face of Bing Yu's attack.

Boom— —!

Chapter 441: Supreme Yang Lightning

The collision of these two beams produced a golden explosion that rivaled Luo City on the brightest day. The whole of the Great Conclave Arena was lost in the glare, while beneath the force shields, the entire battlefield was buffeted by waves of power. Blue and gold intermingled, though it looked like as though the gold had begun to devour everything else.

Then there was another flash, followed by a blast.

Boom-!

Bing Yu had her spear defiantly thrust toward Lan Jue, but the exchange forced her from the air back down to ground. The area around her flickered with golden light. Surprise flit through her expression. She had felt something, a mysterious and indefinable buzz that filled her. A residual heat surrounding the area, but it wasn't from outside. The heat was coming from her. One of the benefits of lightning Disciplines were their osmotic and explosive capabilities. The purer the power, the more effective and damaging the strike.

Boom-boom-boom-boom! One after another, bolts of lightning thicker than a person came crashing toward Bing Yu. The spear in her hand flashed and whipped, deflecting them as they came.

Nine in total, and none had landed. Lan Jue appeared again before the eyes of the public.

Bing Yu lifted her head to look at him. Though none of Zeus' strikes had found their target, she was nonetheless surrounded by a visible corona of electric energy.

"The strength of Zeus' attacks are weaker than Bing Yu's, clearly due to their difference in rank. However, Bing Yu appears to have lost the advantage. Why is the effort so strenuous for her?" Mo Xiao was genuinely curious about what she was watching.

The Terminator's dispassionate voice answered. "Vigorous, prosperous,

positive; the Nine Supreme Yang Thunderbolts. Lightning and Thunderbolt are natural elements that can also be separated in to yin and yang like anything. The yang aspect is hard, while yin nature is soft. Although this masked youth is not of a high rank, he has a very good grasp of his abilities and their attributes. It reduces the power gap between him and Absolute Zero. There are no weaklings in the quarter-finals, remember.”

The Terminator was right; that had been Lan Jue’s Nine Supreme Yang Thunderbolt attack. It was also true that, despite his rank two abilities, the combination of his experience, his two Disciplines and spiritual understanding have made the difference less stark. Bing Yu had been able to block the blast force of his attacks, but wasn’t able to stop lightning’s permeating nature. Those nine lightning bolts had still taken their toll.

Crack! Bing Yu’s spear shattered in to a hundred million pieces, right in her hands. Sparking slivers of lightning were discharged when it did. But Bing Yu was not idle. A white light began to grow, centered on her chest until it swallowed her up and made her entirely translucent. She looked like she was made of the same stuff she commanded, ice.

Temperatures on the battlefield kept falling. On-screen thermometers were flashing negative one hundred and fifty. It was a stabbing, tearing cold. Lan Jue felt like even his meridians were beginning to solidify.

Bing Yu took a threatening step forward. The radiating corona of her power appeared and disappeared at random intervals, while she herself was an inexplicable opaque white from head to toe. The entire battlefield shivered when her foot touched the ground, which was then followed by a blinding light that erupted from below her. It spread until it consumed the whole field, covering every corner. The battlefield was lost in a sea of impenetrable white.

It was an unnatural cold that assailed Lan Jue, even worse than before. He could feel the power being sapped from him by the second. He felt like everything around him was locked in an enormous block of ice, himself included.

Overhead, the Terminator's eyes glimmered. "The true essence of ice... interesting."

Mo Xiao gave him a sideways glance, then engaged. "Your Majesty, I've been wondering. How strong would an Adept like Bing Yu need to be in order to bring the field all the way down to true, absolute zero? 1."

"Difficult to answer," came the Paragon's response. "To reach a certain level and to master it are very different. Setting aside brief spells of success, she would need to be an established Paragon before she could achieve absolute zero for long periods, and consistently. As far as I know there has never been a Paragon with her powers, which makes answering your question difficult."

Mo Xiao, her face displaying regret, turned back to the fight. "It looks like Zeus is going to lose."

Down on the field, that opaque white hue had paled, becoming translucent. The occasional flash of lightning from within was clearly much weaker than it had been. Zeus himself was frozen solid.

Bing Yu did not use this opportunity to launch an attack, but instead remained locked in place in the 'air.' Her faceted figure glimmered like a gem, even as the temperature continued to fall to negative one hundred and eighty degrees.

The battlefield was a frozen hellscape. At this degree of cold, it appeared even Bing Yu was beginning to struggle. If she could, wouldn't she be moving in for the kill? Still, it was clear she had taken the upper hand. Only the areas directly beside Zeus were still affected by the lightning, and even that was growing weaker by the moment. It was an indication of his failing shields, and if that lightning went out it would mean he'd been completely frozen. The match would be lost.

Swaths of white color slithered through the ice. Lan Jue was their target, and they moved toward him with a predatory air. This was pure elemental essence, one of Bing Yu's greatest advantages.

Every elemental Adept sought to find the true nature of their gift. It was practice for immersing oneself in protogenia; an Adapt who had practice

in uncovering the underlying essence of their element was better equipped for progress later. The breakthrough to Paragon was similar.

The cold was slithering passed Lan Jue's protections. He could feel it invade him like a cancer, while his Lightning defenses failed. Even the blood in his veins was slowing down. His heartbeat slowed. His Core was under duress, pressed down tight. The force of his Discipline was dedicated solely to stop himself from being crushed, but his mind was beginning to grow sluggish. The cold was invading his soul.

What awful, pure power!

There was no doubt that Lan Jue was under pressure. His mask and bearing hid his thoughts from view, but inside his heart was as smooth as a lake surface. There was no fear, no anxiety – he focused on the cold, and how it interacted with his body. He immersed himself in it, and at least to him it was marvelous. Lan Jue's body and mind was focused on the present.

The Pharmacist had told him that re-cultivation was a purification process. Like watching a TV show for the second time, you can see and understand a great deal more. After his joining with Qianlin, his Core was smaller and his power weaker. However, Lan Jue could sense the purity in his Discipline, and his increased control.

Thunderbolt had rules. Like everything else, it was also an aspect of protogenia. He was beginning to understand. Pressure from the outside world had a constraining effect on his lightning, but the result made him better able to recognize details since they were happening slower. It was another piece of the puzzle. Lightning didn't have an inherent shape. But that didn't mean it wasn't bound by its own rules. Around his core, tendrils of lightning danced all around but had slowed from the extreme temperatures.

Under Lan Jue's ministrations, his core was glowing a brilliant gold. Pure and vibrant, his Core seemed to continue drawing in on itself. Condensing one's Core wasn't something most Adepts were eager to try. It could crack, or collapse. Either were unspeakable tragedies.

Lan Jue's Discipline was also strong, explosive, and difficult to precisely control. That made the risks even greater. If the Driver knew what was going on, he'd probably be grinning from ear to ear. This wasn't much different than attempting suicide.

But this was another benefit of re-cultivation. Mind and experiences weren't lost when his Discipline was. Alas, the struggle made him better! After the Silkworm ability and the Mystic Raiment, he was better than new.

The compression continued. And the further his Core was pressed, the more pressure his Discipline was under.

Cores were limited by the space they inhabited. The constraints of the human body were a hard cap on their volume. This was why purity and condensing practices were so important, because they were the only path forward. At ninth rank, an Adept's Core was at its peak volume. From there, the goal was to increase density to improve energy volume.

Condensing a Core, shrinking it, was like extending its growth period, while re-cultivated Discipline was denser by nature. It was a dream for any Adept to have a second growth spurt.

As for Paragons, a very important change undergoes their Cores during ascension. With each advance in solidifying their knowledge of protogenia, their Cores were polished until at last they broke through. After that, it could not be said that a Paragon was truly human any longer. They were half human only, and half a being of energy. For those like Lan Jue with an elemental Discipline, it meant that they were inseparable from it. He would be lightning, and lightning would be him.

With the Pharmacist's guidance, Lan Jue had come to understand the benefits of all this. He no longer lamented the loss of his former power. He was thankful to have been so blessed.

The last few days, he had relied on strength of will to succeed. He would purify his Discipline, and he would purify his Core.

Chapter 442: Compress the Core!

He felt like he was succeeding. His ninth level, second rank Core wasn't overly difficult to compress. He had the experience and control of a ninth rank Adept, so this was easier. He was also benefiting from Zhou Qianlin's tenacity, something which he could access after their unnatural union. It settled over his Core and made it stronger. The likelihood of his Core collapsing from the strain was remote.

Of course, as he did so it was for Qianlin – any changes to his own Core were reflected in hers. The young Adept, it could be said, was undergoing her own re-cultivation process. The only difference was, that her discipline didn't have the same explosive power that his did.

In the battle now, he could feel the struggle between Bing Yu's essence of cold, and Qianlin's Queen of Heaven powers. The Queen of Heaven transformation served to empower one's Core, and allowed both he and Qianlin to share control. But although Bing Yu's powers were different, there was still a benefit. The chaotic nature of his Discipline was constrained, and its erratic behavior soothed by the cold. Since Lan Jue's unification with Qianlin had also granted him higher degrees of control, he was having no trouble commanding his abilities masterfully.

How could Lan Jue pass up such an incredible opportunity? The pressure was a great catalyst for his hidden potential. He continued to allow himself to be pressed.

Through their telepathic link, Qianlin's power had been part of him since the beginning, making his Discipline more controlled and flexible. Lan Jue feared no circumstance, for whatever he experienced Qianlin would sense as well. With her Queen of Heaven powers, there was no danger he couldn't overcome here.

Bing Yu, of course, didn't suspect she was actually helping her foe. She could see the electricity around his frost-covered body dimming.

"Your Majesty... should you call the fight?" Mo Xiao cast a nervous sideways glance toward the Terminator.

He shook his head. "It isn't finished yet. The masked man has options yet, and he hasn't used up any tricks. He's got something in mind – let's watch carefully."

A full minute stretched like this, Lan Jue unable to move a muscle. However, he was not idle. As he compressed his Core, he immersed himself in the sensations and secrets of pure elemental ice. It was fascinating to watch the effects.

Bing Yu had never considered the fact that Lan Jue might have a deeper elemental understanding than she did. Protogenia was out of the question.

The secrets of lightning's essence were rooted in righteous qi of the universe 1. Righteous qi followed the path of the universe, and so those who bore a Discipline like lightning were almost physically unable to go against what was just and good. An Adept who went against the grain of his Discipline, found themselves very quickly weakening. This was one reason why the Clairvoyant elected to have Lan Jue join not just the Avenue, but the council as well. His Discipline was proof that Lan Jue could not be a bad man.

What about protogenic thunderbolt and lightning? Where the essence of lightning was a reflection of righteous and correct action, their protogenic reflection was less refined. As Lan Jue understood, it was judgment! Universal Judgement against all that was evil and vile. That was what protogenia meant for thunderbolt and lightning.

A golden light started to radiate from the center of Lan Jue's chest. As it expanded, the lightning from around him was swallowed up and vanished until every inch of him was covered.

This fight was a battle of comprehension. Both were aware of the essence of their gift, so it would come down to a contest of their attributes. Clearly, Lan Jue was not a match for Bing Yu rank for rank. However her mistake was using her own powers to try and contain his. Lan Jue was gifted with two Disciplines and had some notion of protogenia. Bing Yu was fated to lose.

Chu Cheng watched from the stadium seats like the other guests. As the essence of ice froze the ring solid, his lips curled in to a sour grin. He shook his head. "This lucky bastard."

The bundle of clothes that was Hua Li nodded knowingly.

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There was a flash of gold, then Lan Jue was gone. Half a breath later, a streak of light was heading right for the jade-like statue the essence was emanating from. It struck, and coiled around the form causing the pockets of essence to fall away and dissipate. When he reappeared, Lan Jue was still blanketed in that golden light. He looked like a holy avatar come to earth.

Bing Yu dangled from his fist, clutching at his golden hand around her throat. With a shuddering zrgggtttt, she was injected with untold volts of electricity.

The fight was over!

That familiar electronic voice confirmed it. Lan Jue gently returned Bing Yu to the ground.

She just regarded him with disbelief. "You understand essence... even more than I do? How can you, at you rank? How when you only have a third-rank Discipline at best?"

Lan Jue said nothing, though inwardly he muttered about the rank discrimination. There was nothing more to say, so he turned and walked off the field. Bing Yu watched him go, but there wasn't any animosity. Her accomplishments were amazing for an unaffiliated Adept. Ranking wasn't any more important to her than it was for Lan Jue. She had come here to learn something.

She had felt the whole of her Discipline suppressed after Lan Jue hit her with the final lightning attack. Even before then, she had been locked in place while releasing essence. But when he used it, he could move... it was a matter of their nature! She had only sensed Lan Jue's nature for a fraction of a second, but she was convinced her loss was no fluke.

Everyone here was a talented Adept, and young. Their differences in rank didn't matter so much as their understanding. If they grasped the essence of who they were and what they could do, their Discipline would inevitably rise to the occasion. An Adept who rose in rank but still didn't understand this, was destined to hit a ceiling and stop improving.

Bing Yu's curiosity about this Zeus was only greater now after their fight.

The first round of group one battles had concluded. The results; Titan and Zeus had won, while Bing Yu and Qi Mu had been defeated.

For the losers, their chances at advancing to the semi-finals were meager. In the next round, Titan would face Bing Yu while Lan Jue would square off against Qi Mu. If he wanted a chance at qualifying, he'd need to beat the wolf, too.

Now attentions shifted to the second group, which was now choosing fights. The group consisted of the Pharmacist, Jiang Yuan, Qianbian, and Chi Tianjiao. Of all the groups, it was the one the Accountant had fretted over least. The Pharmacist, with her strength, would find little trouble in advancing through the tournament. Her roughest fight would be against Jian Yuan, the Necromancer from the Dark Citadel.

The sorting finished, and the Pharmacist's first fight was to be against Chi Tianjiao. Jian Yuan was pitted against Qian Bian.

"My turn." The Pharmacist gracefully rose to her feet, smiling at Lan Jue.

He nodded, and gave her a thumbs up.

Today, she was dressed in a light-blue qi pao that really set off her figure, and highlighted her traditional Chinese style. Her foot lightly touched the ground and then she rose in to the air like a fairy. She landed within the ring, ready for her fight.

Lan Jue's mind went back to the Accountant's report:

Chi Tianjiao. Westerner. Discipline; hematomorphosis. Nickname; Pureblood Succubus. Ninth level, sixth rank. Besides Lan Jue, she was the weakest Adept in the quarter-finals.

However, the Accountant had said that Chi Tianjiao's Discipline was especially dangerous. It was capable of enacting changes within the blood of their victims. With such a rare and specialized Discipline, there were many ways they could get around a lower rank.

Chi Tianjiao was another female, but who was unfortunately not blessed with good looks. She was large, and big boned. If one looked at her from behind they might think she was a man. Her features were cut stark with high cheek-bones, and her hair was short and straight as steel nails. It was red, like her hard eyes.

When they met in the ring, Chi Tianjiao lustily licked her lips. "Your blood has got to taste something special," she hissed.

The Pharmacist's response was tepid. "Even the basest things feel it appropriate to boast before me."

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

Chi Tianjiao heaved a terrible roar and a vigorous aura of red light sprang up around her. Much to the horror of the onlookers, the light congealed and formed in to a figure before her. It looked like half-congealed blood, but more stunning was its likeness to the Pharmacist.

"Blood boil!" Chi Tianjiao thrust her hands in the sky and shouted again.

The light around the Pureblood Succubus had darkened to a crimson red. A fire of the same hue danced around the bloody form in front of her.

On the opposite end of the ring, the Pharmacist suddenly went rigid. Red had begun to creep in to the skin of her face. She could feel it, like the blood in her veins no longer belonged to her. It felt like it was trying to fight its way out of her body. A strange mist had begun to accumulate over the Pharmacist's head before being blown away by the wind.

"Hmph!" The Pharmacist audibly sniffed at her foe. She stretched her foot out half a step and thrust her hand out vertically with fingers intertwined. Her left foot stamped to the ground.

In that moment, the image of a golden mountain shimmered in to view behind her before vanishing. Right away, the rising heat in her blood was

gone. The creature Chi Tianjiao had summoned fell away in a torrent of blood with their connection severed.

A cyan light slowly rose from behind the Pharmacist, and soared high in to the air. It broadened until it became an enormous sword that swiped right for Chi Tianjiao. The faint image of an enormous fist could be seen groping through the air, bearing the blade down on the Pharmacist's enemy.

The Western Adept felt like everything around her was sheered away. She couldn't dodge, or even move. Her claim to fame, that special blood Discipline, was completely useless. All advantage, gone. How could she possibly survive against this peak-ranked Adepts sword?!

The encroaching swipe of the blade shook the heavens.

Chapter 443: Qian Bian vs. Jiang Yuan

“Chi Tianjiao has lost. The competitors must not be harmed.” The Terminator’s deep voice boomed through the arena.

Chi Tiantjian was caught off-guard and stumbled backward, falling on to her backside. A moment later, two deep slices appeared in the ground where she had just stood. When she saw it, her face blanched. The Terminator’s voice had saved her from getting cut in two.

Down the field, the Pharmacist’s spectral sword vanished from view. She regarded her defeated foe with cold eyes. “If I discover that you use human blood to augment your powers, you won’t even remember a day when you weren’t in agony.”

The Pharmacist glanced for a moment toward the VIP platform, but said nothing. After a moment she floated away back toward the resting area.

That... that was it?

The audience was dumbfounded. It didn’t look like Chi Tianjiao even registered on the Pharmacist’s radar. Too fast to see anything! Certainly the fastest since the quarter-finals had started.

It was expected that the contenders this late in the tournament would all be powerhouses. So how could something so blatantly one-sided happen? Chi Tianjiao couldn’t protect herself – even the Terminator had to intervene. Was their difference in power really that stark? The simple answer was no; the weakness lay in the restraints of Chi Tianjiao’s Discipline.

Disciples of Celestial Master Qian were followers of ancient Chinese values, values which were attuned to the righteous qi of the earth. All things evil, base and vile were weak against her Discipline. Chi Tianjiao’s skills were based in darkness, and with the Pharmacist’s abilities practically on another level, she hadn’t a chance.

The defeated Adept stumbled from the ring in a daze. She looked almost afraid as she walked right past the resting area, and right out of the

arena.

The first fight of the second group had concluded. The Pharmacist had once more marred the field with her power.

Next fight; Qian Bian against Jiang Yuan.

Most competitors had a firm understanding of Jiang Yuan's strength, if not its limit. His opponent was another matter. The Northerner was a mystery, but he'd already left quite the impression with the crowd.

From the Accountant's information, Qian Bian was a ninth level sixth rank who had fused his body and his Discipline with the newest liquid metal technology. The result was fierce adaptability and resistance. Several types of weaponry had been installed as well, so the end result of his conversion was higher than the official score of his Discipline. He was not a weakling.

The two men separated to either side of the ring.

The Necromancer was as imposing and macabre as ever. His compatriot's loss to Titan didn't appear to have affected him in any way. Qian Bian was another classical-style Easterner, tall with a spiky yellow Mohawk over two meters tall. One could guess height was an important aspect of manliness in the North, but in fact the imposing stature of converts was often directly correlated to their strength. This was especially true for an Adept like Qian Bian.

However, for the moment both of them had very dour expressions, and the reason was simple. They had, along with everyone else, seen the Pharmacist's performance. Jiang Yuan may not have been bothered by Qi Mu's loss, but the Pharmacist terrified him. Qian Bian was no different. It was a clear message; you've got no chance in this group.

Jiang Yuan's powers were also rooted in darkness, so he had very carefully watched the last fight. The moment he saw how quickly Chi Tianjiao lost, he knew his days were numbered. But it was what it was, and he would do his best against the Eastern dragon lady to see what he could acquire from the experience. Now to protect his ego, he would have to begin by defeating the convert in front of him. He had something to prove.

Qian Bian was less flustered. With Titan and Yan Ningya in the fight, he had no illusions of winning the tournament crown. His goal had been to reach the quarter-finals, and that was a goal he'd achieved. The rest was just an opportunity for growth, so he faced his next fight with that in mind.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

Qian Bian's hands shot up, and much to the crowd's surprise they watched his body become a pure titanium white. His two arms shifted before their arms, remolding in to dual six-barrel laser cannons. A storm of energy blasts were headed to his foe.

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Lan Jue watched from the resting area, recovered after his own encounter. It had been a great one in terms of results, with his Core a full one third more compressed than it had been. What he wouldn't have dared to do himself, Bing Yu's ice powers had helped him achieve flawlessly.

The Pharmacist had returned as well, and walked over to the chair beside him. It was like the tyrannical woman who'd embarrassed Chi Tianjiao was someone else entirely. She even smiled when she saw how carefully he was watching the fight. “What? Are you afraid they're going to beat me?”

Of course he didn't. Jiang Yuan's Discipline attributes spelled his doom, while Qian Bian just didn't have the strength. Liquid metal wasn't so difficult to defeat as one might think. Direct explosive force was simplest, and besides Qian Mu was still part human.

“I was just thinking about an acquaintance with similar abilities to Qian Bian,” Lan Jue mused.

His mind went to Ke'er, the Force Tempest 1. Those two were very similar indeed! A single Adept with the power of two. Ke'er's 'participation' in the Northern experiments had involved the best technology available, and it appeared the same held true for Qian Bian 2. His Discipline was higher than Kun'er's, but Lan Jue felt like he was

missing something his Amazon already had.

The Pharmacist's gentle voice intruded. "There is no future for a thing half man, half machine. Understanding protogenia requires that we have an understanding of ourselves. Titan is different, though. They built him to join with his Discipline so that they might grow together. For Qian Bian, they tried to force him in to power."

Lan Jue suddenly understood what it was that made Ke'er and Qian Bian different. The Amazon's abilities were metalmorphosis and explosive energy, and the metals they had used to remake her had not been your run-of-the-mill variety. Really, the thing that had been most affected had been her Core, which they'd catalyzed to make it grow. So one difference between the two was that the experiments on Ke'er were of a higher grade. Lan Jue vaguely remembered Ke'er telling him that, when she did it, the success rate for this sort of thing was very small. It was because of her than Qian Bian existed at all.

On the field, the fight had reached a fever pitch.

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Qian Bian opened with a salvo of powerful energy blasts. His style and powers were commonly encountered in the North, though few ever reached his level. With his Disciplines in tune, he blasted Jiang Yuan's side of the ring with missile fire. The six-barrel cannons that his arms had become, belched like raging dragons. Pyroblast Missile!

Glimmering flashes could be seen in the area around Qian Bian's shoulders. His liquid form undulated, and from somewhere inside two enormous orbs of energy launched outward. They screamed through the air right toward Jiang Yuan, with a smoldering tail of fire in their wake.

As Qian Bian was summoning the pyroblast missiles, Jiang Yuan called forth his dark scepter. He pointed, summoning an enormous skull that blocked the path to him. Qian Bian's missiles grew closer and, just as they looked as though they would reach their target, a sickly green light erupted from the skull's eyes. When the light reached the missiles, they exploded in midair. The resulted blast buffeting the whole interior of the

battlefield.

Jiang Yuan remained behind the destructive glare of the skull, all the while muttering curses. Pus-green orbs of toxic power were flung every which way. Dark glyphs hung in the air around him, tainting the piece of reality they inhabited. They slowly began to converge.

Qian Bian had an idea of his foe's abilities from the pre-fight research. Jiang Yuan's curses weren't random, but precise and all-pervasive. So, once he knew that Jiang Yuan would be his opponent, he was ready – more than ready. Victory against the necromancer would be won by direct, explosive force. The longer he waited, the more likely his defeat became.

While Jiang Yuan was dealing with the missiles, the convert crouched low then launched himself in to the air. His body changed as he soared, before crashing to the ground in the form of an artillery gun.

It didn't look like much, size wise, but the barrel was downright huge. The dark maw of the weapon began to glow red as the power within raged to be let free. An unseen energy reverberated all around them.

Jiang Yuan's eyes narrowed, clearly sensing the ominous surge from his opponent. The protective skull before him was little more than fractured bone after the pyroblast missile strikes.

A cold, hard look appeared in the necromancer's eyes, and he took a threatening step forward. At once, the putrid aura swelled to cover him entirely. His growling voice became great cries of profanity.

The arena shook with the terrible power of his voice. Everyone who heard felt their head begin to spin, and those unfortunate spectators who were not Adepts began to wretch uncontrollably.

Light around the arena shifted as the force field readjusted to the threat. Gradually, the necromancer's poisonous words were locked away within the ring. Just in time, for in that moment Qian Bian's attack had charged. The gun roared as a beam of saffron yellow erupted from within to devour the field.

Chapter 444: Summoning the Malefic Wyrms

The intense heat caused the air beneath the force field to shimmer. Even the people in the audience could see the alloy floor begin to soften. The alloy it was constructed from had been made to resist blasts from top-ranked adepts. For those attacks that softened it, it had been imbued with metals for self-repair. The damage to the floor alone, then, was a clear indication of Qian Bian's strength.

The torrent of destructive yellow energy continued for another five seconds before gradually dispersing.

The artillery gun that had delivered the payload shook, and reverted back to the human shape of Qian Bian. However, the victorious look in his face fled when he peered toward where the beam had fallen. There he discovered a doll, about the size of a man's palm, suspended in air.

The little black plaything exploded with an audible crack before a caustic mist seeped from it. The fumes fused to form Jiang Yuan.

"Beguiling puppet!" The Terminator turned his head to look back at Lucifer, seated behind. "Very impressive! For the necromancer bloodline to employ this, they've come a long way."

Lucifer's remained impassive to the praise, but offered a polite smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Qian Bian, of course, was more surprised than anyone. When he saw the shot land, he'd thought for sure the fight was over. He even thought, he confessed, that the Terminator might even have had to intervene.

As one of his strongest moves, Qian Bian was very aware of how powerful the Mass Energy Discharge attack was. Even a peak ranked Adept couldn't match it for pure destructive power. It had also been extreme draining, but he hadn't expected Jiang Yuan to walk away from it unscathed thanks to some trick.

Jiang Yuan ominously brandished his scepter, and the metal floor split

as four skeletal hands groped for Qian Bian from below. They were followed quickly by a string of the necromancer's curses.

The beguiling puppet that had surprised the Paragon was a very useful skill to possess. For someone of Jiang Yuan's ability, it was tantamount to gaining a second life. On top of that, he could keep casting his spells through the doll so there would be no interruptions.

Qian Bian reacted to the clawing hands, shifting his arms once more in to cannons that blasted the skeletal appendages to bits. He knew he was on the ropes. He'd pulled out his biggest guns from the start to take Jiang Yuan by surprise. The plan was to give him no chance to react and fight back. He was dismayed to find the dark mage's powers were stranger than he'd thought.

But he would not roll over so easily, and would resist until he hit the floor. His reconstructed body shivered and launched in to the air where it converted in to fighter jet. His streamlined frame was dazzling, reflecting light off of his smooth metallic surface.

As if in response to the change, a guttural howl swept through the arena.

Those terrible curses that looked as though they had been headed for Qian Bian, fell to the ground some distance away. The white alloy had only just healed from the former blast when the necromancer's dark powers began to change it. The whole surface went smooth, and the purplish-black eminence of his power painted the floor with a mirror sheen. A brilliant purple outline of a hexagram emerged from the black.

The image rotated, and then the whole floor flashed purple. The center gradually darkened again to an intractable onyx. It looked like the entrance to some horrible abyss.

That was where the cry had come from.

Jiang Yuan's villainous face was split in a self-satisfied smirk. Looking up toward the soaring warplane that was Qian Bian, the necromancer extended a single gnarled finger.

Qian Bian didn't know what was coming, but he knew he might not

survive it. All or nothing, that was his only choice. The fighter jet swung around and pointed its nose cone right for Jiang Yuan. The guided missiles bristling from beneath its wings roared to life and launched. It didn't matter what the mage had done – blowing him up would solve the problem.

As the missile's orange flames set the ring in stark light, an enormous white object lifted from the abyss below.

Out on the platform, the Terminator shot to his feet much to the shock of those around him. In a blink he was gone.

Whatever it was filled the entire field, and Qian Bian's attacks were inexplicably swallowed up. He could feel the hunger in it, like it wanted to devour him as well. But then a large silhouette cut off his vision, revealing the Terminator right in front of him. The Paragon gripped him with a meaty hand and then, before he even knew it, Qian Bian was standing outside of the ring.

What he couldn't see before he saw clearly now. The thing that Jiang Yuan had summoned was an enormous skull, as large as the arena itself. He could not name the beast, but the bones looked reptilian. It lashed and flailed like a demon, with a cold putrid fire where its eyes had been.

The monstrous creature lived somewhere in that blackness, and at Jiang Yuan's call had come to devour the convert. It had spread wide its maw and leapt to bite. If the Terminator had been even a fraction of a second later, he'd have been gulped in to the black abyss. He didn't even want to think what that would entail.

"Thank you... thank you, Your Majesty, for saving my life!" Qian Bian could feel the cold icy grip of death on his spine. He had been inches from obliteration!

The Terminator did not reply. His hard eyes were fixed on the necromancer. "You dare to call the malefic wyrm, Yaduobaha. The gall!"

Jiang Yuan had not finished his curses. With a pale face, he concentrated all his focus on the skull of the legendary monster. The beast turned toward the necromancer, spreading wide its jaws anew. The fire in

its eyes flared as the beast appeared to find a new target.

Jiang Yuan jerked. His mouth flew open, and a forceful burst of blood was vomited forth. Shaking hands groped at the pendant against his chest; a skull that looked exactly like the monster's own.

Spatters of the blood from his mouth splashed against the charm. A red light wormed itself from the bone, eventually turning purple as well. A pair of black flames sparked in its eyes, identical to the larger one.

Yaduobaha, as though sensing something, stopped suddenly and shook its massive head. It dissolved in to a beam of light that raced for the pendant Jiang Yuan bore. When it reached him, the necromancer was enveloped in incandescent light. The portal below him retracted and eventually vanished, cutting them off from the terrible behemoth that lurked just beyond.

Amazement flickered in the Terminator's gaze. He shook his head and said, "He calls and seals the malefic wyrm! Courageous, and stupid. For the Dark Citadel to command someone like this, it's clear they are a force that will endure."

The Paragon released Qian Bian like one would a mutt, thrusting him away before returning to his seat upon the viewing platform in a flash.

From the competitor's resting area, Lan Jue had seen the entire thing. From what he could pick out, the necromancer needed time for the full might of his power to be realized.

"Why do I get the feeling this was all to put on a show for you," Lan Jue said dryly to the Pharmacist.

She shook her head. "From the start I wasn't sure what he was up to. At his level of power, he had a great many options for dealing with Qian Bian but he decided to take the lengthiest road. This isn't the first time, either. If you watched his use of the beguiling puppet from earlier, it had been to extend the time he had to complete the incantation. It must be a terrible, powerful curse from the ancient West – some sort of summoning rite that was clearly very difficult to achieve. He was prepared, and still managed under pressure. Likely with some power still to spare. I think you're right...

the purpose was to show me what was in store. Yaduobaha, the Malefic Wyrm? Self-aggrandizing nonsense. An earthworm by any other name...”

Lan Jue had a great deal of admiration for the woman. He looked at her scornful expression and knew she was a match for anything thrown at her.

It took three or four minutes for Jiang Yuan to completely seal the beast. Only once the last vestiges of that bone-white light were gone did he return to normal. Normal, though, was subjective. Now his skin had an unnaturally violet tint, and his eyes burned with an enigmatic brightness. But where his eyes looked fierce and young, his body looked as though it had aged several years. New wrinkles plagued the corners of his eyes. Summoning that creature had cost him.

This was the end of the second group. The winners were the Pharmacist, and Jiang Yuan.

Each fight had been more spectacular than the last, from the Pharmacist’s lightning-fast victory to Jiang Yuan’s display of stupendous power. They were still processing what they’d watched, but they knew that the qualification process meant there could be only one. It was something they were looking forward to.

Lan Jue’s attention was very closely fixed to the ring now, more so than ever. The next group – group three – was the one the Accountant said would be the meanest;

Yan Ningya, the Driver, Cao Shuiqin, and Jun Yongye.

Chapter 445: The Blade of Jun Yongye

“That was an incredible spectacle! I have no idea what it was Jiang Yuan summoned, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw it again before the end of the tournament. Perhaps we’ll see even more to come.” Mo Xiao’s voice rang through speakers around the arena. Her sweet voice never failed to draw every eye. It stirred them from their stunned silence.

She went on. “Now, we will proceed to fight selection for group three.”

Four new portraits appeared. Meanwhile, a dim light hung over the ring as the floor began the process of repairing itself. Recovery was longer this time, though that was no surprise after what they’d witnessed.

“Begin!”

The portraits immediately shuffled in the air above them, quickly arranging themselves in to pairs. It was decided.

“Group three, round one; Yan Ningya against Jun Yongye, and the Driver against Cao Shuiqin.”

The Accountant’s advice had been dire no matter who the Driver ran up against. Use his potential to the best of his abilities, was the official answer. If he triumphed, it would be a mighty feat.

The Driver would face off against Cao Shuiqin, the one the Accountant had praised so highly. First, however, were the disciple and the swordsman. Yan Ningya was the disciple of the Great Conclave’s second Paragon, the Epochrion. Her foe was a man the Accountant knew little about, only that his Discipline involved his sword – Jun Yongye.

Lan Jue turned his eyes toward Yan Ningya, who was rising to her feet. The wind caught the veil that hid her features from view, making it flutter. But while her face was hidden, her eyes were a dazzling prismatic display that drew the viewer in. She slowly made her way out to the ring.

Jun Yongye also rose, and Lan Jue took the measure of this mysterious Adept for the first time. He looked like he might be around thirty, not terribly handsome, with a medium build. He had pale white skin with dark

eyes – not someone who really stands out from a crowd. However, if someone were to give him more than a passing glance, they would discover something different about his bearing. He was dressed in white, but nothing with modern appeal or stylish cut. It was a long robe, like the style they might have worn in the former era Chinese dynasties. His long hair had been coiled up and fixed to the top of his head with a wooden clip. All in all, it was a very oriental flavor.

He entered the ring with the same poise Cao Shuiqin bore. His gait looked almost lazy, but to Lan Jue's trained eyes he could see the flow in them. They were precise, and very evenly spaced.

The Pharmacist regarded him as well, with her brows pressed together in thought. The light of curiosity flitted behind her eyes.

"What do you think about this one?" Lan Jue asked her.

She shook her head. "It's hard to say. This will be a battle between a fierce tiger and a mighty dragon. I think they're more evenly matched than any fight we've witnessed yet."

Zeus was genuinely surprised. "You think Jun Yongye is that skilled?" His surprise could be understood. After all, Yan Ningya was the disciple of a Paragon. She had one of the most fearsome of Disciplines at her command, Time. She was one of the delegates the North pinned their hopes on to win the tournament. If the Pharmacist's estimations were correct, then that spoke volumes to Jun Yongye's capabilities.

The Pharmacist answered. "He's a difficult one to read. He seems kind, and there's something familiar... as for the limits of his strength, we'll only know when we see him in action. At our levels, Discipline isn't the only factor for victory."

Lan Jue nodded in agreement. "I'm anxious to see what we discover."

The two competitors entered the arena together from opposite sides. Jun Yongye's robes flapped in the breeze, like he'd just come in from the wild lands. An amicable smile spread his lips.

Yan Ningya's expression was hidden beneath her veil, but her eyes

continued to flash hypnotically. The audience attention was almost subconsciously drawn to those eyes.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

Jun Yongye wrapped up the outer layer of his robes with his left hand and swept it behind hand back. His right hand extended, and beckoned towards Yan Ningya. Very refined.

His opponent nodded back, as though in greeting. She did not rush to engage. By all appearances, they looked more like friends than competitors.

Then, Yan Ningya shot her right hand in to the air. An odd sword appeared in a flash of white, clutched in her grip. Its length was its most defining feature. An average sword was about three and a half feet long, maybe four. This sword was a full six feet long, and was composed of pure energy.

This Northerner from the Conclave was a swordswoman?

In all her former fights she'd hardly had to try. In fact, she'd hardly had to move. Vicious use of her Discipline had been enough to quickly attain victory.

“Brother Jun! I hear there's no one in the tournament with a better comprehension of protogenia than you. If I'm honest, though, I'm not convinced. I'm anxious for a lesson in swordsmanship.” Yan Ninya's voice carried far across the arena, but oddly spaced. Some were long, and others short, and tumbled over one another in an alluring sort of rhythm. Every word was an enticing coo that pulled at the listeners' hearts.

“Their praise is unwarranted,” he assured her. “But I would be happy to assist little sister in her hobby.”

Jun Yangye reached out as though grabbing for something, and at his gesture a flash of light stretched from within his hand. An ordinary-looking, four-feet long sword appeared.

Yan Ningya's delicate foot stepped forward, just half a foot, and then she was gone. In the next instant she reappeared directly in front of Jun

Yongye.

The Pharmacist gasped. "Phasing!"

She swiped her sword toward his face as it blazed an angry white.

But a change had overcome Jun Yongye, the moment that sword appeared in his hand. His warm eyes sharpened to a single point, the blade. The point of it swayed a little, slowly slanting forward.

Achieve without acting. The very minute adjustment to the sword's angle had it collide squarely with the flat of Yan Ningya's sword. Their collision was marked with a piercing ring!

And then a puff! Yan Ningya immediately disengaged and retreated, much to everyone's surprise. Then they saw that her sword had been broken clean in half. The front part had dissolved in to motes of crackling light and vanished before reaching the ground.

That noise, though, wasn't the noise of the Adept's sword breaking. It sounded like a quick rush of air, like puncturing a balloon. The ring's uppermost shields exploded outward.

The colors flashing in Yan Ningya's eyes displayed pure astonishment. She urged energy through the sword, reforging it in a blink. She pressed the advanced, flowing gracefully in to attack. She became a whirling of motion, her sword flashing dangerously as it came at him from a dozen different angles.

Jun Yongye never looked at her, never looked up. His eyes were locked firmly on the sword. He turned it again, down and diagonally just a few degrees.

Ding!

Yan Ningya's sword broke again, but there was no dramatic explosion like last time. Everything was normal.

On the surface this was beginning to look like a fight between wu shu masters, not Adepts. A few knowing spectators, however, knew that what had transpired in the last moments was crucial.

Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and the Terminator all watched with that knowing look.

What Jun Yongye was using wasn't swordsmanship. It wasn't protogenia either, but a sort of it... the true way of the sword.

No one knew what the man's comprehension entailed, but it made the hair on the Terminator's skin stand on end. It reminded him of someone – someone he didn't want to ever have to think about. Jue Di!

There was nothing similar in the abilities of this swordsman and Jue Di, but it wasn't the ability that reminded it. The similarity lied in the sheer skill, the mastery that bordered on divine. It scared the Paragon. He also thought to his future. For one so young to have so much talent, his Path to Paragon would be a difficult one.

Yan Ningya's eyes hardened. She had a great deal of confidence in her swordsmanship abilities, no less than her formidable Discipline. She hadn't anticipated that she would be so outclassed.

She disengaged and reforged her sword once more.

Jun Yongye didn't follow. He just stared at his weapon. To him, nothing seemed to exist outside of the sword's flashing blade.

The arena was silent. The audience was as still, and soundless. Most didn't understand what happened, but those with a clue grinned from ear to ear. As for those in the VIP platform, they all watched a quiet, dignified disbelief. What they were seeing couldn't possibly be true.

The Epochrion's disciple looked like a child before Jun Yongye.

The Terminator's eyes were more solemn, as though he were thinking about something. Beside him, Mo Xiao sat speechless.

This man... he's amazing! Could he really be so good as this? Is this the power of perfect simplicity?

Yan Ningya lifted a hand, and pulled the veil from her face, instantly stopping the peppered conversations that had begun in the crowd.

What a face! Milky white like flawless jade, with large dark eyes beneath

delicate brows. She was a rare beauty.

Chapter 446: The Alluring Blade

Lan Jue had been blessed with the company of many beautiful women in his life, but this one was only surpassed by Hera and Zhou Qianlin. She had a very different style, however.

Yan Ningya's beauty was something Easterners' could appreciate. She had a very classical appearance that was not the flavor of the North or West where they preferred more straightforward girls. However, once beauty reached a certain point it didn't matter. At least, that's how many in the audience felt when they looked upon her.

She was like a different woman once the mask was gone, though. A fervor burned in those glittering eyes. Then, she turned her back on her enemy and walked a few steps away. She dragged her longsword along the crowd to the sounds of an awful hiss. A jagged trench followed her.

Jun Yongye appeared to sense something, and his response was to smile pleasantly toward the girl. With his left hand he flicked the blade of his weapon. The resulting hum of reverberation sounded like the sigh of a great dragon. It filled the whole arena as commanding as ringing church bells. There was something stimulating about it that cleared the minds of listeners so they could focus more clearly on the fight below.

Seven long steps. Yan Ningya lazily dragged her sword seven steps across the field before slowly turning back to look at the swordsman. Her pretty face was split in a shy smile, and yet her eyes were different. A quick glimpse of sadness existed somewhere in them that appeared only occasionally. For many it only served to increase her charm.

Then there was a flash, a piercing ray of light that slashed the ring in two.

The Pharmacist muttered as she and Lan Jue watched. "The Alluring Blade. Beguiling with a look and a smile!"

The moment Yan Ningya swung back around, Jun Yongye was on the move. The point of his simple sword tore through the air. His eyes followed the biting tip, the blade leaving a dim afterimage in its wake. A

series of tintinnabulating rings followed quickly one after the other, like wind chimes as he deflected the beam.

That cutting light that had threatened to sever the whole ring vanished. Jun Yongye stood unmoved, with the tip of his sword firmly pointed to the distant Yan Ningya.

She looked unmoved, but there was flash in her eyes at the world around her appeared to thicken. Her foe could feel his sword moving more sluggishly, as though trying to cut through jam. At last it was time to use her Discipline – time control.

Her eyes grew sharp and she took a step forward. She and her sword swam effortlessly toward her enemy, as though dancing. She began to sing, sweet soft tones.

“In the North lives a wondrous beauty!” She whipped the sword around herself and over, bringing it down in a fierce chop toward Jun Yongye.

Yan Ningya’s time dilation had begun to slow him down, but a pale white haze sprang up as she neared. He pulled back his sword just in time to deflect her attack with the flat of his sword.

“Clang!” Jun Yongye stumbled sideways a couple steps.

“Peerless and independent!” She almost floated down from the sky above, with her sword piercing straight ahead. He continued to fall back with his sword raised in defense.

“Clang!” He was knocked back three steps.

“One laugh and cities fall!” She let out a sweet giggle of her own. The light around her sword bloomed and birthed countless more shards. All of them were sent flying.

Even on his back foot Jun Yongye wasn’t the least bit flustered. He was retreating when suddenly he stopped, and thrust his blade straight at her. He was slower, but if he focused on that fact then he would have to chance to dodge her attacks.

“Clang!” This time, Yan Ningya was reeling.

She don't know how that happened. Her attack should have struck first. She nibbled pitifully on her lower lip, and her big eyes were full of sorrow. A moment later, though, she giggled again. Her clear voice called out. "Another laugh, another city!" She flipped her sword over so the point was downward over her enemy's head. A blast of light shot out.

Jun Yongye's face became somewhat more serious. He dropped in to a crouch, but it looked like the time distortion wouldn't allow him to bring back his sword in time to block. Instead, he angled the hilt...

"Clang!" Jun Yongye's sword was knocked away.

A multitude of colors flared from Yan Ningya's eyes, and the light washed over the field below. She herself was suddenly enveloped in a golden aura, which formed in the appearance of a courtly dress. A godly phoenix sorrowfully circled overhead.

Back in the rest area, the Pharmacist continued to narrate. "Ah, the Naked Eyes of the Concubine. A very good pair to the Alluring Blade 1."

Yan Ningya shut her eyes and began to murmur. "Such a beauty as this was rare to be seen." Her fairy-like flight took her higher and then, body and sword as one, she descended upon the defenseless Jun Yongye like a lightning bolt.

"Your Majesty!" Mo Xiao cried.

Jun Yongye's destruction at the hand of Yan Ningye looked inevitable. She couldn't understand why the Terminator didn't intervene. In fact he merely sat there, silent and unmoving.

"Clang!"

The disciple's sword rang against Jun Yongye's chest. Shocked, she found that even with all of her power behind it, her sword couldn't pierce him.

Jun Yongye smiled at her, "I am the sword!"

She could see his body quiver ever so slightly, and then radiating waves of vibrating energy wafting from him. In that moment he did look like a

greatsword, standing proudly in the center of the arena. Yan Ningya watched the vibrations from him dissipate her time dilation, and was even forceful enough to force her to retreat. The energy sword in her hand shattered again.

He stood with his weapon raised to his chest in salute. “When you have learned the true meaning of time, and have joined it with the Alluring Blade, then you may seek me again.”

He punctuated the word by half-hazardly pointing with his weapon toward her. With a beautiful flourish, the sword disappeared into the folds of his fluttering robes.

Yan Ningya then felt an impossibly sharp, piercing intent stop just between her eyebrows – right where Jun Yongye had leveled the blade. She knew that the power she felt only stopped from drilling right through her because of her opponent’s mastery. Her eyes were as wide as saucers, but she could sense something in that power she felt she could understand.

“I concede.” She said softly, dropping her eyes to the ground. Her smile was gone.

Chapter 447: Cao Shuiqin

Jun Yongye gave her a final nod, then left the ring.

Compared to the other fights, this one had been almost tame. Although Yan Ningya's charge had been a spectacle, the rest looked like a plain sword battle. However, one of the strongest hopes for the future of the Great Conclave had lost. The crowd muttered among themselves at the result.

Mo Xiao, her mouth slightly agape, slowly turned her head to look at the Terminator. Her shock turned to a smile. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. I was on the edge of my seat and got over-excited. You have incredible perception."

The Terminator did not speak. Were his eyes really so good as she said? The truth was that the aura Jun Yongye bore made him uncomfortable. It was partly for this reason that the Paragon hadn't stopped Yan Ningya from trying to destroy him.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, watched from his small sofa with narrowed eyes. The swordsman's display had him thinking, and only those like Lan Jue who knew the art of combat could see how dangerous that fight had been. Yan Ningya should have tested him out first, and then used her Discipline in the same moment as her Alluring Blade. That would have been the most effective use of her skills.

At any rate, a ninth level eighth rank Talent who could perfectly fuse their martial art with their Discipline... that was something that got people's attention. And although she had lost the fight, her attack would easily have destroyed the arena if those shields hadn't been there to protect them. Still, in the end Jun Yongye used nothing but his ordinary-looking sword to knock her aside.

The Pharmacist looked as surprised as many in the audience. "He... he is no man.

"Not a man?" Lan Jue looked at her quizzically.

“He’s a sword.... Unbreakable Blade style. He’s quite strong,” she illuminated.

Lan Jue wasn’t a student of the sword, so his knowledge didn’t extend passed the rudimentary. However, the Pharmacist was indeed trained in swordsmanship, since her Discipline and martial art both used one. She was certainly the one to ask for insight in to use of the blade.

Jun Yongye did not remain to watch the rest of the fight. His firm and steady gait took him right out of the arena.

Lan Jue sat in silence, and even closed his eyes momentarily. The fight had given him more than just a passing moment of excitement. There was something in there to be learned.

Ever since acquiring the special conductive metal from Lyr, Lan Jue had, on occasion, turned his mind to the future Astrum he would bear if he became a Paragon. Each Astrum was unique to its user, and every Paragon bore one. On the day they died, their weapons would inexplicably be destroyed along with them – as a part of themselves. One of the main reasons that the Gourmet and the Bookworm were still considered weak even among Paragons, was in part because of their lack of an Astrum.

Something he’d seen when watching Jun Yongye awakened an understanding in him. He knew what he had to do.

In the legends of ancient Greece, Zeus’ weapon were his lightning bolts and sometimes a spear of lightning. Likewise, those had been the tools Lan Jue employed in his own battle tactics. Now that he’d seen Jun Yongye’s demonstration, Lan Jue wasn’t so sure his was the best method.

Once an Astrum was created, it could not be changed. If Lan Jue were to adhere precisely to the old tales, then a spear would be best. However, still he hesitated. He was an Easterner who was given the name. Somehow, he just felt as though the spear was not the shape his Astrum should take. He had been moved by Jun Yongye’s mastery with the blade, and wanted that for himself.

In ancient China the sword was called the lord of weapons. It was the most difficult to learn, but his earlier dabbling in swordsmanship became

a desire when he saw what it could accomplish.

When he opened his eyes, the ring was occupied by two new people. The Driver and Cao Shuiqin had already begun preparing for their fight.

The Pharmacist, seated beside him, had also come to from her own thoughts. She was somewhat taken aback by the light of determination she saw in Lan Jue's eyes when they opened.

"I guess you made up your mind," she said with a smirk.

Lan Jue nodded. "Coming here was the right decision. Watching that fight helped me decide what my future Astrum will be."

She blinked at him. "The sword?"

He nodded.

The Pharmacist smiled at the revelation. "If you feel that is the right choice, then it is the right choice for you. The first feeling is often the correct one. Congratulations on your revelation."

Finding one's chosen path with such conviction was not an easy thing. This was especially true when an Adept reached such levels as they inhabited. Once a Talent got to these heights, everything they did was to prepare for the breakthrough to Paragon. The more abundant this preparation, the easier their eventual success would be.

"Three, two, one. Begin!" The fight had already started.

Cao Shuiqin looked like the very picture of soft femininity. Although she wasn't as attractive as Yan Ningya, her gentle aura was almost hypnotizing. She was covered in a yellow dress, and carried a guqin with her 1.

"Another Easterner," the Pharmacist mused.

Lan Jue blinked. She was right! The North appeared to have the tournament wrapped up, but the Easterners who came to participate were making a show of it. Himself, the Pharmacist, the Driver, Jun Yongye, Cao Shuiqin, Xiangyuan Shishi and Ying Suifeng 2 were its representatives. Unfortunately, the third group had an abundance of Easterners, and only

one could advance.

Lan Jue was surprised when Cao Shuiqin was the one to initiate the fight, and not the lightning-fast Driver.

She started with a coy smile, which immediately made the Driver freeze in his tracks. A strange look filled his eyes. In that fraction of a second, her delicate hands lay upon the seven string, thirteen bar instrument. They danced like waving blades of grain, coaxing forth a simple chord.

The humming strings shot forth a fan of sharp, blue daggers of air. The translucent attack spread right for the Driver.

The Driver was still distracted by her smirk and thus was surprised by her strike. Just before those dangerous weapons pierced him, he shot in to the air as a bolt of lightning. There, he reappeared before launching himself down again toward his waiting foe.

Chapter 448: Heartstrings

The Driver was blindingly fast. Before Lan Jue learned the secrets of martial arts, he couldn't have kept up with the Driver's speed. In a flash, the Avenue delegate appeared behind Cao Shuiqin with his hands reaching for her neck.

In this instant, the Driver didn't pay much heed to the Accountant's concerns. He felt that encountering Cao Shuiqin in the first match was a good thing. Her Discipline was music, based in sound. Sound was a great deal slower than light – the speed he was almost capable of achieving. He wasn't worried his powers would be insufficient.

As if to prove the point, his hands clapped down on Cao Shuiqin's shoulders, and she didn't even move. He poured electricity through his hands and in to his foe, though even the audience could tell he was taking it easy because he was fighting a woman.

However, over the din of the crackling electricity, he could make out a crystal-clear buzz.

The sound seemed to be coming from Cao Shuiqin herself. The Driver's hands were suddenly and forcefully knocked away, while his heart began to race without reason. He could feel it buzz, too, just like his foe.

The electricity numbed her, and caused her to stumble forward a step. However, the playful smile on her face showed that the Driver had had little effect. Her fingers danced along the strings again.

In that instant his enemy vanished, and the Driver inexplicably found himself in a vast and empty abyss.

This... dreamland?

The arena began to thud rhythmically from unseen war drums. Then, without warning, a cadre of troops clad head to toe in armor appeared from nothing like the armies of heaven. Meanwhile, the metal floor had become a sucking bog that attempted to swallow him up.

The Driver growled. There was a pulse of silver light and then, with a

thunderous crash, bolts of lightning erupted from him in all directions.

Boom—!

Lightning roared from beneath the Driver's feet in attempts to send him catapulting in to the air above Cao Shuiqin's power. There was a flash, and he changed direction in mid-air to plummet into a swath of bristling soldiers. It was the area he last remembered Cao Shuiqin standing. He was still lost in a world of her making.

Silver light enveloped the ring, followed by a staggering explosion.

In the use of their powers, the Driver and Lan Jue were quite different. Thunderbolt was thunderbolt, and lightning was lightning – he could use them together or apart. The Driver, though, only employed them joined together. This was one important factor in his comparative weakness to Lan Jue, and his troubles moving forward.

Thunderbolt especially, being an aspect of righteous qi, was stronger in its yang form than in its yin.

The Driver jumped back to his feet after the charge, then swung around to envelope another hoard of enemies in fatal lightning. He knew for certain that the things he witnessed weren't real – they were a trick of Cao Shuiqin's power – except that somewhere she was in the darkness. And if he didn't know where his target was, then the plan was simple. Direct, all-pervasive force!

Explosiveness was an undeniable benefit of thunderbolt Disciplines. Its blast-force was strong enough to destroy most illusions outright. Like Lan Jue had the first time he met the Beautician.

But no matter how strong the Driver's attacks were, Cao Shuiqin always remade the dreamland when he destroyed it. At least his strikes were having an effect. However, the more serious problem was the music itself. No matter how much strength he put behind a strike, the music continued. He could fill the whole field with lightning and it wouldn't put an end to the constant echo of that stern music in his brain. It was worming its way through him, tugging at his heart.

What is this?! The Driver was at a loss.

It was evident that she'd chosen this tactic to combat his specialty, but while effective it must also be draining to maintain. This couldn't continue for long. If the Driver was anything, he was sturdy, and once his mind was made up his resolve was unshakeable.

A beam of powerful light launched from the Driver, followed quickly by a thunderous blast. Like a terrible firecracker, it blasted through the remaining soldiers nearby.

While the illusory bodies writhed, he pressed his hands together in front of his chest, wasting no time. His fingers danced and curled around each other in odd arrangements, while silvery runes appeared and vanished inexplicably.

Hand Seals?

Lan Jue regarded his fellow Avenue denizen with some surprise. They could not see the phantoms that plagued him, but they could see the Driver's every move as he combated the dreamland. He tore through the air, spraying lightning everywhere in desperate blasts. Now, as he cast his runes, Cao Shuiqin remained below him in the center of the field playing her guqin.

Nine runes hung in the air, floating around the Driver. The sounds of thunder played on the wind, faintly heard. Then, there was a flash of silver light that filled the sky. The whole of the ring's interior was immediately buffeted by an explosion so fierce that the force fields screeched in protest.

This guy...

Lan Jue knew what he was up to. The Driver knew that even though the dreamland he was lost in looked infinite, there was in fact only limited space in their arena. He was using his greatest attack to fill their limited space, and blast through every corner.

It was usually a dumb strategy, but in this case it looked as though it might prove effective. What Lan Jue failed to understand was how the

Driver succumbed so easily to the illusion. With all of the competitors ninth level and higher, it shouldn't be that easy.

The flying daggers stopped. What the Driver saw as enemy soldiers were consumed by the burning silver light. When it cleared, he was back in the ring. He turned to look at Cao Shuiqin, who looked somewhat disheveled.

She looked right back at him, and offered a smile. "I can't tell you why, but you've already lost.... Well, you seem like a nice boy so I suppose I can."

The Driver just looked at her, confused. Cao Shuiqin simply went back to plucking at the instrument. However, much to the crowd's surprise no sound came out. But the Driver's face changed, and he staggered so much that he nearly fell. To him it felt like waves of overpowering fear were pouring from his own heart. It beat so fast it felt like it might burst from his chest, urged on by some unseen stimuli.

Cao Shuiqin's poison tones were thankfully only heard by the Driver. Acoustics!

"You're strong. Everyone in our group is. If it was a contest of direct strength then I would have had to employ all of my tricks, but I need those for the other fighters. And so, to win I took a risk. Your chance had been at the very start when you put your hands on me. You held back, and if you hadn't then I would have been finished. But I knew you well enough to know you wouldn't charge headlong with your full strength at a woman. I was right. The moment you touched me you were infected by my music. My heartstrings got their hooks in to you, and with each pluck of my finger you are powerless. You cannot resist now that the strings are already tuned. I'm sorry to have used your kind-heartedness against you... but as a consolation, my Heartstrings are not such a bad thing."

Faint hues of red appeared on her pale face. Her delicate fingers laid upon the strings, silencing their hum. The Driver stood still, as though nailed to the floor.

His brows furrowed as he glared at her. He knew he'd lost. His defeat wasn't from a lack of power, but poor planning. After a moment his brow relaxed, and a smile even split his face. "I didn't lose to you, I lost to myself

– the moment I saw you step in to the ring. You are precisely the type of woman I like, perhaps the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. You win, I’m convinced.”

The Driver finished with a gentlemanly bow, then left the ring. Cao Shuiqin clearly hadn’t expected him to be so graceful in defeat. The light red in her cheeks deepened considerably. The cameras streaming to each of the great Alliances caught it all.

He... how could he say this in public like that? There are qualifiers to win, how am I supposed to behave?

She furiously stamped her foot and glared at the Driver’s back. She spun on her heels and ran from the field.

The audience was quiet. Then, suddenly, the whole audience erupted in to laughter. It was hard to tell whether it was meant kindly or something else.

The seriousness of the fight had been relieved by the waves of laughter. “This guy...” Lan Jue said, shaking his head as he watched the Driver come.

“The nerve!” The Pharmacist sniffed, full of displeasure. “How could he tease her like that after losing.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “It is often wise to find advantage in inferior position. I know him, he wouldn’t say something like that out of nowhere. He’s got some plan, you wait and see. There’s a trap in store for Cao Shuiqin.”

The Pharmacist gave him a flat stare. “Men. Not a single good thing about them.”

Lan Jue responded with a profound stare of his own. “Well... before you patent that, maybe add a little disclaimer; ‘but my little brother’s ok’.”

She snorted a laugh at him. “You seem skilled enough in singing your own praises.”

Chapter 449: Constantine's Path

"Just a suggestion," Lan Jue said with a smirk.

So it was for group three. Cao Shuiqin and Jun Yongye had achieved victory. There wasn't a great deal of surprise but for the dark horse Jun Yongye. His almost assured entrance in the final four was a surprising result.

Mo Xiao's final words for the group were brief. This was somewhat understandable, since even she wasn't fully aware of everything that was happening. At this level, the difference between victory and defeat rested on a razor's edge. For instance, she wasn't even sure how it was the Driver was defeated. The Terminator didn't explain either. What happened was a secret between the Driver and Cao Shuiqin.

It had come to the final group of the day, and the last of the opening rounds for the quarter-finals. Group four; Constantine, Blackmoon, Ying Suifeng, and Xuanyuan Shishi 1. Of them, Constantine was heavily favored to advance. Like the Pharmacist, he had smashed through his previous foes as though they were made of paper.

Back in the Avenue during the Citadel's visit, he had shown real strength. He had ultimately lost to the Pauper, though the beggar was half a step away from Paragon at the time. Constantine was a peak-level Adept who, with the Spear of Fate in his hands, was undisputedly a force to be reckoned with.

The big question was the Easterner in the group, Xuanyuan Shishi. This was the one the Accountant couldn't find much information for. He was a young man with short dark hair and a lively sense about him. He was twenty six, maybe twenty seven, and a notable Talent already. His earlier fights had been fast and mysterious. Mist was his Discipline, and when that cloud enveloped his foes they would lose without anyone seeing how.

Lan Jue was helplessly distraught to learn of Xuanyuan Shishi's luck, which seemed almost supernatural. He'd been paired with weaker opponents in every fight leading up to now. His trek to the quarter-finals

had been a breeze.

Blackmoon – the Northern delegate – was also a notable member of the group. His Discipline was called the Wicked Eye, and involved thought control. He bore a high-caliber energy rifle, and once he got the lock the target had nowhere to hide. He was celebrated as a master sniper with attack force almost equal to a Paragon.

But like anything with such awesome power, there were restrictions. He could only fire once in ten seconds. If it weren't for that handicap, then the other Adepts would probably refuse to fight him. For him, like any sniper, the trick lay in not getting pinned by the full force of his strength.

The fight arrangements were complete; Constantine verses Blackmoon. Xuanyuan Shishi against Ying Suifeng.

The first fight would be an interesting test of Blackmoon's attacks. Were they mighty enough to overcome Constantine? That was the key – if he could land even one shot, he could win.

Constantine took to the ring with a majestic gait. He glittered beneath the arena lights, clad in white priest garb inlaid with gold.

Blackmoon was a different sort of animal. He was thin as a rail, with vulture-like eyes. His hair was tied back with a black bandanna, the same color as his combat fatigues. It was night-camouflage, designed to keep him hidden in the dark.

The two men looked at each other from across the ring. Neither said a word.

Blackmoon grunted, and slapped his hands against his chest. The inky color around him was cast forth, then coalesced in his hands in to his trademark sniper rifle. The thing was so enormous it made him look almost comically small.

“Three, two, one, begin!”

“BANG!”

The very instant the voice stopped, Blackmoon's rifle had fired its first

round. Everyone paying attention was stunned. The rules demanded that he didn't carry a loaded rifle on to the field. How did he fire so fast?

Constantine's eyes went wide, and he lunged out of the way.

"Poof!" The bullet seemed set to hit Constantine, quicker than his dodge. But just as the bullet of energy was about to land it fractured and spread out, forming a net of energy that enveloped the High Inquisitor.

Blackmoon had never used anything but mass-energy rounds against his previous opponents. This was completely outside of what they knew about him.

Enhanced Snare Rounds! These things were used against mechas.

The convert's right eye flashed and turned red. The rifle in his hand hummed, and streamers of crimson energy began to gather in it. The strength of Blackmoon's shots were only in part due to hardware. The Wicked Eye was a force to be reckoned with all its own. The two together were earthshaking.

It was a fact few knew. Most of those who did were dead. One hundred shots, one hundred hits – nothing could stop him. That was the power of Blackmoon.

The net had been a bid to give him a shot, literally and figuratively. What no one knew was that the ten second constraint wasn't a rule; if he poured more energy in to the rifle he could charge it faster.

Constantine was caught beneath the net, but he didn't look worried. The snare, which was supposed to force him to his knees, didn't seem to bother Constantine much at all.

"Retribution!" He calmly cried. A beam of white light appeared overhead and shone down upon him.

The snare wasn't just a lash to keep him down, that would be too simple. It was also infused with deadly high-voltage electricity designed to wreak havoc on mechas, to say nothing of what it might do to a human. An ordinary man would almost immediately be singed to ash, but Constantine was not ordinary. The holy light protected him and with a burst of

anointed energy that pulsed from him, but the net remained

Constantine narrowed his eyes.

Three seconds.

The ghost of a smile turned Blackmoon's lips. He was a cold-hearted, professional sniper. Getting him to show any reaction at all was a feat. He knew that the full effect of the enhanced snare round was more than his enemy thought.

A second light appeared from nothing, joining the other. Their fused strength proved too much for the net and finally destroyed it.

Five seconds had passed.

Blackmoon's smile fled. He looked at his foe, who simply stood there. Constantine didn't attack, instead calling out to him with an almost bored inflection.

"Hurry."

There was about no greater insult to a sniper than to let them take their shot.

Blackmoon's red eye flared, and the light gathering in his rifle thickened.

Seven seconds.

BANG–!

A screaming, blood-red round fired from the barrel of the gun. Its kickback was so strong it knocked Blackmoon back three meters. When it hit Constantine it sent him flying across the ring.

The audience watched, gasping in sheer disbelief. The Inquisitor was poised to win the tournament! Could this have really knocked him out of the running? It looked like the loss might have even cost him his life! They just watched him take a shot that would eradicate a gunship.

Bang! Constantine was brutally smashed against the force field, with enough force to send him sailing back forward. He landed with a crash, covered in crackling remnants of red light.

A wicked, self-satisfied smirk split the sniper's face. Pompous ass. Screw off.

Then his red eye went wide.

"Not... not bad. It's true what they say... you almost hit like a Paragon. Pretty close, anyway." Constantly coughed, pushing himself from the ground with one hand while the other tenderly rubbed his chest. The rippling waves of light around him stabilized.

Holy shit, he took it straight on!

Blackmoon simply couldn't believe what he was looking at. He had never once encountered anyone who wasn't a Paragon that could survive a shot from his gun. That shot was the crux of his strategy!

It was completely inconceivable, and yet the proof was standing right in front of him. No matter how much Blackmoon didn't want to believe it, Constantine had faced down his best and was still standing.

That wasn't to say he was unscathed. Constantine was bleeding profusely, from the mouth, nose and ears. It looked like he had taken some damage from the blow. His eyes, though, were sharp as ever. He almost looked excited, and still didn't make to attack Blackmoon.

The convert hefted his rifle and began charging again. It was impossible – he couldn't accept anyone short of a Paragon could escape his gun!

"I get the idea." Constantine waved his hand dismissively. The entire ring was suddenly lost in a sea of holy light

"Winner; Constantine!"

The Inquisitor walked away from the ring holding his chest. He bared his teeth in pain, making him look like a wounded animal.

Lan Jue watched him closely, his eyes narrowed. Constantine's choice to face the bullet was deliberate. He was seeking the thrill, the fear of danger to push him to his potential. It was also reckless, for the point of impact must have been very near his Core. A little stronger and he would have been in far more dire straits.

The dangers were balanced by understanding, though. At the very least his own potential would rise to try and meet the demand. He wasn't here for titles or riches. He was here for the same reason as most of the others.

VIP Platform.

"Your Majesty, was Constantine's choice to take the bullet in order to deepen his understanding?"

Chapter 450: Xiangyuan Shishi

The Terminator patiently offered his knowledge. “He’s following a path I myself took before breaking through to Paragon. I would spend my time at my peak seeking out the strongest contemporaries, and urging them to hit me with everything they had. I would use their strength to help me find my Path, and the stress ensured I always performed at my best. Constantine has the same goal. Let there be no mistake that, if Constantine had desired Blackmoon would never have gotten his shot off. There was too much of a discrepancy between them, and in fact Constantine may struggle to be challenged in his group.”

Mo Xiao nodded, agreeing with his assessment.

Seven of the eight fights for the day had concluded. The final match would be between Xiangyuan Shishi and Ying Suifeng.

Ying Suifeng – Ninth level, seventh rank. Discipline: Voice of Command

Xiangyuan Shishi – Ninth level, seventh rank. Discipline: Mist.

Both men were from the Eastern Alliance.

Ying Suifeng was an ordinary-looking man, young and hip-looking. He was perhaps twenty seven or twenty eight. Shishi, meanwhile, cut quite the heroic figure. His face was lit up with a beaming smile.

“Hello, hello. Take it easy on me, will you?” As Shishi stepped in to the ring, he waved pleasantly toward Ying Suifeng, who only nodded back.

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

Ying Suifeng’s body quivered oddly for a moment, then split in to three identical copies. It reminded Lan Jue of the doppelganger tactics in mecha fighting. The difference was that this wasn’t some trick of the mind. It was likely the function of his Discipline. Then, as they watched, the three figures fused in to a grotesque amalgamation with three heads and six arms.

All three heads spoke in unison. “Silence,” they hummed.

Silence immediately pervaded beneath the force field, sudden and complete.

Xuanyuan Shishi, watching from afar, had a somewhat startled expression on his face when he lifted his right hand. Mist gathered over his foe, and settled to envelope the three-headed Adept.

“Disperse!” The three low voices hummed.

And they obeyed. The mist dissipated until not a trace was left.

This...

The Voice of command Discipline was not often encountered. In some ways it was very similar to Lan Jue’s Ascension, though not as effective. While transformed in to Zeus, his Voice of Command weaved protogenia to manipulate reality. Ying Suifeng could only control things within his immediate area.

Both arms shot over Xuanyuan’s Shishi’s head and summoned another thick screen of cloud cover. Like all of his battles before, the field became lost in the opaque fog.

Ying Suifeng raced forward to meet it. Moments before being completely enveloped, his six hands clapped together. “Disperse!”

Puff! They were gone again, at his command. But the sharp-eyed spectators were given a clue when they noticed that not all of Shishi’s mist was dispelled by his words, only a large swath. His influence extended fifty meters through the clouds before losing potency. The Voice of Command was potential devastating, but had its limitations. If not, no one could defend against him.

Ying Suifeng’s middle head perked up, and called out while one pair of arms pressed their palms together. “Clouds, open!”

The remaining cloud cover was pushed aside by some unseen force. A clear corridor was created.

Lan Jue watched carefully, his brows knit tight. “The Voice of Command has its roots in psychic force, right?” He asked the Pharmacist beside him.

She nodded. “Indeed. The true Voice of Command requires protogenia to realize its full strength. Its effect also depends on the strength of the one it’s directed against. A capable opponent will only feel the urge, but can resist. The fifty meter trick was also a ploy, I suspect. A seventh rank should not be this weak.

Xuanyuan Shishi was not revealed when Ying Suifeng split the clouds. The three-headed Adept stood now in the heart of the mist. He stopped and shut his eyes, while the clouds rolled closer to swallow him up again.

Ying Suifeng’s three sets of eyes popped open. “Erupt.”

The tumultuous clouds stopped, as though frozen in time. A roar sounded from afar, gradually rising in pitch until it shook the whole arena. Great pockets of mist vanished without reason, replaced with dazzling golden light that began to swallow the ring. No one had seen a Voice Adept with such sphere of control!

Could the Voice of Command really be so strong as this?

“His power is centered around him, and extends in a radius. He moved to the center of the ring so that the acoustics bring his voice as far as possible. This tactic isn’t to hurt his opponent, but flush him out of hiding. Once he finds his target, then he’ll attack,” the Terminator explained.

The shockwave force of the blast buffeted the ring, turning it in to a raging sea of energy. The golden light made it difficult for the audience to see anything, and the eagerly waited with baited breath for the dust to settle.

The blast continued unchecked for a full seven seconds before it began to burn itself out. When finally the ring was revealed to them, the spectators looked with unadulterated shock.

The clouds were indeed gone from the ring. But there was something else in its place.

Ying Suifeng stood in the center of the arena, just as he had been. He, too, could only stare with wide eyes.

The air around him was thickly dotted with glimmering swords. They

were long, sharp, and their surface was an undulating milky white. They were clouds – fused tightly to a razor’s edge – that extended all across the field. But nowhere was there any trace of Xuanyuan Shishi.

The feral blades slowly swung their points toward the center of the arena, where the three-headed Ying Suifeng stood. Uncomfortable only began to describe the sensation of standing beneath the collected armory of Damocles.

The look of interest in the Terminators eyes revealed that this was as unexpected for him as it was for everyone else. What was this? Such a sudden, inexplicable change in circumstance.

Everyone was at a loss, as their slack expressions showed.

All but for the Pharmacist. With a gasp, she shot to her feet. “The Ten-Thousand Blade Technique!”

Even when she’d witnessed Jun Yongye’s abilities, she had remained even-tempered. Upon seeing this, however, the Pharmacist was less poised.

The words conjured a memory of Lan Jue’s teacher, and of something he said. Ten-Thousand Blades was a branch from an older technique, the House of Flying Blades. The path to mastery was ever-changing and gruelingly difficult, but the rewards for persistence were prodigious.

Everyone expected Shishi’s Discipline to be mist. And in fact, it was. But that mist became swords, and the sum of them both was formidable power.

Formidable, terrible power!

Lan Jue could feel his heart beating in his chest. The group everyone thought Constantine had sewn up was displaying much more than they’d expected. Whether Ying Suifeng’s Voice of Command, or Xuanyuan Shishi’s secret mastery, Constantine had a rougher road ahead than anticipated.

The mist swords moved once they’d found their target. Like a hail of deadly thorns they whistled through the air toward Ying Suifeng.

“Disperse!” He howled! His Voice, people were beginning to realize, wasn’t just speaking anything. These were Words of Power he was using.

Disperse, open, erupt. Words with visceral ties.

The first group of swords, those nearest, were sent back flailing chaotically. The second, however, kept coming. And so did the others, the hundreds upon thousands of milky blades that seemed to have no end.

“Erupt!” Ying Suifeng spat the words. Once again the power of his Voice ravaged the ring and painted it gold. Once more the audience’s view was blocked as the shields thickened to protect them.

The roar of the blast, fierce and deafening, stretched for a long time. In a perfect mirror of before, the crowd’s eyes were wide in bewilderment as the shields returned to normal.

Half of the swords were gone. But, those that remained were three times as large. Threads of golden energy traced along their length.

If Jun Yongye was the king of swords given flesh, than this was his ancestor. As Xuanyuan’s training had prepared him for, he took the ever changing situation and manipulated it to his advantage. He was as fluid as circumstances required.

The enormous mist swords continued their relentless charge toward Ying Suifeng. They were slower in coming now, but the air around them warped in reaction to their strength. From outside, it looked like the ring was being sliced to bits by tears in reality.

Mo Xiao’s heart beat thunderously in her chest. She shot a glance to her side when she felt the overpowering, murderous intent coming off of the Terminator in waves.

This is... could the Terminator be so threatened by this man that he would want to kill him?

“I give!”

Ying Suifeng’s bitter call rang in the air.

He had no choice. He couldn’t defend against swords sharp enough to

slice reality. It was concede, or get cut to pieces. His Voice couldn't stop these swords, so it was lose fast or lose painfully.

The dense cloud of swords overhead fused in to one, and settled to the ground. A figure emerged, of Xuanyuan Shishi with his hands folded respectfully together toward his competitor. "Ahh no no. You let me win, is all."

Chapter 451: The First Round Finishes

Ying Suifeng's three body's melted away back in to one. He wordlessly nodded, then exited the ring.

Constantine, who was recovering in the resting area, watched with a look of disbelief. Even he didn't know the truth of what this group had in store for him. What was this Discipline? Mistblades... and so strong.

Lan Jue's eyes were bright after watching the contest. It would be a very interesting fight, no matter who he would be paired against later.

"That's it for the first round of the quarter-finals! These fights were so exciting, my heart's still racing. That will be all for today's events, but we will continue tomorrow with the second round." Mo Xiao's excitedly addressed the audience from the VIP platform. The Terminator, resting at her side, was no longer glaring with murderous intent and looked calm.

The final results for round one winners were;

Group One – Titan and Lan Jue

Group Two – the Pharmacist and Jiang Yuan

Group Three – Jun Yongye and Cao Shuiqin

Group Four – Constantine and Xuanyuan Shishi

All eight of them wished to advance to the finals. Now, after the first round, everyone had a clearer picture of where they stood.

Titan was the one everyone had their bets on for group one. The Pharmacist dominated the second, and Jun Yongye looked nearly invincible. For the fourth group, it was difficult for people to choose between Constantine and Xuanyuan Shishi. In terms of Discipline Constantine was the clear favorite, however there was more to it than that. Shishi's strength had never been revealed before today, and that changed everything.

A hard look flitted across Lan Jue's eyes, and he crossed his arms over his chest. His next opponent would be Qi Mu. He'd revealed one of his

tricks to win against Bing Yu, and now he had to ponder how it was he would defeat the Wolf King and his three transformations. His expression was sour because he knew he might have to really tip his hand to win.

Lan Jue rose together with the Pharmacist. Side by side they walked, though the Pharmacist kept her eyes upon the departing Xuanyuan Shishi. Almost as though he sensed it, Shishi turned then and noticed the Pharmacist. He gave her a wide, pleasant smile before joining someone in the waiting room.

The other one stood as Shishi approached and joined in his amicable smile, though it was more reserved.

The two shared a high-five – Clap! – than separated. Shishi returned to his seat.

And who was it he was so chummy with? None other than the first one to shock the crowd, Jun Yongye.

This... these two knew each other? What was their relationship? The curiosity burned in the gut of everyone who saw. Not only was the Accountant unable to learn about this, but no one seemed to. These just appeared out of thin air!

The White Blademaster Jun Yongye. Ten-Thousand Swords in one, Xuanyuan Shishi. Both of them had given the viewers a spectacular show. Both had made quite the impression, and had a real chance at making the finals.

Lan Jue looked at the Pharmacist. “Do you know him?”

She shook her head. “But I’m very familiar with his technique. I learned it from my teacher, as I inherited his knowledge. All schools of sword mastery started with him. According to the information I received, it started in the Former Era. I committed myself to everything I could learn, but those styles were never imparted to me. I walk the traditional path of the Flying Sword – they have mastered genuinely mythical techniques. I never would have dreamed I would encounter them here. They must have gained the master’s knowledge the same way I had.”

They were also Celestial Master Qian's Disciples? It was a stunning revelation, but with it there was a surge of pride. His own master once told him that his greatest regret was not living in the same generation as Master Qian, so as to test himself against the Paragon. Indeed his level is considered higher than Qian's now, but they weren't tested. It would never be certain who was better, since the only way to know was face to face.

The Pharmacist was his partner, and he was just as eager to see what he could learn from the two master swordsmen. Meeting them on the field would help him along his newly chosen path of the blade. He could learn.

The fights were done, and the day was over. Participants and audience alike trickled out in to the city. The Great Conclave Arena gradually became silent. At least, it had outside. In a secret room within was hushed conversation.

The Terminator and the Epochrion sat facing one another. Titan stood behind his master, and Yan Ningya behind hers.

"You saw it?" the Terminator asked them.

The Epochrion gently nodded her head. "I did. Protogenia. It radiated from both of their blades, especially Jun Yongye. He has grasped the essence of it, and has achieved perfection in simplicity. Before I broke through, I could never have reached his level of comprehension."

The Terminator sighed. "In the realm of martial arts, your Eastern Alliance has a wealth of advantage to draw from. The North will never be able to compete in that way. They represent a threat – if they become Paragons than the East's strength will be unchecked. They've been quiet these last few years letting us think they were weak, though we knew that they were rapidly improving in science and tech. Here we seem to have hit a plateau in development. They're weak on resources, but the universe is limitless. They just need time to develop the infrastructure."

His partner nodded again. "The development of humanity will only go so far with science. At a certain point, the burden will have to be borne by the human body itself. There is still so much we don't understand about ourselves, even now – things we have yet to explore. Strength was the

capital we needed to propel us through the universe, so everyone chose their path. The North chose to put their faith in technology. The West decided to play around with genetics. In our respective goals it can be said we've succeeded. The East chose a different tack, using science to stimulate natural talent and evolve along a more natural path. It was this disagreement in direction that made me leave Skyfire Avenue. Now, it appears that they were right. Ancient China was full of incomprehensibly strong things."

"Are you having second thoughts?" The Terminator looked at her with solemn eyes.

She shook her head. "No. I'm firm in my belief, there is no looking back. It just seems like the Eastern Alliance has been making miracles. It's a great thing for humanity, but not necessarily for us."

Once more, the Terminator sighed. "Alas, I am only the Northern Paragon and do not represent humanity. I hope they can forgive my selfishness."

The Epochrion's dazzling eyes fixed him with a serious look. "I know your character. The ends do justify the means, so long as your ends are just. I will continue to support you. We keep an eye on the two young gentlemen. After all, it is definitely no easy feat to grow as powerful as Jue Di.

The Terminator lifted his eyes to Yan Ningya. "Ya. What did you learn, today."

Her answer was quick. "Concentration. At first I didn't feel that his abilities were that strong, but once he fixed his concentration on the sword he began to resonate with it. That was when his power exploded. Perhaps there was protogenia, but I couldn't feel it."

The Epochrion sniffed. "Your loss wasn't from a weaker Discipline, but from understanding. He hadn't even used a fraction of his skill, I think. He's much stronger than you suspect. He may not be a peak-ranked Adept, but has the understanding of a Paragon in regards to Domain. He has one foot through the bottleneck already. Barring any further surprises, I

suspect he will be our champion.”

Yan Ningya shook ever so slightly. It was unsettling to hear her teacher praise the foreigner so highly.

“I will end him!” Titan growled from behind the Terminator. “Master – I want to complete the experiment!”

The Terminator turned back to look at him, and furrowed his brows. “But if you do, then you will lose any real shot at becoming a Paragon.”

Titan’s voice was low, guttural. “You have taught me that man can conquer nature. Nothing is impossible. This tournament is destined to be won by the Great Conclave, but I need more power.”

The Terminator turned back. Silently, he nodded his head.

**

Lan Jue immediately settled down to meditate once returning to his hotel room. He wasn’t joined with Qianlin this time, he was just seated in quiet thought. He focused on the changes in his body.

His Core was more stable after being under such high pressure. Crystal-like threads of purple electricity danced around it. It was smaller, but he could feel the strength within it surpass what it had been. He had a great deal of trust in what he felt.

Chapter 452: Do You Even Know How?

His Core's volume had been condensed by a third. Roughly speaking, it meant his energy was increased by the same amount. For a ninth level Talent this was unheard of! It was likely because of his re-cultivation, which improved his foundation for growth. His powers were more potent, now.

He meditated upon the things he witnessed, like the sword styles of Jun Yongye and Xianyuanshishi. He liked the self-deprecating, simplistic style of Jun Yongye especially. Simple and direct was always powerful. To focus on it was to comprehend the true meaning of the blade. And the essence of swordsmanship... that was like a power all its own. The sword, king of weapons! This would be his path.

By the time he opened his eyes, the street lights glowed beneath a darkening sky. A faint and pleasing odor met his nostrils. "Smells good!"

"Eat. You haven't had anything since we came back this afternoon." Her gentle voice drew his attention. Here in the hotel, she was clad only in a long sleeping shirt. The bulky outfit hit her feminine figure, but each step revealed a flash of thigh.

Lan Jue smiled softly, and pulled her in to his arms for a hug. He could feel her warm against him. "Yeah I wouldn't mind a bite," he said, looking at her suggestively.

"Eating people is illegal," she said with a roll of her eyes.

He chuckled. "I guess that depends on how." 1

This earned a laugh from Qianlin. She fixed him with a charming look. "Do you even know how?"

Lan Jue was instantly filled with the pang of regret. Could he? The moment their affections reached a certain degree, the two would meld and the act would stop there. He doubted their restrictions were limited to kissing.

The barriers between them had quietly begun to dissolve as they spent

more time with one another. Qianlin's silhouette was painted ever deeper in his heart. Their union allowed them to interact on a higher level than most.

Adaptation to one's environment, Lan Jue made no attempts to resist. Hera was gone, and he could not spend his life wallowing in the tragedies of the past. Life was meant to be enjoyed. He decided to grow stronger, to reach Paragon, and to experience that which he had been putting off.

Qianlin extricated herself from his embrace and brought over the little food cart the hotel had provided for them. She pulled away the lid and let a gust of aromatic steam escape. The scent of sumptuous meat filled the room.

It was a big cut of steak. Wine-sauce was dribbled over it, with greens on the side. It was a fierce stimulation for his appetite. 2

He took the knife and fork offered by Qianlin and immediately tucked in. He was clearly hungry, but was trying to remain refined.

"It's been a while since we've had a drink," he said. "This would have gone wonderfully with a fine bottle." Lan Jue heaved a satisfied sigh once the steak was gone. A belly full of food and booze – a joy no one should have to do without.

"You didn't get hurt in today's fight? I felt the danger, but it looked like it was on purpose." She took a warm cup of water in her hands and sipped from it.

He shook his head. "I'm fine. I used the low temperatures to try again and concentrate my Core. The results were much better than I expected. The cold slowed my lightning powers, and made them more stable so I could condense my Core by a third. It's about as much as I suspect I can handle for now."

Qianlin's eyes glittered in interest. "So it helped with control. But does it also make your attacks less potent?"

"At the time, it looked like that was true," he answered. "But I'm not sure. Temperature has an effect on any Adept, it would take more

experience to determine specifics. It's a shame I won't be fighting her any longer. Later we'll do some cultivation, and we'll see if we can't condense your Core as well. I believe that once we merge our Cores do as well, so maybe now that I've succeeded we can do something for you, too."

Qianlin nodded in understanding. "The process may be easier since my Discipline is naturally more stable than yours. Then again, there's a great difference in power, too. So I'm lacking your power, and you're missing my stability. Before I couldn't even comprehend your level of Discipline so I couldn't help. Now, though, you've already managed to succeed. Helping me along shouldn't be a problem."

Her prediction was proven true when they merged later that night. Qianlin's Core was condensed just as his was, without a hitch, as smooth and compliant as water. When they joined, her own Core shrunk to match Lan Jue's. At first, her Discipline was unused to the change and rebelled, but eventually settled down. Their formerly peak-level strength was reduced now, however. They could sense that there was more room for growth, expansion. It was nothing short of a miracle. Now, their Disciplines were rapidly trying to take advantage of the space.

Lan Jue wasn't overly interested in that aspect. His interest lay mostly in purifying their Disciplines, so that they had an even stronger foundation for improvement.

One night of careful cultivation earned them the same progress they would gain in three or four days. When the morning rays peaked through the curtains of their room, Lan Jue's eyes popped open. They glittered with promise and excitement.

He walked to the bed and picked off the comforter. Holding it close, a soft white light radiated from him, and after a moment the lithe figure of Zhou Qianlin was wrapped in the blanket.

He held her close, wrapped tight, and smiled. "It looks like we're pretty lucky!"

Qianlin had become used to this. She huddled beneath the blanket, revealing only her beautiful face. "Yeah! Tonight's results were very good.

But perhaps you should keep me along. You're fighting Qi Mu today, and with your Discipline where it is, I'm afraid..."

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled. "You're my wild card. It's not time to show our hand just yet, but today I'll need to start pulling out some tricks, but not you. Besting Qi Mu without you isn't impossible. With enough motivation and pressure, anything is possible."

Qianlin, as though thinking of something, said "Yes... ever since coming to the tournament your Discipline has been improving quickly. I can see it every day. But you must still consider your safety. If the odds are too great, then don't overdo it."

"It's fine. Go get some clothes on and let's have breakfast!"

They could feel the palpable air of nervous excitement as they walked through the city. The closer the tournament came to its conclusion, the more invested everyone became. After the first round of the quarter-finals, the tournament boasted a higher viewer rate than any time in human history – like the whole of humanity had their eyes glued to these young men and women. The event sponsors had spent an astronomical sum on the prizes, but it looked as though they would be recouping the loss and then some. Already the souvenir items had been selling like wildfire.

Bookies, meanwhile, were also making a killing. Bets for the finals were already done, finished before the first round was over. Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi had sent the whole betting world in to a tizzy, with their sudden and dramatic rise. You could measure their success by the tears of gamblers. It was a guessing game, and they only earned a payout if all their picks for the finals got in. In Jun Yongye's last fight, Yan Ningya had been favored at 1/0.6. He was 3/1 3. Judging by just the numbers, many put their hard-earned cash on the Northern disciple. It cost them dearly.

Now that more information was known, betting for the second round had increased. There were more gamblers than in any previous round. Now, in the early morning, bets had already started pouring in for an hour. Most of today's bets had been picked the night before. Few people would choose this time to come out and put down money.

Of course, there were always exceptions.

Two women in silver fleece walked in to the bookie's office. They were hidden beneath hats, sunglasses and facemasks. Their features were entirely hidden from view.

"Are you ladies interested in betting?" A worker greeted them pleasantly as they entered. In his experience the only ones who liked to hide their faces were people with a great deal of money to spend.

The woman on the left spoke first. "Yes. Qi Mu against Zeus."

"How much would you like to bet?" The worker began to tap at the screen before him as they spoke.

"Five hundred million dollars." 4

Immediately, everything fell silent as she said the number. The woman on the right added. "What, is that not alright? That's the bet limit, correct? Or is that too rich for your blood..."

Chapter 453: The Bet

Five hundred million.... Not a small sum! Dollars and NED had a 2-1 exchange rate, meaning a dollar was two NED. Five hundred million was enough to buy the Great Conclave Arena. The bet these women were making was the max, because no one had ever spent that much before.

“Of course,” the worker said with a somewhat curt tone. He looked down at the odds on his screen, revealing Zeus at 6.3/1 and Qi Mu favored at 0.16/1. “Who are you placing your bet on?”

The one on the left answered. “Put it all on Zeus.”

It was bold. Although Qi Mu had ultimately lost to Titan, he’d shown his strength. No small number of people believed he could easily handle Zeus. Dozens of talking heads had provided their opinions on the masked Monarch’s fight against Bing Yu, where they claimed his victory was a result of exploiting opportunity. No one looked at the weakest competitor as a threat. Even though his Discipline was famed for its explosive force, there didn’t appear to be any path to victory against Qi Mu and his three transformations. In fact, Qi Mu’s odds would have been higher but for speculation he’d been injured in his fight against Titan.

The worker swallowed, printed the ticket, and handed it to the women.

Their bet altered the odds for Zeus, to 6.2/1. Despite the large bet, things remained mostly stable though. It was a testament to the faith the public put in Qi Mu.

The women finished the transaction through their communicators, then left. Once they were out of ear-shot, the worker turned to a colleague. “Go upstairs and let them know.”

And that was it, five hundred million dollars on a long shot. It wasn’t rare at all for people to lay bets on the underdogs, but five hundred million dollars? That was unheard of.

Lan Jue walked through the competitor’s entrance of the arena, breathing in the crisp morning air. It had a pleasant, soothing effect on his

mood. He could feel the ebb and flow of energy through his meridians. He tightened his fists, excited for the battle to come. This was important for him, for he knew that to fight against such a strong opponent would undoubtedly teach him something.

Fight, cultivate, understand. Rinse and repeat. The last few days had seen tremendous progress. He felt like a teenager again, when he had been considered a great future Talent. Then, as now, surpassing his brother had been his goal.

His brother's role in the military was very unfortunate. Lan Jue hoped he could have an opportunity to see him in the ring. His presence certainly would have made things more interesting. Even as his brother, Lan Jue didn't know how much Lan Qing was capable of.

He ruminated as his feet brought him to the waiting area. There were a few others competitors who had already arrived, though the Pharmacist was still absent. The Driver was seated a short distance away in his sofa, staring intently at something. Lan Jue followed his gaze to Cao Shuiqin embracing her guqin. Everyone knew that she used the guqin with her Discipline, but now why she held it so affectionately.

Cao Shuiqin paid the Driver no mind, as though she didn't notice his existence at all. However the flush in her cheeks screamed that she was anything but on an even keel.

Lan Jue felt something odd, a strange sensation. Since when did this tournament become a dating reality show? Come to think of it, he hadn't seen Chu Cheng in days. Who knows what he was up to with the vampire princess, or if they were talking at all. He figured they were – Chu Cheng was possessed of a very specific skillset that almost assured his success.

From what he could see, the Driver also had the bug. His compatriot certainly had an eye for beauty, he'd give him that. Cao Shuiqin, herself from the East, looked as gentle as water, and just as strong. It would be a fine victory for the Avenue if they managed to convince her to come over.

Lan Jue chose not to bother the Driver, lost as he was in his appreciation. Instead, he chose a seat and shut his eyes for a little soul

rejuvenation.

But, just then, a nagging sensation made him pop his eyes open. A massive figure was trundling passed him.

Titan?

The convert's gait was heavy, thudding hard against the ground with every step. He made for the far side of the waiting area and sat. Lan Jue couldn't tell why, but something told him that Titan's Discipline was erratic. When he shut his eyes and regulated his breathing, though, the inkling dissipated.

The common diagnosis for an Adept of his level suffering from unstable Discipline, was an injury. But could he be? There was no way! He'd watched yesterday's fight, and Qi Mu hadn't left any lasting damage. His own martial style was defense-focused as well, to an almost startling degree.

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled. Something wasn't right.

The remainder of the competitors trickled in as the morning stretched on.

"What are you looking at? He isn't your opponent today." The Pharmacist took a seat by Lan Jue's side, greeting him with a smile.

Lan Jue answered. "When he walked by me just now, something was different. His energies are chaotic."

"Eh?" She, too, looked at the concert. At present he looked perfectly fine, calm as the surface of a lake.

"You should focus on today's tribulations. You don't have to worry about him until your next fight." She offered.

"Yeah." He nodded, for she was right. Every fight was going to be a struggle. At the levels they competed at, there were no easy pickings.

It wasn't long before the arena was a cacophonous press of milling humans. There were too many to count. However, they did seem fewer than when the tournament had begun. By now a lot of the competitors

had shown the breadth of what they were capable of already. But where attendance in the arena might have dropped, viewership over the net was exploding. Countless watchers wanted to know what the deal was with the White Blademaster, and how he would perform in today's battle. Jun Yongye would be facing Cao Shuiqin, while the Driver would be facing Jun Yongye's defeated opponent Yan Ningya.

The third group was undoubtedly top of everyone's list of most interesting fights. After the battle between Qi Mu and Titan in the first fight, there was little else to capture people's attention.

Mo Xiao had since arrived, and had taken her place on the viewing platform beside the Terminator. She was ready to start the day's ceremonies.

"Your Majesty." She curtsied respectfully to the Paragon. He nodded back.

"What can you tell us about today's events, sir? Which one are you most excited for?" She beamed a dazzling smile.

He chuckled. "Group four."

"Group Four?" She parroted, looking at the fight list in her hand. Then she understood. "Ah. Xuanyuan Shishi and Constantine."

The Paragon slowly nodded.

Indeed, today the stage was set for a clash of two goliaths. Constantine and his spear of Fate, against Xuanyuan Shishi's Mistblades. Which would turn out to be more powerful? This was the question on everyone's lips. Like the Paragon, many waited with baited breath for their encounter. Most bets were placed on Constantine, the peak-level Adept of the Pontiff's Citadel. Along with Metatron, he had the greatest chance of eventually breaking through to Paragon.

Mo Xiao went on. "There doesn't look to be any surprises in store for our first group. Bing Yu will be facing off against Titan, and Qi Mu against Zeus. Titan's chances for victory far outstrip his competitor, but what do you think about Zeus and Qi Mu?"

The Paragon's deep voice boomed back at her. "From what we've seen of Zeus' Talent so far, it doesn't look like he's got much of a chance. His victory against Bing Yu may have been luck, but I don't think we've seen everything he's capable of. Bing Yu had lost because of a lack of understanding, her element being fundamentally weak to lightning. There is no more explosive Discipline than Lightning. In contrast to Bing Yu, Zeus has a very deep awareness of his powers. If he's got any more tricks up his sleeve, he'll need them for today's fight."

"You think he has a chance?" Mo Xiao asked, somewhat taken aback.

His reply was tepid. "From all the information we have, Zeus should be a rank six or seven Adept. All we've seen in this tournament, though, is the work of a third rank at best. Why this is, I can't say, but I can't imagine it's a simple answer."

Mo Xiao fell silent for a moment, then said, "I suppose we'll see! Perhaps Zeus will prove as mythical as his namesake."

ζ

Chu Cheng lounged in a VIP box tucked away within the arena. He watched the bustle below while occasionally taking a sip of cognac or a bite of dried fruit.

"Well you certainly know how to enjoy yourself. Your friend is about to enter the ring with a monster, and you look cool as a cucumber. Aren't you at all nervous?" Lina muttered darkly at his side. Hua Li was also seated nearby.

Chu Cheng chuckled in response. "Why should I be worried? If he loses it makes me look better."

Hua Li grunted. "What makes you think he's going to lose?"

"I never said he would!" Chu Cheng countered.

"I just hope he does."

Chapter 454: Caterpillars to Butterflies?

“Just wait,” Hua Li threatened. “Just wait till he’s done with the tournament and we’ll see how he reacts when I tell him.”

Chu Cheng simply shrugged. “I’m soooo scared. I hope he gets no quarter, but at the same time there are his group mates to consider. Qi Mu’s ninth level ninth rank, vicious fighting style is a problem. If he was at his normal rank, then he’d have a shot. Now, though, it looks bad.”

Lina sniffed. “What, is he deliberately hiding his strength?”

“I’ll talk about anything else with you,” Chu Cheng earnestly said, “but my brother’s secrets are off limits. Anyway you’re not my girl – we’ve been estranged!”

She sputtered a laugh. “Cut the bullshit, I don’t believe it for a second. You say whatever you want.”

It was much to Chu Cheng’s regret that he discovered she was more cunning than he. Despite his repeated efforts, she always kept herself at an infuriating and enticing distance. She was an itch he couldn’t scratch. The Prince of Nightlife had been absent lately, as the Vampire Princess had siphoned all of his attention.

Hua Li cut in. “The fight’s about to start. I for one hopes he jumps this hurdle, he’s had it rough. He’s had nothing but rotten luck, running in to every tough opponent.”

Chu Cheng fixed him with a flat look. “Do you really believe that?”

With a knowing smile, his fellow Monarch lifted his wine glass and gave his friend a wink. “Think about it.”

The edge of Chu Cheng’s mouth twitched upward ever so slightly. “The caterpillar trick.”

Hua Li chuckled, but said nothing. Lina swept her gaze between the two grinning idiots until curiosity got the better of her. “The hell is the caterpillar trick?”

Chu Cheng tapped his cheek, flippantly adding “kiss me and I’ll tell you.”

Lina almost sniffed. “I’ve got no problem with that if you don’t have a problem with me draining every last drop of blood out of you.”

He gave her a strange smirk. “Go on then. I wouldn’t mind you suckin’ me dry.”

Lina grit her teeth, then planted a kiss on his cheek. “Speak.”

“Caterpillars become butterflies,” was his cryptic answer.

“Caterpillars to butterflies...” Lina was a very intelligent woman. A knowing look dawned on her pretty face.

By now the fight was starting. Mo Xiao’s crystal-clear voice called out for the contestants – Titan and Bing Yu – to begin.

Few people were desperately interested in this fight, but their apathy changed to shock when the match begun.

Titan took the defensive, his overwhelming power conspicuously absent. Bing Yu, conversely, rushed ahead flagrantly, seemingly without concern. Titan’s strikes were noticeably weaker and extended only ten meters or so through that biting cold.

Her loss yesterday was a painful reminder, and she knew today she had no chance to win. Still she threw herself at Titan like a flash freeze, pummeling him with everything in her arsenal.

After ten minutes, Titan found his opening. A single punch smashed through her defenses.

“It looks like Titan’s taking pity on her,” Mo Xiao expressed with a tinge of emotion in her voice.

The Terminator just smiled. He didn’t appear much interested in this fight. This wasn’t the case for Lan Jue, though. He thought it strange.

Compared to what they’d seen yesterday, it looked like Titan had lost a great deal of power. He was weaker, it was clear, and although he defeated Bing Yu it wasn’t the shutout people were expecting.

When the fight was finished, Titan left the Arena instead of returning to the resting area. He was two for two, so far the undisputed champ of group one.

“Something seems off.” The Pharmacist always watched him go with knitted brows. “He wasn’t hurt in the last fight, that can’t be it. There’s only one thing it must mean, that he’s using some new method. It’s affected his body, but he still wants to continue fighting. Why risk it now?”

Lan Jue stood as he spoke. “It might be because Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi put some fear in to him.”

She nodded, suddenly convinced. “Probably. You be careful, don’t over extend.” His fight was next.

Qi Mu stood up on the other side of the waited area. With a dismissive expression, he marched toward the ring.

Lan Jue still pondered Titan, and his own sour luck. He bemoaned the fact that he hadn’t faced the convert today. If he had, Titan wouldn’t have stood a chance. Unfortunately, his luck was not this marvelous. Even the Epochrion couldn’t turn back time, otherwise she would have.

Lan Jue and Qi Mu entered the ring together. They stared at each other across the expanse.

Mo Xiao’s voice filled the air. “Our second fight of group one features Qi Mu and Zeus. Zeus has one victory under his belt, and if he wins today that will put him neck and neck with Tian.”

The first fight was less of a spectacle than people had wanted, so they pinned their hopes on this one. This was especially true for two silver-clad women, hidden behind sunglasses.

Lan Jue’s mask glinted softly beneath the floodlights, making him look all the more majestic. He couldn’t know how many people were actually watching this fight very intently.

ζ

Planet Skyfire, Capital Alliance Hospital.

The Savage Goddess, Tan Lingyun sat quickly at the head of the class. The tournament stream flashed on a projector, the focus of her young charges. The school wasn't a broadcast station, but the administration felt it would be good for them to watch the tournament for academic purposes. Starting from the quarter-finals, classrooms were expected to show the stream. Otherwise none of their students would come to class, they suspected.

The A.R.C. class' students watched, and couldn't forget their golden-masked torturer. However there had been a great many fights and they had been busy, so they didn't think too much on it. It wasn't until there were only twenty-four competitors remaining that they started to wise up to the fact that he was their demon drillmaster!

The students weren't overly familiar with Zeus, but the information was widely available. Before long they had accumulated a wealth of information. Then they realized that he was the Divine Monarch from the God battles, and subsequently lost their minds.

The Drillmaster was Zeus! The Divine Monarch, pilot of Thor!

Tan Lingyun was conflicted. This bastard, she thought, this bullshit about Lei Feng. Zeus! She had spent even more time than those students with him, so naturally she was the first to discover the link.

She never could have imagined that her idol was beside her that whole time. Every time she thought about their close encounter in the mech suit, her heart began to race. This all confirmed it. She had good taste in men.

But where had he gone? She'd asked Wu Junyi, but his response was that he had no idea where the slippery rascal went.

This classroom had been reserved for the A.R.C. class students, who all sat together now watching their teacher. So while the wider audience held their breath for the confrontation between Constantine and Xuanyuan Shishi, the students from the NEU had their eyes glued to this one.

"You've got this, professor!" Tang Xiao shouted from the first show and shot his fist in to the air.

Jin Tao sat right next to him, quivering with excitement.

Neither saw the strange expression on Tang Mi's face beside them.

Zeus... Qianlin. Zeus, Qianlin?!

Tang Mi could still remember the day of her friend's wedding, fresh as though it had happened yesterday. Zeus had burst on to the scene and snatched her away, only to return her some time later.

She didn't know how to react to the news that her drillmaster had been Zeus. It had taken her the last few days to sort it out in her head.

She knew that his arrival at the school had something to do with Zhou Qianlin. Or maybe he came with her.

You can't imagine how jealous I am of you, Qianlin. Why didn't Zeus choose me? Idol... my idol!

Changes overcame everyone who was involved in the A.R.C. class once they knew. The lessons they'd learned from him were a part of them. The training had only been the beginning. Every one of them were improving faster than their professors could keep up. Three months had ended up being as effective as years of hard work. That was the gift he'd given them. The pain ebbed and the memories faded, but what they earned, they kept.

Their teacher was one of the best mecha pilots in the universe! That answered a whole lot of questions.

And then they remembered that he promised to continue their training. The trek had been grueling, but an inexplicable anticipation grew within all of them. When will they meet their drillmaster again?

Chapter 455: Battling the Wolf King

The projector cast images of the ring against the far wall of the classroom. All the students fixed their eyes upon the heroic, masked figure of their drillmaster.

“He’ll win it!” No one knew who said, but they all joined in triumphant cry.

“He’ll win it!”

ζ

Lan Jue stood in the ring once again, allowing the feel of the place to flow through him. His heart eased in to a comfortable silence. There was the faintest hint of electrical light behind his eyes. Even though the fight was yet to begin, he could feel the oppressive pressure from Qi Mu’s Discipline. And that’s exactly what he was looking for!

“Three, two, one. Begin!”

As the buzzer sounded, Lan Jue stood tall and straight. Suddenly he seemed bigger... Not his body, necessarily, but his presence seemed to swell. Meanwhile, Qi Mu quickly shifted to only his first form. He seemed unconcerned about this fight.

Lan Jue wasn’t annoyed by the slight. He switched up his tactics, like he had before. He did not immediately rush in to the Forest of Lightning. Instead he raced to the center of the ring along with Qi Mu. Although Zeus didn’t seem all that fast, by the time Qi Mu reached the center he was already waiting for him there. The Monarch was wreathed in crackling purple lightning that hugged close. This was his armor, protecting him from harm.

Qi Mu sprang forward and wickedly swiped at Zeus. His claws ripped through the air so quickly that shuddering air rippled visibly from their path. His tactics were straight domination, made possible by a superior Discipline.

But Qi Mu didn’t understand why he didn’t use his powers to block the

attack? He just stepped to the side, lazily sidestepping the blow. The mercenary's right hand swung around for a strike.

Qi Mu still looked down upon his opponent. Nothing he'd seen in any of the previous fights had convinced him that this upstart could prove to be a challenge.

"Bang!" Lan Jue's fist found its target, and Qi Mu was viciously blasted to the ground. Thousands of volts raced throughout the wolf's body.

This...

The audience saw it plain as day and it nearly sent their eyes rolling out of their heads. Was this for real? He was supposed to be the weakest one of the group.

The classroom tucked away in the NEU shook with cheers. Watching their teacher put the dog down was like doing it themselves.

Mo Xiao was likewise shocked, and gasped from the viewing platform. "Is that martial arts?"

The Terminator's eyebrows had risen a few degrees, but he said nothing. It was Metatron, seated behind him, that really felt the shock of what they saw. He knew that move.

One of the Nine Strikes of Taiji... Warding Fist Strike!

That was indeed Lan Jue's first move. His intent was to knock his opponent off course – he hadn't anticipated it would fire him in to the ground.

But this was a fight, he wasn't going to waste the opportunity. He shot a foot out to tangle the wolf up. He remain flat on the floor ungracefully, tangled up in his own limbs. Though the wolf king had managed to shrug off the damage from the strike, but his body felt numb. He couldn't dodge.

Lan Jue clapped both hands together and raised them overhead. The lightning energy from all around him condensed to a point between his clenched fists. He brought them down to the sound of crackling electricity and purple flashes, right on his enemy's spine.

Qi Mu was a young darling of the Dark Citadel. He wouldn't take this lying down, and so he quickly broke in to his second transformation.

The second shift increased his defenses, with a red-gold glow that hung over him. Qi Mu couldn't dodge, so he flexed the muscles of his back to ward off the strike.

"Boom-!" The thunderous explosion shook the arena. Qi Mu thought his second transformation would be enough, but he felt the weight of a mountain come crashing down on his back.

When he felt the energy first slip passed his defenses and in to him, it felt almost gentle. However, he could sense the strange sensation within this energy, where it gathered up and set his own energies in disarray. His second transformation had saved him from a painful injury. This time he avoided damage, but was thrown to the ground again.

Two strikes, and twice his enemy hit the ground! You could have asked anyone and they would have scoffed at the prospect, but now they weren't sure. Did Qi Mu get weaker, or was Zeus stronger than they thought?

Downward Punch! A powerful Taiji strike.

Lan Jue had to acknowledge his opponent's defense. He was a second rank, but his strikes were hard enough to shatter a third rank opponent. His attacks were empowered by the principles of Taiji which made them even stronger. But even with this he couldn't surpass Qi Mu's guard.

Qi Mu was on the ground, but not as helpless as before. He shuddered with a deep growl and the golden light surrounding him swelled to force the insidious lightning out. This was the advantage of his superior Discipline. The wolf urged himself in to an ungraceful roll out of the way.

Lan Jue, though, had a wealth of combat experience to draw from. He wouldn't give up his advantage so easily. As Qi Mu tried to roll away, Zeus released the lightning coiling around him. It became a brilliant gold and fired off in all directions. In the same instant, he forced his palms toward his foe, and a column of golden lightning consumed Qi Mu.

"B-boom-boom b-b-boom...." A series of fierce attacks laid in to Qi Mu.

The Wolf King was stronger than Lan Jue, but couldn't match his speed. This put him in a very unenviable position. Under the onslaught he had to use his Force abilities to protect himself. The last two strikes had also affected his meridians. He fell to the floor for a third time.

Lan Jue flashed around Qi Mu, peppering him with attacks. He was too fast, almost faster than the audience could follow. At second rank he could no longer reach light speed, but lightning was still plenty fast. His yang-nature Discipline and the nine strikes of Taiji had Qi Mu on the ropes.

Qi Mu waited for the cooldown. Lan Jue's rank was lower, so he had to come out for air eventually. Of course, he didn't know of the phylactery stone nestled in the flesh of Zeus' left hand. He could keep this up as long as he needed. He was like a relentless battering ram, and that's what made him a competitor.

The audience watched in abject shock as the bearer of their hopes, Qi Mu, was brutally beat down. Qi Mu could only try to protect himself from the thunderstorm.

Lan Jue was too fast, and only a few of the onlookers were able to pick out the specifics of his strikes. Again and again the wolf was hit, and fell. Each time a peal of thunder followed.

In the VIP box.

Chu Cheng watched with mouth agape. "Goddamn! I'm gunna wet my pants here in a second."

Lina Lee looked just as confused. "What the hell is he?!"

Only Hua Li watched with a knowing smile. He jabbed his fists as though he were in the ring himself.

Lan Jue had taken the advantage of underestimation and turned it in to a crushing assault. In the last minute, he'd laid Qi Mu out with over a hundred blows. Qi Mu could only manage half-hearted reposts, but was unable to land any. Crafty! Zeus' attacks had a numbing effect that made the whole ordeal harder. Qi Mu was strong, but not at the same level as Titan. He couldn't stop it. His lightning played directly against the wolf's

speed, and under the incessant assault he was losing strength.

“Bastard!” Qi Mu roared. He reared up, and a blood-red light sprang out from around him. He met Lan Jue’s next strike, the Fist of the Seven Stars, without hesitation.

The seven-star strike laid in to the wolf, and he was swallowed in to a sea of lightning. This time, he didn’t fall.

Chapter 456: Zeus and Taiji

Qi Mu was downtrodden. He felt worse than he did after the loss to Titan. Everyone knew how big a difference there was between their Disciplines – it was disgraceful! His second transformation was enough to protect him from harm, but these strikes would eventually wear him down. So, to protect himself, he was forced to use his energy-intensive third metamorphosis! The wolf's muscled figure shrunk again, but there was a distinct change in his aura.

Qi Mu's defenses were quite powerful in his third metamorphosis. Even against Titan he hadn't taken much damage. He even had a chance to come back. Lan Jue's weaker attacks shouldn't be able to cause any trouble.

But the stress of maintaining this had begun to burn away at his blood and affect him physically. He'd have to finish this fight in a hurry – he couldn't hold it for long.

The lightning vanished, and Lan Jue did not press the attack. He leapt back to increase the distance between them, gone in a flash and appearing at the far end of the field.

But as quick as he was gone, a flash of angry red was back in his face. It was the crimson energy of a claw swipe, raking at his face from above. The speed of Qi Mu's third metamorphosis was ludicrous. He was so furious with Zeus that he fully intended to end him right there. The full strength of his force Discipline, as well as his person loathing was behind the encroaching blast of power.

Lan Jue held his arms before him in bowed arcs, his right hand on top and his left on the bottom as though cradling a watermelon. In the hand above a white light flickered, which was mirrored by the vacuous black energy in his bottom hand. Golden tendrils of lightning danced between them.

The energies grew until they met and began to swirl in to one another. They created a vortex of black and white, with an orb of golden electricity

in the center.

This...

Metatron shot to his feet. His hard eyes glared flagrantly at the ring below.

Him? Is this the one that dared shame the Pontiff's Citadel?

Yes! No wonder he sensed something familiar when he saw him fight. Was it not just the same as the other one who stole in to his home? Jue Di's disciple had left any permanent damage – he hadn't harmed anyone – but he had succeeded in thoroughly embarrassing the entire hierarchy. He stole away an asset, which was a heinous affront. They'd put a strangle order on the news, but everyone with power in the West knew all about it. Their reputation had suffered.

But the one he'd faced had been much stronger. If this was the same man, though, Qi Mu wouldn't be a problem.

Back on the field, Qi Mu's attack had found its target. The red light tore right through the strange vortex but did not break it. Lan Jue dodged nimbly to the side, and where he had stood a deep groove appeared in the floor.

Qi Mu just gaped at him. Never in a thousand years would he believe that this weakling would simply knock aside his full might! Some trickery had saved the masked man from being slashed in two.

The murderous light in the Wolf King's eyes flared. He raced forward, a flash of bloody red, and was in front of Lan Jue before he could blink. Jagged claws reached for his head, as fast as red lightning.

Lan Jue's hands shot out, smooth as water. He slid backward with the claw, keeping it at length, retreating and directing his opponent's deadly swipe to the side. If the first time he'd avoided the wolf was a fluke, this one could not be. The full speed and strength of the third metamorphosis was a terrible force to behold. Qi Mi, though, felt it was all wrong.

The Dark Citadel's representative reared back and lashed out again with both claws. Their deadly arc cut off Lan Jue's retreat.

Zeus' eyes narrowed behind the mask. The golden lightning around him crackled louder, and the conflicting powers of black and white swelled in his hands. His palms stretched out to gently guide the deadly claws, while Lan Jue deftly maneuvered between them. Qi Mu's arms crashed together and Lan Jue danced out of harm's way.

"Bang!" There was a burst of sound, and Qi Mu nearly lost his balance. The pain in his hands was blinding.

"Taiji!" The Terminator's voice thundered through the arena. His pitch had risen sharply. The Gourmet sat beside him, holding tightly to Jun'er.

The little one was busily clapping her tiny hands. "Daddy is the best!"

The older generation of Adepts close enough to hear the words Taiji were startled. For the elders, surprise was replaced with fear. They knew what that word meant. It was utterly inconceivable that they would witness it here, used by this seemingly weak young man.

Back in the day, when Jue Di was attacked by the collected strength of the Alliances, he had used this martial art to protect himself. It was said that when one's Taiji mastery reached protogenic levels, no harm could come to them. The forces of Taiji, the forces of the universe, would inexplicably cast all dangers to the side. The nine strikes of Taiji were very strong, but that was not the whole nature of the art. It was a product of ancient China, the birthplace of all martial arts, and taught the practitioner to best the unyielding with softness. Very few practitioners ever really understood the essence of Taiji.

Qi Mu's third metamorphosis gave him the power of a ninth ranked Adept, furthering the gulf between him and Lan Jue. Still, every attack was parried, diffused, or avoided. The harder he hit, the more potent his opponent's Taiji defense.

Waves of energy rippled through the ring as though they stood in a pool. They spread out from Lan Jue to undermine any attack the Wolf King tried to pursue. Thirteen times he swiped at the masked man's face and missed. Lan Jue eventually stepped away from the insidious energy, but when Qi Mu tried to pursue his body resisted. His face darkened like a bruise.

“Ugh!” The Wolf King spat out a mouthful of blood. He staggered backward and finally could sustain his third form no longer.

Lan Jue watched him calmly from a few steps away. “You’re hurt. If we keep this up it may cause lasting damage. Are you sure you want to go on?”

Utter disbelief was written on Qi Mu’s face, but he knew Zeus was right. If he kept it up he may eventually win the fight, but at the cost of his health. He snarled, bearing his lupine fangs, then stomped out of the ring.

He’s lost... Qi Mu, the Wolf King, has lost to Zeus! Titan had his challenger in the Monarch, who shared two victories. He’d displayed trickery and tactics before, but his victory today was pure skill.

Taiji masters renounced all worldly pleasures. In the end, their task is to spread their knowledge.

Even Jong Yongye, the new darling of the tournament, watched Lan Jue carefully and with interest. Xuanyuan Shishi was the same. He exchanged a glance with Jong Yongye, and a nod of the head.

Group One was nearly decided. The next fight would be Lan Jue and Titan, and no one dared discount Lan Jue after what he’d done to Qi Mu. No one could say for certain Titan wouldn’t meet the same fate.

Mo Xiao heaved a long breath. She had an odd look in her eye, and looked at the Terminator with a little uncertainty. “Your Majesty. You mentioned Taiji... the martial art that Jue Di was known to use, from the former era?”

The Terminator look at her and nodded. His face was sour, and he did not speak. For Adepts – and for Paragons especially – the name Jue Di was taboo.

Hua Li watched with scrunched brows from the VIP booth. “What is Mo Xiao doing? What the hell is she thinking talking him up right now?”

“Now don’t say I didn’t warn you, A-Li,” Chu Cheng instructed. “I’ve always said that Mo Xiao has something against A-Jue. Who the hell knows why, but you’ve got to handle that business. We’re brothers, don’t

avoid it.”

“Yeah I know... but I had no idea Lan Jue’s Taiji skills were at this level,” the rock star praised.

Chu Cheng pulled a sour face. “Qi Mu’s just an idiot. See if it were me, I’d blast him in the face with an inferno. See how he deals with that.”

“Funny,” Hua Li mused. “I’m pretty sure you aren’t in the quarter finals and he is.”

Chu Cheng went rigid, then pretended like he hadn’t heard.

Group Two fights were about to begin; The Pharmacist versus Qian Bian. Chi Tianjiao versus Jiang Yuan.

Nothing unexpected happened, and they finished as without any upsets. Qian Bian could do nothing in the face of the Pharmacist’s overwhelming strength. Her attacks were so oppressive he didn’t even have a chance to shift in to his weapon forms. He managed to block seven attacks before succumbing.

Chi Tianjiao seemed shaken to her Core from the Pharmacist. She wasn’t even able to mount a defense against the necromancer.

Chapter 457: Failure is the Mother of Success

The second group also had two competitors with a pair of wins under their belts; the Pharmacist and Jiang Yuan. They would also determine who would proceed to the finals after tomorrow.

Other than Lan Jue's shocking defeat of the Wolf King, things stayed quiet and straightforward for the other fights.

Of course, gamblers who'd placed their hard-earned cash on Qi Mu were less than pleased. All of it, down the drain. There was nothing in the universe less reliable than gambling.

The audience had had their appetite wet by the first two fights. Now it was time for the next two, the main course.

Group Three. The mysterious powerhouses would return to the ring. The Driver would be facing Yan Ningya, while Cao Shuiqin would square off against Jun Yongye.

The Epochrion's disciple was determined not to lose a second time. However, the Driver had shown some considerable power. His case may not have been as hopeless as it seemed. He walked over to Lan Jue.

"No encouragement for me?"

Lan Jue smiled. "You seem like you're doing fine! Just don't lose too terribly."

"Shit!" The Driver flipped him the finger, then stomped toward the ring.

Yan Ningya was without her veil today. Her status had been revealed yesterday so there was no further need for it. The Driver looked as his often did, with well-kept short hair and a cunning glint in his eye. He looked ready to go.

Yan Ningya nodded at him. He inclined his head in response.

In terms of physical appearance, Yan Ningya was more attractive than Cao Shuiqin. Though, for some unexplicable reason the Driver did not appear

the least bit interested. On the contrary, he had eyes only for Cao Shuiqin, otherwise he wouldn't be watching her like he was.

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

There was a flash of silver right away. The Driver would not hesitate like he had for Shuiqin. With the speed of lightning he raced right for her. However, as he drew in for the strike, he could feel himself become sluggish. All around were ripples of prismatic color emanating from Yan Ningya. The Driver's explosive charge was turn to a crawl.

The time Adept lazily stepped to the side, and suddenly time sped up to breakneck speed. The Driver sped past his target and struck the ground with a jarring blast.

The Driver had put his whole strength behind the strike, and silver lightning crackled violently all around where he'd stopped. It enveloped him as well, acting as a shield against Yan Ningya's own counter attack.

It looked as though the Driver anticipated that his attacks wouldn't be precise, so he spread his power to cover a larger area. All of this while keeping his defenses primed.

The shimmering light surrounding her bloomed outward like a starburst, enveloping her in a magnificent kaleidoscope of color. She floated away from her foe as delicate as a fairy. Her sword swung this way and that as she did so. "In the North there lives a wondrous beauty, peerless and independent. One laugh and cities fall! Another laugh razes countries. In her steps comes disaster, but her beauty cannot be denied."

She sung the lines must faster this time, and with each wave of her sword the light that composed it blazed brighter. The host of colors in her eyes sparkled enigmatically.

By her second stanza, the Driver could feel something wasn't right. The waves of power that swept from her sword weren't directed at him, but instead focused on herself. He couldn't stop her if he wanted to, though, since her time dilation powers negated the speed of his lightning. He also needed a moment to recover from his first blitz.

He spun around and launched himself at Yan Ningya once again. Silver arcs of lightning spat out all around him in another electric explosion. By now Ningya was finishing her final stanza.

A beam of white light cut right through the electricity. The piercing force washed over Driver.

A red aura sprang into being around the Driver, appearing without warning. His meaty hand was extended forward, flagrantly keeping the light several feet away.

“Leniency!” the Gourmet’s voice called.

Yan Ningya dropped her sword and turned her eyes to the VIP platform where the Paragons sat. She gave them a little bow, then left the ring. She only stopped when she reached the waiting area, while passing the White Blademaster.

“Thank you for your instruction,” she said. He answered her with a smile.

The Driver was glum. His bet with the Accountant hung over his head, and it looked like he would owe the mousy man a bottle of fine whisky. The bet was that he wouldn’t be the worst in his group, but two fights in he was zero for two. His next opponent? Jun Yongye.

“Does that count as losing terribly?” The Driver griped as he walked back to Lan Jue’s side.

Zeus met him with a smile. “No. She was using all of her power, too, you just didn’t know what you were going up against. Her time abilities shut our speed advantage down, which is why it was a short fight. But losing fast doesn’t mean you got trounced.”

Lan Jue’s drinking buddy laughed. “Well now I feel much better,” he quipped sarcastically. This earned an admonishing look from his friend.

“Failure is the mother of success!”

“At least get me out of the Accountant’s bet,” he whined.

Lan Jue shrugged. “I think he told me that if he won, he’d give the bottle

to the Keeper. I guess it's up to you."

The Driver left quietly. Sad though he was, this didn't stop his eyes from following Cao Shuiqin up to the ring.

Jun Yongye was clad as he ever was in the white coat, spotlessly clean. There was a comforting consistency; this was how he was, and how he would always be.

They faced each other from across the field, until eventually the blademaker called out to her. "I'm eager for a song!"

She looked back at him. "Very well," she replied with a nod.

The countdown had no meaning. Before the eyes of the crowd Jun Yongye folded his knees beneath him and sat. He shut his eyes, and listened.

Cao Shuiqin followed, sitting prettily on the floor with the guqin across her knees. Her delicate fingers lay upon the strings. The tones they produced were low and ethereal, lingering in the air. From the stands they looked like two people whiling the day away.

The first sign that all was not as it seemed, was when the air between them began to contort.

This continued for ten minutes, until Cao Shuiqin calmly placed her fingers upon the strings and made them still. She looked up, her expression detached. "I've lost."

Her music hadn't only failed to hook the blademaker. It didn't seem to have affected him on any level. It was like serenading a blade – your notes just rang off the surface.

When Jun Yongye opened his eyes, he sighed with regret. "Your heart isn't in it!" He rose on to his feet and left the ring without saying anything further.

He was two wins up. No one else in the third group could stand up to him. Even if he were – by some miracle – to lose in his next fight against the Driver, he still had more points. The first one to qualify for the finals

was not Constantine, not the Pharmacist, nor Titan or Yan Ningya... but the simple swordsman, Jong Yongye!

Cao Shuiqin sat in silence for a little while, thinking over her opponent's parting words. She eventually gathered up her instrument and left the ring, hiding her reddening face. He was right – her heart wasn't in it. She had meant it when she told the Driver that his loss wasn't a whole loss. They affected her as well, and took time to dissipate.

Three fights in, things were looking clearer than ever. The next fight certainly did not fit that category, but it was the most anticipated match-up of the day. Even the Terminator had said he was looking forward to it.

High Inquisitor of the Pontiff's Citadel, Constantine; versus Xuanyuanshishi and the Ten-thousand Blades.

Constantine rose to his feet. A holy light blazed in his eyes, so bright it was like he couldn't contain it. The audience could feel the waves of confidence coming from him. It wasn't a surprise, after all he was one of the most promising young Adepts in the Citadel, and a contender for the spot of Pontiff someday. He would not accept defeat.

He'd witnessed Xuayuna Shishi's strength yesterday, but the display had only served to stoke his lust for battle. He longed to test himself against such doughty opponents. The harder he was pushed, the further he walked on his Path. Lan Qing, Lan Jue, Chu Cheng... like him they had also come to grasp the protogenic world early. But the Path the High Inquisitor walked was much more difficult than theirs.

To be so strong and so young, he'd had to employ a great deal of fantascia genetica. It fully stimulated his Talent, made him one of the best, but there were dangers to rewriting one's DNA. The final steps to Paragon were much more difficult for anyone who took short cuts. This was why the Angel of War, Michael – once lauded as the right hand of the Pontiff and set to succeed him – was ultimately stuck at the peak of ninth level.

If Constantine didn't discover his Path before the age of fifty, he would end up like the Angel of War.

The Pontiff was an old man. No one knew how long a Paragon lived, but

he had already clearly expressed his wishes. When a worthy disciple broke through to Paragon, he would pass the mantle on to them. Metatron's chances were quickly dwindling, while Constantine was at the height of his potency. At this point there wasn't even any competition between them.

Chapter 458: Give It All You've Got!

Constantine was anxious to pit himself against the strongest. For Xuayuan Shishi, though, it looked like just another encounter. He grinned at his foe with a congenial smile and engaged in some light warmups. He looked like he was preparing for a foot race.

"Please. Give it all you've got!" Constantine's low voice called over as he offered a nod to his opponent.

Shishi smiled back. "We'll have to see if you can handle it."

On the VIP platform.

Mo Xiao turned halfway in her seat to look at the Terminator. "Your Majesty, who do you suspect will win this next fight?"

"Mm, tough to say," he growled. "Xuanyuan Shishi did not show us his full power yesterday. It's difficult to know how strong he really is. Constantine is also an amazing talent, and I'm sure he has some secrets of his own. In the end, I'd say there's a fifty-fifty chance for both of them.

She blinked in surprise. "Shishi is that much of a threat?"

The Terminator went on. "There is something that perhaps you missed. Xuanyuan Shishi wrote his title as 'The Ten Thousand Swords Become One.' I suspect he will be at his strongest when that happens. We'll have to see. Xuanyuan Shishi will likely have to use his full power if he hopes to best Constantine."

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

The buzzer called a start to the biggest fight of the day! Whoever won was going on the finals.

Shishi waved his hand, and at the gesture a soupy mist arose. In response, the High Inquisitor muttered a few words and shot his right hand toward the sky. A resplendent golden light flared outward and enveloped him.

Blessing of Holy Light! One of the Citadel's strongest light-based

defenses. It was so bright it blinded the eyes, so pure it caught the spectators' breath.

Shishi continued to strengthen the mist. It became thicker and spread out farther, spurting out from him in attempts to smother that light. The inquisitor didn't seem to care or notice. His risen hand dropped and pointed in to the roiling mist. From the digit, a beam of light exploded out.

The light pierced right to the heart of the mist, but the heavy air responded by surging around the intruder. Constantine's light widened while the mist splayed like the maw of some enormous beast.

The two powers met straight on, and it was soon evident which one had the advantage. The mist began to slowly recede before the power of the High Inquisitor's holy light. It was an indication of their strength disparity.

The golden light was as dense as it was bright, and Constantine's eyes shone with the same flood of energy. Where he had been a foreboding figure in his fight against Blackmoon, Constantine looked like a saint today. Waves of divine power rippled from him.

Suddenly, there was a fierce howl. The thick, lowlying clouds vanished without warning as a hundred thousand blades of mist appeared. It was just the same as last time, with the strong blades tearing through the holy light unimpeded.

The light blazed stronger, hoping to destroy the swords outright. They would not be denied. Burning with seraphic fire, the blades descended upon Constantine faster than he could blink.

Six motes of light appeared beneath his feet as, with a hefty grunt, the holy light solidified around him in to a protective shell. Wave after wave of Xuanyuan Shishi's swords pummeled him, but they only produced ripples on his shield. They were cast back with such force they went sailing all through the ring.

Holy Spirit Aegis! A powerful light-based shield.

A hundred swords were useless against the Aegis. Shishi, though, had a hundred thousand. An endless tide of living blades dashed themselves

against Constantine. They would be blasted back only to return. Over time, the Inquisitor's shields grew brighter and brighter.

The Pontiff's man stood in the center of that blazing light, calmly experiencing everything around him. He was searching for Xuanyuan Shishi. His foe's swords weren't enough, but if Constantine wanted to end the fight he'd have to find his target first. Anything else was fruitless.

Somewhere in the dense sea of swords, a faint light pulsed. There was sunlight radiating from it, and at its urging the swords beat against Constantine like rain against a tin roof. Halos of reflected light were beginning to appear around the shell.

The mistblades swirled among one another like angry eddies, and under that gentle sunlight they began to fuse. Two swords would ferociously clash midair and unite. Their combined strength put even more pressure on Constantine. No two attacks were the same, either. Some swords came as spirals, others crosswise or straight down from overhead. There were even some that tried to drill up from underneath – probing for a weakness.

The relentless assault continued while the sounds continued to join. Now, the majority were the combination of two swords. When ten or so of those drew close they would join as well, in to a single monstrous saber.

Those halos were more frequent now, and were pulses of energy from Constantine he used to bolster his shield. Xuanyuan Shishi's magical – if strange – display opened up the audience's eyes. This must be the peak of perfection.

The Pharmacist especially, watched the ring with avid attention. Her burning eyes never moved, unwilling to miss any detail. . She muttered to herself, “The Way of Changes! I never thought I'd see it in person. I remember master saying it was among the strongest sword styles in ancient China. If paired with-“

She trailed off as the situation in the ring swallowed up her full attention.

Constantine's face wasn't the calm façade it was before. He'd continued to search, but could find no trace of Xuanyuan Shishi. At first he suspected

his foe would hide within the press of misty weapons, but Constantine quickly discovered that every sword bore a trace of the swordsman's aura. This feeling seemed to intensify when the swords combined.

Could it be? Were the swords his foe? How could this be?

Just as Constantine was struggling with his disbelief, every blade stopped in midair. For half a second they simply hung there, but then suddenly began to rearrange themselves. The buzzing aura around them grew ever more potent. Their misty surfaces hardened to be more like a proper blade. Someone was taking things more seriously.

The High Inquisitor took a deep breath. He couldn't leave his circle of protection to find Shishi, so his only recourse was to completely obliterate all of those swords. The swordsman had his limits, and Constantine had a Talent advantage. He wouldn't even need to leave his shield.

He pressed three fingers of his right hand to his forehead. His left hand lay lightly upon his chest. There was a heaving blast of holy energy, and the faint silhouette of some majestic figure could just barely be discerned behind the Inquisitor.

The figure was an enigma but for its opulent robes. The force fields rippled from the blast impact. Xuanyuan Shishi's swords reeled out of control like a routed army.

"Is this... the Second Coming?" Mo Xiao gasped.

"The legendary ability of the Pontiff's Citadel, revealing the image of God." The Terminator's rumbling voice explained.

The Pontiff and his Disciples sought protogenia in a fashion altogether different from their peers. Every one of their Adepts were light – and more importantly, Faith – based. Their path to Paragon would be paved with Faith.

Constantine was no exception. This was the penultimate display of Faith – the Second Coming!

The swords shrank before the encroaching blaze of light. Soon there was nowhere to hide as the whole of the ring's entire was painted gold. The

Pontiff's representative simply maintained his prayer and posture.

Behind him, the hazy image of God started to solidify. Waves of light as pure as God Himself crashed against the mistblades. Those closest to the Constantine were immediately destroyed, and the others were forced back.

Power would force his foe's hand!

The High Inquisitor earned his position in part through self-awareness. When faced with this problem, he returned to basics – which often proved the best decision.

Terrible blasts of holy energy tore through the ring. The ruined swords dissolved back in to puffs of mist, though they didn't dissipate. Instead they joined together with the nearest sword.

This took Constantine by surprise. He was capable of this, too? Even when faced with the glory of God, those swords would not be vanquished.

"Hmph!" There was a cold grunt. The swords reacted with some unheard signal, and gathered together like they were being swept up by some great sea-bound river.

Chapter 459: Godslayer

The many mistbaldes joined together in to a single, enormous sword. Beneath the incandescent glow, the blade seemed less surreal than its smaller progenitors. Roiling clouds rolled along its length.

Although the presence of God was terrifying and intense, the waves of holy power washed right by the great saber. The light parted against its sharp edge like water. There was no resistance for Constantine to interact with.

That shimmering white light around the saber exploded, spreading outward and away. All that remained was the simple – if gigantic – blade. But then, as a powerful light welled up inside of it, Xuanyuan Shishi's sword whistled through the air as a beam of light – right for the image of God.

Godslayer!

The light in Constantine's eyes flared brighter. From the top of his head, beams of light erupted out and lay upon the figure of God behind him. That divine silhouette was even clearer, as His hand reached out for the encroaching saber.

The great figure and the enormous sword were set to collide. However, just then, a strange curtain shimmered around the sword and it disintegrated! Once more, those ten thousand swords went sailing through the air. They swept around the silhouette of God like some monstrous meat grinder.

The auras shifted again, changeable as the tide. The weapons, imbued with a strange energy, were carried through the ring in deadly eddies.

The Second Coming was built on a foundation of Faith. Much to Constantine's consternation, Xuanyuan Shishi's sword was able to cut right through waves of pure divine Faith – so completely as to sever the minute connections within it.

The image of God was carved in to a hundred million motes of light, and

then disappeared. The mistblades were also affected, and swayed unstably overhead. However, they recovered enough to fly up in to the air over the center of the ring.

Constantine's face was the definition of disbelief.

It destroyed Faith! This ability completely undermined everything the Pontiff's Citadel was built on!

"HERESY!" Constantine's howl rang loud, tearing through the arena. His hand snapped out, and an orb of golden light grew in his palm. It swelled and stretched until it took on the shape of a spear. He hurled it with all of his might.

The spear became a bolt of golden lightning that struck the mistblade cluster dead center.

The Spear of Fate – holy judgment!

"Boom—!"

The blades were immediately blasted away in all directions. No small number were destroyed, those that were struck by the spear directly.

The Second Coming and the Spear of Fate; these were the symbols of Constantine's mastery. The Spear was one of the Pontiff's most cherished treasures, a spiritual weapon without equal. The Pontiff bestowed it upon him when his potential as a possible Paragon was revealed. It served its purpose now, as the unexpected addition of a divine weapon set the mistblades in to disarray.

The audience again heard that heartless grunt. The evaporated remains of Xuanyuan Shishi's swords slithered through the air until they coalesced some distance away. This time, however, they did not become swords. This time the mists condensed in to the form of a man. Meanwhile, the Spear of Fate dissolved in to a beam of light and raced back to its master. Constantine held the weapon tight in his hand, as his shining eyes were filled with violent intent. He glared daggers at the distant figure of Shishi.

This man had the ability to undermine Faith, and thus was a threat to the Pontiff's Citadel. Constantine, High inquisitor of the faith, had to

ensure all threats were eliminated. He himself was a man built on a core of Faith. If Xuanyuan Shishi could shake those deep-seated beliefs, then he could destroy the man who relied upon them. Constantine knew this clearly, and it filled him with a terrible fear.

He poured all of that emotion, and all of his own holy power in to the spear. The weapon flashed, releasing a pulse of radiant light before settling back to normal. Normal, but for the addition of several golden runes etched in to its shaft. They pulsed as though with a heartbeat, and emanated a pale golden light.

These were the souls of fallen Adepts, the fires of so many spirits that were taken by the Spear of Fate. It burned with their stolen essence as the Fires of Judgement. A single touch could turn any living thing to ash.

Xuanyuan Shishi did not look any different than any time before. His congenial smile was absent, but that was all. His now familiar grunt sounded, and a blade of mist formed within his hand. It was an exceedingly simple sword despite its construction. No different than any of the swords before. What was different now was the man, and the aura that surrounded him. Something was very different.

Mo Xiao couldn't help but secretly admire the Terminator. It was as he said. This was the Ten Thousand Blades as One – likely Xuanyuan Shishi at his strongest.

Constantine threw himself at Shishi as fast as he could. His blazing spear was held high, ready to be thrown at any moment. His opponent, calm, moved forward as well. His steps were fluid and he advanced like rolling clouds before a storm.

The audience held their breath.

The two foes collided above the center of the ring. Constantine lashed out with the spear, but did not throw it. Instead, the weapon fractured in to a hundred thousand burning beams of light. The Fires of Judgement fell over Xuanyuan Shishi.

Another grunt. The sword in Shishi's hand quivered ever so slightly. Then, seemingly from nowhere at all, a forest of sharp sword-swipes

hurled themselves toward the light.

“Clang! Crack!” The cacophonous sounds were so loud they shook the arena. The spectators held their ears, suddenly caught in what sounded like a clash of two massive armies. Through the dazzling display they could see that the Fires of Judgement had no more power over Shishi than God had. The flames would flash against his strikes then vanish like they’d never been.

The Eastern swordsman had vanished somewhere in the clash, but reappeared moments later floating gracefully in the air. He bore a quiet majesty, and a very different sword. It was one, but it was not. Onlookers could see the blade quite clearly, but it wasn’t one blade. It was countless thousands of them, occupying the same space in Shishi’s palm. They were ever shifting, phasing in and out constantly.

Lan Jue’s eyes were fixed upon the swordsman. His heart raced, carefully analyzing every move. The Way of Changes... wasn’t his own lightning Discipline the same? The explosive nature of it was inherently unpredictable. If he could learn to control it, marry it with something like the ability Xuanyuan Shishi commanded, than his Astrum would be a truly powerful artifact.

All of his focus was on Shishi, trying to ascertain any hint to the man’s philosophy. It would serve nothing to focus on the style – it was too fast, and too much. But if he could learn the intention behind it, he could apply that knowledge to his own studies.

His eyes narrowed. The fight was getting more intense.

Constantine was fierce in his belief in victory. He bore the Spear of Fate! Whatever the tricks, Shishi had only a simple sword. How hard could it be to break through it to the foe behind? He’d wanted to keep it up his sleeve for his fight against the Pharmacist, or perhaps Titan. But he was moved by a vision, this heretic impaled on the end of his master’s weapon.

However fierce his belief, though, he watched as Xuanyuan Shishi and his pauper’s blade unceremoniously blocked the power of his divine spear. The Fires of Judgement had nothing to burn, and fizzled out impotently.

The sword it contended against was ever changing, and it was like the holy fires got lost and overwhelmed.

Shishi had gradually earned an advantage. Constantine could defend himself with his spear, but the swordsman's style attacked from all angles. The Spear of Fate in this Inquisitor's hands was good to block only the most basic of attacks. He faced one of the most powerful styles of martial art in the history of mankind.

Their gulf in Discipline gave way to a deficit of skill. Constantine began to give ground, inch by inch. His spear burned fierce as ever, but he couldn't compete with Shishi's speed.

"Rrrrip!" A tear appeared on the front of Constantine's coat. He reacted by forcing his spear to erupt again, but Shishi hardly moved. There was another quiver of his sword, and countless sword-swipes tore through the air to meet every beam of light.

The High Inquisitor was so enraged he could spit blood. He set his jaw, locked his knees and refused to budge. He would face all his foe could muster, head on.

He was no fool, he knew he couldn't content with this man in technique. But he was stronger, his Discipline was stronger. He would hold out, until this inferior Adept ran out of stamina. That's when he would make his move.

But Xuanyuan Shishi showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, each wave of attacks came quicker than the last. The Pontiff's last great hope was bowing under the pressure. Dozens of small wounds opened up all over his body.

Soon he was covered from head to toe in blood.

This was no slight to Constantine's mighty defenses. It was instead a ringing endorsement of how sharp Shishi's attacks were. The energy of these attacks was as changeable and insidious as their physical manifestation. He could block them, but the energy would find a way to worm passed his guard. Each strike wreaked havoc on him internally. He could feel himself losing control over the spear.

To the audience Xuanyuan Shishi seemed the embodiment of all of those swords. Half-seen shadows of blades flashed around the High Inquisitor, so fast and so frequent they were hard to pick out. Constantine stood strong, but his strength was slipping. Soon, it was even hard to keep a grip on his treasured spear.

The look on Archangel Metatron's face could slay a man. Although he and Constantine were not of the same generation, that only made the facts more acutely obvious. Metatron's own hopes were fading, and were now placed on the shoulders of the young Inquisitor. The Pontiff's Citadel had to ensure its continued strength. They would need a Paragon leader.

The East was much stronger than anyone could have anticipated. From the White Blademaster to the Ten Thousand Blades as One, they commanded abilities that were outside of their comprehension. He was stronger, his Discipline was stronger, his weapon was stronger, he would be a Paragon... how could he be in this situation?

Chapter 460: Ten Thousand Swords as One!

The VIP platform was woefully deficient in Easterners, with only the Gourmet and Jun'er to represent them. The rest were largely Northern dignitaries, with a spattering of Westerners. They were all silent as mice after watching the swordsman.

Ten thousand swords as one, occupying a single space.

"Boom-!" Constantine was fired backwards from a blow. He struck the force field so hard it bounced him back. He lay on the floor, covered in a hundred cuts the Spear of Fate could not defend him from.

"You've lost!" Xuanyuan Shishi was completely untouched. His smile was back, one which the audience saw as friendly and appreciative. Constantine saw it differently, however. To him, that smile was full of ridicule.

"Bastard, I'm not done yet!" Constantine roared. His body surged with holy light, instantly cauterizing his wounds and halting the bleeding. The damage from Shishi's sword qi was ever more evident, though. The Inquisitor's healing light was not as effective as it should have been.

"Gfah!" He spat another mouthful of blood, staggered, then full to his backside. Constantine, his eyes full of disbelief, had lost.

The sword dissolved in to mist, which slithered around Shishi and up his nose. He smiled pleasantly, then left the ring.

The underdog once more exploded in to the lead. Constantine, High Inquisitor of the Pontiff's Citadel was eliminated! Xuanyuan Shishi had emerged as the qualifier for Group Four. He still had to fight Blackmoon, but everyone knew how that fight would play out.

The tournament was inching along, with two of the four groups locked up. The results were already much different than people had predicted. Constantine and Yan Ningya – two of the favorites – had been weeded out. Meanwhile the binary shock that was Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi

exploded on to the public stage.

Two groups were still uncertain, though they could be guessed. For Group Two, the fight to watch would be Jiang Yuan and the Pharmacist. Most expected the Pharmacist to win, since Jiang Yuan's abilities appeared much weaker. Group One looked much the same. Titan held back in his last fight, but most assumed it was out of respect for his female opponent. Although Lan Jue had pulled a surprise victory over the Wolf King, many believed Zeus' defeat at the hand of Titan was inevitable.

Tomorrow everyone would have their answer. Tomorrow, the final four would be revealed!

Lan Jue's keen eyes followed Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi as they exchanged another high-five. He stood and trotted their way.

"I look forward to our fights," Lan Jue said, stopping in front of them. He smiled amicably, his eyes calm and welcoming.

Jun Yongye returned the expression. Shishi looked a little surprised. "Excellent! We'll see if your Taiji is stronger, or if my sword style has a little more. But if I'm being honest, it doesn't look like you have the Discipline. Maybe the next time we meet."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I guess we'll have to see what happens."

"Don't let us down," Jun Yongye interjected matter-of-factly.

This tournament had been full of unexpected upset, something the audience could not get enough of. There were two more today for them to talk about. Zeus and Shishi won their matches and in doing so, had made the next few rounds much more interesting.

Who was stronger between the two Eastern swordsmen? What will happen when they have to face Titan or the Pharmacist? The finals were already a rush of emotions for these spectators. To them it seemed almost a formality, and they were eager for the real contests ahead.

**

"Can I take you out for a drink?" The Driver intercepted Cao Shuiqin in

the waiting area.

The musician's eyes dropped to the floor. "I don't drink."

The Driver answered. "I have tea."

"Alright." After a moment she lifted her head, and nodded at him. Their eyes met, and she could feel the heat in his gaze. Her cheeks flushed.

The Driver motioned for her to lead, in a very classical and gentlemanly gesture. Cao Shuiqin, her instrument cradled in her arms, walked on.

**

Lan Jue and the Pharmacist left the arena together. As they idly walked through the streets, he turned to her. "Hey sis, Xuanyuan Shishi and Jun Yongye. Which one do you suspect you'll be facing?"

She sniffed a laugh. "I'm only worried about facing you."

"You have such faith in me!" He remarked.

She smirked at him. "What, just a little encouragement. You don't like your chances?"

He replied. "It's not that. I'm eager to get in the finals and see how I do against those two."

The Pharmacist was solemn. "These two are definitely not pushovers. Xuanyuan Shishi did not beat Constantine by luck. He won from sheer skill and understanding. Jun Yongye is even stronger."

"I never said I'd win," Lan Jue countered with a chuckle. "I want to see what I can learn about swordsmanship, fighting them. I've already decided that my Astrum will be a sword, it's important for me to know how to use one."

She nodded. "It's a good opportunity. Honestly, I'm surprised you were able to beat Qi Mu without Qianlin's help. A pleasant upset to my expectations."

Lan Jue shrugged. "It's not usually that easy. He set the tone, I just followed the notes. He never got a chance to use his whole strength. I

don't think he fully recovered from using the third metamorphosis yesterday, either."

With a smile, the Pharmacist added. "You must have learned quite a lot today. Meditate on it when we get back."

Lan Jue had been especially punished by the thirteen claw-swipes from Qi Mu's transformation. He'd been able to deflect them by joining his Discipline with Taiji, but only just barely. If Qi Mu had pressed the attack for much longer, he'd have had to rely on more tricks to eke out a victory. Thankfully he hadn't had to. He grit his teeth and forced himself to take it, hoping that conflict would lead to progress.

In the end, it was a success.

The last year – largely thanks to the Mystic Raiment and Qianlin's other powers – he had seen a tremendous boost to his potential. When he'd first starting joining with Qianlin it was like he was a rough diamond. Every fight polished that diamond a little bit more. Each fight changed his Core in a positive way.

It had been much more difficult to defend against the wolf's attacks than people probably thought. It had forced him to really apply himself to integrating his Taiji abilities. Integration was the most important part of martial training. Only when an Adept joined their martial skill with their Discipline were they at their most potent. Why was Jun Yongye so strong? Because you couldn't differentiate him from his weapon. He was his weapon, completely absorbed by his philosophy. That was why people saw his skills as almost peerless.

That was what Lan Jue wanted for himself, and today was a solid step in the right direction. All of this had positive implications for his future that he couldn't even describe. Already he could sense the progress – he was at the peak of second degree now. Soon, he would break through to third rank for the second time. If he just kept his nose pressed to the grindstone, progress was assured.

"Daddy!" Jun'er's ringing voice called out to him. His face immediately broke in to a beaming smile as the Gourmet handed her over. She pecked

him on the cheek. “You’re so great, daddy. The best!”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm. “I get all my power from little Jun’er! Let’s go, I think you need something to eat!”

The Gourmet smiled at the two of them. “Did someone say eat? Count me in.”

“The undisputed king of Northern food is the steak,” Lan Jue said with a laugh. “I think that should be our target.”

The Gourmet nodded emphatically. “Sounds good to me! It’s about the only thing I’ll stomach. Impressive fight today, by the way. You certainly captured my attention.”

“Do you know anything about Jun Yongye or Xuanyuan Shishi?” He asked. “Why is it no one seems to have heard of them?”

The Gourmet shrugged helplessly. “No one is right. I’ve asked everyone who could have any information, even the Keeper and Wine Master. No one knows anything about them. It’s like they were just born out of the stones 2. Not a single bit of information to be found anywhere. Whatever the case, it’s evident that they’re Easterners. When the fights are over I’ll see if I can’t put out some feelers, but I’m not sure if we’ll be able to win them over.”

“You should do everything you can to win your groups! It would be a mean slap to the North’s face, followed back a swift backhand to the West.”

And wasn’t that the truth? Both of these strong strangers were from the East. They didn’t represent Skyfire Avenue, but they were countrymen. If the Pharmacist and Lan Jue beat out their competition, then the finals would be dominated by a single Alliance. Aside from the prestige, those six S-ranked power gems the North would have to pay to their rival. They’d be so mad it would give the Conclave a collective aneurism.

The Terminator looked like he knew it, judging by his sour expression. He sat quietly in the assembly chamber, joined by the Epochrion Huan Xue.

“This whole things seems wrong. Could the East have rigged the games?” Huan Xue mused.

But the Terminator shook his head. “No. I saw the look on the Gourmet’s face. He doesn’t know them either. But something seems familiar about these two young men. They aren’t as strong as Jue Di, but in the future? I don’t want them to leave the North, no matter who they are.”

Chapter 461: Comprehensive Response

The Epochrion looked at her compatriot, genuinely stunned. “Are you thinking of doing something?”

The Terminator heaved a sigh. “There always needs to be a bad guy. As leader of the North, that mantle falls to me. Anyway, I’ve been seen as an enemy to the East for a very long time already.”

She sighed, but did not respond.

He went on in a soft, detached voice. “If you don’t agree I won’t force you to get involved. You’re from the East, after all.”

“You must consider our real enemies,” she said in a low voice. “We should try to preserve all of humanity’s power for that fight.”

“Then let it be the North’s power!” He said, his voice rising in pitch. “NOT the East, do you understand?”

She regarded him in silence for a moment, then sighed. “We must think on it. Let’s wait and see what the rest of the tournament has in store.”

ζ

After lunch, Lan Jue made his way back to the hotel where Qianlin was waiting. She saw his pensive look and answered with high spirits. “You really showed them today! What a victory!”

He chuckled. “Qi Mu underestimated me. It’s an important lesson for you; never walk in to a fight with assumptions. His Discipline is much stronger than mine, and even with my martial arts I couldn’t keep defending myself completely. But he underestimated me, and that let me get the upper hand. I found an opening and was able to let loose with my full power. If this had been a real battle it would have been even worse for him.”

“There’s was another reason he lost, though, and that was faith. After his loss to Titan he was already in low spirits. It has affected his self-confidence, and for that reason the fight was easier than it should have been.”

Qianlin looked at him with a hint of anxiety in her eyes. “You’re facing Titan yourself, tomorrow. Should we join for the fight?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “Not yet. I want to feel it out first and see where his Discipline’s at. After that we’ll re-asses.”

She nodded. “So should we cultivate?”

“Yup.” Lan Jue needed to relax and take some time to reflect over the joining of his Taiji and Lightning skills and how they’d joined today.

ζ

A Coffee Shop.

Hua Li sat with a cup of dark coffee cradled in his hands. The brew had begun to chill, but he still took the occasional sip. He was still hidden beneath the glasses and hat, but the facemask had been removed for practical reasons. He was seated in a far corner, and seemed unconcerned about being discovered.

Mo Xiao sat across from him with a cup of juice, untouched.

“You’ve got to stop taking digs at Lan Jue. I’ve told you a dozen times.” Hua Li patiently explained.

Mo Xiao’s response was measured. “I’m a sports caster, I was narrating the fight. You’re imagining things.”

Hua Li sighed in exasperation. “I wish that was the case... I wish I was down there with him.”

She shook her head without hesitation. “Unacceptable. Poseidon cannot lose. Fans can guess, but they can never see you lose with their own eyes. You’re an idol and an inspiration, Lord of the Seas – do you understand?”

“More often than not, I wish I was just a normal guy.” The rock star pitifully lamented.

“Telling me doesn’t mean anything,” she said with smirk. “Tell that to your family. And if there’s nothing else then it’s time to go back, we still have to rehearse. Don’t forget that the Epochrion and the Terminator will both be at the closing ceremony.”

Hua Li's face fell. "I never thought it'd get this serious."

Mo Xiao nodded knowingly. "But crisis can also bring opportunity. I got news from DreamNet that someone had gotten an alien Core from Taihua. It was full of vitality, which could be processed for human use. An Adept who used it could have their vitality improved, and may even have their lives extended. It's even more potent than the fantascia genetica. Once research is complete, this should be an incredible boon for humanity."

Hua Li looked stunned. "Really?"

She smiled, then added softly. "I would never dare lie to you. I learn more than that, too. There was also news of an auction on Lyr where an s-ranked Tear of Neptune was sold. It didn't earn much. Do you know how the Tear is used?"

Hua Li thought for a minute. "I think it purifies the energy of other power gems."

She nodded. "That's right. And those alien Cores? They're a lot like power gems. With a Tear of Neptune it could purify whatever alien potency it has. The only thing left would be that pure enhancing essence. With that we could start researching in full."

Anticipation twinkled in Hua Li's eyes. He blurted, "Mo Xiao. You really have a head for business. I'm pretty sure you've evolved passed humanity at this point."

She gave him a demure smile. "Of course. I speculate to accumulate. I've already presented the plan to the board of directors."

Hua Li laughed. "Again I'm the last to know."

"But you are the patriarch," she said, suddenly solemn. "Everything I do, you have to know I do it for you."

Hua Li sniffed. "Could you not? The more you put it the less it seems to pay off. I don't want that for you."

Mo Xiao fell silent. After a time, she replied in a low voice. "I have no

expectations for you or what you will become. I only do as much as I'm willing to do, because seeing you happy makes me happy. That's what you do when you love somebody, you do what you can to make them happy. If this plan works out, then it will be a victory for all of humanity. They will live longer, and I'm convinced that will not be the only benefit."

Hua Li looked at her with a serious look. "Alright, let's go and rehearse. It looks like the Gobi Entertainment Group will have to throw their gauntlets in to the fray."

Mo Xiao looked right back. "I just hope when we're ready it's not already too late."

ζ

"DreamNet upgrade is sixty-nine percent complete."

"Continue the update. Maintain security."

"Continuing DreamNet upgrade."

ζ

Eastern Alliance, Planet Skyfire. National Eastern University.

"The Drillmaster won it! He's the best! When are we going to be as strong as he is?"

"Stop daydreaming. At our age, we're past due. The Drillmaster is on another level, still young – I think they say the cut-off is forty. Do you think we'll be as strong as he is, even when we're forty?"

"Who says? If we keep working as hard as we did in the A.R.C. classes then it's a piece of cake!"

"Then you better pray the Drillmaster gets back soon to keep training us. All those needles and lightning and hot baths weren't so bad."

"You're a damn sadist!"

"Heh, you're one to talk. It was your idea, wasn't it? If you want to be a hero, what's a little hardship along the way? At least I'm gunna be ready – he cooked us once and he's gunna cook us again. I'm gunna go cultivate,

so that when the Drillmaster gets back he'll see how much I've improved. Then I'll learn even more!"

"H-hey! Wait for me!"

ζ

The Pharmacist sat by the window, staring out at Luo City as it twinkled in the night. Jun'er lay peacefully in her arms. She looked up at her mother and smiled. "Mama, I'm so happy I got to come. Thank you for bringing me, and daddy, too."

The Pharmacist smiled down at the little one. "Mommy used to think differently. I should have brought you out much earlier. It was your father's suggestion."

Jun'er went on. "Mommy, I do miss home a little though. Skyfire Avenue is our home. When will we be going back?"

Her gentle voice answered. "When the tournament is over, sweetheart, then we'll go home. Do you really think daddy's going to be the champion?"

Jun'er nodded resolutely. "I saw it, I know it's the truth. Daddy will be champion."

"Alright." The Pharmacist nodded at her and gently stroked the small girl's hair. "Sleep little one. Tomorrow you can keep cheering us on. Especially daddy. If he's going to be champion, then he's got a big fight."

"Yeah, but daddy's still going to win."

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The room was dark, and cold. It stank of wet metal, like an alloy factory. A single figure occupied the center of the room. His bare back rippled with swollen muscles.

His face revealed traces of pain. A fine, metallic sweat trickled from his bald head. Most startling, though, was the sound they made – like metal scraping across metal as they popped from the pores.

Veins like writhing worms thumped below his skin. The rhythm was

chaotic, and made the whole of him seem unbalanced.

His skin had become metal, from head to toe. The hue of it changed constantly; sometimes a radiant silver, sometimes an ashen grey, sometimes shimmering gold. He flickered between the three of them. The area around him also affected, and started to warp uncomfortably. At the borders of the light, a deep abysmal black appeared where reality was cracked. It was like he wasn't really there at all, but somewhere between there and another dimension.

Chapter 462: I Must Win!

The two silver-clad women sat in a tidy room. They looked at the ten-digit number flashing on their communicators, then exchanged looks.

“Quite a lot of money!”

“Indeed!”

“Again tomorrow?”

“Of course. This was the boss’ task for us. What do you think the odds are for tomorrow’s fight?”

“Worse than today’s, I guess. His challenger is really strong.”

“It’s so easy to earn money in the North! That’s good, since we need money when we go back. Heheh... feels good.”

“But do you think he’ll win tomorrow?”

“Of course! He has to.”

ζ

The streets around the Great Conclave Arena were packed tight, even in the early morning. The lines stretched for almost ten blocks. Scalpers prowled the area looking for people desperate enough to buy their criminally overpriced tickets. They were still able to catch a few nibbles, though. Ticket scalpers had been anxious since so few were buying. Electronic tickets were set with the buyer’s name and other info, making them hard to sell, but there were always loopholes.

The waiting crowds chatted amongst themselves, raising the city’s decibel levels. “So which fight are you looking forward to today,” one asked. Another answered sighed.

“Man, I dunno. At least on the books it doesn’t look like there’s anything to get very excited about. But we’ll see! The fight between the Pharmacist and Jiang Yuan might be worth watching. You guys remember that skull Jiang Yuan summoned in the quarter-finals? Someone told me it’s some sort of lizard skull. Lizard my ass, that thing’s like a demon dragon. The

Terminator called it something, malcontent or whatever. I dunno if he'll use it in the next fight, but he's facing the Pharmacist so I'm interested in taking a look."

"All you have to do is take a look at the odds to know which one will be worth a watch, silly. The Pharmacist sits at zero point eight, and Jian Yuan is one point two – the closest spread today. That'll definitely be the fight to watch."

"The lightning Adept from Group One also has two wins. He beat Qi Mu. Do you think he has a chance against Titan?"

"Pfft, you're dreaming. Were you asleep for Titan's fight? You saw how strong he is. Whatever that sparkplug dude thinks he's up to, he's got nothing on Titan. One punch and the fight's over, that's my prediction."

"Hah! Nailed it, one punch. I put five grand on Titan today, even though the odds were only point five. Pocket change for winnings, but still. The masked one is at point four, but who's going to put any bets on him?"

"Oh don't even start. I put money on Qi Mu yesterday and then he lost, damn near killed me. I put all the rest of my savings on Titan, so I'll win it all back when he takes today's victory."

"Gambling has a dangerous habit of ruining families 1. Yall should be careful."

There was an electric buzz and the audience took their seats. Today the final four would be chosen. The revelers outside were indicative of the larger interest; most people were anxious for Group Two, where they would see the Pharmacist and Jiang Yuan go head-to-head.

If Jiang Yuan beat the Pharmacist, and Titan beat Zeus, then the final four would contain two Easterners, a Northerner and a Westerner. The two Easterners already qualified, but they weren't Avenue representatives. That would be a situation the Great Conclave could accept.

The Terminator sat in a locker room, perched upon a bench that had been specifically designed to hold his girth. He sat across from Titan, whose face looked like burnished metal.

“Stable?” He asked.

Titan nodded. “More or less.”

The Terminator’s voice was low and solemn. “You’ve chosen a very difficult road. But there is nothing impossible in the face of determination.”

Titan replied. “I have faith in my choice. I know it will make it much harder for me to break through, but my Path is all about faith. For that reason I cannot lose, and I will win glory for the North. My understanding, my vision of my Path will become clearer with each fight. Please, master, don’t worry; I will improve. This is not a step backward.”

The Terminator forced a smile. “Well said! But don’t underestimate your opponent – that was Qi Mu’s mistake. That Zeus... there’s a lot to him, he’s no simple Adept. I suspect he’s Jue Di’s disciple. His Discipline isn’t as simple as it looks, either. I haven’t seen him use Jue Di’s other trademark mastery, but handle him with care. Give it everything you’ve got.”

“Yes!”

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Lan Jue was the last one to enter the waiting area. All of the other remaining competitors were already waiting in their respective sofas. Xuanyuan Shishi shot him a thumbs up and beamed a friendly smile of encouragement. Jong Yongye sat nearby, with his eyes closed. Meditating, he suspected.

The Driver – who had lost his last two fights – sat with an inexplicable smirk on his face. He seemed to have forgotten that the White Blademaster would be his opponent today.

“Quite the atmosphere!” the Pharmacist beamed at Lan Jue.

He chortled back. “Doesn’t matter what’s going on today, I’m not a high school student, I can control myself.”

She smiled. “What? You don’t remember High school well?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “How could I not? We only have our youth once. But if we did go back, I’d probably panic again.”

A strange expression flitted across the Pharmacist’s face, and she adopted a far-off look. “Yeah.... Going back would be nice...”

He gave her an apologetic pat on the shoulder before sitting beside her.

His eyes then turned to his future opponent. When he saw Titan’s face – that metallic, silver façade-he knew that his guesses yesterday were correct. The Terminator’s apprentice was different.

But how?

As he pondered, a sudden and all-pervasive aura poured from him. It was full of arrogance.

The remaining players were all strong Adepts – they all felt it. Xuanyuan Shishi turned his eyes to Zeus, surprise in their depths. Jun Yongye snapped out of his meditative silence. The White Blademaster gave him a fixed and serious look as though he were thinking something. Titan answered by narrowing his eyes. The power around him thickened perceptibly. A host of eyes fell on Zeus. At least they had all been made aware that Zeus had no intention of losing quietly. He’ll be going in to that fight, ready to leave it all on the field.

The VIP Booth

“Sis, am I looking at this right? Three hundred million dollars! I have never in my life spent that much money before,” one of the women in silver fleece said to her companion, seated beside her.

“Stimulating! It feels great. Think about it, his odds are around point four again, that means a profit of over a million dollars. The numbers are dropping after our bet, too. Once all bets have been placed we stand to make a killing.”

“He’ll win! He’s got to win!”

The VIP platform.

“I’m sure you’ve come to anticipate my question, Your Majesty; which

fight are you most interest in today?" Mo Xiao asked with a smile.

The Terminator gave her an easy grin, and spoke softly. "There are two."

"Two?" Group One and Two I assume?" She went on.

He nodded.

Mo Xiao said "Does this mean you aren't confident in Titan's chances to win his group?"

The Paragon chuckled. "There are quite a number of twists and turns we've seen. I'm hoping for an entertaining match. We did not host this tournament to celebrate winning, or to demonize losing. Our greatest desire is that these brilliant up-and-comers have a chance to improve. By the end, they will leave better than when they came. We also intend for this to be a source of inspiration for young Adepts. We want them to be determined, and to grow strong. The stellar migration has been a boon for our species, and it continues to be the highest priority for us as denizens of the stars. If we wish to become the masters of universe, we'll need power to do it."

Mo Xiao thoughtfully nodded her head as he spoke. She was surprised, the Paragon was particularly chatty today. Meanwhile, the Gourmet sat on the Paragon's other side with a contemplative smile on his face. Jun'er looked up at him. "Uncle Gourmet? Why do you have such a mean smile?"

Cough! Cough! The Gourmet's face went rigid. He feigned a fit of coughing to keep her quiet.

The Terminator spared them only a passing glance, with calm eyes, before turning back to the ring.

"There you have it ladies and gentlemen, I hope you were listening! Our first fight will be the one many will be watching; Titan versus Zeus! Whoever wins will emerge as Group One's finalist. Will our first competitors please make their way to the field, and get ready for battle!"

Titan slowly rose to his feet. It was like watching a mountain uproot. The aura of his intent was so pervasive it made breathing difficult for those around him. He spared a moment to look briefly at Lan Jue, then

walked to the ring.

Lan Jue also stood and rearranged the mask on his face, fixing it in place. He took long and eager strides to the field.

As far as Lan Jue was concerned, the most important fight of the tournament was about to get underway. He was about to compete against the closest thing to a manufactured Paragon that the North possessed – the Terminator's disciple.

Chapter 463: The Clash With Titan

In his heart there was only a singular thought; I must defeat my opponent. In defeating Titan, Zeus would prove that he deserved his spot in the final four. It would be a chance for him to learn more from the sword masters.

Lan Jue's gains from this excursion had been tremendous. Still, he wasn't satisfied. There was more to learn. The fire of battle was lit in Lan Jue's chest. How strong is this pure-force Adept, he wondered. He wasn't sure, but the moment he walked in to the ring and the force field shut behind him, he could sense Titan's aura bearing down on him.

On the other side Titan was also stepping in. His chest was thrust out, and a prideful light shone in his eyes.

They nodded at one another. There was no banter, no threats.

"Final fight of the Group One quarter-finals will now get underway!"

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

Mo Xiao's cries and the fight buzzer quickly gathered everyone's attention.

Titan initiated, stomping his left foot hard upon the ground in front of him.

Boom! A shockwave tore across the arena so fast the air roared in protest. Lan Jue hadn't expected an opening offensive from below, but he wasn't flustered. He shot in to the air, clearing the top crest of the shock wave. Hands pressed against his ears to protect against the sonic boom.

His upward rise quickly became a charge, as Zeus became a bolt of lightning. The electric lance fired right for Titan. He was answering with a blitz offensive!

Titan grunt when he saw it. However, in the same moment that his foot had hit the ground, the convert's fist was already cocked.

A roar to rival the blast of a fusion engine screamed through the arena.

The force field actually rose against the pressure like a balloon in a tempest. The blast stopped Lan Jue's charge dead, and sent him careening through the air. He met with the field like a cannon shot. To him, the blast felt unstoppable. It even rippled through him, sending his Discipline in to chaos, and although he'd used his Taiji powers he was still thrown across the arena.

What power!

He was even having trouble breathing. When he hit the shield, every bone in his body popped. Lan Jue suspected he'd look very much like hamburger meat if he didn't know Taiji. Titan was certainly a ninth rank Talent – even peaked. There was no way for Lan Jue's own energy to compete directly with that force.

Now, bounced back from the boundary of the ring, Lan Jue was in free fall. Crackling lights appeared around him, however, and he fired against in to the air.

Titan took another step toward his foe, and thrust his palm forward. Lan Jue instantly felt another wave of force displacing air around them. Now, though, he knew what to expect. His defense was something he'd never shown before.

He shot toward the edge of the ring instead of for Titan. It was the same portion of the force field the convert had punched toward. He got there before the blast did, with enough time to swing his arms in to a circle. In between them, the conflicting and symbiotic powers of yin and yang swirled. When Titan's attack did arrive, the orb of energy devoured most of it. Lan Jue was blasted away again, but much gentler compared to the last time.

Titan's answer was to do it again, three more times. Three terrific blasts of thunder preceded three columns of pure force. They shone like rays of sunlight.

And then the force shield shattered. Even the four powerful Adepts pouring their Disciplines in to it, couldn't stop the shield from fracturing. The terrific blast was headed right for the audience.

Just then, a glittering rainbow of color descended from above. It didn't isolate the ring, but instead separated the crowd from the fight. When Titan's waves of Force struck the shimmering shield, it was immediately weakened and dispersed.

Lan Jue didn't enjoy the same protections. There was no getting away from it, and when it hit him he felt like every bone in his body was reduce to powder. For his Core, it was like someone had a grip on it and was trying to break it apart as well.

This pure Force was nightmarish, and he silently prayed even enough respite to catch a breath. While it had looked like three strikes, he had been assaulted by one continuous assault. Even before the first one passed him by, the second was bearing down, and then the third. He flailed head over heels until the shimmering rainbow shield stopped him.

This force field was different, softer. It seemed like it had some sort of negative energy that sapped the ferocity from Lan Jue's flight, then returned him inexplicably to the ring. It was then he saw the figure overhead, of a woman in resplendent white. He didn't know when she appeared there, but as he looked she folded her hands. Their battleground was once more isolated beneath a powerful shield.

"The Epochrion!" The first voice to call out her name was quickly lost in a sea of excited chatter.

Was this her? The fourth most powerful of the ten Paragons?

"Pfah!" Lan Jue spat a mouthful of blood. He felt like his insides had been wrapped around each other. Every inch of him hurt, every bone ached, and he felt like he might fall apart at any moment.

Horrifying. Was this Titan's power? No... that can't be. He wasn't this strong when he fought Qi Mu.

Even a peak ranked Adept couldn't completely defend against this, unless they had secrets of their own. His Taiji skills had been just enough. He couldn't even have a chance to put his tactics in to play – this was total control.

Titan gave his foe a cool look. His chilly voice called out. "Give up." Lan Jue wasn't his target. The Terminator's disciple looked pointed at Jun Yongye on the sidelines.

That one was his greatest threat.

"I haven't lost yet!" He grit his teeth, and pushed himself up off the floor. He looked like a mad man, and droplets of fresh blood trickled from the bottom of his mask.

"You want to die? Then I shall oblige you." Titan's voice became detached, and cold. His meaty fist rose.

Zeus took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and spread open his arms.

"Hera. I need you."

A piercing white light radiated out from him. Thunder rolled, and flashes of lightning crackled within. A burst of light shot out, and hung over a three meter diameter around him.

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Luo City, Intercontinental Hotel.

Zhou Qianlin sat cross-legged in the middle of the hotel room, lost in meditation. Then, an inkling in the back of her mind caused her eyes to pop open. There was a flash of white light – and she was gone.

This was the moment she'd been waiting for, and the reason she wasn't at the tournament.

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A pearl of white, surrounded by writhing veins of lightning.

Titan stopped, his fist still ready for a punch. Something didn't feel right. A moment ago his enemy couldn't hold a candle to his power. Now... it was different.

Suspended in air, the Epochrion watched the fight from her eagle-eyed vantage. She, too, was surprised at the inexplicable milky light. Even she could not see what lay beneath, but she felt it. There was something....

more, in the ring. What was immediately clear, was the surge of power coming from the masked Monarch.

Ninth level third rank... no, fourth... fifth. Sixth!

Seventh, eighth, ninth rank!

In only a few seconds, he traversed what would take Adepts years of painstaking work. When the light receded, the broken man from before was gone. In his place stood the towering, majestic figure of the God of Lightning – Zeus!

Titan's eyes narrowed to thin slits. "I knew you were full of sleazy gimmicks. We finally see the wolf in sheep's clothing 1.

Lan Jue's response was equally tepid. "Now we're on a level playing field. We can really test what the Terminator taught you, against my Taiji. Don't hold back – try the Fiend-crusher!"

Titan fixed him with a portentous stare. "We'll see if you can survive it."

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. Bolts of electricity immediately fanned out, and wrapped around him as smooth as golden silk. The dramatic rise in rank had also granted him greatly improved control over his Discipline. Those threads of gold spun around him in near-perfect symmetry. Like the lightning had completely shed its wild nature.

Titan challenged him with a battle cry, and punched his enormous fist.

Zeus didn't dodge, retreat or deflect. He took a step forward, and threw a punch of his own.

The rings of lightning shot out, becoming rays of electric light. As they pierced the air they joined, forming in the image of a giant sword chopping at his foe.

Lan Jue's diminished Discipline had brought him this far. Now he had come across one who was not just a contender – he was a menace. It would be the same for every enemy he would face going forward.

He'd tried what he could, but in the end he had no choice but to rely on Qianlin. When they joined his Discipline strengthened to surpass even his

former power. A peak-level Zeus was truly almost god-like!

Boom--!

Titan's attack struck the shield with the force of an air strike. But there was something else, cutting against the grain and impervious to his overwhelming Force. It was a streak of golden light, and it hit Titan head on.

Chapter 464: A Good Hand

A bell-shaped aura sprang out around Titan, warding off Zeus' attack!
Head-on!

Zeus was pitting his Discipline against pure Force, and had the upper hand. Empowered as he was, his control over lightning was supreme. He no longer had to fight for control, and created a much more stable – and deadly – electric current.

The VIP platform was silent. Even the Gourmet, knowing all he did, still looked stunned. The North's Paragon watched with a stone-faced glower. His premonition had turned out correct, and this Zeus was much more than he appeared. Their intel had been wrong, but he was shocked to find by how much.

In the row behind, Metatron's eyes burned, and his eyes fists were clenched. If there had been any doubt before, the sudden rise in strength put them all to rest. This was the one who was so bold as to break in to the Cathedral. This man was the one who stole away their assets. Zeus was the one who had brought such public shame upon the Pontiff's Citadel. And – the bastard! – Skyfire Avenue's Jewelry Master!

Every one of the Avenue's representatives just looked on, eyes wide and mouths open. The Accountant was as pale as a sheet. "W-what the hell happened," he muttered to himself. "When did he get so strong?"

In the waiting area.

Xuanyuan Shishi's eyebrows shot up. He, too, couldn't help but speak up. "With a little stamina... brother, what do you think?"

Jun Yongye nodded his head. "Not bad. He's got a good hand!"

The only one not taken aback by Lan Jue's sudden transformation, was the Pharmacist. Only she was fully aware of the young man's situation. Or so she thought – she had no idea he could join with Qianlin from so far away. That was a daunting revelation.

Titan's eyes reflected the shock most everyone else felt. Part of that was

for his own display. He'd hardly put a lot of power behind those three strikes of his, but they were each as formidable as his strongest attacks before the upgrade. However, his enemy's golden light pierced through like it was nothing more than a stiff breeze. This was in part because he had underestimated his foe, and partly because of Zeus' sudden rise.

Titan roared and charge forward with earth-trembling strides. As he advanced, his energies poured in to the bell-shaped shield around him. It rotated around his hulking form, faster and faster.

Zeus stood calm and collected. Electricity slithered out around him, some thin as tendrils as others thick as tree branches. They hugged the monarch tight, forming in to a twinkling suit of electric armor.

The golden-masked being hovered in the air, with his golden cloak flapping behind and light bursting from his dazzling armor. He looked indiscernible from the mythical Zeus of old.

Titan heaved his enormous girth in to the air. His fists rose with him, and as his trajectory brought him crashing toward Lan Jue those fists aimed to smash him in to the floor. Even before he hit the ground, its alloy surface seemed to bow in terrified anticipation.

Zeus didn't move. Calmly, his left hand extended forward. Titan's fist first collided with that extended hand, but Lan Jue pivoted just as they made contact. His other hand stretched out, and radiating a strange energy, guided the massive convert away mid-air.

Then Lan Jue moved again. To Titan, it just felt like he'd miscalculated and went barreling toward the prismatic shield. But under Lan Jue's subtle directions, he instead crashed unceremoniously in to the ground.

Boom-!

The entire Conclave Arena trembled from the impact. Even with Titan's famously powerful defense, he certainly felt that.

The Nine Strikes of Taiji; Parry, Block and Punch! 1.

Lan Jue exploited the opening and, continuing the pivot, brought his right hand crashing down right on top of Titan. At the point of impact, a

bolt of lightning thick as a tree hit right where Lan Jue's fist landed.
BOOM!

The force buried Titan further in the alloy floor of the arena. The lightning strike had been so intense it turned the whole thing gold. But he frowned. If his control was really at its peak than one hit should have been enough.

The crowd saw it differently. They could only gape at precisely the opposite of what they'd all thought would happen. The scene was familiar, though the players were reversed. How masterful did this masked man's cultivation get?

What Titan had undergone in the last couple of days, had been the next step in the Paragon manufacturing process. What many did not know, was that the North had their own form of fantascia genetica that they employed in their experimentation – a formula no less potent than the West's. Since the Terminator had trained him, he had avoided the trap of replacing too much of his natural body with machinery. This had allowed them to move forward with this next progression. Ultimately it was a failure though, and they knew it. Comprehension of protogenia was not something science could emulate.

In his bid to win the crown, for the glory of his Master, Titan had taken this formula to stimulate the full breadth of his potential. He was already at his peak, so this was intended to force him right up against the barrier to Paragon.

But the power and influence he gained through this wasn't real understanding, and thus not a real manifestation of Domain. This was the difference between Jun Yongye and himself. Although the blademaster wasn't a ninth rank, his understanding was deep. Titan believed the difference in Discipline would be enough.

Yet in the face of Titan's upgrades, his faith, and his strength, Zeus was still controlling the fight. The convert could not know that Zeus' Ascension and Qianlin's Queen of Heaven transformations had joined entirely. This promoted not only Zeus' Discipline, but his protogenic

command. Now it was all brought together here, the God of Lightning showed much more power than he had in the Pontiff's Citadel.

Zeus also benefitted from two Disciplines. Just as thunder followed lightning, as one rose in power so did the other. He was two peak-ranked Adepts in one. Although Titan's pure Force was impressive, Lan Jue's Taiji skills made sure they weren't insurmountable.

"Aaahhhhhh!" Another roar as Titan stumbled to his feet. He veritably poured with an oppressive aura. Zeus was not reckless, and retreated to assess the situation on the far side of the ring.

From within the divot, the convert's body began to swell. Before the eyes of the audience, he stretched until he became as large as the titans of old. His clothes exploded in to shreds, with his modestly carefully protected by briefs of super-elastic material. His eyes blazed red, but his body was a union of silver and gold. His skin was a pure luminous white, and the gold flowed through his pulsing veins. Rays of glorious golden light painted the ring.

This was the manifestation of Titan's greatest faith. His impenetrable defense grew with him, and the displacement of power caused the arena to shake once more. It shook as much from his strength as the cheers of his Northern compatriots.

Zeus regarded his opponent with dispassionate eyes. Metamorphosis? Or something else? He could clearly feel the tempest that was Titan's Discipline, swirling around them. It must be something granted through his conversion, some kind of installation to strengthen his abilities.

It achieved the same effect Lan Jue experienced in compressing his Core, though not to the same degree. Still, Lan Jue had to acknowledge that what he saw before him was daunting. Titan was a hair's breadth from Paragon, and some aspects of his power were probably already at that level.

Zeus took a steadying breath. He slowly extended his right hand forward and followed with a step. He flowed in this way like rolling clouds, difficult to directly face. If he wanted to overcome the strength of a Paragon, he

had but one path; be yielding! Be fluid so that the full force of his power had nowhere to land.

“Boom!” Titan’s right foot stamped hard against the ground. A shockwave with the force of ten earthquakes rattled right for Zeus.

But ten meters from him, the vibrations simply stopped. Distant areas of the ring tossed and buckled, like a sea in stormy weather. Zeus was unmoved.

The enormous Titan roared again, and threw himself in a forward charge. His massive, metallic fist exploded through the air toward his opponent and fired a ray of golden light.

Fiend-crusher!

Lan Jue lifted his arms, and gently allowed them stretch out; Apparent Close Up.

A steady glow of black and white appeared in his palms. But as tendrils of electricity worked their way through the energies, both turned an incandescent gold. He effortlessly deflected Titan to the side, into the ring’s shield.

Titan responded with an apocalyptic hail of punches. Lan Jue danced around them, masterfully employing his Master’s teaching: Grasp the Bird’s Tail, Parting the Horse’s Mane, White Crane Spreads Its Wings. Each one, at the very last moment, turned away Titan’s murderous attacks. They weren’t the nine strikes, but the basic moves and practice of leverage gave him the edge over overwhelming force.

But while it looked effortless, one could imagine the kind of stress it put on Zeus to face off against a near-Paragon. He felt like a blade beneath the blacksmith’s hammer, but the beating only resulted in tempering his mastery of Taiji.

Chapter 465: What's This Trash?

A pale white light surrounded Lan Jue, making his body seem oddly fluid. He slid around the fiend-crusher attacks, giving Titan no opportunity to land a blow.

This wasn't a skill that Lan Jue possessed, at least not inherently. This was Zhou Qianlin's Queen of Heaven. As the most peaceful and supportive of Disciplines, it wasn't particularly masterful in defense. However, what it did do was greatly enhance the capabilities of her target. Her Queen of Heaven enhancement helped Lan Jue more perfectly join the yin and yang energy he already manipulated, offering him better security.

Titan's furious attacks slammed against the shields, causing them to quiver. The Epochrion could do nothing but allow her shields to be assailed. They were for the protection of her Northern compatriots. One errant punch from Titan could take out half the Arena.

The other competitors had risen from their comfortable seats and were crowding around the sidelines. The fight had captured their attention, as much as it had the audience. Everyone was taken aback by Titan's power, but no one – master Adepts included – could believe the explosive power of Zeus.

He'd hidden his true power away for the whole tournament, only pulling it out when faced with this monstrous foe. He was fearless, and for good reason; all along he'd been a peaked-rank Adept, with knowledge of powerful martial arts.

The Pharmacist especially, looked on with a quiet admiration. What skillful use! It looked like the young man was well on his way to true understanding of Taiji.

With each passing moment, the Terminator's expression soured. He knew the ins and outs of his disciple's abilities, and the capabilities of his tech. The Paragon manufacturing process had been completed, but his student's power still wasn't at its strongest. Nor could he sustain continuous punches, a distinct difference between himself and Qi Mu's

three transformations. His opponent already mastered a good deal of Jue Di's teachings, as well.

Lan Jue's two palms pressed in front of his chest, in the same moment that Titan's next punch landed. He met it face on, and instead of deflecting it the whole of Lan Jue's body was spun around, guided by the silver and gold energy in his palms. His left arm rolled and forced Titan's attack up and away. In the same fluid movement, his right fist shot through the sudden opening to deliver its own blast toward the convert.

This wasn't just deflection. Now he was responding with strength! Thanks to the pressure Titan put him under, Lan Jue was forced to understand his powers even deeper, or be defeated.

"Bang!" The Taiji move rang against Titan's shield. Even with his protections, the convert was knocked back several steps. His protective shell shimmered.

Titan shook. He was shocked, but refused to let it undermine his faith. His giant hands were pressed together before his chest before another piercing gust of Force burst out from him.

Lan Jue spun like a top, but never left that one spot. The screaming rage of Titan's power was drawn in to whatever enigmatic powers were at Lan Jue's command. After a moment, the gold and silver lights surrounding him returned to black and white. They were different now, however; the black rumbled with an incessant peal of thunder. The white energies were a flowing orb of electricity, smooth as water. Trapped right in the middle, was the tempestuous power of Titan's Fiend-Crusher fist.

This...

Lan Jue made his move. In an instant, all of the powers around him appeared to condense in to a single point. A single beam of blinding light silently shot out, colliding directly with Titan's defenses.

Boom--!

The explosion sounded like the whole planet had been cracked down the middle. The floor of the arena collapsed and fell ten meters in to the earth.

Although the beam had been directed at Titan, the shields all around the arena warped drastically, like they'd been hit too. If the Epochrion hadn't been supporting the shield herself, then there would have been a real danger that the blowback would harm the onlookers.

Titan, still covered by his shield, was blasted back like he'd taken a salvo from a battleship. As he flew through the air that golden shell cracked, then fell away.

“Bang!”

Titan struck the far shield then hit the floor. His ten-meter tall figure immediately shrank back down to his normal size. His powerful aura was also perceivably weaker.

Lan Jue stood in the spot Titan had occupied. There was another ragged cough, and rivulets of blood dripped from below his mask. The great Monarch stumbled, but did not fall.

Titan struggled to pull himself up, but couldn't. For some inexplicable reason his powerful arms seemed incapable of lifting his girth. Three times he fought to stay in the fight, until in the end he collapse face first in the ruins of the ring – unconscious.

There was no electric voice this time, calling the winner. The ring, and all the installations for the tournament – had been destroyed in their conflict. Lan Jue looked up to the Epochrion, just as his golden armor fell away.

“Zeus has won.” The Epochrion's calm determination hung over the arena.

Beneath the mask, Lan Jue smiled. He took a step back then fell promptly on to his backside. The golden mask concealing his features crackled, then became dust and disappeared. His face revealed for all to see.

ζ

Planet Skyfire, National Eastern University. A.R.C. lecture hall.

“Hey, teach is pretty handsome!”

“Why does he look familiar... ”

Tan Lingyun stared at the projected image, with eyes big as saucers and her mouth hanging open. All the cameras were focused on the Adept, a man younger and more handsome than the crowd had guessed. But that face...

No. No no no. This is wrong – all wrong! How can it be him?!

The first time she’d met him, he was lounging outside of her class like some sort of pedophile. She’d dragged him like a beaten dog right to the Director. He never fought back.

Taihua! And then there was Taihua. That blue mecha was him! It must have been! Yes! This was the only explanation, and that means that blue mecha was Thor. Zeus’ Thor. He had saved me, and so many other lives during that attack.

Then the competition with Lyr, that enigmatic and unbeatable Lei Fang? Him as well. He’d turned that desperate loss around, and she had been on his lap watching the whole thing. She thought she had him that time.

And the A.R.C. class? The mask was to make sure I didn’t find him out. No wonder they’d progressed so far in only three months.

The break-neck race through the asteroid field was also a clue. She should have figured it out months ago, she chastised herself.

Always at the last minute, Lan Jue – that etiquette teacher, the one she’d long ago labeled trash – came to the rescue. He was Zeus, the great Monarch of lightning, who just beat the strongest fighter the North could manufacture.

Him! Him! Him!

She just sat there in her chair, lost.

Tang Mi fared no better. She might have suspected something was off, but who would guess that their idol was standing right beside them the whole time? And it was all for Qianlin, from crashing the wedding to

taking a teaching position.

No wonder her friend always acted so strange when she brought it up, she thought. No wonder they seemed to get along so well whenever she saw them together! He was Zeus, always has been!

ζ

Northern Alliance. Planet Luo, Luo City. The Great Conclave Arena.

The tournament had no choice to be put on a temporary hold. The damage to the arena surpassed its own ability to heal, and would need a great deal of manpower to restore. After some consultation, the organizers announced that the day's events were finished. All tickets would be good for tomorrow's fights as well.

Titan had to be carried out. Lan Jue managed to walk off the ring, but only with the Pharmacist's help. His face was drawn and pale, but his eyes were ablaze with excitement.

I won... in the end I actually won. Man has triumphed over machine – I succeeded!

When they got back to the resting area, he collapsed in the Pharmacist's arms. He'd used up too much. No one in the audience had anything to say – witnessing such a dramatic upset was exactly what they'd come to see.

But Zeus' name, his real face, was now known to the whole of humanity.

The whole of the East was in celebration. Skyfire Avenue cheered their victory. But more than anyone, the NEU A.R.C. class was uncontrollable. Names could be repeated, but barring surgical trickery there was only face like that.

When the news spread, Wu Junyi's communicator was blowing up. Most of the callers were desperate for more information about Lan Jue. Several others were parents desperate to get their kids to sign up. Overwhelmed, he had to ask Principle Xi Renjian what to do. He was told to turn the thing off.

They'd really struck gold! Wu Junyi's self-satisfied smirk stretched from

ear to ear. He could see the future of his beloved university, lauded as one of the best in the East. Who gave a flying shit about Lyr, those assholes didn't stand a chance.

Chapter 466: Can We Not?

For those student who had gone to one of Professor Lan's few etiquette classes, they could talk about nothing else. The A.R.C. students didn't have that luxury. The Savage Goddess was already barking for them to continue their cultivation. However, they didn't mind. Watching their teacher perform so incredibly, who wouldn't want to one day become someone so widely admired?

When Lan Jue awoke, he found himself in the hotel. Things were different, though. The day had gone and evening light crept through the window. He ached all over, like he'd been flattened by a steam roller. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

He stirred beneath the covers, and was suddenly aware of something soft and warm beside him. He turned his head, and the first thing he saw was a head of thick black hair. They hung like silken strands across a pretty face.

This...

He gently lifted the hair to reveal the familiar, alluring features. But it wasn't necessary. Even without seeing, he knew near every inch of the body beside him.

He took a hard gulp. Lan Jue's whole body felt mangled, but everything seemed to be in working order. The relief also came with a slight pang of regret, however. He had the capabilities, but he still couldn't be any more intimate than right now. Otherwise, they'd just join.

He couldn't know when she had been released from within him. So long as no one saw, then that was fine.

Qianlin – as though she'd dreamt something – cuddled closer against his chest. Lan Jue responded by regarding her with warm eyes, and pulling her closer in to a gentle embrace. She even smelled spectacular. Holding her, he felt complete.

With nothing else but to wait, Lan Jue shut his eyes. He turned his intention inward to see how he was recovering.

He wasn't in terribly good shape. There were clear signs of trauma to several of his meridians. But things weren't dire, either. Those meridians were still functioning and his organs didn't appear to be affected... maybe a little displaced. None of that was irrevocable.

What he was surprised to discover was not the damage, but the benefits. Because of the demands he'd put on them, his meridians were wider than they had been to allow for more movement of energy. That was why every bit of him hurt so badly.

His Core was quietly suspended in the center of his chest, where it had always been. The energies within it were purer, and his conflict with Titan appeared to have shrunk his Core even more. An unintentional boon! If someone would have asked him yesterday, he'd have said he didn't think his core could shrink any further, but it was now four times smaller than it had been before the tournament. He could no longer see traces of the energy swirling within, making it look like an opaque gemstone. Even the shell of lightning was gone. These were all signs of continued purification, and more concentrated power.

From what he could sense, his Discipline had broken through as well. Third rank! Now he was at the border of ninth level's beginning ranks. It was still retracing his steps, but at this speed he had no complaints whatsoever.

Qianlin stirred at his side, and he looked down at her just as her eyes fluttered open. They looked at one another. Then, her eyes squeezed shut; if you didn't see it, it never happened.

A hearty laugh bubbled up from within him. He saw no reason to pretend, and yet he could feel her slowly retracting her leg from on top of his. She scooted away little by little as though she were trying to disappear in to the bed sheets. It also started to push the comforter down toward the end of the bed.

Before Lan Jue knew it, she'd completely kicked the covers off of him, leaving him naked to the air. Qianlin's eyes were still tightly shut.

"Can we not?" Lan Jue muttered helplessly.

“Where are your clothes?!” She said, her face scrunched tight.

Lan Jue blinked. That’s right! Where did all my clothes go!? Who brought me back yesterday... sis? This is no good at all!

There was a knock at the door.

Lan Jue almost jumped out of his skin. He gathered up the blankets and covered himself, then stood. Qianlin had a different idea, and lunged at him before he could go any farther. She planted her lips hard against his. There was that familiar white light, then she was gone. Now he was all alone with whatever embarrassing situation he was going to have to address.

“Are you up!” The Pharmacist shouted at him from the other side of the door, but didn’t come in. She seemed anxious to avoid awkward exchanges, too.

“I’m up!” He answered hastily. “I’m up. Sis, was it you who brought me back here yesterday?”

“Me and the Gourmet. He helped get you out of your clothes. How do you feel?” She continued their conversation with the door between them. “I took the liberty of giving you a quick exam, and things looked ok considering. Your vitality was buzzing to meet the need, so most medicines were inappropriate but I made a specialized formula. Take it and see how you feel.”

Lan Jue was out of bed and had thrown on some clothes. He finally pulled open the door and stepped out to meet his compatriot.

Today she was in an emerald green qipao. When she saw him and his disheveled appearance, she couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he assured her. “My body’s alright, just a little achy. Feels like I pushed myself too far, is all.”

The Pharmacist extended a small porcelain bowl. “This is a formula to shore-up yuan qi and fortify health. It’s especially good for recovering damage to the meridians. It’ll help you feel better.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Thanks, sis.”

“Congratulations are in order,” she said. “You made it to the semi-finals.”

He chuckled. “Thanks to no small amount of luck, don’t forget. Man, who’d have thought Titan would suddenly get so strong.”

The Pharmacist shook her head. “This has nothing to do with luck. You achieved this by virtue of your own strength. This is certainly going to earn you even more of a name than you already have. That also means that I have to remind you – your mask was broken. Everyone knows who Zeus is.”

There was nothing he could do for it. Lan Jue’s tone was grudgingly accepting. “Something given, something taken away. There’s nothing I can do about it now. Anyway I’ll be going back with the Avenue. None of my enemies would dare make a move.”

The Avenue was enjoying a wonderful position of power – a sun at its zenith. Anyone after him would have to find a way passed four Paragons.

The Pharmacist went on. “Eat something then take some medicine. You’ve improved very quickly, but now it’s time to be calm. You don’t want to rush – the best thing for you in rest.

“Mm.” Lan Jue nodded in understanding.

Chapter 467: Joint Progress

The Pharmacist eventually left, and Lan Jue could breathe again. She hadn't seen him unclothed, thankfully. Embarrassment averted, he returned to the bedroom and released Qianlin. He covered her in a blanket.

Later, when Qianlin had changed clothes, she came bounding in to the small living room where Lan Jue waited. He was feeling much better since yesterday. Though he still ached, it was much better than it had been.

"I broke through." Qianlin revealed to Lan Jue.

"Oh?" He looked at her in surprise.

Two delicate fingers popped up, and she wagged them at him. "Rank two."

A look suddenly passed his face as he thought of something. If he himself participating in the tournament benefited her, then of course it would be that much better when she fought, too! He thought back to the battle, remembering that it was largely by virtue of Qianlin's defense that he survived.

"What was that last strike you hit him with? It was strong! To me it felt like it was almost Paragon level." Qianlin noted.

He nodded. "That was a crucial moment, Titan's strength is incredible. Talk about Paragon-levels, my martial art could only deflect so much. Some of that attack had to be borne by my body. If he'd have kept it up, I would have lost. At that point there was nothing I could do about it. A Paragon would likely have to work to break through his Impenetrable Defense."

"Luckily, I figured it out. Taiji is more than just deflecting, but reversing, too. I could turn that overwhelming power back on him. I was only going to give it a try, then I saw how effective it was. I couldn't face him directly so I had to take advantage of everything I could."

"I guess you can say I won with Titan's help. His own redirected energy,

thunderbolt and lightning, and all of that behind one of the nine strikes of Taiji. It almost reached a Paragon's level of destructive force. That was the only way to get passed his defenses. And don't be mistaken, he couldn't get off the floor because he was exhausted – not because of any damage I did. I had only managed to break the shield. If anything, he might have felt a little numb. Thankfully, it looks like his sudden breakthrough had its limits.”

Lan Jue's explanation, as well as her own experiences there in the ring with him, helped her understand just how dangerous that fight had really been. However, both had learned a lot, especially about force. It was the toughest fight Lan Jue had faced yet. He'd only barely avoided being ground to dust.

Lan Jue's wrist buzzed and he lifted his communicator to see who was calling. The first thing he noticed was the number of missed calls flashing on the screen. He answered.

“Boss.” A woman's voice, clearly trying to keep her excitement quiet.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Are you feeling alright?” Another voice asked from the other line.

“I'm fine, you can relax. How are things going?” Lan Jue urged.

“Taken care of. We've placed several bets and won one hundred and eighty-seven billion dollars. That's over two hundred and seventy billion NED. Boss, we're rich! We could buy a mothership and then some. Wahahaha, we're rich!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Careful, not so loud – I know. No more bets. I need to get better.”

“Alright, I don't want to push it either. The two of us will go shopping, there's a laundry list to get through. With this much money there's no excuse for anything but the nicest toys! Hehehe!”

“No doubt!” Lan Jue added, then cut the connection.

Qianlin had looked down at her own communicator, and was staring

oddly at it.

“What is it?” Lan Jue asked.

She smirked back at him. “What else? Everyone knows who you are now. Little Mi has sent me over ten messages already trying to find out if it’s true.”

This made him chortle. “Things have a way of sorting themselves out. Revealing my identity may not be entirely bad. At least anyone thinking of causing you trouble will think twice.”

She turned her eyes back to him. “Are you still going to teach when we go back?”

He sighed. “That was my plan, but now the situation appears to have changed. At the very least I won’t be able to continue the etiquette classes. The A.R.C. classes shouldn’t be a problem since its small scale. It’s hard enough making sure these kids have a shot at being great.”

Qianlin nodded. “It would be best if you didn’t leave. Anyway, you’ve already agreed to the terms of service.”

He smiled at her. “I did! I am your bodyguard, by your side at all times – how’s that? Hell I couldn’t escape even if I wanted to, right? One thought and here I am.”

She couldn’t help but giggle. He was right, he had nowhere to run. Until they both became Paragons, each one was at the other’s beck and call.

“I’m hungry, let’s go get something to eat.” Qianlin pulled at his hand, smiling prettily.

“Alright, let’s go foraging.” Lan Jue had already changed his clothes and was ready to go.

However, they only got so far as the lobby before they had to turn back. What he had managed to do was not something many were capable of, beating the Terminator’s disciple. To people in the East he was a hero, but to Northerners he was an affront to their pride! When it came to issues of nationalism, there were few with their heads screwed on right. An old

woman even pelted him with some fruit when he dared show his face downstairs. Now he was starting to understand Hua Li's misfortunes.

Luckily he also had the benefit of listening to Hua Li complain. Using power lines to sneak away from the hotel, the first thing he did was bring Qianlin to a nearby shop and purchase a hat, facemask and sunglasses for her. Once the pair were suitably incognito, they went out for a bite to eat.

They chose a nondescript restaurant serving sea-food. He ordered them a bottle of white wine, then set about answering the messages on his communicator.

"A-Li, come get some food and hang out."

"A-Cheng, want some grub? Come and chill for a bit."

Chapter 468: Get Back Here!

Lan Jue quickly replied to his two brothers. Afterward, he stared for a moment on the next number on his list. His eyes narrowed.

Sensing something wasn't right, Qianlin looked his way. "What is it? Are you alright?"

He smirked bitterly and shook his head. He hesitated, but after a moment ultimately dialed it in.

"Doooo... dooooo" The low ring sounded twice before someone answered.

"When the tournament's over get your ass back here!" Click! One sentence and the connection was cut. Lan Jue just sat there in stunned silence for a moment. He shook just a little bit.

"Lan Jue, are you..." She swung around to stand in front of him, and took his hands in to hers. They were cold and clammy.

"It's fine. Qianlin, after the tournament would you mind coming with me somewhere?" His tones were soft and secretive.

She didn't hesitate. "Of course," she answered with a nod.

He breathed a heavy sigh. They lapsed in to silence, with Lan Jue chewing his lip as long-ago memories flooded his mind.

Is he really ok? We should go back.

Just then, Lan Jue quickly made another call.

"Yeah." The voice on the other end was low.

"He's called me back," Lan Jue said. He sounded defeated.

Silence. After a second, Lan Qing answered. "When you plan to go back give me a call. I'll go with you."

"Alright." His brother's assurances seemed to give him a little bit of backbone. He hung up, then swallowed his half glass of wine in one gulp. The cool and refreshing flavor of the beverage spread through him. He felt

like he could breathe again. Lan Jue pecked the back of Qianlin's hand with a kiss.

Hua Li and Chu Cheng arrived together. They had already been hanging out when they got Lan Jue's call, discussing the fights to come. They wandered in to the restaurant and looked around for a moment before spying their brother.

The very moment Chu Cheng saw Lan Jue's get-up he burst in to laughter. "A-Jue! Looks like you've finally had your day, eh?!"

"Gloating is hardly gentlemanly," Lan Jue muttered.

"Congratulations," Hua Li added with a smirk.

He nodded. "Truth be told, I won because of a fair amount of luck. I didn't expect him to suddenly get so strong."

This made Chu Cheng frown. "Shit, the same could be said about you! You Easterners are shameless, you know that? The Pharmacist will win her fight, then the finals will be dominated by your Alliance."

Lan Jue could only shrug. "The North took that chance when they hosted. It's not like they can stop us from participating."

Chu Cheng's face only soured further. "This is gunna be trouble. Dad's already been summoned to some meeting. I have a feeling that if the East does sweep the finals, the North and West won't leave it at that."

Lan Jue was suddenly fearful, remembering Jun'er a few blocks away. "You think they'll make a move?"

Chu Cheng grunted. "Hard to say. At the very least, you guys need to be careful. I mean, you won't have to worry until after the tournament. They won't do anything with all of humanity watching. Those of you from the Avenue are probably fine, but that may not be the case for those two unaffiliated ones. I've heard those two have already been contacted by agents from the North and West – though I don't know what they said."

"A-Cheng, I don't want you anywhere near this," Lan Jue said, suddenly serious. He didn't want his friend even remotely incriminated in

something so dangerous if it could be helped. There was, of course, the possibility of betrayal – after all, Chu Cheng was a Northerner 1.

Chu Cheng seemed to understand. “Alright, enough about that then. If anything happens I’ll make sure you all get out ok, but you should prepare. You’re already persona non grata out here. And shit, son, talk about sneaky! When did you become a peak-ranked ninth level?! You’re as strong as the big guy.”

“You scared? If it wasn’t for this tournament, I’d have kicked your ass up and down Luo City already.” Lan Jue grinned at his compatriot.

Chu Cheng snorted dismissively. “If I can’t win I won’t fight, what are you gunna do about it? Now let’s get some goddamn food, I’m dying over here. A-Li and I were about to grab some grub when you called.”

“Where’s Lina?” Lan Jue asked.

Chu Cheng shot a quick look Qianlin’s way. “That girl is cunning as all hell. She’s been stringing me along and I’m not gunna put up with that nonsense. There are always other fish in the sea. Anyway, what was up with Titan yesterday! I don’t remember him being that strong at all. No doubt luck was at play, just like you said.”

Lan Jue nodded again. “He must have done something to raise his strength quickly, before the fight. He’s about as close to Paragon as you can get, but has no real understanding of protogenia. That final step to Paragon status will not be at all easy for him. My guess is you’ll break through to Paragon before he does.”

“Is this your attempt at comfort,” Chu Cheng teased. “Don’t you worry, when you leave I’m gunna really apply myself. I can’t let you all leave me in the dust. I ran in to uncle, actually, and he taught me some of the cultivation methods he’d learned. He asked me to bring them back home and teach them to the family.” When the discussion reached the Gourmet, Chu Cheng’s eyes became red, ever so slightly.

Lan Jue felt for his brother. “He didn’t want to go back?”

Chu Cheng gave him a biter smile. “He said he couldn’t face his brother,

my dad. He's acknowledged that what happened all those years ago was a misunderstanding."

Lan Jue, moved by the situation, added, "Tell your father not to pursue it, A-Cheng. He has a whole lot on his plate, not the least of which is keeping trouble from your family. The relationship between the North and the Avenue is tricky right now."

"I know," Chu Cheng replied. "Uncle said the same thing. We met in secret, you can relax. No one knew anything."

The restaurant they'd chosen wasn't anything special, providing only traditional Northern fare; grilled fish, prawns in garlic sauce, salad and so forth. With the addition of the white wine, it was a fine meal.

They ate until the four of them had reached their limit.

Hua Li patted his stomach. "Now that you're in the finals it doesn't look like you have easy fights to look forward to. Don't let up! But on top of everything going on, you have to be extra careful since everyone knows who you are now. Now that I think of it you all can use the Gobi Entertainment ships for transport if you need to. Even the North doesn't want to upset us."

That was an understatement. Gobi Entertainment and its parent the Poseidon Group was the largest business collective in all of Alliance space. They were based in the West, but they'd grown past the borders of a single Alliance. They were everywhere. He had single-handedly crippled Reims' economy after he'd heard about their assassination attempt against Lan Jue. Not even the Pontiff was able to solve that easily. They even had enough power that they could cause the powerhouse that was the North's economy to stumble if they really went for it.

Lan Jue gave his friend a small smile. "If it comes to that then you'll hear from me. You both can relax, I've got it all figured out. Skyfire Avenue isn't an organization they can easily push around."

Hua Li nodded. "Good."

Lan Jue stretched. "It's getting late, I think I'm going to call it and head

back. I have work to do for tomorrow.”

Hua Li smiled. “You’ve really put the pressure on A-Cheng and I, after advancing so quickly. At least it compels us to want to catch up!”

“Then we’re all gunna be working hard,” Lan Jue urged. “One day we’ll all be Paragons, then we’ll really be the Four Divine Monarchs.

Hua Li and Chu Cheng exchanged a glance. In one voice, they answered. “Looking forward to it!”

Before long he and Qianlin were back at the hotel. He took up the Pharmacist’s medicine, then they set about cultivating their abilities. Part of the reason he’d wanted to go out and eat instead of stay in and work all day, was to relax. Too much pressure inhibited a person’s recovery time.

Lan Jue uncorked the china bottle the Pharmacist’s had given him, and it immediately filled the room with the distinct aroma of medicine. He poured its contents out in to his palm; a single pill.

It was a dark, verdant green, about the size of a lychee fruit. Strangely, it glowed with a light that radiated out from within it.

When he popped it in to his mouth, the sizeable pill immediately dissolved and slid down his throat. The bitter, acrid flavor slithered down in to his belly. Soon, however, the unpleasant flavor was replaced with a mellow, sweet aftertaste.

The warm and relaxing feeling spread out from his stomach like he was sitting in a bubbling hot tub. His damaged meridians were quickly relieved, and those that had expanded from use were fortified. After only a short time, he could sense a sort of glossy sheen covering his energy pathways.

He didn’t need to ask. He knew it must have been some benefit from the Pharmacist’s decoction. Although he didn’t know what this medicine was, it was easy to guess its worth by how quickly it started to work 2. In the end it did just what the Pharmacist said it would do; support, not improve.

Chapter 469: Ascension

Lan Jue understood. This was the Pharmacist's way of helping, by letting him pick himself up. Quickly shooting up a few ranks could be done, but that wasn't the point of re-cultivating. It was the journey, and the insights you gain walking a familiar path a second time. You came to know your power and stood on sturdier footing. Your energy was purified by it. So Lan Jue would pick himself up, and take no short cuts.

With the aid of his friend's medicines, he slipped in to a peaceful and meditative state. The precious pill was miraculous in returning his body to health. More importantly, his meridians were tonified, nourishing them for the cultivation ahead.

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Two figures faced one another in a dark room, no trace of light to be seen.

"You face the Pharmacist tomorrow." The one speaking was surrounded by a dripping purple aura, which scattered the darkness. It was the Fallen Angel – Lucifer, second only to Satan.

"Yes." Jiang Yuan, the Dark Citadel's Necromancer, sat across from him.

"You are the last hope of your Alliance, and the last hope of your Citadel. Work a miracle." There was a dark and fanatic light in the dark Angel's eyes.

In Jiang Yuan's, there was a caustic gloom. "Yes... the final miracle."

ζ

Miracle!

It was a word rarely used, not since the God-Rank battles on DreamNet when the Star Alliance and the Four Divine Monarchs fought. This last miracle had been witnessed by everyone, right on their projector screens.

They were calling it the Miracle Melee. Titan's shield would give a Titan pause, but Lan Jue busted through. The image of Zeus' crumbling mask

was plastered everywhere. Lan Jue's drawn, pale face was revealed to the world.

He had been respected for his poise. There was no wild cheering or flagrant displays of celebration from the Monarch. Only confidence. The audience was amazed, how could a single Adept's power be so terrifying?

When the analytics were released, it was revealed that Zeus' final attack could only be compared by measure of battleships. A blast from the main cannon wouldn't do what the Monarch's final strike had achieved, to say nothing of hardware like a mech – assuming it wasn't piloted by a strong Adept, of course.

Now everyone knew what kind of power they were witnessing. This was the next generation of Paragons, battling for supremacy!

Zeus' name had been elevated.

The God-rank battles were mentioned again, this time in comparing the metrics from that fight to the last one. There was also in-depth digging in to his actions as the once-mercenary king. His name was on everybody's lips, and electricity was the new fad. Almost overnight, Zeus was everyone's focus.

Lan Jue was completely unaware of it all, he'd spent the night in cultivation. He split his focus between healing and meditating on what he'd learned. Every day was a struggle that brought new revelations, a step on the path to understanding.

Although he didn't know how far things had gone, Lan Jue was still wise enough not to leave without his disguise. It was lucky he did, otherwise he'd have been swarmed in an instant.

When he got back to the Great Conclave Arena, he couldn't help but admire the efficiency and ingenuity of the North. It had taken them only an afternoon to completely repair the damage to the battlefield. At least on the surface, it looked good as new.

By the time he arrived, the stands were already packed with spectators. When they spotted Lan Jue, the crowd erupted in to a noisy din.

If this was the East, then he would be greeted with cheers and cries of admiration. This was not the East. Here, he had besmirched the name of the Northern delegate, and snatched victory from their home court. His name was well known in the North, now, but that didn't mean it was held in high esteem. He was practically an enemy of the state.

He got no respite from the eyes of participants, either. They followed him from the shade of the waiting area. One of them was Titan, and in fact all three of the other losing fighters from his team were present. At least Qi Mu wasn't glaring at him with the same loathing he had before.

Bing Yu made up for it, with eyes even colder than the day she'd lost. Clearly she still believed he'd shown her tremendous disrespect.

Jun Yongye and Xianyuan Shishi also looked his way. When Jun Yongye caught his eye, the blademaster gave him a knowing nod. Shishi smiled warmly and gave a friendly wave. It was like there was no concern at all that they would be future competitors.

Lan Jue took his seat. "Thank you, sis," he said to the Pharmacist beside him.

She smiled back. "You call me sister, and you act like a father to my little girl. What are you doing thanking me?" She never explained what the medicine she'd given him was for. He didn't ask. But whatever it was, the act had brought them closer.

The Terminator sat at the place of honor upon the VIP platform. His expression was stony, and no one could guess at how he was reacting to the tournament. Mo Xiao was beside him, with a professional smile and a polite demeanor.

"Your Majesty," she said, "Yesterday we had to postpone the final fight of the quarter-finals for what many are now calling the Miracle Melee. Analysts are now saying that Zeus may win it all. What do you think? Is this just luck?" She was very much like a reporter following a lead.

The Terminator's answer was delivered evenly. "Luck is a kind of power, but I don't think that's what brought him to the semi-finals. The answer is information. There's more to Zeus than we knew, and he's a much more

complicated Adept than people expected. In that last fight, if he'd held back even a little than Titan might have won. I hope he has a chance to test himself against this young man again one day, and that Titan will emerge victorious."

It was a fair and accurate analysis of his discipline, and a fine display of the Paragon's character.

Mo Xiao returned her attention to the camera. "Yesterday we witnessed a miracle, but who knows what today has in store. In just a moment, we'll begin with the final fight of Group One. Although neither of these fighters will be advancing to the next round, it's still a chance for them to test their mettle."

Indeed, they hadn't been able to complete even the first group fights yesterday. Qi Mu and Bing Yu still had to trade blows. Altogether there would be seven contests, but Mo Xiao's tone said that only one had a chance at being a stunner; The Necromancer Jiang Yuan, versus the Pharmacist. They would battle for the final spot in the semi-finals. Jiang Yuan carried the hopes of two Alliances on his shoulders.

The fight between Qi Mu and Bing Yu went as expected. Bing Yu was too weak in Discipline to put the full advantages of absolute zero temperatures to work for her. Qi Mu never gave her a chance, and quickly won after changing in to his second metamorphosis. In the end, neither looked like their hearts were in it. They knew they had lost the tournament already.

Now that the first fight was out of the way, the crowd started to perk up. Next was the Pharmacist and Jiang Yuan! Now they would see if the West could sneak in to the final four, of whether the East would sweep it.

Lan Jue turned to the Pharmacist, and called to her in a low voice. "Sis. Be careful how you deal with him. I can't shake the feeling that Jiang Yuan's been hiding something. There was something unusual about that summoning. Don't overestimate him."

The Pharmacist nodded. "I'll be careful. He never seemed like a straightforward case. But I'm afraid he doesn't know, that I know all about

him already.” Her words put him at ease. The Pharmacist rose and made for the ring.

Jiang Yuan walked toward the other end. Today he was clad in a robe which was black on the outside and purple inside, which made him look even more like a dark sorcerer. The necromancer was hidden beneath a strange aura that drank in the light and obscured his face from view.

He walked to the ring, not too fast and not too slow. Each step saw his aura dim and thicken.

But Lan Jue wasn’t worried, after what the Pharmacist had told him. Although he had no idea what Jiang Yuan was hiding, she seemed to. There would not be any problems. He was strong, but who could stand up to the full power of this incredible woman?

With the Pharmacist and her knowledge, it was like a sea of stars at his fingertips.

The two fighters faced each other from across the field. The thousands of spectators were silent, holding their breath. Every eye was on the screens before them. They had high expectations.

Tickets for the semi-finals were already astronomical. Everything so far had gone off without a hitch. There was no need for them to advertise or sell more tickets at all – they were already rolling in profits. By now, those tickets that people could find were already five times more than sale price.

Chapter 470: Jiang Yuan's Secret

Hordes of the rich and powerful tore across the border or the Northern Alliance, racing for Luo City. Then trend now was to use tickets for the semi-finals as negotiating tools in business exchanges. This was to say nothing of seats for the finals. The end of the tournament was near, with just the semi-finals, the finals, and the Championship Battle remaining. Even the average citizen knew that they were watching future masters of protogenia. Being able to witness this with one's own eyes was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to be treasured.

The Pharmacist was clad in a moon-white qipao, whose simple elegance was interrupted by an elaborate peony flower that had been etched upon it. Swaths of red, yellow and pink stretched across her figure and made her especially alluring. She certainly stood out, and in fact had been voted the most attractive competitor in the tournament by its authoritative body. While she was not as physically attractive as Yan Ningya, she was greatly superior in bearing, willpower, strength and nearly every other category. From the beginning, she'd been the center of a lot of attention.

She stood with her delicate hands folded before her abdomen, regarding her opponent calmly. Jiang Yuan stood at the far end, spewing an aura of caustic black power. His eyes were cold and dead. He was hardly visible beneath the cloak of shadow.

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

The most anticipated fight of the semi-finals was underway. Most people expected the Pharmacist to win – Northerners included – but everyone was hoping first and foremost for entertainment. They all dreamt of another dramatic, miraculous upset. Jiang Yuan's earlier performance gave them fuel for speculation, like what was that beast he'd summoned? How strong was he really? His mystery was a sort of strength.

In a break from normal tactics, Jiang Yuan did not immediately begin casting his poison curses when the fight began. Instead, a guttural and uncomfortable chant rattled from his throat. The resonating notes birthed

an area of black beneath Jiang Yuan's feet. Each syllable spread it further out in all directions.

The Pharmacist sniffed. From her back, a beam of cyan light burst in to the air. It rose drastically then swelled, forming the shape of an enormous sword suspended in the heavens. Seven resplendent orbs of light twinkle along its length. She adapted her strategy as well, and instead of lashing out with the force of a thunderbolt, the weapon instead hung unmoving over the top of her head. An instant and shuddering sensation of sharpness swept through the ring. And yet, the black aura around the necromancer scattered the deadly gusts, like he was hardly present in this reality at all.

However, it was visible that – when their powers collided – the Pharmacist's was more explosive. Jiang Yuan felt almost powerless, though he didn't let any of that show. He instead took a brazen step forward to meet the aura. He extended his gnarled finger, and a silver light shot outward.

It started as a single point of light, but quickly grew to the diameter of a silver coin. It bulged larger, until lines of fresh blood could be made out upon its glittering surface. An uncomfortable and dangerous sensation preceded it.

The light power congealed in the air, first a mist of silver and red but quickly fusing in to the figure of a demonic beast. It flailed, hellish maw wide and ready to swallow the Pharmacist's weapon. The sharp aura it passed through was dispersed like it had never existed at all, and the aura of black at Jiang Yuan's feet began to rapidly spread.

This...

Lan Jue couldn't shake the inkling that this power was familiar. It was a faint memory, somewhere in the back of his mind.

"Hmph!" The sound came from beside him. Lan Jue turned his head to spy the Pontiff's High Inquisitor standing nearby. He glared at the field with a dark and accusatory look.

Now he put the pieces together. Seeing Constantine's reaction

immediately brought to mind the incredulous looks of the Dark Citadel when they'd come for their 'friendly' exchange with the Avenue. They'd dispatched someone who'd used this same power, or something close to it.

Judas? Was this one of the descendants of that man who'd betrayed the founder of their faith? Now, the bloodline seemed as malefic as it ever had been. He was stunned to discover that the inky shadow from before had been this man, Jiang Yuan. And yet, from what he could recall that Judas didn't fight at all like Jiang Yuan, but was a close-combat fighter! He had been a peak-ranked Adept.

And didn't they battle one another in the Avenue, too? It ultimately had been interrupted by an incensed Satan. This was Jiang Yuan's ultimate secret, that he was holding himself back, and was in fact the future successor of the Dark Citadel. The Pharmacist knew it all along.

It appeared that Judas' true specialty was the power of betrayal, his birthright. It meant he was good in close and far away. What looked like a straight-forward fight suddenly got a lot more complicated.

The blood-beast the necromancer had summoned was bearing down on the Pharmacist's Seven-Star sword. She sniffed again, "Thunder in the Realm of the Big Dipper!"

A burst of light exploded from the sword, so powerful it threatened to destroy the shields again. Clouds gathered over the center of the arena – but not normal clouds. They were purple, and laden with a strange energy. Jiang Yuan's dark creation paused.

Just then, a purple orb descended from on high. It passed through the shield like they were made of paper, and merged with the floating sword. The weapon answered by growing even larger. Bolts of purple lightning lashed out suddenly, striking the demon.

The dark vision dissipated in to a cloud of blood, and vanished. The silver coin that had seen its creation was struck away, flying toward Jiang Yuan. The necromancer himself had not moved, but swayed slightly back and forth. After a moment, he too vanished from sight.

Lan Jue was immersed in the action. As a lightning user himself, he

recognize the Pharmacist's lightning as yang-type. And it was a pure, natural form of lightning. It contained levels of pure elemental power that his own lightning lacked.

Was this... the Dharma of Heavenly Lightning? Designed to smite the evil things a monk passed on his path. Meanwhile, the Pharmacist's sword was swiping dangerously. The aura of power around it flared, and then one became seven. Seven enormous swords came tearing through the air, descending so fast they were little more than beams of light. They arcs around and buries themselves in the alloy floor surrounding the Pharmacist. She was now surrounded by the cyan-purple light, and as if their own volition that beams exploded out every which way.

The radiating power clashed with the encroaching black filth. It receded in the face of the Pharmacist's holy corona, like ice beside a flame. Clearly, the Pharmacist's own abilities were well equipped to counter the necromancer's, and the whole thing seemed pretty one-sided. But, where did he go?

Their answer was delivered in the form of a booming, devilish sermon that rag through the whole arena. A series of roars came from where Jiang Yuan had been standing. The floor was painted with an enormous, glowing hexagram. While the dark aura surrounding it was pressed back by the Pharmacist's Heavenly Lightning, the hexagram itself appeared impervious.

A hint of shock passed across the Pharmacist's face, but it lasted no more than a second before she was ready to react. With a cold and belittling laugh, she pointed a slender arm toward the far end of the arena. Her swords wrenched themselves free of the ground, and raced for their new target.

Another roar shook the ring's foundations. The hexagram suddenly surged, expanding until it covered the whole floor. The frighteningly familiar sight of the evil vortex was again revealed to the audience. A massive skull started to heave itself out of the hellish dimension that had been opened.

The Pharmacist's weapon's retreated back to her location. Their flickering power swirled around her like a column of protective light. It lifted her high above the collapsing arena floor. She stood suspended near the apex of the upper shield.

Everyone watched as the great skull of the demon-beast, Yaduobaha, joined the fray! They were treated to a good, nightmare-inducing look. It was only bone, with no hair or skin, and teeth as large as broadswords. A toxic green fire blazed where its eyes should have been. Its great maw spread wide, and it reared skyward to try and swallow the Pharmacist up.

She could feel crushing waves of fear rushing out from that darkness, pushing the beast toward her like a tempest of fear. Her Dharma didn't appear to slow it down at all.

The swords around her glowed even brighter, and she rose ever higher – but the shield was just overhead. If she left, it would count as a forfeit. Her swords answered the call, falling down toward the beast. The dissolves until they became seven glimmering points, falling in the shape of the Big Dipper. They landed upon the great skull, becoming drilling flares of light that melded in to the monstrous head. A bone-shaking explosion followed moments later.

But, with the Pharmacist occupied, she did not appear to see the dark figure silently creeping up behind her – Jiang Yuan!

His figure seemed larger and, arms folded across his chest, he seemed to float quickly through the air toward his unsuspecting victim. The beast below shook off the great blast that had stunned it, and began to rise for another try. There wasn't a single mark on it, like that seven-star attack hadn't done anything at all.

Chapter 471: Punish and Extinguish Evil, Nine Heavenly Rays!

The Pharmacist found herself in the midst of a crisis. Now she had to face two enemies instead of one. If she went after Jiang Yuan, that would leave Yaduobaha to swallow her up. That wouldn't be a matter of winning or losing – she'd lose her life! Back in the waiting area Lan Jue had jumped to his feet. He had to hold himself back from rushing to her aid. However, his fears were unwarranted. For the briefest moment he caught sight of the Pharmacist's expression. She glowered with a dark and unforgiving look – like they were both beneath contempt. He no longer felt the urge to run in. She had this under control.

Her body became illusory, like a spirit. Jiang Yuan rushed at her, but seemed to pass right through her ghostly form. When he turned around, he saw the Pharmacist blazing brighter than the surface of the sun.

She opened her pretty mouth and released a ray of searing white light. It spread wide before her. Below, the monstrous beast roared as the Pharmacist's seven swords became clearer.

The light changed direction and raced toward the vortex where the floor had been. In its trek, the light condensed and grew larger until it took on the form of another massive broadsword over a hundred meters long. Once fully formed, it simply hung there in the air. But while it did not move, Yaduobaha seemed similar pinned in place. If it rose, that sword would be there to meet it.

Rays of incandescent light poured from the Pharmacist. She took seven steps forward, and with each was released a burst of light. The purple mist from earlier revealed itself again, thicker than before though it was hard to tell by how much.

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Eyes near the VIP platform suddenly shot toward the Terminator, who had gasped in spite of himself. He could feel it, the power raging from the

ring – strong enough to even make him shudder.

How could this be?!

He watched with steely eyes for any information he could glean from the ring.

“Punish and Extinguish evil... the Nine Heavenly Rays!”

At the Pharmacist’s harsh command, four thousand nine hundred and thirty six separate bolts of purplish lightning. They blasted down, but not at Yaduobaha. They hit that hovering sword, again and again, over and over.

An aura of electric energy buzzed around the weapon, and then a sudden release of energy burst out of it like a supernova.

Her face was starting to look drawn. Another aura of white power began to press out from within her. Jiang Yuan lunged forward to take advantage, but couldn’t approach. The dark aura around him scattered like darkness before the sun. Jiang Yuan turned and fled from her as fast as he could.

“Annihilate.” The Pharmacist commanded heartlessly.

The word rang through the air, and on cue the towering sword fell to the ground. Thump! The sword passed through the grey bone of the monster as though it were paper. With a ranging screech and a shrill yell, the sword and demon dragon were pinned to the vortex. The swirling darkness was changed before their eyes, infected with the white light of the Pharmacist’s spectral weapon. Soon the whole thing was a radiant white.

The beast’s screeches were deafening, and yet the crowds could still hear it, raging in the back of their mind. “Noooo—!”

Cracks appeared, slithering out from where the sword had pierced through the dragon’s bony head. Powerful light fought from between the silk-thin fractures, until...

Boom—!

Every trace of evil scattered, fleeing every which way in attempts to flee

the purifying light. The beast turned to ash, then singular motes – then nothing.

Every member of the audience gasped, finally able to breathe. They'd been so nervous they'd forgotten.

Jiang Yuan was pressed against the far side of the arena, as close to the shield as he could press himself. He could no longer hide beneath that cloak of shadows, or anything in fact. His clothes had been seared to ash and fell away, revealing his rail-thin and bony figure.

His pale face looked worse than normal, and an indescribable fear shined in his eyes. He looked like he had been faced with the stuff of his darkest nightmares. His arms shot up in silent capitulation, too scared to even answer. He looked at the Pharmacist like she was some sort of monster.

Too frightening... really too much. He'd only felt the residual power of her sword, but even that shook him to the bone. He felt like her intent alone could turn him in to nothing but a memory. His ninth level ninth rank Discipline was useless. He didn't know exactly how strong that sword strike had been, but it couldn't have been anything less than Paragon-level. It wasn't even protogenia... it could cut through that too!

Even the memory of that terrifying sensation was irrevocably seared into Jiang Yuan's heart. He had no spirit of resistance left.

Several people in the waiting area were on their feet. The Great Malefic Wurm had been destroyed, completely and utterly. Members of the audience were also standing, most notably the Gourmet and the Terminator.

Even the Gourmet was absolutely floored by how strong the Pharmacist had shown. Much stronger than he could have known. And that sword... he didn't even know the full scope. She wasn't even a Paragon yet!

The Terminator was quiet, and his face was crestfallen. He seemed lost in thought. Jun Yongye and Xianyuan Shishi had – at some point – fought to the front of the crowd to watch. They looked excited.

How could this be? What was all of this? Who could have imagined they would see this with their own eyes. The Pharmacist was much stronger than any Adept they'd have ever seen. Jun Yongye and Xiyuan Shishi's simplistic mastery, the Pharmacist's oppressive swordsmanship, and Lan Jue's surprise rise – the championship was still up for grabs. Except, now they saw what the Pharmacist was truly capable of.

Constantine was actually trembling, ever so slightly. It was childish for him to think he could contend with the Pharmacist. Now he understood how little ninth level ninth rank actually stood for.

The Pharmacist's weapon dissolved away and became a beam of light that returned to her. It melded in to her body and vanished without a trace. She descended on to the surface of the ring, light as a feather. Delicate footsteps took her from the battlefield. From where the spectators sat, she looked like she was just finishing up a relaxing stroll. She wandered over to Lan Jue and smiled. "Why are you standing? Sit!"

"Uh... oh. Right!" He gulped and flopped on to the sofa.

The whole arena was a roar of cheers or groans. Wild cries howled from thousands of throats. Then, of course, there were those who felt more resentment for the outcome.

The beautiful woman triumphs over the dark wizard. It was a storybook ending that was definitely a crowd-pleaser. She was a bright point of pure light – the extinguisher of evil spirits! This had been the most stupendous display of ability since the start of the tournament. She'd left an indelible impression.

"You... you are..." Two shadows hung over the Pharmacist. The White Blademaster had finally given up his impassive façade and faced the Avenue denizen with clear excitement on his face. Xuanyuan Shishi was like everyone's favorite uncle, and smiled goofily as he reached out to shake her hand.

She lifted her finger and placed it upon the radial artery on his wrist. Shishi gasped, and drew his hand back like he'd been shocked.

"We'll talk later." The Pharmacist promised calmly.

“Y-yes... yes, later.” Xuanyuan Shishi almost looked pained, but still answered quickly.

Jun Yongye was back to his impassive self. He stepped back a couple of paces and nodded respectfully to the woman. He motioned for Xuanyuan Shishi to follow, then they both returned to their respective seats. The whole way back, Xuanyuan Shishi looked over his shoulder.

Lan Jue swallowed. “Sis... that was something else.”

She smiled. “Not really. It’s all in the weapon.”

Lan Jue nodded, but added nothing. He knew that the sword she’d used at the end was different than the others. It was her true weapon. Her Discipline allowed for the Big Dipper skills, but the sword was something separate. It must have been her Astrum, and what’s more it seemed to contain the power of a Paragon already. But she was not a Paragon!

Chapter 472: The Sword-Spirit Fairy

Lan Jue had encountered Astrum before, with the Wine Master's scepter first to come to mind. But this white sword of hers was different, like it belonged on a whole other level. Could it be a relic, passed down from the ancient days?

If that were true and this sword once belonged to Celestial Master Qian, then it was the faintest glimpse of the power he had wielded. His own master might one day be so strong. Hell, in truth Lan Jue didn't even know what his master's Astrum was. All the power he'd witnessed had come only from the old man's fists.

Like going from a steak to chicken soup, the remaining fights all seemed bland and uninteresting. The two swordsmen did what they were expected to do, and swept their final matches.

At last, the final four were official revealed; Group One, Zeus the God of Lightning; Group Two, the Pharmacist, who some were now calling the Harbinger Fairy ; Group Three, the White Blademaster Jun Yongye; and Group Four, Ten Thousand Swords as One, Xianyuan Shishi.

The crowd had chosen a new moniker for the powerful Pharmacist. Sword-Spirit Fairy, a name they'd chosen after witnessing her harrowing command of the sword – 'Annihilate', and it had! The Pharmacist seemed well pleased with their choice.

By night the evening news casts scrolled through highlights. Now everyone could see that the East had swept the tournament. Once again, the East was the center of everyone's attention. This was especially true for Skyfire Avenue.

The Pharmacist was the only remaining competitor of the Avenue's four entrants. But was that not enough? Then, the other three were Easterners as well. In a few shorts rounds, the East went from underdog to dominating force.

"We need a meeting!" This was the frantic message sent to the Avenue delegates through their communicators.

Intercontinental Hotel. A meeting room.

Several people were seating around the circular conference table. The room had sunk in to an uncomfortable silence. The accountant glowered at its polished surface.

His depression was warranted. Not only had his determinations for the Pharmacist and Lan Jue been wrong, he'd also lost his bet. Jun Yongye had actually given up his final fight against the Driver, making his record 2-1. It was still considered a loss for the Accountant, though.

Aside from the pouting Adept, all other eyes were fixed upon the Pharmacist. Lan Jue had made his impression, but a day later that was already old news. The Pharmacist's display was not only fresh in their minds, but was a far more terrifying display of strength. No one expected her to do what she'd done, but they'd all seen it with their own eyes.

The Gourmet looked at her with a serious expression on his face. "Why not take that step?"

The Pharmacist laughed. "Some things can't be rushed. If I haven't accumulated enough then it won't happen, and I'll never get there."

The Gourmet sighed. "You need you on the same level." It was a phrase that, although the two were being candid, was not lost on the others gathered. The Pharmacist was strong enough to be a Paragon, so why wasn't she?

"You can never forget the truths you learn of protogenia. My power comes from my Discipline's ability to destroy protogenic manifestations, and that means I need to understand it clearer than anyone. One day it will happen, but at least not now."

The Gourmet smiled ever so slightly. "Whatever the case, congratulations. The Avenue won't ask what you can do, we're just happy that you're a part of our family. But, from what we've seen today we would be remise not to offer you a seat on the Council.

The Barber jumped to his feet. "That's right. Fame follows merit! I'd gladly give up my Councilor position to her. Watching how everyone has

performed brings me great pleasure, but also great shame. I'll perform my penance when we get back home." This wasn't sadness talking. He already knew how strong Lan Jue was from long before, though he wasn't aware to what degree. Zeus' strength and the Pharmacist's incredible showing had inspired him.

The Pharmacist, though, gently shook her head. "There's no need. I have no interest in becoming a Councilor. I prefer calm and quiet. If you need me specifically, then you can send the Jewelry Master to let me know – I won't refuse."

Lan Jue blinked. She was both refusing personal advancement and supporting him instead. But now everyone was falling silent. The Gourmet's next words would be important.

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The Great Adept Tournament had citizens across their entire neck of the galaxy buzzing with excitement. The Adept world was especially thrilled with the appearance of these incredible Talents.

Of course, the East – having swept the semi-finals – was the big winner. Since yesterday they had received over three thousand applications to join. All of them were Adepts. Apparently the Avenue's strong showing had inspired a sense of cohesion and patriotism in the Easterners. The Avenue helped push it along by releasing some information about its five leading Paragons. Excluding the Clairvoyant, of course.

The two newest additions, especially, served to lift the Avenue up. Their ascension had stirred the motivations of middle-and high-grade Adepts alike. Clearly, the Avenue was a place that was quite good at making Paragons.

But there were detractions too. Here on Luo, the excitement surrounding the semi-finals was different somehow. Everything was calm on the surface, but was that how people really felt?

Lan Jue was sunk in his sofa, staring in to the middle-distance with his brows screwed up tight. He was thinking of something. Little by little, a grin crept on to his face.

“I can’t get ahold of Chu Cheng. What are you smirking about?” Qianlin asked, looking at him strangely.

Lan Jue had been trying to reach his fellow Monarch all day.

He smiled. “Am I not allowed to smile? ‘Flake-tastic’ is another name we have for that bastard. He’s the representative of his family, and that means when it comes down to it he has to stand beside his bloodline. However, whether it’s his decision or not, if he has to break off his relationship with me then he’ll let me know himself. But at the very least we won’t see any significant changes until after the tournament. The relationship between the Three Alliances is improving, and with it the relationships between all the Adept organizations. In the end, the basic premise never changes; humanity’s future is paramount. Right now, though, outsiders will watch us with covetous eyes. The North especially will do what they can to keep us down, but not until the games are done.”

Qianlin watched him with a calm smile, the nervousness that had been clawing at her gone. She moved to his side, and said “Should I ask dad to send the army in to help us leave?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “No. If there’s a chance we could get out of here safely, why risk a confrontation with the North? Anyway, I’m anxious for the fight with Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi – I want to see if my theory is right. I’ve gained a lot through this whole experience, that’s the most important thing. We should also keep an ear out for any new information about the alien aggressors, like how strong they really are. This is important, for every human alive.”

Qianlin nodded her head in agreement. “Wherever you go, I’m going to. We’ll fight them shoulder to shoulder.”

He smiled at her. “You know, I saw a particularly choice bottle of alcohol while making my way to the meeting. I’ve earned some money, so what would you say to a little drink?”

“Alright!” Qianlin said with a beaming grin. “I don’t really like to drink, though...”

“No problem,” he assured her. “You’ll definitely like this stuff. It’s

famous for being popular with women.”

“Oh, really?” She asked.

Lan Jue nodded in affirmation. “Let’s go – today it’s just us.”

The two of them bundled up in their urban camouflage of hat, glasses and mask, then left their room. The hotel’s bar was on the second floor, at the end of a winding corridor. Like most bars, its lighting had been brought down to a comfortable twilight. Each table had an elegant candle burning in its center. Very atmospheric.

Every time Lan Jue visited a fine hotel, he made a point of looking over their bar. There were always surprises in places like this.

“I’m very sorry, sir. That bottle isn’t for sale. It’s decoration, a treasure of the owner.” One of the waitresses was apologetically answering Lan Jue.

He smiled at her. “No problem, kindly call over the manager. I’ll talk it over with them, is that alright?”

“Of course sir, please wait,” she answered. Places like this were famous for their high-quality service. They did everything in their power to make customers happy.

Before long, a man appeared in a tight, straight suit. He greeted them both with a smile. “You’ve certainly got taste, sir,” he began.

Chapter 473: The Sweetest Wine in the Universe

Lan Jue mirrored the man's smile. "You mean my luck! I would not have guessed I'd see a 1990 Rieussec here. I have to admit I'm desperate to try some. If you're willing to sell it to me, we'll open it up right here – we won't take it anywhere."

True aficionados of wine, even merchants, understood. If you had to give up a wine, then the next best thing was to watch it being enjoyed. This would also ensure it wasn't wasted by the uneducated.

The manager was one such person, and the moment he heard Lan Jue's assurances then his face softened. He looked much less defensive.

"I can see you're a genuine connoisseur, good sir. Regrettably, this particular vintage is quite painful to part with." He paired the words with an apologetic smile.

It was Lan Jue's turn to adopt a pitiful look. "I hate to cause you trouble, but I'm determined. Tell me what you want and we can discuss a price that works."

This made the manager think for a moment. "I'd have to ask the owner. If you'd wait for a little while..."

Qianlin stood quietly by Lan Jue's side as they spoke. She was stunned at how difficult the process was just to get a bottle of wine! She could see it behind the glass of an ornate cabinet behind the counter. It was quite small – maybe only three hundred and seventy-five milliliters – filled with a golden liquid like the color of honey. It looked particularly attractive.

When the manager reemerged from his office, about fifteen minutes had passed. He returned with another man who was quite tall. The newcomer looked as though he were perhaps in his fifties, with a suit even more straight and starched than the manager's. His collar was smartly pinned, and a Windsor knot fixed his tie to his neck. A pocket square with white embroidery was an accent. Altogether he appeared very gentlemanly.

He walked over to Lan Jue with a pleasant smile. “Ah, so this is the newest one to be smitten by my bottle of gold.”

He meant, of course, the wine, using an old name it was referred to in the old days. It was truly a precious vintage.

“It’s a special day for me,” Lan Jue began. “I was hoping to leave an impression with a very fine wine. I would be very grateful for your help. I would also be remiss not to share your precious bottle with you.”

The middle-aged man smiled in response. “If I might be so bold as to ask, what is so important about today? And, if I could see your face... I’d very much like to know who it is who shares my interest in this wine.”

Lan Jue grumbled, then leaned in close to whisper something to the man. He then stepped back, and picked off the items covering his face.

A waiter standing nearby gasped in surprise when he saw who it was, but the older man shot him a silencing look before he could say anything. He then swung his eyes back to Lan Jue. “As a Northerner, I really shouldn’t grant this request. You’re single-handedly responsible for kicking our greatest hope out of the tournament.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “For that I can only express my apologies.” He’d revealed himself to the man out of respect – and out of respect for the wine.

The man burst in to jovial laughter. “No, no – let me finish. I shouldn’t, but I also come from noble lineage. I should certainly do as you request, since I’m likely talking to a future Paragon. Perhaps we can build a friendship over a fine bottle.”

In the end the owner was a businessman. He managed one of the greatest hotel chains in the universe, and having a Paragon patron would provide stupendous benefits.

“The Intercontinental has enjoyed by business for quite a long time,” Lan Jue answered with a smile. “The rooms are wonderful, and you all have a great attention to detail. Even the starched sheets are perfect.”

The praise lit up the man’s face. “You are a man of impeccable class, I

can tell. More and more it appears my bottle has found a new owner.”

The owner plucked a key from his coat pocket before turning away and walking to that ornate cabinet. Almost ceremoniously, he opened the lock and pulled out his prized wine. The bottle itself didn't appear all that special – just a small bottle – but the cabinet it was stored in betrayed its worth. It was not just for show, but was very carefully climate controlled. Faint tendrils of condensation rose off of it as he pulled the bottle from its chilly home.

The owner led them personally to a table near the window. After motioning for them to sit, he produced a corkscrew from another pocket and opened Lan Jue's new purchase. He placed it on the table, and spread his hands as though to say, 'enjoy.'

Lan Jue smiled. “Aren't you going to have some with us?”

The owner shook his head. “I imagine this is a time you'd like to spend together, just the two of you.”

Lan Jue didn't argue. He offered a thankful nod instead. The owner then left them to their drinks.

Qianlin, appearing a little anxious, looked around at their surroundings. She feared someone might recognize Lan Jue and cause unnecessary trouble. She didn't want some stranger to destroy one of the few quiet moments they got together. Of course, cultivation didn't count.

Lan Jue reached across the table and took up the bottle. He poured the contents in to the glasses, and immediately a sweet and fragrant aroma swirled between them. The refreshing scent filled them with a sense of rejuvenation.

“This is quite a rare treat. Chateau D'Yquem, giving a name in ancient China to evoke the memory image of liquid gold. It's a French wine, from the Left Bank of the Bordeaux region. It's among the best there was, even more of a prize than a Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte. We are about to enjoy one of the best white wines ever produced. Really, only the German vintages by Egon Muller are better. Ready for a sip?”

Zhou Qianlin nodded, then took up the glass and gently brought it up to her nose. She was quickly surprised to find that she could no longer smell the sweetness from before. Now it was replaced by a heady grape scent that was very refreshing. Like the scent of spring, or of a young woman.

She took a sip, and the fine liquor slipped passed her lips like honey. That sweetness returned as the wine sloshed around her tongue, and for a moment Qianlin thought she could taste all the beautiful things in the world within it. A relaxing sensation spread out from within her. It was difficult to describe.

“This is a class of wine called ‘pouerriture noble’ – noble rot. All of the best white wines fall in to this category. If Champaign is the alcohol of choice for a good time, then this is what you open for a relaxing, sweet affair.” Lan Jue then took a sip of his own, and punctuated it with a heartfelt sigh of appreciation.

Qianlin was not one to often partake in alcohol, but this liquid gold was something else. It was like all the best things in the universe had been shoved in to a tiny bottle.

Lan Jue smiled at her. “Do you know what I said to the owner to convince us to let us have the bottle?”

“It wasn’t because of who you are?” She asked.

He shook his head. “Those types of people are quite stubborn. Anyway, he only learned who I was later. The only way to get what I wanted, was to make a good impression.”

Qianlin was curious. “So what did you say to him?”

Lan Jue laughed, and looked deeply in to her dazzling blue eyes. “I told him I wanted the sweetest thing in the universe to woo the sweetest girl I know. I had hoped that I could leverage this in to a chance at being her boyfriend.”

Zhou Qianlin, for a moment, was too stunned to speak. And then, “what girl is this then?”

Lan Jue’s face fell 2. “Who do you think?!”

She looked in to the depths of her wine glass. A far-away look invaded her eyes, but she shook her head to clear it and stared out of the window. “A bottle of wine may not be enough to convince her. How do you know she’ll even like it? One shouldn’t be so arrogant.”

She looked up at him, and he could see her choking back tears.

Since this trip, their relationship had become much closer, as to be expected when one had to kiss simply to cultivate. And, he still couldn’t get past the walls protecting her. Qianlin knew it, too, and knew that the specter of Hera would always haunt her bodyguard.

She had been waiting, day after day. Waiting for him to see her for her. Although they were indeed much closer, Qianlin had fought to keep her affections on the surface only. She had no confidence.

Their bodies had touched long ago in the way that a man and a woman’s does, but their hearts had yet to catch up. It was completely unexpected that on this seemingly normal night, he was seeking to change that.

It was too sudden, and she was not prepared. On the one hand her heart beat excitedly in her chest, but somewhere in there was uncertainty, too.

It was not easy! She took another sip to try and keep the tears in her eyes from falling. As she did, she noticed that he had yet to respond.

Almost unconsciously her eyes turned back to him. But, much to her surprise, he was nowhere to be seen. Only his half-empty glass remained as any trace that he’d been there at all.

He left? Was he angry?

She felt herself become flustered. She turned around looking for him, and gasped when she turned to find his face right beside hers.

Chapter 474: I...

He knelt beside her on one knee, with bright eyes that watched her closely. At some point – she didn't know when – he'd produced a sweet-smelling rose. He held it out to her.

“Qianlin, I'm sorry. I'm not sure if this is too late, or too early... maybe you can't accept or it's one sided. But I wanted to show you how sincere I am.”

“Ever since the day I met you, my heart's been all knotted up. At first I couldn't help but replace your identity with hers. Her shadow was a large one that covered everything in my life. For a long time I wasn't even sure you weren't her. I told myself it wasn't right, and that it wasn't fair to you. Just because you look alike doesn't mean you're some sort of substitute. In my guilt and shame, I kept you at a distance. I had to keep telling myself you weren't her, you weren't her.”

“However, somethings are out of our control. When you showed up my dead heart started beating again. I see your gentleness, your strength, and I see how well you treat me. Your sister's image will always have a place in my soul, but you are just as deep.”

“I resisted for a long time because I thought it was a betrayal. It was a betrayal of her love, and so for a long time I couldn't reconcile that within me. But life has to be about looking forward. Although, that's much easier said than done. I told myself before that Hera would be the only woman I would ever love – but life had different plans.”

“At a point even I don't know when, I fell in love with Zhou Qianlin. Not a Substitute for the love I lost, but something new. You are Zhou Qianlin, not Hera. My heart knows it now.”

“Hera had to go... and now I'm moving forward. My love for her will never subside, but I have more love to give. I know I've hurt you many, many times, and I can't ask you to put that all aside and accept me. But maybe, you'll give me a chance, I hope you will. I hope that I'll find a way to tell you, starting right now, you are the Zhou Qianlin in my heart. The

girl I like... the girl I love.”

“I know it’s... not phrased the best, maybe. I don’t know what I can say to really get my point across, but I promise that I’ll never hurt you again. I will devote all of my care and attention on to you.”

“I was unwilling at first to be your bodyguard at the university. I was afraid I was giving up my freedom. Now, though, I realize that this was a gift of a new start, from you. With your approval, I’d like to extend our contract indefinitely. I will stand at your side watching over you, protecting you, and loving you.”

He lifted the flower up to Zhou Qianlin, his face full of sincerity. She looked back at him too stunned to speak. Tears had begun to stream down her cheeks long ago. Her whole body shook.

Then, she shoved the rose away. Her head snapped to the side as though she couldn’t look at him. “No! I can’t, at least not now.”

Lan Jue was completely taken by surprise. He thought she might not accept right away, but outright rejection was not what he’d anticipated.

“Don’t cry, Qianlin. Don’t cry. Its fine – I can wait.” Lan Jue stood and enveloped her in a hug.

She shook against his chest. Her voice was low and broke from the tears. “I’m sorry, A-Jue. I’m sorry I can’t answer... and right now I can’t tell you why. When this tournament is done and we go back to Skyfire, I’ll show you something. If afterwards you still want to be together we can talk about it again. Ok?”

With that said, she jump to her feet and fled the bar. Lan Jue was left standing there, flower in hand, feeling desolate. He returned to his seat and quietly finished first his glass, and then Qianlin’s. The taste was sweet as ever, but it couldn’t soothe the bitterness he felt. He replaced the cork. At least right now, he wouldn’t be enjoying this bottle.

Outside the bustling streets of Luo City were a circus of sights and sounds, but all he felt was loneliness. When he eventually returned to his room, he entered to find it plunged in to darkness. Qianlin lay on the bed,

seemingly already asleep.

He didn't trouble her, and absconded to the couch. It was then he felt it, the pang of those old wounds. It'd been a long time since he felt it, but it was as clear as sharp as ever.

They didn't spend any time in cultivation. The whole day had gone by without any work. Early morning the next day, the first thing Lan Jue did after stirring was look toward the bed. He saw Qianlin there, clad in her nightgown, looking outside. He then noticed the blanket that was covering him.

He took a deep breath to try and calm himself, then wrapped the covers around him and stood. Qianlin, hearing him stir behind her, turned around and greeted him with a smile. She looked mostly recovered. "You're up. I've ordered us breakfast, it should be here soon."

"Alright," he replied. "I'll go take a shower, then."

"Alrighty!" She shot him a dazzling smile, bright and wide.

Lan Jue shuffled toward the bathroom. He suddenly felt the need to escape her smiling face.

Qianlin watched him go, and once his back was turned a pained look flitted passed her eyes. She nibbled her lower lip. Could you understand that my own heartache is so much worse than yours? But I can't tell you. It would affect you too much, affect the tournament. Wait for us to get back, and then I'll tell you everything. I don't want anything to stand between the two of us... and I don't want you to feel regret, later.

On the outside, everything seemed perfectly normal. The two of them had a pleasant breakfast, then continued with their cultivation. Although, Qianlin could feel that Lan Jue's kiss was far more 'polite.'

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The finals were about to begin, and the streets were a mess of people trying to make their way. Every broadcast station from here to the shattered starfields was covering the games.

Lan Jue hadn't seen the Pharmacist all day. When he saw Jun'er, she was with the Gourmet. He guessed she'd delivered the child to the Gourmet early, so as not to interrupt his cultivation.

Now it was time for the games to continue.

The finals would be determined by lots, to see which fighters would compete against who. When Lan Jue got to the waiting area, it felt almost deserted. But wasn't it? There were only four left, where once there had been thousands.

The Pharmacist, Jun Yongye, and Xuanyuan Shishi had all already arrived. When his Avenue compatriot saw him, she greeted him with a smile and a nod. Jun Yongye and Shishi offered a respectful greeting as well.

Lan Jue offered a nod of his own, then sat. It was time to focus, but not for glory. He was eager to see what more he could learn.

Really, this chance was one in a million. He'd already done what he could to push the troubles between him and Qianlin to the back of his mind. After all, he wasn't the same Lan Jue as before. He'd grown and matured considerably. Love was an eternal consideration, but it wasn't everything.

He smiled to the Pharmacist. "If we happen to get paired up, then you have to promise not to go easy on me. Give it all you've got. I'm anxious to feel the destructive force of the fairy."

She smiled back. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

He laughed. "I guess that's up to lady luck. Best would be me against you for the championship. If that happens I'll forfeit. We can always test ourselves back in the Reaper's Arena."

The Pharmacist looked at him seriously for a moment, but said nothing.

Meanwhile, things on the VIP platform were proceeding as they had been, without any visible deviation but for one. The Terminator sat in the center of the platform, calm and impassive as a mountain. What was new was the person beside him.

She wore a snow-white veil, with a gown that matched. From what one could see, she looked to be in her thirties. But here in the North, there was only one other person who deserved the same respect as the Terminator. The Epochrion!

She had settled herself between the Terminator and the Gourmet. She was still and silent, simply watching the scene around her.

On the Terminator's other side was, as ever, Mo Xiao. She was still in charge of announcing the rest of the games.

"Ladies and gentlemen, hello and welcome. I am Mo Xiao." As the time came for the game to commence, her voice rose like a crystal chime through the arena.

"I hope you're all looking forward to the semi-finals! Finally, we have fought past the gauntlet and have emerged with four remaining fighters. Whatever their performance, each of them will be leaving with wonderful prizes to show for their effort. However, there can only be one champion, and all the riches they will earn.

"Let me introduce you to our potential champions. From Group One; Zeus, the God of Lightning! Emerging from Group Two, the Pharmacist, also known as the Sword-Spirit Fairy. Group Three has produced the White Blademaster Jun Yongye. And last but not least, from Group Four, the Ten Thousand Swords as one – Xuanyuan Shishi!"

Chapter 475: A God versus Ten Thousand Swords

“I’m sure we’re all anxious to discover who will be in conflict for the semi-finals. Who will face off next for a chance at the championship? Who will put their best on display? I’m certain that these young Talents won’t fail to entertain, and soon we’ll have our last two for the Great Championship Battle. I must admit, even I’m excited. So, without any further adieu, let’s see who’s fighting who!”

Four beams of light appeared from overhead and fell upon the ring. Instead of the portraits, this time the competitors were represented by full holographic models. The area beneath their feet began to shine as well; two gold, and two silver.

“Today we are also blessed with honored attendees, aside from our majesties Terminator and Gourmet. Yes, today we are graced with the presence of the second Northern Paragon, the Epochrion! Our respected Paragons will take over responsibilities of selecting matches. Epochrion, if you would be so kind as to start us off?”

Ladies first, basic manners. The time mistress nodded her head, and in a cool and dispassionate voice that sounded like a child’s, called out over the arena.

“Begin!”

The four figures began to flash and shake. In fact, before long the whole ring was a sea of indecipherable flashing light. It was the Terminator who spoke next.

“Stop!”

At his command the flashing rings of silver and gold stopped beneath the projections. The fights had been chosen. Lan Jue and the other fighters watched carefully from the sidelines. The results brought a smile to Lan Jue’s lips.

“Well sis,” he said, “I guess our luck isn’t so bad after all!” He referred, of

course, to the chance that they would have to fight one another first. That was not the case. The result: Lan Jue versus Xuanyuan Shishi. The Pharmacist versus Jun Yongye.

Mo Xiao's voice called out again, alive with excitement. "Good. The fights have been decided. The first fight of the semi-finals will see the God of Lightning testing himself against the Ten Thousand Swords. In fight two, the Sword-Spirit and the White Blademaster will see who has better command of the sword!"

Lan Jue's shining eyes swept over to Xuanyuan Shishi. He found his opponent staring right back. His countryman's face still bore that friendly, almost jovial smile as he shot Lan Jue a big thumbs up. Lan Jue answered with a nod.

Zeus' wish had been answered; he would face off against this masterful swordsman to see what he could learn. One of the best things about this tournament had been its rigid and efficient structure. Other than the finals, which would occur tomorrow night, everything else had been held to a specific and regular routine.

Lan Jue and Xuanyuan Shishi stood together, and walked toward the ring. As they made their way across the sidelines, floodlights followed.

Now, at this point, it was safe to say that these two young men had the attention of all of humanity. It was still too early to say who would walk away with the title of champion. No one dared look down on Zeus any more, after his dramatic victory over Titan. But, one must not forget, his opponent had bested Constantine. Who would emerge victorious? There was no way to tell until the dust settled.

"Who do you favor for this fight?" Mo Xiao turned to ask the Terminator sitting beside her. She imagined the Paragon was still upset that his Discipline had lost, but she had a job to do. The show must go on.

The Terminator's low cadence answered. "Hard to say. They both have very different combat styles, but in terms of Discipline Zeus has the edge. He did a frankly astonishing job at hiding it, as well. However, the determining factor in their fight will be their martial art. At the very least,

Xuanyuan Shishi's swordsmanship will narrow that power gap. Yet, Zeus has a very impressive grasp of Taiji. I suspect that ultimately, the winner will be chosen by how well they perform under pressure."

Mo Xiao smiled politely as he explained. "Even you aren't certain your Majesty – but at least it means it should be an exciting fight! We'll have to see who rises to the challenge, and I hope that these two powerful young Adepts surprise us."

Mo Xiao's eyes slid almost unconsciously toward Lan Jue, and her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. It was hard to tell what she was thinking. He didn't see – he was already in the ring with his opponent.

"I'm honestly surprised you managed to beat that blockhead. Not bad, not bad. I suppose now we have no choice."

Lan Jue looked at him in curiosity. What did he mean, no choice?

"I'm honored to test myself against you," Lan Jue retorted. "Please, don't hold back!"

To this the swordsman nodded. "Don't worry, I will. Defeating me won't be so easy, you'll find. You'll need to do your best as well. And if you do win, the rewards are significant."

Another phrase that seemed to make little sense to Lan Jue. He maybe a little despondent... it seemed like this very respectable warrior had a few screws loose.

"Three, two, one. Begin!"

Xuanyuan Shishi raced to action as the buzzer sounded. His hands shot out, and at their motion a white fog rolled out to meet Lan Jue. It moved with unnatural speed. Although they had never met in the ring before, Lan Jue had watched enough fights now to know what to expect.

The Mercenary King's answer was to stamp his foot against the ground and soar in to the air. As the wind rushed around him, his own hands splayed out and pressed downward.

Lan Jue's whole body suddenly turned royal purple. Then, revealed in a

chorus of crackling blasts, countless bolts of bluish-purple lightning assailed the ring. The mists summoned by his foe were instantly dissolved, though the two enormous mist-swords hidden within – as well as Xuanyuan Shishi himself – were unharmed.

The crowd was suddenly reminded, his Discipline was thunderbolt and lightning! Since his last fight against Titan had relied solely on Taiji, many in the crowd had forgotten what his Discipline was!

Titan's strength had been his incredible defense. It had required an incredible pinpoint force from Lan Jue. Xuanyuan Shishi's strength was in the sword style he was now famous for. Zeus' tactics would have to be different, and so he started with his Forest of Lightning. It was important to note that he had joined with Zhou Qianlin before arriving. This Forest of Lightning was ninth level ninth rank – very different than those that came before!

Each individual bolt was the size of a man's arm. Everything beneath the force field was completely lost in lightning – Xuanyuan Shishi and his blades were no exception. Terrible blasts of thunder exploded all around them, again and again.

Xuanyuan Shishi himself was stunned by what he was seeing. His body dissolved in to a cluster of clouds to try and escape. But the Forest of Lightning was all-encompassing. There was nowhere he could run to. Almost immediately the bolts of lightning began to tear through the mist and separate it, but it also danced around like mad.

The fight came down to how their Disciplines interacted. When he fought Titan, Lan Jue's lightning Discipline hadn't been enough, by any measure, to break Titan's shield. Shishi's defense was not so doughty, not even half of what Titan had commanded. Further, his style of ten thousand changes couldn't use its advantages against ten thousand lightning bolts.

Back in the waited area, the Pharmacist nodded as she looked on. Her little brother was smart. He knew what his foe would try, and had a fine answer for it.

However Shishi was no pushover. His tactics changed when he noticed his original plan was ineffective. The two giant swords dispersed, only to reform after a moment in to a large slender sword suspended in air. It swiveled and swiped around the bolts as it searched for Lan Jue. But the sword would never find him. Just as Shishi could lose himself in mists, Zeus employed the lost arts of lightning to become electricity himself. He was everywhere. The slender blade was a lost fish in a sea of lightning.

Shishi's plan was a good one, in theory. His opponent's attacks were sure to expend a great deal of energy. Therefore, he would save his own and focus on protecting himself. He could prevent himself from being too adversely affected and wait, and when Lan Jue's energies were low enough than his defeat was assured.

It was the same mistake Lan Jue's other opponents made. None of them knew of his Phylactery stone.

This was not to say that the attacks were not exceedingly draining, especially at his level of power. However, with the benefits of the Phylactery he could sustain it for a long period of time without much trouble – maybe an hour and a half. Besides, these thick bolts of lightning had already started to affect Shishi.

Even if Lan Jue's output was seven times Shishi's, he could keep this up for quite a while.

“No... no, this isn't right. This can't be true, how could you have so much energy? We don't have any long-ranged skills!”

It didn't take Shishi long to see the problem. He yelled out in frustration.

In the end Xuanyuan Shishi was right. The fight continued until energy was gone – he just didn't think it would be his own!

Chapter 476: Stabilizing Protogenia

Xuanyuan Shishi's cries were heard clear throughout the arena, and it sent chaos rippling through the stands. Constantine was watching also, and he was full of a helpless disbelief. How could he have lost to this guy? And Zeus, what he was doing should be impossible. How was he sustaining such a taxing barrage?

The more attentive onlookers could see how this man's Forest of Lightning was a problem. However, a competition was a competition, and victory was earned at any price. But what they did not expect was Lan Jue's cry.

"Very well!"

The overwhelming swell of lightning finally began to subside. Just as all rivers flowed to the ocean, the great bolts of electricity all flowed back toward Lan Jue – standing suspended in the air – and disappeared within him. That slender sword tumbled to the ground where it reformed in to the figure of Shishi.

The swordsman looked at his opponent, refusing to believe what had happened. "Scoundrel... you must have a way to shore up your energy reserves."

Lan Jue looked at him helplessly. "Can you relax?"

"Fine," Shishi replied with a sniff. "Now we'll see what's stronger – your fist or my sword." His challenge came as Shishi flowed toward Lan Jue, himself very much like a cloud. Another misty sword had appeared in his hand.

Lan Jue answered by sinking in to his stance. His hands rose up in the now-familiar and fluid motions of Taiji. He'd agreed to stop the forest of lightning because winning wasn't what he was after. He was in search of growth, and the best growth always came from pressure. What was there to be gained in a straightforward win?

There was a flicker of light against Shishi's sword, then he was in front

of Lan Jue. His weapon lashed out and birthed ten thousand copies that flowed like mercury. They slithered toward Lan Jue's shields while the swordsman himself seemed to become more incorporeal.

Xuanyuan Shishi's weapon was like an extension of his own body. His movements were unpredictable and dangerous. For Lan Jue it was like everywhere he looked were swords. Every single one of those deadly blades were heading right for him, aiming to pin him to the ground. Shishi's title was more telling than he'd imagined.

They hadn't reached him yet, but he could feel them. Every one of the acupuncture points dotting his body began to ache. But, he had a plan. He shrunk in on himself a little more, sinking lower in to his hands and bringing his arms around to form a vertical circle. Where Shishi's sword style was swift, guileful and enveloping, Lan Jue's response was to slow way down. It put the both of them in sharp contrast.

Then, the scene became strange. Those ten thousand sword-shadows were drawn toward something – that circle Zeus was making with his arms.

To Shishi it was like those swords were all piercing through a vortex. It was like they'd gotten lost in a quagmire, and even Shishi was starting to feel the pull. Years of extensive study led to Zeus being capable of completely fusing his Discipline with Taiji. Since electricity had its own vacuum force, it bolstered the Taiji vortex even further. This was his plan, combine them together to creation the appropriate reaction.

Shishi, seeing this, had no recourse but to use all his strength to wrench those mist-blades free and attack again. He came at Lan Jue from a different angle of attack.

Lan Jue's arm began to move, but maintained the circular shape. However, the Taiji power spilled free and started to conceal Shishi's attacks from view. The new center of gravity sent the sword master's weapons spinning, and ultimately unable to hit him. Gradually Shishi lost control, and his weapons were directed where Lan Jue wished. Their difference in Discipline also began to show. Xuanyuan Shishi's mists had

started to grow sluggish.

He inwardly complained at the situation. Whether the Forest of Lightning or the Taiji abilities, everything had him locked down and unable to fully engage his speed. The Taiji skills of a peak-ranked Adept were too strong. Even the atmosphere under the force field swirled at the behest of Zeus. Shishi was on a battlefield completely out of his control.

There were still a few spectators that thought Lan Jue's victory over Titan was a fluke. The proof now overwhelmingly proved the opposite. No wonder he won, they thought. Taiji was much more capable than any ordinary person could have imagined 2.

Lan Jue moved slower and slower, and the whole of the energy around them began to change by degrees. The shields surrounding the ring fluctuated as though it was under assault. Xuanyuan Shishi was losing control of himself to Lan Jue's flowing force.

Lan Jue himself was a tool of it, he was a part of it and seemed almost separate from reality around him. For a moment, he even forgot he was in battle. Every moment saw his lightning Discipline and the Taiji powers more completely combining. His yang-style powers were brought in to the transformative properties of Taiji, and softened it. The overwhelming force of it felt more pliant, and yet the moment of release was as powerful as one of the Taiji Nine Strikes. It hit with enough force to shake the earth.

This is what he meant! I remember master telling me, that the rage of yang lightning could be given peace by Taiji.

He also remembered the words of his teacher: When he could bring those two worlds together, he would discover his Path.

It was completely unexpected that he should have this epiphany now, in the midst of competition. It was not a revelation derived from this one fight, but the result of days – years – of contemplation. Only now was it revealing itself.

Nor was this just his Discipline. He could feel it flowing all through him. As his Core gently rotated in his chest, an aura of radiating energy was pouring forth.

This was not an aura of explosive electricity, but was infinitely gentle. Beneath his feet, the swirling image of the yin-yang, of white and black power, appeared and began to swell. It grew until every inch of ground beneath them was covered. If anyone could see the invisible flows of energy in the ring, they would see tendrils of power. Thin and pliant as a strand of silk, they flowed to the center of the enormous swirling image.

The sense of it was not grandiose, but the intractable pull of the energies were undeniable.

Xuanyuan Shishi's body had begun to spin out of control. His weapons could only blindly flail through the arena. Even he had lost his target.

The results of the fight were already known. Lan Jue made no effort to press the attack.

Jun Yongye watched carefully from the arena. He nodded, agreeing with some unspoken thought.

Just then, Lan Jue bellowed a clear and righteous yell. It was as thunderous as a dragon, as fierce as a lion 3. In the space of a blink, the white and black powers flipped and collided around Lan Jue. Xuanyuan Shishi was buffeted every which way.

In the midst of this overwhelming assault, a brilliant beam of light erupted from the swordsman. It was a sparkling red of pure sword spirit that fired through the top of the ring's shields. Within it descended a ruby-red blade.

But it lasted only a moment. In a breath it was gone, forced shut by some invisible force.

The Pharmacist and Jun Yongye's eyebrows shot up in the same instant.

The vestiges of red power from Shishi vanished. He, too, disappeared, but only to spring back in to view in the center of the ring. He was no longer spinning.

The spinning vortex of white and black power was also slowly reducing in size. It eventually retreated to reveal Lan Jue in it's epicenter, and vanished in to a spot on his chest. His skin fluctuated between black and

white, flickering and melding in to one another. It shifted to dazzling gold and silver and, flickering thrice to the intensity of Lan Jue's screams, disappeared.

It was like witnessing a staggering phenomenon.

Xuanyuan was completely oblivious to the change in Lan Jue. He couldn't even tell where he was.

Lan Jue had chosen to wear his mask for the fight. It was a part of Zeus' identity, and revealing his face one time was no excuse for abandoning tradition. But if people could see his face beneath the golden façade, they would discover that his face was covered by a glossy shimmer. The sense that came from him changed, too. It seemed more grounded in the natural way. He looked more like a Paragon.

This was the sign that an Adept was on his first steps of the Path. If a peak Talent could fortify his understanding and work hard, he would ascend to the rank of Paragon.

But Lan Jue's true power was only third rank! This was the benefit of re-cultivation. These were the benefits to his future that were promised. It was slow to start with a sudden explosion of growth to Paragon, much different from barely managing.

"Do you still wish to continue?" Lan Jue asked his opponent. He still sounded vigilant.

Lan Jue's transcendence had been well timed, for while he took that great stride he could still feel the staggering power Shishi had summoned. It had been just a moment, but the strength of it had made Lan Jue's heart race. But he was determined, now that his feet were on the path, he could overcome.

Chapter 477: I Abstain!

Xuanyuan Shishi did not continue to press an attack. “So dizzy... no more, you win.” He punctuated the statement by hopping out of the ring. The first fight of the semi-finals was complete – Zeus, God of Lightning, had defeated the Ten Thousand Swords.

The swordsman was never given an inch, and could not bring his full strength to bear. The fight was under Lan Jue’s iron-fisted control from the start. The result was completely unexpected.

Mo Xiao’s surprised voice confirmed it. “Congratulations to the God of Lightning, our first competitor in the finals. With each victory he seems more and more the deity. Your Majesty, what can you tell us about that last fight?”

The expression in the Terminator’s eyes could be described as despondent. “Xuanyuan Shishi didn’t really lose. He had something up his sleeve, but had no chance to use it – or couldn’t control it. Zeus had very good understanding, that’s what saw him win so quickly.”

His own disciple had made his own future progress slower in order to win glory for the Great Conclave. But he lost, giving his spot in the quarter finals to this mercenary king. What’s more, Zeus had used the opportunity to find his Path. Was Skyfire Avenue really so richly endowed?

Of course he knew that Zeus also went by the name of the Jewelry Master, a Councilor of the Avenue. He was his organization’s future, and he had played a part in stealing away the North and West’s splendor.

Mo Xiao could hear the irritation in the Terminator’s voice and quickly changed the subject. “The next fight will be against the White Blademaster and the Sword-Spirit Fairy. Do you have any thought on this fight?”

He didn’t hesitate to give this answer. “The Pharmacist appears stronger, she showed us that at the end of her fight against the Dark Necromancer, Jiang Yuan. It was no less powerful than a strike from a Paragon. Her weapon is likely already an Astrum, or equivalent.”

He was a second level Paragon, and with that insight he knew that her strength was even enough to curtail the spread of his own Domain. In fact, it was hard to say for certain she wasn't already a Paragon in disguise. And she was of the Avenue as well! With their five Paragons, even minus the Clairvoyant, Skyfire Avenue was simply lousy with star Adepts. The Terminator was less than pleased.

Mo Xiao nodded. "Well, let's take a look!"

Zeus jaunted back to the waited area in time to see the Pharmacist give him a smile and stand. "Congratulations," she said.

Lan Jue chuckled. "You've got this one, sis!"

His companion's face bore a smirk, full of trickery. "You're the one needing encouragement. Your next fight is a big hurdle."

"Eh?" He looked at her quizzically. But before he could get any answers, the Pharmacist dissolved in to a beam of light and raced for the ring. There, she reappeared.

When the Sword-Spirit Fairy appeared in the ring again, the crowds went wild. The strength she'd shown was absolutely incredible, like some legendary warrior. Ever since, she'd been everyone's favorite subject. If the Northerners were asked who they'd like to see win the championship, more than seventy percent would probably pick her.

Jun Yongye, known as the White Blademaster, also entered the ring from the other side. He offered the Pharmacist a respectful bow. It was a gesture she did not return. She stood quietly for a moment, looking carefully at her opponent.

"I abstain!"

Abstain! The two rounds rang loudly through the arena. She was conceding? Why?

The place became a sea of voices trying to shout over one another.

How could this be? She was the favorite, their Sword-Spirit Fairy. And yet, when faced with the White Blademaster she gave up her chance.

What had promised to be an epic class between two powerhouses was finished, just like that.

This...

Lan Jue had just sat down, but when he heard her voice he shot right back up on his feet. She quit?! Sis, what are you doing? You were supposed to meet me in the finals, weren't you?

He was as stunned as everyone else. This included the Gourmet, who sat up in the viewing platform with wide eyes and open mouth. What was she thinking? The Pharmacist, concede? She represented Skyfire Avenue, and her loss meant that now no one in the champion fight would carry their banner. It was an embarrassing situation to suddenly find himself in!

The Terminator turned his massive head and gave the Gourmet a long, silent look. Then nodded.

Inwardly, the Gourmet screamed relief. This guy thought it was planned, a stunt to avoid embarrassing the North and West. But... that wasn't his plan at all!

The crowds had fallen in to disarray, but Jun Yongye seemed unperturbed. He simply offered her another bow. The Pharmacist nodded, then left the ring. She was calm as she walked back to Lan Jue.

"The fights for today are done, let's go." She grabbed his arm, and pulled him from the arena.

If she had quit when facing Zeus, then this whole thing would have made more sense. Their relationship had been clear to the audience for some time, and they couldn't help but concoct stories to go with their assumptions. But that was not the case, and she had given away her opportunity to Jun Yongye. It was flabbergasting. She had no reason to throw the fight!

"Sis... why did you give up?" He could deny his curiosity no longer.

She shot him a glance. "I can't tell you now, but you'll know soon enough. What you need to focus on now is preparing for tomorrow – to fight Jun Yongye! Do you understand?" Her tone had hardened, and she

sounded for all the world like a big sister, or perhaps a strict mother.

Lan Jue almost unconsciously nodded his head in acceptance. A thousand ideas were swimming in his brain, but none of them explained why she would act this way. There didn't appear any logical reason. The only one, was that she would give up her spot so he could learn from another opponent. For cultivation? But even this didn't make much sense.

Lan Jue dutifully allowed himself to be pulled along out of the Great Conclave Arena, though his heart was full of doubt. Many shared his confusion, but the tournament sponsors jumped on the chance right away. Seats needed to be filled.

Now the competitors for the final had been decided; Zeus, versus Jun Yongye! Very soon they would battle for supremacy, to reveal who would be this tournament's Grand Champion.

"I told you daddy's going to be champion. Tomorrow, daddy's definitely going to win!" Jun'er, bundled up in the Gourmet's arms, excitedly gave everyone around her a talking-to. She wasn't the least bit upset at her mother's loss – like she already knew it was coming.

The Avenue's Paragon got to his feet and bid his two Northern Compatriots farewell. With Jun'er in his arms and uncertainty gnawing at the back of his own mind, he left.

The Pharmacist and Lan Jue walked lazily toward the hotel. "When you get back, get right to cultivating," she instructed. "You must work on firming up your control over Domain. Don't trouble yourself with anything else, you can deal with all of that when the tournament's finished. Jun'er and I will be cheering for you. We're both certain you'll be the champion. Certain!"

"I'll do my best," he promised.

The Pharmacist answered by patting his shoulder. With a smile, she turned and left to go collect her daughter.

Lan Jue watched her go, mulling over something. After a minute he left for the elevators, but carefully. He was wearing his mask, and it would be

very easy to be noticed.

The first thing he did when he got back, was to release Qianlin. He absconded in to the bathroom and waiting for her to get herself decent. He leaned over the sink and stared at himself in the mirror. “So why do you think she threw the fight? I have a strange feeling that sis knows Jun Yongye.”

Qianlin shouted through the door as she changed. “Maybe it’s something she finds hard to say. At the very least, I’m sure it’s nothing that would hurt you.”

Her words immediately reminded him of their exchange at the bar. Was she talking about the Pharmacist, or herself?

He was silent. After a moment Qianlin’s voice called again. “I’m done.”

He left the bathroom, and saw Qianlin waiting for him in a simple and breezy white dress. “You can relax,” he told her. “I want to meditate on what I’ve learned today for a little while.

“Ok,” she replied with a nod. “I’ll make sure you aren’t troubled.”

Today, Lan Jue’s command over domain had risen. It was a great boon. They were joined at the time as well, so she had very clearly experienced the breakthrough just as he had.

Lan Jue wasted no more time in conversation. He knelt cross-legged on the floor, shut his eyes, and slipped in to meditation.

Qianlin stood beside him. She looked down at his quiet, relaxed figure, and a strange expression passed across her pretty face. Inwardly, she thought; A-Jue, if only you knew how much I wanted to tell you everything. But right now you are on such an important trajectory, I can’t distract you. Please just wait until we get back. I’ll tell you everything.

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The audience had been less than pleased with the finals, the viewer ratings highlighted that very clearly. There appeared quite a lot of criticism over the web, directed at both the sponsors and the Pharmacist.

Fewer of those curses came from Easterners, though, for after all the final two fighters were both Easterners. Whoever won, the tournament crown would be coming to the East.

Chapter 478: Before the Championship

“Why would you forfeit?” The Gourmet’s incredulous question was directed at the Pharmacist.

Her response was tepid. “I have my reasons. I do regret that I was unable to take the championship in the Avenue’s name.” Her words were apologetic, though her expression bore no such sign.

The Gourmet’s grin was drawn and bitter. “Fine. We wouldn’t even be in the quarter finals without you, anyway. We’d have more trouble to consider, certainly. At any rate, the Jewelry Master is one of ours, even if it isn’t on his name tag. It is what it is, and I wouldn’t speak any more on it. Now, let’s just hope our Jewelry Master can emerge victorious tomorrow.”

There was a flash of excited energy in the Pharmacist’s eyes. Her voice was resolute. “He’ll win. He must.”

The Paragon was a little taken aback by her sudden and intense demeanor. What pride, to state he’d win so categorically. Was her surrender today somehow tied to the Jewelry Master?

The Pharmacist went on. “That’s enough about this. We can talk more about it after we’ve finished preparations, if we must.”

The Gourmet’s face stiffened, and his eyes narrowed. He answered with a curt nod.

By the afternoon, news outlets had run wild with reports of the finals. The Pharmacist was now the target of widespread ridicule for her decision to concede. Unfortunately for her detractors, the Pharmacist couldn’t care less what anyone thought. At around evening, however, the story had grown tired. Now people were starting to talk about the final fight.

Every fight the White Blademaster and the God of Thunder had participated in were shown one after the other. Reports and analyses flashed across the screens. Meanwhile, social media chatter focused on who the champion would be affiliated with, and what sorts of prizes they’d earn. No less popular were the odds. Zeus’ odds were 1:6, and Jun

Yongye's were 1:8.

Evidently there were significantly more people, now, who thought Zeus might pull away with the win. After juxtaposing the two competitors, their relative journey to this point was highlighted. Jun Yongye's rise through the rounds was largely unhindered, whereas Lan Jue had to fight tooth and nail nearly every step of the way.

Ever since winning his Group, analysts have had to completely reword their models for Zeus. Every one of them used pretty much the same phrase as well; wolf in sheep's clothing. His ability to conceal his true strength was staggering.

The Championship! At last it was time to pick the greatest warrior of humanity's up-and-comers. This was the latest news, the one thing on everyone's mind. At last the day had come, but perhaps ominously, the weather did not hold. In the early hours of the morning clouds gathered over the city of Luo and began to sprinkle it with rain. It made the air chilly. However, the wet blanket of precipitation didn't dampen the city's spirits. It was a rare occurrence here, and made the air thick with humidity.

However, today's last fight would not follow the structure of earlier rounds. It would not be in the morning, and would instead proceed at night. By early morning, the arena had already been transformed into an awards amphitheater. Winners from previous rounds were invited back to receive their just rewards. Audience members who had won various raffles or prizes were also recognized while the field was available.

Then, there was the closing ceremony.

The audience members were allowed into the arena to watch all of this, so ticket-holders had already begun to mill about in the early morning. Those little digital slips were veritable treasures that would grant them access to all of that, and the championship fight besides. They came in droves, lugging bags laden with food and other essentials for a day-long event. It looked more like a concert than an Adept fight.

Many of the competitors from previous rounds were also in attendance

to pick up their winnings. The crowd was most interested, though, in the last two – the focus of many bets. The novel activities and the exciting conclusion on the horizon conspired to make the whole arena feel like a carnival of anticipation.

The afternoon came quickly. The activities slowed, and eventually stopped as the crowds settled. After all, not even a child could keep up a whole day's worth of high excitement. They would need to conserve their energy if they wanted to be ready for the night.

That didn't mean the audience was idle, by any measure. They sat in their seats and went over older footage. Of course, those fights with in-depth analysis were also available, for a fee. Platforms for digital payment made consumption – and profits – easier.

Lan Jue entered the arena, accompanied by tournament attendants. He walked throughout without any fuss to a separate waiting room, where he took his seat. There he would wait for the time to arrive. Jun Yongye wasn't present, and must have had a room all his own. He figured it was a ploy by the organizers to make the process more exciting.

As the day wore on, the sun faded and night took hold. The arena's floodlights cracked noisily as they lit up. They blazed so bright it looked like daytime in the center of the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the lovely Mo Xiao to the stage!" The announcer's excited voice called out just as the image of Mo Xiao appeared in the air. Suspended by some unseen contraption, she descended from on high like an angel.

"Spectators, friends, Adepts... good evening to one and all!" The penultimate mistress of ceremonies was clad tonight in a blaze of red fabric. She was a blaze of fire in an otherwise black night sky that descended like a meteor.

She spread out her arms and curtsied low to the ground, using the Western means of etiquette to give everyone her regards. The crowd screamed back their welcoming cheers.

She smiled. "I imagine you're all eager to get started? I am, too. This has

been a clash we've been waiting for, and at long last the time has come. For more than half a month, we have followed these amazing Talents on their journey to discover who is the strongest. Soon we will have our answer. Remember that this is only the first time these young Adepts have been tested. I'm certain it won't be the last. We hope that as the youth of this generation and the next look on, they are inspired by the magnificence put on display these past weeks. Let all of this drive you to become the best citizen of humanity that you can be. We as a species need strong and capable leaders, and that is all of you – the future."

"After the tournament our magnificent, handsome, boundlessly talented Poseidon will be holding a concert. Also, our gracious hosts, the Paragons of the Great Conclave, have some important news that concerns all of us. They would like to request that everyone remain until the end, so that they hear this announcement. Of course, the final winner will also need to receive their grand prize. Our two competitors have both earned an S-ranked power gem, simply for making it to the Championship Battle. The winner will receive a special mystery prize. What that prize is, even I do not know. We'll find out together, when the Great Adept Tournament comes to a close!"

"Ah, and before I forget, I will be narrating our fight from here. I know I'm rather like the ghost of some unfortunate soul, hanging here in the air, but I'm confident I am at least your favorite specter. Right?!" She looked out over the crowds, beaming. The arena shook with their cries.

As Mo Xiao fired up the crowds, the guests of honor entered and took their seats. First were the two Conclave Paragons and other Northern political leaders. The Avenue Paragon was followed by his delegation, then the Pontiff and Dark Citadel representatives.

It was finally time!

The Terminator bore a smile, and spoke cheerfully with the Gourmet as they entered. Any hint of his earlier displeasure with the situation was gone. His Avenue compatriot was absent the little girl he'd watched over for the last month. Jun'er, instead, was nestled in her mother's arms a row back, with Metatron, Lucifer and Titan.

Jun'er was pressed against her mother's bosom, looking particularly well-behaved. Her gleamless eyes would wander as she got lost in some internal monologue. She wasn't wearing her helmet yet, instead waiting for the activities to begin. The Pharmacist was wary to put her under any undue strain from wearing it too long.

"Very well, the end of the Great Adept Tournament will begin in five minutes. Let's introduce the final competitors, warriors fighting for the crown of Champion. Ladies and gentlemen, first – please welcome the White Blademaster, Jun Yongye!"

Her words were punctuated by a flash, and a cone of golden light beamed into the distance. Its target was a platform slowly making its way through the air. Jun Yongye, his robes flapping in the breeze, was deposited into the ring. He looked like a legendary hero of old, emerging from the wilds.

He quit the platform and took a few slow steps out onto the battlefield. He stood in the center, beneath humanity's collective gaze.

"Next, I encourage everyone to welcome our second challenger, the miracle challenger and God of Lightning, Zeus!"

Another column of light blazed forth, pointing in the direction opposite from where Jun Yongye had emerged. A similar platform silently glided through the air and bore Lan Jue to the ring. Today, he was clad in ornate, golden battle dress. His trademark golden mask was also in place. All of it shone majestically with each errant photon, sending light scattering every which way.

When the platform settled, he stepped down with a firm and resolute pace. He never made a sound, only approaching like an inevitable tide. He stopped a few meters from where his opponent stood, and nodded.

"Our potential champions have entered the ring. Ladies and gentlemen, we're ready for the Championship Battle of the Great Adept Tournament! These last moments belong to them – we ask our warriors to give it their best!"

Chapter 479: The Championship Battle!

The floodlights popped as they all turned on, all at once. Every detail of the Arena was highlighted in the stark light. The shields around the ring itself also shimmered dramatically. It looked significantly more robust than ever before.

Most fights started with the champions separated by some distance. This kept things fair. However, neither stepped away from the middle of the ring. They stood toe to toe, looking at one another.

“Three, two, one. The Championship Battle has begun!” They’d even changed the digitized voice. It sounded more excited for this last fight.

Lan Jue rose to the tip of his toes. His arms rose and splayed out, in a motion that looked as fluid as it did gentle. Jun Yongye’s eyes honed in with laser focus, for he felt the energy coming from the God of Thunder. It was a strange and formless power that tugged at him to come closer, but not at his body. The force was pulling at his soul.

Jun Yongye shot his arm out to his side. In the same motion, he staggered back half a step. A flash of white light emerged from his hand, and grew until it became his trademark simple sword.

“Eh? The White Blademaster staggering already? Is there something more than just the gentle motions from Zeus?” Mo Xiao looked on from overhead, narrating the important points of their clash.

In truth Jun Yongye’s movements were as deliberate as Lan Jue’s. The flailing of his hand had looked like some sort of mystical seal, but it was really casting out an invisible gust of sharp Discipline. It split the attractive power from Lan Jue’s Taiji, making it slip harmlessly around him. An orb of white light also faintly appeared around the swordsman.

The whirling, diametrically opposed powers of Yin and Yang joined between Lan Jue’s hands. The orb of black and white was surrounded by its own atmosphere of peace. If they hadn’t seen it created at Lan Jue’s bequest, then it would be easy to confuse the universal power for a living entity.

As though of its own accord, tendrils of errant power stretched out from that orb, alternating black and white. They brought with them the same power that swelled around Lan Jue, that odd vacuum force that was neither seen nor physically felt.

In a day's concentration, he had brought his Taiji powers to an entirely new level. Closer inspection would reveal that the dark and light energies were, in fact, thunderbolt Discipline. They were as soft and fluid as water, and a cursory glance wouldn't reveal it as lightning at all. It was as insidious as it was powerful.

As that beguiling power pulsed larger, Jun Yongye swung that simple sword skyward. The tip pierced through the air, pointed to the vaulted crest of the ring's force field. Lan Jue heard from somewhere the disjointed sound of gurgling water. While he couldn't see it, something the swordsman did fought back against his protective aura. Stranger, though, was what came from the crack. The breadth of inhaling force from it was staggering.

Lan Jue's aura undulated like an orb of water. A dip from Jun Yongye's sword, and it was like popping the bottom end of a balloon. All the power of it flooded down and out.

The orb in his hands rotated as Lan Jue moved his arms. As it moved, the supremely harmonious essence of it was clearly felt all throughout. The fissure that had appeared in his aura was inexplicably sealed. Then, as gentle as a breeze, Lan Jue's hands pressed outward. The waves of harmonious energy urged the orb of black and white forward, right for Jun Yongye.

The sword in the Blademaster's hand moved, almost of its own. It rotated and swung in an arc, spinning the swordsman's body with it. The arc became a circle, with him in the center of it. It was like he had cut away reality and stood in a realm all his own. The blade finished with a single-minded thrust that cast a beam of invisible energy right to the center of Lan Jue's orb.

In great contrast to Xuanyuan Shishi's style, Jun Yongye's blade was

calm and peaceful. His concentration was like iron, fixed on the body of his weapon. It looked simple, but the spirit behind every movement was almost transcendent.

This was Jun Yongye's grasp of martial prowess. If this fight had occurred yesterday, the difference in comprehension between their styles would have been quite large. However, Lan Jue had had an epiphany, and that made him stronger.

"Shhrip!" The strange noise came from Jun Yongye's sword driving through the orb of black and white.

Both of them stopped. For a moment, nothing moved, and then suddenly the orb erupted with a hundred thousand beams of light. Tendrils of lightning coiled up around Lan Jue, and an unparalleled surge of electric power condensed around him.

Like the orb, it was a tide of black and white. After the explosion began to subside, to observers it was like that peaceful sphere of energy had simply swallowed everything up. Jun Yongye's body was enveloped by a deep cobalt blue, and where the electric light encountered it, the assailing energies vanished without a trace. His weapon, however – that blade of light – couldn't take it. It broke apart and dissolved in to a hazy cloud of dimming light.

An airburst, massive as a missile shot, erupted between the two fighters. Both of them were thrown violently backwards.

Finally the crowds were waking up. The beginning of their contest had been almost boring, until that giant explosion. Only now did they realize that the beginning of the fight had been no less dangerous, just less visibly exciting.

Where they had been inches from one another at the start of the fight, the blast had separated them by hundreds of meters. They glared at one another, their eyes full of... admiration.

Lan Jue's arms traced another arc, but this time instead of summoning a ball a beam of light descended from above. It coalesced in his grip, becoming a sword ten meters long. His aura shifted, becoming more regal.

He then threw himself at his foe.

Jun Yongye watched as the black-and-white sword came crashing down from overhead.

The Blademaster's right hand snapped out, and another blade of light was summoned on his palm. The vicious intention of that oncoming attack made his robes flap dramatically. He spun again in a similar motion to before. This time, though, when his sword thrust out it met directly with the tip of Lan Jue's.

"Ting!" At the moment of impact, a blast of power was released from around him. The aura that propelled it was earth-shaking. Once more, that deep-blue shielding appeared around the White Blademaster, extending now to imbue his sword as well. It changed from white, to the same cobalt blue.

Lan Jue's weapon was swallowed up by the blade of light. He switched his trajectory in the air, stepping out to strafe and lashing out with his right fist.

The Seven-Star Strike of Taiji! One of the Nine Taiji Strikes!

The true essence of the Taiji Domain was the most important aspect of stabilizing one's powers. Lan Jue's comprehension was put on display when the entire fields reacted to the strike. All of the arena became a stark world of black and white, and the floor was indelibly marked with the image of yin and yang on the floor. A flickering orb of lightning was right in the middle. The whole place was immersed in the essence of Taiji.

"Boom!" The yin-yang sword crackled and fractured into a bolt of lightning. Jun Yongye's sword acted like a lightning rod and took the full brunt of it. The ensuing blast forced the Blademaster back nine steps before he could recover.

Zeus rolled his arms again, once more summoning the yin-yang sword. Its reemergence was a tide of majesty that swept across the whole arena. This one was different from before. Where the first sword was borne of calm and quiet, this one was almost overbearing. It was slower, but its path was marked with a wake of black and blue that ejected like solar

flares. The enormous yin-yang symbol emblazoned on the arena floor started to rotate.

The ring was now a self-contained world of blue. Jun Yongye found himself immersed in it, and it felt like fighting against an undertow. He had no more time, there was only attack.

He rose on to the tip of one foot and thrust forward. His body and blade moved in perfect in unison, as a single unit, then melded into one. The cobalt blade hung suspended, alive, and from its tip was fired an array of deadly wisps. It rolled like a sea of a hundred thousand swords, sweeping past Lan Jue's electric world.

The pull of Lan Jue's sword-aura sent Jun Yongye's attack scattering in all directions. Once again, he was relying on the duality inherent in the yin-yang powers to defuse the attack. Every deadly sharp wave ultimately was swallowed up in black and white.

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The Pharmacist watched from the VIP platform. Her hands were fists, and she muttered darkly to no one in particular. "Convergence style, 'where all rivers meet the sea'... little brother, prepare yourself!"

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Lan Jue and Jun Yongye met on the field, their swords whistling through the air toward each other. At the moment of impact, the yin-yang sword warped and imploded into a vortex that threatened to swallow Jun Yongye whole.

But, in that moment, the blue light surrounding the living sword flared like a supernova. Though it should have been impossible, Jun Yongye was untouched and unmoving in the air. Then, it swept horizontally toward Lan Jue.

The wave of energy released from the motion was sharp enough to split the sky. Lan Jue's almost impervious yin-yang powers were chopped right in half. Again there was an ear-splitting explosion as all of that power was released. The whole ring was lost in a sea of black and white lightning.

Lan Jue was stunned. He hadn't guessed Jun Yongye would have this ability. His blade could make the sky collapse! More startling, Lan Jue felt the world around him grow fainter. The peeling rolls of thunder sounded far away, muffled as though his head were underwater. It became dark. The whole ring melted away in the darkness until even he was swallowed up.

Don't get rattled! Lan Jue inwardly chastised. In situations like this, it was only the calm who saw opportunity.

Chapter 480: The Pervading Blade

Lan Jue didn't know what Jun Yongye's sword was, but he felt it. It was vibrant, full of steadfast intention. It was so complete that it cut right through space and time, not unlike the powers of the Wine Master. But this seemed more complete.

Lan Jue's hands gathered together in the shape of a circle, and the yin-yang energies existing all around him were drawn together in tendrils of monochromatic lightning. The more it fed, the thicker the tendrils grew, converging to a point that fought to both expand and contract in equal measure.

He was suddenly assailed by a tremendous pressure. It fell on him like a mountain, constraining his Taiji and keeping it from spreading too far. He fought back, focusing everything on his lightning and forcing it to the strongest he could manage.

It was fearsome... like nothing he'd ever felt before. That pressure squeezed not just his body, or his Discipline, but collapsed upon his Core directly – even his soul. He had to fight against it with every fiber of who he was.

No! I won't lose like this!

Lan Jue bit the tip of his tongue, and the light in his eyes flared. He dropped his hands, and from the center of his chest – from his Core – a column of pure white light issued forth. A miniature symbol like the one that had covered the floor rotated against the center of his chest. The black and white that composed it flashed with its own power.

Zeus was immediately surrounded by an aura of righteousness. He pumped his arms, attacking with his open palms nine times. With each push a blast of white light ensued which birthed an orb of energy. Those orbs quickly dissolved and rippled over, but would overlay one another in beautiful patterns

Then, something strange happened. They spread out in a refractive pattern all but for the very center, where a single spot of black resided.

Zeus' pupils contracted to a pinpoint as it fixed on that singular location. His right hand – a glowing white, pale as pearl – extended to point at that distant black spot.

Time slowed to a crawl, stretching out impossibly as that tiny black dot was consumed in to the surrounding white. The collapsing world around them intensified, stabilized, like it was enough to drink up the whole planet.

There was an explosion, and the entire Great Conclave Arena shook on its foundation.

The audience looked on as the protogenic world the fighters had built collapsed. They saw the sword that was Jun Yongye thrown away across the field. The chaotic flow of Taiji also refused Lan Jue's control.

In the next moment, though, another change overcome the battlefield. The first place where it was evident was around Lan Jue. The nine orbs he'd used had somehow served to stabilize him in this chaotic tempest. He pointed again.

Lan Jue turned in to a superconductor, with bolts of feral electricity exploding out from him in all directions. Each bolt started as a deep sapphire blue, but quickly changed to gold, then silver, and finally pure white.

A buzz came from Jun Yongye's sword. His metallic figure stabilized after being blown away, and hovered in a pocket of safe sky. He followed with three ripping swipes, trying to sever whatever invisible power was connecting him to Lan Jue.

The force field rippled and strained. Its dome shape had warped, falling in on itself as whatever vacuum force from within sucked at it.

"Not good!" The words only barely left the Terminator's mouth before he was soaring through the air toward the ring. The Epochrion was close behind.

The Great Conclave Arena had a million people in the audience. Any problem could potentially spell disaster for a great many souls! As hosts

especially, the North couldn't allow anything to happen. It had been made clear that they were unprepared when the first force field had been broken, so the Paragons reacted to make sure that unthinkable result wouldn't happen.

The two Northern Paragons appeared above the ring in the same instant. They spread open their arms, and waves of Discipline radiated out over the ring.

The Terminator and the Epochrion had been close compatriots for years. Of course they knew the ins and outs of each other's Disciplines without having to ask. Ooperation was seamless, and the Epochrion's technicolor power joined with the jet black Force coming from the Terminator to create another shell.

They finished just in time. The moment that shell was complete, everything beneath erupted in an apocalyptic display. The attraction even started to bend the Paragons' shield.

The black eminence of the Terminator's power blocked vision of the ring's interior. The audience could only stare wide-eyed with baited breath. But what they could see was the image of a face, pressing hard enough against the shell to leave an indentation.

The Terminator's face fell, and the Epochrion openly frowned. They could both sense it; this power was Paragon level. This wasn't near-Paragon status of Discipline. This was true protogenia, the same as either of them.

It should be impossible for a normal Adept – it went against everything they knew about Protogenia! But as much as they could not believe it, the evidence was right in front of them. This Easterner really did possess this level of strength.

The truly unbelievable happened after. The Paragon's protective shell continued to yield until the ringing sounds of cracking filled the air. Then the implosion reversed, and all the condensed energy beneath the shell changed direction. Everything moved outward. The shell expanded sharply outward like a balloon – but one that was quickly reaching its limit.

The audience could see the danger and became afraid, and though they knew the power contained beneath the shell would obliterate them, they were too afraid to move. Was this... could a human do this?

The look of the Paragons' faces weren't any more composed. The Terminator reacted, roaring an earth-shaking warcry. Behind him, the faint silhouette of a black figure could be discerned. It was enormous, with three heads and six arms each bearing a war hammer. All six of the jet-black hammers where thrust in to the sky.

Reality cracked. A fissure the size of a building split the world, belching six black orbs. They fell upon the strained shell, bolstering it even more.

The Epochrion did not dally, either. The ever-shifting halo of colors around her drained away to a pure white, while the image of a massive clock shimmered behind her. It was one of the ancient kind, with a pendulum below an ornate clock face. The pendulum slowed, and with it time seemed to get stuck. It was like moving through soup, densest around the shell.

Everything that approached that lensed horizon slowed to a crawl. Meanwhile, the Terminator began to direct his overwhelming Force toward compressing the shell to its original size. A tempest could not last forever, so the raging explosion of power beneath had also begun to calm.

It took two Paragons summoning the power of their Domains to keep that terrifying power at bay. They had to disregard the safety of the competitors or potentially sacrifice the audience.

The Gourmet had long been on his feet. He hadn't moved to help because he'd have gotten in the way, the two Northerners were a well-practiced team. Yet he fretted for Lan Jue, even though releasing that power meant sacrificing a million lives! That wasn't even counting the area around the arena.

The combined strength of the Paragons won out, as the chaos beneath eventually calmed. After a full minute, they let the shell fade away. The audience was a sea of gasps when they saw what lay beneath.

The newly-repaired floor of the ring was a wasteland. Its alloy coating

appeared to have evaporated, leaving a crater one hundred meters deep. In the deepest part of that pit, Lan Jue pulled himself to his feet. His once majestic clothing had been reduced to rags, thankfully sturdy enough to protect his modesty. His mask did not survive, and his beaten features were revealed to the cameras. His tousled hair and bruised face made him look like a wild man.

Jun Yongye was nowhere to be seen, but the blue sword was. It hovered in the air in front of him. The weapon looked almost identical to before, but now its length was covered in faintly pulsing runes. The strange script flickered like ghostly writing.

Wisps of gentle light spilled from the runes, coalescing in to the shape of the White Blademaster. He looked pale, like the fight had taken everything out of him.

The two men looked at each other in silence, but the mutual respect was clear in their eyes.

“I’ve lost.” There was regret in Jun Yongye’s voice.

“The victory was hard won!” Lan Jue offered the swordsman his hand. The two shook then, with a laugh, had to stagger and hold each other up.

Jun Yongye nodded at him. “But worthy.”

Lan Jue gave him a weird look, just for a moment. He was as crazy as his friend, full of nonsense.

Chapter 481: The Aftermath, My Own Yin-Yang

“It looks like the tournament is over.” Mo Xiao had fled the near-explosion, but returned now. Her voice sounded strange, a reflection of her surprise. She couldn’t believe Lan Jue was so strong.

The Terminator looked at her, then shouted out across the Arena. “Announcing the Champions of this year’s Great Adept Tournament; Zeus!” His final declaration was the end of the games.

Now it crossed the minds of the audience to cheer. However, back East, every corner of every Eastern Alliance planet had been cheering for ages. Most especially, the National Eastern University sounded like it was host to a riot. The administration had been quick to abuse Lan Jue’s image. The moment his face was revealed, the NEU made sure everyone knew he was one of their instructors. The news had spread all across the East.

Jun Yongye and Zeus clambered from the crater on wobbly legs. They both looked like the battle had cost them a lot. But while their bodies were hammered, their spirits were high. Lan Jue couldn’t shake that sense he’d felt, in those last moments. It was a taste of what it was to be a Paragon, a hint of what was to come.

It had been a move of desperation. That fissure created by Jun Yongye had been so overwhelming, that a bold leap had been necessary.

The nine thrusts were the might of his yang lightning, overlaid with the Taiji powers as enhancement. Under his ministrations, his Discipline was empowered and concentrated by it – resulting in one of the strange rules of yin-yang; when Yang rose to its peak, Yin is born 1.

That final moment, that crucial point, Lan Jue felt the yang-force of his thunderbolt flare outward. With his own yin-yang powers as a base, his lightning was catapulted in strength. Just like when he fought the Driver. The joining of his Yang-and the Driver’s Yin-Discipline had been a brief glimpse at the possibilities. The combination of Lan Jue’s subsequent

cultivation, and the refinement by Taiji had recreated that explosion a hundred times over.

For a moment, somewhere in that cataclysmic blast, he'd seen it again. Like before, the Path to Paragon – he sensed the direction now. But it was also far beyond his control. Even before the yin-yang powers merged, in that second where Yang was at its peak, he couldn't control it. Only once he reached Paragon was that level of mastery capable.

Every inch felt like a mile as the two heroes struggled from the ring. The crowds cheered in admiration.

There was no question that the fight had been frightening for them. However, at the very least that was testament to the strength of the fighters! These two men were worthy to fight for the Championship.

The Great Adept tournament had wowed spectators for more than a month. Now, whether they were there in person or watched on their screens, people didn't quite know what to do with themselves.

As they sat, lost reverie over the last few weeks, the floodlights dimmed. The arena was plunged in to an inky darkness. But, before anyone could panic, a single column of light burst in to existence. In the surrounding darkness, it was particularly eye-catching.

The beam fell upon a figure, dressed in a dark red suit. It made the man look gloomy, set stark beneath the light, but his unparalleled features were the focus of every spectator. Deep notes wafted through the black, but muffled as though locked away.

Poseidon! It's Poseidon!

Indeed it was, the God of the Sea, suspended in the middle of the Great Conclave Arena.

He looked like the field sounded, broken and repressed. The white light gradually died, and was replaced by a crimson light that seemed to come from everywhere. He was suddenly immersed in a sea of red.

The melody rose in volume. It was pleasing to the ear, but none could say it was peaceful. The trudging notes were thick with oppression and

grief.

A new song from Poseidon! The screens in front of every seat flashed with four dark-red words: The Sea of Blood.

It was a tale told through song, about when humanity left for the stars. It showed the progress of humanity through the Stellar Migration, and the glory of its achievements. The story went on to detail man's journey up to now, with both its victories and blemishes.

The scene changed. The red became green, and the sea was a forest. Sprite-like figures of green light danced through the air of the arena, unhindered. The crippling sadness was gone, replaced with an atmosphere of sunlight and joy. The sudden shift made the audience gasp.

Poseidon's song shifted gears as well, becoming softer. He sang like it was the story of his life, with all its peaks and valleys, but nonetheless a glorious landscape.

The image scaled back and suddenly, the audience was looking over a majestic forest vista. As they looked on, toxic spots of purplish-black appeared within the green. With startling speed, the corrosive hue spread.

It was familiar, and many in the audience recognized the scene; Taihua.

The Taihua Massacre, the worst disaster for humanity in recent memory, and the worst in Eastern Alliance history.

Flashes of light. Enormous, monstrous creatures appeared in the hologram eating at those green sprites: travelers, out enjoying nature. The monsters consumed everything, never stopping. All they wanted was more.

The terrifying images caught the audience's breath in their throat. They'd seen the images of these monsters when the reports first came, but never to scale. They were huge, and close enough that it seemed those jagged purple claws could reach out and grab them. They could feel their insatiable hunger.

It was too much – too frightening. So frightening, in fact, that several of the audience members looked as though they may faint. Was this what

really happened on Taihua?

Poseidon's voice became impassioned. A streak of blue raced across the scene, a sapphire figure at its head. Boom! The blue silhouette clashed with a beast in midair, reducing it to ash. There was a crackling electric energy that flowed in its wake. Every bolt lashed out at a creature, destroying them outright and saving tourists from a hell of suffering.

Back and forth the blue figure danced. Each pass littered the forest below with the ruined bodies of the monsters. Poseidon's song followed the hero's trajectory, punctuating every life saved, every beast destroyed.

When the blue bolt eventually slowed down, it was revealed to be a sapphire-blue mecha, massive and dignified. Blinding bolts of lightning danced across its polished surface, attacking the creatures of its own volition. But even machines tire, and eventually that blue mecha came to a stop.

A monster, much larger than any of those that had come before, rose in to the air over the forest. It lumbered toward a fleet of escaping transport ships in a last-ditch attempt to swallow them up. Though drained, the guardian mecha threw itself at the beast with the last of its strength. The monster fell before the might of the hero, but he did not escape unscathed. The mecha tumbled to ground.

Calm came over Poseidon's tone. The image swept back, and again the audience was looking over the forest. Only now, it was acres of poisoned, purple wasteland.

"The invasion of an unknown species was a tragedy for mankind." Poseidon's regretful voice rang clear in the air.

"Many helpless travelers lost their lives, to the monstrous threat."

"Where did they come from? These vicious beasts, where do they call home?"

"But humanity has a chance."

"Not one, but legion. All of you, are the guardians of humanity."

“In the face of this nightmare, we can only survive if we band together. As one, we can protect the things we love from annihilation. Together, we can carry the light of humanity far out past the stars.”

“Today, I will share with all of you a secret.”

A soothing blue light surrounded Poseidon. The beam of blue light followed him as he settled back to ground. The audience followed his every move.

When his foot touched the floor, another light sprang to life. It painted him stark against the bleak landscape. It also revealed the figures of Jun Yongye and Zeus, who stood before him.

Poseidon turned around to face the audience. His voice was full, and bubbled with pride. “All of you saw that warrior, who fought incessantly to save the lives of those travelers on Taihua. This nameless savior defended the lives of thousands, by killing thousands of foes.”

“But there is something you don’t know. In his valiant attempt, this unsung hero nearly gave his life. The sapphire mecha battled against that evil titan until the end, refusing to give in until the Coasmagus – Paragon of Skyfire Avenue – arrived to offer support. As you all know, even a God-ranked pilot has his limits.”

“So how is it that this one man was able to fight for so long, so hard? That is the secret I am going to share with you today.”

Lan Jue stepped forward and put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Poseidon turned to look. Then, with a smile, he pulled his fellow Monarch forward to stand at his side.

“Don’t stop me. I want everyone to know. And anyone who tries to cut me off will have the Gobi Entertainment Group to deal with.” This sentence was lower, reserved for Lan Jue, but the last words were loud enough for all to hear. Poseidon wasn’t just the most famous rock star of humanity – he was also the heir to its richest organization! Whatever Poseidon had to say, the audience knew it was going to be something good.

Chapter 482: A Heroic Tale

“The secret to the blue mechas success wasn’t equipment, and it wasn’t skill. The power he had that day was from an entire bottle of Fantascia Genetica the pilot drank before the fight.”

“Some of you might not know what Fantascia Genetica is. I’ll tell you. It is the greatest DNA-altering substance the West has produced. Taking any amount will help one’s Discipline. The most important question is; can one handle the strength of the medicine? The single exception to this are ninth-level Adepts. Popular knowledge holds that a ninth-level who takes a bottle of Genetica will outright explode. His powers would be too strong for him or her to control.”

“The pilot of this majestic war machine is indeed a ninth-level Adept. He knew the risks, and yet he drank that decoction, so that he could save more lives. He burned away his body for his people, burned away his life until only the faintest spark was left. If the Cosmagus hadn’t had arrived just then, that hero would be lost to us. We would never have the opportunity to know them. But now you do!”

Poseidon stopped, grabbed Lan Jue’s left hand, and thrust it into the air!

“A-Jue, let the people learn who Zeus really is.” Poseidon’s eyes were alive with excitement, burning with it. His fervor had infected the crowd who shouted down at them.

Lan Jue returned his look with a serious one of his own. His brother wasn’t doing this to turn him into a hero.

Chu Cheng had used his own methods to alert Lan Jue of the potential dangers surrounding him. Hua Li was giving him another tool to protect him. None of this was part of the earlier rehearsals. The only purpose was to protect his friend.

Lan Jue heaved a deep sigh. Silent as a statue, he simply extended his pinky finger. Thor’s promise glimmered in the floodlights. A flash, and a towering figure appeared before Lan Jue and Hua Li.

Thor! It was, Thor!

The mecha slowly descended from the sky, encased in blue light. The sleek, metallic surface cast of blinding rays of refracted light. The air around it writhed with images of the battle on Taihua.

Thor, Zeus, Thunderbolt Discipline... it all added up. Now they understood. That mysterious hero, who had saved so many lives, was Zeus. That Sapphire guardian angel had been Thor. And although this Thor wasn't exactly like the Thor in DreamNet, it was close enough for the audience to connect the dots. There was a single word bouncing through the collective consciousness; heroic!

This was the hero of Taihua, before their eyes. Short though the crowd's memory was, several still remembered Zeus' rise. He was an Easterner, an outsider, who had belittled a woman on interstellar television. They couldn't understand why a woman like the Pharmacist would consent to be seen with him.

Now they knew. Or so they thought.

Shock wasn't reserved for the audience alone. Many of the tournament competitors were just as stunned by the revelation. They were Adepts, they all understood the risks of a ninth level using the Fantascia Genetica. Yet, somehow, this man had done it and survived. Now he was the tournament Champion – hero and victor! Despite all that had come before, that was how the crowd saw him now.

His Eastern Alliance companions were no less impressed. With the Gourmet first among them, the Avenue delegation looked upon him with profound respect. Jun'er was the only one not struck dumb by the news. "That's my daddy!" She cried, never looking away from him. "That's my daddy!"

The Pharmacist's eyes welled with tears to hear her little girl's happy cries. Her face revealed appreciation. His efforts gave Jun'er the complete childhood she so desperately needed.

Jun Yongye stood a few meters behind the tournament champion. His face was a mask of shifting emotion.

“Can we give our hero some cheers and applause?!” Hua LI’s excited voice cried out to the masses. Their response was thunderous. It sounded like a bomb went off in the stands, shaking its foundation.

No... not just the Great Adept Arena. This was being streamed to every household on every planet throughout human civilization. What they were hearing now was echoed on Luo, Lyr, Skyfire, and everywhere else humans inhabited. In the East, spectators stoically faced the projection of their hero, and bowed.

Lan Jue wasn’t prepared for this. A strange sensation washed over him just like the adoration of the audience. He couldn’t describe it, but there were words for it. If he had been born a believer of the Pontiff, someone would have told him it was the power of faith.

He could feel, much to his surprise, that his already solid Discipline had been refined even further. The progress was much faster than anticipated. He’d never experienced anything like it before. Somewhere in there was also the arrow of compassion, shining its pale light on his soul.

Improvement. Every day, improvement. Lan Jue was a product of the environment, tempered by it.

He was joined with Qianlin, so he couldn’t feel if his own Discipline had risen in rank. All he knew was that everything he’d experienced since coming to the tournament had coalesced to help him get better. In addition, he could sense similar improvements in Qianlin’s abilities.

The cheers rang for over ten minutes before petering out. “Say something... to me, to all of humanity.”

Lan Jue looked at him in silence for a moment. Then, slow and deliberate, he swung his arms open and enveloped his brother in a hug.

Poseidon smiled and hugged him back.

When they separated, Lan Jue gave them both a distance of a few meters. Thor then reached down, whereupon Lan Jue’s stepped up onto the mechanical hand before being lifting up into the air. Thor’s hand hovered at heart length, and Lan Jue stood easily in the palm.

“Thank you everyone, for your cheers and applause. I really never expected I would be here. On that day, on Taihua... everything happened so fast. I am a teacher, and went with my coworkers on a retreat. Disaster struck, suddenly and without warning. When fleeing to the camp, our group came across a soldier running out to meet the monsters.

“They fought with every fiber of their being, sacrificing everything they had to protect these innocent tourists. I caught the soldier before he left and told him that only a mecha would be able to beat these things. He was throwing his life away. What he said stuck with me; he said that it was his duty, the duty of his brothers, to protect the people. There were still scared, hurt tourists out there. We have to protect them.

“After that he left, no hesitation or fear. I have a decent memory, and I can still recall his ID. When the dust settled I looked him up. He gave up his life so that others might live. If we want to survive as a species, then we need to be like that soldier. Not just a few of us – all of us. We will colonize the stars, but only if we adopt that spirit. Really, there are countless heroes every day. You call me a hero, but I can’t be considered among them.

“Taihua was no accident. The creatures that devastated that planet are coming. We must band together, and contribute what we can to the strength of humanity. All I am doing is the best that I can, the same that anyone else would. This is my responsibility, as a part of humanity.”

He finished his short speech with a bow. The hero of Taihua dropped from between Thor’s fingers as the mecha became light and disappeared into Thor’s Promise.

The effect, if not the sound of Lan Jue’s speech persisted in the air. It rang in the listeners’ chests, igniting their spirits.

The floodlights illuminating the ring darkened, like a planet eclipsing the sun. It was the Terminator, whose mountainous figure was suspended in the air. The lights flicked away from the ring and converged on the Paragon. He looked at the cameras with solemn expression.

“Yes, citizens, they speak the truth. Humanity needs more heroes. The

reason behind this tournament was just this, to find champions for the human race. Our rewards were to attract the best.

“Unfortunately, events have reached the point where they need to be discussed. Tonight we will. Ladies and gentlemen, please turn your attention to the screens.”

With that the Terminator vanished. A three-dimensional holographic image took up the arena’s interior. When it first appeared it looked like an image of the night sky, a blanket of twinkling stars. A lumbering space ship heaved into view, though from this perspective it looked like a toy.

Military enthusiasts recognized it right away. It was a Monarch-Class Mothership, followed by its strike group. There were four battleships, twelve expedition cruisers, and other a hundred other support ships. The whole fleet slowly wandered through space.

Chapter 483: The Seventh Fleet

The markings on the ships revealed them as the North's Seventh Fleet. It was the North's strongest battle group.

“An entire exploratory mission was wiped out while exploring an uninhabited part of the galaxy. All we got were ambiguous transmissions when we tried to get in contact.” The Terminator's voice grew louder. “Now we are aware of what they encountered out there in space. When we learned of it, we sent out three battle groups to deal with the problem. Each wave of ships was stronger than the last. In the end it didn't matter what we sent out, the results were the same. They would simply vanish, most without a trace. Judging by the time it has taken for the ships to stop transmitting, we believe this threat is getting closer. This was why we have sent out the seventh fleet. We will use this opportunity to show you what I mean.”

The Terminator did a fine job explaining the situation as it stood. He did not do so well in putting the crowds at ease. In fact, his words made them all quite nervous.

There were only a few people who knew the threat facing humanity before now. If not for the Terminator's revelations, then it was likely the average man would never learn until it was too late. Even the Avenue wasn't completely sure of what the Seventh Fleet found out there. It was delivered at the perfect time, too, while the attention of humanity was fixed in one place.

As though on cue, the faces of the Skyfire Avenue delegation became stern. For the North to do this, the situation was far beyond their ability to control. If they could, they'd avoid the potential panic of letting everyone in on the danger.

The recording went on to show the Seventh Fleet making its way through the vacuum of space. In the horizon one could make out three strange planets. They were massive in size, and were covered in a thin atmosphere of purple light. In the enormous and inky darkness of the

cosmos, they were very hard to pick out.

Lan Jue had never seen images of the three planets before. Although the planets were too far away for him to pick out any surface features, that shade of purple was one he'd never forget.

When the three planets appeared in their field of vision, the Seventh Fleet began to slow. The entourage began to fan out in a battle array to bolster attack. They would need space to employ the full force of their arsenal.

The four battleships splayed out as well around a near-stationary Mothership. Cargo doors hissed oxygen out in to space before belching with scores of mecha suits. The flagship itself hummed and glowed with blue light that surrounded it like a halo. Part of its forward armor plating split, revealing an enormous main gun.

The diameter of the gun was ten times larger than the Great Conclave Arena. That was even just what the hologram showed, but it was enough to have the crowds marvel at man's destructive power.

This was the main gun of a Mothership. The only other man-made instrument of destructive more powerful, was the attack force of a Bastion ship. A direct blast from a Mothership was strong enough to obliterate a small planet. That was the target of the Seventh Fleet's flagship. It slowly positioned until it faced the middle of the three alien planets, all the while spooling up its doomsday weapon.

But under the surprised gaze of the crowd, that target planet actually began to grow. In what seemed like only a moment, the planet was ten times the size it had been. In the center of it, appeared an inexplicable black hole like a gaping maw. It swallowed up all the light around them, making the Seventh Fleet look like ghosts in a dream.

At last, the Mothership's guns were ready to fire. A blinding orb of energy was emitted, stretching over time to a piercing beam of white light. The rest of the battlegroup followed suit, and aimed their weapons. Only specifics artillery could attack a target from this distance, so they instead prepared for the inevitable offensive.

The crowds couldn't help but have faith in the power of their technology. Although these planets were strange, they couldn't possibly be a match for something like a Mothership. The gun was enough to deal with the problem.

The enormous planet hovered against the bleak backdrop of space. Aside from being a planet, it had grown to a much larger target. There was no avoiding the blast. Everyone watched with quiet satisfaction as the energy blast ten times the size of the arena drilled in to the planet. But that wasn't right. It never struck the planet. Instead, it was swallowed wholesale in to the depths of that black hole.

Blast delay? The silent hope was on the mind of the commanders as they waited. At the distance they were to these planets, even light would need time to arrive. Perhaps there was a shield, but the clash of energies would definitely enough for them to get a reading.

The silence stretched on. Then, from the depths of that black hole, the gathered energies switched direction.

And then erupted outwards!

The Mothership began to react right away. Now it was clear that these planets were an enemy to humanity. Safety had to be a priority above colonization, so these foes would need to be destroyed. This was the duty for any soldier – destroy that which threatens mankind.

As the audience watched the alien planet shrug off the cannon blast. Their pupils were wide with fear and disbelief. What was this light? Was that from the Mothership? But, how could it simply turn it around like that?

The Seventh Fleet never had a chance to react. The Mothership was immediately swallowed up in the cleansing white fire.

They watched as the shields began to fail. That thin shield of energy grew dimmer by the second.

It was rare for a Mothership to engage in conflict. A single shot from its main battery was enormously draining, and required a lattice of high-

grade power gems. That was the price of near incomparable destructive power. Its shields had to be equally impressive.

The Northern battle group fought with terrible fervor, a cohesive and deadly unit. More blasts came from the battleships, while the expedition cruisers threw themselves in the line of fire to protect the flagship. The remaining ships could only stand by, with no practical combat use this far out.

The fleet pulled it together just enough to survive the alien counterattack. But, before the spectators could even recover, another wave of red light was ejected from the planet's mouth. It rolled toward them like a cosmic storm of purple and red.

The image zoomed in, and sharpened. That wasn't a cloud.... Those were the alien beasts.

Lan Jue's pupils contracted. Weren't these the same monsters he fought on Taihua? But none of them were tiny, and the smallest of them was larger than the progenitor he killed. Some of them beat wings more than a hundred meters across. Some were twisted and strange like enormous purple cauliflowers, and others were comprised of spiky angles. They hurdled through the air no faster than the expedition ships, and blotted out space.

The battle group opened fire on the horde. They didn't have the benefit of the Mothership's main gun, but secondary turrets were still operational. A wall of fire converged on the monsters' path.

Thankfully the individual beasts didn't share their home planet's ability to grow, at least without the benefit of something to consume. However, their personal armor was intensely strong. Only a few of the blasts were strong enough to penetrate and kill the creatures. With their numbers, the humans just weren't causing enough damage.

The monsters in the front ranks of the horde swallowed up many of the turret rounds. They encroached upon the human position in a crescent shape. They continued to flank them, with dedicated beasts to return and deflect fire. Soon they were surrounded.

Even the overwhelming destructive force of the Seventh Fleet wasn't enough to destroy them. At present, it was barely enough to keep them at bay. From the holographic recording, they could see the fleet trying to retreat. But their evacuation route was overrun with purplish-red monstrosities. Their retreat was cut off.

These aliens worked together. Just like an army.

Scenes from the next; Skyfire Avenue!

Boom!

Waves of crimson blot out the distant galaxies – reinforcements.

—

The ragged breathing of the crowd was audible from everywhere. Households all over human occupied space were incensed, frightened, and shocked by what they were witnessing

—

“Everything you’ve seen is true.”

—

Jun Yongye pulled away the cloth to reveal a box that looked to be made for crystal

....

fade to black

Chapter 484: The Emperor Jewel

The enemy forces came nearer. Much to the shock and fear of the audience, they saw that the monsters outnumbered the Seventh Fleet at least ten to one. Some of those beasts had a mass to rival warships. These were truly the things of nightmare!

The fleet circled the wagons in a defensive maneuver. Once the ships were safe, they launched their counterattack.

Fighters were expelled from their hangers and joined the mech suits, battling the monsters as they descended upon them. The thick-skinned aliens were well-defended, but individually couldn't contend with a warship's armor. Their numbers made up for it.

In the ultimate insult, each kill became the creatures' food. Everything was consumed and used for more destruction. The other two distant planets were also quick to take advantage of the food source. Waves of crimson blotted out the twinkling distant galaxies – reinforcements. The creatures were too many to count, stretching to the distant horizon.

The fleet continued to fire wildly as the creatures came closer and closer. Each one killed was replaced by ten. A blast from the mothership ripped open a vast swath, but it shut half a heartbeat later.

The recording froze.

The ragged breathing of the crowd was audible from everywhere. Households all over human occupied space were incensed, frightened, and shocked by what they were witnessing. The tournament competitors watched with solemn faces. Lan Jue had known of this for some time, being seeing it like this caused a storm of emotions to appear on his face.

The North was the strongest human Alliance to date, but even their entire armada counted only around ten battle fleets. A single one could conquer a galaxy. Whether it was distance, strength, or energy renewal, there was no naval body that could match them. People called it invincible.

This harshly underlined how arrogant humanity really was. This terror from the depths of space was unimaginable. Their soldiers were swallowed up by the invaders. The aliens were stronger than the fleet. It looked stronger than ten of them.

This was also just the tip of the iceberg. These three planets were beyond comprehension. Whatever destructive capabilities they had, the crowds still couldn't guess. But, who would go out to learn more? Who could they ask to sacrifice themselves like that?

The Terminator's voice called out again. His tone was no different, but in the thick atmosphere it sounded much lower.

"Everything you've seen is true. The Seventh Fleet has valiantly given their lives for their Alliance. They died to give us this information. They bought it with blood. Now we know the strength of our hostile neighbor, thanks to them.

"We've learned that these three planets are living entities. They move at the speed of a Bastion, and are getting closer. At least a year, as long as three... that's how long before they reach our homes.

"Thanks to the information gleaned by the East, we've discovered that these monsters consume essence. They use what they devour to evolve – and not just life, but anything with energy. Make no mistake, these beasts are out for our destruction. What you saw was not a single event.

"When these alien planets arrive, we will be faced with the possible destruction of our species. But don't be hopeless. We held this tournament to show you that humanity has a chance. Make no mistake, fellow human citizens... we have entered a dire era. Starting immediately, we need to muster all of our strength. We need to make preparations to meet these enemies and stop them at the gates. They will be greeted with our greatest weapons and be laid to waste. If we can do this, then there will be nothing to stop humanity from prospering in to the distant future. There will be no threat to our continued existence among the stars.

Silence hung over the arena, as the spectators let the news sink in. Those images were frightening, the moment that a hundred thousand people

died. Before the news had been kept confidential, and even family members didn't know the circumstances behind their loved ones' death, though the government compensated them. Many in the audience cried openly as memories of their loss came flooding back.

The pictures vanished and the floodlights returned. The excitement of earlier was gone, replaced with a thick and somber atmosphere. It stretched on for some time, until Mo Xiao's voice returned.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Great Adept Tournament has come to a close. Please join us for the awards ceremony, where our Northern hosts will be presenting the finalists with their prizes."

It was the moment they had been waiting for, but the mood had soured. Excitement was in short supply. It proceeded under the dark threat of alien destruction. Finalists were assured at least an S-ranked gemstone, and because there was no fight Xuanyuan Shishi and the Pharmacist received the same s-ranked gem.

The second part of the awards ceremony followed. Jun Yongye and Lan Jue stood before the two Paragons. They had been given no time to change clothes and looked pretty beat up.

There had been two main reasons for the Great Adept Tournament. The first – as mentioned – was to inspire the youth of today to work for strength. The second was to announce what the Terminator had dubbed 'the Dire Era.' These goals had been achieved, so the rest was keeping promises. They didn't need to make a fuss.

The Epochrion floated to the space before Jun Yong ye. She bore a tray in her hands, with a box-shaped item beneath a red cloth

"Open it. Congratulations!" She sounded like a young woman, but there was no emotion in her voice.

Jun Yongye pulled away the cloth to reveal a box that looked to be made of crystal. Within, a twinkling gem stone the size of a man's fist sat. It's faceted, oval-cut surface glowed with a golden light. The box was still clothed, thus constraining its aura, but it nonetheless caught every Adept's attention.

Lan Jue saw it clearest, standing right beside the Blademaster. He couldn't help but gasp, like he was looking upon a masterpiece. He was in the power gem business, after all, he knew what he was looking at. It was an s-ranked gem, of course, and a rare one.

It was called the Emperor. That's right, the Emperor Jewel!

It was a lofty name, but it was not one given lightly. The functions of the gem earned it the title. The Emperor Jewel didn't contain a great deal of energy, not did it possess the ability to ingest more. It did, however, have a very special ability. That was capitulation. Through some means, the power gem forced other gems to submit to a new master.

Not all power gems were safe. There was a level of uncertainty when using certain types. Some contained wild energies, or emitted harmful radiation. That was why there was a saying in the world of power gem trade; the brighter it twinkles, the stronger it booms.

There were always exceptions. The Phylactery stone imbedded in Lan Jue's hand was an example. It had the ability to draw in outside energy, but its primary use was containment. The Tear of Neptune filtered energy and removed impurities. But these were outliers. Most power gems were dangerous or unstable, and steps needed to be taken before they could be used personally or in construction.

This was true, unless you had an Emperor Jewel. With one in hand, those problems cease to be problems. The crystal pacified whatever unstable gem was placed before it, removing downsides and constraining radiation. There were no known gems that were resistant to the Emperor Jewel's domination.

Aside from that, it had other stunning applications. Most warships sat on complex lattice arrays of power gems that had the destructive force of a supernova. With an Emperor Gem, it made them much better than normal energy reactors.

Chapter 485: The Blinding Stone

In those cases, many power gems were joined together. The result was greatly augmented or joined capabilities. Without something to bring them in line, so many power gems together would result in mutual destruction. However, putting an Emperor Stone in its center served to stabilize these erratic energies. It made them safe and effective. Even particularly powerful – and, thus, dangerous – gems were not a threat when the Emperor Stone was part of the picture. In short, it made whatever it was equipped to better – that was its purpose, stability and strength.

Judging by the size of Jun Yongye's prize, it was good enough to power the gem lattice of a scout ship. It was worth more money than most people would see in their lifetimes.

Emperor Stones were only produced in the Northern Alliance, and it was one of their chief strategic products. If the governments of the East and West needed them for their ships, they would need to pay the North for the privilege. Often the price didn't come in dollars, and instead were traded for resources or other gems.

This was the second-place prize. What did they have in store for the champion?

Lan Jue was a little speechless when he noted that Jun Yongye didn't appear to know what it was he was looking at. He took up in his hand with a blank look on his face.

He swallowed nervously. Lan Jue wasn't a greedy man, but after seeing what his opponent earned, he couldn't wait to see what he would be going home with. The things he could do with Zeus-1 if it was equipped with an Emperor Stone, not to mention Thor. It would be something out of his wildest dreams. He had to think about whether there was anything he could offer the Blademaster.

Lan Jue, lost in thought, almost didn't notice when the Terminator stepped in front of him. He also had a tray, with a red cloth hiding

something a little smaller than Jun Yongye's award. It looked almost tiny in the eight-foot-tall man's hands. Size didn't matter, though, the worth of a thing did not always equate to its size. Second place had been given a top-of-the-line, S-rank power gem. What could his prize be?

An anxious light blazed behind Lan Jue's eyes.

"Congratulations on your victory, Champion. It looks like your daughter was right all along. You are the strongest." The Terminator's look had more meaning in it than the words let on.

Inwardly Lan Jue felt his chest tighten. He smiled back at the Paragon. "A daughter's praise for her father is never honest. She guessed, and I got lucky." The cloth was removed as they spoke, revealing the crystal box beneath.

At last the final award was about to be given. The crowd gave the Terminator their full attention. Their screens zoomed in on the prize.

"Eh?" Lan Jue couldn't help but exclaim when he saw what it was. Surprised mutters rippled through the audience as well.

The crystal box was the same as the one Jun Yongye's award had come in. But this one was empty.

Lan Jue swallowed again, this time in apprehension. He offered a nervous laugh. "Is the Champion's reward the crisp Northern air, your majesty?"

Laughter rippled through the stands, but there were also some disgruntled chatter. Could the North be stiffing the tournament Champion on his reward? Would they dare? Hua Li had just finished telling everyone how their Lan Jue wasn't just the tournament champion, but a bona fide hero!

The Terminator's meaty hand released the tray and pulled the top of the box open. There were no waves of energy, no sensation: the box was empty. But he reached in, and pulled his hand out again with his fingers wrapped around... nothing. He extended his hand toward Lan Jue.

The Terminator sighed as he looked down at it. "If I had known you

would be the champion we would have chosen something else. We prepared this for Titan. You do indeed have good luck.”

There was nothing there... he couldn't see anything. He when the Terminator put it in his hands, he could feel it. It was round and smooth like a power gem, slightly smaller than the one than had been given to Jun Yongye. He could hide it in his fist. However, he could feel absolutely nothing coming from it – no energies at all.

Lan Jue's face lit up. “Thank you very much, Your Majesty. And I would like to offer my sincerest thanks to the Great Conclave as a whole.” He said it with sincerity.

The Paragon nodded. “The Champions prize! It is the Blinding Stone. Perhaps you could give us a demonstration, champion?”

He'd suspected before the Terminator said it, but now that Lan Jue was certain his excitement catapulted.

The Blinding Stone was an S-ranked power gem whose concealing properties were unparalleled. Emperor Stones were produced at least to some degree, but Blinding Stones had only ever been discovered a handful of times. It was the third rarest power gem on record.

In lieu of a flashier display, Lan Jue simply lifted his hand in to the air. His fingers, wrapped around the invisible treasure, were the first things to become transparent. It spread to his arm, his shoulder, and then he vanished completely in to thin air.

Jun Yongye was standing but a few inches from the spot where Lan Jue had been, but he felt no trace of the man.

The Terminator's booming voice rattled the arena. “Channeling energy through the Blinding Stone will enable its concealing affects. There are no current technologies that can penetrate this cloak – making them effectively, blind. Only a Paragon's reflection of their Domain can recognize its use. It is a power gem of the highest grade. Unfortunately, this stone is too small to conceal an entire ship – but installed to a mecha, it would completely wipe it from radar. This will make Thor a ghost.”

He needn't explain any further. Lan Jue reappeared, and bowed toward the Paragon to show his appreciation.

This was a truly deserving gift! The implications of a mecha completely undetectable to radar were staggering. He could also use it on himself and no one but a Paragon would be able to find him – and even then, only if they were channeling their Domain! It wasn't like they walked around with it 'turned on' all the time.

Of course, this didn't overcome a Paragon's crisis awareness. If he used the stone to try and conceal an attack, a Paragon would recognize the threat immediately.

Lan Jue was satisfied. But, if he could get an Emperor Stone like Jun Yongye's, then his planned upgrades for Thor would be complete. The miracle battle against Star Alliance had underlined the need for new hardware. After all, he had gotten stronger. Thor would need to be stronger to handle it.

The tournament had come to a close. The final prizes had been given out. Once Lan Jue and Jun Yongye collected their prizes, the announcement was made that the festivities were over. The audience left in orderly fashion, without fuss. Any residual excitement they had was gone. Humanity was under threat, and even the military didn't seem capable of handling it. An entire fleet had been destroyed in moments, and those same planets were headed their way. What sort of havoc could they wreak on civilians?

At least on Luo they felt a degree of safety. The news had reached hundreds of planets, though, and many of them did not enjoy the same protections the Northern capitol did. All three Alliance governments had been made aware of this early, and so measures had been taken to ensure the crowds remained peaceful. For their safety.

"If you don't have any pressing business, I'd appreciate a talk with the two of you," Lan Jue said to the White Blademaster. Jun Yongye immediately agreed, to Lan Jue's surprise. Xuanyuan Shishi said nothing. He appeared happy to follow Jun Yongye's lead.

Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi left together. They followed the route designated for them to exit the arena.

“We’re returning to the East. What about you two?” Lan Jue turned his head to ask Jun Yongye.

He nodded. “Let’s go back together.”

Lan Jue felt the whole thing a little strange, but nodded nonetheless. “Perfect.”

They couldn’t leave right away, so they hung around for a minute until the Gourmet came. Jun’er bounced in his arms. The rest of the Skyfire delegation was close behind. They filed on a maglev bus that had been arranged beforehand, then made their way to the public air hangar.

They’d planned this before the tournament’s end. The North’s influence stretched far, and the earlier they left the better. The Northern government could, if they desired, blow them out of orbit. But the Avenue had prepared for this eventuality as well.

When they got on the bus, Lan Jue went to the back and changed his clothes. Jun Yongye hadn’t brought any, so he lent the Blademaster some of his own.

Qianlin was still joined with him, and he didn’t want to release her so soon. He would wait for more safety and privacy.

The streets were clogged with traffic, making their trek to the hangar slow going. The mood within was solemn, though it wasn’t because of the potential danger. They’d seen the same thing the audience had in that arena.

The Barber was the first one to break the silence. He turned to the Gourmet. “Are they really that dangerous?”

The Avenue’s Paragon nodded slowly. “It’s real. They’d kept this little bit hidden, but it only highlights how life-threatening the situation has become. The Clairvoyant was right as always. We’ve entered a dark period of human crisis.”

The Gourmet looked at Lan Jue. The Clairvoyant had also told him that their Jewelry Master would be humanity's only chance.

Chapter 486: The Big Send-Off

Lan Jue leaned back against the bus seat, with his eyes closed. As the bus hummed along, the passengers all seemed lost in their own world. He could hear the Pharmacist and Jun'er beside him. The young one displayed her uncanny cleverness by sticking close to her mother.

Eventually the traffic cleared up and the bus made it to the airship hangar. It was the largest one in Luo, and could accommodate nearly any class of ship. Private or commercial, most air traffic came through this place.

The road widened up and the hangar spread out in front of them. But what he saw through the windshield widened the Gourmet's eyes.

Before them, stretching back to the gates of the hangar, row upon row of mechas were revealed. They lumbered up from a downhill slope, and their vanguard was a heavy defense suit. A cadre of flying suits hovered above for support for the main force that followed.

Their eyes were the only tool they had to count them, but it looked like over a thousand suits had been assembled.

A thousand suits was a standard mecha division. If this was some kind of training maneuver, they wouldn't be doing it in front of the public air field.

The bus was rented, and their driver stared at the scene with unbridled shock. So stunned was he that his first reaction was to bring the bus to a sudden stop.

The Gourmet's face spread in to a bitter grin. "That's a big send-off."

A murderous light simmered behind the Barber's eyes. The Beautician picked at her nails as though she hadn't noticed anything. The Driver and the Bartender were fighting over a glass of alcohol while the Coffee Master fiddled with his fingers. They tapped incessantly, so fast they blurred.

"Open the door." The Gourmet said to the driver. "Then get as far as you

can.”

The driver did as he was told. He didn't know what was going on, but he was no fool. Whatever was going on here was not going to be good. It was a problem he didn't want to be involved in.

The encroaching mech suits had spread in to formation. All at once they stopped, as though nailed in place. Their guns rose and the telling buzz of charging cannons filled the air. A v-formation of flying suits hung overhead, but did not engage. They quietly awaited orders.

The Skyfire Avenue delegation, together with Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi, filed off the bus. The Ten Thousand Swords rolled his shoulders. “Well, this isn't the best outcome we could have hoped for. It looks like traveling with you all will bring trouble.”

“Enough.” Jun Yongye shot his companion a look, but said nothing else. Shishi seemed to fear him on some level, and kept silent.

Lan Jue was apologetic. “I'm very sorry. We didn't know this would happen, either. It looks like we don't have a choice, though – we have to face them.”

Jun Yongye smiled. “Shoulder to shoulder.”

The Driver appeared beside Lan Jue. He glowered at the enemy, with his arms crossed before his chest. “I like the odds. It's better when things get noisy.”

The adepts lined up to facing their enemy. They quietly surveyed the mechs, knowing that these were no ordinary soldiers. The pilots would be some of the best, and in a straight-on battle it was unlikely they would win. However, that was not counting the Paragon among them. What's more, what Adept would be silly enough to fight a mech toe to toe? They had methods for facing off against mechanical enemies.

Gusts of wind pulled at their clothes, born from the engines of the airborne mechas. Lan Jue looked to his left and to his right, peering down the line of his compatriots. He was excited to stand by their side in conflict. He was proud to have allies-in-arms. Together, they were a

unified force.

“The tournament just ended? Why are you in such a rush to leave?” The deep voice seemed to come from all around them. The day went from pleasantly sunny to a gloomy dark, without warning. A shadow fell over them Avenue denizens as a massive figure descended from the sky. It was the Terminator.

The Gourmet, his pupils contracting, took a step forward. “Terminator. What is the meaning of this?”

The enormous man’s voice was low and passionless. “I’ve never been one to beat around the bush. I was very surprised, not least to discover that your Jewelry Master saved so many on Taihua. Our priorities are aligned – we do it for the species. I don’t want to hurt an ally.

“Leave Jun’er here and you can go peaceably. I give you my word as a Paragon that the North will not impede you on your journey home.”

Jun ‘er... his target was the little girl.

But that hadn’t been his only goal. Before news of his heroics had gotten out, the Terminator had desired to keep the Jewelry Master from fleeing as well. That was no longer an option.

It didn’t take him long to notice the two swordsmen in their party. He nodded to them. “I would ask you two to remain as well. We would certainly like for you to join the Great Conclave. Here you would have access to limitless resources. With your Talent, you are sure to become Paragons, and the Conclave will come under your leadership. If you agree, I ask that you come stand at my side.”

Xuanyuan Shishi answered with a jovial laugh. “Big man, don’t think your stature frightens anyone. You think you can force us to stay by yourself?”

The Terminator grinned. “I’m not by myself. I have no desire to do this, but I am a Northerner. I must do what’s best for the future of my Alliance. Gourmet, what is your answer?”

That was all the acknowledgement Shishi would receive. The only one

who could be counted his contemporary was the Infernal Vanguard. The Paragon returned the Terminator's gaze.

"Jun'er said you weren't a bad man. Are you going to disappoint a little girl?"

The enormous man sighed. "I am sorry, I do what I must for the North. The Avenue is already too strong. If you are led by another Clairvoyant we will have no leg to stand on, so my only choice is to keep her here. I promise you she will be treated like an heir. We don't have any soothsayers, but there are many with knowledge of the craft. We will spare no expense to train her, and I swear her abilities will never be turned against the East. Gourmet, don't let this be an end to an era of peace. Leave the girl, and go. In the future we will fight again side by side, when it matters."

The Terminator had thought a great deal about this. Were it not for the threat of invasion from the aliens, then the North would have tried to keep every one of the Avenue's young Talents. It would have crippled the next generation of Eastern leaders.

Chapter 487: Good Enough?

It was true that the Avenue was powerful. However, a closer look inspired less awe. Two of its Paragons were newly ascended, and their powerful Clairvoyant had reached the end of his days. Even with the backing of the East, the North could take what they wanted. There was too great a gulf in strength between them.

However, circumstances were different than before. Now a foreign enemy was bearing down upon them. The tournament, like the miracle battle before it, was meant to inspire the next generation of soldiers. DreamNet's upgrade achieved the same aim. Everything was designed to help humanity prepare for the inevitable battle.

The Terminator feared the future of the Avenue, but he couldn't go to the extreme. The Clairvoyant's successor was the greatest threat.

Lan Jue would be a Paragon, but rising to the level of his Master, Jue Di, would be no easy feat. Still, if Jue Di were alive he wouldn't appreciate a disciple in trouble. Besides Lan Jue was a hero. The East's response to having such a luminary kidnapped would be intense. The North would have trouble keeping its head above water. In the end Hua LI's move had been wise; the North couldn't stop Lan Jue from leaving now that everyone knew who he was.

Jun'er was a different story, and once she grew in to her powers she would be the darling of the North. He came upon this decision because he felt that taking one would avoid a multitude of problems in the future. To him, there was nothing more important! It was also the least harmful path for relations between the Conclave and the Avenue.

There was also the Pharmacist, a woman of great strength and Talent herself. If he had her daughter, how could she leave? With those two under Northern control, the others could leave and it would still be a resounding victory. If only they would come peaceably, he thought. With the North's advanced technology and strength, the opportunities available to them would be many. All he would need is time to win them over. The

Epochrion was not a Northerner, but she had chosen them – and so would they.

The Pharmacist glared at the Paragon with eyes that glimmered with a frigid light. “If you want my daughter, you better think about what it will cost you.” She wasn’t the least bit disturbed by the power of the man, and faced him with the same imposing air she was famous for.

“You’re all intelligent people,” the Terminator pleaded. “So am I. I didn’t come here alone.”

They were suddenly aware of another figure, descended from the sky in to their field of vision. The Epochrion.

She hovered in the air, her face concealed behind a veil. Like a statue, the second Northern Paragon regarded them with a dispassionate gaze. In the same moment several other figures began to emerge from their surroundings.

Over a hundred Adepts from the Great Conclave surrounded them. Among them were Titan, Yan Ningya and several other Northerners who’d performed well during the tournament. More mechas arrived with them, both by land and air. The Skyfire Avenue Adepts had nowhere to turn.

The situation was beginning to look as hopeless as it was inescapable. And yet, in the face of a thousand mechas, a hundred Adepts and two Paragons, the Easterners were calm.

The Gourmet answered him, calmly. “It’s pretty telling how much firepower you’ve brought. Mechas, warriors, disciples... The Great Conclave must have quite the impression of us.”

“Just enough firepower to show you what the consequences are,” the Terminator rumbled. “I brought the show of force because I had hoped I wouldn’t need to use it. I know you have plans, but don’t think they’ll be enough. I’ll say it again: Leave the girl and the two swordsmen, then you can leave. We won’t stop you.”

The Gourmet laughed. “The Avenue’s government may not be as strict as yours, but don’t mistake that for weakness. As a Paragon of Skyfire, no

partner will be left behind so long as I draw breath. Did you really believe that any show of strength would make us bow to you?"

A dangerous light flashed in the Terminator's eyes. "Still not enough? Then we'll up the stakes."

He punctuated the sentence with a clap. Several figures hidden behind the line of mechs extricated themselves from the crowd and moved to the Terminator's side.

The Gourmet watched. He was calm, but then, a change.

Metatron, Constantine, Sariel and a cadre of lackies appeared. Lucifer also made his presence known, with the Lich-descendant Jiang Yuan, the Wolf King, and even the vampire Princess Lina in tow. Chu Cheng's former crush looked pained to be there, but was bound by her commitment to the Dark Citadel.

The Great Conclave had joined with both of the West's houses. They were joined in their nefarious plot to overcome these few foreign Talents. Clearly, the Avenue hadn't been the only one making plans! The Terminator had been busy as well. He seemed better prepared.

"Good enough?" The Terminator asked sarcastically.

At last, the Gourmet's calm expression broke. His features turned in to a dark, threatening scowl. He began to walk slowly forward. "Are you prepared to make an enemy out of Skyfire Avenue, Terminator? An enemy of the East?"

The Terminator's deep voice replied. "I've told you, our only enemies are those who are coming to destroy all of humanity. We're allies."

This made the Infernal Vanguard bubble with laughter. "Allies? This is how you think an ally behaves? What's more – this still isn't enough. There's a lot of potential destruction standing here. I pause to think of the damage it'd cause this planet."

This did cause the Terminator to hesitate. The Gourmet had just reached Paragon, but he was harder to deal with than the Terminator could have guessed.

Chapter 488: Four Paragons Meet

The Gourmet's threat was not an empty one. If a Paragon consumed their own life force, the destruction they were capable of was unimaginable. Even both the Terminator and the Epochrion wouldn't be able to contain it all. None of the many mechs surrounding them could survive the ensuing power. The North would pay dearly if they chose that route.

What's more, the Avenue's representatives were few, but strong. All four of the tournament's finalists were present, and everyone had seen the strength that they possessed. Each of them could touch the border of Paragon, even now.

The tournament had forbade the use of protogenia, too, and that was no longer a restriction. Who could say what these fighters were fully capable of? The North's timing was good, though. At least Lan Jue and Jun Yongye were not at full strength. They hadn't had enough time to recover after the championship battle.

"And if we include me?" The cracking, aged voice was followed by a piercing beam of holy light. It illuminated the area around them from overhead, revealing a new silhouette beside the Terminator. A bejeweled crown sat upon his head that looked resplendent against the plain white cassock that covered him. It was the Eye of God, the Pontiff!

This was a real shock to the Gourmet's small party. It blindsided them, more than any of the faces that appeared before.

The Pontiff was a lower level than the Epochrion and Terminator, but his power was no less terrible. With him here the combat effectiveness of the Citadel was increased a hundred fold. The Pontiff was the final straw to break the camel's back. The Gourmet stopped his advance.

Three Paragons against one, each one stronger than he. The Gourmet was very quickly running out of options.

The Terminator watched his Eastern counterpart earnestly. "Make your choice, Infernal Vanguard." It was the first time he addressed the man by

his respectful title.

An inexplicable look came over the chef. “Such bully tactics – bringing so many against so few.”

None of the other Paragons reacted. However, he could see it in the eyes of those many soldiers who followed them. They thought the same. This was robbery.

The Terminator’s goal had always been to get what he wanted without bloodshed. At last, it was starting to look like he would have his way. He watched as the faces of the Eastern Adepts darkened with realization.

“There’s nothing worse than trying to win a fight by relying on all your friends. 1 Pontiff, you’re everywhere like a damn cockroach. No fear that I’ll tear apart that rat’s nest you call home?” A voice, filled with range and indignation, joined the conversation.

The Pontiff’s face froze.

The holy light blazing in the sky was suddenly gone, like someone flipped a switch. Everything was plunged in to darkness and a hundred millions stars twinkled overhead. They shone so brightly that the Adepts below could see everything. It was different from that holy light, though, like all of Luo had been plunged in to eternal night.

“The Arcane Magnate!” The Terminator cried. The Avenue had another Paragon, who’d arrived somehow on Luo completely unannounced. No wonder... no wonder the Gourmet was so calm. His backup was already here.

“Yes, it is I, you enormous iron pimple. Come, let’s see who’s stronger, out in space!” The Arcane Magnate wasn’t the strongest of the Paragons, but he was – without a doubt – the meanest. His present also struck fear in to the hearts of those present. There was no man alive capable of more destruction than the mad scientist.

It was necessarily advantages in combat that made him such a frightening foe. Instead, it was because his attacks were so all-encompassing. The North definitely couldn’t handle the aftermath of such

a confrontation if it meant sacrificing Luo! It was the same tactic he'd used on the Pontiff in his own citadel.

The power the Gourmet would command if he sacrificed his body was enough to give the Terminator pause. What the the Arcane Magnate was capable of, would terrify the whole nation.

The Terminator's voice grew cold. "I thought there was a saying where you're from, scholar. 'When the old don't die it's like thievery.' You're brave to come out here at your age. Aren't you afraid you won't be able to return? That you'll lose the chance at a peaceful, natural death?" The sudden and menacing arrival of the Keeper caused him to lose his composure. The stress of the last few days was becoming evident, and a suddenly oppressive atmosphere descended around them.

The Terminator clapped his hands again, and the ring of mechs retreated.

Any contest between Paragons was no place for mechs. Removing them from play was saving their lives. It also looked like preparations for combat.

The Pontiff stood passively by the Terminator's side. To him, conflict wasn't something to fear. This wasn't Reims, he wasn't responsible for what would come. On the contrary, he was eager to teach the Keeper a lesson for past transgressions.

"Someone said bully?! Just the three of you? We've got numbers, too!" Another voice interrupted their exchange. This one was heavy with disdain, thick with contempt. He sounded even more ornery than the Keeper.

The skies were again the canvas for displays of power, as a sea of shooting stars burned across the heavens. The spectacular meteor shower filled the world with undulating silvery light.

A Paragon! Another Paragon!

The Terminator sucked in a breath. He was seeing just how important Jun'er was to Skyfire Avenue. Two more Paragons had come to fetch her

apart from the Gourmet. This new Paragon was not one he was familiar with, but he could immediately feel his energy. It mingled with the Keepers, and their synergy birthed a dictatorial air. The Terminator could feel it constraining his Domain, fighting to keep it contained.

“The Karmic Scholar.” He growled.

“Correct, it is I – your elder brother. What was all this about old people dying? Let me tell you something, q-tip, we two old geezers will be kicking around long after you’re dead.”

The Karmic Scholar, once the mortal enemy of the Keeper, and in a former life called the Bookworm! Now, they were the twin pillars of strength underpinning the Avenue.

Towering images, each a thousand meters tall, stretched high in to the air. They were the projected images of the Arcane Magnate, and the Karmic Scholar. They stood in majestic pose, peering in to the distance like a pair of old heroes. To put it succinctly, they were peacocking.

Now it was even; three world-destroying super humans against three more.

In terms of pure numbers, the North still looked to have the upper hand. The Ecpohrion and Terminator were both in the Reflection stage of Paragon. Each of them individually were strong enough to handle both old men together. Strength wasn’t the problem... except it was. If they used their full strength, it would be the people of Luo who would suffer. The cost was unthinkable. Already, regret had wormed in to the Terminator’s mind. If he’d had known, the ambush would have been set in space. Out there it didn’t matter how devastating their clash became.

“You’ve done your homework, Terminator,” the Keeper said proudly. “In pure strength, we can’t compete. But I promise that the East’s memory is long. You will never know another peaceful day. And perhaps, sometime, I’ll appear around one of your Northern Planets. I’m sure a Positron Cannon blast through its core would be satisfying to watch.”

The Bookworm followed on his heels. “You know, I’ve been fiddling with a new device, and I’m fairly sure it can strip a planet of its atmosphere.

I've yet to test it, though, for lack of an adequate test subject. The North does have the most planets, which makes it an excellent test environment."

"Enough... it's clear you two old madmen don't have any shame. Do you have any integrity?" The Epochrion could no longer hold her peace. Her pretty voice was hard with anger. "You two are Paragons. They are called that for a reason – paragons of integrity, and honor. You should act like it."

The sharp rebuke earned a rare moment of silence from the two crotchety old men. They exchange a look, but said nothing.

And then there was another voice. "You are no longer the Avenue's Clockmaker. You are not the assistant to the Clairvoyant, or the Chairwoman of the Avenue Council. Not anymore. You are the Epochrion, and you belong to the Great Conclave."

When she heard the voice, the Epochrion went rigid. The Pontiff, too, was visibly shaken. They turned, and saw the man standing a few feet away, bathed in silver light. He held aloft a glimmering scepter.

The Cosmagus! The Wine Master! All four of Skyfire Avenue's Paragons were gathered for war!

"Bold, bringing all four of you here. Aren't you afraid to leave the Avenue unprotected, Cosmagus?" the Terminator asked.

The sudden arrival of the Karmic Scholar, Arcane Magnate and Cosmagus was no accident. They hadn't even just arrived. Skyfire Avenue must have had time to prepare for this, and did so amply. Three Paragons were sent for a handful of Adepts and a little girl. The Terminator hadn't counted on that.

Now the Northerners were outnumbered. The Terminator was confident they could still win, even down a man. After all, the Karmic Scholar and the Infernal Vanguard were only recently ascended. However, their appearance meant that his plan had been thoroughly ruined – there was no hope for a bloodless resolution.

Chapter 489: The Cosmagus and the Epochrion

The Avenue's four Paragons didn't only represent their organization. They represented their whole Alliance. If something were to happen to them here on Northern soil, then the entire government of the East would be forced to retaliate.

Things would have played out differently if the alien threat didn't exist, but they did, and they were coming. Once again the North would be first to suffer. It was unwise to start a war with the East under these circumstances.

Hearing the query, the Wine Master's cold gaze fell upon the Epochrion. His voice was soft, but unfriendly. "The Clairvoyant isn't dead. That's hardly leaving the Avenue undefended."

The Terminator was slow to react. He may have only been one level of Paragon beneath the Clairvoyant, but the gulf between them was immense. That was as true in their contributions to humanity as it was to their strength. This was also why he feared the idea of another Clairvoyant so much.

The Terminator's voice was hard by contrast. "You thought bringing so many people here would frighten me in to letting her go, Wine Master? You forget – this is the North!"

"That is exactly what I think," the Wine Master tepidly replied. "And now that I'm here, do you think we would put Jun'er in harm's way? Pharmacist... show him."

A smile spread across her pretty face, and she set the bundle in her arms to the ground. Jun'er began to walk forward with a stiff and awkward gait.

Everyone here was among the best Adepts of humanity. With their incredible powers of perception, it only took half a moment to realize the truth: this was a robot!

The Terminator's face fell. "Impossible. I felt her powers myself in the

Arena. I know she was real.”

“Of course she is,” the Wine Master replied. “If she weren’t why would we go through all this trouble? I was waiting in the corridors when the tournament finished. A quick exchange, and that was that. The details aren’t important.”

Indeed they weren’t, and to explain any further would be an insult to the Paragon’s intelligence. The Wine Master’s powers lie in interdimensional manipulation. Absconding Jun’er to safety was a simple matter, as was replacing her with this metallic substitute.

Defeat was evident to the Terminator, and it was starting to fray his nerves. He’d been outsmarted, and all his strength couldn’t change the fact. The Avenue had prepared well.

Their objective wasn’t here. What was the point of any further conflict? Especially when the Bookworm and Keeper seemed to have such little regard for Northern life. They were already prepared to inflict massive damage to Luo if provoked. They had defensive measures in place, of course, but who knew how well they’d fare against a cadre of Paragons.

“Good, fine! You may go. But Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi are not your responsibility.” The Terminator was grasping for a victory.

“They are not part of the Avenue,” the Wine Master confirmed.

“But they are my fellow apprentices,” the Pharmacist interjected.

The Terminator’s face darkened even further. The art of the sword was an ancient technique passed from master to student, so her assertions were plausible. It made him furious.

Jun Yongye languidly sauntered over to the Pharmacist’s side. He smiled. “You won’t be keeping us here either, even if you’re Paragons. Xuayuna, let’s head out. We don’t want to bring our friends anymore trouble. Sister, we’ll find you when you get back.” He nodded once toward his companion. Then, pausing for a moment, the swordsman looked toward Lan Jue and nodded as well.

Xuanyuan Shishi arrived at his friend’s side. There was an odd flash, and

then the two changed before everyone's eyes. Two swords – one red, one blue – hung suspended in air. They glimmered brilliantly and then, piercing effortlessly through the ground, vanished.

It was an unanticipated exit, to be sure. Neither the Terminator nor the Epochrion knew they could do that.

The Pontiff waved his scepter, and an aura of holy light spread out around him. He looked prepared for battle. The Epochrion fixed the Wine Master with her silent, shimmering gaze.

The Terminator's chest heaved, fighting his anger. After a moment, though, he eased. His voice was hard as iron. "I am honored to have so many illustrious Paragon guests on Luo, but you've taxed my hospitality. I ask that you leave as quickly as you're able. Men! Send them off!"

The Terminator dissolved in to a jet black column of energy, then vanished. It had seemed frank, but it was more fatal than the Easterner's had known. He could feel the Pontiff's lust for blood, and letting that loose would have hurt his people as well as theirs. Everything would have been thrown in to chaos. In light of these unfortunate revelations, fighting would have achieved nothing. After all, there was their common enemy to consider. He would have to swallow the bitter pill of today's embarrassment.

With the Terminator gone, it signaled the North's defeat.

The Pontiff didn't stick around. He took his entourage and left. The Dark Citadel made their exit as well, in another direction. The Pontiff was here and Satan was not, so they weren't interested in starting trouble. They knew what kind of man the Pontiff really was, and given half a chance he would destroy them all.

They had been on a razor's edge, but now the atmosphere cooled. The Avenue delegation could breathe a sigh of relief. The skies overhead brightened anew, which signaled the departure of the Keeper and the Bookworm.

The Arcane Magnate's voice hung in the air after his figure disappeared. "We'll wait for you on the airship. Hurry up." It was also Jun'er's hiding

place. They would need to get there quickly to protect her. Those last two words were deliberate.

Lan Jue also heaved a sigh. Thanks to the Pharmacist's medicines he was recovering, but the fight against Jun Yongye had drained him. Complete recovery would take time. This was a much preferred alternative to fighting.

The Gourmet broke his reverie. "Let's go. We'll have to fly there ourselves." Without regarding the Wine Master, he led them in to the air and toward the air hangar. Only two remained.

The Wine Master and the Epochrion exchanged looks. The old man's calm face was belied by emotive eyes. They looked pained.

"Have you been alright?" The Epochrion spoke first.

"Very well." He answered.

The Epochrion's small voice was almost a whisper. "It's been a long time. You haven't changed at all."

A sad smile spread his lips. "Just older. But really it is you who hasn't changed. As young and beautiful as you ever were."

"You should go, too," she quickly interjected. "The Terminator can calmly deal with a situation, but the military isn't so level-headed. You should be careful, even on the way home."

A silvery flash sprang out from the Wine Master's hand, and the scepter it clutched vanished. "I didn't only come here to protect my people. I've had questions on my mind for the last forty-two years, and today I'm going to get answers. We may never get another chance."

There was a moment of silence, before the Epochrion looked up at him. "Ask."

The Wine Master took his time. His hands slowly clenched in to white-knuckled fists. "Why did you leave? Was it really just a disagreement in philosophy? Did you take our relationship in to account?"

She didn't answer. The Wine Master couldn't hide the emotion from his

face any longer.

“My whole life I’ve only ever loved two things; wine... and the Clockmaker.” “He fought to calm himself, managing to a degree. “There are a few shops on the Avenue that lie empty. The Horologium, and the photography studio still await the day their owner returns.

There was a clear note of disappointment in her voice. “Go back? I’m sorry, Wine Master. I know how you feel about me. That’s part of the reason I left.”

The Wine Master looked at her, shocked. “Because of me?”

She sighed. “Time passes so quickly. People think I control it, but do I? I sure don’t think so. No one is the master of time, because it cannot be controlled. Forty-two years... neither of us are young anymore.

“There’s a lot I never said for fear of hurting you. But you’re insistent. The truth is, I never loved you. My heart always belonged to someone else, someone who loved my sister instead. I couldn’t accept it and left. It wasn’t all you, either. You were too good to me, and I couldn’t repay you the way you wanted. I felt I had no choice but to go.

“Those disagreements of vision were just an excuse. The real reason was I couldn’t stand to face you, or even face myself. That’s when I met the Terminator and decided to leave. Perhaps it was the best decision for me, at the time.”

The Wine Master was at a loss for words. He didn’t know how convoluted the truth had been – or how cruel.

Chapter 490: Absconding

The Wine Master took a step back and staggered, almost falling over. His ruddy features were now a ghastly pale, and twisted in agony. “I was a clown and nothing more. I’m sorry I troubled you. Had I known, I wouldn’t have been around all the time. I apologize. I won’t bother you any further, but I will say that the Horologium is still just the same as it was. Come by, if you’re feeling nostalgic. It’s been forty-two years, your store is the same but many other things are different. Otherwise, I promise that I won’t disturb you anymore.”

A pain difficult to put in to words struck at the old man’s heart. Over forty years of waiting, only to discover this. He felt empty, like his dimensional rifts had carved away the inside.

The former Clockmaker looked at him in stunned silence. She watched as he retreated a few steps, then turned as though to leave. His shrunken frame quivered, and an amorphous light splayed out around him.

Forty-two years, and he still...

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Zeus-1 was tucked in to an unassuming corner of the public air hangar. None of the newly arrived Paragons had used it to get here, though. The Gourmet had informed the Wine Master of Jun’er’s abilities at the earliest chance he could. The Cosmagus then immediately alerted the other two and made for Luo. This was not simply a matter of bringing back the little one safely. The entire future of the Avenue was altogether, not least Lan Jue who the Clairvoyant placed such high hopes on.

A great deal went in getting in to the North undetected so quickly. It required a series of secret identities to confound would-be defenses. They’d refused Lan Jue’s offer to use Zeus-1 to maintain secrecy.

The Accountant kept them abreast of the situation with a special frequency their communicators were attuned to, to hide the messengers from curious ears. For minds like the Karmic Scholar and the Arcane Magnate, it was a laughably easy network to set-up.

The three Paragons watched closely as the East began to dominate the tournament. Lan Jue's miracle victory over Titan put him in the finals, and swept potential victory from the other two Alliances. With each passing moment, they knew their haste and secrecy was warranted.

They knew the North, its domineering style. To be faced with such an excellent showing by the Avenue and the East, it would have been strange for him not to try something.

The Gourmet covered their retreat in conjunction with the other three. No one need fear any longer, with nearly all of the Avenue's strength at their back.

Their painstaking preparations had paid off in the end. And what's more, even with four Paragons they had not overdone it. Without them, the Gourmet and his party would have been at the Terminator's mercy.

They without fuss, and made no attempts to hide their tracks. They were sufficiently protected and even if they'd tried, the North was the biggest Alliance in the galaxy. If they wanted to track them, they could.

Jun'er was waiting on the ship, as promised. She was in the middle of playing, surrounded by a ring of beautiful women.

They were familiar figures: the Stygian Succubus Mika, the Asura Blademaider Xiuxiu, and the Psychic Tide Lin Guoguo. Ke'er was the only amazon not present. Due to her history with the North, Lan Jue thought it best she remain behind and tend shop. His accomplices during the tournament, responsible for the bets, were Mika and Xiuxiu. They'd be coming back to the Avenue tremendously wealthy people.

Su Xiaosu, the Morning Star, was of course with them. She had helped the two amazons during the tournament before busying herself with their escape plans.

The Accountant sat at the controls, fidgeting. He turned to look at Lan Jue. "Everyone here, Jewelry Master?"

He shot the twitchy man a thumbs-up, to which the Accountant chuckled deviously. "Then let's get the hell outta here! Ladies and

gentlemen, the fasten seatbelt sign has been illuminated!”

Zeus-1 slowly pulled out of the hangar and on to the runway. The delegate were perched awkwardly around the cabin, as it hadn't been equipped for luxury travel. The seats were the ones he'd had installed for the ARC students. Discomfort was a staple of that training, so he hadn't spent very much on amenities. The passengers had to make do with limited elbow room.

Every moment on Luo was a risk, so when the Accountant got the airship lined up, take-off was swift. The engines roared as Zeus-1 streaked across the sky and through the atmosphere. The ship's state-of-the-art dampening equipment made the acceleration feel no more uncomfortable than a bus ride. Jun'er almost didn't notice they were moving.

Almost the entire Avenue leadership was on Luo, and it was no longer a secret. They needed to get back to Skyfire as quick as possible, or they left themselves exposed to danger. In reality, however, they knew the chances of something happening while they were away was small. Short of a Paragon attack, they would be safe.

Flickering reds and oranges filled the cabin as the atmosphere burned just outside the cabin windows. Soon it faded away as Zeus-1 thrust itself in to the empty embrace of space. Lan Jue sat in his usual seat, with the control helmet perched on his head. They weren't completely out of the proverbial woods. The North had the strongest fleet in the galaxy, with bastions and warships that could destroy them without much effort. Whatever the likelihood of that happening, he had to be ready.

The wrinkled face of the Keeper slipped in to his field of vision. The old man patted him on the shoulder. “The Blinding Stone. Let's have a look.”

Lan Jue wasn't sure what he wanted, but hastily produced it from interdimensional storage. It still sat in its crystal box. Presumably. He handed it to the Keeper.

A gem like this was a rare thing to see, even for him.

He weighed the box in his gnarled hands, and chuckled. “That idiot baldy has suffered a hell of a lot to safe face! This sort of gem is not cheap. A

worthy reward. I'll take a closer look at it while you're bringing us home."

"I'll go, too!" The Bookworm spryly leapt to his feet and made to follow his colleague. Upon breaking through to Paragon and assuming the mantle of Karmic Mantle, the dispute between them withered and died. Now the two were practically attached at the hip. They spent their days trading theories and testing hypotheses. Through it they had made pretty amazing advances.

Those two were a large part of what made the Terminator back down. With their powers joined, they were as strong as a second level Paragon. That was likely to change, though, as both had begun their path to second level individually.

The two old researches left, while the Wine Master kept to himself in a corner. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking about by his face. The Gourmet stood at Lan Jue's side, ready to offer assistance if needed.

The Jewelry Master allowed his psychic energies to flow through the helmet and in to the ship. He used it as a conduit, to spread his perception out through space. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Soon they were moving at light speed, toward safety on the route the Accountant had designed.

After about fifteen minutes, Lan Jue took the helmet off. He smiled. "It looks like the Terminator is a man of restraint. There doesn't appear to be anyone in pursuit."

He could hear the audible sighs of relief from the passengers. He couldn't blame them, it was a tense situation.

"I need to visit the bathroom," he said before standing. "Accountant, watch the radar."

"Count on me, I got this." He was piloting the ship, but when needed he had almost superhuman focus. It also helped that his two worst nightmares were a few feet away.

Lan Jue made his way to the bathroom, the safest place to release Qianlin from within him. It wasn't a state they could maintain forever.

“I see nothing! Can’t see anything!” Lan Jue shut his eyes tight and turned away from her.

Qianlin, modestly covering what she could, pepped Lan Jue with his eyes screwed shut. Her clothes were in his hands, held out to her. She gave a little giggle before taking them from him and quickly changing.

“All set.” She said, when she was finished.

Lan Jue opened his eyes, and saw the blushing face of Zhou Qianlin. He greeted her with a friendly smile. “Did you get hurt in today’s fight?”

She shook her head. “No. You took all the attacks. Are you alright?”

He, too, shook his head. “After sis’ medicine, I’m fine. Check, what’s your Discipline at, now? I’ll check as well.”

He knew that after Hus Li’s announcement, something was different. He felt stronger. The faith and appreciation of the masses had infused him. Qianlin was with him through the whole process, so her improvement was just as impressive.

But when he closed his eyes and turned his perception inward, he discovered just how much of an improvement it had been. He was ninth level third rank before, recently risen upon finding his Path to Paragon. Still, that process would need time.

It was everything else – that pure flood of faith and power – that bolstered both him and Qianlin. His Discipline had exploded to fifth rank, tempered through the whirlwind events of the tournament. It felt solid, too. His foundation was strong. His Core was maintaining its condensed state, and its energies remained pure. This tournament probably saved him several months of hard cultivation.

Chapter 491: Joint Statement

Zhou Qianlin's gains through this ordeal were even better than Lan Jue's. Her Discipline had exploded to ninth level, fourth rank. Lan Jue might have risen by more ranks, but the qualitative change was the same. Passing third rank was the first major bottleneck in a ninth level Adept. Now, she was in the middle ranks.

Zhou Qianlin had never risen so high in rank before. The tribulations of this ordeal had helped her cross the gulf. Months of her life had been saved, that otherwise would have been spent in arduous meditation. Lan Jue had already traversed this path, so the way was clearer.

It was also great that they should break through like this together. Still, Lan Jue didn't spend too much time marveling over it. He smiled at her, then opened the door of the bathroom and slipped out first.

She watched him go through the closing door. A myriad of conflicting emotions flitted across her face. But she pulled herself together and followed him out.

"Eh? Are we pulling beautiful women out of thin air?" The Coffee Master blinked at Zhou Qianlin when he saw her.

"Not bad, right? They should call me the Magician." Lan Jue dodged. The Coffee Master didn't need to know about his relationship with Qianlin.

The Pharmacist looked to Qianlin for a moment, then waved the Jewelry Master over. He trotted over and sat by her and her daughter.. Jun'er smiled him when he came, and opened her arms to be held.

He snatched her up in to his arms. "What's up?" He asked the Pharmacist. He reminded himself to be careful how he addressed her in front of Jun'er.

"Aren't you curious why I forfeit, and pitted you against Jun Yongye?" The Pharmacist asked.

He nodded. "A little. But I know you have my best interest at heart."

"Indeed," she replied. "In many ways they really are my fellow disciples."

That wasn't entirely untrue. The fight you had with them was also a test, one which you passed. Soon you'll reap the rewards."

Lan Jue looked at her. "That submersion technique, to go underground... they must still be on Luo. Will they be safe?"

She shook her head to assure him. "Don't worry. Nothing will happen to them. In reality, there probably isn't anyone in the galaxy who could hold them if they didn't want to be held. I believe they'll come looking for you soon."

Lan Jue sighed in relief. "Then we can go home at last. After so long, this trip has become exhausting."

How could it not be? First it was the Burrows, then from there right to the Holy City of Reims. Luo was only the last stop in a whirlwind tour, culminating in a knock-down, drag-out tournament. It had been more than a month of running, fighting and training. Now that he was finally heading home, he could feel the fatigue settle in to his bones.

The Pharmacist chuckled at his side. "When we get back, be sure to work hard at your cultivation. You've learned a lot, and you'll need time to absorb it all. All of this will help you when it comes time to break through to Paragon."

He was suddenly curious. "Sis... could you really become a Paragon whenever you want? Why are you holding back?"

She gave him a wry smirk. "If only it were that easy! I let the Terminator believe a deliberate misconception. He mistook the power of my weapon, with my own strength. It's true that I am at peak rank. I also know my Path. However, the weapon I use is too much for me. It will take time to master, and until I bring it fully under my control I cannot break through. When we get back I'll be shutting myself in as well, to see if I can finally succeed."

The Pharmacist's weapon was that enormous white sword, spied briefly during the fights. He was only more curious, but it felt inappropriate to press her further on personal matters.

She went on. “Have you decided that your astrum will be a sword?”

He nodded. “Actually, I used a sword when I was younger. Xiuxiu there, she was arranged for by my master. Her Discipline is the sword, and she can become the Asura Godblade. Master told me that he would teach me the sword when my Taiji was good enough. I guess when I took on the name of Zeus, I just decided to use the spear to keep up appearances. It looks like my first inclination was the right one.

The Pharmacist smiled softly. “Be firm in your conviction and harbor no regrets. Your astrum will help determine your success or failure on the Path to Paragon. In fact you don’t have the luxury for regret, so you need to believe in success with every fiber of your being. Do you understand?”

He nodded. Lan Jue had had the same thought: this sort of decision was final, and he couldn’t afford to feel uncertain. His eyes swung over to Xiuxiu, and there was where the uncertainty lie. To create an astrum, he needed a base – something to build it on. Xiuxiu was perfect, but she wasn’t a weapon, she was a person. If he chose her as his astrum, their fates would be forever linked. That would cause problems. He knew how she felt about him, but sometimes even time couldn’t grant love’s wish.

That wouldn’t work. If he took that path, things were bound to get very messy.

A strange, dim light hung around Lan Jue. An icy-cold expression sat on his face, while the light in his eyes mimicked his aura. When they would fluctuate, so would the bubble. He pressed his hands before his chest and foxed his gaze. This was a problem he could have to think carefully on.

Zeus-1 cruised along at double subluminal speed 1. Luo quickly vanished behind them. They were distant now, but the Accountant still kept the radar operational. It was, thankfully, silent.

Interstellar travel was always an arduous and tiring process, but Zeus-1 was a far sight faster than commercial travel ships, and a lot nimbler. They didn’t have to worry about orbital assists or gravitational fields. The Accountant already had them locked into the quickest, safest route home.

Half an hour later, the Keeper and Bookworm returned to the bridge.

They were all safely in the depths of space, and were no longer needed on guard. They had busied themselves with the installation of the S-ranked invisibility gem, which was now complete. Nothing short of a Paragon, actively channeling their Domain, could pick them out from the blackness of space.

Autopilot took over. The only thing the crew needed to do was take shifts, watching the radar.

Lan Jue found himself a deserted corner, and dropped cross-legged to the floor to meditate. There was too much to do and not enough time, so every moment would be needed if he really wanted to take advantage of everything he'd learned.

Things would also slow down for a while. This was good – he didn't want to rise in rank too quickly. The whole point of re-cultivating was stability, and purity. It was not about break-neck advancement. Now he would need to focus on consolidating the strange and mysterious energies he'd come to experience, and join them together.

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While the Avenue delegation hummed through the vacuum of space, the worlds of humanity were thrown in to turmoil. The North, the West and the East all announced plans to prepare for war, plans that they released in a joint statement to the people.

It pledged to fight the alien menace together. The Alliances would turn their strength to the defense of human kind. In the meanwhile, probes would be sent to the three planets, to watch their progress.

In addition, all of the Alliances would be instituting a draft. For the east, their conscription efforts would be overseen by someone who commanded a great deal of respect. He was the Supersoldier of An Lun, the one they called Prometheus. Lan Qing. With the backdrop of the miracle battle, the tournament and the threat of immanent destruction, the recruiting centers had lines out the door.

This was not to say there wasn't worry. Many feared for their safety. But, if there was one resource humanity never lacked it was hot-blooded, able-

bodied youths. The military was always an attractive option, and they were treated well. Especially in times of war, however, they became heroes. This stirred even normal people to take up arms.

Everything raced ahead to the beat of the war drums. The differences between the alliances already seemed to start melting away as they worked to avoid destruction. Humanity would need to become a well-oiled military machine to survive.

The resolve to fight quickly spread to every corner of human-occupied space. Mining planets saw their output surge as demand increased. Military institutes were preparing themselves as well, and recent enlistees were brought in at a higher rank. However, this was also met with a much more stringent training regimen.

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Seven days later, Zeus-1 pulled in to the public air hangar on Skyfire. As he disembarked, Lan Jue couldn't help but stop and take a deep breath. Really, though, the trip had flown by. He'd spent most of it in quiet contemplation.

Maybe it was because he wasn't joined with Qianlin, or perhaps it was just that he'd risen too fast, but whatever the case he could sense his Discipline's progress slowing. There was a change, though nigh imperceptible. He could feel it, but he couldn't quite describe it. All he knew was it was a good thing.

"Ah! Only the air on Skyfire can make a man feel at home." The Coffee Master called out what everyone was thinking.

A maglev bus silently awaited passenger a few feet away. When the doors opened, a familiar face peaked out. It was the Seamstress.

Chapter 492: Coming Home

The Seamstress had left Luo shortly after her stint in the tournament. At the time, only the Gourmet knew why. Going to Luo was an opportunity for the Avenue. Not just in the tournament, but it gave them an excuse to purchase goods and military equipment that was only available in the North. They were purchased in good faith, under the edict of mutual aid in the fight against the monsters.

The Seamstress brought the haul back to the Avenue herself. A short time later was when the Paragons began to notice the strength of the East. During the semi-finals, pressure had already begun to mount against them, and leaving would have been difficult. She got out with their purchases before getting swept up in the North's net. The Great Conclave's focus had been drawn by Lan Jue, the Pharmacist and the others. The Seamstress was small potatoes, comparatively.

The Gourmet strode forward and wrapped her up in a hug. The two shared a wordless look and smiled affectionately.

"Homeward," the Wine Master's low voice called. Everyone filed on to the bus.

Ever since the Clairvoyant shut himself away, the Wine Master had become the leader of the Avenue. But, the entire ride home he never spoke a word. The old man sat as though in a stupor, with a sour expression on his wrinkled face. No one troubled him, or tried to help. This man was from another generation, and it was the place of youth to pester their elders.

The bus hummed along the road back home.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin sat together. He had his eyes shut, and a neutral expression that made his thoughts hard to guess. Qianlin watched the scenery pass outside her window.

Did you have something you wanted to tell me? Lan Jue asked through the Soulcaller stone.

Qianlin: Give me two days. I promise I'll tell you everything.

Lan Jue opened his eyes and looked at her.

Two days?

She looked back apologetically.

I need to prepare.

Alright.

Lan Jue hadn't been able to shake the memory of her rejection. It dug at him like a fishbone caught in his throat.

The bus reached its destination, stopping outside the entrance to the Avenue. Every face on the bus broke in to a smile when the sight of home appeared on the horizon. Even the Wine Master's.

When they got off the bus, Qianlin turned to Lan Jue. "I haven't been home for a long time. I'm going to head back."

"I'll send you home," Lan Jue replied.

"No, it's fine," she said, shaking her head. "I'll manage."

She hurried off in the direction of Mount Tai.

Lan Jue's brows unconsciously knotted. Ever since his confession, she'd been acting strange. She was disconnected. Had he known, he would have kept it to himself. It was better when the two of them were in harmony.

"Is there something going on between you two?" The Pharmacist's voice interrupted.

He looked down at Jun'er, tucked in her mother's arms, and shook his head. "Nothing major."

She nodded. "Come with me to the shop first. I have something I need to discuss with you."

"Sure," he replied.

He then turned to Mika. "You all head back first. I'll be at the Hall of Supreme Harmony for a while. Get a room set up for Xiaosu, then

inventory what we brought back from the North. I'll be back later."

"Got it." Mika nodded, and shot a glance toward the Morning Star. There was a visible glint of hostility in her pretty eyes.

She wasn't alone. None of the Amazons were tolerant of the former Bloodfiend Empress. How could they be? She had almost gotten Lan Jue killed, and Mika kidnaped. Xiaosu didn't appear to notice. She was quiet, but warm.

Her Discipline was stronger than all the other Amazons, but the Morning Star was wiser than that. IF she wanted to stay here and serve at their side, she would need to at least be cordial. Otherwise, at their word she would be cast away.

Xiaosu left with the Amazons, and the other Avenue denizens went their separate ways. Lan Jue took Jun'er from her mother and wrapped her in his arms as they left for the Pharmacist's shop.

When they reached the underground, Lan Jue was amazed at what he saw. There was easily twice as many people now than there used to be – back when he thought it was crowded. Every shop was a buzz of activity. As they entered the Hall, he was floored. The press of humanity was crushing. He slipped on the face mask and gave the sunglasses to the Pharmacist by means of disguise.

After the Pharmacist's incredible showing, her and her shop had become instantly famous. She was a household name overnight.

Especially in contrast to outside, the inner sanctum of the Hall was blessedly quiet. If Lan Jue was forced to pick his favorite place on the Avenue, it would have to be the secluded, winding paths of the Hall. The old Chinese-style pavilions peppered throughout were all fastidiously crafted to the principles of feng shui, balance of the five elements and internal powers. It was a place rich with culture.

They quietly walked the paths to the back, where they deposited Jun'er in to her room. Then, Lan Jue followed the Pharmacist to a small alcove. It had a strange construction, with eight equilateral walls much like the pavilions they'd passed. The moment he entered, he somehow felt

different.

It had a distinct energy within it, while also isolating them from anything outside. The primordial energies of the planet were gathered here. He didn't need to ask to know this was where the Pharmacist did her cultivation.

She confirmed his thoughts. "This is where I temper myself. Here I have built a conduit of powers, gathering the five elements and eight trigrams. Even the spirit of heaven and earth can be felt. It is also protective, and even a Paragon's breakthrough can't be felt outside of this room.

Lan Jue smiled. "Why all the mystery? Why couldn't you just tell me on the airship?"

The Pharmacist, by contrast, looked at him with a serious face. "Because we have serious things to discuss. A Paragon could hear us anywhere but in here, so this is the safest place."

He put his smile away when he saw her expression. Whatever she wanted to tell him, it wasn't going to be trivial.

She motioned to a cushion on the floor. "Sit."

He removed his shoes and settled down on the very traditional hassock, legs folded underneath. He felt a little self-conscious in the very sage-like posture.

"This is a pretty incredible place, sis. It has got to have a serious effect on cultivation." Lan Jue praised.

"You can come practice Taiji here," she offered. "Taiji, the five elements, the heavenly stems and earthy branches 1, purple star astrology, they all come from the same root. They were born from the same source and supplement each other."

"It would be disrespectful for me to decline," he said with a nod. The best way to advance was still to cultivate with Qianlin, however, they had earned tremendous gains this last month – too fast, in fact. They would need some time to themselves, to stabilize their Disciplines. Not to mention, things were a little tense between himself and Qianlin. At

present, finding a place to cultivate on his own was a better option.

The Pharmacist went on. "It's small, but it took five years of labor, and all the profit from the Hall of Supreme Harmony to realize."

This took Lan Jue by surprise. It was common knowledge that the Hall of Supreme Harmony had the best income, much to the envy of many. Thanks to her personal strength, and the support of the Clairvoyant, no one caused her any trouble because of their jealousy.

He knew at least that her profits were head and shoulders above Zeus' Jewelry Shop, but he was still reaping the benefits. What great gains, and he didn't even have to put in any effort! There was an old saying that claimed 'you could do nothing that's better than selling drugs.' All of that money was hard to imagine.

She saw the surprise on his face. "Do you know why I did it?"

"I imagine creating such a powerful array is difficult to construct and sustain," he said.

She nodded. "That's part of the reason. The heart of it is an s-ranked gen, surrounded by a lattice of ten a-ranked. That isn't all that much money, however. Most of it was spent to suppress my own strength."

"Huh?" Lan Jue blinked at her, confused. She was half a breath from Paragon, and still she struggled to control her own Discipline. What was she ultimately capable of?

She smirked. "It's strange, isn't it? But it's the truth. It cost me ten times the resources to create an array that would do what I needed. The loss of Jun'er's father has made my Path longer, but repressing my strength has also been a major hurdle. But it isn't entirely a bad thing. The results are similar to the re-cultivation process you're going through. As I keep it down, I can polish and strengthen my Discipline, and master my Domain. When I do ultimately break through, my progress will be much faster than someone like the Gourmet, who broke through normally."

"I still don't understand why you'd want to tell me this secret," Lan Jue apologized. "Does this have something to do with me?"

“Not directly, but there is a correlation that involves you,” she answered. “First, I’ll show you what I am suppressing.”

Her final words were punctuated by a dim light. She spread her hands out, and the light filled the room with a graceful, majestic elegance. Lan Jue looked on as the walls reacted, shimmering with ancient runes. They shimmered, light as air, but there was a sense that their strength ran deep.

Chapter 493: The Legend of the Godly Blades

The sudden, crushing pressure forced the air out of his lungs. All it once it was like a mountain had landed on him. He'd seen improvement in his Discipline, and by extensive command over his Domain and spirit – but this power was overwhelming.

The Pharmacist didn't appear at all affected, having long since become used to the pressure. Only her hands moved, fingers dancing through the air. Each swaying motion released a wave of light that fell upon the rune.

All at once the pressure doubled. The room had nothing in the way of ornamentation or furniture, and the only thing he'd seen in it were the cushions. Now he knew why. Anything in here when the Pharmacist let herself loose would be crushed to dust.

The woman's pretty eyes flared to life, blazing with internal light. But however bright they were, her gaze was ice-cold. The air was thick with a murderous intent so overwhelming that Lan Jue could only stare. He felt like even his soul was frozen.

He fought against himself, forcing himself to remain still and not interrupt. The Pharmacist had had countless opportunities to harm him in the past, so that was surely not her intention. So he sat, and watched as the Pharmacist continued to reach for something.

Shot pointed with her right hand, and then a flash. The room was filled with an incandescent light. It was so intense that, if Lan Jue were a normal man, he'd have been outright blinded.

Slicing within it was a white light, somehow separate that hung in the air.

Not a light. A sword, one whose every inch blazed with light. Its point was directed to the ground, its handle pointed skyward. When it appeared, the air felt like it turned to liquid. The same suppressive energies that threatened to crush Lan Jue also seemed to work on the sword. Its

luminous aura dimmed, ever so slightly. To Lan Jue, the pressure on himself felt more diluted, as well.

Strange lines were etched along the blade's surface. Looking upon them made Lan Jue's spirit shudder. He'd seen them before, when the Pharmacist fought against the necromancer Jiang Yuan. It was the same blade that overcame the malefic wyrm, the one they spoke about before – her Astrum!

“Sister, all of this to control your own Astrum?” Lan Jue asked in surprise.

There was a bitterness in her voice when she answered. “It is more accurate to say, all of this to control what I hope to make my Astrum. If I succeed, I will pass the barrier and become a Paragon. This thing is part of the reason Jun'er was born without sight. It is both a great blessing and a terrible curse. It is the thing that keeps me locked in this place. Only after years of painstaking effort have I seen some success in the last few years.

There was certainly a story in all of this, but Lan Jue was silent. He didn't wish to interrupt the Pharmacist's explanation.

“I found it the year I discovered Master's legacy; it was with the medicines, and cultivation teachings. Like them, it was part of the inheritance. But it had a mate. Two swords, and one was taken up by my late husband. We trained together, and improved together, but we still didn't have the strength to approach the weapons. It took a long time for us to understand, but even the presence of their aura helped us obtain knowledge and strengthen our Disciplines. Little by little, we grew strong.”

“At last, when we had come upon the threshold of ninth level, we took the first steps in claiming the weapons for our own. We were so happy. Even just being near them had helped us so much, we foresaw such benefit once we could integrate completely with them.”

“We were right. We advanced faster than other Adepts, and were stronger. Eventually, though, we discovered that something wasn't right. The weapons were actually much stronger than we had at first thought.”

“Master's teachings speak of them. Inherited blades, artifacts even he

couldn't completely control. He gave these weapons to the future, so that a way to unlock their powers would be revealed. They are a set of four in total. I remember Master telling me once that the swords should never be brought together, even though they are inexorably linked. No human could contain their power, and the result would be outright Armageddon. He never joined with them himself, only studied their power. When he felt as though he didn't have much longer to leave, he let them loose to find their destiny.

"The weapons are dangerous, he urged. They are as murderous as they are sharp. In the condition he was in, he dare not attempt to command them, lest he cut his diminishing life short. His teachings urge us to be cautious, and only train with them once we achieve Paragon.

"Unfortunately, my husband and I chose not to heed the warning. We were sure that ninth level was strong enough to assert our dominance on the blades. We could do what the Master could not, we thought. When we first joined with them was when we discovered the swords were much more terrifying than we could have imagined.

"The murderous energies, that infernal sharpness... it tore at us. As a couple, as people. It quickly began to carve away our lives. Only great doses of medicine saved us. For the sword, it was like the addition of our life force excited them. The energy they released was stronger than ever. We couldn't hold it, and it felt like they were trying to slice their ways out from within us. Still we were confident. We had succeeded in joining with our Astrums! How could this be wrong? The only thing that would stop us from mastering these weapons was death itself.

"In order to sustain ourselves, we refined our medicines. Then, we discovered that certain power gems had the ability to suppress the sword's power. We searched furiously for more gems, and they helped. But we needed more, and in order to afford them my husband joined the army. He enlisted with the exploration fleet to scout of planets for resource mining. He chose the job so he could keep an eye on discoveries that could help. Neither of us knew he'd never come back."

She paused for a moment, choked by the overwhelming sadness evident

in her eyes.

“That was when I became Skyfire Avenue’s Pharmacist, and opened the Hall of Supreme Harmony. With the help of Master’s teachings I persevered. My daughter and I pulled through, day by day. It’s funny, when you think about it. My husband and I were both so attached to those swords, just as they were cutting us apart. I honestly can’t tell you if I love them or hate them. They’ve brought me great strength, but also terrible pain.”

Lan Jue was a good listener. He sat across from her and never made a sound as she told her tale. It was evident this was something she’d held on to for a long time. It was important for her to let it out.

The Pharmacist lifted her head to the ceiling, denying her tears the chance to tumble down her cheeks. It took a moment for her to regain composure.

“I hate thinking back on these things. It’s only gotten better in the last couple years. Jun’er is bigger, and I am slowly asserting my control over the artifact. As long as I don’t try to tap in to its full power, I can suffer it. Little brother, have you guessed why I’m telling you this?” She suddenly asked.

Lan Jue looked up at her. “You said that there were four blades. I imagine Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi are the other two. They must have also come across Celestial Master Qian’s teachings.”

The Pharmacist smiled. “Not quite, but close. They acquired a part of Master’s legacy. That day, when the Terminator made his threats, he could never have made good on them. What he did not know was that the styles of Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi were actually two parts of what was intended to be a harmonious whole. Once the two of them are in tandem, it’s said to be completely invincible – like magic. Even your Taiji sword style, or the legendary arts like Lonely Blade, would struggle to go toe to toe. That is to say, in a fight with the Terminator they wouldn’t necessarily have the disadvantage. But that would mean letting the swords free, with all their hungry power.”

Lan Jue looked at the Pharmacist, stunned. He'd never heard even a whisper of this before. Where there really dual-style martial arts like this? Unfortunately he had no way of knowing. When he left to see his own master, and learn the way of the Taiji Sword, then he would discover more about the power of the combined weapons.

The Pharmacist continued. "All of these weapons share the same name. You're a Disciple of Jue Di's martial expertise. Can you guess what it is?"

Chapter 494: The Four Banishing Blades

A thoughtful expression flit across Lan Jue's face. In reality, he'd guessed the story of these weapons once the Pharmacist started explaining. From what she told him, it sounded as though Celestial Master Qian was not the sword's creator. Instead they were ancient artifact weapons, old and powerful. But where did they come from?

It was more complicated than that, though. It was common knowledge that an Astrum was destroyed with its owner. How, then, could these swords have survived to be passed on? Perhaps they weren't really Astrum – maybe it was just that simple.

With such being the case, it must have an ancient heritage. But Lan Jue searched his memory, and could think of nothing about a set of apocalyptic swords. A normal Astrum should be strongest when it's whole, but the Pharmacist displayed incredible ability with only one fourth of a set. They were so strong, and so old, it didn't make any sense that they weren't more widely known. What on earth were they?

He wracked his brain, but came up with nothing. He shook his head. "You're going to have to tell me. I don't know."

Her eyes sparkled. "There is a belief, passed down from early generations of humanity. Back then, they aligned themselves with different schools of thought; the School of Insight, and the School of Interpretation 1. The founder of the School of Insight was Celestial Master Lingbao. He, along with Celestial Master Yuanshi and the Elder Sage, constituted the Three Pure Ones. They all followed the same Master – Ancestor Hungjun. The great teacher separated a treasure in to four parts, and gave one to each of his disciples. Each of these great artifacts had a name; Ultus, Occisus, Captus, and Demortus. The Banishing Blades!

"The Banishing Blades?" Lan Jue exhaled upon hearing the names. Was it true? Could they be the Banishing Blades?

Now that she'd told him the name, of course he knew of them. But calling them an artifact was only scratching the surface. The legend of the

Banishing Blades talks about the Pure Ones using them in tandem, a style called the Banishing Stance. They would emerge from any conflict unscathed. They were considered among the strongest god weapons.

“Sis... are you telling me that your sword is one of the Banishing Blades?”

The Pharmacist smiled. “ ‘Ultus sharp, Occisus death. Captus naught but blood light left. Demortus’ shifts are limitless. Godly blood spills down my dress.’ The sword I bear is the sword of death – Occisus!”

Lan Jue’s eyes were so wide they threatened to roll out of his head. His pupils were wide in surprise, and he took a hard gulp. The... the Banishing Blades!

Holy shit!

The Pharmacist saw his expression and bubbled a laugh. “And with Celestial Master Qian as strong as he was, how was it even he couldn’t persevere against their power? No one is sure whether Ancestor Hong Jun actually made the swords, but it is clear that they are incomparably mighty. Unfortunately, when Master found the swords he did not also discover the Banishing Diagram – teachings for how to perform the Banishing Stance. Its power is enough to obliterate a Bastion ship, and no man-made object could ever contend with its destructive power.”

Occisus... Occisus, Occisus! The name echoed again and again in his mind as he struggled to comprehend.

“Hey, come back to me.” The Pharmacist waved a hand in front of his face. He snapped back to the present and looked her way.

“Occisus, that’s really one of the Banishing Blades. Sis, with that in your hands, you could defeat the Terminator even as a first-level Paragon.” Lan Jue said.

The Pharmacist smiled. “That sounds about right. Occisus is the most murderous of them – the Terminator wouldn’t be too much of a problem then.”

Lan Jue’s eyes suddenly narrowed. “So that means, Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi...”

“... are the same. Jun Yongye is Captus, and Xuanyuan Shishi – the ten thousand swords – is Demortus. The one my husband took with him when he left was the sharpest of them, and the first among the Banishing Blades. Ultus.”

Lan Jue’s breath had become ragged. He tripped over himself to talk. “So in the tournament, neither of them were able to completely control their blade, either?” Now the strength of these weapons was well established. If those two gentlemen had been able to use the weapon to its fullest, how could he have become champion?

The Pharmacist explained. “Xuanyuan Shishi is a little less advanced than his friend. He cannot control Demortus’ power. Jun Yongye is further along – you’ve experienced what I’m explaining.”

That was indeed true. He had been awash in the unbridled power of it. If it hadn’t been for his sudden comprehension of the nature of yin and yang, he’d have lost. Victory was achieved when, at last, the union of yin and yang lightning was complete.

“You remember, after the round-robin? Those two already knew what power I wielded. That’s why they called me sister, and I call them fellow disciples. They asked me to give up my spot in the final four, so they could have a chance to test you. That’s ultimately why I chose to forfeit against Jun Yongye... and his understanding of the blade is inferior to mine.”

“Test?” He thought back to his fights against the two Eastern swordsmen. He remembered how strange the things they said seemed. Did this mean...

The Pharmacist continued. “Yes, they were testing you. In fact, that was their whole purpose in coming – to find two people worthy. As it turns out, you were the best candidate. You aren’t just strong, but have an idea of your Domain as well. Once Poseidon shared that story of your heroism, you passed their test.”

There was a hint of doubt in Lan Jue’s face as he answered her. “But why? My teacher was Jue Di, and you can’t build a house on a different foundation. Anyway, no one even knows where Celestial Master Qian is,

or if he's around at all."

The Pharmacist chuckled and shook her head. "You don't understand. I just said Jun Yongye is Captus, and Shishi is Demortus. Do you understand?"

"Of course!" He said. "Jun Yongye possesses the one sword and Xuanyuan Shishi has the other, right?"

She shook her head. "No. I said they are the swords, not that they have the swords."

His eyes widened again. He didn't believe what he was hearing, but he understood it.

"You mean... they are actually swords?"

"How else do you think there would suddenly appear two young masters?" She asked. "Each of these weapons have a soul, and my own weapon's spirit has already joined with mine. I am it, and it is me. It's been like this ever since we discovered Occisus and Ultus. Probably due to the connections between the swords, Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi would know if the other weapons have chosen a host. Little by little, that sword spirit awakened within them, which allows them to become the image of the sword. They told me, they came out to join the tournament because they were lonely. The Banishing Blades are said to bring tragedy with them wherever they go. This was true the last time they were revealed to the world. It took Celestial Master Qian and the other Elders together to contain the Banishing Stance. Ancestor Tongtian took back the weapons and, in an act of guilt, distributed them among humanity. He bequeathed them to man, so that they may prepare for the next time they'll be needed. Their arrival is for one purpose, to avert disaster."

"The Clairvoyant told me this, while convincing me to join the Avenue. He also said that the swords were an omen of impending doom."

A shiver ran along Lan Jue's spine. He suddenly understood. Everything was connected, and there was always a cause and effect. But most terrifying, was that all of it seemed to be the machinations of the Eye of Tomorrow. From he and Qianlin's run-in with Bize, to the sudden

appearance of these mystical blades. The Clairvoyant saw it all.

It was uncomfortable, to feel like someone was playing with your destiny. In the end, though, there wasn't anything Lan Jue could do about it.

"So I have been chosen, by Captus and Demortus." Lan Jue tried to control his thudding heart. His question was almost unconscious.

She nodded. "More specifically, they've chosen both of you. After all, you didn't fight them alone."

"Qianlin?" Lan Jue looked at her in shock.

She nodded sagely. "Just so."

He shook his head. "Then, where are they? Why didn't they come back with us?"

"I can't say," she replied. "But I believe it won't be very long before they come find you. In the meantime, it's imperative that you refine your Discipline as much as you can. If you don't, you'll end up making the same mistake I did. Don't count on the strength of you and Qianlin together to control them. You have two individual spirits to convince, not just one. Become Paragons. Only then can you control the power they wield.

Chapter 495: The Chance of Harmonious Swords

The Pharmacist smiled at Lan Jue. “Right now, you don’t need to concern yourself too much with the Banishing Blades. The most important thing is to improve your Discipline. I have been and will continue to search for the Banishing Diagram. If all of this is true, and humanity is in dire straits, then we’ll need to find a way to use this formation to our advantage. That is humanity’s best hope for survival. And if we get it, we can use the diagram to find the location of all four swords. Perhaps...”

She trailed off, but the light of hope in her eyes spoke volumes.

Yes! If they could find Ultus, then they’d find her husband!

“If you get any news about the diagram, let me know. I want to help,” Lan Jue said.

“Alright,” she answered, nodding her head. “I did manage to learn something after running in to the other two swords. But right now your primary focus is perfecting yourself. Tell this to Qianlin, and have her begin preparations as well. Also, if you hope to uncover the lost knowledge of the harmonious swords, there mustn’t be any barriers between you. The harmonious swords are built on the prerequisite of emotional connection, and a union of the heart. Only then is harmony achieved, and the style effective. If you can master the techniques, and if both of you manage to break through to Paragon before the diagrams are discovered and the aliens arrive, then humanity will be ready to face this terrible threat.”

Lan Jue took a deep breath. “So no pressure, right sis? I don’t know if I can handle this...”

The Pharmacist’s voice suddenly grew hard. “Whether or not we think we can, we must. That is our destiny. Remember that no matter what, I am here to share your burden. Do not worry over whether the Clairvoyant has controlled your destiny, because I know you’re thinking it. Everything the

Eye of Tomorrow has ever done was in the best interest of mankind. He has sacrificed more than anyone toward this aim. Compared to what he's given up, our tribulations are nothing."

Lan Jue sat up straight at her words. Slowly he nodded.

"Alright," the Pharmacist said, "you're tired. Head back and rest. Do not tell anyone other than Qianlin about what we discussed today."

"Yes." He nodded resolutely.

Even after he stepped out from the Hall of Supreme Harmony and into Skyfire Underground, his heart was still racing beyond control. The Banishing Blades... legendary artifacts.

The press of complicated issues surrounding him began to feel overwhelming. His thoughts were scattered. The Pharmacist's voice was clearest, and her words were a reminder of where he was meant to be. Indeed, the feeling of having your future determined by another was unpleasant. But if it was for humanity? What did one person's concern mean in the face of that?

"Boss! Who do you think you are, King Yu? Thrice to the threshold but never inside?" 1 The hard voice caught Lan Jue's attention.

He snapped his head around to find Ke 'er standing in front of Zeus' Jewelry Store with her hands planted on her hips. Her eyes were wide, and hard with anger. He'd walked right past the door to his shop, lost in his own thoughts.

"Hey, Ke'er. Have you been keeping out of trouble these days?" Lan Jue smirked at her, easily shifting in to a more congenial mood. He was still wearing his face mask for fear of being spotted. Of course, Ke'er would never look past her own boss.

"Hmph!" She sniffed meanly at him. "You're the one in trouble! Gone for so long, never getting in touch, this is not the behavior of a responsible employer! You all left me here by myself, busy all the time. Ke'er's so tired! Every day, so many people. I can't get a moment! Thank goodness An Liu was here to help me."

An Liu? The security officer?

But of course. Things must have been crazy around here with the sudden increase of traffic. Certainly Ke'er couldn't have managed by herself.

Lan Jue looked at her apologetically. "I'm so sorry, Ke'er. I had no idea there would be so many people. Name whatever compensation you want, and you've got it."

Ke'er straightened her shoulders, causing the fabric of her uniform to stretch against her well-endowed figure. "Kiss me, and I'll forgive you!"

"No!" The door behind KE'er flung open, and three pairs of hands yanked her in to the shop. Mika's face appeared around the door frame. "Get in, boss."

Lan Jue smirked. Ah, home! Where it is always warm and sweet.

Lan Jue almost had to fight his way in. There was a press of people from wall to wall, and the girls were all busy. Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu were helping customers, and Ke'er had to race back to the counter. A lot of the merchandise was missing from within the display cases, and a line of people were waiting to get more.

Lan Jue gaped at them. Since when was buying power gems like going to the cabbage market? 2

Mika looked over at him. "Boss, I think we should close the shop after this wave of guests. We need to organize and restock."

Lan Jue nodded. He'd been gone for a long time, so he'd need a minute to go over the condition of the shop. While he was out being productive, the business side of things had fallen on the girls' shoulders. He was out of the loop.

Mika turned off the welcome sign, then set about helping. Meanwhile, the Morning Star stood in a corner and observed the raucous crowd. She looked confused, and a little disappointed.

Lan Jue saw, and pushed through the people to get to her. "What's wrong? Not really your scene, I bet."

Su Xiaosu shook her head. "It's not that I'm uncomfortable, I'm... hopeful. This is such a wonderful feeling, to have a place so lively and safe. Where you don't have to constantly be looking over your shoulder, or worrying over problems of life and death. It's so nice! I always wanted just a day like this. Thank you, boss."

Lan Jue smiled at her, and didn't correct her address. She was here, so might as well prepare for her to stay. There wasn't really any other option. He couldn't force her to leave, especially now that the Pontiff knew who it was that took her. All eyes were on Skyfire Avenue now, and if it weren't for the state of things then retaliation would be expected.

"If you like it, then stick around. You're smart and empathetic. You'll fit right in." Lan Jue said with a wide smile.

Lightly shaking her head, Xiaosu said "I want to, and I'll try my hardest to make the other girls accept me. But I can't, not now. I have to say goodbye."

"You're leaving?" Lan Jue's heart skipped a beat, but he hid it from his face.

She nodded. "I had good people in the starfields, people who would have followed me through hell and high water. The Moonfiend Pirates may have been puppets of the Pontiff's Citadel, but I ran the outfit for years. I have my trusted people. Without me there, things have got to be hard. Gao Yong was the one who came to you, and if he hadn't I would have died. I wouldn't be able to help them. So I'm going back, and I'm going to rebuild the Moonfiend Pirates."

Lan Jue's brows shot up in surprise. "You've changed your mind?" It wasn't long ago that she was begging to be one of his Amazons!

She answered with a sigh. "You helped me make up my mind. When I saw your heroism on Taihua, I realized that people can't just live for themselves. Life isn't a careless walk through the park. I saw those monsters, and when I did I knew that we can't rely only on our Disciplines. We have to have real strength, inner strength. I have resources out there, and I'll turn them toward the fight against these alien predators. We will

be an arm in the fight against eradication and throw off the shackles of the Citadel.”

The more impassioned she became, the more vociferously Lan Jue nodded his head. He looked delighted. “Seeing you like this makes me very happy. You have my support. But, going out right now by yourself is too dangerous, and I’ve got my hands full.”

Su Xiaosu shook her head. “I’m also not the girl I was before. I was still bound by the training and regulations of the Citadel when they came for me before. I have no such relationship them any longer. With your help, I’m no longer a slave to their faith. Besides, the universe is a big place. Finding me won’t be easy.” There was a bright light of wisdom and confidence in her face.

Lan Jue gave her a big smile. “It looks like our Moonfiend Empress is going to make herself felt. If you’re confident, I certainly won’t stop you. Take Zeus-1 with you, I’m sure it’ll be a big help.”

That was an understatement. The ship had just been modified to include the top-grade Blinding Stone. It was a mini warship that could pop in to existence practically anywhere. It was a telling sign of Lan Jue’s commitment to her cause.

“Boss, I can’t accept that. That ship is too precious.” Her face reddened.

“Who said anything about giving?” Lan Jue said with a chuckle. “I’m lending it to you, you can return it to me later. And actually, there’s something else I think I can help you with...” Lan Jue manipulated his Discipline so that his voice was directed to Xiaosu alone. He spoke a few sentences while she listened quietly. But with every word, her eyes seemed to get brighter.

“Alright, so it’s decided. Once everything’s said and done, I expected a position here in the shop.” Su Xiaosu said with a smirk.

Lan Jue chuckled. “It would be my honor to employ the Moonfiend Empress. Zeus’ Jewelry Shop will always be open to you.”

Xiaosu dragged her eyes over to the other girls, busily helping customers.

“I won’t say goodbye to them, they’re still upset. The next time I come by, I’ll show them that I would be just as good to the boss as they are.” She suddenly spun around and wrapped Lan Jue in to a tight hug. It was just for a moment, then she quickly released him and left the store.

She’d felt soft, almost like she was boneless. This was different than the countless other girls he’d hugged. He stood there stunned for a moment, and when he came to, Xiaosu was gone.

Chapter 496: BOSS!

“Quick as the wind, this girl,” Lan Jue muttered helplessly.

“Boss!” He suddenly realized the customers had all gone. The four amazons all stood at his back, hands on their hips. He awkwardly plucked off his mask and coughed.

“Em, do you girls want a hug, too?”

“Hmph!” They shouted in unison.

“Ladies,” he said, his face spreading in to a winning smile. “It’s so nice to be home, let’s not ruin the mood, am I right? In fact, I think we should have a drink and celebrate, what do you think?”

They couldn’t hold it, and Ke’er bubbled in to laughter. “I don’t care, but I do want a hug. You all going out and leaving me behind... you don’t know how much work it was!”

Mika replied. “It was no cake-walk for us, either. Running this way and that, hiding our identities, making deals and buying supplies... it wasn’t easy!”

They made their way toward the far counter of the jewelry shop. The ladies were careful to keep Lan Jue captured in the center of them.

His shifty eyes flit in all directions. “I’ll have you know, girls, that I’m a man of integrity!”

“Like this is some sort of rare happening,” Ke’er quipped. She stuck her tongue out at him, and the other girls tittered.

“Alright,” Mika said, “business to discuss. How has the store been these last few days, Ke’er?”

She nodded. “Business has been unusually busy. Our stock is down to forty-three percent. Everything is selling like hotcakes, it doesn’t matter the price.”

Lan Jue bobbed his head in understanding. “To be expected. In the face of a crisis, everyone wants to prepare, and make themselves as strong as

possible. These gems are used in ships and mechs, but any Adept worth their salt knows that making their equipment stronger improves survivability. Down here, the ones who come to buy are the smart ones. You watch, soon these things will be strategic resources for the coming fight. I suspect personal sales will dwindle or stop in the near future. I think we should close the doors for a while, not for any profit reason, but to arm ourselves.”

“Yeah.” The four amazons each nodded their heads. Beyond simply agreeing with their boss, they would follow his decisions unconditionally.

Lan Jue went on. “So now that we know what we’ve sold, Mika, tell us what we got.”

A glimmer of excitement lit up the Stygian Succubus’ eyes. She began with a dark chuckle. “Oh, we got quite the haul. Luo is the capital of the North and is fat with all kinds of resources. Under the boss’ instruction, we went out to go look for power gems to restock. Thanks to the bets we placed on him during the tournament, we had no trouble getting everything we needed. We cleared out about thirty percent of all the stones in their market. Our focus was on A-and B-ranked gems. It’s certain that after the Terminator’s announcement, prices will skyrocket. Meanwhile we’re got plenty of working capital. The boss was right, power gems are going to become a precious commodity, and we’re sitting on a giant cache.”

Lan Jue cut in. “I need you to take stock of everything we have. Make a list, and make sure the Wine Master gets a copy. Whatever the Avenue needs, we sell at cost.”

“Yess, boss,” Mika answered.

“Boss, why did she leave?” Now that the important business was done, Mika switched gears. She scowled out the window to the Avenue outside.

Lan Jue made his face unreadable. “You ran her off.”

Mika’s eyes snapped back to him. “We never did anything to her! We may not like her all that much, but she was the one that set up the trap in the Starfields.”

Xiuxiu interjected. “Boss, don’t be mad. Let me run out and bring her back.”

Lan Jue’s displeased expression turned her way. “You’re the good one, Xiuxiu. When did you start being so insincere?”

This made Lin Guoguo chuckle. She tugged on her arm. “Because we all think four is enough! Any more and you won’t be able to control us!”

Lan Jue’s stern expression collapsed at the joke. “Alright, that’s enough innuendo. I leave and you all gang up on me. Anyway, Xiaosu’s life has been a difficult one – much like all of you. Hell, she’s had it worse.”

He went on to give a brief look in to the pirate leader’s life. The girls listened dutifully, and when they heard about the dark underbelly of the Citadel, their faces changed.

“Boss, we were wrong.” Mika hung her head. “I had no idea the Pontiff’s Citadel was even filthier than Satan! What a hypocritical bastard!”

Lan Jue shrugged. “It’s fine, I don’t blame any of you. I just wanted you to know that Xiaosu’s life wasn’t so easy. So also didn’t leave just because of you all. The remnants of the Moonfiend Pirates are still loyal to her, so she went to help them. I trust in her abilities. She built her clan up to the fiercest group in all of the Shattered Starfields, and they were the unquestioned masters of the place.. She’s had constant battlefield experience, ever since she was young. We have to let her stand on her own feet. Oh, and I lent her Zeus-1, what do you think?”

“WHAT?!”

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Lan Jue slinked to his room, though perhaps it would be more accurate to say he was cast out of the store. As a boss, the last couple days had been a trail, but in the end a smile was on his face.

Tough work, but comfortable!

When he entered, Lan Jue immediately fell back on to his feet. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, and his mind began to wander.

What a trip, and in the end it had been indispensable. He'd found two ancient gods of wine, saved Su Xiaosu, and walked away from the North as Champion of the Great Adept Tournament. His heart, mind and Discipline had all benefited tremendously.

Emotionally, however, there was still uncertainty. Qianlin's rejection weighed heavily on him, and had his stomach tied in to knots. He was not once to force people, and especially not Qianlin. He needed time to straighten everything out in his head, and so did she.

Lan Jue pressed his fingers to his temples and began to rub. His eyes lit up as a sudden thought popped in to his head; he should go see the A.R.C. students. Now they knew his identity. He could no longer continue his etiquette classes, but they insisted on keeping him on as a drillmaster. He would be needed to help these A.R.C. students continue their growth, and anything to help humanity prepare for the invasion was needed.

Lan Jue dialed a number in to his communicator. It rang three times before connecting.

"Yeah." A deep voice answered.

"I'm back on Skyfire. How are things over there?" Lan Jue asked.

"Right now, everything's normal. All three Alliances have turned their intelligence resources toward the monsters. The only thing we've been able to determine for sure is that they're headed our way. Sometimes they speed up, and sometimes they slow down. It makes it impossible for us to know exactly when they'll get here." Lan Qing delivered the report in a matter-of-fact tone.

Lan Jue asked, "have we managed to learn anything new?"

"They have surprisingly strong counterintelligence measures. We learned our lesson from the North, and keep our probes at a distance. From what we gathered, this is a deadly race. These three planets aren't planets at all, they're living beasts. They invade a world, suck its lifeforce dry, then use its husk to transport it to the next victim. Military personnel have discovered from Taihua that these creatures are capable of pillaging everything from a planet and use it for their own improvement; metal,

power gems, anything. However, the energy they get from those is significantly less than from a planet's vitality. Somehow, they take this life force and convert it in to energy for themselves."

Lan Jue couldn't help but suck in a breath at his brother's report. He knew what this meant. Humanity exploded across the galactic stage, and now sat pretty at five hundred billion strong. Add to that the plethora of flora and fauna on these planets, and it was clear why the pillaging aliens had their eyes pointed in their direction.

"I want to help," Lan Jue said.

On the other end, Lan Qing was silent for a moment. After a moment, his voice answered. "Don't."

"Huh?" Lan Jue's eyes widened. It was only a word, but he knew his brother, and he could hear something else behind the word. Could the Supersoldier of An Lun be doubting humanity's chances? He could hear something different in his mood.

He'd never heard anything like it from his brother before.

Lan Qing changed the subject. "When are you going to see him?"

"In a few days. You?"

"It doesn't look like I'll be able to. Too much to do. You should head over there yourself, first."

"Myself?" Lan Jue sounded almost scared.

Lan Qing answered with some measure of comfort. "You had to go see him sooner or later. Me going would only be to help shore up your courage – I can't really do anything substantial to help. It's all on you."

"Alright. I'll go see him. At least I won't show up without something to help me save face," Lan Jue joked.

"You've grown quickly," Lan Qing affirmed, "have things been alright?"

"Some, here and there," Lan Jue answered. He didn't hide things from his brother. He told him all about the issues between him and Qianlin.

Chapter 497: Going Home

“The Clairvoyant? Him again?” Lan Jue could hear his brother sigh on the other end of the line.

“There’s still about a month before we’re supposed to meet the Clairvoyant, like we agreed. You’ll be back around the same time. Remember to remind A-Cheng and A-Li. When you come back make sure you bury any hatchets that have been dug up.”

“Yeah, I know. Brother, I’ve decided to leave tomorrow and meet with him. Honestly, though, I’m afraid I lack the nerve.” Lan Jue’s sudden revelation come out of nowhere.

Lan Qing thought for a moment. “What if you brought that girl with you?”

Lan Jue hesitated. “Nah, I guess I’ll just go myself.” He’d originally wanted to bring her, but with things as they were now he wasn’t sure. If he was going to trouble the old man with a new person, he had to make sure they were close enough to stand it. Qianlin’s uncertainty put him on unsure footing, too.

“Tell him I asked about him,” Lan Qing said.

“Sure thing.”

He hung up with his brother, and immediately dialed in Chu Cheng’s number. Things were strained, he needed to keep in touch.

“You get back?” Chu Cheng’s flippant voice answered.

“Yeah, just got back. You can stop worrying.” Lan Jue said with a smirk.

Chu Cheng was quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry. Can I help?”

Lan Jue chuckled. “We’re brothers, don’t worry about it. You think I don’t see what you’re all about? Now how are things on your end?”

“His Majesty the Terminator is in a sour mood,” Chu Cheng replied. “He’s having a hard time swaying the Poseidon Group. They have incredible influence, more than you might think. Hua Li’s left, back to

Europa I think. Oh, and be careful about these bastards from the Pontiff's Citadel. The Pontiff showing up was a pretty brazen move against you guys."

Lan Jue nodded. "I know. You be careful, too. Don't go around corrupting all the women."

He heard Chu Cheng sniff. "Nah, those days are done. I've found my one true love. I'm preparing to go to Europa too and find Lina. This time she'll know I'm serious."

Lan Jue stared at his communicator helplessly. "You're definitely the kind of guy who changes hats half a dozen times a day. I was curious how long you'd be serious about this one."

"Yeah I get it, I get it. Hang up the damn phone. I'll see you in a month."

After conversing with Chu Cheng, it was time to get in touch with Hua Li. Lan Jue dialed in yet another number. Communications point to point like this were difficult on interstellar journeys, unless the ship was specially equipped with high-tech coms units. Hua Li may have still been in transit, but Lan Jue didn't doubt the financial capital of the Poseidon Group, or the quality of their ships.

Tomorrow, he would be going home!

He heaved a sigh, trying to calm his beating heart. He sat with his arms crossed against his chest, and an uncertain look in his eye.

The next day, the sunlight peeked timidly over the horizon, painting the horizon with golden light.

The hem of Qianlin's white dress rippled in the gentle wind as she made her way down the Avenue. In her arms was clutched a weighty black box. She looked torn, and made her way slowly along the flagstone path.

Her eyes were surrounded by rings of black, like she hadn't slept well. In truth, she'd spent the night going over what was to come, wracking her brain to prepare herself.

The humming sign for Zeus' Jewelry Shop loomed before her. She could

see its garish blue wall and golden lightning bolt. The muscles along her cheek stood out as she set her jaw, and walked in toward the store with determined steps.

Some things get caught in the heart, and you can never run away from them. These were the things you had to face, no matter what. Rather than let it ruin their relationship, it was time to face it head on.

“Ding ding!” The sweet chimes of the doorbell filled the shop. Inside, Xiuxiu and Ke’er both swung their eyes toward the door.

“Welcome.” Ke’er’s pretty face lit up with a smile, and she walked around the counter to greet Qianlin. However, she kept a respectful distance.

Qianlin nodded her greeting and returned her smile. “Hello. I’m looking for Lan Jue, is he in?”

Ke’er picked out her distracted and uncertain mood right away. Xiuxiu walked over and stood by her coworker’s side. “I’m sorry, Miss Zhou. The boss isn’t here right now.”

Qianlin blinked, surprised by the news, but also a little relieved. “He isn’t here? Where’d he go? When will he be back?”

Xiuxiu explained. “He went on a trip, left early in the morning. I believe he left for another planet, we’re not even sure where. We’re just employees, we can’t ask so many questions.”

Left? He left? Another planet?

Qianlin stood there, silent, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. She bit her lip to try and fight the tears from rolling down her cheeks. She nodded. “Thank you.”

Ke’er watched her push open the door and leave. She looked toward Xiuxiu. “She looks like something isn’t right! Do you think the boss’ quick departure has something to do with her?”

Xiuxiu shook her head. “I’m not sure. But we can’t tell her what the boss is up to.” The warm, gentle eyes of Xiuxiu were now surprisingly cold.

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As Qianlin left the shop, she felt a sudden wave of exhaustion come over her. She leaned against the building's façade to help keep her on her feet.

"He's still angry with me. He probably left to meet Jue Di. Without me." Of course she knew what his destination was. She had been there when he got the call.

She tried to contact him through the Soulcaller gem, but there was no answer. He wasn't on Skyfire.

Of course! Turning him down the way I did, how could he not be upset? Her doll-like faced scrunched in to a bitter frown. She shut her eyes, and at last the tears began to carve their paths down her porcelain cheeks.

After a little while, she managed to get herself under control. She pushed off the wall, and started heading back the way she came.

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Lan Jue had run off early in the morning. Even he felt a little like it was an escape. He sat quietly in Zeus-2 as it quietly raced through the cosmos. The marvelous expanse of the universe spread out before him, so beautiful that sometimes he forgot to breathe.

What was it she wanted to tell me? Lan Jue was piloting the craft by himself, but the onboard computers did most of the work. He had plenty of time to think.

He didn't know why, but Lan Jue was a little afraid of what Qianlin had to say. He'd left early to avoid having to find out.

Maybe being apart for a little while was for the best. Both of them needed some time, and some peace. Time to think was never bad.

Zeus-2 was a copy of Zeus-1, at least before the upgrades. Aside from the Blinding Stone, the Bookworm had also taken a crack at the ship and upgraded it tremendously. He left Lan Jue with the procedure to do the same with the other ships. However, he hadn't been in a rush to upgrade. As it stood though, Zeus-2 was still capable of reaching light speed.

Piloting a ship on your own was different. Out in the emptiness of space, the loneliness, everything seemed much quieter. Man couldn't help but slip in to contemplation when out here along among the stars.

Lan Jue sat at the controls, the sound of his fingers hitting the keys filling the cockpit. Ship components and strings of data outputs flashed across the screens.

Now that he had the time, he was doing things he had been putting off for a while. At present he was designing the blueprints for Thor's next upgrade. No one knew Thor better than Lan Jue, and he knew his old war buddy needed some polishing. He had the Phylactery stone, and several more power gems that needed to be swapped out. Now his shop was doing well, and the ladies had already built up their suits. He was the last straggler.

First the designs had to be planned, then materials could be collected and installed. Assembly much easier than the upgrade process. Planning involved a great deal of science that the Bookworm and Keeper would be well equipped to deal with, but doing it himself was the only way to ensure perfection.

As Lan Jue lost himself in concentration, time flew by like the stars outside the window. Before he knew it, two days had passed.

"Beeep! Beeep! Beeeep! Beeeep!" The harsh screech of an alarm woke Lan Jue from his thoughts. His head shot up from the designs to search the screen for answers. What he saw immediately darkened his expression. His pupils contracted to small dark points.

The main screen showed a purple light, racing toward him at incredible speed. The radar had a solid lock.

"Approach, and identify the object. Arm the main cannon!" Lan Jue's low voice was almost a growl. He could tell by its trajectory that this unknown arrival was headed his way.

Zeus-2 slowed and approached the unidentified object. Its weapons hummed as they charged, but for now he just remained vigilant.

“Attempts to hail the unidentified craft have met with silence. Radar scans indicate life.” The computer’s digitized voice delivered the report. The image on the main screen was enhanced and enlarged.

It was exactly what he expected; one of the purple alien invaders. It looked like an enormous, elongated date pit with purple light expelled from its tail. The creature was moving incredibly fast.

But as Lan Jue watched, he noticed something different about how this one moved. It wasn’t maintaining a constant speed, and instead would sometimes blast forward, then slow time. It looked like it was trying to conserve energy. Sporadic bursts of purple light shot out from its tail, and would subsequently send it barreling ahead.

“The main cannon is ready to fire.” The screens confirmed the computer’s report.

Lan Jue switched to manual control. The ship aligned itself with the creature as the main battery slowly pulled out of its housing. They were coming at each other at break-neck speed, and the closer they got the better read the radar was able to get. Now he could tell that the beast was at least three times bigger than Zeus-2.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes, and hit the fire button. A beam of harsh sapphire light exploded from the ship’s main cannon, right for the encroaching monster.

Chapter 498: Battle!

Lan Jue and the monstrous alien were already close, and the ship's main cannon had a total lock. It wouldn't miss.

It didn't, but the result was not what he expected. The beam of empowered electric light struck the alien straight on, but instead of obliterating it, the beast instead grew larger. Its seed-like shape morphed before his eyes until it splayed out like an umbrella. It flattened itself out to give the blast more surface area. The only lasting effect seemed to be a halo of blue light that hung over the creature.

His attack was completely useless. The rapidly advancing monster stopped, and only continued to advance through inertia. Lan Jue urged Zeus-2 to the side, veering out in a graceful arc so he could flank it.

Clearly this was a monster and not a machine. If it were a construct, then how could it change shape like that? It relied on its physical abilities for defense, not shields or anything else. All of this only confirmed Lan Jue's suspicions.

The monster swung around as graceful as a flying saucer, picking up speed as it did. It was getting closer.

Lan Jue kept his eyes on the sensor read-outs. He could now clearly see the scales that ran up and down the length of its body. They appeared to release some kind of strange purple light that hung around them like an atmosphere. Lan Jue figured it must be that light that somehow managed to neutralize his attack. It must be unthinkably strong! The saucer-shaped beast was coming in horizontally, and he could see that its edges were as sharp as the edge of a knife. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if they crashed.

The ship's engines roared as he picked up speed. It lurched and pitched as the ship changed direction, burning for an escape trajectory. Relatively speaking, Zeus-2 wasn't the most heavily armed ship. However, what it lacked in fire power, it more than made up for in maneuverability.

Of course, Lan Jue wasn't running. He needed some distance so continue

the assault. But even though he looked to be retreating, the monster never stopped. Its body collapsed and returned to its former shape, while plumes of purple light were blasted out from behind. Soon it was racing toward him at the speed of light 1.

The distance between them was closing. Things were beginning to look bad for the lone blue ship.

Damn things are so hard to deal with! His was the first thought that raced through Lan Jue's mind. These things were even meaner than he remembered. Running wasn't an option. There was only one thing to do!

He jabbed at the keyboard, and the ship gained speed. A shell of protective light appeared around him.

"Zeus-2 has entered in to cruise control. Human Delivery Ordinance, stage one, commencing." The calm, digital voice rang through the cockpit. An electric blue light sprang up around Lan Jue, and warped around him to become a glimmering golden flight suit. Fighting in space was different from fighting in atmosphere, and he had to be ready. Even his head was covered.

"HuDO, stage two commencing!." Lan Jue's seat retracted and went flat. Behind him, the wall slowly spread apart and Lan Jue was delivered in to the ordinance room like a torpedo being fit in to a tube.

"HuDO, stage three commencing!" A square-shaped protrusion appeared on the surface of Zeus-2.

"Firing."

A piercing blue light blasted from the ship and back toward the chasing monster. Zeus-2 continued on its course. An egg-shaped orb had been spat out from it like a cannon shot, and within it was Lan Jue. An imposing shadow followed in his wake. Thor!

Zeus-2 wasn't a combat ship, and it didn't have the tools necessary to fully express Lan Jue's abilities. Thor didn't have that problem.

There was a flash against Thor's breastplate, and Lan Jue vanished in to the mecha. The war machine's eyes flared to life. Immediately, waves of

energy began to emanate from it.

Thor remained in the pocket of light as it barreled toward the encroaching foe. Lan Jue furiously integrated his Discipline with the mecha in preparation. A golden sword of energy coalesced in its metallic hands. He'd chosen the sword as his weapon, so he and his mecha needed to adapt.

The beast continued at top speed toward Zeus-2. It of course could sense Lan Jue's approach, but paid little mind to the irritating speck. It spread open its mouth to reveal four rows of jagged teeth like mountain ranges, ready to swallow the blue light up.

Except that Lan Jue was a smart one. His speed bled to zero, maintaining a safe distance from his target. He then fired thrusters and shot the mecha upward. This both prevented impact damage and cut down on unpredictable outcomes.

But the creature lashed out with its gnashing teeth, and caught the edge of Thor's booster. Crack! Thor shuddered as the enormous bite force caused the thruster to buckle.

Lan Jue's combat experience was vast, so he knew how to react. In addition, it could be said that he'd improved in almost every way from his last encounter with these beasts. While his Discipline may not be the same rank it was, it had been tempered, and his control had improved.

His hand speed was now around eighty commands per second. Thor suddenly flared in to a blazing point of light, and drilled in to the creature's mouth. Its great maw was closed, with the ruined slag of Thor's thruster in its teeth. Lan Jue and his suit were somewhere in the depths of its mouth.

The creature was big, but its perception was razor sharp. In a matter of moments, it knew that something inside itself was different. The slimy walls of its innards rolled and contracted, trying to dislodge the irritant. Thor's exterior flood lights revealed the meaty surroundings, which shone back at him with an unsettling luster.

Speed wouldn't save him from the crushing pressure of the monster's

intestines, but Lan Jue didn't panic. If he didn't have a plan, he wouldn't be here. His previous encounters with these creatures taught him what they were capable of, but everything had its weakness – even if it was three patrol ships long. Nature had rules, and that was that the outside was always tougher than the inside. Even a Bastion ship could be destroyed from the inside.

The peristalsis didn't come alone. Soon a flood of purple, caustic fluid came rushing through. Thor reacted by releasing a corona of purplish-blue light. The golden sword in its hand swung around, and dug viciously in to the meaty floor.

However, he was shocked to discover resistance. His sword was imbued with traces of protogenia, and yet something still fought back. The rolling waves of contracted became quick and erratic. Still, though, the sword would not cut through.

No wonder this tiny thing allowed me to eat it, the creature must have thought. It thinks it has a way out.

Flickers of intense light flashed in Lan Jue's eyes. He fearlessly called upon the power of his Discipline to burst out and empower Thor. The violet light it released suddenly lit up and became a dazzling gold. It began to spin, faster and faster until it was a blazing drill bit with all his power directed straight down through the sword.

"Squelch!" At last the sword pierced monster's flesh, and in that instant a rush of electrical current fired out from Lan Jue in all directions. The current put the beast's innards into a spasm and stopped the crushing waves.

The light in Lan Jue's eyes blazed ever brighter, and he fought further through the intractable meat of the creature. Bolts of golden lightning thick as a man continued to barrage the alien from the inside. Its shielding was beginning to show signs of weakening.

It was in pain. Suspended in the vacuum of space, the creature cut off its chase and began to writhe in agony. It appeared its last meal didn't agree with it, but regret solved nothing. Throwing it up also appeared easier said

than done. It thrashed and wretched in attempts to dislodge the painful invader, by this time Thor was already through in to the monster's organs.

Thor was surrounded by the mangled innards of the beast. Lan Jue looked around for just a moment, then took advantage – as a temporary guest – to fill the inside of the creature with a full-strength Forest of Lightning.

From outside, the alien monster contracted every muscle in its body, twisting itself in to a tortured ball. Beams of golden light began to creep out from fissures in its surface. Lan Jue was filling it with attack power comparable of a battleship, and the enormously powerful beast could do nothing.

The golden light continued to rage inside and flicker without. Its great girth contracted until it could no longer move.

Several minutes passed in stillness, then...

Poof! An orb of golden light drilled straight through the monster's skull. Out in the silence of space, its muscles finally released as it died. Its corpse hung suspended in the darkness, and would remain there for eternity.

Thor cut through the vacuum of space like a blazing star, while errant bolts of lightning erupted from it every which way. Its resplendent surface gleamed with electric power, and no trace of the grimy depths it had just traversed were visible.

Behind it, the great beast heaved, and then the light of its life went out.

Thor cut its thrusters and hung motionless in the air. It lifted its great hand to reveal a crystalline, spindle-like object. It looked similar to the one from Taihua, though smaller. What was strange, however, was what it released. Waves of strange, heterogeneous energy poured from it among a mist of purple vapor.

This just confirmed what Lan Jue already knew. This creature was the same kind that attacked Taihua, but since he has never seen the planets they purportedly came from, he couldn't say if they were connected.

Chapter 499: Planet Ziluo

It started as a pinprick of blue light, which slowly grew until it was almost on top of Thor before suddenly stopping. It was Zeus-2, returning to the scene. Thor returned to the ship, and soon Zeus-2 was hovering over the corpse of the monster. As it neared, a beam of pale silver light shot out from below it. It enveloped the body, and then soon after the creature vanished.

In order to accommodate large caches of materials, Lan Jue had set up a series of high-grade interdimensional storage gems, set up in a lattice. It seemed the extra installation was coming in useful. Of course, no living thing would survive in this pocket reality. It was made to store inert materials like minerals and mech suits. The capability of this small ship to house a large number of mech suits was actually one of its great advantages. All of it was, of course, quite expensive. Lan Jue paid for it what a country would pay for a battleship. It was not something your average citizen could afford.

It was quite the find. This universe-traversing specimen wasn't as strong as the progenitor on Taihua, but it wasn't much weaker. Now that he had another piece to work with, they could learn even more about what these things were and how they ticked.

Zeus-2 continued on its journey, though Lan Jue was more cautious this time. He gave up cultivation in lieu of watching being vigilant. He guessed that the one he ran in to was a scout from the monster planets. It was strong, and fast. It was out here scanning for suitable planets, then would have likely returned to share what it learned.

It was a guess, and one he couldn't prove without more information. However, this was still human-occupied space he traversed. Finding one of those things out here was at least proof that the alien monsters were getting closer. Also, it had some means of getting around the blockades that protected human space. Space was large, though, and it was impossible to watch everywhere at once. He guessed that whatever the case, this creature must have been highly intelligent.

The encounter brought Lan Jue's mind back to the images of the seventh fleet. Flashes of destruction flit across his memory, playing against the backdrop of Luo's horizon. The power of those planets alone was staggering. Add to that the countless hordes of monsters, and the implications were enough to give one nightmares.

At least it was starting to look like humanity would be able to fight back. He'd watched the planet swallow up and spat back the battleship attacks, but at least the smaller creatures were killable. Humanity was also awash with incredibly destructive weaponry they hadn't tried yet. Plundering human planets wasn't going to be an easy task for these creatures when all three Alliances' Bastion Ships were giving them hell.

Lan Jue split his time between watching the route and finishing the Thor designs. Upgrading an already world-class mecha wasn't easy. The designs had to not only be precise and make sense, but also had to be theoretically possible. Once it was designed to the right specifications, next he had to gather the needed materials. That was the cheapest way to do it.

Zeus-2 continued on its journey for another three days. Eventually a planet, covered in a purple hue, loomed in the distance. It wasn't large, in fact dwarf planets were likely a bit bigger, but it was beautiful. It hung against the blackness of space like a gemstone on black velvet. The light from its star filtered through the purple atmosphere, making it appear to glow.

Planet Ziluo, an Administration planet under Eastern jurisdiction. ¹ It was about one-sixth the mass of the mother planet, which was small for its function. It had fresh water and all the things human needed, but was otherwise lacking in resources.

An interesting quirk to this planet, was that every year it was buffeted by intense galactic storms. The near-constant encounters caused the planet's magnetic field to adapt in a completely unique way, resulting in the condensed shell of elements that it was famous for. The radiation that flooded the planet's interior was harmful to most humans. Life could only survive in small, shielded pockets on its surface.

To Adepts though, Ziluo was a fine spot for cultivating. This was especially true for Elementalists who's Disciplines resonated well here. They came in droves every year to train. And, while it wasn't terribly rich in resources, it did have special power gems unique to itself.

The entire planet had only thirteen cities dotting its surface, but each one was huge. Special biomes were created around these cities so that the denizens could live comfortably. It boasted the highest rate of Adepts of any planet in the East, and aside from Skyfire Avenue, the strongest. There weren't a wealth of peak-ranked Adepts, but the number of mid-ranged Talents was impressive. Finally, it was also famous for its mecha R&D and manufacturing plants.

"Cleared for approach!" A sweet and melodious female voice crackled through the speakers. Zeus-2's credentials had already been scanned and approved. The magnificent, sapphire body of the craft shimmered like a gem as it pierced Ziluo's atmosphere. It began its descent toward the planet's capital, also called Ziluo.

Ziluo City was the largest settlement on the planet, and famous in particular for its research facilities. The city was covered with scientists and engineers, all dedicated to the advancement of mecha technology. Many God-ranked mechas were designed here. The obviously invested a lot in this place. So, considering the city's focus, the most encountered professions were mecha pilots, engineers and construction crew.

Lan Jue guided Zeus-2 in to the public air hangar. Practiced movements urged the ship to a designated, sapphire blue spot in a quiet corner. It looked very much like his private hangar on Skyfire, only much bigger.

Lan Jue's expression was a little strange, and every meter forward that he moved, he looked less comfortable. He bit back the distracting feeling and followed the robots guiding him to park.

The warehouse wasn't empty. As Lan Jue steered Zeus-2 in to place, he passed by another ship of similar hue, though it was two or three times larger than his own. Aerodynamically it looked like a souped-up version of Zeus-2, and polished to where it almost looked like it was made entirely of

sapphire. The dim lights of the warehouse interior reflected off its surface.

Lan Jue sucked in a breath. This had to be his latest creation.

He disembarked, and couldn't help but wander over to the flashy machine and take a closer look. He spent several minutes looking at it, while the fearful expression drained from his face. It was slowly replaced by surprise.

"You're back." his voice was deep, and sudden.

Lan Jue spun around before he could even think. He then froze like a statue, hardly even daring to breathe.

Footsteps rang through the enormous warehouse as a figure approached.

He looked to be around forty, roughly the same age as the Gourmet. Tall, with leathery skin the color of old bronze, his eyes seemed to shine with an unnatural brightness. The man couldn't be considered handsome, but he exuded a powerful male aura. The black hair on his head was cut short, and stood against his head like countless little black needles.

He was dressed in a worn and tattered jumpsuit with the sleeves cut off. His arms were strong, nothing but muscle. The legs of the jumpsuit were rife with tears and holes. Clearly, it'd been a while since he'd bought new clothes.

A smoldering cigar was caught between the man's thick fingers. He lifted it to his lips and took a long drag, then slowly exhaled. All the while he simply stared at Lan Jue, saying nothing.

"Come with me." He motioned curtly with his hand, then turned and left the warehouse.

Lan Jue hadn't moved a fraction of an inch during the whole exchange, but the moment the command was given Lan Jue was on the move. He almost ran after the other man. He kept his piece, and didn't utter a single word. However, it was clear from his stiff gait and trembling hands that he was anything but collected.

The left the warehouse and took a short walk to its outer wall. There, the middle-aged man placed his hand against the plaster. At his touch, a beam of golden light appeared and opened a portal against the warehouse wall. He walked through it without a second thought.

Lan Jue stumbled in on his heels, blindly and without hesitation. He was as obedient and unquestioning as a child.

The older man walked on at an easy pace, as the route brought them down through the earth. After about fifty meters, they arrived at an elevator. They stepped inside, and the man pushed a button.

The elevator shook, then they began their descent. For a moment, Lan Jue felt somewhat weightless.

The man didn't say anything to Lan Jue during the trek. He stood quietly while Lan Jue watched his every move. The look in his eyes was conflicted. This went on for about a minute, then the elevator doors opened to a raucous scene.

It was an open room, with a ceiling easily two hundred meters overhead. Lan Jue swept his eyes left and right, but couldn't find where the room ended. Machinery hummed all around – this was evidently a factory.

The older man walked on. Lan Jue dutifully followed.

"Uncle Chi. 2' Each worker they passed respectfully saluted the man. The black-haired man greeted each of them with a gentle smile. He wore the uniform of a normal working man, but his status was clear by the respect the others showed him.

They walked through the noisy factory to a far wall, where the man led them through another metal door. It shut behind them, and all sound from the outside world ceased. It looked as though they'd entered some sort of office, furnished with simple metal accoutrements. Beyond that, it was pretty sparse.

The man made his way around the single desk, and fell in to the seat behind it. He pointed to a nearby stool. "Sit."

"Father!" Lan Jue couldn't hold the silence any longer.

Upon hearing the greeting, the man's eyes narrowed. "That's what you call me, but I was certain you'd never come back here."

Chapter 500: Dad

Lan Jue hung his head, like a child who knew he was wrong. “I... was too ashamed.”

There was a flash in the man’s eye, and suddenly an unseen power warped the air around them. Lan Jue felt like a small bird caught in a hurricane, and the terrible winds could rip him apart at any moment. His Discipline flared subconsciously to come to his defense. A thin aura of blue hung over him.

As quick as it had come, the inexplicable power vanished. Lan Jue swayed from the sudden change, but quickly regained his footing. A brief but visible swirl of black and white appeared to help keep him stable.

This made the older man nodded in approval. Then, he said the five words Lan Jue least expected to hear. “So long as you’re back.”

Lan Jue quickly lifted his head, overcome by something within him. Tears rippled at the base of his eyes, threatening to fall. “Father, I...”

He shook his head, fighting a despondent look. “I don’t blame you,” he said in that gruff tone. “I was too intractable before.”

Lan Jue would have dealt better with a beating. He’d had countless dreams and nightmares over how this reunion would go. This was never one of them. He had prepared for the harsh, crazed, iron-hard father – this man was very different.

Lan Jue was faced with the reality that he didn’t really understand the man he called his father. This was the first time he’d ever seen him so calm, and yet he felt like this was the man’s true face.

“There was no need to avoid me. I called you home this time just to tell you one thing.” The man’s voice was even and soft.

Lan Jue unconsciously shot to his feet.

Slowly, the other man lifted his head. His eyes were strange, alive with a flowering power, and when he looked at Lan Jue the two held the gaze for a long time without speaking.

Then the older man smiled. Lan Jue thought it looked strange at first, almost ugly, on this man's face. He never remembered him smiling once throughout the years. It didn't fit, but nevertheless it finally caused Lan Jue's tears to stream down his cheeks.

"I've got a good kid! Gone for a while, but still comes home to visit." The man's low voice was earnest, and full of pride.

"Dad!" Lan Jue cried out, his face covered in tears. He stumbled forward to fall on his knees, but the other man anticipated this, and used his burly arms to pull Lan Jue in to a hug.

"I'm sorry dad. I'm so sorry." No matter how thick their armor, everyone had their soft side. Seeing this man, Lan Jue's was on full display. 1

The other man laughed, deep and happy. "Maybe I am old. I've been learning to let things go."

And indeed that seemed to be true. In his harder days, this man would never have given a call the way he did. It was also fear of that hard man that had Lan Jue so unwilling to visit for so long.

"Alright, enough crying. You're not a woman." He pushed Lan Jue to arm's length, then clapped a calloused hand on his shoulder. The young Jewelry Master sniffed and wiped the tears away with a laugh. That sort of talk was the father he remembered! But, where before his voice would have been terrifying, now Lan Jue could hear it was full affection.

"Shall we go home, dad?"

"Yes!" He slapped the desk before him, and the wall at the far end of the office split open. It revealed a capsule situated before a long tunnel that could seat four people. It looked like a cannon ball primed for use.

They both filed in to the vehicle. Lan Jue settled in and clicked his seatbelt into place. The other man did not.

Without warning, a thunderous roaring sound assailed them, so loud it shook the capsule. Then, just like a cannon ball, they shot through the tunnel at incredible speed. Without any gravity dampeners, Lan Jue was firmly plastered to his seat.

The other man didn't budge, instead sitting there with a pleasant smile as though he were taking a Sunday drive. He took another drag of his cigar and slowly exhaled. Soon the interior of the vehicle was thick with scent of cigar smoke.

"Still as extravagant as ever, huh dad. Those 1966's have a wonderfully rich smell." Lan Jue said with a smile.

The other man grunted. "This is your old man's one vice, so don't you even think about it. None for you.

Lan Jue chortled, but didn't say anything.

"So talk." He continued.

Lan Jue quickly put away his smile. He took a breath and composed his thoughts, then proceeded to tell his dad everything.

He listened carefully as Lan Jue spoke, and puffed occasionally on the cigar. There was no climate control in their little ball, so it wasn't long before even their view of each other became somewhat obstructed. Lan Jue didn't complain, it was a hobby they both shared.

Lan Jue's calm recollection of events did not match his hard expression, and though the tale was long, he wasn't in a hurry to finish. His father listened carefully, but silently. He had no questions, nor comments to share. He just listened.

"Vrrrrrm!" The vehicle hummed as it slowed and came to a stop. As the doors opened, a plume of cigar smoke heralded their exit. The two men walked to a nearby elevator and took it up. A few minutes later they were back on the surface.

The elevator doors opened, and on the other side was a simple wooden door. The middle-aged man pushed it open, and Lan Jue followed him inside.

They were instantly greeted with a refreshing scent. The whole place smelled like flowers and fresh plants. It was a cabin, constructed entirely of wood and without any trace of metal. The whole place looked very simple in comfort and construction. A practiced eye might have noticed

that all of the furniture was antique. They were beautiful and elegant pieces.

Outside the window there was a picturesque scene, straight out of an old Chinese painting. Vast fields of green trees and swaying grass met the eye, while chirping birds sang somewhere nearby. This clean and pleasant scent was natural.

There was a long time that Lan Jue hated his father. Those years were torture, in every sense. But, the man always said that if they wanted to be the best, they would have to suffer the worst. The road to greatness was not ordinary, and we would not allow them to be ordinary.

That process forged both Prometheus and Zeus.

Thinking back on it now, Lan Jue knew that his father was right. His methods may have been simple and crude, but yesterday's pain was today's strength. To live life to the fullest and experience all the great things the universe had to offer, one had to choose the hard path and get strong. This was something he'd learned many years ago.

The middle-aged man opened another door and stepped out into the world. Lan Jue was tight behind. As they stepped out, a vast forest stretched out before them.

The log cabin itself was ringed with a field around seven hundred square meters in diameter. After that was where the forest started. It was almost like a fence that hid and protected the small home.

Lan Jue took in great lung-fulls of fresh air. He could feel the elemental forces that permeated this place. All of these plants, he remembered, had been planted by his father. Ever since living here, gardening had been his way to relax.

No one would believe him if he said it: Jue Di, who could bend the fabric of heaven and earth, who single-handedly took on the Alliance's greatest fighters and won, was living out here as a part-time farmer and scientist.

He remembered that once his father said his dream was to experience as much as he could. He didn't just want interludes of experience, he wanted

to throw himself in to every effort.

He'd worn many hats through the years, and used his extended lifespan in pursuit of study. Lan Qing and Lan Jue both saw him as a vast sea of knowledge that knew no bottom. He was a living repository of all the greatest things humanity had produced. Sometimes he seemed almost omnipotent.

"I cherish my memories of this place," Lan Jue said quietly.

"And yet you didn't come back for so long?" Jue Di said. "Am I really that frightening?"

Lan Jue gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you want the truth?"

Jue Di nodded.

"Absolutely." He didn't even need to think twice.

Jue Di's lips turned down in a scowl. "Then maybe I should just kick your ass."

Lan Jue chuckled. "That would be a normal day. You've already scared me with this new you. It's uncomfortable."

This made the Paragon chuckle. I guess I'll never end up a good man, if you all prefer me from before."

Lan Jue shook his head. "No, not that. I like the new you. It's just hard to watch you get old."

Jue Di was quiet for a time, and then sighed. "Be they a normal human or the strongest Paragon, no one can escape getting old. I may have a long future yet, but my heart is old. You know, sometimes now I get lonely and frighten myself. Eventually that fear was so much that I had to give some things up."

Lan Jue looked at him with surprise in his eyes. His 'father' had never once shared such intimate thoughts with him. He was the indomitable Jue Di!

Now he had become an old man, happy to lose himself in old memories, even if he did still look young.

“You know, dad, the world’s changed a lot. If you’re lonely then you should go and take a look! Humanity still needs you.” Lan Jue said.

Jue Di smirked. “What does it matter what they need, or what they don’t need? Once you reach a certain degree of power, there is only fear. It’s not just your enemies, but your companions, your friends. They all come to be afraid of what you can do. I like it here, and although I’m lonely I live a life of freedom. The people here know Engineer Chi, and they have no cause to fear Jue Di. I have what I need, and it’s a life I’ve become accustomed to. Saving the world I’ll leave to you young folk.”

Chapter 501: Nirvana and Luo Xianni

“Chi Bupang! 1. Get out here right now!” Just then, a woman’s voice full of anger and alluring promise echoed through the forests.

In that instant, the colors of this whole world seemed to change. The vibrant expanse felt like it came grinding to a halt, or perhaps more fitting was to say it was a picture. Everywhere he looked, it was like a hundred thousand detailed paintings layered on top of one another. Even he looked like a painted reflection of himself.

“Rip!” The sound was followed by a hand that appeared to tear open reality and pull itself out. Cracks spider webbed out from the hand and crackled in all directions. They shook and quivered for a moment then, as though they were glued together, things returned quickly back to normal.

Jue Di thrust himself between Lan Jue and the strange hand, and in that moment Lan Jue felt like he was a towering mountain standing in his defense. And yet, there was a sense of instability in his master’s power. No... that wasn’t right. Not his power, his emotions.

A figure appeared in the air above them. It dissolves in to a beam of light that shot to earth, and coalesced once again a few feet away.

From behind Jue Di’s wide shoulder, Lan Jue could see a very attractive, middle-aged woman. She wore tight-fitting jeans that made her legs look long and shapely, a white jacket that accentuated her other features. Her hair was pulled back in to a simple pony tail. If it weren’t for that strange light in her eye, Lan Jue would have assumed she was around twenty years old.

Right now those eyes were blazing with fury, and they were fixed dead on Jue Di. The whole place was suffocating under the weight of her rage.

Lan Jue knew it without having to ask – she was a Paragon. The brief moment he experienced the flare of her power, he could sense that it was stronger than the God of Wine he’d encountered before, Bize. However, in his memory Lan Jue couldn’t remember a Paragon with these abilities.

Long ago the Clairvoyant had said that there were a number of hidden Paragons out in the universe. This woman must be one of them, and what's more, she seemed to know his dad.

In a situation like this there was nothing Lan Jue could do to help. He stayed put behind Jue Di, and didn't dare try to join in with his Discipline.

Jue Di looked embarrassed. "Ho-... how did you find this place?"

The woman glared at him with eyes like frozen daggers. "Hiding! You're hiding from me! Chi Bupang, I swear, you could run all the way up to heaven and dig all the way down to hell and I'll still find you! But this time I'm not letting you go anywhere!"

"Heh, eh... Xianni... you see we have a young man here. Help me save a little face." Jue Di's voice was placative and apologetic.

Lan Jue could only watch, with his mouth hanging open in shock. What the hell is going on?! He thought to himself. I this the same Jue Di? He's scaring my melons off. 2

In every instance he could remember, Jue Di was always in a position of power. His strength, wisdom and character assured that he was never seen as lesser than anyone else. Forget never seeing or hearing anything like this, Lan Jue downright couldn't believe what was going on.

"Face? Do you even know what that means? Face. What about my youth?! Ten years wasted, and where are we now?" The angrier she got, the fiercer her aura became.

"You head back first," Jue Di said, speaking over his shoulder to Lan Jue. He curtly waved the younger man away in attempts to hide his humiliation.

"Oh." Lan Jue didn't protest or ask questions. He knew when it was appropriate to ask question, and in this case it would be safer to watch from a distance.

"Wait right there!" The woman roared.

Lan Jue froze in place. His wide eyes slowly turned to Jue Di.

At last the newcomer turned her eyes to Lan Jue and looked him up and down. She narrowed her eyes to angry little slits. “What’s your relationship with him?”

Jue Di hurriedly piped in. “Disciple! He’s my disciple.”

Her eyes hardened further. “Just a disciple? Young man, what do you call him?”

Lan Jue just stared at her.

She took a step forward, and in a blink she was mere inches from Lan Jue’s face – like she just appeared there. He was familiar with interdimensional powers from the Wine Master, otherwise he would have assumed that was what she was using. This was different, though it seemed to have something to do with interdimensional space.

“I asked you a question. Did you not hear?” She hissed the words mere centimeters from his face.

A smothering pressure bore down on Lan Jue. He found himself speaking in spite of himself. “Father, this...”

“FATHER?!” She screeched. Her voice was so pregnant with indignant rage that Lan Jue stumbled backward to get away from her. By then she had railed on Jue Di, and the little thirty-something woman looked ready to tear him apart. Reality swirled and warped frantically around them.

An orb of black appeared suddenly, as deep and dense as a black hole. It swelled until the two were swallowed up, and then disappeared just as quickly. Lan Jue stood alone now in an empty field, too stunned to react. 3

It wasn’t that he was confused, he knew had happened. When a Paragon reached the third level – Nirvana – they were able to flee to interdimensional space.

Jue Di was the undisputed master of such skills, but he knew his father’s energy signature and that wasn’t it. It was hers! She wasn’t just a Paragon... she was a third-level Paragon!

Lan Jue remembered a talk he had with the Pharmacist, where he

vaguely recalled her mentioning that Jue Di was the only one that may be a fourth-level. Her own master, Celestial Master Qian – was third level, or possibly fourth if he was alive. The Eye of Tomorrow had just entered in to third level when he sequestered himself. Other than those three, the remaining known Paragons were level two or below.

This woman was an unknown factor, at least not a Paragon he'd ever heard of, and actually at Nirvana level. Since when where there so many Paragons running around? Was she really that strong?

He suspected there was more to this. Who knew the true identity of this woman his father didn't seem able to handle?

After thinking for a moment, Lan Jue pulled up his communicator. He had a sneaking suspicion that this new Paragons Domain was similar to the Wine Master's. He could sense the dimensional ripples she created, but they weren't as pure as the one's he'd sensed from his old friend. It felt more... solid. Perhaps the Wine Master would know something.

"Uh." 4 The Wine Master's voice crackled on the other end. He sounded as somber as the day they got back from Luo.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" Lan Jue asked.

"I'm having some wine." It was code, meaning if it isn't important, don't bother me with it now.

"Yeah? What are you enjoying?"

"Rieussec."

Lan Jue chuckled. "They say Rieussec is good when you're in a good mood or when you're lovesick. So which are you?"

"If you've called to waste my time with nonsense then I'm not interested." The Paragon growled.

"I've found another Paragon, a new one," Lan Jue said. "I've never heard of her. A new player certainly changes things, don't you think?"

"Who does she work for?" He asked.

Lan Jue explained. "I'm not sure. She's a woman in her thirties or forties,

and very pretty. Her Discipline had vestiges of strong dimensional ripples, and her protogenia seems to somehow segment reality. It was like everything existed in a cracked mirror. What I can tell you is that she can summon the Protogenic Singularity. That must mean she's entered Nirvana."

On the other end, the Wine Master was quiet. Lan Jue didn't trouble him, he knew the old man was thinking.

A little while later the Wine Master spoke up again, but there was a strange note in his voice. "Is her last name Luo?"

"I dunno," Lan Jue admitted. "But I heard someone call her Xianni."

He heard the old man yelp. "Her? Where is she? I'll be there right away."

Lan Jue chuckled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you where we are. It concerns an elder family member."

The Wine Master was a Paragon, and had a wealth of experience in controlling his emotions. His momentary shock was replaced quickly with calm once more. He was also aware of this enigmatic 'elder' Lan Jue spoke of. "Him?"

"Yeah." Lan Jue didn't need to hide everything from the Wine Master.

"So you know this lady, Xianni?" Lan Jue inquired.

He heard the Wine Master chuckle dryly. "I don't just know her, she's my aunt." 5

Lan Jue's face twisted in confusion. "But, she's so much younger than you."

"Bullshit!" The Wine Master's tone was irritated. "A Paragon's appearance remains the same as the day they broke through, until they die. My aunt had incredible talent, and broke through when she was only thirty-seven. Of course she'd look younger than me."

"Why haven't I heard about this Luo family ancestor until just now? At her level of power, she should be widely known! She's not on the Paragon list..."

The Wine Master's tone eased again. "That involves Avenue secrets. All you need to know is that she was one of the founders. The Clairvoyant was the Council's chairman at the time, and she was his right hand. She was also part of the reason the Clockmaker left. Later, for reasons I don't know, she had a falling out with the Clairvoyant and left. She's isolated herself ever since. She used to be the Avenue's secret weapon, if she were still here then we wouldn't get so much trouble from the other groups. It's been so long... it's incredible you've run in to her. Tell her I'd like her to come back."

Lan Jue scratched his head. "Well, eh... I'll try. Your aunt has quite the temper, heh."

Chapter 502: Dad's Getting Old

"Yeah, not the greatest," the Wine Master confirmed. "Before she reached Paragon we used to call her Little Pepper. She's still famous for her temper, apparently."

"So, I can only promise I'll try. I don't think I have much leeway, especially since I intend to live for a few more years," Lan Jue quipped.

The Wine Master chuckled. "Do what you can. If you learn anything else, tell me right away. Tell her also that the Clairvoyant isn't doing well, and will likely pass. Whatever you have to do to convince her."

"Alright." That was something he could do.

Their conversation was interrupted by a sudden wave of energy that swept through the house. The mysterious singularity appeared again, and two figures emerged above the fields. But this black hole was high overhead, and the figures came tumbling through in freefall. The first was Jue Di, somehow missing the top half of his overalls. The pants were a ragged mess.

Luo Xianni's descend was purposeful, and direct. She slammed in to Lan Jue's father at full bore. Jue Di reacted by crushing her against him with his burly arms. She struggled, but couldn't wrench herself free of his bear hug.

"Let me go!" Luo Xianni shouted.

Jue Di cackled. "Then stop pitching a fit. Finish your tantrum and I'll let you go."

"Fine." She answered flippantly.

He let her go, but the second she had wriggle room she spun around, and dug her teeth in to his shoulder.

"Aaahhh! Did you just bite me!?" Jue Di yelped. The fiercest beasts could tear at the Paragon and he would feel nothing, the strength of his Discipline was indomitable. It looked, however, like he was not engaging his defense here, perhaps for fear of hurting Luo Xianni.

Lan Jue clapped a hand over his eyes and felt his way back in to the cabin. Some things were better left unknown, he thought, to spare oneself the trouble.

A little while later he heard the door open.

“Brat! Get out here, now.” Jue Di’s thoroughly irritated voice called to him.

Lan Jue was instantly transported to the days when he and his brother suffered this man’s abuse regularly. He remembered them fondly. He sprang up to his feet and went outside.

“What is it, father?”

Jue Di and Luo Xianni were in the main room, both looking a little beat up. Xianni was in better shape – at least her clothes were in one piece – while Jue Di looked like he’d been mugged.

Jue Di’s angry voice called to him. “Still calling me Father. Do you see how much trouble you’ve caused? Xianni, you go check – there is absolutely zero blood connection between me and this punk. I’ve looked after him and his brother since they were small. They’re my disciples, my foster children.”

Lan Jue was smart enough to recognize the cues, and started to piece together the relationship between his master and this Luo family ancestor. He sputtered to interject. “Yes, that’s right! I’m not related to father at all.”

Luo Xianni sniffed derisively. “If not, then fine. But if there is, I’ll castrate him.”

Jue Di felt himself tense up. “Can’t you show at least a little sympathy in front of the boy?”

“I ask again, what about my youth? I have been looking for you for thirty-six years! And you dare talk to me about saving face?” She spun on her heels and tore in to the older man again. Tears had begun to accumulate at the base of her eyes.

Thirty-six years? What’s that about, dad? Lan Jue quietly criticized his

adopted father. But then he sighed, for wasn't this his doing? He'd come home to visit his father, but ended up causing trouble.

"Dad, how about you and the Lady Luo talk first? I'll take a walk around, I haven't been here for a while so it'll be good to see what's new." He didn't even stop talking before he started to trudge away.

"Stop!" Luo Xianni shouted again

Lan Jue was starting to get very tired of this conversation.

"What are the lady's instructions?" Lan Jue said with an impossibly sweet smile.

This only made her glare even sharper. "How do you know my family name? Did he tell you? Did you guess?"

Lan Jue looked over to his master, trying to gauge the expression in his face.

Lan Jue answered with a knowing air. "Yes! Father told me. He used to talk about you all the time, his very close lady friend – the most beautiful girl in the universe, he'd say. He said her name was Luo Xianni. That's how I recognized you."

She grunted, thoroughly unimpressed. "Stop the bullshit. A three year old wouldn't believe that nonsense. If he thought about me so much, why didn't he ever come find me, huh? It's not like he couldn't. Now tell the truth!"

Lan Jue looked over at Jue Di again, but his father was too busy holding his head in his hands.

"The Wine Master told me. I just asked him." Lan Jue muttered dutifully.

"Wine Master?" When she heard the name, she straightened her back and got a far-away look in her eyes. Her full-on sprint down the warpath eased. "You're also part of the Avenue? What's your designation?"

"Jewelry Master," he answered.

Luo Xianni turned back to Jue Di. "At least you're the slightest bit conscientious. You sent him to the Avenue to look over things."

Jue Di heaved a sigh. “It was my apology. Things change as time inevitably marches on. I’d rather not hash up the past again.”

Lan Jue hardly contained his look of surprise. But Dad... you didn’t ask me to go to the Avenue! All that head-holding was an act, too. On more levels than one, he and his dad weren’t anywhere near the same level.

She sniffed again. “Don’t bring it up? You’re dreaming. You will never have a moment of peace ever again, not until you kill me!”

What could have spawned so much hatred? Lan Jue swallowed hard, then scurried away toward the nearby door. It was best to not get involved in old wounds. Dodge the bullets when you can.

Jue Di separated a few steps and fell in to a nearby chair. “Xianni, if you want to hit me, then hit me. If you want to curse my name then do it. But first sit and have a cup of tea.”

Her well-practiced sniff made a return appearance, but she did walk over to him and sat nearby. She sat on the same side as the clear indentation of her teeth set in his shoulder.

Lan Jue desperately wished to take a picture of the scene and share it with Lan Qing. He wanted his brother to see what had become of their harsh taskmaster.

“Get the hell out of here!” Jue Di snapped. Lan Jue spun around fast enough to give himself whip lash, and ran inside. Anyway, the whole thing was too weird for him to handle.

Once he was out from under that angry cloud, he felt much more relaxed. He just kept running until he reached the edge of that expansive forest. He was convinced that he didn’t want to know what was going on between his father and this woman. Whatever it was, it had to mean they used to be very close. It was almost unthinkable that his dad – who had never shown interest in women before – had this fiery woman on the side. An unhappy couple, but still.

Lan Jue heaved great breaths of familiar air as he came to a stop before an enormous tree. This particular tree was beautiful, laden with blooms

and healthy. He lifted his eyes skyward, where he looked through dappled sunlight at the expansive canopy. It provided him with cool and shade. It would take over a dozen people to surround the base of this old denizen.

Lan Jue sat down beneath the shade and pressed his back against the tree. He remembered when father would tie him and Lan Qing up to this tree and beat them. The intent was to teach them to dodge. They would writhe and wriggle like fish on a line as Jue Di whipped them.

That time they were beaten black and blue. They were suspended then for ten days, and every sunrise brought a new round of beatings and an herbal soak. Beat, soak, beat, soak. Only when he and his brother were barely breathing did he let them down.

Phantom pains still caused his muscles to spasm at the mere memory. At least it served its purpose, though, for their reaction time improved by at least one hundred and twenty percent.

Memories danced all through this forest, filled with long gone days of him and his brother among the trees. Things change as time inevitably marches on. Now that he was back, everything seemed different.

Father did seem a little older, not least because of his more easy-going attitude. He could tell it was something he had been working with. It made Lan Jue's heart feel heavy.

No one knew Jue Di's true age, but Lan Jue knew that even Paragons passed away eventually. Was his father nearing that inevitable end to the road?

He refused to face it! Those memories were painful, but without his father he and Lan Qing would not be the men they are today. Anyway, love and appreciation for all the work he did to raise them trumped everything. They didn't have a mother to learn on, just this strict father.

Lan Jue lifted his communicator to his face, and quietly dialed in his brother's number. He knew his brother was busy, but the action just came naturally.

"Di di... di di!" The ringing continued. Lan Jue was about to hang up

when suddenly there was an answer.

“You went back?” Lan Qing asked.

“Yeah, I’m here.” Lan Jue said, nodding his head.

“Father, he...” Lan Jue could hear the hesitation on his brother’s voice as he tried to explain. But he cut him off.

“Dad’s changed. He hugged me.” The words felt strange in Lan Jue’s mouth, almost distasteful. He went on to tell his brother everything he’d seen.

“Dad’s getting old.” Lan Jue finished.

“...” Lan Qing was quiet for a long time.

After a while, it was Lan Jue who had to break the silence. “How are things over there?”

Lan Qing finally answered. “For the moment, dead calm. Our investigations have concluded that these planets are real, they are a threat, and their first target will likely be the North. The agreement is that once the aliens make their move, every Alliance will hit them with everything we’ve got. We’ll provide aid and combat assistance. We’ve put everyone on high alert and have them drilling constantly.”

“When I’m done here I intend to go over and help,” Lan Jue said.

Lan Qing’s tepid voice replied. “Don’t. You’re not a soldier.”

Lan Jue face set in to a stubborn expression. “What, is it too late to join?”

Once more, Lan Qing lapsed in to silence. “I don’t want you to come.”

Chapter 503: A Greeting Gift

Lan Jue glowered at the communicator. “You aren’t telling the truth. Things must be worse than you’re saying. When I was coming here I ran in to one of those things. It was strong, and could fight in space. I used Thor to take advantage of its carelessness and bore through its body, killing it. There’s no way there isn’t some record of this thing coming this far in to human territory. Bro, you don’t need to hide anything from me. I don’t want to go and help just because you’re my brother. I’m doing it because humanity needs it.”

Lan Qing’s low voice replied. “If you really want to help, then don’t enlist. There’s a lot more you can do in this fight. I’m sure the Avenue has plans for how they’re going to act. All of our research shows that all Adept Disciplines work well against them – much better than all our guns and ships. I suspect it has something to do with biology. They evolved different from us, on a completely separate path. We’ve evolved our brains to build protections for our bodies. These creatures, through millions of years of tribulations and consumption, have perfected their bodies. The radiation out in space is lethal to us, but they were molded by it. All of our laser weapons, all of missiles, they are built to withstand that. The North’s sacrifice showed that Adept-driven mecha – that union of Discipline and Technology – was what did the most damage.”

Lan Jue’s heart started racing. “Was this one of the reasons for the Great Adept’s Tournament?”

“Yes, it was. It was a great excuse to get the best Adepts together and judge their abilities. From there, all you had to do was get them to enlist. Not just the North, but all of the Alliances were watching closely.” Lan Qing affirmed.

Lan Jue was beginning to understand. The Avenue delegation back on Luo had back-up, but the Terminator and Epochrion didn’t even really try to discourage them from leaving. Everything had been the threat of force, but no punches were thrown. Now he knew why – because the future depended on Adepts.

All of this information started what became a change of heart. His brother was right, there was more he could do.

“I know what I need to do. After a few days, I’ll go back to Skyfire Avenue.” Lan Jue said.

“Right.” His brother answered. “I have to get to a meeting. Keep in touch.”

“Yup!” Lan Jue nodded.

Lan Jue cut the connected and lapsed in to quiet thought. The fate of humanity now lay squarely on the shoulders of all Adepts. He would need to improve, and be at his best.

As his mind pondered, he allowed his eyes to slip shut. Soon he was deep in meditation. He wanted to firm up his foundation, then he could continue the trek to the peak of ninth rank.

He couldn’t tell how long he’d been there before an ineffable feeling caused him to open his eyes. He saw the familiar, towering silhouette across from him together with another smaller one.

Jue Di had changed his clothes. When he saw that Lan Jue was back in the present, he nodded. “You’ve improved a little. Re-cultivated?”

Dad would be dad. He was the kind to critique his cultivation methods and progress. But he didn’t go in to the whole story, about all the things that had happened in the last year.

“Let’s head back. We’ll talk there.” Jue Di nodded curtly at him. There was a chill in his expression, a shadow of his old father.

Luo Xianni walked by his side. The pissed off face Lan Jue knew her by was gone, replaced by all things with a gentle smile. That was one hell of a one-eighty! What did you do, dad?

Although Lan Jue was critical of his father, he didn’t dare let any hint of that escape. He didn’t particularly fancy a beating, and dad wasn’t in a great mood.

As they made their way back in to the log cabin, Lan Jue took a minute

to look over this mysterious woman.

“Hey kid, what do you think you’re looking at?” Luo Xianni snapped. “You’re gunna be calling me mom before long, you hear me?”

Jue Di visibly winced, but he didn’t dare contradict her. Lan Jue thought he’d try again. “Em... Lady Luo? You’re so young, calling you mother might make you seem older...”

She sniffed at him. “It’s fine, mother doesn’t mind. So that’s what you’ll call me!”

“Sure!” Lan Jue beamed at her. If his dad was going to be stuck with her, what could he do about it? Honesty was always the best policy.

He addressed her with a gentlemanly air of respect. “Mother.”

“Good boy!” The overbearing dragon lady was immediately supplanted with a woman all smiles and sunshine. She thrust out her hand, and pressed something in to his palm.

“Take it. Its mother’s greeting gift.” 2

Lan Jue turned his hand over and opened his fingers to look at it. It was a lump of snow-white metal, about the size of a chicken egg. Its spotless white exterior looked thick, and he could tell it had been neither forged nor polished.

This is...

His eyes went wide. “Mother, is this power ore?” This time, Luo Xianni’s new title sounded a lot more genuine.

What was power ore? It was similar to power gems, in that they both were minerals that contained energy. But power ore had an advantage power gems didn’t have. Malleability.

A power gem could never change its size or shape without being destroyed. However, power ore could be shaped in to whatever form the use desired.

They were much rarer than power gems. Normal metal could have special properties, but they couldn’t contain any intrinsic energy within

themselves.

Lan Jue dealt with these materials all the time, but really only ever with power gems. He'd never had the opportunity to see power ore, due to its rarity. The uses of it were numerous, and only a few planets produced the stuff. Manufacture and distribution were very carefully controlled by the Alliances, because it was an integral component in making power gem lattices. That was to say, that any time someone wanted to connect a series of gems together and really employ their full potential, this stuff was the way to do it. Only power ore could handle the strain.

Another way to highlight its importance, was as a requirement for new generation core reactors in ships. Using it for the engine already makes that battleship a flagship. Using it in any other systems would be extravagant.

Bastion and Mother ships had power ore as a necessary part of their construction as well. This little nugget looked small, but it was packed with pure energy. It wasn't enough for a battleship, but it was more than enough to make a lattice for a mech suit. Lan Jue had been searching for a way to get his hands on some, but it was ludicrously expensive. A chunk this size of power ore was equivalent to the cost of an S-ranked power gem. He'd never had an opportunity, until here of all places.

"Seems like you know about it." Luo Xianni made no effort to hide her pride.

"Hey, are you gunna talk or what!" Lan Jue reminded him.

"Oh." Lan Jue then began to tell Jue Di and Luo Xianni all about what had happened in to him. Thankfully, news of Qianlin's forced marriage and the events proceeding had already been told to Jue Di. He would at least be spared that embarrassment. He started his tale from when he joined the National Eastern University.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni quietly listened as he talked them through it. Neither of their faces showed any expression. That was, until Lan Jue got to the part where Bize fused he and Qianlin's powers together.

The old Paragon's brows furrowed. "That old shyster. Daring reading my

people.”

Lan Jue stopped and looked at him in curiosity. “What do you mean?”

Jue Di huffed. “That fraud the Clairvoyant, always boasting he knows it all. Well he must have been in his visions, then. Qianlin suddenly appearing couldn’t have been an accident. What a coincidence that you should run in to someone on Skyfire, who looks exactly like Hera. She has the power of the Queen of Heaven – practically tailor-made to prop you up. Do you really think all of this just happens out of the blue? He’s got to be involved in this in some way. When you get back, you need to get to the bottom of this and make sure his motives are good. I won’t have him turning my son in to a weapon.”

Lan Jue felt his heart skip a beat. Ever since Qianlin appeared, his life had turned upside down – the definition of chaotic. Her similarity to Hera clouded his judgement, but when Jue Di said it it all seemed clear.

Yes! Everything did look like one big coincidence. Qianlin always appeared whenever he needed her most. He only got pulled out of his self-loathing when she arrived. Did that mean, she...

He felt himself shiver right down to his core.

Jue Di’s soft voice intruded. “Continue.”

Lan Jue obliged, telling them next about the Gods of Wine and their experience in the vineyard. When he got to the Arrow of Compassion, he noted that Jue Di’s pupils narrowed again, but this time his father didn’t interrupt.

Luo Xianni was entirely calm, almost detached. She sat quietly as he went about describing the last year of his life.

All of the minutia in between, the conflict with the Pontiff’s Citadel, the tournament, and even his interactions with the Pharmacist were shared. He told them everything he learned about the Banishing Blades, exactly as she had told it to him.

When he got to the legendary weapons, both Paragons revealed surprise in their faces. Evidently, they knew about the swords as well.

Chapter 504: Imparting Knowledge

“This Pharmacist sounds like something,” Jue Di said appreciably.

“That’s everything. I went back to the Avenue for a few days, then came here. You must be right about Qianlin, there’s something going on. When she rejected me on Luo her expression was strange, but I was too hurt to understand. That must mean, this really is...”

Jue Di looked at Lan Jue, saw his downtrodden expression. Then he slapped him forcefully upside the head.

“Hey! Why are you hitting people?!” Luo Xianni glared at Jue Di, her voice sharp and threatening. She was taking her new role as mother seriously.

Jue Di dragged his eyes to her and gave her a flat stare. In a domineering voice, he said, “when I’m teaching my child, try not to interrupt.”

Much to Lan Jue’s surprise, Luo Xianni obliged and remained silent.

Jue Di turned his callous gaze back to Lan Jue. “What, you’ll die without a woman? We’re facing a powerful enemy, you need to stop putting so much focus on things that aren’t important. We can at least assume he has no intent to cause you harm. That gypsy bastard – always so self-righteous, bemoaning the state of the universe – his little games aren’t to hurt you, either. Right now, your first priority must be to become stronger. I’m certainly not pleased he’s put his fingers in your destiny, but it’s better than you laying about on the Avenue.”

Lan Jue didn’t utter a word. Right! This last year he’d been active, even lively. Father was right again, improvement had to be first.

Jue Di rose to his feet and turned to leave. “Come with me.”

Lan Jue knew who he meant, and quickly followed. Luo Xianni also stood, but she didn’t go far. She just walked to the door and watched them go from the threshold.

Jue Di raised his hands, and dropped in to a stance. Lan Jue got the hint, and moved in front of his teacher to copy the pose.

The Paragon's hands began to move. The motions were slow and fluid, but each wave and twist sent crests of energy rippling around them.

Push Hands. A common training method in Taiji. Lan Jue could still remember back in the day, he could never last more than ten seconds against his father. Now, after so many years, it was time to test himself again. He focused his concentration, accumulating and swirling the energies within himself as he followed Jue Di's movements, hand to hand.

Visible vortices of energy whorled between them. To Lan Jue, he felt like his father was an infinitely deep chasm that could swallow everything up. He didn't fight it, instead going along with that sensation and simultaneously released his own stored power. He followed to the limits of where he could maintain stability.

The familiar haze of black and white sprang up around Lan Jue. He felt himself slip in to that state, the same one he felt during the tournament.

Natureally, he was much stronger now than he was the last time they did this. However, his strength only highlighted how unfathomably vast his master's skill was. His father wasn't applying any force, simply keeping to the repetitive movement of the dance like the whole world was in that singular motion.

Jue Di's feet began to move, slowly but as fluid was a gentle river. The two of them played off of one another, moving through the field as mirrors of one another. Their dance created arcs pleasing to the eye.

Lan Jue stumbled, and the haze of Taiji power around him thickened and the image of yin and yang shimmered in to existence behind him. He settled in to a rooted position immediately, retracting his injection of force and keeping himself in sync with the Paragon.

As Luo Xianni watched, a flicker of surprise flit across her face. She nodded, ever so slightly. This was a sign of real comprehension of Taiji essence. For a man this young to have reached this level of mystical understanding was no easy feat.

After a minute, Jue Di suddenly stopped and planted his feet. His arms jerked at the perfect moment, and the sudden change caused Lan Jue to

spin like a top. He made ten circles before regaining his footing. All throughout, his arms were reacting, keeping him from going out of control. When he stopped, his face was as placid as a spring sky. The halo of Taiji power around him receded back inside of himself.

Jue Di dropped his hands and nodded. “Not bad. You’ve got your foot in the door. Your foundation is much stronger. Keep training, and you’ll get far.”

“Yes, sir.” Lan Jue said with deep respect. He didn’t give voice to it, but there was some surprise in his eyes.

In that short period Jue Di had used the practice of Push Hands to excite and galvanize his Taiji abilities, and the inherent energies of his body. The whole process looked passive on the outside, but in fact Lan Jue fought to maintain stability. His comprehension deepened, feeling the truth of the opposition of yin and yang. When yin was an excess, Yang strengthened. When Yang was overbearing, Yin undermined. They supplemented and restrained one another, and that experience improved his awareness.

“Pay close attention to this business with the Banishing Blades. They have the power to destroy everything we know. If you do find the Banishing Diagram, understand that there is no one today who can contend with that power. This means that you cannot come at this half-cocked. At the very least, you must have perfect mastery of the weapon you inherit. At the very least the weapon won’t become your enemy. Now that you have chosen the sword, I will teach you the Taiji style for it. The Harmonious Swords is passable for attack, but there is no better defense than Taiji.”

“Yes, sir!”

For the next several days, Lan Jue remain at the log cabin, training with his Father.

Compared to the old days, Jue Di was much calmer. He was a guide now, leading Lan Jue through the problems he encountered in his own cultivation. He consulted on methods and concerns after his student’s re-cultivation, solving them as they came. It was only a few days, but Lan Jue

felt renewed and changed by it. He came away with the fundamentals of Taiji sword, and a deeper knowledge of Taiji in general.

Three days solidified that knowledge.

“Alright, you’ve got it – more or less. Let’s go.” Jue Di, today clad in his work uniform, waved for Lan Jue to follow.

“Where are we going, dad?” Lan Jue asked, following dutifully.

“We’re going to the lab. You’re trying to upgrade Thor, yes? We have the materials ready to go,” he answered.

Lan Jue blinked. “But I didn’t bring enough power gems. It’s mostly just an idea, but I need gems to finish it off.”

Jue Di nodded. “I have some here. If they aren’t enough, you can construct the lattice and complete the installations when you get back.”

“Alright!” Lan Jue said without any further questions.

The common man knew Jue Di the Paragon, but there were more than a few that knew him by another name – his true name – and another job. In the East, they knew him as Chi Bupang, the famed researcher and engineer. He was no less knowledgeable than the Bookworm or Keeper, only unknown because he wanted it that way.

Luo Xianni lived there with them in the last few days. Aside from her very emotive arrival, she remained perfectly gentle since. The only indication of her temper was her presence, in that Jue Di never got a moment to himself.

During that time, Lan Jue never spoke to Xianni about the Avenue. Jue Di also didn’t bother with it, so they spent those days immersed in training.

Luo Xianni followed along. However, as they reached the capsule, Jue Di looked regrettably to her. “Xianni, you stay. This isn’t suitable for you. You like action and this you’ll probably find boring.”

She started her response by giving him a sharp look. “You’re still trying to get rid of me? I’m telling you, don’t even dream about it. No matter

what you say, I'm going – you're going to have to kill me. Aren't you that same cruel man? Just kill me and rid yourself of all this trouble."

Jue Di sighed helplessly. "Didn't you hear A-Jue? The Clairvoyant is dying, the Avenue will need a leader. And this disciple has been bullied. Don't you want to head back? Relax, I'm not going to run anywhere. I'm used to life here, and if you're willing then we'll get used to living here together."

"I'm not going!" She flatly rejected.

He sighed. "I have no interest in women!"

"Well I'm interested in you, and that's all I need," she shot back.

"I'm old!"

"I'm not young!"

"... .."

Luo Xianni's voice suddenly became sweet as honey. "Isn't it really so bad to have company in your old age? Come, I've been looking for you for so long. I'll do whatever needs to be done for you. I know you don't like my temper and that's why you left. I can be gentle! If this doesn't please you, then tell me what you want me to be. I will do it. But no matter what, I'm not leaving. I'll be right with you."

Another sigh from the Paragon preceded his reply. "I was clear with you back then. We just aren't suitable together. We're pursuing different goals. I am not a man who will remain smooth, or live steady. I want to experience all of the wonderful things this universe possesses. I will not settle, not for the rest of my life."

Luo Xianni would not be deterred. "Then I'll accompany you! Where you go, I'll go."

Jue Di's anger flared. "How do you not understand?! I want freedom, I refuse to tie myself to anyone! You're a good woman, it's me who isn't up to snuff. I am not a good man, period. Why do you insist on staying? I cannot stand having someone attached to me at the hip, can't you

understand that?”

Luo Xianni was quiet.

Lan Jue was unfortunately stuck in the middle, trying to make himself as small as possible. Dad was right, he sure wasn't a good man!

Chapter 505: I'm Leaving!

Jue Di's face was infinitely calm.

The capsule shook, then arrived at its destination. Jue Di was the first to rise and exit the vehicle.

Lan Jue nervously swung his eyes to Luo Xianni. "Mother, you..."

She laughed. "Relax, I'm not so easily defeated. The more he wants me to go, the more I'm going to dig in. One day he'll come around. Come, let's go."

Lan Jue followed after Luo Xianni and clambered out of the capsule. He had no right to speak to their relationship dispute, nor did he dare to incite her anger. But, he was starting to like this lady.

Father was being honest. He was not one to stick around. Even when he and Lan Qing were small, he'd often go missing. The longest he was away at one time was six months.

"Chi Bupang!" Luo Xianni called out to him.

The man stopped and turned back to look at them. "Change your mind?"

She chuckled indifferently. "Yeah. You don't want me, right?"

Jue Di's hard expression softened, and he offered a bitter grin. "It's not that I don't want you. It's that I can't dare to. I know what kind of man I am, and I can't settle down. I know that although I like you..."

"Fine! Enough said. I'm leaving!" Luo Xianni spun on her heels and stomped away with big strides.

This was a quick and unexpected change of events. Didn't she just swear she'd never leave? And then... she leaves?

Lan Jue was thoroughly confused, as was the great Paragon. Jue Di thought he knew this brilliant woman – the two had been tied up with one another for more than a hundred years, on again and off again. And she was going to just walk away? That can't be right. This was completely out of character!

As he sat there pondering, Jue Di couldn't help the pang of uncertainty that ate at him. It just couldn't be that easy.

But he watched her sashay away, head held high, and completely ignorant of what was going on in there. Both men felt something ominous about the whole thing.

"Come on!" Jue Di barked with curt wave of his hand. Lan Jue skittered after him.

Soon, they arrived in a large open warehouse, a typical mecha construction assembly. The machines needed to perform this were arrayed around them.

"Let me see your designs." Jue Di seemed to relax for that Luo Xianni wasn't peering over his shoulder. He could sense that she had meant it, she was no longer nearby.

Lan Jue walked to a nearby computer and uploaded his plans.

**

Ziluo Public Air Hangar

Luo Xianni had changed clothes and freshened up, and a pretty fragrance followed her as she boarded a ship. As she took her seat within a first-class cabin, a smile spread across her face.

"Chi Bupang, you old bastard. You'll be looking for me soon enough. Your old lady won't have to go looking for you anymore. Hehehehehe..."

A pleasing, artificial female voice cooed through the announcement system. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for joining us on today's flight. Our destination is Planet Skyfire. Skyfire City."

**

Planet Anlun.

Lan Qing stood tall, peering out of the expansive window on the bridge of a ship. He watched the traffic pass quietly by, a sharp glint in his eye.

The date they'd set with the Clairvoyant was rapidly approaching. He

would need to set out soon.

These days, Anlun was like a ravenous war machine, always in motion. This was one of the foremost military outposts in the East, so there were always resource ships coming and going. Soldiers were drilling constantly in all corners of the bases.

“Beep! Beep!”

“A-Cheng!” Lan Qing connected the call.

“Hey big brother, when are you going to Skyfire Avenue?” Chu Cheng’s trademark lazy voice answered.

“The day after tomorrow.” He kept to simple answers.

“Ah, then I’ll start getting ready as well. Ah, right. I haven’t seen A-Jue for a while, where’d he disappear to? He doesn’t answer my calls, it’s been almost half a month.”

“He’s fine,” Lan Qing said. “He’ll be there on time.”

Chu Cheng switched topics. “Things have been pretty crazy up here. Planets on the boundaries are already under martial law and they’ve got fleets going back and forth all the time. You got any news on your side?”

“Military secrets.”

Chu Cheng chortled. “As uninteresting as ever. So what do you think, huh? Lan Jue’s gotten pretty good, I’m not sure you could take him anymore.”

“He said you’ve gotten better, too.”

“Eh... you know, forget I said anything.”

When they hung up, Lan Qing allowed the faintest ghost of a smile to turn his lips.

“Sir!”

“Enter.”

“Admiral, the Bloodiron Khans have completed their training. We await inspection.” The major snapped to attention.

“Nhm.” Lan Qing’s answer was quit and simple. “Let’s go.”

The Bloodiron Khans, a new collection of soldiers borne from the reorganization of their forces. Every pilot was outfitted with the latest generation of war machines, the Anaxigen class mecha suit¹. The Bloodiron Khans consisted of three thousand warriors, every one of them Adepts. None were below fourth rank.

The formation of this group had been at Lan Qing’s direction. His brother’s A.R.C. class had been the inspiration. Usually, a single mecha fighting unit wouldn’t make that much of a difference in a deep space battle, but the Bloodiron Khans had only the best mecha pilots in the East. Their commander, none other than Lan Qing himself, the Supersoldier of Anlun!

Beyond all doubt, when the fighting began these men and women would be the tip of the spear.

ζ

Jupiter-1 slipped through the emptiness of space, somehow simultaneously moving fast and slow. That was just the sense, though. The ship was cruising along at twice the speed of light, and it wasn’t even at top speed. In the whole ship there was only one person, making the ship designed for mecha platoon transport seem awfully empty.

Lan Jue sat in the captain’s chair, a smile plastered on his face.

It was one incredible ship, he thought. It didn’t have the benefit of the Blinding Stone, but everything else was head and shoulder above Zeus-1. It was also larger, and better equipped for combat. Its speed was its defining attribute, though.

It had been a gift from father before he left, while he took Zeus-2 and set out as well. He suspected that Luo Xianni, so quick to vanish, must have been up to no good. Although he didn’t know what she did, it was better to go take care of it.

In front of Lan Jue, was that purple crystal swinging back and forth. With Jue Di’s stabilizing efforts, the crystal’s impressive stores of energy

acted much like an Adept's Core. But it wasn't, it was an Alien Core.

A Core with enough inherent energy to rival an S-ranked gem.

The first Core they'd carved free, he'd given to the Bookworm and Keeper. They'd used it to extend their lives. The Bookworm's ultimate breakthrough to Paragon was due in part to the use of that strange crystal Core. They showed up for the rescue on Luo because they owed Lan Jue.

This crystal was muddled, it would need the power of the Tear of Neptune to filter it. It would improve and supplement its vital force.

From what he learned from father, the importance of these Cores in the struggle between Alien and man was already beginning to make itself known. Every beast that died left one behind, and the smarter ones were already on Lyr looking for the Tears they needed. The formerly cheap s-ranked gems were suddenly in high demand, and the first ones there were representatives from Skyfire Avenue.

Su He was acting as the representative for the Avenue in the area for all their purchasing needs. How many Tears he'd purchased for them he couldn't say, it was being kept a closely guarded secret.

Lan Jue had already promised his father, that when he got back he would send the Tear he had over. His father's aged state of mind still troubled him. Perhaps he would use the alien Core to help extend his life like the Keeper and Bookworm. He wasn't sure the Clairvoyant would need it.

The three months since his last meeting with the Clairvoyant was nearly up. It's was time to go back to the Avenue as he'd promised.

The ship's incredible speed traversed the trip from Ziluo in half the time. He descend in to the air hangar, and then discovered that his own space wasn't big enough to accommodate the much larger Juppiter-1. He had no choice but to lease a new one temporarily.

A car was already waiting when he disembarked. Xiuxiu had come to pick him up.

"Boss." She greeted him with a sweet smile, then drove them back to the Avenue.

“You’re always so considerate,” Lan Jue praised with a smile.

Xiuxiu laughed, but behind her eyes there was a bitter light. She focused on driving.

The car lifted off, and Lan Jue leaned the chair back to make himself more comfortable. “Things have been good these days?”

Xiuxiu nodded. “Everything’s good. As per your instructions, we’ve suspended business. Our suits are all fully upgraded and ready.”

“Good. And Xiuxiu, this last time when I went back, dad taught me a new style. I’ll show it to you when we have some time.” Lan Jue said with a smile.

“Ok.” Her eyes lit up.

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Xiuxiu. These last few years I’ve wronged you.”

Xiuxiu laughed dismissively. “Boss, what’s this nonsense? Serving at your side has always been Xiuxiu’s mission!”

Lan Jue glanced at her. “You know I’ve never looked at you like an attendant. You’re like my little sister. So stop acting like a servant, we’re partners, friends. We’re family, alright?”

Xiuxiu’s face blanched somewhat, and her pretty lips puckered. “Boss, what are you trying to say?”

Chapter 506: Misunderstanding

Lan Jue responded with a sardonic chuckle. "I don't want to steal the spring of your youth."

Xiuxiu turned her head and gave him a look. "I've never wanted anything from you. I've only ever wanted to be by your side. If you want to deprive me of that, then I have nothing to live for."

Lan Jue was stunned by the strength of her words. "You can't be serious?" Lan Jue knew Xiuxiu. She looked soft, but she was made of iron. When she made up her mind that was it.

She proved that with her rigid answer. "Absolutely!"

He gave a soft laugh and shook his head. "Alright then. Pretend I never said anything."

Her mousy voice came again after a moment. "Don't bring this up again, ok? I just want to see you often, and be by your side when you need me. That's enough for me. I'm different from the other girls. I didn't stay with you out of affection. My reason is simple."

Lan Jue felt his heart sink from her tone. He knew Xiuxiu was the one who felt most deeply of all the Amazons. That's why he spoke with her first. These were young women in their twenties, it wasn't fair for him to keep them so close. It was a waste of their precious youth, and he couldn't give them what they wanted."

It was impossible that Xiuxiu didn't have any interest at all. However, he'd always seen Xiuxiu as a little sister. After so long, that feeling was deep-rooted. When later he met Hera, Xiuxiu was even more the confidante and friend than a love interest.

Through all the years Xiuxiu was unfailingly at his side. She never asked for anything, and she never brought him trouble. This truth, though, only made him feel worse.

The verticar quickly made the trip to the Avenue's periphery, then settled just outside. Lan Jue stepped out and began walking back when he

was suddenly grabbed from behind.

Xiuxiu's soft body gently shook against his, her arms wrapped around his waist. "Please don't make me go, ok? Please, I beg you."

Even if Lan Jue was a hard man, he couldn't help but crumble before Xiuxiu's sad display. He heaved a sigh, saying, "alright. I promise I won't say anything like this again. Xiuxiu, I'm afraid you're in too deep."

"I'm not afraid." She answered resolutely.

They separated and Lan Jue turned around. He gently stroked her hair, and Xiuxiu fell in to his embrace. Great tears tumbled from her eyes.

Something tickled at the back of Lan Jue's mind as he held her, and he lifted his head. He saw another figure nearby, her face also wet. Zhou Qianlin stood in silence, with a black box clutched in her hands. She wavered slightly from side to side as though she might fall over, and her lip was caught between her teeth.

Her delicate hand slowly rose to her chest where the precious Soulcaller gemstone sat. Deflty, she plucked it off her neck, followed by the twinkling pearl on her wrist.

Lan Jue heard her voice in his head.

"Have these back."

She crouched and placed the box, necklace and bracelet upon the floor. Full of grace and composure, she rose to her feet and left.

Lan Jue wanted to follow, but Xiuxiu held on to him tightly. She was still shaking from her sobs. Without the Soulcaller, he had no way to explain.

He couldn't see Xiuxiu's red eyes, staring in the direction Qianlin had left.

She cried for ten minutes before being able to reign herself in. "Boss," she finally managed to say, "Let's go home." She wrapped her arm in his and started back.

"Yeah," he answered, his heart heavy. His right hand rested at the small of his back. Out of Xiuxiu's view, he indicated with a finger and the

jewelry Qianlin had left flew over to his palm.

When they got back, Lan Jue went straight to his chambers. The Jewelry Store on the upper Avenue was still open as he walked through. It was just a normal Jewelry Store, after all.

The other girls were ill at ease when they saw Xiuxiu's red and puffy eyes. Yet they didn't trouble Lan Jue, who walked by them as though they weren't there. His face was dark and sad.

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"Didi – didi – didi!" Lan Jue looked at his communicator as it rang. No one picked up on the other end. He let it go on as he stared at the heart-shaped Soulcaller and the pelagic pearl cradled in his palm. There was a dull ache in his chest that wouldn't go away.

He could have guessed she would come quickly. Their shared connection meant she could feel when he was nearby. She was waiting for me, to tell me something. But she got there just in time to see Xiuxiu hugging me. Of course she'd misunderstand.

The communicator rang and continued to be ignored. Lan Jue couldn't keep the frustration from his face, and he heaved a deep sigh. He focused on her, thinking of them together. He reached out to summon her to his side.

But, much to Lan Jue's shock, Qianlin had somehow cut their link. Her energy was still there intermingled with his, but without her cooperation he couldn't call her close.

What in the world is all this?

When it came to matters of love, sometimes it was best to step away from a misunderstanding and let cooler heads prevail. The fear, though, was how deeply entrenched that misunderstanding became.

This wasn't something he was prepared to allow. A glint of determination flashed in his eyes. Although he'd worked hard at his cultivation these last few days, the specter of Zhou Qianlin had lingered in his mind. It was clear she occupied a special and eternal place in his heart.

Now he knew this to be true, and he understood what his heart wanted. There was no further reason to hesitate. He was on the other side of his pain from Hera, and he had grown tremendously as a person in the interim. It was maturity that came from time and experience, an important factor in being a man.

He needed to find her so they could talk through their pain. When he saw her he knew that she was not heartless, and that she had real feelings for him. Otherwise, what was everything they'd been through?

After he calmed down, Lan Jue could see things much clearer. Sometimes matters of love needed logic too. A lot of intractable misunderstandings happened because the chance to resolve them slipped by.

He took a shower and changed his clothes once his mind had been made up. When he left, he saw the girls gathered in the shop. They called to him all together when he stepped out.

"Boss."

They'd been with Lan Jue for a long time. Of course they would pick out his poor mood. Though, now he seemed better.

The communicator on Lan Jue's wrist chose that moment to start ringing.

He connected right away when he saw who it was. "Wine Master."

"Are you back?" The Paragon's deep voice answered.

"Yeah."

"Come pay me a visit."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed. "Now?" He's only just made the decision to go after Qianlin and explain things. He wanted to avoid future heartache, but the Wine Master seemed determined to change his plans.

The Paragon affirmed. "Unless you have something very important to handle, then yes."

"Alright." Lan Jue replied helplessly. The Wine Master was insistent. The

only thing he could think of that would need immediate attention, would be the Clairvoyant.

Chapter 507: Meeting Mother Again

Lan Jue stepped out of the Jewelry shop out on to the Avenue. The Gothic Winery was only a few feet down the lane. The walk was short, but the familiarity and comfort of home helped put his mind at ease.

Lan Jue was a little surprised to find the Wine Master waiting for him in the foyer. He welcome him in with a smile. "Thank you."

"Eh?" Lan Jue blinked. "Why so cordial?"

"Come with me and you'll find out," the Wine Master cryptically replied.

Lan Jue chuckled. "Well whatever the reason you can keep your thanks. I'll take a bottle of wine."

This made the Wine Master chortle, too. "Fine, then we'll share a bottle later. Whenever you have time."

Lan Jue was well and truly shocked, but he kept it to himself. He followed the Paragon deeper in to the Winery.

They made their way back to the familiar long table they often drank at. This time, there was already someone waiting for them, seated at the place of honor. When Lan Jue saw who it was, he stared with wide yes and an open mouth. It'd been no time at all!

"M-... what are you doing here?"

Seated on the other end of the table was none other the bane of Jue Di, the same woman who vanished at his request. Luo Xianni, Lan Jue's new adopted mother.

Evidently this had been her destination after leaving Ziluo.

She shot him a sidelong glance. "Call me what you're supposed to call me. We're away from Ziluo and suddenly I'm not your mother anymore?"

The Wine Master, hearing this for the first time, slowly turned to Lan Jue and lifted a curious brow.

Lan Jue met his gaze with a sheepish expression. "So, what are you doing here, mom?"

The Wine Master continued to look from one to other, so stupefied he couldn't think of anything to say.

"This used to be my home," she answered. "The shyster and I founded it. Why wouldn't I come back? You came back just in time. Take a seat."

Lan Jue shot another look at the Wine Master, who was still trying to process what was going on. The Jewelry Master made his way over to the chair beside his mother, and took a seat.

The Wine Master had a plethora of questions, but this was not the time or place. He took a seat on Luo Xianni's opposite side.

When everyone was settled, she went on. "The fortune teller's life has neared its end. We used to be close, so I wanted to come and pay my respects. I expect both of you to keep all of this secret."

Lan Jue couldn't help but interject. "Will you be leaving after this?"

She turned her wide eyes his ways, the threat of violence ever twinkling in their depths. "Are you saying you want me to leave?"

Lan Jue couldn't shake his head fast enough. "Of course not! With you at the head of the Avenue, things are looking up!"

Her face lit up in a pretty smile. "Good, then I won't be leaving."

"Truly, aunt?" The Wine Master asked excitedly.

She sniffed. "My baby is here, I'm not going anywhere."

Lan Jue was resigned. What could he do? She certainly didn't look like she could be his mother on the outside, by the age difference alone. She was old enough to be his grandmother's grandmother, but people only paid attention to what they could see. For the Avenue, though, there could be no better result. For a Nirvana-level Paragon of her strength, none of the other Alliance groups had an answer. Beyond that, it was an excellent boon for humanity in their preparation against the alien invaders.

The Wine Master fixed Lan Jue with a look. He knew it was completely ludicrous that the two would have a blood connection. He couldn't fathom under what circumstances he would send Lan Jue out to bring back his

aunt, only for the kid to turn her in to his mother. It was something he would have to ask in private.

Luo Xianni went on. "Again, my presence and the things I do here must be kept a secret. Whatever you all were up to before, keep it that way. When that palm reader wakes up, I'll go say hello."

"Of course." The Wine Master was quick to answer. Although he himself was a Paragon, he had been growing up with his aunt since he was very small. A lot of what he knew had been imparted to him by her. He had a great deal of affection and respect for this woman.

Luo Xianni turned her attention to her nephew. "You haven't improved much these last few years. You still haven't been able to let it go?"

The Wine Master's face changed, and a hard bitterness crept in to his expression. "You still remember?"

"Enough. Time changes all things. You need to put aside everything that isn't important. There are always more opportunities, so long as you look for them. She has run off to the North, and it's been years. It's clear there's no place for you in her heart. What's the point of obsessing over it so much? I'll introduce another to you, don't you worry. I hear A-Jue mentioned this woman called the Pharmacist. She sounded nice, what do you think?"

The Wine Master suddenly looked very uncomfortable. "Aunt, let's not rush in to making you a matchmaker!"

She sniffed dismissively. "What's this nonsense, don't you know I used to be known as First Among Matchmakers?"

"Never," the Wine Master begged. "A hundred thousand times, no. I'm scared of you."

She changed the subject. "You've been looking after my shop. How are things? When can we start business again?"

"More or less ready," he assured. "In a couple days you can head over and take a look."

Lan Jue looked over to his mother with a bit of surprise. “Mother, what store will you be managing?” According to the rules of the Avenue, every councilor had to have a shop under their direction. At least one was the prerequisite, either on the Avenue or the Underground. The Clairvoyant and the Wine Master, despite being Paragons, were no exception. The only ones who saw a slightly different circumstance were the Keeper and Bookworm. They worked together.

Luo Xianni giggled. “Your mother used to go by ‘the Photographer!’ When you’re ready to get married, I’ll take the wedding photos for you 1. My shop is called ‘Luo Xianni’s Wedding Photography Studio.’”

Lan Jue stared blankly at her. His mind went back to when he’d first seen her, and the power she commanded. Connecting that with her designation as the Photographer, he was starting to understand. Her Discipline was some variation on dimensional manipulation. “Alright, I’m leaving. I’ll be back when the shop’s ready. By the way, this place stinks like booze. It makes me sick. I prefer my man Bupang’s cigars.” With her opinion given, she rose to her feet, and strut out the door.

My man Bupang...

Lan Jue didn’t know how Jue Di would have reacted if he’d heard, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to take his place by contradicting her.

The return of Luo Xianni to the Avenue was a tremendous boon. Especially now, as the Eye of Tomorrow was closing, there could be no better news. Her return was also important for the Avenue’s strength, if nothing else. Not only did it swell their Paragon numbers, she was also damn strong.

“Ahem... So, Jewelry Master. What in the name of the multiverse is going on?” The Wine Master quietly waited until he was sure his aunt was gone before whispering the question.

Chapter 508: The Avenue Will Raise an Army?

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. "If you don't know, how should I?"

The Wine Master pressed. "She's met your master?"

The Jewelry Master nodded. "She has, but I don't know what's going on there. I only know what I've seen and heard."

"Yeah, yeah, so it is." The Wine Master didn't push him any further. After all, this involved one of the strongest Paragon that has ever lived, Jue Di!

Lan Jue went on. "I also don't know why mother would want to come back to the Avenue. At first she was dead-set against leaving father's side. She's the only one who knows why she came back."

The Wine Master smirked. "Whatever the reason, it's good she's back. All of this, only you and me know. Even the Gourmet, Keeper and Bookworm aren't aware of everything. Their relationship is likely cooler, since she left shortly after they came to join the Avenue. They aren't aware of the plans for her Photography Studio either. I've been keeping that under wraps."

The two of them exchange looks for a moment, sharing an unspoken understanding. None of this could leave this room.

"How is the Clairvoyant?" Lan Jue asked.

The wine Master's face stiffened, and a despondent look crossed his face. "Three days, that's how long he has left. On that day we'll gather and send him off. About a week ago he told me who he wanted to attend. Aunt was on there, as well as you and your four companions and the other Paragons."

Lan Jue offered a gentle nod. He felt sad as well. The Clairvoyant had done miraculous things for humanity, for the Avenue. He spent countless years in defense of this place, and his time was nearly done.

Lan Jue asked, “have my brother and the others come yet?”

“Not yet,” the Wine Master said, “but the air hangar has been alerted and spots are being held. They should be here in a couple of days. But to business. I called you here because of my aunt, but also to discuss something else.”

“Alright,” Lan Jue said.

The wine Master nodded. “As we’re all painfully aware, the alien creatures will soon come upon human space en masse. From all the information we’ve been able to gather, we know this is going to be one mighty struggle. The Clairvoyant’s visions have shown us all that needs to be prepared. We’ve followed his wishes, and have started to expand the Star Alliance. At present, all Avenue resident below the age of sixty have begun training with mechas.”

Lan Jue looked at him in shock . “All adepts under sixty?”

He nodded. “Of course, this was voluntary. No one was forced or coerced to get involved, and the loose structure of the Avenue has been maintained. The Paragons are not part of this, since a mecha suit has little benefit in the face of our natural power.”

Lan Jue was assured of that fact. It wasn’t that the suits weren’t useful, but that in order to be of use to a Paragon, a great deal of top-shelf materials were needed. That kind of spending made Sovereign-class suit construction look like a cheap knock-off. Most important, though, none of the modern crop of Paragons had an interest in mecha piloting. As Paragons, they commanded power that would outclass a battleship. The saying ‘A Paragon’s reach surpasses the sky,’ was no exaggeration.

“So what’s you’re saying,” Lan Jue probed, “is that the Avenue is making its own mecha combat division. With the aim of sending it in to battle against the aliens.”

The Wine Master grunted. “That’s the basic idea. I also wanted your input. We Paragons will also be on the field. From what we know, while our numbers are few we can do tremendous damage to the enemy. We’re worth far more than one mecha suit. However, when it comes to planning,

that's where we're deficient. We need you and your brother for that."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed tight as he thought. "This is a very serious matter. It'll need some time to think, so I can't give you an answer just yet. But that's not a bad thing. All of our Adepts here are solid, too – strong. However, a good, tailor-made suit will need time and materials!"

The Wine Master grinned. "Don't worry over that. Our coffers are not just theoretical. The mechs suits are all being paid for by us. We've been in the process for some time already, with the Bookworm and Keeper in charge. They'll handle it."

"So how many have joined the Star Alliance," Lan Jue asked.

The Wine Master thought for a moment. "At first it was about one third of those eligible. After the tournament, it rose to fifty percent and growing." 1

Lan Jue looked at the Wine Master in open surprise. He didn't think that so many people would be interested in joining the mecha alliance. This was a battle division being put together to face the alien menace. It was a dangerous posting.

As far as he knew, Skyfire Avenue had forty thousand registered Adepts. About half of those were in the age range they were looking for. Half of a half still made for ten thousand new recruits.

"There aren't as many as you think," the Wine Master could see the shock written on the Jewelry Master's face.

Doubt started to creep in to Lan Jue's face. "How many really?"

"We also have a power prerequisite," the Wine Master explained. "Recruits have to be a minimum of sixth rank. Under sixty, sixth rank – those are the requirements."

Lan Jue gave the older man a flat look. "Stop running me around in circles, people are going to die, alright? With these restrictions we've got about ten times fewer bodies."

The Wine Master smirked. "The Avenue may be strong, but do you think

we have Sovereign-ranked pilots just waltzing around all over the place? What we're building is a strike force, the tip of the spear. Of course we'll need to make sure our people are strong enough to handle it."

The minimum requirement for an Adept to register with the Avenue was fourth rank. Demanding that an applicant be sixth rank was cutting their pool by a huge margin.

"So tell me straight, how many people are there actually." Lan Jue asked once more.

"More than six hundred," the wine Master finally revealed. "With more joining every day."

Lan Jue shrugged. "So why are you telling me all this?"

To this the older man gave him a flat stare. "Isn't it obvious? You have been given the Star Alliance, did you think that you wouldn't be in charge of it? We've been helping to get it started, but later things will depend on you. Your first job should be to get them strong enough to make a difference. A good Adept doesn't instantly make a good mecha pilot. How you make that happen is up to you. I hear your training courses at the NEU were successful. You also have my approval to bring those young men and women in to the Avenue as full members. We'll create mecha suits for them as well, free of charge. What do you think?"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait." Lan Jue lifted his hands, entreating the Wine Master to silence. He frowned at the Paragon. "It's starting to sound like you expect me to lead your army."

The Wine Master nodded matter-of-factly. "That's exactly right. You've already promised the Clairvoyant, haven't you? It's a little late for regrets."

"I..." Lan Jue stared at him, for a moment too stunned to finish his thought. "This was your plan the whole time, wasn't it."

The Wine Master nodded again. "Right! What would be the point of having the Divine Monarchs and Star Alliance fight otherwise. Advertisement for the Star Alliance, which you agreed to inherit from the Clairvoyant."

Lan Jue's face twitched. "You're a pretty direct guy, huh."

The Wine Master grinned at him. "Always have been."

"So what am I supposed to do now," Lan Jue asked.

The Wine Master was the picture of astonishment. "How do I know? Like I said, we're just here to set you up. If you need money, we'll get you money. If you need resources, you'll have resources. What else could you possibly trouble us old men for? We're too old to do any teaching. The future belongs to the young!"

Lan Jue could outright puke blood at this old man's nonsense. What kind of mafia did he get himself drafted in to? Lan Jue suddenly felt a lot less pity for the Clairvoyant.

At first glance, training six hundred pilots didn't seem like a very daunting class. Lan Jue was a God-ranked pilot, and had the A.R.C. experience to draw upon besides. But were things ever really as easy as they seemed?

Of course not.

Adepts weren't students. The NEU kids were young, willing, and without the burdens of adult society. They were weaker, and Lan Jue could direct them as easily as the arm directs the hand.

But Avenue Adepts were different. They were bound to be cunning, experienced, and strong. He still remembered when the Citadels came. In the height of conflict, a hundred Avenue Adepts came flying to their aid. Aside from Adepts with a flight Discipline, only ninth rank Adepts could traverse the skies. A hundred people that strong would not be quick to follow instruction.

This didn't even take in to account the loose nature of Skyfire Avenue. These people were used to doing what they pleased. If he was expected to turn them in to soldiers, they would need a soldier's training. That meant discipline. This division he fell in to was going to be a chore, be it in training or in battle.

Seeing Lan Jue's crestfallen expression, the Wine Master piped up.

“What’s wrong? Is there a problem? Whatever it is let us know, and the council will do whatever it can to help you solve it.”

Chapter 509: Skyfire Avenue's Star Division

Lan Jue heaved a sigh. "Is there any way I can get out of this?"

The Wine Master theatrically extended his hands toward the younger man. "Look at you. After all the trouble you've caused the Avenue, not least of which stealing the Eastern chairman's daughter on her wedding day!"

"Alright! I get it." Lan Jue pleaded. "I agreed, and even if I hadn't you would have found a way to make me do it anyway. But I'm telling you, if I'm running this than my commands have to be your commands. Whatever I need Skyfire Avenue will provide, agreed?"

The Wine Master nodded his head. "We pay the money and you pay out in effort. The Avenue will do whatever it can to help."

It was Lan Jue's turn to nod. "To start, any commanding officer will need to be a strong deterrent to breaking the rules. Otherwise controlling these adepts will be impossible. Do you agree?"

"I wish there was something I could do there," the Wine Master backpedaled. "I'm just an old man... I'm sixty years old!"

Lan Jue responded with a little irritation. "I'm not talk about you. The Keeper and Bookworm would be no help either, the three of you can help with logistics. The Gourmet isn't sixty. He can help me as assistant commander. The Pharmacist as well, with those two I should be fine."

The Wine Master agreed. "I'll be responsible for getting the Gourmet on board. The Pharmacist you'll need to manage on your own. Her situation is special, you know more about it than I do."

Lan Jue nodded, indicating he understood. "Alright. I think it'd be best if you called a council meeting and let everyone know."

This seemed to amuse the Wine Master. "You haven't been to an Avenue meeting in days. We've discussed it already, several times. Relax, everyone

knows it's your job to get the Avenue fighting ready."

The Jewelry Master's eyes popped wide. "You guys have been whoring me out when I'm not even around?"

"Well, you don't need to make it sound so crass," the Wine Master complained. "None of this was done on the sly, and we aren't hiding anything from you."

Lan Jue shot to his feet. "I'm going!"

The Wine Master was nonplussed. "We'll send all the relevant data to you, everything is more or less ready for you to begin. We just need you're A.R.C. students. When you bring them over here, we can start training."

Lan Jue almost tripped over his own feet. Suddenly he had the overwhelming impression that he shouldn't have come to visit. Hell, he shouldn't have come back from Ziluo at all! This old bastard was ruthless!

As he watched Lan Jue's retreating back, the smile slipped from the Wine Master's face and he sighed. "Foolish kid. You are the Clairvoyant's chosen. It's a heavy burden, but we'll help where we can."

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Lan Jue stomped out of the Gothic Winery. A myriad of thoughts and emotions rushed through him, so much that he forgot about Qianlin. This was a big undertaking the Wine Master had laid at his feet. He suddenly felt heavy and tired. This was not going to be easy!

He lost himself in thoughts and began to wander down the street. After a while, he came upon a familiar storefront: Wendy Wang's Haut Couture Clothing

Almost unconsciously, he pushed at the doors and found them locked. Usually visitors required an appointment. But, after knocking, the Barber pulled aside the blinds. He was surprised for a moment, then opened the door. "When did you get back?"

Lan Jue chuckle. "Is that reprobate the Driver hanging around here?"

The Barber answered with a nod. "Yeah. Come in."

The room was filled with the smell of revelry, and Lan Jue picked out the Driver right away. He was seated with a glass of whisky in one hand and a cigar in the other, looking comfortable.

“Ah, you’re back.” The Driver never missed a beat. He pulled out a glass from beneath the end table beside him, and place it beside a bottle of whisky. He poured Lan Jue a generous helping.

Before anything else, Lan Jue plucked up the glass and took a sip of the golden liquid within. His lips spry in to a bitter smirk. “I shouldn’t have! You people – not a soul told me what I was walking in to!”

The Driver’s chuckle was deep and mirthful. “Of course. If we had told you, would you have come back? You can’t lay the blame on us, we were under orders from the Wine Master. And isn’t this a good thing? They’re grooming you for command of the whole Avenue. That’s good, right?”

Lan Jue gaped at him. “Good? I joined the Avenue so I could mind my own business. Now suddenly there’s all this responsibility sat square on my shoulders. You think that’s a good thing?”

The Driver felt he clearly needed more whisky, and poured him some more. “Alright, alright – calm down. Things aren’t as bad as you think, anyway. You’ve been around for a while and have a reputation here. And speaking of reputation, we weren’t the only ones who saw your performance at the tournament. Everyone in the Avenue knows who you are and what you can do. Ever since the tournament ended, volunteers for the Star Division have increased by thirty percent. Who do you think they came for? You’re underplaying your role on the Avenue.”

The Barber reappeared and placed a glass of ice water in front of Lan Jue with a nod. “He’s right. There wasn’t a breath of opposition to the idea of making you Colonel of the Avenue’s Forces. Your qualifications were clear to anyone who watched that tournament. We saw the strength of your Discipline, damn near Paragon, but we also saw your strength of character. Your actions on Taihua were as telling as those on Luo. That’s what their faith is built on, and why it won’t be the nightmare you expect. And, since the council voted you in, we’re obligated to make sure it works. You’ve got

a lot of people at your back. You won't be struggling alone."

The Driver's words were convincing, but it wasn't until the Barber chimed in that he started to feel more at ease.

He was a smart man, and he quickly analyzed the truth of what they said. There were a number of strong Adepts, but all of the strongest he knew personally. He'd at least have Paragon support, and help from the original members of the Star Alliance. It was by no means going to be an easy task, but it didn't look as hopeless as it had before.

The Driver went on. "Well, it is what it is. Worry about what you need from the council instead. And before everything, I think you need to consider how to direct your new army. We may not be tight-knit, but there are advantages. Nearly all of them have at least some experience with a mecha suit. A lot are legitimate mecha pilots. They may not know how to work as a unit, but they'll learn that with time. I think they're going to surprise you. But you can't treat them like soldiers. If you did I don't think you'll have much of a division left."

Lan Jue's brows knit as he thought. "So you're saying we're going to need a different training method."

The Driver shot him a thumbs-up. "That's the idea."

Lan Jue's eyes shuttled back and forth as his mind raced. Yes! A loose structure had its own benefits. However, while the Adepts were strong individually they couldn't compare to a soldier's cooperation. Battle groups like on An Luo were not the way to go.

All of these fighters would have already been customized through their own training, used to a style. There would be power discrepancies and more to contend with. But if they each fought together, but separate...

There weren't any forces like this in any Alliance military. The only equivalent he could think of was...

A tell-tale glint of excitement lit up Lan Jue's eyes.

"Drink." The Driver lifted his glass, and gently struck it against his guest's.

Lan Jue obliged. He could feel the whisky burn a path down in to his stomach, before that comfortable heat spread all through him.

“I’ll think on it, and call the original Alliance members together when its time.”

The Driver nodded. “Not a problem, everyone’s already here to send the Clairvoyant off.” His voice trailed off at the end, and his face darkened. It was clear to Lan Jue that the Eye of Tomorrow meant a lot to this man.

Lan Jue gave a small sigh. He knew he could ultimately turn all of this down if he had to. Maybe if the Clairvoyant was in better health, he’d be more insistent. But things as they were, he had a responsibility to carry the task.

Although it was hard to know his path was chosen for him, his hatred for the Eye of Tomorrow’s meddling eased when he realized it had all been for his benefit. It smacked of servitude, but it was servitude to himself, and to all the worlds’ people.

The Driver saw Lan Jue’s expression change. He said nothing further.

Lan Jue sat for another half an hour before leaving Haut Couture Clothing behind. He hopped on his bicycle, and turned it toward Mt. Tianshan.

Peace within to resist dangers without. He knew he would be very busy in the coming days, and now was the time to put his personal problems to bed. He needed to speak with Qianlin and clear up the misunderstanding. Otherwise, there could be no peace within.

Lan Jue didn’t steal up to the mountain top this time. He took the main road, tall and dignified. None of the checkpoints challenged him. He’d called the Wine Master on the way over, and had asked him to handle authorization. After the scan authorized his passage, Lan Jue continued the ascent.

He pushed his bike along the road, and with every step closer to the peak his heart calmed. In his mind were two separate images, clear and distinct: One was Hera, and the other was Zhou Qianlin.

Chapter 510: Halt! I'm Talking to You!

So who was it that held higher status in Lan Jue's heart? It was difficult to admit, but the image of Hera had begun to dim. Zhou Qianlin was sharper, more impressed upon his mind. However, deep in his heart there would forever be an overlap between them. He'd come to accept that this may always be the case.

It doesn't matter, I like her! Lan Jue firmly reminded himself. There was no more time for looking back.

It wasn't long before he arrived at the peak of the mountain. Lan Jue found a place to lean his bicycle, then walked up to the front.

He pressed the doorbell.

After a moment, the door flung open. Lan Jue was met by none other than the Chairman of the Eastern Alliance, Zhou Xueguan.

Lan Jue went stiff. Ever since taking Zhou Qianlin from her wedding, Lan Jue had been left with an unhealed wound. He didn't know how he could explain, and apologize to her family.

The Chairman fixed him with steely eyes. "Who are you looking for?"

This wasn't the kind of place solicitors frequented.

"Uncle, hello," Lan Jue began. "I am looking for Zhou Qianlin."

The most powerful politician in the East stood in the doorway, and sized up the young visitor. Lan Jue had chosen an ash grey suit, with a deep blue shirt and dark grey tie. His brown leather shoes were a stately addition, and with the suit set off his slender, athletic physique. The edge of a white handkerchief peaked from his vest pocket.

"You are?" the Chairman asked.

"I'm her friend. I'm sorry, is she home?" Lan Jue inquired.

Zhou Xueguan shook his head. "She is not. She left early this morning and hasn't returned. Why haven't you called her communicator, friend?"

Lan Jue smirked sheepishly. "We've had a bit of a misunderstanding.

She's not answering my calls."

"A misunderstanding?" The statesman looked at Lan Jue curiously. "Come in." He stepped aside and pulled open the door. He didn't know how this young man got all the way up here, but in his years of experience he'd learned to read people well. This young man, in his estimation, had no ill intent.

This was the first time Lan Jue entered this complex by the front door. The place was as spartan as Qianlin's room. Only the simple essentials and tasteful decoration could be seen.

Zhou Xueguan lead Lan Jue to a sofa and sat. "You still haven't told me who you are."

"Ah, I'm sorry, how impolite. Uncle, I am Lan Jue." He was still a little out of sorts, otherwise he wouldn't have forgotten such a simple courtesy.

"Lan Jue?" Zhou Xueguan searched his memory for the name, but shook his head. "I'm sorry. I've never heard Qianlin talk about you. How do you know each other?"

Lan Jue fumbled for words. "I'm one of her instructors at school. I'm an etiquette teacher at the National Eastern University."

It appeared those qualifications were enough for the chairman. His face softened once Lan Jue explained who he was. "Etiquette teacher, eh? No wonder I get a refined sense from you. Well, Qianlin isn't here. I myself have a meeting to get to. Won't be long."

Was this a hint for him to leave? Lan Jue looked reluctant, but he was not slow in rising to his feet. "Uncle, if I could trouble you to give Qianlin a message? I have to speak to her about something rather urgent."

"Sure," the chairman replied. "But I'm afraid, instructor, I must remind you. You are Qianlin's teacher, and thus should call me 'sir', not 'uncle.'"

Sharp! No wonder he's the Chairman.

Lan Jue couldn't think of a way to answer. He only nodded, and muttered "Of course, Mister Zhou. I'm sorry for troubling you."

Zhou Xueguan put in his daughter's number in to the communicator. After a few rings Qianlin's familiar voice answered. "Daddy, what is it?"

Inwardly Lan Jue couldn't help but gloat. Hah! I knew she was just screening my calls!

"We have a visitor here at the house," her father began. "He says he's your teacher. Lan Jue. He says he needs to speak with you about something urgent."

"Oh. Hand him the communicator, please." Her voice was calm.

Zhou Xueguan gave his communicator to Lan Jue, who thankfully took it from him. "Qianlin, where are you?"

Qianlin's sweet voice answered. "Professor Lan, I'm out walking around with a few friends. What's the matter?"

He couldn't be direct with her father standing right in front of him. "Can we meet somewhere and talk?"

Her response was soft. "I'm sorry. I've already left Skyfire City."

"Left?" Lan Jue was surprised at the revelation. "When are you coming back?"

"I'm not sure." Qianlin's voice was halting and timid. "If that's it, Professor, I'll talk to you later."

Lan Jue rushed to fit in a last word. "Look, everything was a misunderstanding –" He could hear the dial tone on the other side. She'd hung up. He was forced to hand the communicator back under the Chairman's fixed, curious stare. Lan Jue's face was both bitter but resigned.

"I'll be leaving uncle, sorry for troubling you." The former Mercenary King bowed respectfully before the Eastern leader and then left. He didn't give any thought to addressing the chairman wrong a second time. The Chairman didn't correct him. He simply watched the young man go, with a small smile on his face.

As he trundled down the mountain, Lan Jue was a lot less confident and a lot more depressed than he had been coming up. He hadn't seen this coming, and it was the worst outcome he could have dreamt up. But leaving without saying anything, how could he fault her for that? He'd just done the same thing! He could only blame himself.

Lan Jue pondered on the sour matters as he rolled homeward. Oh well, he thought, I'll deal with other matters first.

But wait – she'd said she was out with classmates. He would go to school first, then, and at least find out who she was out with. Maybe he could guess where they went. If time allowed, he'd go find her. It sounded like she was out of the city, but not off planet, so it wouldn't take too long time get wherever she was.

It had been a long time since he had walked the campus. This was as good a time as any to get in touch with the A.R.C. students and get them up to speed on the plan. If they decided to join his division, he'd at least have a group capable of following instruction. It was a great deal for them as well. Aside from Avenue membership, they also got a damn god level mecha suit for signing up.

However, he couldn't just show up looking like he did. He was too recognizable now. If what the Driver said was true, he was practically a celebrity after the tournament. He had to be careful, otherwise he'd get himself in trouble.

He pulled off the path at where he and Qianlin used to separate after school. He put on his hat, mask and sunglasses, and then continued his trek to the NEU.

To ensure he wouldn't be seen, Lan Jue didn't go through the main gates, either. He pulled the bike around the side and scaled a wall. If he'd wanted to come in the normal way, security would have had to ask him his identity. That would've been less than ideal.

The NEU's perimeter wall was tall, and was equipped with an electronic fence to deter unwanted visitors. This, of course, was not a problem for an Adept who specialized in lightning. He easily hopped the wall, and once

inside began to walk the narrow alleys like everyone else.

Lan Jue chose not to visit Wu Junyi in the administration building, and instead head straight for the electives offices. Wang Hongyuan would be there, and he could tell him about the future of the A.R.C. class as well.

His walk across campus was going well. No one he passed seem to recognize him, and his destination was only a few feet away. At this time, most of the students were in class, so the roads were mostly deserted.

He was congratulating himself on his luck, when suddenly a harsh shout pulled his eyes away from the electives building.

“Halt! I’m talking to you, the guy in the hat!”

The shout almost made Lan Jue leap out of his skin. He unconsciously spun toward the source.

Of course he knew who it was! In fact, he was starting to think the two of them were forever cursed to be in each other’s orbit. He could always count on it, and always at the worst times.

Tan Lingyun, known locally as the Savage Goddess, was in his face faster than he could gasp. “Who the hell are you, skulking around the school like this? Take off that ridiculous mask, and the hat and glasses while you’re at it. If you refuse don’t blame me for the consequences!”

The sudden sense of déjà vu caused his hackles to raise. Rude as ever!

He heaved a deep, helpless sigh. “It’s clear that your temperament isn’t ever going to improve. We were born with opposing horoscopes 1. Why is it whenever I expressly don’t want trouble, you’re always around the corner?”

As he spoke, he lifted his head, pulled off his hat and glasses, and stared coldly at her. He didn’t need to hide his identity from her anymore, not after the tournament. Running in to her was probably a good thing. She must have watched it, too.

When she saw his face, old habits kicked in. “Again I run in to you, piece of tr –“

And then she remembered.

Her curse caught in her throat. “Yo-you... you... you are... !”

“I am what?” Lan Jue said in faux resignation. “Trash? That’s what you were going to say. I’m on the edge of my seat waiting to hear your opinion, Professor Tan.”

The Savage Goddess stared at him with eyes so wide he thought they might roll out of her head. She was still as a statue, and suddenly she found she couldn’t utter a single sound.

Since the end of the tournament, she’d been waiting for him to come back. She wasn’t sure he ever would, but she had been looking forward to the chance to meet him face to face again. She figured that the chances would be small, though, considering his sudden rise to stardom. After the tournament he was a household name, and she figured coming back to the school would have caused a splash he wasn’t interested in. Still she prayed that was the case. And here he was – was he coming back?

Now, however, with the man right she wanted him, she couldn’t think of anything to say. Here she was, and now everything was not what she imagined. He was Lei Feng? Was that even possible? This was the Demon Drillmaster?

Zeus?

How could this be Zeus, though? How was he not a rough and rugged warrior?

A thousand questions flooded her mind all at once, so many that she couldn’t even straighten her thoughts enough to pick one. She just looked at him, hardly able to believe her eyes.

Chapter 511: I Prefer the Mask

“You..” IT was the only thing Tan Lingyun could manage to mutter.

“Are you alright, Tan Lingyun?” Lan Jue waved his hand in front of her eyes.

Suddenly, there was a flash in the woman’s eyes. Before Lan Jue could react, Tan Lingyun reached out and grabbed his hand, and tried to twist it around.

Lan Jue was taken aback for a moment, but his subconscious reacted for him. He took a step back, his hand still held tightly by the Savage Goddess. He turned his wrist, forcing hers to as well. A half-second glint of lightning flashed as a bolt struck her wrist. Her whole body went numb, while Lan Jue took a few steps back to maintain a safe distance.

“Professotr Tan. I really don’t understand why you have to be violent every time we run in to one another. Is there so much hatred between us?” Lan Jue was beginning to grow irritated.

“Yes!” She screamed back in challenge. She lunged at him like a leopardess, her fingers swiping like claws at his face.

Lan Jue watched her coming, and grunted angrily. “I’ve tolerated you for long enough!” Lan Jue’s body shimmered and vanished. All Tan Lingyun saw was a flash, and then suddenly, before her eyes, there were countless Lan Jues menacingly glaring at her. The whole world went spinning, and when she finally got her bearings she discovered she was on her back. Luckily, Lan Jue was not the kind of person to react in anger. She’d hit hard, but he’d floored her on the grass. He could have just as easily driven her through the concrete a few steps away.

Lan Jue pressed her against the floor with a hand against her shoulder blade. His other hand kept her wrist twisted and pressed against her middle back. “Are you convinced?” He asked, dryly.

She writhed in ager. “I am not! Let me go!”

“I can do that,” Lan Jue answered. “But you have to stop acting like a

crazy person.”

Tan Lingyun did not protest. She didn't say anything. Eventually Lan Jue let her free.

She took the opportunity to whip herself around, trying to sweep Lan Jue's legs out from under him.

Damnit, Lan Jue muttered inwardly, is she trying to cut my legs off? He brought his legs together and launched himself backward. In the same moment, his right hand reached out and released a gust of gentle energy. When it struck Tan Lingyun, it sent her spinning in the opposite direction.

He came to a stop, pointing threateningly with his hand. There was a flash of gold, and suddenly Lan Jue face was replaced with the opulent golden mask familiar to Zeus. “Enough! Stay your hand!” he commanded.

Tan Lingyun, upon seeing the true Zeus before her, was frozen in place. Her whole body quivered. For reasons unknown, when she saw him this way all violence drained from her.

He saw her standing there, stunned. “What's wrong with your head? Are you finally finished?”

She summoned enough gall to stammer at him. “Y-you... you look better this way. I can stomach it.”

“You're a damn masochist!” Lan Jue hissed at her. “Where are my A.R.C. students. Take me.”

“Oh.” She'd been a vicious tigress moments before, but dutifully pointed out where the students were and trotted off without any further argument.

Behind the mask Lan Jue watched her go, truly speechless. Mean women need mean men, apparently. This lady...

Tan Lingyun quietly led him to the distant building, never once looking back. She managed to get herself under control, but she could feel the hard eyes behind the golden mask at her back. It made her shiver, and memories of the A.R.C. class swam through her foggy head. It was a feeling she found she liked, one she didn't get from Lan Jue.

Am I really a masochist? Tan Lingyun worried over the question. None of that mattered, though. He came back.

Her lips spread in to a sinister grin. “Drillmaster, now that you’re back, do you need your assistants again?” She queried.

Lan Jue nodded behind her. “If you all agree, we can continue the training. But it won’t be on campus.”

“I agree!” There wasn’t an ounce of hesitation from her. Inwardly,

Lan Jue sighed. Those were the words he wished he’d heard from Qianlin. If only! But pondering the what-ifs wasn’t helping anything, and it was all too late. She was gone, and he didn’t know where.

“Other than Qianlin, which other A.R.C. students have left campus?” He asked.

Tan Lingyun called back over her shoulder. “They’re all here, except for Qianlin. Me and Wang Hongyuan, too. With his identity and exploits made public, Wang Hongyuan’s was also caught in the crossfire. Everyone knew about him as well. In fact, the two of them had been in charge of the independent A.R.C. program since his departure.

“What’s been going on with the university lately?”

They continued to walk as Tan Lingyun caught him up to speed. “Things are very good. Ever since the news of who you are broke, enrollment has skyrocketed. A lot of foreign instructors have applied for positions, too. The local government’s been keeping a close eye, and are angling to turn this in to a military university.”

“Mh.” Lan Jue nodded as she explained. “That’s good. Let’s see how the students are doing.”

He kept the mask on. It seemed to command respect from the Savage Goddess, so perhaps the students would react similarly. Under Lingyun’s direction, they traversed the college and walked in to a separate area off to one side of campus. A single building and a small training field had been constructed there.

The school sure was generous! Lan Jue looked over the additions with silent praise.

Of course, the University was run by a couple of crafty old bastards. After Lan Jue's victory, it took them no time to capitalize on it. Snippets of the training he lead were inexplicably 'leaked' and served as wonderful advertisement. The A.R.C. kids were the university's trump card.

As a unit, they were spectacular. When you added in their gear earned from An Luo, they were definitely the center of many discussions. Not least of this was Wu Junyi's clandestine trip to Luo, where he tried to convince the university to come for another round of competitions.

His goal was obvious.

Su He was no longer part of the university's teaching team. Lyr had many good pilots, but the school didn't have the benefit of Lan Jue or his training program. Nor did it have the likes of Tan Lingyun or Wang Hongyuan. You didn't have to be the Clairvoyant see how that competition would play out.

The NEU's teaching director also called in the media once the story broke. Under his sneaky dealings, students from worlds away were trying to find a way to get in to his school.

The A.R.C. students themselves suddenly awoke to discover they were hot commodities. Stellar offers were being thrown at them from everywhere.

Thankfully, Tan Lingyun had remained to look after his students, and she kept to his strict teaching doctrine. With her keeping careful watch, they worked to solidify the things they learned during training. Firming up after a period of laziness was always harder than just maintaining!

"We're here. At around this time, they should be training." Tan Lingyun indicated the stadium

"Right, let's go take a look." Lan Jue followed behind her. When they got closer, he started hearing the sounds of activity. They slipped in and stood in one corner to watch.

Forty-nine crack pilots in training practiced battle stances under the close watch of Drillmaster Wang Hongyuan. One on one fights! Limitations in space kept the groups to four each. They alternated, and it appeared that the day's training focused on Discipline integration.

"Can you insure safety while training like this?" Lan Jue asked Tan Lingyun.

She nodded. "We've thought about that. Every fight has either Wang Hongyuan, myself, or a high-rank Adept keeping close watch. They all know to take it easy against each other. It doesn't have the same benefits as a real life or death struggle, but it helps them. They're much better at employing their Discipline in combat now, and that means more efficient use with their mechas as well."

Lan Jue nodded in appreciation. "You've taken a good tack, but they need to be stronger. Let's see how much they've improved."

Even before his words disappeared from the air, Lan Jue vanished in a flash. Like a bolt, he raced toward the oblivious trainees.

His sudden and dramatic reaction startled Tan Lingyun, and excited her. Big green eyes sparkled, and the verdant green aura of her Discipline surrounded her. Her voice boomed across the field as she raced after the demon Drillmaster. "Enemies are at the gates! Attention!"

Her call was like a password. All at once, the students broke off from one another and scattered in all directions. Defensive mechas were in the front, filling the stadium with light as their Discipline birthed shields.

Lan Jue was a golden arc of electricity. He always preferred to start things off with his own people. His first target was Tang Xiao.

The young Adept hadn't changed much since the last time Lan Jue saw him, still a little fat. Tang Xiao reacted immediately when he saw the figure approach. Crouching low, human flesh became metal and what was a mecha became an orb of metal. Dozens upon dozens of dangerous spikes suddenly sprang out from its surface.

As crafty as ever!

Lan Jue came to a sudden halt in midair. A single finger stretched out, and from it shot a bolt of lightning. The wild blast of electricity struck Tang Xiao, and coiled around in preparation to blast him away.

However, in a shocking reversal, Lan Jue watched as Tang Xiao reacted. The spikes around him stretched taller, then splayed out like umbrellas. This second metallic shell protected his inward body from being directly affected. He got hit, but there was no conduction for the lightning to cause real damage.

His head snapped around when, suddenly, he heard an earth-trembling scream coming from his flank.

Chapter 512: The Demon Drillmaster Returns!

Lan Jue extended a palm just as Jin Tao came rushing at him. The berserker went tumbling over his head, but Lan Jue was genuinely surprised as how strong he'd suddenly become. Flooded with his Discipline, he stretched over eight feet tall. Coarse, golden hair sprang out from every pore. He looked like a wild lion, and was just as fierce – it reminded him of the Wolf King, Qi Mu. His Discipline wasn't as strong, but Jin Tao was no less savage.

But so was Lan Jue.

The Drillmaster broke away from Tang Xiao and Jin Tao, pressing into their protective circle. His right hand shot up and pointed to the sky. Bolt after bolt of feral lightning exploded out from Lan Jue in all directions until it swallowed up the whole field. Even Tan Lingyun and Wan Hongyuan were swallowed up. No corner was safe from the Forest of Lightning!

It was time to see what his students could do. How would they react to an attack like this, something so sudden and all-encompassing? React they did, by clumping together in to groups. Each student drew upon the full strength of their Disciplines for defense.

Mutual support formations? Good choice.

A single person's defenses could be overwhelmed, but there were limitations to lightning. Its strength and damage depended on conduction, and that meant it could be countered. By making the target bigger and consolidating defense, the students diffused the lightning's power over a bigger and sturdier bulwark. It was the perfect contingency measure.

However, not everyone was quick enough. They had to manage in other ways. Tang Xiao, for instance, was too far away to quickly join a group. The metallic ball became human-shaped again, and he threw himself at Tan Lingyun soaring by overhead. But Tan Lingyun saw him coming.

When he got close enough, her long leg shot out and booted him away.

Deflect a single bolt and facing a whole Forest of Lightning was very different. Tang Xiao couldn't protect himself. The lightning callously ignored his screams as the pudgy pilot was swallowed up.

He wasn't the only one. Several students had been caught out and lay splayed across the field. The stronger ones, like Tang Xiao, were able to scream. The others could only convulse.

Lan Jue watched and gauged their reactions as he attacked the young unit. He never let them see it, but he felt pride. It was obvious these kids hadn't been wasting time. They were better than before. None of their control or experience had been lost to idleness. Very good.

It hurt, but the pain served as a reminder and an inspiration to them. That golden mask glinted in the harsh light of lightning, bringing with it a bittersweet revelation. He's back! The Demon Drillmaster is back!

Just like Tan Lingyun, how could they not be excited at the return of their harsh but effective teacher? They had worked hard every day for this very moment, to avoid punishment. It was the time of reckoning, and perhaps the beginning of the next phase of their training. Few realized this, however, as the weaker members were too busy trying not to lose consciousness.

Geng Yang had improved his tenacity. He could handle much more now than he used to. Wang Hongyuan had also refined his abilities. And Tang Mi, her legs were looking even longer!

But if she was here, it meant she wasn't with Qianlin. If she wasn't with Tang Mi, then who in the world was Qianlin with? It couldn't be a male classmate!

The mere thought reflected itself in his Discipline, and the lightning he released became stronger. The shakes and cramps of the afflicted worsened.

Wonderful! The feeling was wonderful!

He held the flood for a long time, but eventually the power receded back

in to him. Eventually, the students began to recover. Lan Jue looked over the scores of collapsed bodies with his hands stuffed casually in his pockets. “Your resistance is garbage! I bet if I keep this up, every one of you will end up peeing your pants. Five minutes – anyone else who thinks they can take some more had five minutes to get themselves in order.”

Flashes of light and color flared around the field as students fought back on to their feet. Five minutes was five minutes, this man would give them not one second more. All through their struggle he could see it in their eyes – the ferocity and excitement. It was more than that, though. That was the light of fanaticism.

These kids had grown up quick.

Tan Lingyun recovered the fastest. She stood before the Drillmaster panting lustily. That green aura shimmered around her, while those pretty green eyes blazed.

Lan Jue looked back at her in surprise. “You’ve advanced?”

She was filled with pride when she nodded to him. She had advanced – ninth rank! And on the cusp of being a God-rank mecha pilot! She was responsible for the A.R.C., but that hadn’t been an excuse for her to work less than anyone else. On the contrary, she pushed herself the hardest. He was looking at the result of hard work, and she was better for it in every way.

Lan Jue nodded. “Keep up the hard work. You’re advancing, but you’ve still got a long road ahead. Remember that you can’t train with the goal of quick success. Every time you rise in rank, firm up your foundation, do you understand? The next time you’re about to take a step up, tell me. I’ll check your bases.”

Re-cultivation had served to deepen Lan Jue’s experience and understanding, especially of ninth rank. He could use this knowledge to help the newly promoted Tan Lingyun.

“Alright.” She punctuated the response with a nod of her own. She could hardly contain her excitement now that he was back. She was buzzing with it.

Next to come to their senses was not Wang Hongyuan, as he expected. In fact, it was Tang Xiao that took up position behind the Savage Goddess. His thicker girth had its advantages, although he still suffered from the occasional tick.

Wang Hongyuan had a stronger Discipline than Tang Xiao's, but the dark nature of his Discipline was a variable to take in to account. For him, the terror of lightning was real and hard to overcome. This applied to his bioelectricity, as well.

One by one, the students pulled themselves up and arrayed themselves in organized rows for presentation. Lan Jue had very high expectations for them, but he felt safe enough behind the mask to smile. All of the work they'd put in had not been for nothing. The A.R.C. class had been a success.

"Drillmaster, reporting! Forty-nine of the fifty A.R.C. participants are present. We are missing one student." Wang Hongyuan called out.

The Demon Drillmaster nodded slowly. "Not bad. I don't yet regret the time I've spent on you. At least you haven't been spending your time with your thumb up your asses. So congratulations, you've done the bare minimum."

The backhanded praise was a surprise to them. It felt unnatural.

"But!"

This made their backs straighten. Deep in their hearts, a dark joy grew: He's back! He's back! The Demon Drillmaster returns!

Lan Jue sniffed contemptuously before continuing. "None of you are anywhere near as strong as you need to be. Clearly your training needs to continue. Just like last time, this is your opportunity to bow out. If you don't think you can handle it, you have this one chance to leave. For those of you who decide to stay, today marks the first day of your military service. We will be leaving the university, and I will train you like an army. I will make you in to a unique fighting force. I don't need your answers now. Take three days to discuss this with your families. When I come back, those of you who are ready for the next step will leave with me. The

rest will be left behind. Disperse!”

Lan Jue shouted the order, but no one complied. Not a single student moved, they only looked at one another with strange expressions.

“Sir!” Tang Xiao’s voice cut the silence.

“Speak!” Lan Jue swung his eyes to his disciple.

“Drillmaster! I don’t need to go home. I’m ready to join!” Not a hint of doubt was in his voice.

“And me!” Jin Tao was half a second in following.

Lan Jue lifted his hand to dissuade others, who were ready to shout their agreement. His voice was low. “I don’t want your declarations. If you join me, you it won’t be long before you’ll be facing a real enemy. Not pirates, not even men. You will be expected to put your lives on the line fighting those alien beasts. Even now we don’t know what these things are capable of, and that means there’s a real chance coming with me will cost you your lives. It’s a life that doesn’t just belong to you, but to your family. You have an obligation to go home and speak on it. Come back when you’ve really made up your mind. If you do join, I will do everything in my power to protect you. You will have access to the best training and equipment. So long as I draw breath, I won’t leave a single one of you behind. Do you understand?”

Chapter 513: The List

“Understood, Drillmaster!” The students called out in one voice. No one else rushed to say they’d join.

Lan Jue nodded. “That is all.” He turned his back on them and walked away. The students remained where they were, looking at each other speechlessly. The expected return of their Drillmaster was at hand, and they suddenly realized fully what that meant.

Lan Jue had pulled no punches in telling them about the danger, but he also promised to protect them as much as he could. The students felt it, felt inspired by it.

“I want to be a soldier, and nobody’s gunna talk me out of it. If it wasn’t for the Drillmaster I’d have signed up already. My family always said I was good for nothing, well I’ll show them. I’ll protect them, and the whole Alliance! Without a country how could we have a home? What makes us different from those aliens then? I’ll kill every one of them!” Jin Tao’s spirited voice carried on the air.

He was a very frank, very direct young man. In all the students of the class, he had improved the most. From the moment he agreed to start training with Lan Jue, he was a new person.

Before meeting Lan Jue, Jin Tao secretly thought he’d never be strong. He never thought people would look at him with pride and concern, instead of pity and disdain. His family no longer looked at him like a waste of space. His desires to join the army never changed, though. He’d told Lan Jue that dream long ago, and now his Drillmaster was to become his division commander. There could be no better outcome for Dumb-Mutt.

Tang Xiao chortled. “Yeah, you’re the smart one, right? I’m definitely going, too. Your elder brother isn’t so morally obligated, though. Listen. if I die under Professor Lan’s protection, then that mean’s it’s lights out for humanity already. When it’s war, you want to put yourself right next to the strongest person, that’s the safest place to be. It’s a simple concept. Easy as that. Let’s go, I gotta take a shower!”

Jin Tao's fire and Tang Xiao's practicality were mirrors of what all the students felt. Lan Jue, who had not gone far, secretly lauded his choice in disciples.

Wang Hongyuan and Tan Lingyun fell in with their Drillmaster, the dance instructor leading the way. They left the small stadium and entered the nearby building. Wang Hongyuan led them up to the offices.

"Back at last. You don't know how much the kids have been looking forward to this," Wang Hongyuan chuckled.

Lan Jue pulled the mask away, revealing his true face. "It was always the plan, there was just a lot to do. Now that things are handled, of course I'd want to come back. After all, I raised these pups. I can't just abandon them, I want them to grow up strong. I want them to be a benefit to humanity."

Wang Hongyuan nodded. "Where've you decided to bring everyone? At least me, anyway."

"I've decided to bring them to Skyfire Avenue," Lan Jue answered.

Tan Lingyun looked at him, surprised by the answer. "Skyfire Avenue?"

Lan Jue affirmed. "Yup. It's where I come from, and I'm a council member. Those monsters will be here soon, and the Avenue's going to prepare by building its own army. We've got full coffers, which means the best equipment and the best training. They're going to be part of a force that will protect the Eastern Alliance."

Tan Lingyun spoke up. "Why didn't you say so? If the kids knew they were headed to the Avenue, and were going to be so well equipped, no one would give up that chance."

But Lan Jue shook his head. "I don't want them to join for the benefits. We aren't interested in numbers, we want quality recruits. I hope you both understand this."

"Drillmaster." Tan Lingyun's self-control slipped for a moment.

"What is it?" He asked.

“Would you mind wearing the mask? I’m not used to seeing you like this...”

“...”

Lan Jue fit the mask back over his face, and heaved a sigh of resignation. “Pay close attention to these kids over the next few days. If they make the decision, there can’t be any reluctance. Leaving is not an option. I hope you both understand this, too.”

“Yes.” Tan Lingyun was less uncomfortable now that his face was hidden.

Wang Hongyuan shook his head. “Not a problem to me, and the students are smart enough to follow their own ideas. What about the university, though? How are you going to explain it to them?”

Lan Jue waved his concerns away. “Easy to handle, I’ll speak to them. We’re going to need West Hill, too.”

West Hill was the closest military installation to Skyfire City. There was enough space for what they needed. Especially now that they were creating the Star Division, they would need a place to train. After some thought, Lan Jue determined West Hill was the best place for it.

With his connections to the Keeper, Lan Jue knew it wouldn’t be a problem to talk the administration in to it. They had no reason to refuse.

“I’ll go with you to the Dean,” Tan Lingyun announced.

Lan Jue nodded. “Fine.”

As he suspected, no one opposed the idea. There were, however, some small requests. They asked him to keep special excursions to a minimum, and give two lessons to the top students once a month.

None of their requirements were a problem, and Lan Jue agreed.

With his business complete, the Demon Drillmaster replaced his mask with the three-piece costume he arrived with and left on his bicycle. As he rode along back to the school, he was suddenly struck with a thought, and pulled off on to a side street heading a different direction.

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Grace Hospital

Lan Jue rolled up to the combination hospital and retirement home, and set his bike against a nearby wall. He pulled open the door and walked in.

He hadn't been by in so long, and Qianlin had been off on the trip as well. His old friends popped suddenly in to his mind. He remembered feeling that spending time here felt renewing. Things were about to get very busy, and he wasn't sure when – if ever – he'd have a chance to make it back here.

“Ah, Grandma Li – you're looking radiant! All rosy cheeks.”

“Grandma Zhang, how's your leg feeling? Hey now, slow down. Let me help.”

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Lan Jue learned that Qianlin had been visiting the hospital a lot lately, and least three times a week. He, however, had been gone entirely too long for a polite young man.

Reminders of his troubles with Qianlin made his heart sink. Their problems needed to be addressed, at least before he started training in earnest. If he didn't that painful distracted would eat at him every day.

By the time he got back to the Avenue, the sky had darkened to night. He ruminated on the fact that he hadn't had a single day of solid rest since coming back. He stumbled in to his room and fell on his bed, bone tired. Still, he couldn't rest. Her image kept flashing through his mind.

Qianlin...

The night passed without incident. The next day...

Lan Jue woke early in the morning, had his breakfast, than left Zeus' Jewelry Shop. He made the short trip across the street to the Gothic Winery.

“So early,” the Wine Master said in greeting. “Eager to embrace your new role!” He sat at the head of his long table, dressed in very gentlemanly

attire, enjoying his breakfast. Bread, milk, jam, fried eggs, and a glass of white wine.

Lan Jue pulled out the seat next to the old man, and took a seat. He took a glance at the fluted wine glass in front of the Wine Master before commenting, “They say only lovesick gentlemen drink sweet white wines. To drown their sorrows.”

The Cosmagus dropped his knife and fork onto the table with a clatter. “Do not disturb my pleasant breakfast!”

Lan Jue chuckled. “I just can’t stand to watch a prideful man gloat over his breakfast.”

The Wine Master didn’t take the bait, instead lifted his hand over the table. He snapped his fingers, and in a flash of silver light a parchment appeared in his grasp.

Lan Jue smirked at him. “What year is it? Who uses paper anymore?”

The Wine Master sniffed in disapproval. “Paper is the best way to keep secrets. There are only two people in the universe who know about this list; you, and me.”

Lan Jue was captured by curiosity, and leaned over to get a better look. Across the top of a sheet was a string of script; name, age, Discipline type, specialty, mecha piloting rank and more. What followed was a detailed list of data.

The top entry on the list was familiar:

Name; Jewelry Master

Age; Under thirty

Discipline Type; Thunderbolt

Specialty; Eastern martial arts and discipline integration

Mecha Piloting: God-rank

Below him was the Driver, then more familiar names after that. Not all of them had designations, either. Several of the names were true names of

outsiders. When Lan Jue saw what it was, his face went solemn.

The Wine Master went back to delightfully finishing his breakfast. Though, perhaps tellingly, he didn't touch the wine glass.

He eventually finished, wiping the corners of his mouth with a napkin. Only then did he address Lan Jue. "What? Is there a problem with the list?"

"Of course there's a problem. A lot of problems," he answered. "Off the top of my head, the mechas. If every one of these people are going to get a custom suit, that's going to require time. Where are we with that now? That's just one. Another thing, are all of these people even here on the Avenue? I've found a training area on NEU's West Hill. If we want to make a fighting force that means anything, we're going to need to understand that time is a factor. There's a whole lot to do, and only me to do it. I'm going to need help."

The Wine Master fixed him with his steely gaze. "I'm here to work with you to solve all of those. First, the mechas. You're first – time is important. By our estimates it will take between three and six months before tailor-made suits are completed. But, your training can start right away. You've forgotten – DreamNet's upgrades are completed."

Chapter 514: Solving Problems

Lan Jue's eyes glittered. That's right! According to the time frame announced earlier, DreamNet's upgrades were either complete or very nearly so. He was sure this would turn out to be a huge boon, since now users could integrate their Disciplines into the virtual world. Students would be able to integrate their abilities and mecha combat just as though it was happening in real life.

The Wine Master grinned in self-satisfaction. "The real suits are being manufactured, but we've already begun to port the schematics in to DreamNet. Ten days at the most, and they'll all have been uploaded and ready for use. When the time has come, you can begin training your Skyfire's Star Division right from the comfort of a pod."

"Stop! This Division is not mine." Lan Jue glowered in irritation. "I'll also be bringing the A.R.C. students from the university, so they'll need suits as well. When will we be getting the new pods?"

"Already here," the Wine Master answered. "I'd originally planned to put them in the arena here, but since you've decided on West Hill I'll just have them delivered there instead. I've already spoken with the Gourmet, and he's agreed to help you with the Division. You should make a visit to the Pharmacist yourself sometime soon. The other members of the original Star Alliance will be your right hand, and any problems you run into will be their problems, too."

Nodding, Lan Jue praised the Paragon. "Very thoroughly prepared! It looks like my manipulation wasn't hastily thrown together, at least."

The Wine Master's brow rose. "Manipulation is an art. I'll gather everyone together once the time comes for the Clairvoyant's departure. After we bid him farewell, the training can begin. Ah, yes. Also, to stir up interest in the Division, we've put out information about the alien Core. We've come to call them animulae."

Lan Jue was excited by the implication. "So you're saying that the Keeper and Bookworm's experiments are finished?"

Nodding, the Wine Master explained. “After purification through the Tear of Neptune, the animula’s energy can be directly infused into a human. We’ve found that cells which have been exposed to this process are revitalized, thus leading to a complete internal renewal. We’ve taken a cue from our animal brethren and call this mechanism exuviation. At present, the first stages of research are complete. You’ve seen for yourself how it’s transformed the Bookworm. Exuviation was particularly effective on him – he’s probably lengthened his life by at least fifty years. It isn’t an easy procedure, though, and one needs a lot of experience if they want to reap stable healing benefits.

“A major concern is how this applies to varying skill levels. We’ve only tested the animula on a Paragon, how will a lower level Adept react? Can the exuviation procedure be used on non-Adepts? Only once these questions have been answered can a final determination on its use be made. Unfortunately, we have a critical shortage of testing material. The sample you brought back with you is nearly used up. If we wish to refine more animulae, then we’re going to need a great deal of the base material – the monster Cores.”

Lan Jue immediately picked up on the Wine Master’s unspoken implication. “You plan to announce the current progress for exuviation?”

A smile spread across the old man’s face. “I do! If this process ends up being everything it promises, the benefits to humanity would be priceless. But all of this is predicated on having enough supply. In order to get what we needed, we entered into deliberations with the Eastern parliament. After some discussion, it was agreed that experimentations would continue in return for the Eastern military having a say in the distribution of the first batch of animulae.”

Lan Jue shook his head, and fixed the man with a steady stare. “Wine Master, you really are a cunning old fox.”

In tones that were equal parts pride and apathy, the Wine Master replied. “All of this wasn’t solely my doing. The decision was reached by everyone. If I’m a cunning old fox, then we have an avenue full of them.”

“All this work on one person’s promise,” Lan Jue replied with a sigh.

Assurance was in the Wine Master’s answer. “But this promise is real. The life of a human being has its limits, Paragons included. About the only exception are Paragons that keep rising in rank, like your master. Only the smallest fraction of Adepts will ever achieve something close to that, but everyone deserves a long life. We only get one. 1 If exuviation works, then money and man hours are a small price to pay. Fighting for the people has always been an honorable endeavor, and those who pay the highest price are cheered the loudest. The Eastern government has already passed a bill which promises to staff the experiment with soldiers as long as they’re needed. From what we’ve found through trials, the data points to life extension of at least fifty to one hundred years – and we’re not sure yet if repeating the process is dangerous. But we have the subjects, we still need the materials. We went to the other Alliances, but the problem is the same – not enough of the raw stuff needed. I guess in a way, the appearance of these monsters isn’t a total tragedy.”

Lan Jue felt something within him stir, noting the excited glint in the Wine Master’s eyes. “So you’re saying, that if this experiment succeeds and the aliens don’t attack... we’d start a war anyway.”

The Wine Master sighed in frustrated resignation. “Survival of the fittest; it just doesn’t apply to the beasts of the forest. Everything in the universe follows this cruel tenet. In the end, only the strongest species will be allowed to propagate. I don’t think I need to explain this to you.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Survival of the fittest, you’re right. If that’s the case, then humanity must be the one to come out victorious. Should one of the Division’s goals be collecting animulae?”

He answered first with a nod. “Right now, our greatest asset is actually Lyr. A few months ago the Tear of Neptune was considered trash, and neither the North nor West made any attempt to retain a stockpile. In the last few days, resolutions had passed in all three Alliances, designating the Tears as war assets. Any outside sale is a punishable offense. But this, as with all things government, was subject to bureaucracy and took time to implement. Forward thinking organizations with money were smart

enough to buy up a great deal of Lyr's exports before the rules could take effect. Chief among them is your friend's Poseidon Group."

"A-Li?" Lan Jue exclaimed.

The Wine Master continued. "The Avenue still currently has the largest cache of Tears, but as we continue to refine animulae, they're consumed. I hope you understand how important this and exuviation are to the East."

Lan Jue nodded. Of course he understood. Once the East perfected exuviation, it would become mecca for the best of humanity. It had incredible implications for the development of their Alliance, possibly even usurping the North.

"The North and West have appealed to open trade with us for Tears. We're in the process of negotiations, which I imagine will involve a number of conditions. The Avenue must continue to focus on obtaining animulae so research can be completed as quickly as possible."

Upon hearing once more of their need, Lan Jue's response was to lift the pinky finger of his left hand. Thor's Promise glinted as it caught the light, and suddenly there appeared before them a large purple alien Core.

The Wine Master gaped. "This is..."

"On the way to meet father I ran into one of them," Lan Jue explained. "It must have been a scout. I got this from its skull after I killed it. This must be one of the animulae you mentioned – similar to the one we got from Taihua, seems to me."

The Wine Master looked at the crystalline structure between them with open surprise, and nodded. "Spectacular. With this, research will definitely speed up. We have no way to determine how expensive something like this is, what do you want for it?"

To this, the Jewelry Master shook his head. "Nothing. I am a member of Skyfire Avenue. I just hope somehow this exuviation process can be used on the Clairvoyant."

But the Wine Master sighed, undermining Lan Jue's hopes. "That doesn't seem possible. The Clairvoyant's problem isn't just vitality. His body is

like a funnel, and whatever life-giving energy we try to give him is just swallowed up and disappears. If we could, we would absolutely save him from the brink of death. All I can promise, is that when this is finished you and whoever you like will have access to exuviation.”

“Alright.” Lan Jue didn’t see the need to be polite, and instead of fighting the courtesy simply accepted it. The allure of a prolonged life affected everyone, he was no exception. In addition, he had a number of people he cared for, who he promised to look after. This process improved vitality, lengthened life, and keep one’s spirit young – something everyone could benefit from.

Zeus’ Amazons were always his worry. Four women hell-bent on standing at his side, but he was only one man, He couldn’t give them the affection they wanted. Perhaps he could repay taking their youth by extending their lives. Maybe then he wouldn’t feel so guilty. Earning the right to use exuviation on more than just himself was an important point.

“I’ll take the list with me, then head over to the Pharmacist’s. Hopefully she’ll agree to join the Star Division.” After the Wine Master’s explanations and a glimpse at the big picture, Lan Jue felt a little less apprehensive about what was to come.

Even the most unruly of Adepts would find it hard to pass up exuviation. With such an impressive carrot, managing everyone should be easier.

Lan Jue’s first priority had to be the setup of this new fighting force. Then, training. Only once they’ve started would he be able to see what his recruits were capable of, and what they were good at. That was when the future of Skyfire Avenue’s Star Division would be planned.

Chapter 515: Nearby Godblades?

Lan Jue left the Gothic Winery and took the elevator down to the Underground. His destination was the Hall of Supreme Harmony. When he entered, he encountered no resistance. The workers there were under instruction to allow him in without question previous notification.

The Pharmacist sat in an eight-pointed pagoda, plucking at a guqin set before her. She was a vision of classical beauty, clad in a shimmering white qipao.

“You’re here.” Her delicate fingers stopped, resting upon the strings and bring them to silence. She smiled at him.

“Where’s Jun’er?” Lan Jue asked.

“The Wine Master came to pick her up a little while ago. He said the Clairvoyant wanted to see her,” she replied.

Lan Jue felt his heart flutter. “The Clairvoyant...”

The Pharmacist cut him off. “The Clairvoyant is nearing the end of his life. I don’t know what he could be giving my girl, but it can’t be bad.”

Brows knit, Lan Jue fixed her with a serious gaze. “Is this the path you want for her?” The road laid out before her, even before taking up the mantle of the next Clairvoyant, was a difficult one for a child. Her life would be sacrificed for it, her childhood. She will have to face many things a little girl like her should not have to face.

She sighed, clearly troubled by the idea. “My little girl is already doomed to a life without the ordinary. What reason do I have to stop this? She may be small, but she has her own idea. I asked her, and she said she agreed – she wanted to help.”

He hung his head, and spoke again after thinking for a moment. “She’s made up her mind, our job should be to support her. But I’m also here to talk to you about something else, sister.”

“Why are you standing, sit!” she said, changing the subject. Her small hand reached out and picked up a beautiful red-enamel tea pot, and

poured him a glass of steaming liquid.

Lan Jue took upon a seat across from her. “Sis, I’ll just go ahead and say it. The Wine Master has approached me, and asked that I turn the Star Alliance in to Skyfire’s own army.”

He went on to tell her the rest of what the Wine Master had revealed. The Pharmacist listened patiently, with a faint smile on her face. “And you came here to ask me to help manage it.”

“Yes,” he replied frankly, looking at her.

“Alright!”

“You agree?” Lan Jue had come fully expecting her to turn him down.

She laughed. “Why shouldn’t I? This exuvium sounds beneficial to me, too, not to mention Jun’er. Plus, I’m a woman! What woman doesn’t want a few more years of youth and beauty?”

He chuckled. “Thank you, sis. You can be sure exuvium is going to happen, we just need to wait for news of success. You’ll be first in line.”

Smirking, and shaking her head, the Pharmacist replied. “There’s no rush. Actually, there’s something to discuss first. Fighting I can do, but commanding a unit is not something I’ll be doing. Instead, I’ll act more like your bodyguard. How’s that?”

Ugh,” Lan Jue reacted. “Don’t even say that, I can’t handle it!”

Her clear and pleasing laughter echoed through the temple interior. “There’s nothing to handle. Relax, I’m perfectly pleased with the idea. Jun’er would be happy, too. I’m not much of a mecha pilot, though. I’ll need to learn from the beginning. What do you think should I start studying?”

Lan Jue shrugged. “As strong as you are, it doesn’t make much of a difference if you learn or not. The advantage of a mecha suit is personal protection. It also makes deep-space combat easier. Even a Paragon would benefit with the right suit. But in terms of power, there’s nothing a suit can offer you that you can’t do better.”

Her nod said she understood. “There’s truth in that. I’ll have a suit made for me as well. A strong defense is also important. I’ll rely on my own abilities in fighting, so the mecha won’t need to focus on amplification.”

She’d never touched the controls of a mecha suit, but Lan Jue was confident she would learn quickly. People as strong as she was usually did. However, joining one’s Discipline with their suit was something that took time and wasn’t necessary in her case. She was a breath away from Paragon, and once that threshold was crossed even the defensive benefits of a mecha suit didn’t mean much.

Lan Jue’s eyes lit up. “That’s a thought.” The beautiful fairy of destruction was so strong she didn’t even need a mecha weapon! Occisus was strong, stronger than he could know.

“Has there been any news from Jun Yongye or Xuanyuan Shishi?” Lan Jue asked. Things were busy, but he couldn’t forget his interaction and possible future with the Banishing Blades.

But she shook her head. “No word. I haven’t heard anything since you left. However, I do have an inkling, in the back of my mind. It’s possible they’re already on Skyfire. There’s a connection between them and Occisus, but I can’t use it to tell where they are exactly. After all, I still can’t even fully command the weapon.”

He nodded in understanding. “It is what it is, we’ll let things take their natural course.” He was anxious, but the only option was to wait for the right time. Lately he had improved a great deal, both in ability and comprehension. While the weapons would be a tremendous help, he still felt he would break through to Paragon in a couple years, if this current trend continued.

The Clairvoyant had put a lot in to quietly arranging Lan Jue’s path. At least it was a path aimed at helping him succeed.

“That’s all the important stuff that needed discussing, sis. After we send off the Clairvoyant, training will begin,” Lan Jue announced.

Alright.” She nodded. “And if you need any money, I’m happy to help. Lately business has been quite good.”

He laughed in spite of himself. “Far more than ‘quite good’, I’d think. You have a line out the door.”

Medicine and power gems were different. Power gems were non-renewable resources, once you used one it was gone. Lately, gems were becoming invaluable military resources. Medicines, though, were easy to cultivate. Modern scientific technology made re-growing them even quicker. In a short time, exhausted supplies could be replenished. The rarity of a medicine lay in their combination and preparation, both things the Hall of Supreme Harmony specialized in. Making money was not a problem for this place!

“Alright, but do you need money? How many power gems did you bring back from this last trip to the North?” She asked, a little irritated.

Lan Jue answered. “It shouldn’t cost us anything personally to build the Division. The Wine Master has assured me that all costs will be borne by the Avenue. Our target is going to be these animulae, and once we’re all set up I imagine we’ll be called on to be the tip of the sword for the East. No resting on the back lines for us. As you can imagine, those animulae are going to be exceedingly rare. However, they’re also going to make all three Alliances much more dangerous. Right now, it’s hard to say whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. Even if these invaders were headed elsewhere, we’d probably be coming after them for their Cores. In essence, I guess we’re no different from them.”

She saw the light of disappointment in his eyes, and it made her frown. “It’s not helpful for anyone to think like that. We are different species, with different needs. Remember that they were the aggressors. Whatever their purpose, our two species were meant to kill one another. Put the thoughts to rest. You have a good heart, but when it comes to survival of the species, sometimes we have to do bad for the ultimate good.”

The Pharmacist’s voice became hard but resolved. It made him shiver.

Yet, her resolve put his heart at ease. His eyes hardened. “Yes, I understand.”

What he didn’t realize, was that Arrow of Compassion’s effects where

what he felt. Humans were good hearted by nature, but reacting to everything with empathy wasn't the right course. There was a time and place to be good.

The Pharmacist watched his expression become sober. "Alright," she said, then, "I'm afraid you're going to be pretty busy for the near future. If you need anything, give my communicator a call. You don't need to always come here in person."

"Alright," he answered. They were friends, he didn't need to be overly polite.

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He stepped out onto the Underground Avenue after leaving the Hall of Supreme Harmony. For a moment, he just stood in front of the doors, lost in thought. Then, after a moment, he began to head toward Zeus' Jewelry Store. While things were going to get busy very quickly, right now he had the time to get his thoughts in order. He needed to figure out how he was going to train his new soldiers.

As soon as he entered the store, though, the door chimes were joined by the buzz of his communicator.

"Bro! Have you arrived at the Avenue?" The number belonged to Lan Qing. Lan Jue started their conversation with the question.

His brother's low, even voice answered. "Come out and get us. We've at the entrance." He hung up.

Here already? Lan Jue turned on his heels and walked out again. He was already heading toward the Avenue entrance when it hit him. We!

It didn't take him long to get to the Avenue's gate. He saw three figures waiting patiently outside.

Chu Cheng was as flashy as ever, wearing a dark red blazer and his collar popped up. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses and his shock of red hair had been slicked back.

Hua-Li kept a much lower profile. He was dressed in a dark blue blazer,

sunglasses and a mask to hide his identity. He apparently felt safe enough to leave his hat at home.

Lan Qing stood in the center. He was dressed entirely in black, underlining his severe countenance. Compared to the other two, he was much more stately and respectable looking.

In front of them was a young woman. She was none other than the Captain of the Guard, An Liu.

“An Liu,” he called to her, “These are my friends.” He hurried over to join them.

She greeted him with a nod, but her eyes went right back to Lan Qing’s stony face. It was then the younger Lan saw something strange in his brother’s face. It lasted for only a fraction of an instant, but he’d caught it.

Chapter 516: Gathering of the Monarchs

“So what is this, a fashion show?” Lan Jue looked pointedly at their matching outfits.

Chu Cheng chuckled lazily. “Nah, great minds think alike is all, I shouldn’t have to tell you that. Or maybe I should – it looks like you aren’t part of our unspoken psychic connection.”

He did happen to own a similar blazer. His was part of a dark blue suit.

“Let’s go!” He curtly waved them into the Avenue. An Liu stepped aside to let them pass.

He led them to his own Zeus’ Jewelry Shop first. As they traversed the Avenue, Lan Jue turned to his brother. “Why didn’t you guys tell me earlier? I’d have gone to meet you.”

“Wasn’t worth the trouble,” Hua Li answered. “Didn’t you just get back?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “This isn’t any trouble.”

They arrived before the Sapphire entrance of the Jewelry Shop. He pushed open the door, and they found all four of his Amazons inside waiting. They rose to their feet as the Monarchs entered.

It wasn’t a very large store. Eight people started to make it feel stuffy.

This didn’t go over Lan Jue’s head. “This place is starting to feel a little small,” he ruminated, “there’s no way to make it bigger, though. Let’s head inside.”

They traversed the store, and entered Lan Jue’s quarters located behind the service counter. Xiuxiu brought in some seats, and with the sofa it was enough to accommodate everyone.

Lan Qing took a seat, and then turned his attention to Lan Jue. “How’s father?”

“Well his face looks the same, but his character sure has changed,” Lan Jue replied.

Lan Qing’s eyes dimmed as his thoughts turned dark. “I’ve been so busy.

I should go see him, too.”

Chu Cheng, his tones regretful, chimed in. “Are the things you’re responsible for handled?” It was a fair question. Humanity was about to be embroiled in a war, and Lan Qing was one of the foremost commanders in the East. He was personally responsible for a whole planet, An Lun. How could he leave with all this going on?

His presence on Skyfire was only possible because the Avenue requested his presence from the Eastern military. He was given special permission to leave his post, otherwise this would have been impossible. Once this business with the Clairvoyant was done, he would have to return right away.

When Lan Qing didn’t answer, his younger brother spoke up instead, “Dad’s got cabin fever. I heard him say it a few times while I was there. He may not be on Ziluo anymore. Can’t know unless you go there, I guess.”

A hard light glinted in Lan Qing’s eyes. “I suspect the arrival of these aliens and father’s sudden wanderlust aren’t a coincidence.”

Jue Di was the single strongest human living today. If he were to show up in the fight against these invaders, then the benefits were self-evident.

A smirk touched Lan Jue’s lips. “My hope is that he comes to Skyfire Avenue. But at least for the time being, that probably isn’t going to happen.”

Chu Cheng thrust his head toward Skyfire Museum. “How’s the Clairvoyant? When is he supposed to break his hermitage?”

Lan Jue turned to Chu Cheng. “Soon, within the next couple days.” His mood soured when reminded of the Clairvoyant.

“Every human life has its conclusion.” Hua Li’s soft, sage-like words joined the conversation. “Don’t be too sad, it’s the natural way.”

Lan Jue swung his eyes to Hua Li. “This reminds me. You guys at Poseidon are damn slick. Got a nice haul of Tears, I hear.”

Hua Li gave a demur smirk. “That has nothing to do with me. Mo Xiao

deals with all of that – I don't do much on the business end.

“Tears... are you guys talking about those useless ‘S’-ranked trinkets from Lyr?” Chu Cheng gave them both curious looks.

Lan Jue darted him a look down his nose. “Your head for economics... The Poseidon Group knows what they're up to. Not a moment's hesitation when they sensed opportunity. What I mean by that, is those useless gems are going to become one of the most precious commodities in the universe very soon. It cost them a pretty penny to buy up what they did, but the potential returns I can't even imagine.”

Lan Qing's low voice added to his brother's explanation. “The Group also knows how to get what it wants. Their purchase was originally blocked, but they leveraged the help they'd given Taihua to push the purchase through. A one-time deal.”

“Wait wait wait... hold on. How is it all you guys know this and I don't? What the hell is going on with these Tears all of a sudden?” Chu Cheng swung his eyes from one face to another.

Lan Jue explained. “Here's the deal...” He went on to fill him in on the animulae, and how the Tears fit in.

Chu Cheng's eyes got progressively bigger until Lan Jue finished. “So you're telling me... that we've discovered a way to stay young. Forever.”

“Forever? Unlikely, but at least extend your life and delay old age,” Lan Jue said. “These animulae follow the law of conservation of energy just like everything else. This is a transfer of energy from one state to another.”

Chu Cheng took a deep breath. Then, he fixed Lan Jue with a solemn look. “Does the Avenue need any more people?”

“Sure,” Lan Jue said. “We always want people. Not swine, though. People.”

Chu Cheng's face lit up at Lan Jue's first words. Soon, though, that face was less bright and more constipated. He vomited a string of curse words.

Hua Li, meanwhile, was guffawing loudly. “Well said!”

“Well said my ass!” Chu Cheng challenged. “Life is precious, and love is worth even more. Not that any of you lonely sad saps over here would have any idea what I’m talking about. Sooner or later society is gunna weed you bastards out, mark my words. Now speak, is all of this even possible?” His last question was put to Lan Qing.

The super-soldier nodded slightly. “Preliminary experiments have already concluded, but the next step will need more research. We aren’t the only ones working on this. The North and West have their own programs looking into it.”

Chu Cheng whistled appreciatively. “So that means we’re gunna live longer than anyone before, and still look good while doin it! Haha!”

Lan Qing just stared at him with a flat expression. “The best way to stay young forever, is to stop wasting your energy chasing women and cultivate instead. Once you hit Paragon, your body will stay the same until the day you die. I would also highly advise all of you to decline exuviation until after you’ve broken through. So far, we aren’t sure if this process has an effect on an Adept’s potency. The Bookworm might have been a special case. He was trapped at peak rank for many years, and the exuviation process helped him to shed the blocks of his old body. For others, if they have the possibility of breaking through naturally, then that should be their priority. It might end up posing as an impediment.”

“So you think it has the potential to stop us from advancing,” Lan Jue asked.

His brother nodded. “I’m not certain, but the evidence has shown that the possibility is significant. Outside energies are outside. No matter how well purified it is, there’s a chance your body will reject some of it. Until you break through to Paragon, it will of course affect everything. Still, the best way to keep your youth will always be working to become a Paragon. When you are immersed in understanding of the universe, your life will naturally be extended.”

Lan Jue nodded. He definitely agreed with his older brother’s thinking. His foundation was much stronger than it had been, and since re-

cultivating his ultimate breakthrough to Paragon was certain. It wouldn't be long.

Hua Li looked back at him, his eyes full of meaning. "After taking the Championship, the Avenue's status in the universe has grown. It may not be a good thing, ultimately, but at least it's an opportunity."

Lan Jue's face fell. He look to his brother.

Lan Qing sat ramrod straight, immovable as a mountain. "The desert wants the rain; the maid seeks to get married. What will be, will be. We will resist what we can."

Lan Jue smiled. In this moment, he was glad to have an older brother.

Hua Li nodded slowly. "Just prepare as early as you can. A-Jue, you've got a lot swirling around you lately. Be cautious."

Chuckling, Lan Jue spoke up. "I was hoping just be an observer, but that won't be the case. The Avenue is making a mecha Division, and the Wine Master's put me in charge. It's given me a headache. They're all Adepts, and the Avenue has always been a loose organization. Commanding a group like this won't be easy."

Chu Cheng and Hua Li were both visibly survived by the news. Only Lan Qing's face remained impassive, like he already knew.

Hua Li eventually recovered and nodded. "That's definitely a problem. What are you gunna do about it?"

Lan Jue answered. "The best I can. I'll figure it out when training starts. I need to know where they're at."

Lan Qing was encouraging. "It won't be as difficult as you think. At the very least you're all fighting for the same thing, and have similar goals. What you need to do is you make sure you're all on the same page, then divide and conquer."

"Divide and conquer?" He looked at his older brother, eager for advice. He'd brought it up so he could get Lan Qing's thoughts. It would have been a waste otherwise.

Lan Qing nodded. “An Adepts greatest strength is their individual fighting ability, which is much higher than an average soldier. The Avenue won’t be sparing any expense for these machines. These men and women won’t find army training suitable. Fighting as a cohesive unit takes time and training, and it won’t allow them to employ their full strength. Adepts are too different to work effectively together that way. I suggest you separate them into small groups, and watch how they progress then. Have them separate when the fight starts, and stay away from the main battlefield.”

“I have the same thinking,” Lan Jue replied. “The front won’t be suitable. That’ll be up to your army. We’ll be backup, and support.”

Lan Qing went on. “You can use the pirates as a proof of concept. Hit them hard then retreat, protecting yourselves by disengaging. In this way, if the war goes south you’ll be poised to give aid.”

Chapter 517: Lan Qing's Suggestions

Pirate fighting techniques? Lan Qing was, of course, referring to the clans of the Shattered Starfields. If that was the case, didn't they already have fighting pirates? Su Xiasu's figure flitted across Lan Jue's mind. She hadn't made contact since leaving Skyfire Avenue.

Lan Qing continued with his advice. "Another important point. The number of Adepts isn't something to worry about. Remember that Adepts are also separated in to the strong, and the weak, The system is built so that those who are strong command faith. If you can earn the respect and obedience of the strongest Adepts, the others will fall in to line. That will make managing easier."

Lan Jue was inspired. Yes! Lan Qing was right. He didn't need everyone to follow his commands, just the unit commanders. They could handle their own men. In this way, he needed the support of a lot fewer people.

He only needed to look at the A.R.C. class, and recognize that he could turn fifty kids in to a crack mecha squad. With Tan Lingyun and Wang Hongyuan, the task had been easy. He'd pick out the strongest and make them leaders. Then, with enough faith and familiarity, command would be shared.

Lan Qing recognized the look in his brother's eyes, and didn't interrupt his thinking with more pointless talk. He was confident his brother had the head for it.

Chu Cheng, seated to the side, poked Lan Qing. "Bro," he said, voice low, "Look. You know Zeus is sitting all high and mighty with this championship he won. Don't you think you should challenge him? I mean, being the best has to feel great, am I right? It'll be an opportunity for you to see if your little brother's improved."

Lan Qing stared at him with that stoic, stony expression, silent as a statue.

A malicious expression touched Lan Jue's face, as he turned his eyes to Chu Cheng. "Your jaw sure is flappin' around a lot, A-Cheng. Maybe you

need me to help you knock it back in to place?”

A dark chuckle answered from the red-haired Northerner. “You think I’m scared of you? I’ve been making strides, too.”

Lan Qing appeared slightly confused as he addressed Lan Jue. “I sense that you’re weaker than you were during the finals. Almost like before. What’s going on?”

None of them completely understood his relationship with Qianlin yet.

He sighed, and spoke in a low voice. “My situation is somewhat special...” He then proceeded to give them the simple version how he and Qianlin fit together. He talked about how they were stronger when joined, and how cultivation was better together.

All three of them, Lan Qing included, sat in shock as Lan Jue told them the story. The worst was Hua Li. He looked like he was half lost in a trance the whole time.

“This is a thing? Re-cultivation? Has this always been a thing?” Chu Cheng’s surprised questions came in rapid succession. “No wonder it felt like you were all funky, and I knew you were hiding something the whole time. This is cheating! I’m gunna report you!”

Lan Jue just cast him an irritated look. “Go on, then.”

Chu Cheng snorted. “Why aren’t I showered with infinite gifts, huh? No wonder you’re with that broad every day. Speaking of, where is she, anyway?”

“We’re in a little bit of a spat,” he said. “She ran off.”

He got no sympathy from Chu Cheng, who chortled back. “So, if we fought now do you think you could take me?”

Lan Jue’s eyebrows shot up. “You think my Discipline isn’t high enough to do the job, eh?”

His friend’s expression seemed to ask, is that not obvious? “That’s right. Without a strong Discipline, how could you be a challenge for me? Let’s go! Let your older brother teach you a thing or two about kung fu!”

A grin spread across Lan Jue's face. "Fine, let's give it a shot. Bro, you coming?"

Lan Qing nodded. He'd seen all the videos, but being there in person was still more vivid, the details were clearer. Lan Qing wanted to see what his brother was capable of with his own eyes.

For Adepts of their level, there was only one place nearby where they could really test their skills; the Wine Master's Reaper Arena. He didn't mind troubling the old man with accommodating them. He'd caused Lan Jue plenty of trouble, lately.

Lan Jue had the four women close up shop and come as well. It would be good for them to watch combat at this level and take notes. It was a good opportunity for their future development.

They walked across the avenue to the Gothic Winery. Lan Jue entered without announcing himself.

"You've all come," the Wine Master greeted. When he saw them enter, he gently relinquished a glass of wine on to the table.

Lan Qing gave the Paragon a respectful nod. "Hello, Your Majesty, Cosmagus."

"You've been working hard, commander," the Wine Master responded. "Let me get someone to arrange rooms for all of you."

Lan Qing was the one to answer. "That won't be necessary, thank you. We've arranged for our own accommodations. We would like to trouble you for use of the Reaper Arena, however."

"Arena?" The Wine Master's eyes immediately went to Lan Jue. He looked strange.

Lan Jue's face was stern. "As future commander of Skyfire Avenue's forces, I feel that my personal abilities are far below adequate. Sparring with other Adepts of similar rank is sure to have a positive bearing on my development. You said that we would have whatever we needed from the Avenue in the establishment of this fighting force. This is therefore an official request. In addition, I have brought in Commander Lan Qing for

consultation, and as this is an official function I expect the Avenue won't require payment."

The Wine Master's voice was thick with aggravation. "Fine! If you don't want to spend money than just say it! I didn't need the self-righteous diatribe."

Lan Jue sighed. "Didn't I learn it all from you?"

The Wine Master could clearly sense the young man's resentment. He had no recourse. "Very well, I'll go along with you. I have to make sure you don't destroy my arena with your horsing around."

The Wine Master led them down to the underground. Before long they were at the Reaper Arena.

Business here had also flourished in recent days. There was no small number of Adepts who came to test themselves and help each other improve.

The elderly Paragon waved a hand, and his astrum scepter appeared in a flash of silver light. A pale light filled the corridor, and on the far side was revealed a doorway.

This place sat amid many dimensional pockets, divvied out to Adepts as they came to test their strength. Lan Jue had been here a few times, but he'd never seen this silver doorway before. It was a large, and silver, with hinged double doors. The surface was engraved with old style patterns. Most importantly, space-time was strange here. The energies were thick and potent.

The dazzling dimensional scepter gestured toward the far door as the Wine Master waved his hand. The great doors opened inward. What was revealed, was a portal of undulating energy that warped space.

The Wine Master turned to face the four of them. He nodded. "Come with me."

They walked through in, into a space between. Then, in the next moment, they were somewhere else.

It was different from the Reaper Arena Lan Jue knew. His first sensation after walking through, was that this place was real.

The other pockets he used always felt a little surreal, and it was clear that you weren't in the primary reality. This place, by contrast, felt very stable. He could hardly tell it apart from the reality he lived in every day.

Sweeping their eyes around the space, they found it to be no less expansive than the Great Conclave Arena, with nothing but a void all around them.

"Who's come in here to bother me?" A sweet, melodious voice wafted over to them.

When the Wine Master heard the voice, he was struck with surprise. Then, a helpless smile spread across his face. "Aunt... how did you get in here?"

Lan Jue was well aware of who 'Aunt' was. The others, however, had no idea. Even Lan Qing, who was about as expressive as a rock, looked taken aback. The Cosmagus was a Paragon, and while not as old as the Clairvoyant or Keeper, he was still on in age. For him to call out Aunt, while the voice sounded so young... what was going on?"

A flash of light, and suddenly there was another in this pocket dimension. Luo Xianni.

The woman almost completely ignored the Wine Master. Her attention went immediately to her 'son.' She quickly became a bubbling font of joy. "Ahhh, my adopted son! Have you come to see your mother? And you've brought friends, so lively! Which one of these lovely young women is your wife? Or, are they all?"

The line of questioning immediate turned every Amazon's face red, but curiosity kept their eyes on this woman. She couldn't have been past her thirties!

Adopted son? Since when did their boss get a new mother?

Lan Qing was particularly speechless. However, it wasn't her words that struck him. It was her power.

Lan Qing was the strongest of their group aside from the Cosmagus. That was, until Luo Xianni appeared. When his perception fell upon her, he was struck by the flood of energy radiating out of her.

No matter how hard he looked, Lan Qing could not sense the depths of her strength. That could only mean one thing; she was a Paragon. Only the breadth of a Paragon's power felt this vast.

Skyfire Avenue actually had another Paragon?

Luo Xianni, as though sensing Lan Qing's thoughts, turned to him and pressed a finger to her lips. "You have to keep secrets. Ey.. why do you look so much like my son? You must be Chi Bupang's other adopted charge. He speaks so highly of you."

Lan Jue was afraid his brother might not react properly, and rushed to his aid. "Yes, mother, you've guessed right. This is my older brother, Lan Qing. Brother, this is dad's very close lady friend. Our mom." He caught his brother's eye, silently pleading with him to go along.

Chapter 518: Recognizing a Son

Lan Qing looked between Luo Xianni and Lan Jue, clearly confused. However, he remained perfectly respectful, bowing before her. No matter who she was, as father's woman, she was their elder.

"Your Majesty, hello." Lan Qing greeted.

She flicked a wrist, and then there was something else resting in the palm of her hand. A silvery metal, that shimmered in the light. "Call me mother. Here, take a gift for our first meeting. Ah, if only I had children as handsome as you two."

Lan Qing wasn't sure how to take that, but he accepted her gift all the same. "Thank you so much for the consideration, but I can't accept. This is too expensive."

Her face darkened. "What? You don't want to get to know your mother?"

"Bro, take it." Lan Jue plucked her gift out of Luo Xianni's hand and gave it to Lan Qing.

In truth, Lan Jue fostered a silent pity for Luo Xianni. She was infatuated with Jue Di, but he only wanted to hide from her. As members of the younger generation, it was their duty to try and help work things out.

Lan Qing held himself to a strict code of morals. This felt inappropriate, but before he could say anything further Chu Cheng took a big stride forward.

"Hey auntie, if you want some more sons to look after I'm available. What do you think?" He put on his best charming smile and directed it to Luo Xianni.

She looked him up and down, her brows furrowing. "So young with those bags under your eyes... I can tell you're a lusty sort of youth. I have no interest in a son like that."

Chu Cheng's face twitched. "Auntie! The bags are just because I don't sleep well. There's no lustiness about it." He didn't believe she could see him that clearly after half a moment.

Appearing almost bored, she explained. “It isn’t something you see on the face. I’ve had decades of experience reading people, so I know precisely the kind of person you are. It’s not hard to see that you’re Kidney-deficient, either.”

“Kidney... Kidney-deficient?” Chu Cheng’s face drained of color. Motherf-... in front of so many people! Chu Cheng had a thick hide, but right now he desperately wished he could dig a hole and disappear. 1

Mika, Xiuxiu, Lin Guoguo and Ke’er couldn’t help it, and all burst in to a fit of tittering laughter. Hua Li and Lan Jue were howling. Lan Qing even joined in with a sensible chuckle.

Luo Xianni wasn’t done. Her eyes darted to Hua Li. “This one’s grown up well. A pity he’s so girly. Far too soft, and manly-deficient. Hm, my Bupang does have a good eye – my boys are good choices.”

Lan Qing couldn’t stand it anymore. He was the soldier of a generation, and he was expected to simply become adopted by this crass woman. But he took a cue from Lan Jue’s expression. He could tell his younger brother didn’t seem to mind. This was the only woman their dad had ever appeared close to on any level. Mom made a kind of sense.

“What’s your name?” Luo Xinni fixed her eyes on Lan Qing.”

“I am Lan Qing,” he replied.

“Call me mother. Let me hear how it sounds.” She cooed a genuine plea.

For a moment the commander hesitated, stunned. His thin lips twitched, and after a time he managed to chew out a word. “Mother...”

Her face dropped in to an admonishing frown. “Ah, little Qing. You’re not as obedient as my little Jue. Say it with warmth. Remember next time.”

“Aunt.” The Wine Master rushed in to interject.

“Oh, right. What did you bring them here for?” She turned her attention to her nephew.

He gestured to them. “They’re friends, here to spar for a little while. I promised to offer them a space to do so.”

“Ah, there’s going to be a fight! Excellent, I’m in!” This was a woman who surely thrived on chaos.

The Wine Master entreated calm. “Aunt, please. Be reasonable, they wouldn’t be a challenge. You should serve as proctor.” It was a long shot, but he couldn’t let her wreak havoc in this place. Who could be her opponent, anyway?

She acquiesced, though clearly displeased with the idea. “Fine. You need a ref, I’ll be a ref. How are they fighting? Boy-girl pairs or full-on melee?”

The Wine Master stood there speechless. He shot Lan Jue a look.

The Jewelry Master hastily replied. “Chu Cheng and I are going to test each other out first. Then it’ll probably be me and my brother.”

“So about standard and boring. Fine, start whenever you like. Make it interesting!” She clapped, and even before the ringing sound dissipated, there was a flash of strange light. Lan Jue and Chu Cheng were by themselves.

Lan Jue shivered. He’d easily sensed that transition, and to him it felt like reality was being carved up like a loaf of bread. This place had been carved apart just for them, and they they were transferred in to it. It had happened so quick that it looked easy, but even the Wine Master would find it difficult to manage so fluidly. Her strength was proven once again! At the very least, she was stronger than the Cosmagus.

The two young men stood, staring at one another. The light of excitement was reflected in one another’s eyes.

“A-Jue, I’m not going to go easy on you! I will turn my grief in to power!” His public humiliation at the hands of Luo Xianni had him ready to fight, like an angry bull. It was clear in his eyes that he anticipated what was to come. He’d prove it by deed – he was not Kidney-deficient!

Lan Jue, by contrast, simply smiled. He did not stomp or puff himself up dramatically. His right hand slowly rose, and motioned for Chu Cheng to come at him.

He blinked, and suddenly Chu Cheng’s eyes were dual balls of fire. The

air around him swirls and was replaced by a thick red aura. He set his stance with his left foot, and punched with his right fist.

The punch itself looked simple and direct. However, there was a rooted sense to it, like it was followed by all the force of a mountain. More importantly, Lan Jue could feel the hidden, explosive quality wrapped up within it.

This was the protogenic essence of fire, explosiveness!

Chu Cheng had been honest, and it seemed he hadn't spent all his time chasing skirts. After the tournament he must have also worked hard on his cultivation, which resulting in this power spike. All four of the Monarchs knew each other as well as brothers, so even small changes were quickly spotted.

Lan Jue strafed to the side while his arms rose. They swirls in arcs that sought to seal off Chu Cheng's punch. All of a sudden, everything about Lan Jue seemed softer. There was no more radiation of energy from around him. Instead, all their surrounding energy seemed drawn to that spot between his arms.

Puff! The force of Chu Cheng's punch vanished in to a void. His capable attack was swallowed up by what he could only describe as an infinite vacuum. There was no resistance, like his opening move simply failed to find a target.

In that instant, Lan Jue's figure vanished. Half a breath later, he reappeared from Chu Cheng's flank. Lan Jue crashed in to Chu Cheng's shoulder like a freight train.

Chu Cheng growled, and bent his knees so as to maintain stability. He dropped his shoulder in to Lan Jue's charge. Fire poured out from his shoulder like a river of magma. Chu Cheng's control over Hades' Fire was muscle memory by this point.

Lan Jue had already exposed his secret, and Chu Cheng knew his opponent was no more than fifth rank. The Northern Hades descendant was seventh rank, nearly eighth – far higher than Lan Jue's. The gulf in power was enough, he suspected, that he could simply overwhelm him

with overwhelming offense.

Bang! Two shoulders met. Just before contact, a shimmering light of black and white – the mysterious energies of yin and yang – appeared around Lan Jue. The swirling image of black and white forced Chu Cheng's hellfire away to create passage. Lan Jue found his target.

Chu Cheng could feel the incredibly unloading force as Lan Jue made contact. He reeled, and Lan Jue followed up with another shoulder smash. Their encounter occurred in a very small radius, but Chu Cheng was able to recover and push back with gusto. He fought for a few inches, then lunged to the side to increase the distance between them.

One-Inch Guard! A rare and difficult Taiji technique, only one who understood the true nature of the martial art could call upon it. Jue Di had imparted the knowledge to him only recently. A practitioner who mastered this skill could difuse tremendous destructive power in a very small area. It was a nigh-mythical ability.

Chu Cheng was not aware of it. The unforeseen reversal took him by surprise. Lan Jue – in the midst of his retreat – thrust out his arms and threw dual bolts of golden lightning at his dumb-struck opponent.

He was on his back foot, but Chu Cheng would not be caught off guard so easily. His right hand quickly shot forward with fingers splayed, and from the gesture a thick shield of flame was born. The lightning bolts hit it and were deflected away.

Lan Jue's arms were moving again, tracing out a slow circle in front of him. The pull of the void sprang up around them once more. Chu Cheng fought desperately to resist it, eventually stabilizing once his Discipline activated.

Lan Jue slid his foot forward and shifted posture, suddenly within striking distance of Chu Cheng. He swung his hips, and his right hand exploded forward. Skimming Hammer punch!

Bang! The shield of fire broke apart in to a million errant flames, then vanished. Chu Cheng stumbled backward.

Lan Jue was like a leaf on the wind. He leapt forward, seven alternating steps. Every silent footfall sent waves of pressure out to Chu Cheng that forced him to keep up the retreat. On the seventh step, his Seven-Star Hammer punch was poised – ready to flatten mountains.

Chu Cheng was out of defensive maneuvers. He could only try to defend by putting his arms between them. When they made contact, he was almost crushed beneath wave after wave of explosive force coursing through the Jewelry Master's fist. Beneath the alternative waves of pure force and gentle retreat, his defenses were unable to cope. He went flying.

The others watched from a distance. Each of them looked at Lan Jue with new eyes.

Luo Xianni, though, carefully watched with no visible change in expression. Lan Qing was quietly nodding his head, for he recognized that his brother's comprehension of Taiji was much deeper than it had been when he saw him on An Luo. Their fight wasn't a dramatic display, but the skill they demonstrated was incredible to watch.

Chu Cheng found himself at a disadvantage, even though he was stronger than Lan Jue. His foe wasn't letting him call upon his full strength, dictating the pace of the fight. It was very telling.

Lan Jue was relying entirely on the properties of Taiji to undermine Chu Cheng's advantages. Technical superiority was winning the day.

Chapter 519: Too Nasty!

Chu Cheng flew for a dozen meters before falling to the ground with a crash. His arms were numb and limp. Lan Jue was going easy; if he had used lightning with his Taiji, Chu Cheng would be feeling it.

Chu Cheng's fighting spirit flared at the humiliation. The hellish red light in his eyes flickered, and then a murderous aura crept out from around Hades. It started beneath his feet, but the dead grey light that consumed the ground quickly started to spread in all directions. Everything was cold, gloomy, and still as the grave.

His numb arms were drained of color. They were grey, like they belonged to a corpse. Meanwhile, the aura surrounding him felt like a chasm of alluring death that would cripple a normal man.

Lan Jue didn't press the attack. He stood tall and straight, with eyes that blazed with battle-lust. Tendrils of golden lightning emerged and swung about him erratically. Soon they relaxed, becoming a layer of golden clothing. However, unlike Chu Cheng, his power didn't radiate through the world.

Lan Qing couldn't help but keep the pleased reaction from his face. Turning lightning in to such a thin shell required tremendous control. Lan Jue was much improved over where he had been even only months ago. This was an accomplishment, as Thunderbolt Disciplines were notoriously difficult to command.

The two men stared at each other from across the field; one gold, one grey. The potential destruction was palpable as their auras clashed between them.

The Wine Master waved his hand. The scepter clutched in his gnarled hands flared, and a protective silver light sequestered the fighters from the others.

Chu Cheng once again made the first move. He knew that if his friend had a chance to focus his Discipline, its explosiveness would overcome his hellfire. He raced forward so fast that a blurry afterimage of himself traced

his path. He crossed the field in a heartbeat.

To Lan Jue it looked like a dissolving swath of grey that melted heaven and earth into one wherever it went. His response was to slowly his extend his pointer and middle finger into the air before him. A glorious pattern of lightning hung where his fingers crossed.

The indomitable press of Chu Cheng's charge broke off at the last second and he moved to the side. Their Disciplines clashed. Lan Jue jukeed around his foe and the two changed places.

Lan Jue's sword-fingers traced another outline, all around Chu Cheng. This time the lightning appeared as a full circle, suspended in air. The flickering light set off the hard lines in Chu Cheng's face. He could feel its buzz affecting his body.

Hades saw his leverage slip away. The uncomfortable sensation broke his rhythm.

Lan Jue's orb of lightning was a dazzling display. But as he looked on, it grew sluggish and an ominous sensation filled him.

Hades' protogenic capabilities specialized in immediate extinction, the thin line between life and death. Lan Jue's orbs changed this, though. Somehow, Chu Cheng found he couldn't command that division as easily – it was like Lan Jue's Discipline was keeping them glued together.

He flailed and jerked, trying to free himself from the prison of electricity. His form swelled as he railed, and two beams of grey light fired out like a pair of luminous scissors, right for Lan Jue's neck.

Lan Jue traced another circle with his fingers and darted back. Chu Cheng's beams of grey were swallowed up by the attractive force of his lightning before being destroyed.

At least it had earned Chu Cheng some breathing room. In that moment of respite, his body joined with a grey sword that surreptitiously appeared overhead. Chu Cheng drew circles.

The sword broke its constraints and fractured into a dozen copies. They surrounded Lan Jue and besieged him on all sides. Lan Jue still traced

circles.

Wave after wave of grey light raced toward Lan Jue. Each one was thick with a sense of death, so numerous that they were like a life-devouring tide.

But, no matter how many attacks Chu Cheng threw at Lan Jue, they vanished into the depths of those golden orbs. Chu Cheng was a raging force of destruction, and Lan Jue was fighting to hold everything together. He was there for every step his foe took.

Seventy-eight attacks, and not a one found its target. Lan Jue's defense was absolute.

Ting! Chu Cheng had to stop. The last ringing sound of his attack being deflected away hung between them. He couldn't sustain that level of offense for long. Already Chu Cheng sensed his energy reserves down by a third.

While it may not have looked it, Lan Jue was glad for the pause. That brief exchange had been grueling. His style had changed, no more the reckless warrior like his opponent. But that defense had required endurance. He didn't dare stop, else he be drawn into its all-consuming vacuum himself.

"I..." Chu Cheng fought for breath, trying to concede. Lan Jue was also taking big gulps of air. That clash was intense.

Lan Jue didn't give him the chance. His fingers flicked out, flickering with a golden haze. A sphere of roiling lightning surrounded Chu Cheng. The Northern Monarch's Discipline flared as he shored up his defense.

What was fierce at fore grows weak at aft. Chu Cheng was exhausted, and yet that mysterious orb from Lan Jue was robust. Defending against it was as impossible as fighting destiny. Little by little, Chu Cheng's energy slipped away. Soon he couldn't stop his body from being swept up into the swirling tide of the orb's power. It was like being caught in an undertow, only getting worse as his Discipline wore out.

Lan Jue's fingers spiraled out and away, causing Chu Cheng to fly

spinning like a top to the distance. He was just adding insult to injury.

The golden light in Lan Jue's eyes dimmed. The buffeting force that filled the arena fell away. Outside of the force field, a host of shocked eyes followed him.

Even for Hua Li and Lan Qing – who knew Lan Jue very well – this was beyond comprehension. They both knew that Lan Jue, recently crowned champion at the tournament, had a better chance at victory. What they saw instead was a masterful performance.

Lan Jue hadn't laid out a single straightforward attack. Instead, his defense had done all the heavy lifting. It matched and surpassed everything Chu Cheng threw at it. It didn't look like much, but the simple fact it withstood the full force of Chu Cheng's attacks proved its magnificence.

Lan Jue retracted his finger and stood tall. He stared at his defeated opponent, looking as lofty as a mountain, as deep as the ocean. He was surrounded by a strange and charismatic aura. The swirling vortex of energy finally swirled in to him and vanished, just as all rivers flow down to the sea.

For a full eight seconds Chu Cheng stood where he'd landed, solid as a rock, staring at Lan Jue. Then he began to sway, until ultimately he stumbled and fell on his ass. His face was pale and drawn.

Lan Jue rushed over to his side. He clenched his hands together into a double fist, and bashed them against Chu Cheng's back. The other man jolted, then seemed to recover.

"Goddamn, what the hell was that? So nasty!" Chu Cheng managed to angrily spat the words after recovering.

Lan Jue stood over him. "A defensive technique."

Chu Cheng shot him a detestable look. "I am never sparring against you again. That shit sucked. I prefer head to head, getting a beating would be much less uncomfortable. Bro," he said, looking at Lan Qing, "look at your little brother. How can you look at this bullshit and not want to smack

him around?”

Lan Qing regarded his brother with a placid gaze. “Do you need a rest?” He was anxious to test himself, now that he knew what Lan Jue was capable of.

Lan Jue shook his head. “No need. But I do need a sword.”

“Alright.” Lan Qing acquiesced.

“Little-Jue.” Luo Xianni’s voice interrupted.

“Mother?” He answered respectfully, something he reminded himself he needed to speak with Lan Qing about. He couldn’t help but be a little scared off his new – somewhat off-kilter – mother.

She answered with a smile. “Your Taiji sword play is very good. More agile than Chi Bupang, but less stately. You need more vigor. From light to heavy, something you’ll learn with experience.”

Lan Jue’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, mother.”

By this time Lan Qing had arrived at the center of the ring. Lan Jue turned to Xiuxiu and waved her over.

She smiled, then quickly jogged to his side. Xiuxiu rose to the tips of her toes, as a gentle silver light enveloped her. Her body lengthened and warped until she became a shimmering longsword hovering in the air. The handle hovered before Lan Jue, awaiting his grip.

Lan Jue took the Asura Godblade. The golden aura sprang back to life, and he charged.

Lan Qing face was as still as a dry lake bed. He slowly retracted his right hand to his chest, then exhaled evenly as he stretched it out again. He stood out, the definition of towering majesty.

As his hand stretched out, it seemed the bearer of stillness. Everything around them, the whole ring, suddenly became calm and silent.

Lan Jue knew that facing his brother would be completely different from Chu Cheng. Hades was like a volcano that could blow at any moment. Lan Qing’s strategies were as layered and boundless as the night sky.

Lan Jue lashed out, commanding the power of Xiuxiu and the Asura Godblade. The blade traced a beautiful arc but, to Lan Jue's surprise, no hint of power followed in its wake. It was as though Lan Qing's singular hand was drinking it all up.

Lan Jue understood suddenly that Lan Qing had long since learned to join his Discipline with martial skill. But his reactions were quick. His experience against stronger opponents had been bolstered in the Great Adept Tournament. He channeled the energies of the Asura Godblade, and concentrated his own thunderbolt Discipline. He swung the blade through the air again, but this time agility was replaced with intent.

Pfu! Lan Qing thrust his palm forward. Lan Jue felt himself shake, and the circle he was tracing was knocked off course.

The super-soldier of An Lun curled his hand into a fist, and struck again with an explosive one-inch punch. The deafening blast of an explosion tore through the arena. Wisps of cyan energy coalesced into a fist, half a meter across. It quickly crossed the ten meter distance between him and Lan Jue.

Lan Jue suddenly began to move faster. A rapid succession of swirling orbs were cut in the air, and knocked the fist aside. In the next instant, it was surrounded by a net of golden lightning.

It exploded. The cyan fist became a ferocious tornado of compressed wind that obliterated Lan Jue's defensive circles.

Chapter 520: Live Life Like Luo Xianni!

In that instant a nimbus of light surrounded Lan Jue, while a white phantom shimmered at his back. He thrust his index finger forward.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Lan Jue's pupils contracted, and without hesitation he dropped his sword. He retracted his hands, then returned with the mightiest of the nine Taiji Hammers; Downward Hammer strike!

Boom–!

The concussive force shook their surroundings. Lan Jue staggered back, nearly falling before regaining his footing some ten meters back. Lan Qing had not moved.

Both Hua Li and Chu Cheng watched the brothers in awe. It was no surprise that Lan Qing was strong – the strongest of all of them, no doubt. Only now, they had some measure to compare it to. Both of them had plentiful experience with peak Adepts – Chu Cheng's father was one, after all – but even at the highest levels there were enormous discrepancies in strength. Aftershocks of his power still caused the floor to tremble.

Palm, fist, finger. Three strikes, straightforward and unobtrusive. One might even call it drab. And yet, its strength was such that Lan Jue's Taiji sword couldn't stand up to it. This was not just an inferior Discipline, but inferior martial technique.

Lan Qing could see his brother was still a beginner with the sword. His opening tactic was no different than Chu Cheng's: Overcome with superior force. The difference lay in Lan Qing's strength.

Chu Cheng's outright offensive couldn't penetrate Lan Jue's defense. Lan Qing's storm of energy put Lan Jue and the Asura Godblade on the ropes.

"Very good!" Lan Qing's hard voice called. He raced forward to press the attack. As invasive as wind, as aggressive as fire – in a moment he went from being rooted as the mountains to a raging lion.

Lan Jue saw him coming, but didn't back down. On the contrary, a hint of a smirk cracked his lips. And why wouldn't he? This was the first time in all their clashes that Lan Jue had been able to withstand his brother's Prajna triple-attack¹. And he didn't even get wounded! He'd done it with only rudimentary sword training.

He'd dropped his weapon, not because he didn't have an answer with his sword style, but rather because he feared the attack might injure Xiuxiu. In substitute he fell back on the more familiar Taiji defense. He knew that Lan Qing hadn't used the full strength of the Three Prajna Charms, but just defending at all was a success.

In an instant, Lan Qing was nearly on top of his brother. He struck at him with a fist. Lan Jue responded with a cross-step, and dropped into a defensive posture with his hands at the ready. His Taiji technique prepared to meet his brother's fist.

Boom – boom – boom!

Three blast, as the two brothers clashed three times.

Lan Jue's nine hammers were iron wrapped in silk, imbued with his intrinsic lightning. His tai-yang bearing was on full display.

Lan Qing was as omnipresent as the wind. His attacks were heavy as a tumbling mountain, then light as a summer breeze. From time to time, he'd lash out at Lan Jue with another Prajna charm to keep him on his toes.

They danced around each other, faster and faster, until gradually they were just a pair of blurry shapes. The arena was buffeted with the screeching howl of their powers.

For the spectators, this was a much more pleasing fight than the one before. Lan Jue was forced back with every collision, but he still managed to defend against his brother's attacks. He was on the defensive, but wasn't losing too much ground.

"Careful." Lan Qing suddenly cautioned.

The nimbus that had appeared around his head before appeared anew,

and Lan Qing's entire demeanor changed. His iron exterior seemed to soften with an ethereal benevolence. He thrust out with his palms, alternating one after the other. Each press added to a tide of concussive force headed for Lan Jue. However, not all of them were of equal strength. Some were deceptively soft, which made the stronger ones more acute. The whispering green energy became a fierce wind that kicked up dirt and stones in its path.

Within it, was the faint trace of protogenia.

Lan Jue did not retreat, but rushed forward. The golden aura around him blazed. Behind him, the image of yin and yang, black and white, rotated around one another. His clawed hands rose as though lifting something heavy, then he pushed forward with all of his strength. It was all in total contrast to Lan Qing's measured strikes.

Boom-! The arena became an explosion of color, as hurricane-force blasts of energy filled the area. Reality collapsed in the center of the ring, and rebounded with a violent detonation that sent Lan Jue flying. Lan Qing tumbled out of the sky and staggered back, but kept his footing.

Lan Jue caught himself, and swung his eyes toward his brother. Gold light poured from them before the whole ring became immersed in it. Lan Qing fell back on his heels, while the halo of light surrounding him fanned out like a holy areole². Behind him, another image of a cyan Buddha spontaneously sprang into being. He pressed his palms together in front of him as bands of white and cyan intermingled all around. Everyone could feel the energy levels rising.

"Stay your hand!" The Wine Master's booming voice interrupted their exchange.

The brothers were too caught up, and had begun to call upon their protogenic Domain. This was the arena, and while it may look real it was still a constructed reality. If he let them employ the full breadth of their protogenia, he feared this place wouldn't survive.

But they had already passed the point of no return. Even if the Wine Master intervened personally, it would just be adding his own flame to the

raging fire. It could make matters worse.

However, before the critical moment a strange energy infiltrated the arena. A figure appeared, followed by a bone-crunching crack! Everything around them froze as time was arrested. Lan Jue and Lan Qing were unable to even blink, frozen in the instant before their collision.

Protogenic coagulation?

This...

Lan Jue and Lan Qing had awakened from their battle lust, but found they couldn't move. The protogenic domains they summoned coalesced in on themselves impotently.

Neither of them had experienced anything like this before. They weren't Paragons, but at least their command of protogenia wasn't anything to sniff at! This kind of protogenic coalescence... what sort of power could do that?!

There was an odd flash of pink light. Lan Jue and Lan Qing seemed to shrink, no more the doughty titans of the ring. There was another flash and pop.

Luo Xianni busily flicked a Polaroid photo in her hand. It had captured the perfect moment, just at the peak of the two boys' conflict, with all their power swirling around them. At some point during their clash, she had produced a delicate looking pink camera from somewhere. She smirked at the collective stares directed her way. "If you want to know how to live, learn from Luo Xianni. Always carry a camera along! Oh, yeah!"³

They... they'd been changed into a picture?

Chu Cheng was struck dumb with amazement. He could only stare at the newly revealed Paragon.

They had all guessed, but now they knew. This woman who claimed to be Lan Jue and Lan Qing's mother, had to be one of the old-style Paragons. She was unknown, a hermit, and now they saw how powerful she really was.

Two men in the midst of calling upon the peak of their power, were immediately reduced to a pretty picture. All of that impressive protogenic energy, gone. How was that even possible?

Even the wine Master looked stunned by what he'd witnessed. After all, it'd been many years since he last saw his Aunt. His memory of the woman wasn't what it once was.

She tittered on, her face split in a wide smile. "Not bad, not bad! These two young men are an impressive pair. Strong, good potential. Bupang really knows how to pick them. Ay, if only they were my real children!"

In the midst of her lamentations, the flicking photo vanished in a flash of light. Two figured then appeared, suddenly and without warning. They were Lan Jue and Lan Qing. Neither were employing their powers anymore.

The two brothers shared a wordless look, and saw the shock mirrored in one another's eyes. Lan Jue remembered her telling him she was once known as the Photographer in these parts.

Even the Avenue's photographer could move mountains.

Luo Xianni chuckled to herself. "It's been so long since I've used my camera, I'm a little rusty. When you're fighting, try not to move around so much. It ruins the picture and makes it blurry. Alright, I think that's enough for today. Come and find me if you ever want some pictures!"

They left the arena. All four of the Monarchs were silent as they stepped back out onto the Avenue. Lan Qing, especially. Luo Xianni walked right beside them.

"Mother, where are you going to go?" Lan Jue asked.

"To my store to take a look around," she answered. "It should be more or less ready for the grand re-opening. Make sure I'm the first one you call when it's time to get married. I promise, you'll have photos unlike anything you've ever seen. It's up top, called Luo Xianni's Wedding Photography."

"Mother, I have a question. How long can you seal time like that when

you take a picture?” Lan Jue pressed.

She thought for a moment. “Not too long. At your strength, no more than three years, I suspect. I wouldn’t be able to take pictures though, a pity.”

Three. Three years...

Lan Jue just stared at her. The concept was terrifying, worse than any prison. Only moment ago he felt what that was like; he could think, he could even control his Discipline, but he couldn’t move even a centimeter. Nor could he find a way to break free. This was the containing power of protogenia.

Imagine: No one under the rank of Paragon could deny her a picture. It was terrifying!

Lan Jue went on. “If the photo is destroyed, what then?”

Her answer was thoughtful. “That depends on what you mean by ‘destroyed’. I’m the only one able to damage the photos. If I rip up your image, then you are ripped up too. The higher the Discipline, the more difficult it is to tear up.”

Chapter 521: Unexpected

Lan Jue gulped. “Mom, you must be busy...”

Luo Xianni answered with a charming smile, then sashayed away from them looking for all the world like a care-free young woman. But who would dare tell her that to her face!

“Your Majesty, has your aunt always been this terrifying?” Chu Cheng asked the Wine Master.

The Wine Master shot him a look. “She taught me everything I know. At the inception of the Avenue, my aunt was the most experienced fighter we had. She would have been chosen our leader, except her terrible temper wasn’t suitable for the job. Even then there weren’t many who knew her, and she wasn’t one to brag about her strength so most never knew. She stopped coming to the Avenue frequently, until eventually she disappeared for thirty years. I haven’t seen her in a very long time.”

The others exchanged quiet looks. Lan Jue’s mind, though, went back to what the Clairvoyant had told him. At the height of the crisis, he was to find the hidden Paragons littered through human society and recruit them against the threat. He didn’t give it much thought at the time, since the ten recorded Paragons were the only ones known, not included the Avenue’s recent additions. However, since then he’d had a number of unexpected run-ins with Paragons, each one stronger than the last. How many secret Paragons were there, hiding under rocks in distant galaxies?

What’s more, the longer Lan Jue spent on the Avenue the deeper he became embroiled in its secrets. The Clairvoyant’s time had come, but his machinations would continue long after he passed away.

The Pauper and the Pharmacist were the future Paragons of the Avenue, and unique additions at that. His brother was set to lead the charge, with no obstacles on his path. If in the future that included himself and Qianlin, than Skyfire Avenue would be by far the wealthiest nation in regards to Paragons. The East would never need fear for their defense.

Everything had the Clairvoyant’s fingerprints on them. The Eye of

Tomorrow's greatest strength was never on the battlefield, it was controlling the fate of humanity.

Ignoring the rest, the oppressive power of the Photographer was enough to instill fear. She was stronger than the Terminator, and even back in the day she was a better fighter than the Clairvoyant. She could only have improved since then. She was the only Paragon knew, aside from Jue and Celestial Master Qian, ever to reach Nirvana.

"Wine Master," Lan Jue asked in curiosity, "what is mother's Paragon title?"

The Wine Master thought quietly to himself. "She doesn't use it often. Usually she prefers 'the Photographer.' I've forgotten what it was, I suppose you'll have to ask her."

Lan Jue turned to Lan Qing. "Shall we go, then?"

His brother nodded.

The group bade farewell to the Wine Master and left. They didn't return to the Jewelry Store – it was too small – so they went to the hotel that had been arranged for Lan Qing and the others.

Lan Jue led them from the Avenue, and drove them in to the city.

When they arrived, Lan Qing pulled him aside. "A-Jue, I have something I want to discuss with you."

"Alright."

Hua Li and Chu Cheng left for their respective rooms. Lan Jue followed his brother so they could talk.

"Ask your question," Lan Qing said. He waved his hand, and a pale green aura hung over them.

Lan Jue nodded. "You've taken the step?"

Though Lan Qing had been the one to invite him in, he'd done it because he saw the glint of doubt in his brother's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "And no. My situation now is similar to your re-

cultivation. The further I walk the path, the more I see my Path. To do that, this step needs to be done as slow and careful as I can. I never re-cultivated, and your foundation now is already better than mine. Without that benefit, slow is better. If I control my Doman and pay attention to its changes, it will remold me. Then I will learn all its secrets.”

Realization dawned on Lan Jue’s face. “No wonder!”

He’d sensed something was off during their fight. Lan Qing was holding something back, even though he was as strong as ever. He could feel the power lurking underneath, and it made him shiver.

That final, fateful step could happen at any moment. All Lan Qing needed to do was be calm, be patient, and maintain control.

Lan Jue’s latest race to catch up with his brother had seen some strides. Lately, his improvement had been incredible. Still, it looked like the gulf between them was as vast as ever!

He wasn’t discouraged, though. On the contrary, the extra challenge was motivating.

Lan Qing handed him a bottle of water. “You’ve made some very impressive strides lately. But what’s going on between you and Qianlin? There’s got to be some problem you’re going through. Will it affect your cultivation?”

Lan Jue sighed. “It was a misunderstanding, but there’s something else separating else. She wants to tell me something, but this confusion is making it harder. I’ll deal with it, don’t worry. It won’t affect my cultivation. But I want you to know, if I agree to establish a division here, I won’t be able to help you.”

Lan Qing shook his head. “I don’t need your help. An Lun has organized its own Bloodiron Khans, a mecha unit of Adepts like yours but weaker. We’ve gathered crack soldiers and we’re going to train them to fight in units to improve coordination. If you need help with anything, ask.”

“Alright.” Lan Jue said with a nod. “I’m out, then. You take it easy.”

Lan Qing followed him as he rose to his feet. “What do you think will

happen with the Clairvoyant?”

Lan Jue considered for a moment. “Right now I’m not sure. I guess he’ll announce a successor. That’s what the Avenue needs most. What Hua Li said was right, the East is on the upswing. The North and West are going to be much more vigilant. When the fighting starts we can’t rely on anybody. We’ll need to watch our backs.”

Lan Qing nodded sagely. “I’ve long believed the only one you can rely on is yourself, and the soldier at your back. You be careful. Winning the tournament is going to be a double-edged sword for you. You’ve got a big target painted on your chest, so if I were you I’d stay put a little while.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

Lan Jue rose, wished his brother a good night, and left. His fights today with Chu Cheng and Lan Qing had improved his understanding of Taiji. Victory and defeat were both vehicles for improvement. Since it was so rare for them to get together like this, it was good to take the opportunity to test themselves.

He left the hotel and was heading for his car when a sudden chill spread through his chest. It was unnatural fast and sharp.

Without hesitation, Lan Jue reached out and slapped the hood of his car. The Jewelry Master dissolves in to a hundred thousand bolts of lightning, then vanished. He appeared a moment later inside the car. His lightning’s conductive nature allowed him to pass through the metal.

His eyes snapped to the window. In the space where he had stood, a tranquil gust of energy swept by. If he had been even a second late, he had no doubt that energy would have pierced right through him.

Lan Jue didn’t dare waste time. All at once the car and everything around it was swallowed up in a ball of electricity. Lan Jue’s hands were brought together in a circle which galvanized his Taiji powers to create a field of energy.

Even as his powers surged, Lan Jue could see reality around him draining of color. He could see everything, but it was all reduced to shades of black

and white.

Domain! A Paragon!

In that moment, Lan Jue felt a chill boring in to the center of his back. He knew who this was.

He had to rely on area attacks, it was the only way to deal with them. He wouldn't be able to tackle a Paragon in a straight fight, but if he bought enough time his brother might notice something wasn't right. It was his only hope for survival.

As though to taunt him, a shadowy figure appeared just outside of the car's windshield. Lan Jue's plan had been to become electricity and get lost in the forest of lightning, but his opponent's timing was masterful. It left Lan Jue with nowhere to hide, against a foe who stood amidst the sea of lightning like it wasn't there.

As a thunderbolt Adept, one of Lan Jue's specialties was speed. However, he was surprised to find that somehow his speed was being restrained. It wasn't just that his foe was faster – which they were – but that his agility was curtailed. His enemy's Domain was doing this.

An entry-level Paragon's Domain was strong enough to overcome any Adept. No matter how strong, the difference between a normal Talent and these superhuman beings was enormous.

In this instant of crisis his body reacted instinctually. The familiar swirl of black and white as his Taiji powers swelled appeared at his back. Lan Jue's hands thrust forward together, and his body shook as a shell of consuming lightning surrounded him. One-Inch Guard!

Phu! A spear of ethereal power pierced his defense like paper, and buried itself in Lan Jue's chest. Thankfully, the One-Inch Guard lived up to its promise. The attack narrowly missed his heart. There was no pain, only an instant of cold. Even that was short lived as a breath later he felt a crazed flush of energy rampage through his chest. He was going numb.

Poison!

Chapter 522: Blocking Daggers

This small victory was thanks to the One-Inch Guard. Without it the evil energies would have been far worse. The poison would have been injected right in to his organs.

As things got more chaotic, Lan Jue grew calmer. He did not fluster, because losing his cool meant death. He reacted by shutting off all the meridians in his chest and creating a defensive net of electricity around his Core. Everything leading to it was locked down. The toxin and the rampaging force it rode in on couldn't invade.

His eyes blazed as they filled with golden light. A stately and commanding aura poured from him.

"Stagnate!" The deep voice boomed from Lan Jue. He was like a star, blazing in the center of the black and white vortex.

Everything slowed, like they were stuck in a mire. He could see a black dagger in the air – the dark image that had attacked him.

Ascension, and protogenic command! His One-Inch Guard had bought him the opportunity to call on his full strength. It had been some time since he'd had to use his Ascension, but it benefited from his deepened protogenic understanding just like everything else.

"Eh?" The whispered gasp of surprise came from all around. The dark weapon became translucent, and from it radiated rays of impenetrable darkness. Gold and black fought in the skies overhead, while color returned to the world below.

This showed the disparity between an Adept's comprehension and true Domain. After all, Lan Jue had not entered in to the Realm of Protogenia. He was simply an Adept, and fleeing the full force of a Paragon's Domain would be very difficult.

His struggle continued as he shoved his palms forward, delivering nine palm strikes. They spread all over the area before him.

This crucial moment was the time to go all out. The One-Inch Guard

bought him time, so did the Ascension command. He could hit like a Paragon, but he had to join the powers of yin and yang with his lightning to get there.

The first time he'd tried protogenic lightning was during the DreamNet battles. He led the Driver through the process of joining their Disciplines, yin and yang. Results were mixed.

After some training he and the Driver tried again. His comprehension of Taiji was better by then, and he came to understand protogenic lightning more deeply.

His Ascension, meanwhile, was protogenia – but there were degrees. The Domain he was fighting against could only be commanded by someone who had truly broken through. Protopenic lightning was different. It was a single attack, not a sustained state. He could cross the barrier to Paragon-strength if he could condense it in to a single attack.

It was the same power he relied on to win the Great Adept Tournament.

That time he'd been joined with Qianlin and commanded the power of a peak-level Adept, with one foot in the Realm of Protopenia. Now his Discipline was dropped to ninth level fifth rank. Summoning protogenic lightning was going to effort. His Ascension did serve to boost his abilities, but to bring yin and yang to its brink with protogenic lightning would require power he did not possess.

He watched as the yin and yang energies reached their apex, could feel his internal energies failing to meet demand. It was ravenous, even the phylactery stone would serve no use. Lan Jue bit his tongue and drew upon every ounce of power within him. Success hung upon this singular moment. He would life, or die for his cause.

He suspected his enemies would send men after him. His failure had been in underestimating how soon, and how violent their pursuit.

Clang! The golden light scattered. The world regained normal speed as the Ascension command was overcome.

The darkness closed in from all around. The dagger reemerged but

translucent as before, details hidden beneath an unnatural blur.

Just in time, for in that moment a column of lightning exploded out from Lan Jue. Protogenic lightning lanced out every which way, warping reality in its wake. Even the swirl of black and white behind him warbled threateningly.

“Ay?” The surprise sounded as countless holes appeared in the shimmering world of black and white. The evil energies assailing Lan Jue seemed to calm, but only for a moment. Soon the world was back as it had been. Lan Jue had used up everything he could.

He was finished!

He'd done the best he could. Only once you faced a Paragon did you realize how powerless you really were. His protogenic lightning had been strong enough to cut through his enemy's Domain, but only for a moment. He thought it must have been enough to get Lan Qing's attention, but his brother was nowhere to be found. It was too late – the final blow was near at hand, and even Lan Qing couldn't contend against this Domain.

Just as hopelessness was threatening to overwhelm him, Lan Jue was blinding by a beam of white light. All of a sudden, he felt like he was nothing. The enemy Paragon's Domain was slow to close, which allowed Lan Jue to slip through. The living dagger cut at the beam, but couldn't stop Lan Jue's retreat. In his place there appeared the stifling aura of a Paragon, and a rain of cyan energy.

“Hmph!” The irritated grunt reverberated through the air. All of the hues of black and grey were swallowed up in to a single point, then blinked out of existence. It looked like nothing had happened.

Lan Qing, his face pale and livid, descend from overhead followed closely by Chu Cheng and Hua Li. Another group of figures appeared swirling with protogenia.

“Jewelry Master?”

ζ

“No-!” Lan Jue's body bucked and shook, down to his very soul. He could

describe it, other than to say it felt like his heart was being carved out of his chest.

He was in a dim room with stone walls. Refracted colors danced across them as light filtered through stained glass windows. In the center of the room a pale figure rested in the arms of a woman in a snow-white dress. They were a dramatic centerpiece to a drab scene.

A few moments ago Lan Jue was sure death had caught up with him. But then, a familiar energy. Summoning! Yes, it was the intrinsic bond he shared with Qianlin. Everything was gone, only Qianlin holding him protectively. Then, through that portal a tendril of evil power lurched through. It was quickly repulsed, but not before digging in to Qianlin's body. She threw herself between him and the killing blow.

"No. No! Qian. Qianlin, wake up! Don't die! Wake up!" Lan Jue gathered her in to his arms now, holding her tight. Tears covered his face, his emotions unmitigated. He felt the soulless hand of death with its grip on his heart, strangling every beat.

Qianlin's face was white as snow. IT was amazing how quickly blood left. Her eyes were wide and unfocused. He could see the light of life within them start to dim. She never said a word, all through the terror and pain. Not a single word.

She knew it the moment Lan Jue fell in to the ambush. Right away she turned her whole focus to him, thinking only of him so as to summon Lan Jue out of danger. But the Paragon's Domain had cut him off.

Her heart had been full of fear, much worse than Lan Jue's. She'd cried bitter tears as each attempt to summon him failed. She focused on the hate she felt for the idea of never seeing him again. She prayed desperately to exchange her life for his.

Then, when that dagger struck, she was filled with an unspeakable sorrow. As the darkness came down on her, she welcomed it.

In the end it seemed her prayers had been answers. Her desperate tries had summoned him to her side, but in exchange she took his place. It was a choice she made consciously and willingly by putting herself between

him and that mortal blow.

Fresh blood stained her favorite white dress. Flows of deadly energy slithered through Qianlin's veins. Their enemy had managed to infect her with his poison, and now she looked up at Lan Jue's tear-streaked face with no way to say what she felt. It was a cruel sort of torture.

How did this happen... ?

Qianlin's life was quickly slipping away. The poison had managed to overcome Lan Jue's blockages as well, and surged through his meridians. The Jewelry Master set his jaw, his face full of a grim resolution. If they were to die, then they'd die together.

He'd watched helplessly while Hera died. He couldn't bear to have another woman he loved die in his arms. Dying together wasn't so bad.

The morbid promise swam in his brain as Lan Jue looked in to Qianlin's beauty, hazy eyes. He dropped his head, and kissed her pale lips. They were cold, so cold it made his heart skip shudder. But he didn't pull away. He kissed her deep and long.

We'll die together!

This single thought echoed again and again in his head. A lone anchor as everything else slipped from his mind. Nothing existed anymore, just her lips and her smell.

Sure as the rising sun, Qianlin's body was slowly consumed by light and fused with Lan Jue. They would bear this pain together, he inwardly assured her.

As his meridians spread the rapid increase of power, he felt the cold and numbness consume every inch of him. IT was Qianlins' power, and that poison. It was all through him now, too.

Lan Jue sat, his chest heaving. If today is the day it ends, then I'm ready to go with you!

He stared ahead with hard, firm eyes. All the locks sealing the poison in place gave way.

He felt the potent toxin flood through him like a tsunami. Soon it infested every meridian and every vein. A poison this strong would kill a normal man in under two hours.

Chapter 523: Antitoxin

As Adepts he and Qianlin were more resilient than normal people. But, like any poison, once the Paragon's toxin spread through him it would spell his death.

The assassin's blade cut through the fissure in their Domain, but couldn't strike accurately. The dagger struck Qianlin as she placed herself between it and its target, but luckily it missed any major structures. Now that they were joined, both of them would defend against the poison together. But if they failed, they failed together as well.

Lan Jue clenched his jaw, aware of every moment the cold and numbness ate at them. Thankfully, joining brought his Discipline – and thus defense – up to peak level. His Core was desperately injecting his meridians with energy to protect them and counteract the poison's corrosion.

Sharp pain sharpened Lan Jue's focus when he bit down on the tip of his tongue. A golden corona of energy sprang out around him as he called on his Ascension. This poison was from a Paragon. He thought – he hoped – that protogenia could help him defend against it.

Lan Jue had his suspicions as to the identity of the assassin. He'd discovered a number of hidden Paragons, but the famous ones were widely recognized. There was only one on that Paragon List who was an expert in both speed and poison; the once-weakest Paragon, the Astral Phantom. After this brief encounter, Lan Jue placed the assassin ahead of the Karmic Scholar or Infernal Vanguard.

What could be more terrifying than a superhuman assassin? He'd attacked Lan Qing a number of times, forcing the super soldier to rely on several methods to keep himself alive. He was the only one of the Phantom's targets still walking around. Likewise, Lan Qing owed some of his impressive power growth to the constant assassin threat.

At least for right now, Lan Jue was part of the very short list of survivors. For how long, was the question.

Paragons were already creatures of unfathomable power. They became the thing of nightmares when they choose to specialize in murder. It was too fast, too sudden. Lan Jue had been smart enough to respond right away, but he was fighting a Paragon! The only one who could compete was someone on the same level.

Lan Jue took personal control of the flow of energy through his meridians. He needed to carefully direct it to combat the poison. Perhaps he could force it out.

“I command you to stop!” Lan Jue’s voice was low and dictatorial. Suddenly, his entire body became flooded with resplendent golden light. He looked like a statue made of precious gold. His Ascension command had stopped the blood in his veins. Lan Jue wouldn’t be able to hold it for long. He was still human, and without moving blood he would soon be dead. But it was his only choice.

Sadly, he soon discovered his efforts fruitless. This poison was too strong, he could feel it eating away at his cells. How could you expel something that was destroying you on a cellular level? The words of command would help him live a little longer and stop the spread of the poison, but without a way to remove it from his system it was only delaying the inevitable. Even the Phylactery Stone couldn’t help.

Qianlin, I don’t know if you can hear me. I just needed to tell you I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you, and you shouldn’t have had to suffer so much because of me.

I love you, Qianlin. Whether or not you love me back, I love you with my whole heart.

But no, I shouldn’t be saying this nonsense. After everything you’ve done how dare I question your feelings? It’s me who’s wrong. Me.

Lan Jue’s heart was full of regret. The bitter realization that it was too late was crushing.

Qianlin didn’t answer. The poison must have put her in a coma. Hopelessness and a whole host of negative emotions threatened to break his will. Damnit, no! I’m not supposed to die like this.

A silver light cut reality in twain right in front of Lan Jue's face. An alluring figure emerged.

"Capture spirit!" The voice was boisterous and strong. The force in it put some of Lan Jue's despair to bed. Although the poison had begun to take his sight, he knew who it was by the sound of her voice.

It was mother! The Photographer, Luo Xianni!

Luo Xianni's hands were pressed against Lan Jue's back. In the next instant his Ascension command gave way, but instead of poison he felt another strange energy permeate him.

Lan Jue was locked in place, but it was different than his command. This time even his thinking was sluggish, though he could feel everything that was going on around him.

Silver silk-like strands slithered in to Lan Jue's body. They were impossibly thin, but beautiful. They seemed to move at Luo Xianni, who looked at her son in law absent her usual coquettish smile. It was quite the opposite, for her eyes betrayed a deathly calm overhanging smoldering rage.

As the slivers of energy invaded, Lan Jue's body began to shake. Luo Xianni retracted her hand and took a step back. The frail, pink camera was in her hands again.

Ka-cha!

Lan Jue became a photo, frozen in time. The Polaroid gently fell in to Luo Xianni's hand. She gripped it by the top of bottom, then pulled to stretch the photo larger.

Lan Jue flickered with a strange silvery light against the face of the picture. It wasn't all silver, though. It clashed against threads of dull grey. Luo Xianni continued to fiddle with the photo as her fingers – ethereal and enigmatic – danced across its surface. Every tentative flick galvanized that grey energy, and hung around the top of Lan Jue's head like an evil shadow. Before long there was a copy of Lan Jue in grey, like a ghost-image from the camera.

Luo Xianni reached in and pulled the flickering silver Lan Jue from the photo, depositing him on the floor beside her. She left the grey Lan Jue in the picture. She clapped, and it shrank back to normal size within her palm.

Lan Jue had a moment to check himself over. He felt remade, but the process had him reeling. It was like being sliced in to a hundred thousand paper-thin slices. It felt like even his soul had been segmented and cut apart. Though the pain was brief, the sensation was seared permanently on his memory.

The numbness was gone, but tremendous pain remained. He felt like he'd been broken in to a thousand pieces. Evidently, Luo Xianni's healing had side-effects.

He winced when his eyes were assailed by another flash of silver. This time it was the Wine Master and the Doctor who arrived.

"What happened?" The Wine Master hurried to Luo Xianni's side.

Her face was cold and callous. "He won't die. You guys are really something. An assassin was able to get right up to your front door and attack one of your people. If he hadn't used that special retreat, he'd be dead. Did you catch them?"

A dangerous glint shone in the Wine Master's eyes as he shook his head. "A crafty one. He took his shot then ran. Too fast to catch."

Luo Xianni's eyes narrowed. "What's the name of this assassin's crew?"

A chill ran through the Wine Master's chest. "Aunt, you..."

She rounded on him, eyes wide and wild. "Don't tell me someone gets to attack my son and get away with it! I'm not done with them. An assassin never does anything for free right? I'll follow the money and find their employer. If they won't tell me, I'll wipe every trace of these arrogant bastards from the universe. They'll all face my camera!"

"Blood Phantoms, that's what they call themselves. The Astral Phantom founded it. We have some more information on them, I'll give it to you when we get back," the Wine Master said.

The Doctor rushed to Lan Jue's side and clapped a hand on his shoulder. An emerald green light spread out from within the Doctor and in to his patient.

The Pain was starting to take its toll on Lan Jue. He fought against his dimming vision, but eventually succumbed to darkness.

ζ

"Ah!" A searing pain shook Lan Jue from sleep. He shot up, and after a moment recognized the interior of his rooms behind the Jewelry Shop. The pain was gone, it was only a memory that woke him up.

Everything felt like it was in its proper place. When he groped a hand against his chest he couldn't feel a wound. Internally he searched his Discipline: Ninth level fifth rank, thankfully the same as before the attack.

Wait! What about Zhou Qianlin?!

His pupils contracted to two dark points. Ninth level fifth rank – it meant he wasn't joined with her. So where did she go?

"Boss, are you ok?!" Xiuxiu hurried in to the room. When she saw him sitting up, and so tense, she was filled with concern.

"Am I ok?" He gasped. Lan Jue took deep breaths and tried to calm his racing heart.

Everything that happened before his coma came rushing back, like some kind of dream. It was more than a dream, though – that pain was real, and he would never forget it.

Chapter 524: The Last Clairvoyant

He remembered Qianlin turning to light and being absorbed into him. He remembered her eyes; no pain, no despair, just satisfaction. Happy to protect. Zeus was supposed to be the one protecting her, but she was willing to pay her with her life to save him.

“Where is Zhou Qianlin? Have you seen her?” Lan Jue asked Xiuxiu, standing by the bed.

This gave his Amazon pause, and a subtle change overcame her expression. She recovered with a quick shake of her head. “Nope, haven’t seen her. The Pharmacist was the one who brought you back.”

“You up?” Lan Jue looked passed Xiuxiu to the door when his three brothers came walking in.

Each of them had dour expressions, especially Hua Li. Lan Jue had never seen the singer so upset before. When he saw Lan Jue sitting up, though, his mood improved.

The Jewelry Master nodded. “How long was I out?”

“Two nights and one day,” Lan Qing responded. Lan Jue wanted to follow up, but his brother cut him off. “Don’t talk too much right now. If you’re feeling alright, we need to see the Clairvoyant.”

Lan Jue fought the tearing urge to make them tell him where Qianlin was. How was she?! But as he awoke and calmed down, his perception widened. He could sense Qianlin, somewhere. She was alive... she was still alive.

“Wait for me outside. I’ll change and then we’ll head out.” He was, of course, aware of the fact that beneath the covers was nothing to protect his modesty.

Xiuxiu’s face reddened as she walked out of the room. Nothing I haven’t seen before, she said to herself.

Lan Jue felt weak and woozy as he got up from bed, like he’d lost a lot of blood. Fumbling with his clothes, Lan Jue thought about what

happened. Astral Phantom! One day I'll pay you back a thousand-fold for the pain you put me and Qianlin through!

He remembered the thoroughly bizarre process by which Luo Xianni had saved his life. He couldn't understand by what power she'd managed to do it. It had felt like he was cut into sheets and put back together while the poison was drawn out. It was not a feeling he wanted to experience a second time. Far, far too painful.

He changed into some clean clothes and joined the others outside. Lan Qing was by the door, and when his brother emerged the super soldier placed a hand on his shoulder. An infusion of energy swept through Lan Jue. After a second, the Eastern general removed his hand and nodded. His face was calm, but there was the promise of violence in his eyes, and it was clear who that homicidal intent was meant for.

Chu Cheng's angry voice filled the shop. "Astral Phantom... there will come a day when him and his little group of faeries will be wiped from existence!"

Hua Li's voice was low, but no less harsh. "We won't stop with them. The Blood Phantoms are a business. Whoever paid them for this job is the most important target."

"Who else could it be? There are only a few people with the capital to hire the Astral Phantom." Chu Cheng's voice was cold and calculating. "The North or the West, the Great Conclave or one of the Citadels. That's about it."

Hua Li nodded thoughtfully. "It's gotta be one of those. How are you feeling, A-Jue?"

"I'm fine," the former mercenary said. "We'll talk about this later. Let's go see the Clairvoyant."

The four of them left Zeus' Jewelry Shop without any further discussion, and headed for Skyfire Museum. As they walked, Lan Jue took the opportunity to examine his internal state more carefully. His energy felt plentiful, and there didn't appear to be any after-effects. It was the second time Qianlin had saved his life.

The attack had been so sudden and so fierce. It had nearly killed them both, but it also shattered something inside of him. There was resolution in Lan Jue's eyes.

Skyfire Museum was as quiet as the name implied, and as empty as one might expect. That is, except for the person waiting for them by the front door.

When they got close enough, the Wine Master nodded to the four of them in greeting. He never said anything as they pushed through the doors and made their way to the back of museum. As they made their way through, Lan Jue could sense a strange energy lingering in the air. It was soft, but confining – soothing for mind and spirit.

Lan Qing, Huali and Chu Cheng felt it too. Their furious thoughts eased as they passed through the eddies of pacifying energy. Footsteps were the only sound as they ascended a flight of stone stairs.

A set of large but simple double doors stopped them when they reached the top. Several others were already waiting. All of the Star Alliance was present, along with the Keeper, Bookworm, and Gourmet. Many of the Avenue's councilors were also here, along with the Pharmacist.

When Jun'er's mother saw Lan Jue approach she waved him over. "Relax," she said when he came close, "Qianlin is fine. I sent her back myself."

Lan Jue had suspected as much, but hearing it from her did help settle his worries. He nodded his thanks and tried to get his emotions under control.

Everyone was quiet, and somber. There was no idle conversation or chatter as they awaited the Clairvoyant's appearance. No one looked happy to be here, for they knew what this gathering meant. Three months ago they were told this would be their leader's final revelation. Afterwards, he would die. Silence prevailed as they waited, with many going so far as to bow their heads before the double doors. The atmosphere was as bleak as a funeral.

Half an hour passed, but no one seemed eager to get on with it. Most of

the Avenue's denizens hoped this day would never come – or at least not for a while longer. That was the hope they kept quietly to themselves as they waited.

Finally, a familiar old voice whispered through the hall. “Come in, everyone.”

The Clairvoyant!

Heads rose, and people roused from their contemplative stillness. The old seer's voice was as gentle as they remembered, but everyone heard the notes of grief. The enormous double doors slowly opened. Waves of ultraviolet light flowed out like a breeze.

The mourners entered, led by the four Paragons. Next followed the Avenue's leadership and the Four Divine Monarchs. What greeted them was an extraordinary scene. Crossing the threshold took them into the center of an infinite universe. It was spectacular. The door vanished to reveal the glittering expanse of the cosmos laid out in all its splendor.

Everyone's reaction was different. For Lan Jue, the sea of stars was a backdrop for a lightshow, with rays of brilliant light radiating from the highest point above him. Whatever it implied, it had something to do with him.

Raising his head brought everything into sharper focus. He peered deep within the galaxies as their light washed over him.

A change of perspective helped everyone forget their sorrow for a moment. Hearts eased as eyes swept the majestic cosmic vista. Then a single point no brighter than any of the others intensified, scattering the others like snowflakes. Three figures stood out against the blazing starlight.

Two were tall, and one small. The small one was little Jun'er. She'd been dressed in a pretty yellow summer dress that made the adorable child look like a pixie. What struck Lan Jue wasn't her clothes, though. There was a sparkle in the little girl's eyes that wasn't there before. There was also a silver crystal between her eyebrows, a third eye.

The child felt her father's gaze. She looked right at him and smiled the sweetest smile, but obediently stayed in place. Leading her was a gallant looking man in his fifties. He was dressed in a flowing robe littered with twinkling gemstones. Two deep black eyes reflected the image of the universe around them.

Standing beside him was the Photographer, Luo Xianni, clad in a pink dress that made her appear even younger and more vibrant than usual. Her expression, however, was calm and impassive.

He's...

Lan Jue didn't know this middle-aged man who stood in the center, but he knew his aura. That infinitely deep, almost surreal aura.

"You're... the Clairvoyant?" Lan Jue asked.

He smiled. "I allowed my body to show signs of aging so that I might save energy for living. That's no longer necessary, and I like this look for me."

It was him, the Clairvoyant. The gathered luminaries of Skyfire Avenue bowed in respect.

"There's no need for that." He smiled affectionately as he addressed them. "I can feel your sadness, but I will tell you there is no need for it. Abandon your sorrow, because for me this is a liberation. I can give up my burdens to you and join what I have watched for so long. A prophet's soul never dies, so long as you continue to believe the Eye of Tomorrow is watching over you.

"Is there really no other way?" The Wine Master sighed.

The Clairvoyant gave his old friend a sad smile. "Why? I am losing nothing, what have I to regret? I have only one final responsibility, and I have called you here today so that I may pass it on to you. My time has come to rest, but the Avenue – and humanity – still need all of you."

Chapter 525: The Link

The Clairvoyant paused, and dropped his eyes to look fondly upon Jun'er at his side. His face was full of contentment. "I'm grateful I got to meet our sweet Jun'er before I had to leave. I have already passed the title of Eye of Tomorrow to her and she will continue my legacy. Once I have gone she will be the proprietor of the Skyfire Museum, and the new Clairvoyant."

The Gourmet quietly added his voice. "We will do everything in our power to protect the legacy of the Clairvoyant. The Eye of Tomorrow will watch over Skyfire Avenue for a long time to come."

Nodding in appreciation, he continued. "I elect the Wine Master as your new Chairman, and the Jewelry Master will take the position he has vacated."

Everyone's eyes fell upon Lan Jue. He anticipated this would happen, but nerves still fluttered in his stomach. He strode forward to stand by the Wine Master's side. "I won't let you down."

The old Paragon sighed and then, under Lan Jue's shocked gaze, he bowed to the Jewelry Master. Lan Jue wanted to rush forward and pull him straight, but an enigmatic column of light fell from the sky and froze him in place, stopping him from interrupting.

"This is.." Lan Jue shot back, surprised.

The Clairvoyant straightened, a glint of something in his eye. "I've had my eye on you for quite a while, Jewelry Master. Longer than you'd probably care to know. All that time I have been quietly guiding you. By now I suspect you know I will try to guide your path again. I must start with an apology. No one's life should ever be under another person's control. I know the pain of it more than most. But I was left with no choice.

"I saw the first signs of this disaster in a vision, fifteen years ago. Mankind was devoured beneath a tide of purple. Humans became extinct. I realized I was witnessing the end of our species.

“These kinds of ominous visions are rare, and it was my first as a seer. I was so frightened – was this the way our people were meant to end? I was established in the East by then, of course. I thought, I must convince the East to find other planets to flee to. However, it was unachievable. The process was too long, and finding a habitable planet far enough from harm was difficult.

“Later, I became less frantic. I remembered something my teacher told me. He said, ‘Destiny is never certain.’ There’s no such thing as unavoidable extinction, and the more dire the danger the brighter the gleam of hope. If we could just harness that hope, we could save life from destruction. We still had a chance.” Even near death, there was a fierce and fervent light in his eyes.

He looked at Lan Jue. “I decided a way had to be found at any cost. Using the most powerful techniques I knew to perceive the future, I searched time for that one in a million hope. All the danger, all the cost, it all paid off. I found that one in a million chance. I found you.”

Lan Jue felt his heart seize. He’s heard the Clairvoyant say things like this before, but now – after everything that had happened – it felt different. The Clairvoyant sensed this.

His voice was low and soothing. “At first I didn’t understand. A single person is capable of only so much. We don’t live in a universe with grand Savors. How could one lonely boy save us from our fate? But every vision led to you, so I went myself to see how you were different from the rest. I wanted to know what hope you bore.

“Ultimately it came to me.” He stopped, and pride overtook his bearing as he looked at Lan Jue. “You’re the link! Even if you were as strong as your master you couldn’t save us all by yourself. However, you could be the link. Everything you do affects the people, the places and the organizations around you. This connection and your good fortune could be used to give all of humanity its best shot to save itself.

“Once I realized this, I started to exert my influence. With you at the center of my visions, our chances at survival were under twenty percent. It

was apparent that I would need to make you a stronger link. Something radical would need to happen, and I would need to guide it – either directly, or indirectly.”

That pride was gone now, replaced with an expression of deep shame. His voice soft, he continued. “I cannot ask for your forgiveness. I only hope that you choose to continue to bear this responsibility. Would you grant me this?”

Lan Jue looked at the storied Paragon calmly. “If you want me to reply from the heart, then no. I am not a hard-working man, on the contrary I love life and I love to enjoy life. If I had my choice – a real choice – it would be for lazy days without stress. But you succeeded, and I’m stuck in this storm whether I like it or not. I will acknowledge that your guidance has brought me here with all these friends, and a life I’m proud of.

“Once my goal was to experience everything the universe had to offer. Now I’ve experienced a great many things I never would have without your meddling. It never contradicted my desires for myself, so after some thought I decided it wasn’t all bad. You can relax, I’ll keep walking this path because now there are a lot of people I want to keep safe. For them, for me, I won’t stop.”

He didn’t mention humanity in his impassioned speech. He stuck to simple, and he stuck to true to convince the Clairvoyant of his commitment.

“Thank you,” the dying Paragon replied.

Lan Jue shook his head. “If anyone should be thankful, it’s all of us. The words alone aren’t enough. You have been an unparalleled defender of humanity. But if I may make a small request...”

The Clairvoyant urged him on. “Of course.”

Lan Jue looked at him in earnest. “You’ve been watching for so long, please tell me who hurt Hera. I know Hera is dead, it was all real, but there was never any trace.”

His voice went low. “I will tell you, once we’ve finished here.”

He turned to the others, then. "I tell everyone this, because it is my hope you will help him through. Our organization is loose, and free, but when it counts I believe we will unify. The exuviation technique has also inspired many. You stand on the cusp of a major step in human evolution.

"If we survive this dark time, mankind will enter into an unprecedented golden age. It will be a step toward becoming the true masters of the universe." The fiery resilience from before blazed in his eyes again as he looked at each person in turn. "We must band together, and face this foe with our full strength."

Everyone nodded. The Keeper chimed in. "Clairvoyant. What have you seen in your final visions?"

The question made him sigh despairingly. "I've seen all that I was meant to see. That which I see now only confirms what we know. I'm as blind to the future as you are. Opportunities are there, but all I can do is my small part in making them better and easier. I am finished, I guess you'll have to see if those opportunities arise."

The Paragons were unpleasantly stunned by what they heard. They had expected more instruction before the Clairvoyant's passing, but he had nothing more to impart.

He gently patted Jun'er's head. "Go to your mother, sweetheart."

"Yes, teacher," Jun'er answered respectfully. She then quickly tottered over to her mother's side. Her eyes were bright, but it still seemed she was blind. Lan Jue rushed forward to take up one of her groping hands and lead her to the Pharmacist.

"Little Jun'er has more Talent at her age than I did when I was older. She wasn't in any of my visions. It appears as though the universe has its own ideas of providence. She was a gift."

He watched Jun'er for a moment longer before returning his attention to the adults with a smile. "It's time for me to bid you all farewell. If we have the chance to meet again, someday at the end of time, that would make an old man happy."

“Your Majesty.” The collected Adepts and Paragons bowed low to the Eye of Tomorrow. Only the oldest – the Keeper and Bookworm – declined to bow. However, they nodded at their compatriot, with eyes full of respect.

“Thank you, I ask that you all return to your homes. Zeus, Prometheus, Hades, Poseidon. If you would stay. And the Pharmacist as well.”

“Hey, you old scoundrel, I’m not staying?” Luo Xianni looked at him ready to disagree.

The Clairvoyant looked back, and seeing her set expression could only sigh in resignation. “You stay too then, I suppose.”

She sniffed. “Right. As it should be.”

The Wine Master shook his head. When it came to his crazy aunt, there wasn’t anything he could do. Adepts and Paragons filed out. They weren’t sure why, but after seeing the Clairvoyant the sorrow that clouded their hearts seemed lifted. Now they felt disappointment, like saying goodbye to an old friend for a long time.

The Clairvoyant turned his attention to the Four Divine Monarchs. He waved a hand through the air, and four distant points of light twinkled in response. They rapidly grew larger and more defined, separating into four dazzling flashes of green, red, gold and blue that in front of the four Adepts.

Chapter 526: Starlight Pendants

The Clairvoyant's face grew solemn. He turned first to Lan Qing. "Prometheus. You have spared no effort in your work for the Eastern Alliance. You and people like you are the reason we persevere through these hardships. The future strength of our nation will rely on you. I have four protective talismans. To you I impart Aerius, and wish you calm seas and blue skies."

The azure-green star descended unto Lan Qing. It flickered incessantly, from a dark jade to pale aquamarine and back again. They were buffeted by gusts of vigorous wind. Lan Qing was a spot of darker green against the blaze of jade until, suddenly, the light erupted out in all directions in an incredible supernova. The core of the store merged with the An Lun Super Soldier and vanished.

Lan Qing felt the center of his chest grow warm. A pendant sat against his sternum, feeling as much a part of him as blood or bone. For a moment it was as though he were in a place of nothing but stirring winds. He recognized it, the essence of wind he'd born on his heart for so long. Now it felt as though he were a part of it, tapped in to its elemental nature.

Next, the Clairvoyant turned to Chu Cheng. His smile was wide and pleasant like this was a weekend get-together, but underpinned with a quiet dignity. The man's words were calm and sparse, but all of them could recognize the true weight of it all. This great man had used the last days of his life to create these for them!

"Hades, the Master of Death, so full of life. Of all those who held the title before, your heart is the kindest. Beneath your impetuous exterior is a heart that beats in defense of the righteous. You are destined to go far. Remember that the master of the underworld does not just command Death, but also that which comes after. I present Emberblossom, and hope that you continue to strive for that spark of life in the fires of the underworld."

Everything around them was bathed in red light as the star approached. Flashes of crimson red interspersed with a rainbow of colors were ejected in violent bursts along with a gratifying warmth. Its corona soon engulfed Chu Cheng.

The others looked on as Hades burst in to flame, becoming a raging column of fire. He felt it sear all the way down to his soul, a cleansing ache. He understood it now – if he wanted to master the flame of Hades, he had to know it like he knew himself. Chu Cheng stood amidst the swirling clouds of ash, renewed!

The flood of understanding brought him to his knees. Emberblossom smoldered against his chest while inside, realization raged like a tempest.

The Clairvoyant nodded. His third gift was for Lan Jue.

“You have a languid nature, but an honorable heart. You have been touched by destiny, an old god reborn. You bear the hopes of mankind, future Paragon. There will come a day when you transcend it all, and will wield power that make the universe shake. However, you must never act against your nature, for when you stand at the precipice it is your essence that will bring you happiness. Look to it to keep you from losing your way. In that way you will control destiny – it will no more control you. Compassion, honor, courage, persistence. For you I have created Lumina. May it help you become a shining reflection of the heavens.”

The golden star approached, slowly entering in to Lan Jue’s chest. The intensity of its light surged for a moment, turning Lan Jue to gold. To the Jewelry Master the pendant’s power felt like a piercing beam through his soul. The deluge of energy was difficult to describe. He saw things with new eyes, like the frailties scarring her heart were washed away.

The resplendent light fell upon him. It illuminated his body, but also his heart and soul. The Arrow of Compassion, glittering and translucent, flickered with light. It fluctuated in reaction to the pendant. Lan Jue’s apprehensions about when and how to use the Arrow inexplicably eased. Meanwhile, a star-shaped talisman appeared upon his chest, pouring golden light.

A storm of light surrounded him. Zeus closed his eyes, and immersed himself in the current of power.

At last, the Clairvoyant came upon the final Monarch. However, his face did not bear the happy smiles he'd had for the other three. Instead, there was pity. "You are a reflection of what you command; as relentless, as soft, as pure as water. You possess its fragility and gentleness as well. If you were a woman, you would grow to be a great Queen of nations. Alas..."

Hua Li shook. He watched the Clairvoyant with wide, stunned eyes.

The Clairvoyant's own twinkled like starlight. "You will bear Cerulea. May it lift your might and mind, and help to cleanse the ills of the world."

A mollifying blue light arose as the star came to Hua Li. It entered through the performer's chest and went supernova like the three before. Hua Li became a blue silhouette in the flood of light.

He was different than his companions, though. He looked through the blaze to the Clairvoyant beyond. Deferentially he spoke, "Please – show me the path."

The seer hesitated, but his low voice eventually replied. "The tide of destiny needs you to proceed. There will come a time when you may..."

Pale blue light erupted from Hua Li, cutting the Clairvoyant off. Poseidon felt something within him give way, and like a dam the roaring tide of awareness swallowed him up. The Clairvoyant said something, too soft to hear. His face was full of sympathy.

The four Divine Monarchs stood suspended in the infinite expanse of space. Their pendants blazed with shimmering light – four lustrous stars in the sky. Lan Qing and Aeries; Chu Cheng and Emberblossom; Lan Jue and Lumina; Hua Li and Cerulea. The colorful lights surrounded them, infiltrated them, making them extraordinary.

"You're quite the artiste," Luo Xianni loudly commented.

The Clairvoyant chuckled. "This is the last of what I can offer. What use are tools and baubles beyond this, these days?"

Then, he looked to the Pharmacist. “It will be a little while before they snap out of it. I am delighted to see that you have shaken yourself from that haze, Pharmacist.”

Her eyes lit up, and she smiled. “That is because Jun’s father has returned.”

The Clairvoyant nodded, knowingly. “Indeed. The two of you are very happy. Be wary of Occisus, for there is nothing sharper. As you strive to neutralize the danger, come to lean on the Jewelry Master’s Taiji to redirect it. Remain close to him, and you shall reap the benefits.”

Chapter 527: The Clairvoyant's 'Flaw'

The Pharmacist nodded. "I've sensed it already. There's a comfort when I'm near him, now I know why."

The Clairvoyant then turned a warm eye upon Jun'er. "The little one has already been gifted my inheritance. She will be the future Eye of Tomorrow. Soon she will surpass even me. However, precisely because she is my successor, I cannot see what the future holds for her. Even now, with my sight at its clearest, there is nothing I can tell you. Protect her, and she will grow naturally. It's a shame I'll never see the things she accomplishes!"

The Pharmacist took up Jun'er's tiny hand. She stood tall and proud. "She's my daughter."

The Clairvoyant smiled softly. "It's time to bring her back home. Then, I must trouble you to return here."

"Alright." She didn't question or argue. She knew by now the man must have his reasons. The two of them left for the Temple of Supreme Harmony, leaving only the Clairvoyant and Photographer conscious in the swirling sea of stars.

"Xianni, do you still blame me?" The Clairvoyant's voice was soft and low.

The emotion behind Luo Xianni's eyes shifted somewhat. Her warm smile faded, replaced by a rigid expression. "It's been decades. What could I still have to blame you for?"

The old Paragon sighed. "If not for me, the two of you would have been together long ago. It was I who told him so much that was better left unsaid. I instigated that change of heart."

Her eyes hardened the more he spoke. Her responses bore a distinct chill. "I said it's done!"

This brought an apologetic smile to the Clairvoyant's face. "There are many I owe an apology to in this universe. More than I can count. But of

them all, you are the one who's owed it most. My involvement made him leave."

A secret pain surfaced behind Luo Xianni's eyes. "Involvement? You are an instrument of chaos, Clairvoyant, but don't delude yourself into thinking our relationship problems were all your doing. He's always loved his freedom, that wasn't something you made. Even if we'd never met you, it wasn't likely we would be together long. You helped him see his own heart more clearly and fermented his fear of mediocrity. He was being true to himself when he left. I did hate you... I hated how your damn fingers were in everything. Later when I thought about it though, I questioned whether he really would have stayed otherwise. That's when I came around, and knew there was no looking back."

The Clairvoyant dropped his head. "There are flaws in every human. I once thought I was somehow separate. Maybe since I was such a perfectionist, I figured I must be perfect by extension. But nothing's perfect, and even someone with a view as long as mine can't escape fate."

Luo Xianni took a deep breath, then turned a glare to the Paragon. "I've told you there's no need for explanations. Why do you insist on bringing it up! Do you need me to hate you, just before you die? I have always looked at you like an older brother, and when I knew that you had to bear the consequences of what I did... I didn't just leave because I was angry. I didn't know how I could face you. So I left. I came back so that I could at least give you a happy send-off. I don't want to rehash old times, and you are determined to open old wounds."

The Clairvoyant was silent.

She took another breath. "Fine, if you want to talk about it then let me get a few things straight. Why did you do it? Why get involved in the relationship between me and Chi Bupang? How in the world did I offend you so deeply? You were the kindest, truest, most self-less person I'd ever known and then you stain my life for years. How?"

His face jerked as she spoke, like he was being stabbed. He winced against her cutting words. When he answered he was full of regret. "Yes, I

was wrong to intrude. I knew what I was doing but I couldn't control myself. I never saw you as my little sister."

Luo Xianni froze, unsure of how to respond.

The Clairvoyant went on, the words hard and bitter in his mouth. "Clairvoyant, founder, Eye of Tomorrow... I had everyone's respect. Respect, but I never had anyone's affection. I hoped that would be different with you. I thought about you every day since the day we met. Yet, as founder there was so much to do. You were with me every day, I had hoped you understood me. All through the creation of Skyfire Avenue you and I strove side by side. I saw everything falling into place, like a stream carving out a channel to flow through for the rest of its days. It was all I'd hoped. Ultimately you and I would walk the path together. Not as my sister. As my wife.

"But then he came. At first I was overjoyed! I thought, with his support surely the Avenue would become the greatest gathering of Adepts in humanity. Soon, though, it was clear you... you liked him. I may have been kind, and I may have been self-less, but when faced with losing my one chance at love, I lost control. Jealousy took root. I couldn't wait to see him torn to pieces. He couldn't leave fast enough. I'd chase you right back into my arms. Because I love you."

A pair of tears rolled down the Clairvoyant's cheeks. Luo Xianni was stunned to silence. A million times she'd wracked her brain, trying to puzzle out why he acted the way he did. She could find no answer. Hate came then, for infecting her relationship with Bupang. That hate was a real part of her reason for staying away.

Then all of this, all these years, was the result of jealousy? He was her brother, she never looked at him any other way. She never knew, and this is where they ended up. It was like a dagger cutting at her heart, but all that resentment was bleeding away.

It took the Clairvoyant some time before he could get his emotions under control enough to go on. "I am no competition for Jue Di. Otherwise I may have actually fought him for you. Unfortunately I was never on his

level. There was nothing I could do, only the stupid and desperate decision to try and break you two up. I've regretted it my whole life, but it hurt too much for me to confront you. I can't tell you how happy I am to see you now, at the very least because you've given me the chance to say sorry. If I could have a final wish, it would be to have told you this from the beginning. In the end, though, I got to tell the woman I loved, that I have loved her for my whole life."

Luo Xianni bit her bottom lip, saying nothing.

Chapter 528: Cripple

The Clairvoyant sighed. "I've searched my heart and all of this – all the work I put into the Avenue and to humanity as a whole – all of it was to distract me from the guilt I felt. I am sorry, Xianni. I was wrong."

"Alright!" Luo Xianni suddenly snapped. "It's over! Enough. I will always see you as an older brother."

The Clairvoyant was hopeful as he looked her way. You... you're willing to forgive me?"

She shook her head. "I don't forgive you. But I don't hate you."

The Clairvoyant pressed her. "It made Huan Xue leave, too. Only she knew where my heart was. Then she left. This whole thing has been a sour combination of errors. I liked you, she liked me, the Wine Master liked her. Love is the strangest to human emotions. It's as wonderful as it is agonizing."

"I knew Huan Xue liked you for ages," Luo Xianni replied. "She told me in confidence once about how she felt. I told her you were by brother and there wouldn't be any competition. She was so happy... you shouldn't have failed her."

With a bitter voice, the Clairvoyant nodded. "Affection does as it wishes, I'm sure you understand. You will always see me as a brother, for instance. To me Huan Xue is like a sister."

Both mighty Paragons were silent as they ruminated on things. Everything that had happened lingered like a painful memory.

The Clairvoyant sighed again to break the silence. "Thankfully you decided to come back. When I am gone, I wish to impart the Avenue to you. With you around, I can go in peace."

Her face also turned bitter and hard. "Maybe I fell in love with the wrong man."

The first one to awaken from their haze was Lan Jue. He ached all over, but despite the discomfort his spirit felt anxious. It was bursting with energy, ready for anything.

He turned his perception inward to discover his Core acting strangely. It would swell and contract like it was breathing, and the power it exuded had become a dazzling gold.

Lan Jue stopped for a moment, surprised. This was protogenic lightning! Before, he could only manage it when conditions were right. However, in this quiet time, this lightning around his Core seemed no different. His Thunderbolt Discipline was at the next level, but he didn't expect it to get there until after he'd become a Paragon.

What was going on? Was it because of the pendant? He opened his eyes, and saw the Clairvoyant watching him with a heavy expression. While Lan Jue had only been out for a short time it looked like the Clairvoyant had aged a decade.

"Come with me." The clairvoyant waved a hand at him. Beams of pure white starlight appeared out of nowhere and surrounded them both. In the next instant, Lan Jue felt like they were lost somewhere out in the expanse of space. The stars and galaxies were suspended in the darkness around them, not unlike the room they'd just been in. Their twinkling light illuminated the two men from all sides.

"Clairvoyant, where are we?" Lan Jue looked around as he asked.

The Clairvoyant quietly replied. "This is my Domain."

The Jewelry Master felt odd. There was another flash, then they were joined by a third presence.

"Qianlin!" When he saw her, Lan Jue was overjoyed. It was short lived, though, for in the next moment he looked into her eyes and saw nothing. There was no light, no consciousness – no signs that a person existed in there. Like she had no soul."

"She... what's the matter with her?" Lan Jue asked. He was obviously distressed.

The Clairvoyant took a deep breath. “Your saviors were a moment too late. The Photographer recognized the problem right away, but not before the poison had started to affect Qianlin’s brain. We’ve done everything we can but she won’t wake up from this persistent vegetative state. She reacts to stimuli, but there’s no consciousness.”

A vegetable! 1

It was all so sudden. From one moment to the next Qianlin was no more than an empty home. Lan Jue looked at her in a daze. He’d have been dead if Qianlin hadn’t come along, but she was paying the price.

The Clairvoyant’s face was bleak. “Perhaps this was is a cruel turn of Destiny. When the universe gives us great gifts, it often makes high demands as well.”

Corded muscles rippled along Lan Jue’s jaw as he clenched his teeth. “No. No one’s taking her away from me. This woman is going to be my wife.”

The Eye of Tomorrow looked upon his in surprise. “What if she never awakens? Will you live like this forever?”

Gradually, calm came upon Lan Jue. His face and eyes relaxed and softened. “Then I’ll care for her, every day, until we grow old and die.”

The old Paragon nodded. “This young girl’s love was not misplaced. There was something that she wanted to tell you, but since she cannot the task falls to me.”

Lan Jue suddenly turned his whole focus on to the Clairvoyant. By the way he’d spoken about Qianlin, he had reason to believe the old schemer knew her personally. All the signs were there, in his explanations and apologies. If Lan Jue couldn’t figure at least that out by this point, he would be a very poor Zeus.

The Clairvoyant’s voice was low and solemn. “You’ve probably surmised that Qianlin and I have met. This is correct. I also met Jin Yu. To be more precise, my relationship with them can be compared to the one you and Lan Qing have with Jue Di. I raised those girls.”

Lan Jue went rigid. He had some idea, but when the Jewelry Master heard the words it felt like his heart seized. The Clairvoyant had said his influence over them was extensive, and now he knew how much.

“Hera... you told her to stay with me?” His voice cracked. An indescribable fear hung over him like a hurricane.

The Clairvoyant nodded again. “The best way to influence a man, is to have the ear of the woman beside him. Yes, I asked Hera to remain with you. She would be my hand, guiding you without your knowledge, a positive influence. She helped me to make you kind, compassionate, just and strong.”

Lan Jue’s hands curled in to fists. “And our relationship? Was that all fake, at your command?” He’d loved Hera for years. After her death, he was devastated. If everything they’d experienced had been manufactured – if he was just a mission – he wasn’t sure he could handle it.

The Clairvoyant heaved a sigh. “I admit that I had a measure of control in everything. I believe you underestimate how much control over Destiny I possess. But that’s precisely why you shouldn’t fear. Hera’s love for you was real. My manipulations took her affections into consideration.”

Lan Jue stood there, still and silent. He didn’t really understand.

The Clairvoyant went on. “When I had Hera approach you, my only order was that she try to influence your behavior by osmosis. Stay by your side, and protect you. Beyond that, she had no other instructions.”

Lan Jue just looked at him, still trying to process what he was hearing.

“Hera’s love was real,” the Clairvoyant assured, “everything you experienced together was her choice. I would never send her to seduce you, as a matter of principle. I was trying to guide you to be good. Underhanded methods are counter to that message. Once Hera realized she loved you, she came to me and asked if it was ok that you were together. I told her of course it was, and that whatever happened between you was her decision. All I required was that she kept guiding you on the righteous path.”

At last, the muscles all through Lan Jue's body began to relax.

Gently shaking his head, the Clairvoyant continued to explain. "You have so little faith in yourself. You are a disciple of Jue Di. If you cannot see truth from falsehood, how can you become the link my prophecy describes? Jin Yu loved you. Qianlin loves you. This is undisputed truth.

"Hera's death was a great tragedy, not just for you. I was... greatly saddened. I searched time, even going so far as to use my greatest techniques. The only thing I could discover about who was responsible was that they must be powerful, with amazing destructive capabilities under their command. This is the only way this 'accident' could have been pulled off so flawlessly. Beyond that, they must be someone who is very familiar with you. That's how they were so accurate and precise.

"The North's reason for remotely destroying the planet was because of a dangerous radioactive source. If left alone it would have influenced the planet's Core. The explosion would have impacted star systems all across Alliance space. The closest planets would be stripped of their magnetic fields. A pre-emptive strike would avert the danger before it could affect innocent lives.

"Before the attack the exploration team was evacuated. Hera went there to help save someone. Who, we never discovered. She never said in her final correspondence. Whoever it is, it's someone you and Hera knew well, otherwise she wouldn't have trusted them."

Chapter 529: Hera

“Someone who knows us?” Lan Jue’s breath was coming faster. There weren’t very many people he knew both he and Hera. That narrowed it down, and with some investigation he might be able to find a thread.

The Clairvoyant went on. “I believe now is when she would show you this.” He lifted his hand, laden with a small box.

The sight of it made Lan Jue quake. It was the same box she was holding the night she saw him with Xiuxiu. The pang of sorrow in his chest sharpened.

The Clairvoyant opened the box to reveal that it was in fact a computer. The screen inside flickered to life and displayed a stream of data.

Lan Jue looked at the screen, then back to Qianlin. Her pretty eyes were open but saw nothing. His hands clenched in to quivering fists.

The truth was steadily revealed.

When the computer was booted, the Clairvoyant navigated to a specific folder and opened it up. Within were a number of video files. The Paragon chose the first one, and they were greeted by a pretty face. Beautiful figure, black hair, blue eyes. A long, white dress. She was standing on a sunlit beach with the ocean waves crashing behind her.

Hera!

She and Qianlin were very, very similar. But Lan Jue knew his his lost love. He could recognize her spirit in her eyes. Her eyes were warmer, whereas Qianlin’s were more alive.

“I met him today.” Hera’s slightly distorted voice issued from the computer. “He’s a little arrogant – looks ok I guess. Cocky, certainly. Master wants me to get close to him. We’ll see. Here’s hoping he isn’t too hateful.”

The first clip stopped.

Lan Jue got a far-away look as he stared at the screen. He recognized

that place, a resort planet called Zodenka. That was where he met Hera, yes! That was where they'd first met. And the same day – this was like a journal, or a mission report. The Clairvoyant opened the second video. This one also featured Hera, though the location was different.

“Ugh, I’m so tired. We were out playing around all day, and I’m sure he’s trying to get closer to me. Heh, I guess I’m pretty charming. He’s pretty haughty but he’s got class, I have to give him that. He knows a lot so at least it’s interesting being around him. Alright, that’s about all for today. I need a shower.”

Entry two finished. They opened the third.

“It was a good day today. I was apprehensive when Master gave me this mission, but it isn’t looking too difficult. This is a good guy. Yeah, a good guy. I fell today and sprained my ankle. He carried me all the way to the hospital on his back. Even when we got there he wouldn’t put me down. When they were done he picked me back up, and carried me back. I could feel that he was anxious, and he didn’t try anything.”

Entry four.

“Ah, why is my face so red? Today there was a development. He... well he took my hand. He said he liked me. What should I do? What should I do! Should I tell Master? I was told to guide him, but... oh what should I do! I’m so confused.”

Entry five.

“Hehehe, excellent! Master said I could make my own decision, he had no opinion. I mean, he didn’t look upset. So should I tell him I like him back? No – no, it can’t be that easy. He won’t appreciate it if it’s easy. I’ve got to string him along a little! Hehehe...”

Entry six.

“Zhou Jinyu, you are useless! I said I’d string him along, right? Then why, the moment I’m in front of him I lose all restraint. Ugh, his eyes. You get lost in them... Alright, alright. I said yes, and that’s that. Gah, why is my face so red. I mean, really...”

“I can’t keep watching!” Lan Jue grabbed the Clairvoyant’s hand, stopping him. He was choked with sobs, and tears streamed freely down his face. Each video was a knife in his chest. Hera... it was Hera! As she used to be, as the girl he loved. This was a record of all their time together. He didn’t seem to appear anywhere, but the memories were clear and bittersweet.

Lan Jue liked to think he was a strong and stable man, but these videos exposed the chink in his armor. Six short videos had reduced him to a sobbing mess.

The Clairvoyant looked at the younger man with an expression of sorrow and pity. With a sigh, he opened the last video in the folder. A scene of ruined metal buildings appeared. Hera stood among them, scanning her surroundings.

“Something isn’t right! I’m here, but why isn’t he coming out? This isn’t right! When he told me to come I thought it was strange, but I didn’t have any reason to suspect... Now I’m here and – ah! What’s that!”

The video panned to bring an enormous beam of light into frame. When it struck, the entire planet began to shake. It made landfall hundreds of miles away, but the destruction it caused came surging towards Hera at terrifying speed.

“No... no I don’t want to die! A-Jue, A-Jue!” She whimpered for a moment, but then grew calm. Courage started in her eyes then bolstered her whole person. As the world shook itself apart, she looked right into the camera.

“Master. If I die... if you find this recording, give them to Qianlin. Have her study them, and take up my mission. No... no that’s not good. I’m being too selfish, aren’t I. He’ll be so sad! Qianlin, baby sister. I’m begging you... I’m begging you.”

The world-swallowing light was moments away, poised to eat Hera up alongside everything else. Hera’s jaw was set in determination as everything around her fell into chaos. She ripped the communicator from her arm and threw it into a box. Then everything went dark.

Lan Jue watched, silent. His tears had stopped.

Hera... even when staring down death she was afraid I would be sad. When she said she didn't want to die it wasn't because she was scared. She was angry, and unwilling. She was reluctant to leave me. Hera! My Hera! It was me... I couldn't protect you. It was my fault! How could I let her leave on her own? Why?

Lan Jue was cursed with a clear memory of the day. Hera said she had a surprise for him then left. Later he got the news that the planet had been destroyed. It was all so sudden. There was no trace.

The Clairvoyant's low, soft voice returned. "The data on Jinyu's communicator had been hacked, which means whoever was responsible had enough clout to authorize tampering with a communicator's operating system. We could tell from her tone and what she said that whoever it was that lured here there must know you two. However, after a great deal of searching I could uncover nothing. Those at your side are loyal, as far as I've been able to divine. For years I have searched, but have come up empty-handed."

Lan Jue's fists were clenched so tightly his knuckles were white. After all this time the pain and anger were no less than the day she died. When he heard the news he hardly wished to live. It had destroyed him.

They had plans. They were going to pick out her wedding dress and make invitations. They were supposed to argue over who would it where. Instead she died, and no trace that she ever existed remained.

From that day he was lost, confused, hardly a man at all. He spent years nursing his emotional wounds. In all that time he never gave up his thirst for vengeance, but without any information to go on he was castrated. Everything was atomized when the planet exploded.

The fact that the Clairvoyant had even this small piece meant he'd exhausted all resources to find whatever he could. Finding a single box in the mangled remains of a planet could not have been easy.

"Does this... am I a bad person? I can't think of any reason why someone would hurt her. If this person has so much power and hates me so much,

why don't they go after me directly? What was the point of killing someone whose only goal was to be a good person?" Lan Jue's eyes were screwed shut against the painful questions. He maintained his composure, though. It was an old wound, even if all of this was tearing it back open.

The Clairvoyant gave a hard and bitter smile. "I share all your same questions. It's the lack of answers that has had my hands tied. There is one more thing I want to show you."

The Clairvoyant closed the video folder and opened another one. This one was also filled with video clips, fewer than the first but still many. The Clairvoyant opened the first one.

The heart-wrenching sounds of sobs met their ears. A tear-streaked face appeared on screen.

"Sister... sister, sister!" She was screaming herself hoarse. Her black hair was wild. Her blue eyes were red and swollen. Great big tears rolled down Qianlin's face.

Chapter 530: Qianlin's Recordings

Lan Jue's chest tightened. It was harder to breathe. This must be when she first found out her sister had died.

"Sister... I'll find your murderer. I will..." That was all he could make out. They went to the second recording.

"Sister. This is the one year anniversary of your murder. I found that man, part of Skyfire Avenue but... I don't have the courage to approach him. I hate him. He's the reason you're dead. I hate him! I can't do what you ask."

Entry three.

"Sis. I watched him from far away today. I used a pair of binoculars. It was hard to watch. He was like a corpse, shambling around in a daze. Like he had a broken heart. Master hasn't approached me about replacing you in the mission."

Entry four.

"You have to help me, sis. I can't find a single clue anywhere. We've looked in to everyone he knows and they're all clean. Why weren't you clearer? Who was it that called you to that place? Tell me something... ah, sister. I miss you."

Entry five.

"I've made up my mind, I'll give him a shot. I've gone over the plan with Pearl. My identity as the Chairman's daughter has already been established. Now I've got to get close to him, but I won't take your place. I am me. But we'll see if he likes me because I look like you. If he does it means your love was fake. If that's true I'll... I'll... "

Entry six.

"Why. Why does it have to be like this? I took that medicine because I was afraid I'd give it away. Why didn't he just take me to a hospital? Sis he... he kept calling your name. We... ah... what should I do?!"

Entry ten.

“This bastard. The bastard! I swear I hate him so much...”

Entry fifteen.

“He’s been better to me. I’m happy, but sis, I feel like I should apologize. Now I get it, why you were drawn in. He really loves you, I....”

Entry thirty one.

“He’s started to make some moves toward me. It looks like he’s finally pulling himself out of his haze. I’m so happy for him, and yet not. Sister, what should I do? I’ve refused his advances and I know it hurt him. But how can I? I got close to him with a goal, and everything he knows about me is a lie. I’ve been deceiving him for months, how could I let that continue? I’ve never been the Chairman’s daughter. I used his history with you to manipulate him, even the wedding was staged for his benefit. I engineered the whole thing. I can’t accept his affections like this! I... I have to tell him the truth. I can’t stand it, I have to tell him. But I’m scared. When he finds out everything, will he still like me? Sis, now I know why you called out to him before you died. Loving someone like this is painful. Tell me what I should do. Do I tell him?”

Entry thirty three.

“I’ve decided that, no matter what, I can’t hide anything from him anymore. I’ll tell him everything. He may not forgive me, but he needs to see the real me at least once. Only then can I let myself love him.”

That was the last entry. Lan Jue looked between the computer and the unconscious body of Qianlin. He swayed back and forth like he was going to fall over.

The Clairvoyant had spoken true. Both Qianlin and Hera had loved him without any ulterior motive. It was amazing to discover all that had been going on under his nose. He was sad and embarrassed by how much more Qianlin had suffered.

I don’t mind, Qianlin. Lan Jue fixed his sad eyes upon her. I don’t mind. You were never Hera’s replacement. I love Hera, but I also love you –

Qianlin.

He felt it all over again, the feeling of his heart breaking. The Clairvoyant shut off the computer, closed the box, than handed it to Lan Jue like a cherished artifact. He took it with trembling hands and pressed the box against his aching chest. His arms squeezed tight, like the box contained all of his past and present love.

The Clairvoyant took Qianlin's hand, and led her to Lan Jue. She moved like a doll, with a vacant expression. "I impart her to you once again. You must understand that right now, Qianlin is a blank slate – her truest self. If you need to hate someone than hate me. It was my involvement that has led to these two tragedies. I must beg you, in my capacity as the closest thing she had to a father... cherish her, protect her."

He looked older the longer they spoke, and tears rolled down the wrinkles appearing on his face. It was strange to see the powerful Eye of Tomorrow reduced to the role of concerned father.

He took her delicate hand. It was cold, and while its contours were all familiar, something about it was off. He gently guided her into his arms where he stroked her long, dark hair.

"I won't let you leave my side again." He lowered his head and placed a gentle kiss against her lips. Her body shook then, and like she had a thousand times before, she became a pearl of light and vanished.

The Clairvoyant placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let's head back."

"Yeah." Lan Jue nodded.

There were two flashes of light, and suddenly both of them were back in the museum's star room. Both Lan Qing and Hua Li were back to their senses, leaving Chu Cheng as the last one still engrossed in the pendant's powers.

When Lan Qing saw his downcast brother, his eyebrows scrunched together. He looked at him questioningly.

Lan Jue only quietly shook his head. Then, he returned to the spot he had been in before.

The Pharmacist returned only a moment later. The first thing she noticed was the change in Lan Jue's mood. It was surprising, but she didn't address it. Instead she took up position before the Clairvoyant like all of the others.

The Paragon looked at each of them. "I've told you everything I was supposed to. Prometheus, Poseidon... I would trouble you to wait outside."

"Yes." The two of them acquiesced and stepped out of the twinkling room. Chu Cheng, Lan Jue, the Pharmacist and Luo Xianni were the only ones apart from the Clairvoyant who remained behind.

The old seer looked at them with a calm façade. After a long time he spoke up. "In my life there have been failures and successes, it will be up to the annals of history to decide what I'm remembered for. I've said what I needed to say. When I am dead make no efforts to hide the news. It's time to forget everything that's come before and look to the future."

Lan Jue was still reeling from the videos, but his eyes fixed on the Clairvoyant when he spoke. This was likely the last words he'd ever impart.

The dying Paragon lifted his head to gaze upon the starry sky. His face was flushed. "I used to think I was destined to be the savior of humanity. I thought I could control everything, bend the ebb and flow of destiny to my whim. I eventually discovered that Destiny is a path that has been chosen long before I sought to make my mark. I never succeeded, but I suppose I never failed. Now I am off to meet a new reality. I don't know what will happen, but who's to say we won't meet again one day, in some other form. Know that the amulet you were given will protect you in a time of need. But that doesn't mean you are safe. You must still seek the answer to your question. All I can tell you is that it will be made clear one day."

He knew the Clairvoyant was referring to Hera and her killer. He resolutely nodded his head.

A smile spread across the rapidly aging Paragon's face. "Alright, it's time for me to go. I have loved, I have hated, and I have tasted jealousy. In the end it was my past regrets people will remember, but they will leave me. "

The stars that surrounded them began to twinkle. Their soft and soothing light grew and fell upon the aging body of the Clairvoyant. He rose off of his feet and hung suspended in air. His face was ruddy and bright with life, like the abundance of youth was filling him.¹

“Thank you all for sending me off. I’ll see you all again, in the next life.” As he rose through the air, the Paragon nodded his appreciation. With each passing moment the blaze of starlight reflecting off of him brightened. Suddenly, there came a surge of cosmic light and power that swept through the whole museum.

Luo Xianni staggered to the side and cut Chu Cheng off from the shock wave. However, as the power came barreling their way it mysteriously split around them. It was like a river parting around a boulder.

“Be at peace, Xianni. I saw the flows of time, how could I be so thoughtless in my last moment? If there is another world, Xianni, then I will wait for you there. I won’t give anyone else the opportunity to get close to you.” The ball of resplendent light dimmed and vanished. The Clairvoyant was nowhere to be found, as though he himself had become one of the twinkling astral bodies surrounding them.

“Clairvoyant!” Luo Xianni shouted his name to the uncaring heavens. All of her pent up emotions were flushed out. Hate was gone, and now in her mind’s eye she saw him as the young man who had helped her so much.

Brother! That was what she lost today. Lan Jue stood in the same spot, too stunned to move. Waves of powerful emotions assailed his heart. He felt detached, like he was floating through the scene.

The Pharmacist, her own face laden with grief, moved to his side and took his arm. But, when she looked at him again, the sadness in his eyes was gone – replaced with a determination that was hard to describe. Each second saw that determination strengthen behind fiercely bright eyes.

“I will get strong! I’m fine, sister.” He turned to the Pharmacist briefly and gave her a hug. Then, with long, resolute strides, marched from the room.

Chapter 531: The New Paragon List

Yes, he would get strong. A man who always ran from his problems was a coward. The things that happened couldn't be undone, and even the Clairvoyant was powerless to change that. Hera was dead, all that was left for her was revenge. Qianlin still lived. Lan Jue had to protect her, and find a way to wake her up.

Once an Adet reached Paragon, it opened up a whole new universe of possibilities. He thought that, if they one day could break through to Paragon together, than Qianlin might wake up. Starting now, that was his ultimate goal.

They were as close as flesh and blood. She was an inalienable part of him, one that he would keep with him until the day she awoke and would be his wife.

When he left the museum he was surprised to find the sky dark. It was clearly still day, but they were surrounded by the night. Stark against the black was a searing comet, leaving a trail of starfire in its wake. The Wine Master, Keeper, Bookworm, and Gourmet all watched it pass in silence.

At some point without him noticing, Skyfire Avenue had become choked with people. No one spoke, or moved, or cried. Every eye fixed its solemn gaze on the shooting star as it blazed a path through the darkness of the heavens.

That was the third strongest Paragon known to humanity. The Eye of Tomorrow; the Clairvoyant; the preeminent sage of humanity; the founder of Skyfire Avenue. Gone.

A day later both the Avenue and Underground were wreathed in white 1 . Stores were shuttered and Skyfire's members spent the day in retrospection. For a time Skyfire Avenue was quiet as the grave.

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The Dark Citadel.

"He's gone." Satan muttered the words to himself. There was something

in his tone, something difficult to place. “I should be happy, but why do I feel so dismal? It’s like losing a part of myself. Ah, you slippery bastard. Why did you have to go now? You’re abandoning your post.”

For days Satan was in terrible spirits, lashing out at his people with particular ferocity. No one understood his sudden irritation, but likewise no one dared approach him about it.

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The Pontiff’s Citadel.

The Pontiff stood under the starry sky. He lifted his scepter. “We all die, and there is a world waiting for us when we do. Which one will you find yourself in, Clairvoyant? Heaven, or hell? Safe travels.”²

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The Great Conclave.

The Terminator and the Epochrion sat facing one another.

The Northern leader stared blankly at his feet until his brows furrowed. “He’s gone.”

“I know,” came the Epochrion’s soft reply.

Bitterness underpinned the Terminator’s smile. “Shouldn’t you be more upset? There’s no reaction from you at all. I’d prefer you cry or show some kind of emotion.”

The Epochrion rose smoothly to her feet, shaking her head. “Forgive me, Davis. I’m going back.”

This took the Terminator by surprise. “He asked you to go back and send him off and you didn’t. Why now?”

A mournful smile turned her dainty lips. “I didn’t go back because I didn’t want to see him like that, mostly dead. I didn’t want to bring back all that heartache. If I want to give up my past, then I mustn’t give it any opportunity to catch up with me. Now he’s gone I will go back to the Avenue, because I have always been Skyfire’s Clockmaker.”

The Terminator's eyes were wide and indignant. "You!"

The Epochrion's voice was dispassionate. "We made an agreement when I first came. We agreed that you would not try to stop me if one day I decided to leave."

"This is really what you want? Honestly, I never thought the day would come," the Terminator pleaded.

"I've missed so much," she replied, though it sounded like she was talking more to herself. "There are some things I'm not longer willing to miss out on. In the end, that is my place."

Agitation was clearly written on the convert's face. "That may not be how they see it. They might not even want you back!"

The Epochrion smiled back. "So what if they don't? I'm going back because I want to. So I'm going back."

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Planet Ziluo.

Chi Bupang rose to his feet, with a glass of whisky in one hand and a cigar in the other.

"The old shyster is on his way. Respect."

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Three days later a new paragon list was officially drawn up.

Celestial Master Qian was gone longer than most can remember, so his name was removed. The Eye of Tomorrow had met his end. The new official rankings had changed;

Jue Di The Terminator (Force) The Epochrion (Time) The Pontiff (Faith) Satan (Dark Faith) The Arcane Magnate (Science) The Cosmagus (Dimension) The Astral Phantom (Speed, Poison) The Karmic Scholar (Science) The Infernal Vanguard (Death-Faith) Ten names, the same as before, but different. Four of them – numbers six, seven, nine, and ten – were members of the Avenue. Their total presence on the list had grown by one, but their total strength was much reduced.

A week later the Clockmaker returned to the Avenue and opened her shop. Half of the list was now Skyfire members.

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The Wine Master had been standing at the Western entrance to the Gothic Winery for ages. The glass in his hand changed as time passed; a round, white wine glass, then red wine, then cognac. He never left farther than his shop's threshold, but his drinking became more vigorous.

Across the street sat Zeus' Jewelry Shop, but his eyes were focused further down the lane to a smaller building.

She's back... just like that.

No explanation – not a word. The Clairvoyant was gone, and suddenly she was back. She left because of him, now he was gone and she was back.

The Wine Master spied her the day she returned. She opened the store, and by herself set about cleaning the place up. She used only the simplest and most straightforward method to tidy up, her own hands.

The Epochrion was back, and that had put a spark of something in the Wine Master's eye.

He wanted to just walk right over like he used to a decade ago. He used to just wander by and invite her over for a drink and a chat. They never spoke about cultivation – just wine and clocks. It had been a wonderful way to pass the day.

He thought about it often. When he did, he'd follow the train of thought and simply stare, lost.

He thought he had his emotions under control, but when she came back he found that it was all just a paper cap on a volcano. Her sudden arrival was all it needed to blow.

The Clairvoyant left, she returned. It was an emotional time for him. If only the Clairvoyant was still here. Or if only he had more courage. He had neither of those things.

“What are you looking at?” A calm voice interrupted his thoughts.

The Wine Master didn't need to turn his head. He knew who it was. "I thought you had work to do."

Lan Jue walked over to his side and followed his friend's eyes down the street. "I'm getting ready to head for West Hill, what are you talking about. If you're thinking of going over there, just go do it. All this hemming and hawing is not the Wine Master I used to know."

The Wine Master chose to play dumb. "What the hell are you jabbering about?"

"Are you having fun?" Lan Jue shot him a look. The Wine Master didn't reply.

Lan Jue lifted a hand and patted the Wine Master's broad shoulder. "I've got stuff to do, you figure something out. I'll be too busy to look after you. Remember that opportunities only come around once and life is short." A bitter look flashed across his eyes as he delivered the last sentence.

After the Clairvoyant's departure, Lan Jue closed up shop for three days. All through that time he watched and rewatched the recordings. After three days he emerged, looking like a new man. He was calm and composed, at least on the outside.

At home he took meticulous care of Zhou Qianlin. He changed her clothes, massaged her muscles to keep them nourished, bathed her, and fed her. When he had to leave he would take her with him, merged inside. The routine helped keep his heart on an even keel.

Starting today, life will be different. It's time to get busy!

None of the A.R.C. students refused the invitation, and by now they were all members of Skyfire Avenue's new Star Division. It'd taken three days just to get the numbers in order for this new endeavor.

Altogether the new battalion boasted eight hundred and twenty three soldiers, more than expected. It even included a Paragon, the Gourmet! The Pharmacist could almost be counted in that, too. There were several other familiar faces interspersed. The Star Division was ready to begin turning the crack fighters of the Avenue into real warriors.

West Hill had been emptied out for their purposes, while a thousand upgraded sim pods had been delivered. Meanwhile, their custom mech suits were already under construction.

Next on Lan Jue's list was to assess the changes to these pods and DreamNet. An internal review. He had to first understand their strength before he knew what needed fixing. They were all Adepts as well, the most difficult fact to address. Everyone's Discipline was special in some way, and he had to find all of that out. On top of that, their experience with mechas ranged from brand new to veteran soldier. He also had to pick out who knew what.

Only with all the data would he be able to run this outfit. It was a tedious but necessary job.

Luckily, he wasn't alone. The Accountant had been conscripted to be their intelligence officer. Data and analytics would be his realm of expertise.

They began the process quickly. There was no check or registration for their Discipline, they just clambered in and got to testing one another in virtual mech suits. With the Eastern authority's approval, everyone was given a virtual mecha model to begin. They were only available for use in designated DreamNet areas, which did not include out in 'public.' They were strictly meant for training purposes.

The support is what ultimately gave Lan Jue faith in what they were doing. Now all the data was ready and everything was underway. It was time to start the training and selection process.

Chapter 532: The Clockmaker's Return

Lan Jue wanted to take command personally. Not everyone was compelled to participate. People Lan Jue knew well, and those whom he had enough mecha data on where not required to join. These included Lan Jue himself, the Bartender, the Driver, and the Seamstress. They were involved as judges and team leaders rather than competitors. There were eight hundred of them, testing one by one was ludicrous. The A.R.C. students weren't exempt, though their participation was to determine how strong they'd gotten.

The Wine Master watched Lan Jue go and couldn't help but sigh. He knew what the young man had to bear, how heavy the load was on his shoulders. How could he, a Paragon, not? Anyone could sense what kind of burden it was.

Yet, Lan Jue seemed to be carrying it well. In fact he looked positive, ready to attack the task ahead.

His eyes unconsciously swept back to the Clockmaker's shop. He took a deep breath and straightened his clothes, and before he knew it, his long legs were moving him across the street. He made up his mind, so there was no more hesitation. When things needed to be faced, it was important to face them head on. He had been a coward for so long, would he be a coward for the rest of his life? So long as he was alive he would avoid regrets, not accrue them. That was what Lan Jue was trying to tell him, he was sure.

The Clock Store's display had been cleaned, he noted as he walked by. When he stopped at the open door he heard a chorus of mismatched ticks and tocks. Inside, needles jerked and pendulums swung.

From the door he could see the Clockmaker inside with a grandfather clock. She muttered to herself from time to time, probably trying to find the perfect spot.

He walked in, picking through the store toward the Clockmaker. He pointed to a spot nearby. "I like it there."

She shot him a glance, then without a word moved around to the other side of the hefty clock. She straightened, managing to get it halfway off the floor before stopping. Her eyes fixed on the Wine Master. "Help."

For a moment, the Wine Master was startled and didn't move. But he quickly recovered and quickly took up the other side. Neither used their Discipline, struggling mightily by muscle strength alone. Together they shuffled it to where the Wine Master had suggested.

The Clockmaker straightened, then walked back toward the store's interior. The Wine Master remained behind scratching his head, unsure whether he should follow.

"Come." Her voice saved him from the awkward indecision.

"Oh." He hurried over.

She stood behind the counter, looking at him. He looked back. Both seemed unsure of what to say.

"I want some wine." Her wet, sad eyes betraying her hard façade.

"Yeah," the Wine Master nodded. "What would you like?"

She sighed an even response. "It doesn't matter. I just want to send him off."

The Wine Master didn't have to ask who she meant. The pain of the loss of his friend was still fresh, and it showed on his own face. "Alright."

She looked him dead in the eye. "I mean, from my heart."

The Wine Master looked at her, confused for a moment as though he'd heard wrong. Then it dawned on him...

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The sparring started in earnest. Lan Jue, along with the others, busily watched them for clues to their abilities. There were only ten proctors, so only ten fights could be watched at a time.

DreamNet was convenient for this. It saved them a great deal of space, money and labor. There was zero possibility one of them would be injured

or killed, but in all intents and purposes it was a carbon copy of real life. This was especially true for Adepts, which was why the upgrades to DreamNet were seen as the beginning of a new Era.

Lan Jue stood behind the main control board, transfixed by the screens. From what he could see things weren't great, but they weren't dire either. Most of them had at least some experience piloting mechas. As Adepts they were also naturally superior over normal cadets, and that meant training would go smoother. The highest praise he could give them was that they all knew how to use their Disciplines to enhance their mecha combat effectiveness. That was the single most important factor of an Adept pilot.

There were faults as well. In regards to maneuverability, they were all over the map from fresh faced to near-masters. While they could use their Discipline with the suits, they still relied too heavily on the machine to do the work for them. Their advantages were going to waste.

Lan Jue had anticipated all of this. They weren't in a rush and he didn't expect perfection. First they had to separate them into type, then round them up into groups. That was the bedrock on which their full potential would be realized.

The busiest person, though, had to be the Accountant. On top of running the procedures he was also carefully studying each fight and sorting data. He had three separate computers arrayed before him, and his fingers danced fluidly over the keyboard. He was starting to look like he could give the Coffee Master, the 'fastest hands alive', a run for his money.

They carried on, one fight after another. It wasn't any sort of round-robin tournament, but rather in teams. A small team had ten pilots, so that meant every cadet fought nine times. There wasn't anything after that because it wasn't about rank. This was a chance to test every fighter against different opponents so they could see what they were made of.

Lan Jue was surprised at his A.R.C. students' improvement. Their piloting and integration were much better than they used to be. In fact, their virtual suits were brand new, but it only took them a couple of days

to become wholly familiar with them. Many Adepts stronger than them fell to superior training during the sparring. It was a rare, happy surprise.

The Accountant was flagging. He was leaning back in his seat with lidded, misty eyes. His hands never stopped dancing across the keyboard, though.

“How much longer until the analyses are complete?” Lan Jue walked over to stand by the Accountant’s chair and put a hand on his shoulder.

“A day for preliminary results,” he replied. “Three for a full run-down.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Alright. There’s no rush, don’t overwork yourself.”

The data analyst nodded acknowledgement. “I can tell you just from what I’m seeing that some recruits won’t be suitable for battle. Several of them have Disciplines like mine. I plan to conscript them to help me here. They maybe won’t fight but we need intelligence and battlefield coordinators too. What we really need is a battleship...”

“As you say,” Lan Jue replied. Not everyone in a mecha unit was built to be a warrior. They would need logistics personnel for the back line. There would come a time when they were needed to fight, but they won’t need a battleship to do it.

The real-world mechas being built for them by the Avenue came with interspatial storage capabilities – that probably cost them an arm and a leg. The battleship Lan Jue brought back after meeting with his Master would be sufficient. To honor his teacher Lan Jue had the ship’s name changed to the Majesty, flagship of the Avenue military.

Of course, it wasn’t just a transport ship. Lan Jue had delivered it to the Keeper and Bookworm, and asked them to try and find anything that could benefit from an upgrade. The results should make it more formidable in a fight.

The communicator on his wrist buzzed and blinked. When Lan Jue looked down to see who was calling, his eyes lit up. He hastily connected the call.

“Little Su, you finally called me back.” The former Bloodfiend Empress

was on the other end. Now she went by a different moniker, the fifth of Zeus' Amazons, the Morningstar.

"Boss." She sounded tired.

"What's up?" Lan Jue asked. "How's the situation in the Starfields?"

"We've had a few scraps already and I got my people back, at least some of them. The rest have been scattered or killed. I've got a battleship and some resources, that's it." Xiaosu's voice didn't sound inspired. The Bloodfiend clan had been the product of her heart and devotion, and her allegiance was mirrored by her core people.

"Come back," Lan Jue urged.

Su Xiaosu was quiet for a time after hearing the words. She was strong, and in the face of an enemy she could be as cruel as her former title suggested. But those few simple words from Lan Jue made her eyes mist up.

"Boss, I..." She was the leader of a pirate clan. Her flock had served her loyally for years, even forsaking lucrative Citadel bribes for her. She couldn't just abandon them.

"Go to An Lun. I'll give you some contact information, get in touch with him. Leave your ship and have them drop you off here. I'll incorporate you and your men into my forces." Lan Jue's voice was calm and logical.

"Really?" He could hear the excitement in her voice. "Boss, you're willing to take them in?" She knew the full implications of what that meant. By taking them in, he was also agreeing to bear responsibility for everything these pirates had done, past and present. She could also guess at Lan Jue's status in the Avenue. They could request asylum, and her people would have a chance at a normal life.

Lan Jue didn't need to answer. "Here's who to call..." He gave a number to Xiaosu. All of this had been planned, he would fill her in when she got back. When it came to pirate leadership there was no one more capable than Su Xiaosu. She was also an expert in guerilla tactics, the same Lan Qing had suggested he use for the Star Division. As the analysis continued,

Lan Jue became more and more convinced his brother had it right.

Chapter 533: Creating a Division

The tedious but necessary process of separated the Adepts by strength continued. Afterwards cadets were arranged into small squads. Individually these squads weren't going to win the war, but with the right training they could be invaluable scouts and shock troops.

The pirate fighting tactics were perfect for the job. He needed Su Xiaosu's experience. In addition, she had imposed control and restraint on a group that traditionally had neither. The people she commanded were not wicked, but were fiercely loyal.

"Get some rest, don't stew on it too long." Lan Jue urged the Morningstar. When they hung up he took his own advice and returned to his dorm. With training officially underway, he couldn't return to the Avenue.

Once he got back Lan Jue ate some dinner and released Zhou Qianlin. Her condition was unchanged. Physically she was fine, but there was nothing behind her eyes. They were dull, staring voids.

He dressed her, then placed her in a seat nearby. "Alright sweetheart," he said softly, "you should eat."

He fed her spoonful by spoonful, then bathed her. Once the nightly ritual was complete, he kissed her to join their bodies and began to cultivate.

Every day when they joined, he focused inward and called to her. He flushed their shared vessels with nutritive energy. Qianlin's Queen of Heaven Discipline was also known for self-regenerative effects, Lan Jue knew. She would wake up one day naturally, but even if she didn't things would change when they became Paragons. Protogenia was a mystical force that could do incredible things, joined with her healing powers. That was why he used every spare moment cultivating.

Thankfully Qianlin's loss of consciousness didn't affect the speed or quality of their cultivation. When they joined it proceeded unhindered under Lan Jue's direction. He'd tried using bioelectricity to stimulate her

brain, but she looked hurt and didn't dare try again.

He didn't neglect the worst case scenario. What if she never got better? It didn't matter. Just having her with him would ease his heart. It'd suffered a lot of ups and downs lately, culminating in the assassination attempt that put Qianlin in this state. At least it had stirred his potential, and sped up his cultivation.

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Three days later.

Skyfire Avenue's Star Division was nearly established.

The cadets were arrayed on the field in their flight uniforms. It was white, with a swirling flame emblazoned on the right breast; the insignia of the Star Division. All eight hundred plus stood in rows, stretching across the grounds. Lan Jue and a few other Skyfire elites stood before them.

"Evaluations have been completed. Today we will be separating you into units. Once that's done training can begin." His voice was hard and low. However, curt though it was, there was a captivating quality to it. Every eye was fixed on him.

It wasn't his charisma. He'd imbued his voice with the protogenic power of his Ascension command. If he wanted respect, he'd have to flex his muscles.

The Gourmet and the Pharmacist stood at either side of him. One was a Paragon, and the other showed stupendous strength during the tournament. It was hard to say if Lan Jue still would have won if not for her forfeiture.

"You all came for different reasons. We are Adepts, we yearn for perfection, we yearn for strength – but we also have families. This Division has been created to protect Skyfire Avenue. It was made to protect the Eastern Alliance and yes, it was made to protect your families. I'm not going to stand here and lecture you on ideals. I'm just going to tell you straight; if you want to survive this war, and maybe improve yourself in

the process, then you'll need to prove it on the training field. This Division will do its best to bring you back to those families but to do that, you have to be more than Adepts. You have to be soldiers.

“You all came of our own volition. No one coerced you to sign up. If any of you want to go at any time, no one's going to stop you. You turn in what we provided for you and we part ways. But by completing this training you swear to rise to the occasion when the time comes. When the call to fight rings out you answer. I hope by then we've formed a bond here – brothers and sisters in arms – a pact where you know the person beside you has your back. We will stand strong, stand together, and fight.

“In addition, as a representative of Skyfire Avenue I will remind you that anyone who remains in active service for three years or longer will be placed on a priority list for the exuviation procedure. But if a long life is what you're looking for, you have to make it back in one piece. Remember that you and a unit are not the same. When there is discipline and unity, you will survive. Alright, now for teams.”

“The Star Division will consist of four brigades. I will be leading the First Brigade personally. The Driver will command the Second, the Coffee Master will lead the Third and the Fourth will follow the Bartender. Some of you may be wondering why the strongest leaders – the Gourmet and the Pharmacist – are not leading brigades. I would remind you that this is a mecha Division, and commanders must be masters of mecha combat. Do you remember what they called the miracle battles, against the Four Divine Monarchs and the Star Alliance? Allow me to introduce you. The Driver, known to you all as Thunderclap. The Coffee Master is really the Knave, Fastest Hands Alive. Finally, the Bartender – the Demon Dragon of Ice and Flame, and pilot of Bahamut.”

A buzz of excitement rippled through the cadets. Lan Jue and all the Adepts around him were at least ninth level, very strong. However, being a good Adept and being a good pilot weren't one and the same.

The titan of electricity, Thunderclap. The Knave and his extraordinary hands. The Demon Dragon of Ice and Fire. These were names that would give them shivers, great pillars of mecha piloting. Lan Jue was himself an

illustrious Monarch – Zeus, God of Lightning. With leaders like this, how could they not have unwavering faith in the new Division?

Lan Jue quickly set about organizing the troops. Using the data they'd gathered, he arranged them according to their strengths into four types. The first type were specialized in speed. The second were unique and miscellaneous Talents. The third type were close-quarters fighters and the last, ranged attackers.

This was the best way to call on their full potential. Too many Adepts with different specialties together would get in each other's way, and ultimately harm the Division. If a team shared a specialty then their effectiveness improved, and their training was easier.

It would behoove them to learn how to work together as companies, but at present he didn't even know how long they would have before the enemy arrived. Right now they needed to stick to simple and effective methods.

Lan Jue would be responsible for the First Brigade, which was composed entirely of long-ranged mecha fighters. The Driver's Second Brigade was close combat. The Coffee Master and his Third Brigade were special units, and the Fourth Brigade under command of the Bartender was all about speed.

The First and Second Brigades were the most populated. Together they numbered over five hundred strong. Third Brigade added another one hundred, and Fourth Brigade was double that.

Now it was time for squads.

It was the same for each Brigade; ten pilots to a squad with a squad commander and a sergeant as second in command. Leaders were chosen from data acquired during registration. The most difficult in this regard was Third Brigade. They had scores of different abilities that didn't quite fit anywhere else. After three days of wracking their brains, though, they managed to work out a plan that matched their needs.

Once that was finished each Brigade picked an Ace Squad to lead by example. First Brigade's Ace Squad was saddled with the Pharmacist, but

Second Brigade had it worse with the Gourmet. Third Brigades' was the Beautician. Fourth Brigades' Ace Squad was led by the Mechanic.

The Ace Squads were composed of the best pilots on the Brigade. Their strength would be applied to sensitive missions and special tasks. They were all equipped with God-ranked mecha suits.

At last the structural part was done. The cadets hurriedly reorganized themselves by Brigade and Squad, leaders at the fore. The Ace Squad members stood proud with a crown insignia pinned to their shoulders.

Lan Jue made it clear that the Ace Squads were expected to take the most difficult and dangerous missions. However, they would also reap the best rewards. Through meritorious action and hard work, members of other Brigades could challenge for a post on Ace Squad. If they succeeded, they were welcomed with open arms. There was no max capacity.

Then, in front of the collected gaze of the Division, Lan Jue handed out an A-ranked power gem to every Ace Squad member as a reward for making the cut. They were carefully selected to be useful for the pilot.

The gems weren't all provided by the Avenue. In fact, a large amount came out of Lan Jue's own inventory. The Amazons were less than pleased to see them given out like this. In return the leadership of the Avenue agreed to front the cost of Majesty's upgrades, and at the very least look for a replacement stealth gem. The Amazons were less upset after that.

Lan Jue didn't resent using his own resources, but more than just he relied on Zeus' Jewelry Shop. The Amazons all had financial and emotional stock in the store, and he respected their opinion. Most of their haul from Luo had been sold to the Eastern government, but with the stipulation that they were only used to create the Star Division mechas.

Chapter 534: DreamNet Training

Now that this was a true Division, they would need the equipment to match. Normal loadouts weren't going to cut it, heavy weapons would be needed for deep space combat.

Once all was said and done, Lan Jue gave the command for them to relax and take a moment to get familiar with their squad mates. Humans were high-functioning and emotional animals, so communication and relationships were important. Communication lead to understanding, mutual faith, and friendships.

Next on the agenda was rigorous training. Since their real mecha suits weren't ready yet, training would begin in DreamNet. The system he would use for the Star Division would be different than what he'd used in the A.R.C. class. Those were kids, with weak foundation. He had had to start from scratch. All of these cadets were adults of sixth level or higher, with strong foundations. The tactics used for the A.R.C. class weren't suitable here. Instead, they needed to refine the skills they already possessed, strengthen their mecha control, and keep working.

Hua Li's training procedure from Gobi was a good start. Lan Jue put them through it. Its greatest advantage was the program was designed to push every pilot to their limit. With the Bookworm's upgrades it was even better, since now they could use their Disciplines.

This first stage would take about a month for all cadets to complete. Everyone, with the exception of the Pharmacist and the Gourmet, was going to participate. This included Lan Jue.

By putting themselves in their cadets' shoes, it seemed to have the desired effect. At least everyone was actively participating. The Avenue's structure was loose, but these were adults. He could rely on them to make more mature decisions. They knew what they stood to gain from following orders, and what they stood to lose by ignoring them. The harder they trained, the more likely it was they would survive to talk about it. No one backed out.

This time he was implementing a series of rewards, completely different than his tactic for the A.R.C. students. For those who performed outstandingly in training, their reward would be power gems. Very pricey power gems. In times like this, when all of humanity was preparing for war, power gems were the best form of currency. As an incentive, it certainly did its job to get the cadets fired up.

Being sixth level Adepts, it didn't take them long to adapt and overcome this first challenge. At the end of the first month every pilot could teach a master class on fundamentals. Medicines from the Pharmacist and Skyfire Avenue arrived as well. Generally they would have been too expensive for too little worth, but the Pharmacist's decoctions were a cut above and the Avenue was covering costs. The medicines she provided weren't for improving their Disciplines, although formulas for that existed. This was instead not unlike the medicines Lan Jue had used for his students, more for restoring the damage to their bodies. A pilot's body was their biggest obstacle to mastering a mecha suit. If they didn't have the hand speed, reaction time, or endurance then they wouldn't be able to keep up.

Tan Lingyun was an example. The day she sat on his lap for the games, she became dizzy when he was using his higher skills. Her body wasn't ready. Before a pilot could perform the more advanced maneuvers, they needed to make sure they could handle them.

That was what this medicine was specifically designed to do. Lan Jue was confident that it would make them strong and committed. No amount of money was too high for that sort of return.

As the first month closed out, not a soul dropped out of the program. Basic training was done, it was time to move on to tactical drills. This was when Lan Jue introduced them all to their Chief Military Instructor – the Morningstar, Su Xiaosu.

Twenty six pirates fled the Starfields with the Moonfiend Empress. They were the best of her people, by her side since the clan's inception. Now they held different positions.

When they got to An Lun they were forced to give up their ship.

However, they were allowed to keep all the resources in it. In a shock change of identity, Xiaosu was also given a job in the An Lun military; Colonel, a Commissioned Officer. Her men were made drillmasters. You couldn't tell by looking at them, but behind those military fatigues were hardened former pilots.

Why did it take a month for them to return? Their trip wasn't idle. When they got to An Lun, they were also put through a brief training, watched over by Lan Qing himself. When they were ready to head to Skyfire, they were like whole new people.

Lan Jue didn't know what Lan Qing did to train them, but even mentioning the name Prometheus almost made the former pirates soil their pants. Even Su Xiaosu grew pale when he came up in conversation.

Even true soldiers didn't have the breadth of combat experience pirates did, at least in peacetime. The Moonfiend Pirates had been the greatest pirate force in history, so this went double for them. These twenty-some men and women had been the heart of that powerhouse. Making them drillmasters to teach his people the way of Profiteering was a fine decision.

It was a little rocky at first. The pirates were like country bumpkins coming to the city for the first time. They were showered suddenly with riches, from tailor-made mechas to the Majesty, which made their mouths water.

Soon they found their place and proved themselves in solo combat. However, in regards to battlefield tactics they were all greenhorns. Pirate combat was shrewd and dirty. They only faced their enemy when they had a huge advantage. Ambushes, assassinations, guerrilla strikes, these were where they excelled, what they would teach the others.

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In the blink of an eye, three months had passed. Now it could be said that the Star Division was a preliminary success. At the very least, the cadets knew how to fly their suits. There were only a few trainees who were good enough their respective Ace Squads. But what they lacked in

numbers, they made up for in skill and strength of Discipline.

In three months all of the mechs were ready to go, and real-world training could begin.

Lan Jue had also been furiously training, and was now at sixth rank. Qianlin was only a rank below. Sadly, her spirit was still lost. The good news was that thanks to his meticulous care, Qianlin was able to perform simple functions herself. Eating, changing clothes, and walking were tasks she could manage.

These were excellent developments that gave Lan Jue hope. These were signs that Qianlin was healing.

Since receiving the amulets, each Monarch had gone their separate ways. Lan Qing returned to his duties on An Lun. When Chu Cheng awoke from his coma, he immediately returned to Luo and locked himself away. The amulet had given him insight, and he had to use this opportunity to discover his Path.

Hua Li went back to the Poseidon Group. They were preparing their own response to the crisis. Although he didn't tell Lan Jue what it was, he promised that when war broke out, he'd be right by his side.

Day followed day, and Lan Jue's Pirate scouts began returning information. There were more sightings of the aliens in every Alliance. They were like spies, probing for weakness. So far no sign of the three home planets had been found.

Humanity continually sent out their own reconnaissance flights as well, but information was sparse. Many scouting parties never returned, and those that did had to turn flee from heavy alien aggression.

As these incidents increased, everyone became more convinced that humanity was their final destination. It was simple logic. These beasts feasted on vitality. Humans were many, and their worlds were verdant.

Every Alliance was throwing itself behind the war effort. Their respective militaries were operating at full steam. In the North, they just completed construction of a new class of Bastion ship, and have undergone real-

world testing. At present the North had eight active Bastion ships. The West and East were also creating new generations of Bastions with five and four respectively.

That numbered seventeen in total. They were distributed along the border of human space, with their main battery pointed toward the black, ready to welcome those three alien planets should they come knocking.

Chapter 535: Star Division, Dispatch!

The search for information never ceased. A great deal of what they learned was a direct result of the the North's Seventh Fleet and their sacrifice. Comprehensive intelligence estimated that humans would now be able to stand their own against the monsters, when they came. A fair amount of that confidence came from the mighty Bastion ships. Be it offensive or defensive, the capabilities of those technical marvels outstripped a whole fleet. Strange though these creatures and tactics were, they still had to resign themselves to the law of conservation. There were only three alien planets as opposed to humanity's seventeen Bastion ships. All they had to do was surround them and their chance at victory was great.

"Parliament has approved your request. You can begin whenever you like." The Wine Master informed the bright-eyed Lan Jue seated across from him.

The commander nodded. "Good. Give us three days to get our things in order, then we'll set out."

"Keep damage to a minimum," the Wine Master urged.

"I know," Lan Jue replied. "Every soldier is a son or daughter of the Division. Still, they're soldiers. The best way for a soldier to learn is in combat. This mission isn't about making them hard, but to make them confident. We'll see how they're coming along."

The Wine Master still looked dubious. "Be quick. Those things will show up any day and we'll need to react immediately. Remember also that no matter what you're doing the East will disavow any knowledge of your existence. As we prepare for the invasion, this fragile peace must be maintained."

Lan Jue returned with a soft laugh. "Relax. I'll bring them back in the same condition they left in. I'll need Majesty and Zeus-1. We'll need to hurry with upgrades to Zeus-2 and 3 as well."

The Wine Master rubbed his wrinkled forehead. "Do you have any idea

how much money we've spent since you started this Division?"

Chuckling, Lan Jue shrugged. "What's that got to do with me? My only responsibility is to turn them into a fighting force. Anyway, who's to say we don't come back with some plunder of our own."

This earned a wry smirk. "Fine, go prepare. We'll cover your departure. Strike quickly and decisively, then get back."

"Yeah." Lan Jue nodded, then left.

Four months had passed since the establishment of the Star Division. The bulk of that time the cadets trained in DreamNet. Later they added real mechas, but still leaned on DreamNet for most of their drills. With their training beginning to bear fruit, it was time to test them and deepen their comprehension with a live exercise. It was time to show off this lauded troupe they'd created. It was like Lan Jue said, they didn't need to be thrust into the fray. They needed confidence and unity. Victory would give them confidence, and shared investment would forge unity.

Two days later, two ships quietly slipped out of Skyfire's public hangar. They roared through the atmosphere and into the darkness of space.

Lan Jue stood in the center of Majesty's bridge. He looked at the soldiers of his Star Division milling about. After its upgrades, Majesty was able to house a thousand soldiers onboard. In regards to mass it wasn't any less spacious than a standard battleship, with a flashier hull. The hull's strength wasn't its only improvement, though. If the military brass knew the full specs of Majesty they'd probably faint from all the blood rushing from their head.

Lan Jue had allowed the use of his ships, but with conditions of course. Majesty had been Jue Di's creation, and while he was certainly not lacking in scientific prowess, his resources were limited. With the Avenue's agreement all of its older core gems had been replaced. Even with Lan Jue's experience as Jewelry Master, he visibly gulped when he found out what they'd put in it.

"After four months I'm sure you're all stir crazy. Now it's time to see if you've learned anything. So, we're on our way to a live exercise. Now take

note, this is not practice. You're about to face a real battle." His face was serious, stoic.

The four brigade commanders looked back at him with eager expressions, ready for battle. To keep their journey a secret, only a few had known their purpose. Once they'd gotten the soldiers on the ships some had their suspicions, but now they were confirmed.

Lan Jue was pleased with how they'd turned out. There was little chance of finding cowardice among these men and women. They were Adepts with solid Disciplines all, and sure in their abilities. Adding months of training had honed their mecha control, and every one of them had seen great improvement. With cutting edge equipment, overwhelming power, and shrewd leadership, they didn't need to shrink from combat. It was time to go find it. Lan Jue wasn't the only one who wanted to see what these warriors were capable of. They needed to see it for themselves.

Lan Jue's authoritative voice returned. "This time our target is weak, and soft. This should not be a difficult fight for you. I will stress that any resources captured will be evenly distributed as determined by Division leadership. You will follow orders, and if you don't you will be summarily dismissed. Are we clear?"

"Yes, commander!" The soldiers called back in a single voice.

Lan Jue nodded in satisfaction and smiled. "Then with that said, it's time to raise the black flag. We're the Star Pirate Clan, now. Our operation zone is in the Shattered Starfields. Our goal is to create the largest pirate clan in the system within one month. We're going in there to fight fire with fire."

The Division soldiers shared looks of confusion. Starfields? Pirates? Combat in the Shattered Starfields was mostly ship-to-ship. How was this going to involve a mecha division?

There were a lot of questions, but the four months of training had not been in vain. Squad commanders had a tight control over their people, and the weaker leaders had been swapped out long ago. Questions though there were, no one disobeyed.

Majesty soared through the vacuum of space at a moderate speed with Zeus-1 at its flank. Lan Jue's ship was piloted by the Accountant and the commander of his operations intelligence squad. The Accountant's men were responsible for intelligence gathering and missions, and had Disciplines suited for the task.

Zeus' Amazons were the crew of Zeus-1. Su Xiaosu and her main crew were aboard, along with the other Division trainers. If they were going to the Starfields than it was important to bring someone who knew the place well. It was a complicated place with more clans than common sense. There was nowhere better to learn pirate tactics.

At present the largest of the system's three planets was under the thumb of the Pontiff's Citadel. The former Moonfiend Empress had come in beneath their radar thanks to Zeus-1's cloaking capabilities, but it was a single ship and a lone woman. For her to walk away with her people was pretty impressive.

In addition, simply being a clan represented strength. You needed resources and information to grow large. Constant problems you needed a strong handle to handle.

The Pharmacist approached Lan Jue with a smile. "I have good news."

"What news?" Lan Jue asked.

When they'd started he had hoped the Pharmacist would agree to more important duties. He'd wanted her to be the second in command, or even commander of the First Brigade. She refused, stating that she was only interested in dealing with matters of the Ace Squad.

She looked at him. "They're here."

"They...?" Lan Jue was confused for a moment before recalling who she meant. His voice immediately dropped to a whisper. "Where?"

She grinned back at him. "Come with me." She turned and left the bridge.

Majesty's battleship construction meant it had spacious room as sleeping quarters for the soldiers. Zeus-1, by contrast, had only a cramped

cabin. The Pharmacist lead him to a private room and shut the door behind them. With a wave of her hand, three blazing lights joined them.

They were a glimmering white, blue, and red. As the light receded they were revealed as three swords suspended in the air before Lan Jue. The flood of power he expected from them was conspicuously restrained.

The white one he knew; that was the Pharmacist's Occisus. The other two were simple-looking aside from the hue until one looked closer. A strange aura hung around the red blade that drew the eye and focused concentration. Lan Jue fought the desire to reach for it. The blue sword seemed fuzzy and unreal, like it was a thousand possible realities of itself forced into one place.

"You can come out," the Pharmacist assured.

The swords shuddered in response, and then with a flash of light they became two familiar faces. They were none other than the White Blademaster, Jun Yongye and his companion, Xuanyuan Shishi the Ten-Thousand Blades.

"Ah, gentlemen. It's been a long time." Lan Jue greeted them with some surprise.

The two swordsmen nodded back.

The Pharmacist went on. "You boys chat. I'll be around." Her delicate mouth opened and Occisus became a beam of light that vanished down her throat. Then she left.

"Please, sit." The cabin wasn't large, and it was a little tight with the three of them.

Chapter 536: Godblade Secrets

Jun Yongye smiled at him. “Lan Jue. No need for courtesy. We believe you know our purpose for being here. We are Captus and Demortis – our spirit given human form as we seek our bearers. When we were made aware of the Great Adept Tournament, we decided to take a look. After all, no normal human has what we seek.”

Xuanyuan Shishi sat at the other’s side, nodding.

The White Blademaster continued. “We selected you. Or to be more precise, you and the woman with you. We were once with the one you call Celestial Bearer Qian, and when we took human form he taught us two sword styles. But maintaining this form is draining, and cannot be maintained for long. This is why we seek a suitable bearer. If we do not, then our bodies pass in ten years’ time.”

Lan Jue blinked, surprised. “Ten years and you die?”

Jun Yongye nodded. “We are not the first generation of sword-spirit. We pass, and every once in a while a new soul-spirit is born. Only once a suitable handler has been found will the spirit bond totally within the sword. Until the bearer’s death at which time they, too, pass. We exist as transient faces until we find our bearers, or pass away and wait for the next time we take shape.

“It is not easy to earn our loyalty. There are many conditions to be met. They must be strong, and true. They must be unique in their skills and singular in potential. Then they will have earned a chance at our acceptance. They must be the pride of the Banishing Blades.”

“After Luo we returned to the site of our true forms and rejoined with them. We had to first prepare ourselves to accept a new bearer before seeking you. Then, we heard about Ms. Zhou...”

At mention of Zhou Qianlin, Lan Jue’s face darkened, though a sad smile lifted his lips. “I failed to protect her, and she suffered it by getting poisoned. It has caused her to become... lost. She doesn’t recognize the outside world. I’m afraid there may be no way...”

Xuanyuan Shishi's brows furrowed. "This is troubling. The style we know must be taught to two who share a common mind and purpose. Without her senses about her, I fear the acceptance process may be dangerous for her."

Jun Yongye's deep voice continued. "But our time also grows short. If we wait any longer our spirits will grow weak – we won't have the strength to join. Then we will disappear."

Lan Jue took a deep breath. "Then choose others." Lan Jue said it with force. Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi exchanged a look after seeing the change in the commander's eyes.

These two were representative spirits of some of the strongest artifacts in the universe. Joining with them would mean Lan Jue's Paragon Astrum would be unparalleled but for the other swords. Could he really be turning down something so magnificent as the chance to wield a godblade?

After he said it, Lan Jue seemed to deflate a little. He bowed respectfully before the two sword-spirits. "I must apologize. Though I do wish I could battle with you in the coming war, I cannot accept such a risk to Zhou Qianlin. She suffered greatly because of me and was nearly killed. I will not allow that to happen a second time."

There was admiration in Jun Yongye's face as he smiled and replied. "It is evident we have selected well. Not just anyone has the qualifications to bear us, and our decision is not lightly made. Even if it means our death, the selection of a bearer is venerated."

"I can see the connections between you that go deep as veins. Joining with us is not impossible. If you can bear the process for the both of you, the end result will be the same. Though be warned, it will be a grievous path for you. You will face the baptism of Demortis and Captus together. This is to say that Xuanyuan will join with Qianlin, but your body will be her surrogate in sustaining the internal energies. Once the powers are filtered, they will be imparted unto her. In this way she may painlessly accept to bear Demortus. From what we have seen of your joined strength, we suspect the chances are good. However, the process will be painful."

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled. If they said there was a chance, then he couldn't give it up. Pain? What pain could be worse than the pain he bore in his heart? Ever since seeing the videos from Hera and Qianlin it was like a scorched hole in his chest. Maybe some pain in the body would help distract him. Most important was making sure Qianlin didn't suffer a thing.

"Very well, I accept. I'll accept you both!" Lan Jue resolutely said to Jun Yongye.

There was appreciation in the sword-spirits response, and he nodded back. "Good. However, space is unsuitable. We must wait until your feet are on solid ground. Best we finish in under half a month. After that, there may start to appear fluctuations in our presence."

Lan Jue nodded in understanding. "Alright. After we enter the Shattered Starfields, we'll start looking for a place to merge right away." The Division was well established by this point, and their mission wasn't difficult or critical. Lan Jue did not need to keep his eye on them the whole time.

Majesty and Zeus-1 crept through the darkness of space like shades. Somehow the Wine Master had made good on his promise, and by means unknown acquired another Blinding Stone just like the one on Zeus-1. Now even the most sensitive radar couldn't pick them out.

Hence how precious Blinding Stones were.

Five days later the two vessels slipped past the border into the Shattered Starfields. Thanks to their cloaking abilities they encountered no pirate resistance as they penetrated into the inner parts of the system.

The Starfields were a big place. Thousands of pirates roamed the asteroid fields but the distances were vast. Only those small planets with valuable resources saw any settling, and the rest were lifeless hunks of heavy elements.

Lan Jue and his brigade leaders had come up with a simple plan; from easy to hard. Start with the weaker pirate clans for experience and confidence. Then, start hunting for fatter fish. The task began the moment

they entered the Starfields. With only a month to eradicate the pirate menace, they had work to do.

As former mistress of the system Su Xiaosu took the lead. She would direct them to objectives, all of which were wicked men.

Their first target was a small clan called the Poison Wasps.

The Poison Wasp Clan did not have a long history in the Starfields – a couple of years, at most. They had no battleships, only five modified patrol ships. Relatively weak, the man who ran the outfit made up for it with cunning and ferocity. They were a type of pirate that preyed on others of their kind. They were new and small, but infamous.

They did have their advantages. They had no static base, living on the five ships they used for pillaging. They would hit a target, loot it, then disappear into the dangerous seas of asteroids to evade counterattack. Other pirate clans had their own territories they didn't appreciate being violated. And yet, that's what the Poison Wasps did regularly and got away with it. Every time they made themselves stronger. When they started, they only had a single patrol ship.

Poison Wasp's leader was also called Poison Wasp, a cruel sociopath.

Su Xiaosu was already familiar with them, since they'd been a popular topic of conversation for some time. They would hit one of the three primary planets and then vanish before a deterrent force could muster. Cunning as a fox. Not long ago they signed up with the Pontiff's forces and were absorbed. Now they served as an advance force, with a small base planet to call their own.

This was, of course, covert support from the Moonfiend Pirates that few were aware of.

The location of their new base wasn't far from the three primary planets, but separated by a dense asteroid belt. If you had a pilot with experience navigating it, you could cross the belt and get to the planets in a day.

Majesty and Zeus-1 quietly slipped closer to Poison Wasp and his band of murderers.

Their base planet was not resource-rich. On the contrary, it could be said to be barren. If it did the Moonfiend Pirates probably wouldn't have let it go. At the very least, however, it was safe harbor. At a certain point every pirate clan needed a territory to establish and expand from. The alternative was to drift through space, desperate for resources and unable to grow. After all, strength needed men to wield it. Those patrol boats didn't have very much in the way of space.

Lan Jue stood by the porthole and watched the tiny planet as it spun through space. He could see its three big sisters behind it in the distance. His brigade leaders stood at his side.

"Give this one to Fourth Brigade," he said.

The Coffee Master looked up. "Why give it to them? Third Brigade can handle it."

The Driver scowled, but didn't reply.

Lan Jue explained. "We're testing synergy. There's no need to fire a nuke at a bunny rabbit. Now it's time to talk about our plan..."

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Poison Wasp looked out with pride over the base beginning to take shape before him. With the support of the Moonfiend Pirates they had already secured and established an area of one square kilometer.

It wasn't the most welcoming planet. Life support systems needed to be in place for anyone to live for long. They also needed shields and other defensive structures to protect against harmful cosmic radiation and keep precious oxygen inside. All food was either brought from off world or cultivated from small plots of land beneath the shield.

Chapter 537: Poison Wasp Pirate Clan

Of course, as pirates most of their food came offworld, from pillaging. Sustenance was an important resource. The only clans that could produce what they needed were settled on one of the three major planets. The Poison Wasp Clan took what they needed – otherwise they wouldn't be very good pirates.

Through the last couple years of struggle, the Poison Wasps haven't been making any friends. In fact, most of the Starfield's denizens would be happy if the predatory crew was dealt with. But none of this was important, you didn't become a pirate to be liked. They got noticed by the Moonfiends, didn't they? Everyone needed a rabid dog to turn on their enemies.

One day we'll be the greatest clan in the Starfields, and all of this will be mine!

Poison Wasp's face split into a sadistic grin. He had a plan for his future, and an advantage the others did not. Not only was he an accomplished airship pilot, he was also a Sovereign-rank mecha pilot. He was strong in his own right, and the main reason the Poison Wasps still existed today.

"Boss!" A large pirate hurried over.

"Yeah, did you get the girls?" Poison Wasp's eyes lit up. Like all pirates his tastes were particularly lascivious. Their planet didn't come with women, but there were enough in the Starfields to take what he wanted.

His subordinate answered with a dark chuckle. "They just got here, fresh off the boat. Guaranteed to please the boss."

Poison Wasp nodded. "Once I've had my fill you can divvy the rest up among the men. Let's go take a look."

"Alright!" The man didn't waste any time, and brought him to the residential area.

Poison Wasp didn't fear for his base's safety. One of the conditions he had before being absorbed by the Moonfiends was a state-of-the-art radar

system. The Deep-Probe Radar was capable of picking up everything in a large swath around their tiny base. It came with a price tag as lofty as its capabilities.

Years as a pirate taught Poison Wasp how to survive. He knew the importance of scouts and information. No matter what mark they were after, he never left his ship. He preferred to rely on the upgraded ship's speed and maneuverability to use the asteroid fields as cover. Trying to catch him then was impossible.

They had the radar in place even before their headquarters had finished construction. Poison Wasp could rest easy. No one was going to sneak up on him.

The residential area was a sector that had been carved out for habitation. Metal prefab houses brought over from the three main planets had been hastily put up all over. They'd cost Poison Wasp a pretty penny, but in the years of banditry he'd managed to build an impressive cache of treasure.

He was an intelligent and experienced man. He didn't have aspirations, like many pirate leaders, of commanding a battleship. Although they were strong, they weren't nimble enough for what he needed. He preferred smaller ships, upgraded patrol boats that could strike fast and disappear. There was no better choice for survivability out here.

"Eh?" Poison Wasp stopped in his tracks and look up at the sky. It was night on their tiny rock. The stars twinkled quietly overhead.

"What is it, boss?" The other man asked.

Poison Wasp stared at the sky with furrowed brows. "My heart rate increased. Whenever there's danger I feel it."

He wasted no time, and dialed a number into his communicator.

"Scar. Scar! Pick up!" Poison Wasp growled at his wrist.

"Boss, what's up?" A lazy voice finally answered on the other end.

Poison Wasp's tones were less than pleased. "Pay attention, dammit. Is

there anything on the radar?”

“Nothing,” Scar answered. “I’ve been sittin’ here staring at it. Boss, will you relax and let me handle it? Everything’s normal.”

The pirate leader allowed himself to relax. If the radar didn’t show anything, then it must mean he was just on edge.

“Alright, keep a close watch. I’ll have Gorilla send you up a girl. But if you screw up with that radar, you’ll pay with your life.”

“Heh, boss, I wanted to tell you Gorilla and his crew got back. Get me a soft one!” Scar wasn’t a scrub in this outfit. He was a commander of one of their few vessels and an ace with electronics. These skills made Scar the natural choice when they needed someone to man the radar. He was also one of the few henchmen Poison Wasp could trust.

“Let’s go.” He cut the connection, already feeling better. Vigilance. It’s what kept him alive so long.

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Scar sat across from the radar monitors, scowling. “That guy needs to get the stick out of his ass. Who the hell would come all the way out here to pick a fight?” He took another glance at the monitors and, seeing they were all quiet, put his boss’ concerns out of mind.

They’d only been here a short while, but in that time the radar had already proved itself. It had picked up several ships, but they were big ones from the Moonfiend Pirates, on their way to the main planets.

Everything was Moonfiend Pirates now, he supposed. Ever since their shadowy backers arrived their strength had exploded. Moonfiend battleships now numbered eleven. The last time they were there, they saw one of their mecha squads too. They were crack pilots, with some of the best equipment.

With so much friendly firepower in their backyard, what did they have to fear? So, Scar didn’t pay much mind. Poison Wasp’s fears were unfounded.

“Potato.” Scar called.

“Ey, brother Scar!” A tiny ugly man with narrow eyes and a crooked mouth came bounding in.

“Go and get me a couple bottles of beer.” He was about to have company, he wanted to get a good buzz going before it happened, set the mood. In this meteor-blasted landscape there wasn’t much fun to be had normally.

“Got it!” Potato barked, then he was off.

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In total, the pirate clan numbered around two hundred souls. None of them had been with the clan for very long, so families weren’t a staple yet. Here in the radar building they had five people, electronics specialists and people with talent.

As Potato trotted away from the radar building, a lusty smirk was plastered on his face. He’d heard what Scar and the boss were saying. Generally once the higher ups had their fun they gave their men a turn. He was aching for a little fun himself.

Behind the building was their warehouse, which housed food and drink. Alcohol was also on offer. Bars were one of a pirate’s favorite things, after all, and that wasn’t going to change.

Potato pulled open the warehouse door and walked in. Right away he felt what seemed like a nip in the air. Then, a large hand clapped down over his mouth. His neck felt a sudden and intense cold and the young pirate felt all his strength draining away through the chill.

“Clear.”

A dim light filled the warehouse. If Potato were still alive he’d have been shocked to find ten strangers huddled in the dark interior.

A tall slender man had been the one to take care of the pirate. He had eyes as hard and sharp as an eagle’s. All ten of the intruders wore white flight suits with a purple flame emblazoned on the chest. The insignia of Fourth Brigade.

“Peepers, whatcha got.” The tall man turned his head to the side and addressed another thin youth nearby.

“No reaction so far. Everything’s normal in the radar building. We can make our move, squad leader.” The slimmer man’s eyes flashed red as he squinted toward the nearby structure.

This was Fourth Division’s First Recon squad, second only to Ace.

Their squad leader was the tall man, called Stonehammer. He was a formidable, ninth level Adept. The Recon leader had to be more than strong, though. They had to be fast, stealthy and sharp.

Zeus-1 was the first to land on the planet. Majesty was too large and well equipped. The moment it landed, the energy it put off would be picked up for miles around. Instead they sent Zeus-1 ahead with fifty soldiers to prepare for the full attack. The rest of the force would follow in Majesty.

“With me.” Stonehammer waved for them to follow and slipped out of the warehouse. A particularly diminutive and demur girl went after him.

Her eyes were an unsettling, absolute black. There was no white at all. A similarly dusky aura sprang up and surrounded everyone. As it enveloped the team, reality rippled and they disappeared from view.

Group Stealth. A rare Discipline indeed, and very useful. She was by no means weak in her own right, but her skills were used now to help them slip into the radar building undetected.

“The hell is taking Potato so damn long?!” Scar muttered in irritation. “Yo number three! Go take a look.”

“Ah no need, Scar. I bet the kid’s just sneaking a drink. When he gets back you can ask him. If he smells like booze when he gets back we can kick his ass.”

“Alright, enough. Shit, which of you haven’t taken a little secret sip here or there. You’re a bunch of animals, I tell ya.” Scar muttered.

Suddenly he had the feeling something wasn’t right. No time to think, he just reacted. His right hand shot out and smacked the big red button on

the table in front of him. In the same instant an iron-hard carapace formed around his body.

Chapter 538: Poison Wasp's Destruction

Scar's Discipline was entomological in nature, and his danger sense was keen. This uncomfortable inkling in the back of his mind was a familiar friend to him. He felt like there was suddenly more breathing in their small building. Faint, but enough to make the hairs on his neck stand on end.

Scar's Discipline was called Golden Beetle. He could use several of the small creature's capabilities to aid him in battle, especially defense. He could also fly short distances. The plan was to hit the alarm and call up the shields. Then in the confusion he could mount a counterattack. This was their home turf, all he had to do was let his compatriots know.

Unfortunately, that was not to be.

Something ice-cold, smooth and yet sticky affixed itself to his hand. It was stopped him mere inches from sounding the alarm. The next thing he felt was like being hit with a sledgehammer.

CRACK! The harsh sound would make you grind your teeth. Scar was hit so hard he hit the ground with bone-jarring force. He grunted as the air was knocked out of him. He couldn't believe it. Him – a sixth level Adept specialized in defense – floored so easily. It didn't just crack his shell, either. He felt like his organs had been rearranged around bits of broken bone.

He lifted his head to see a very large figure towering over him with a shield in hand. It was bronze, wide on top and narrowing to a tip at the bottom.

Thunk. The shield fell. Scar's head rolled away.

Whoosh! The stuff gripping Scar's lifeless hand retracted. It returned to an obscene looking middle-aged man with a dour smirk. "Come on, so violent squad leader. You got his blood all over my tongue."

"Quit the bullshit, Iguana. Check the radar." Stonehammer commanded.

The other occupants of the radar building had been silenced. With the

way they'd been trained and organized, a small group like this didn't even break a sweat. Only Scar had been an enemy of merit, the others were mediocre Adepts. They'd been disposed of with hardly a sound.

"We've got control of the radar, Squad Leader. Shutting down outside shields and communications." The girl from before who'd smuggled them in hastily reported the news.

"Good. Send a message to Majesty, let them know it's done. Defensive perimeter." Stonehammer ordered.

"Sir."

A shadow spread across the pirate base, silent as a shade. Behind a bunker, a dark figure furiously waved their arms.

Overhead, a beam of white light soundlessly beamed to the surface. A thousand meters overhead, the air shimmered and rippled unsettlingly.

Wide-Spectrum Frequency Jammer. Interference would choke every wave-band except their own within the affected area. Outside communication was impossible.

Afterwards the hum of engines were the only sign as an invisible ship soared up through the small planet's atmosphere. Zeus-1 continued its patrol for errant pirates they might give them away.

All of the planet's warning systems had gone the way of its radar. Normally, alarms were sounded when their systems were interrupted, but instead everything was silent. A frightening, total silence.

Next a group of dark silhouettes lifted from the ground and hovered over the pirate base. Their broad chests were painted with a flame insignia. Suddenly they were alive with light as they charged ahead. Dazzling wakes of flame hung in the air, and the night sky was pierced with light from their passage. Their target; the docking port. Below the ground shook as a host of mecha charged in like a hurricane.

The unnatural silence was suddenly and violently shattered, as this small planet was descended into fiery chaos. The air was filled with blasts and screams. The pirates on guard didn't even have time to realize what was

happening before they were torn to shreds.

The blitz continued for nearly twenty minutes before the bombardment stopped. A contingent of mechs charged in towards the base's center. It was too late by now for the pirates to react. One by one, they fell to the terrible death machines that prowled the night. In five minutes, the base was firmly under their control.

Poison Wasp himself was tossing and turning in bed when all four walls exploded around him. He scrambled up and brought his Discipline to bear. Stonehammer stood in the ruins of his cabin.

Poison Wasp's Discipline was much as his name suggested. He possessed the powers of a wasp, giving him speed and attack. His hands could become stingers to be used in battle.

Unfortunately wasps didn't do so well against boulders, and stingers couldn't pierce mountains. There was nothing he could do to best Stonehammer's defense, and no way to get to a mecha. His met his end at the bloody point of the invader's shield.

The battle was short, simple, and fierce. The enemy was overwhelmed.

All four brigades participated. Fourth Brigade's goal had been reconnaissance, first strike, and taking the radar building. First Brigade had provided air strikes and destroyed the most dangerous pirate capabilities with surgical precision. They mopped up those who managed to get into a suit or ship and cut off all escape. Second Brigade handled the main fight, and Third Brigade moved in to mop up and gather up their spoils.

When all was said and done, the Star Division soldiers milled about, ultimately unsatisfied.

"Commander, let's find a target with a little more bite next time. What's the point of sending in a force like this for some piddling pirates?" The Driver mumbled in dissatisfaction. He only just was getting ready to join the fray, but it was finished already. The fight was practically over, even before his Second Brigade joined in. He never got the chance to satisfy his itch.

The Poison Wasp Pirate clan had about two hundred men, whereas Star Division numbered over eight hundred. Crack pilots and strong adepts, with four times the manpower. On top of that, they had two ships for backup. The difference was too great, like an elephant stepping on cockroaches.

Lan Jue smirked at him. “Don’t be hasty. Let them get their bearings first, then we can throw something bigger at them. Sweep the area, then we withdraw.”

The pirates didn’t have much for them. There was the radar system, and the booty they had squirreled away from their raids. It seemed to be a trope carried over from the olden days, but it was still a habit for every pirate clan to have a secret treasure stash. Finding them were simpler now, though, with modern technology.

It was a pretty good cache, all things considered. There wasn’t anything in the way of cash, but energy-saving power gems instead. Standard currency for pirates. Altogether they pillaged over a thousand power gems. There were only a handful b-rank or better, all told it was a worthwhile haul. They might not have been exquisite specimens, but the stones would recharge their mechas with a lot to spare. Both Zeus-1 and Majesty could recharge with cosmic radiation, so the stones didn’t have much use for them. Any surplus could be sold. So in the end, it was a good harvest.

An hour later all the goods were boxed up and shipped out. Majesty approached and landed, now that the base was liberated from pirate control. Star Division boarded and soared off to their next objective with Zeus-1 as its entourage. The pirate base lay silent behind them – a ghost town. In the center was burned the image of a swirling flame, and a skull in its center.

The insignia of the Star Pirate Clan.

Lan Jue was looking for a place to commence the joining process with the Godblades, but the Poison Wasp’s relationship with the Moonfiend Pirate Clan made him uncomfortable. They were likely to check in sooner rather than later. How long the joining process took, Lan Jue had no idea.

It least it would be important to find a place that was safe and peaceful.

The debriefing was quick. Destroying this small band of criminals was nothing to boast about. Lan Jue praised them for their victory and adherence to command. He pointed out Stonehammer and his team in particular for taking the radar building and killing Poison Wasp.

Their feats were recorded.

On to their next objective.

While the fight had seemed simple and straightforward, the results were unique. There was something more in the eyes of every soldier. Excitement. They had no remorse for the killing of these monsters, to them they were performing a service. Cleaning cancer from humanity. Repaying these scoundrels for their misdeeds and getting paid for it felt pretty damn good.

Everything they earned through the raid was distributed to the Division. This had been part of Lan Jue's agreement with the Avenue. No matter what they found out here among the asteroids would be used to make them stronger. Everyone would get a piece for the work they were doing, determined by individual merit.

A system of rewards and punishments was integral for effective command. This was especially true for an organization like theirs, which enjoyed a unique sort of freedom for its soldiers. They didn't have the same restrictions here that an official army might face. How else were they going to pay their people? No high-level Adept was hard-up for cash, so wealth had little meaning to these men and women. Other than the exuviation process, they were only interested in getting stronger. For Adepts, strength meant a good life and a bright future.

But building a powerhouse took resources. Where did they come from? Your own effort!

Chapter 539: Tempest

Lan Jue had told his people all about this before coming. For commercial enterprises, the Shattered Starfields were no-man's-land. Even the Alliance militaries avoided this place. To the Star Division, however, it was a goldmine with everything they could want.

Battle plans were moving along, it was time for them to attack their next objective. Lan Jue's people have proven that small groups were not a challenge, so their target was a larger group further away from the three main planets. It was an older, more established group they had in their sights. They were called the Desert Tempest.

This clan was in possession of a battleship and eight patrol ships, hosting over one thousand five hundred pirates. They were much stronger than the Poison Wasps, and subsisted off commercial vessels that skirted the rim of the Starfields. Not only were they a considerable force, but pirates of Desert Tempest were disciplined. The planet that served as their home was called Tempest, and had served as their base of operation for over thirty years. They far outstripped the Star Division's last enemy.

The Desert Tempest were carefully chosen for their next campaign. They were far from the main planets, which was important if they were to fight against such a well-established group. In addition, its distance meant Lan Jue could use the planet for whatever it was the Godblades required for the joining process. In the first month's battle plan, this was the longest flight yet.

The Moonfiend Pirates would be quick to investigate any changes to their little pet planet, and were unlikely to let the matter lie when they discovered what happened. At the very least, they'll want to find out who would dare attack their people. The best course of action would be to avoid the Moonfiend Pirates – for now. It was destined, since they were Lan Jue's ultimate target. That fight would be the final test for his fledgling Division. If they couldn't handle a group of pirates, how would they defend against aliens?

“This time no one’s gunna take it from us! Second Division’s taking the lead.” The Driver arrogantly flailed the battle plans crumpled in his hands.

The Coffee Master scowled in response. “Who says, you? Your people will just rush in and trip all their defenses, and lose half your number. Remember, this crew had been around a while. Ground and space defenses are not going to be anything to sniff at. And as for radar, they likely have more than one system and I’m betting they’re better than the last. These guys won’t be as easy as the Poison Wasps.”

The Driver answered with a scornful glance. “That’s just your guess. Commander, send me in with the Ace squad. We’ll tear them up from within while the rest of Second Brigade attacks them head-on. I swear not a soul will come back harmed, the Desert Tempest will be handed to you on a bloody platter.”

The Driver’s assurances weren’t arrogance. He believed everything he said wholeheartedly, and so did Lan Jue. His brigade commander was one of the top ten god-ranked pilots in all of humanity, after all. In all likelihood the Driver could probably take out the pirate clan himself without a scratch, all before even considering the Ace Squad. Infiltrate and deconstruct. That was the Driver’s specialty.

“Come now, Driver. We’re old friends – when we come across a windfall we share in the benefits, right? Fourth Brigade should go with you as intelligence and oversight.” The Bartender wanted his piece, too, and made it known.

Lan Jue chuckled at the lot of them. “Come on, we’re all adults here. Calm down and act like it. Driver, aren’t you concerned about keeping face? The Ace Squad and its leader are good enough. Somehow I don’t think he’ll find a group of pirates troubling.”

“Eh...” the Driver shrunk beneath the haughty looks of the other three. When Lan Jue said it, they all remembered who the leader of Second Brigade’s Ace Squad was. Their secret weapon, the Infernal Vanguard – the Gourmet!

Indeed, how could a mid-sized pirate clan cope if he decided to unleash

his full power? A Paragon had the destructive capabilities of a battleship all by themselves, otherwise how was it they were considered such a deterrent force?

The Driver was aching for a fight. In reality if he sent the both of them, the damage they could cause...

Lan Jue rapped the table between them with his knuckles. "We're here to train. We're definitely not here to wave our dicks around. No matter the enemy, the four brigades must work in synergy, as a whole. United we're stronger. Once they're broken in, they'll face a tough enemy and be unyielding. None of our Ace Squads are going in this time. They'll supervise and rescue as necessary. For everything else stick to the battle plan."

The Bartender nodded. "Alright, so it is. I'll send in my team first for reconnaissance and to collect intelligence for the final plan."

"Good." Lan Jue replied.

He looked around the room. Aside from Lan Jue and the Brigade leaders, the war council was further populated by Ace squad leaders and the Division's Second-in-Command, Su Xiaosu.

Su Xiaosu sat beside Lan Jue. When he was here she didn't speak or involve herself much. Behind the scenes, though, all of their military strategy had been devised by the Morning Star before they were open to discussion. Her title was Second-In-Command, but she was the one directing their every move. Her commands were given through Lan Jue's mouth. Her responsibilities were numerous. Her voice held the greatest weight, but her work was endless.

Endless, but enjoyable. She found purpose in her work that brought her joy. She was different from the Amazons, and this role suited her better she thought. As former leader of the Moonfiend Pirates she had experience in spades, and compared to her former force the Star Division was far stronger. The Moonfiend Pirates had twenty ships to the Division's two, but on an individual level they could never compete.

Su Xiaosu had already told Lan Jue her thoughts on this. If this division

could work together, develop a chemistry, then it would be the most terrifying pirate force the universe had ever seen. Yes, pirates – not soldiers. Soldiers required strict discipline and fought in a group. The strength of the individual was ignored. What Su Xiaosu meant when she said pirates, was a unique and fearsome mecha division.

Afterwards, once the analyses had completed, she presented Lan Jue with a comprehensive training and integration plan. After taking a look and discussing it with the others, the decision to make her Second-in-Command was passed down.

From training to this expedition, Su Xiaosu had shown herself to be a remarkable commander – the mastermind. She was just as much the leader as Lan Jue was.

After the council was adjourned, Lan Jue turned to the Morningstar. “Is there anything you’d like to add?”

“Relax, boss,” she replied. “I’ll have a detailed plan. They have numbers, and they’re well spread across the planet. We’ll need to be very precise. We need to rout them, but we need to do it with zero casualties. The Blinding Stones help us a lot with this. In addition we can lure them in, and...”

Lan Jue nodded repeatedly. Her overall idea put him at ease.

Over the last few days, Lan Jue had obsessively trained, merged with Qianlin as always. He had to prepare to join with the godblades, and every step up in strength meant a greater chance of success. Jun Yongye, Xuanyuan Shishi, and even the Pharmacist would cultivate at his side so he could feel the energies of the swords. To become familiar with them. It would make the process easier when the time came.

Su Xiaosu stood at the main controls, looking over the data. She lifted her head and looked Lan Jue’s direction. “Commander, now is as good a time as any.”

He nodded, then turned to the Bartender. “Send out the reconnaissance team.”

“Sir. They’re already waiting on Zeus-1.” In similar strategy to the Poison Wasps, the Division’s smaller ship would deliver the unit to the surface undetected. They would look and report back to inform the final battle strategy. When the fighting broke out, they’d strike like a thunderclap.

It didn’t matter who – or when – you fought. The most important factor in any fight was your scouts.

“Commander, there. That’s Tempest.” She indicated out of the porthole toward the approaching planet.

The planet twinkled green and blue against the stark backdrop of space. Normally green meant foliage and blue was water – life. Evidence suggested this place was habitable for humans1 .

Lan Jue exclaimed in appreciation. “These Desert Tempest guys chose well!”

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Zeus-1 quietly slipped away from Majesty and approached the planet, cloaked by the Blinding Stone. They shut off all nonessential systems to reduce their energy footprint. Su Xiaosu’s voice crackled over their radio. “Zeus-1. Zeus-1, this is Majesty. Respond.”

Chapter 540: Progenitor?

“This is Zeus-1.” Mika’s voice replied to Su Xiaosu’s hails. No one knew that ship like the Amazons, so they were its standard crew.

Xiaosu continued. “Your landing zone is aquatic. When you touch down scan the biosystem.”

“Zeus-1, understood.” When there was a task to complete, Mika wouldn’t get in Xiaosu’s way.

Majesty cut its engines and maintained a geostationary orbit. Without more from the scouting party, it was too risky to approach.

Suddenly, Lan Jue’s eyes fixed on the planet and narrowed. “Quick, get back on with Zeus-1 and tell them to stop their approach immediately. Get them back here.”

Su Xiaosu was surprised at Lan Jue’s command, but wasted no time. “Zeus-1, retreat! Get back now!”

“What?” Mika’s voice answered. “We’ve almost reached the mesosphere.”

Lan Jue shouted back. “Mika, turn your ship around right now!”

She could hear the fear and worry in his voice. She asked no more questions. “Yes, boss.”

The rest of the Star Division leadership realized something was amiss and came over. The Gourmet spoke first. “What is it?”

Lan Jue, his brows furrowed, looked over the planet. “There’s trouble. Look. Enhance the planet’s surface.” He pointed to what he meant. To keep their presence a secret they couldn’t use radar, but long-distance cameras weren’t a problem.

The monitors showed the planet, large and clear in contrast to the view out of porthole. Now everyone could see the streaks of violet that marred its surface. At present they were small and disconnected.

Violet? The Gourmet’s heart skipped a beat. He looked at Lan Jue,

making no effort to hide his surprise. “That’s...”

Lan Jue shook his head. “We can’t be sure yet, but I think so.”

“Aliens?” Su Xiaosu ventured.

Lan Jue turned to face everyone. “Recall your reconnaissance team. I’ll lead the Ace Squads from First and Second Brigade to go take a look. Get Majesty ready for combat.”

He had to keep safety in mind. This was training, not a full military campaign.

“You’re our commander. I should lead the reconnaissance team.” The Driver interjected.

Lan Jue shook his head. “No, I’ll go. I’m well familiar with these things. Besides, the Pharmacist and the Gourmet will be with me. There won’t be any problems. Xiaosu, you have the bridge. Keep contact.”

This wasn’t a debate, so the Driver didn’t push the matter further. He wished his commander good luck.

Zeus-1 reacted swiftly to the orders and was docked with Majesty before long. The scout team disembarked and was replaced by Lan Jue and the two Ace Squads. Lan Jue had seen the strength of these beasts with his own eyes. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust these young soldiers, he was just trying to avoid any unnecessary death. When it came to these beasts he knew what to expect, and what to look for.

Zeus-1 crept toward Tempest like a wraith. They overshot the original landing zone and headed for the violet streaks. First they needed to confirm this wasn’t some kind of unique vegetation. If that was the case, then the plan would proceed as before. If it wasn’t, they’d need to change their strategy.

Zeus-1 pierced the atmosphere. After a few moments the planet’s surface was skimming by a few hundred meters below. When it came in to view, Lan Jue sucked in a breath – vast fields of putrid violet. Anything that sick light touched, all the vegetation, was dead. It was a cancer, spreading across the land and leaving a poison bog behind.

“Majesty, this is Zeus-1. Intelligence suggests high probability that alien invaders are on site. Make preparations for combat.” Lan Jue delivered what information they got back to the ship.

The experience with these creatures on Taihua had put him right in their path. He recognized that poisonous fog that ate life force. He remembered the dead vegetation. It all looked exactly the same.

“Should we disembark?” The Pharmacist asked.

He shook his head. “Don’t rush. Let’s take a look around, see if the Desert Tempest has any people left.” Lan Jue glowered at the scene. The Shattered Starfields were rife with piracy, but it also bordered all three Alliances. Their presence here meant they could appear on planet in human occupied space.

Space was vast, and closing a portion of it off completely was impossible. However, despite this there were no reports of alien presence anywhere since the news broke. Yet here they were. It was a sign, a frightful revelation that these creatures were being led by some form of intelligence. Something was directing these creatures away from Alliance space, probing for weakness and maximizing advantages. Humanity, on the other hand, had no idea where those three alien planets were.

Lan Jue was worried. Not because they were strong – a strong enemy could be overcome. More than that, they were cunning.

Their physiology was also troublesome. They thrived off life force, and with each planet they took the monsters became stronger. Each passing day was a victory for these creatures.

Zeus-1 thundered across Tempest’s sky, scanning for the pirate base. It wasn’t long before they found it. Judging by the buildings and resources they could spot, the pirates were stronger than they’d figured. However, they were working off of Xiaosu’s relatively old data. Apparently the Desert Tempest pirates had done well for themselves in the last few years.

But the discovery revealed that these buildings had also succumbed to the violet swamp. The deadly landscape had swallowed everything up, covering the buildings entirely. The corrosive quality of it had already

begun to dissolve the structures noticeably.

They didn't pick up a single sign of human life, not even corpses or bone. There was only the slowly creeping bog of death desperately searching for more to devour.

Lan Jue spotted a large spot of purple hunched atop a particularly tall building. It looked like an enormous flower bud, with a flashing purple light flickering within it. Great root-like tendrils crawled down the building and buried themselves in the earth. The black-red veins pulsed and throbbed.

Eating. It was eating everything around it.

This was the first time any of them, aside from Lan Jue, had seen one of these aliens up close. They were all changed by it.

Lan Jue's deep voice called out. "Mika. When we disembark, return to Majesty and lead it back here. Tell all members of Star Division to get in their mechas, and do not land on the ground under any circumstances. There will be no contact with anything infected. Prepare to engage with the enemy, and be wary of any show."

"Sir," Mika confirmed.

Lan Jue spun around to face the Gourmet and the Pharmacist. "We're heading out – get ready to fight. This big guy out there is probably an alien progenitor. It'll be strong and almost certainly surrounded by protectors even if we can't see them. Try not to get separated."

The ship's doors opened and several figures flew out into the crisp air. Only Adepts ninth level or higher were allowed into First and Second Brigade's Ace squads. All of them had the power of flight.

Flashes of light flickered around each of the soldiers, and they were replaced in mid-air with humanoid machines. Lan Jue also summoned Thor, which had undergone no small amount of changes. It retained roughly the same volume, but its bluish-purple exterior was now a deep royal blue with the faintest hint of gold. An enormous sword was fixed to its back, in contrast to its unarmed default form before. Its arms were

thicker, too. Most striking though, was that none of its joints or connections were visible at all. It was an integrated, seamless whole, just like a man.

As Lan Jue entered, it was like Thor was injected with life. Its body jerked as a flash of golden light rippled through it. Then, one of the machine's enormous hands draw the dark-gold sword from its back.

Other than Lan Jue, there were twenty soldiers preparing for battle. One by one their mechas sprang to life. They weren't just strong Adepts – to fight alongside the likes of the Pharmacist and the Gourmet, they had to be amazing pilots, too.

Separate from Zeus-1, the team and their mechas were no longer invisible to prying eyes. Thor soared high overhead, then thrust with its massive blade. A single bolt of lightning erupted from its point, but did not hit the progenitor. Instead, it struck a spot not far from where he and his team hovered.

Boom! The thunderous sound was met with an explosion of debris and fountains of purple fluid, like he'd blown apart a body. The others gasped in surprise. The great swath of violet that was devouring buildings was actually a part of this beast! These monsters were even scarier than they'd thought.

Chapter 541: Combat

Lan Jue wasn't shaken by the fountain of gore. His eyes narrowed and he stopped their forward advance. Below, the ground rumbled and a series of sickening 'squelch' and 'poof' noises filled the air. Enormous alien monstrosity heaved themselves up from their surroundings covered in a strange sort of sludge. Roughly a hundred of them were belched from the violet landscape.

Lan Jue issued his orders through a shared mecha comms channel. "You're all going to be fighting, but do not separate. Try your best to stay in the area. Gourmet, Pharmacist, we'll deal with the progenitor. Once it's finished we won't have to worry about reinforcements."

He wasted no time, and urged Thor up high into the air. The two Ace Squad leaders were in close pursuit.

The other two also had their own mechas, but were reluctant to use them. Lan Jue convinced them otherwise, explaining that mecha combat was a strength with benefits for safety. There was nothing else better. What's more, this was a Mecha division. He couldn't have his Ace Squad leaders shirking that rule.

Their suits had been constructed to forgo combat effectiveness, and instead focus resource on boosting speed and amplifying Discipline. Their strength wasn't in piloting but Talent, so their mechas had to at least not impede that.

The Gourmet's mecha was grey and smaller than Thor by two thirds. However, it was incredibly dexterous. Three pairs of wings were affixed to its back, and when they were unfurled, the jets on them made him incomparably fast. He was at Thor's side in a blink.

The Pharmacist's mecha was white, covered in a flower pattern. It was slender and bore no weapons. Hers also bore wings that quickly caught her up with the other two. Three sparkling machines soared through the atmosphere toward the alien progenitor.

But, just in that moment a dozen sprays of violet light shot toward the

sky, as alien creatures rose to block their path. They were hideous things, with an aura as sick and toxic as they were. Corrosive gas poured from their maws as wings unfurled and issued them into the air.

A flash of light issued from the Pharmacist's mecha. It was a flood of sharp energy that spread and brightened until it became a sword, blazing from the light of seven miniature stars. Scores of strikes just the same as what came from the Pharmacist covered the sky. When the alien invaders got within twenty meters, they were instantly cut apart into a hundred thousand pieces that tumbled to the ground below. Nothing was between them and the progenitor, but a cloud of fine violet mist.

On Lan Jue's other side, the Gourmet's ash-grey mecha lifted its right hand. A tornado of crimson fire arose, and burned away the remaining cloud of blood and gas the monsters left behind.

There were no normal monsters that could hope to block the likes of the Pharmacist or Gourmet. The progenitor seemed to sense this, and reacted by ripping its great branches from the building around it. Like great tentacles, the progenitor's pulsing limbs swatted at the three attackers.

The beast was over three hundred meters tall, and oozing with terrible power. When its throbbing tentacle-arms began to writhe they nearly blotted out the sun.

The Pharmacist's seven-star blade led the charge. One of the beast's tentacles heaved into view to cut off their approach. There was a flash, and tentacle reeled back with a vicious gash that almost cut it in half.

Almost. Tough! Lan Jue knew how strong the Pharmacist and her sword were. Yet, just the creature's tentacle managed to survive a head-on strike. Surprised was not enough for what he felt.

Of course, that didn't represent the Pharmacist's true strength. The single sword fractured into a hundred copies, and they swung through the air like a tornado of deadly light.

Thor lifted its burly arm with the giant sword in its grip. The blade burned with a blinding light. In the next instant, its energy was released as a beam piercing through the heavens.

After upgrades from both he and Jue Di, Thor was like a different beast altogether. The energy it released was strong, strong enough to satisfy Jue Di.

Lan Jue was also a God-ranked pilot, in contrast with the Gourmet and Pharmacist who gave up their mecha training. His combat effectiveness was helped significantly by his piloting skills and Thor's new construction.

A thick beam of shimmering golden light split the sky. The darkened sky was painted bright, and the clouds looked as though they were on fire. Joined with Qianlin, Zeus was currently at the peak of ninth level. With the formidable additions of Thor, his lightning was pregnant with protogenia.

Soon after, the sky exploded into a magnificent light show, with golden bolts of lightning falling to earth all the way to the horizon. But their target was not the progenitor, or the other monsters. There were precisely as many bolts as there were soaring blades from the Pharmacist. The lightning sought the swords and collided with them, imbuing each with flickering electric power.

What was strange about this lightning was more than the color. Whereas most lightning curved to find the path of least resistance, Thor's lightning bolts were perfectly straight. They fell upon the swords like beams of sizzling light. The next time one of those swords cut at a tentacle, they imparted their electricity into it. Sparks spewed from the wound, and coiling golden lightning consumed the flailing appendages.

They were wracked with spasms. Between Zeus' power and the Pharmacist's strength, the tentacles' defenses were overcome. They were cut away and discarded like weeds.

The progenitor squirmed and lifted a second host of tentacles to deal with its attackers. Lan Jue and the others weren't in a rush to pull out their big guns, though. These creatures were virtually unknown to them. This was an opportunity to see what else they could learn. Things were different now than they were on Taihua.

Behind them, the numbers of both Ace Squads were already engaged

with the monsters. They'd drawn themselves into a defensive posture so that each individual's strength was unimpeded. The best from pilots from First and Second Brigade unleashed a devastating counter as the alien's descended upon them. They specialized in long-range and melee combat respectively, making the aliens fight for every inch.

Few aliens even approach the ring of deadly fire, and fewer pierced it. When they did the contingent of close range combatants made quick work of them.

After months of training, there was an unspoken but universal understanding between all brigades. These Ace pilots were all ninth level and were well versed in mecha combat as well. A hundred of the creatures threw themselves at the humans, and a moment later a hundred alien corpses littered the poison ground.

Yet, despite the relative ease, none of the soldiers were relaxed. During breaks in the fighting their eyes scanned the horizon. In the distance, it almost looked as though the ground was rolling toward them. Scores of black dots tainted the sky. Reinforcements.

Zeus-1 had returned to Majesty and both entered the battlefield. As the ships hovered overhead, one mecha suit after another began to tumble from the cargo bays. They rushed to meet their brothers in arms and joined the fray.

From on high the scene was particularly chilling. The ground rumbled and spat out aliens in droves. They burst from membranous cocoons, spewing caustic fluid every which way. Though they differed drastically in size, every one of them rushed with incredible speed to the progenitor's defense.

"First and Second Brigade, defend the Ace Squad's outer perimeter. Third and Fourth Brigades, reinforce and backup. Majesty and Zeus-1 are air support, fire at will."

The human warriors rushed to their compatriots' aid. It was their first encounter with the monsters, but the Star Division warriors never missed a beat. The aliens were hideous and frightening to behold, but Lan Jue's

charges were confident in their strength. They also knew that the Core crystals from these monsters was how the exuvium process was performed. The more they got, the better position they'd be in.

Lan Jue didn't need to stoke their battle-fervor. They were already eager for a fight.

Tang Xiao charged into battle with the unit he commanded, Squad 11, in tow. He didn't get the position due to his relationship with Lan Jue. The merits of his performance during the Division's creation was evident to everyone.

At his request, his sister Tang Mi was also in his unit. In fact, most of his people were former members of the A.R.C. class.

Tang Xiao's mecha bore a striking resemblance with its pilot, enormous and plump. It looked a little ridiculous. No other mecha in the Division could best it in terms of bulk.

"Squad, with me!" Tang Xiao commanded. He led his people down to earth. Lan Jue's standing command was not to come into contact with the purple swaths of ground, but not every inch was covered. Several taller mountains rose bald over the hellscape. Without vegetation to draw on, the aliens didn't appear interested in spreading over them.

The squad left contrails through the air as they descended to the mountain's peak. Tang Xiao chuckled as he surveyed the battlefield. "Witness! Fat-God, transform!" Fat-God, of course, being the name of his mecha suit.

Before their eyes, the soldiers watched as Tang Xiao's suit began to expand. It went from a solid tank to something like a water balloon as it swelled.

"All aboard!" He cackled.

His soldiers were used to Tang Xiao's means and antics. Without hesitation, they each one after the other vanished into the thirty-meter wide ball of undulating metal.

Chapter 542: Tang Xiao and Jin Tao, All Grown Up

The plump orb was perfectly round, without blemish. It wasn't long before the whole of Squad 11 was snugly fit inside.

Then, the orb changed again. This time a drill head slowly appeared at its base. The entire orb began to spin, and the drill tore open a hole. Tang Xiao and the mechs within him drilled through the ground. A pair of mechanical hands at the top busily covered up the hole above it by disrupting soil. Tang Xiao and his team disappeared.

Before long the aliens arrived at the mountain top. The first one to scale it was a two-headed creature, long and sleek like some sort of mutated wolf. It leapt upon the patch of disturbed earth and started to dig. However, in that moment a gear hidden within the soil shot up and buried itself in the creature's belly.

The inertia from the leap and the gear's force split the monster cleanly in two. Two mangled halves collapsed to the floor.

Next, another silver light flashed where Tang Xiao had been. The ground was disturbed as the light shot out, revealing itself as a long silver spear. It soared over two hundred meters in the air, ultimately burying itself in the throat of an incoming flying creature. It ripped itself out and returned underground even before the alien was dead.

For a moment it was still on the mountain top. After the spear's return the ground was visibly churned. However, those odd little hands squirmed out again and smoothed out the ground to hide their location.

Only Tang Xiao would fight so dirty.

He had hand-picked every soldier on his squad. Half of them were specialized in energy enhancement or conduction. The remainder, including Tang Mi, had Disciplines relating to metal. Practically everyone from the A.R.C. class with these abilities were part of his team.

The result was a unit with a special fighting-style Tang Xiao called the

Transformer approach. Tang Xiao manipulating himself and his mecha to serve as a protective shield for his unit. They launched attacks and kept energy levels high, while he managed the unit in general. His ability to transform assured that they were suited to any battlefield environment while giving them the element of surprise. With everyone together it was a strategy that bolstered defense and allowed them to play off one another's strengths.

It was the first time the tactic was used in a real fight. During the extermination of the Poison Wasps Tang Xiao had been disappointed. He didn't even have time to prepare the transformation before the fight was over. Now that he could see the payoff, he was pleased with their new style.

He was an eighth level Adept now. Benefiting from his fellows and the fine mecha provided by Skyfire Avenue, his tactics were solid. If one could overlook the less than honorable fighting style, they could recognize that no other squad worked better together.

While these monsters weren't among the stronger breed, that didn't mean they were stupid. After two of their number were killed, another seven or eight flooded the area and discovered their wily tactic.

The first of this second wave was a giant, grotesque bear. It towered thirty meters tall with arms thicker than a mecha suit. Its violet claws began to dig furiously where it had seen the spear vanish.

The sun caught something metallic that flashed in the light. A blade was revealed slicing toward the beast. However, the monsters were now prepared. The alien bear roared and reared, swiping its great claws at the threat.

The attack impaled one of the monster's enormous hands and stopped. Just then a second creature much like the first joined it on the mountain top. Its first reaction was to open its maw and vomit sickening violet light that incinerated the ground.

A shield plopped up from below the dirt, deflecting the burning power. Then great spikes of steel suddenly shot up from below the aliens' feet like

a forest of metal. They caught the monsters in their soft underbellies, killing them mid-charge.

The alien's defense was strong, but these spiked were infused with Tang Xiao's Discipline, as well as the aggregate power of the support Adepts and the mecha's power gems. They all served to increase his damage potential. The mountain became a bristling alien graveyard.

Fat-God exploded out from underground. Different from when it vanished, now the orb was dotted with razor-sharp blades that stuck out in all directions like a porcupine. Whatever alien creature managed to evade the spikes was quickly mowed down by Tang Xiao the human meat-grinder. The mountain was cleared in under half a minute.

But the respite was brief. Before long another wave of alien creatures were rushing for the mountain top. The orb changed back to the familiar pudgy war machine before Tang Xiao led them forth to rejoin their enemy.

Tang Xiao did not underestimate these creatures. They were weaker than he, but yet he plotted his tricks. Strong or weak, pirate tactics were about survival at all costs – Su Xiaosu had taught them that. The most important thing was getting back alive. It was a practice Tang Xiao could get behind. He would often seek out Xiaosu for instruction if there was nothing else to do. He might have had some ulterior motive, but if he did he was keeping it close to the vest.

Because Tang Xiao was Lan Jue's student, Su Xiaosu held nothing back in her instruction. Tang Xiao learned quickly.

Of course, not everyone subscribed to Tang Xiao's doctrine. There were others that preferred a more direct approach...

Jin Tao's former nickname had always had an effect on him. Dumb-mutt was a moniker he both loathed and loved. For this reason, Jin Tao chose a rarely-used animal shaped mecha. His looked like a huge Tibetan mastiff.

The mastiff was a mysterious animal from former-era China, the most powerful of its species. Fully grown alphas were said to be able to take on lions.¹ They were almost entirely extinct now, but Jin Tao had been fascinated with them since he was a child. When the chance came to

choose his mecha, he knew exactly what he wanted.

It was fifteen meters long and half as tall, and stocky. Its head was covered in plate armor that could be used for both attack and defense. The alloy claws bristling from its four paws were the mechas strongest weapons. While piloting he also employed his own Discipline to transform. In this way he could more completely meld with the suit.

There were specific differences between piloting a beast mecha and a humanoid one. Humanoid mechas required input, whereas beast mechas were controlled by the movement of the pilot's body. It was more direct, but the requirements demanded of a pilot's body were much higher. It was perfect for Jin Tao.

He was also squad leader, though circumstances were different. He wasn't as strong as the others, but his ferocity on the field was unparalleled. In a mecha he was better than most, and was particularly adept at head-on fights. So, even though he and his team were low on First Brigades' totem pole, Jin Tao was a solid leader.

Unlike Tang Xiao, his team wasn't only made of A.R.C. students. All of them were like him, with Disciplines mimicking beasts of prey. Each of them also piloted beast-shaped mechas, just like their squad leader, which made them a unique part of the division.

When they spotted the aliens coming, Second Division reacted with a flurry of ranged attacks. Jin Tao and his Squad 31 were the first ones to charge the line. Long range attackers needed melee support to keep them protected. Even though Jin Tao and his crew piloted animal mechs, every suit provided to the Star Division had the power of flight. He named his own suit Black Gold, after the two-tone color scheme it sported. The mechanical mastiff sprouted a pair of small wings which lifted it into the air and toward their foes.

The first volley trickled and stopped. In its aftermath were scores of dead alien beasts. Their enemies weren't given a chance to catch their breath before Jin Tao and his squad were on them.

A monster that looked like a massive bird swooped down to meet them.

It's razor sharp beak whistled through the air, right for Black Gold's head.

Transformed, even the aura pouring from Jin Tao was different. A wild, feral sense followed in his wake as he shot up to meet the creatures with a swiping right claw.

"Bang!" The claw knocked the beak away, leaving enough space for the flying dog-machine to swing around and grab ahold of the giant bird's back. The beast had the advantage in size and strength, but Black Gold was too fast and Jin Tao's resolve was too strong. Black Gold's great claws shimmered a dark gold and with a mighty swipe, separated the bird's head from its body.

Errant spurts of dark violet fluid spewed all through the air. Jin Tao carefully evaded, and leapt from the beast's back into the air. He immediately started toward his next target. The mangled corpse of his first victim tumbled to earth and made contact with a sickening splat.

But below, a different monster had chosen Jin Tao as its next meal. It leapt into the air, groping for him with its hulking arms. Black Gold spun in midair to avoid the rush while simultaneously swiping at the arm with its back legs. The force kicked the arm away and Jin Tao shot for the hideous baboon it belonged to.

Chapter 543: Righteous Protogenia!

If one had to describe Jin Tao's fighting style, one word would suffice – insane. The others in his crew weren't any better. They were like a pride of lions, tearing apart any alien beast that crossed their path. They didn't move on to the next until the first one was a bloody mess.

The unyielding pack of animals and the aid of the other brigades made it impossible for the aliens to advance. Everywhere they turned, destruction awaited.

The fighting reached a fever-pitch. For every alien that was killed, ten more took its place. It was like the entire planet was rising against them. They were certainly deficient in numbers, but each fighter was prepared and well trained. They were strong, and though their fighting wasn't as cohesive as a normal military division they relied on individual strength to advance and their mecha suit for defense.

Majesty and Zeus-1 were also integral as they soared overhead. Whenever the beasts seemed about to overrun the soldiers, one or several beams of light would crash down and obliterate great waves of them.

Third and Fourth Brigade were now in the fight. They were there to shore up the weaker parts of their defensive line against being flanked or overpowered.

The best way to learn about war was to participate in it. They needn't worry about morality against these foes. They would not surrender or plead for their lives. No one held back or harbored regrets.

This disregard allowed them to fight like demons. Aside from the A.R.C. students, one would be hard-pressed to find an Avenue Adept who didn't have at least some battle experience. They had the benefit of exquisite training and air support, and none of these creatures were overly difficult. Star Division didn't seem to have anything to fear.

All of this was even before considering the Paragon that flew among them! The Gourmet, the Pharmacist, and all four brigade leaders were the backbone of their strange company. When Lan Jue created the Division he

did so with the core principle that they must be invincible. They could not be allowed to lose or morale would suffer. If spirits remained high their progress would be quick, but that required victory. Insubordination, despite Lan Jue's fears, was not an issue. Everyone worked well together, and they were only getting better with time. Squad Leaders were effective in keeping their people in line. The Star Division's cohesive force was starting to show.

Of course, Lan Jue had not anticipated the appearance of their true enemy. Thankfully none were as strong as the beasts he'd encountered on Taihua, but that didn't mean they were out of the proverbial woods. Enough ants could take down an elephant, and these things were much larger than ants.

Still he was pleased with what he was seeing. Lan Jue ordered Majesty to patrol overhead and monitor the situation. He commanded the ship to engage if any sign of stronger enemies were spotted.

Meanwhile, the progenitor's tentacles continued their wild assault. Wherever the Pharmacist's swords chopped one down, another took its place. They seemed endless. What's more, the violet creatures that were killed within the sick zone were quickly consumed and used to creature reinforcements.

He left Majesty and Zeus-1 handle it from here.

He turned to the Gourmet at his side. "Alright, that's good enough." The three powerful Adepts were in no hurry to deal with the progenitor. First Lan Jue wanted his soldiers to experience the enemy. They had to become familiar with the beasts they were trying to eradicate. Analysts were also busy getting all the information they could to make future encounters easier.

"I'll do it!" The Pharmacist exclaimed.

Lan Jue turned to her. "Alright." At first he'd planned to go in himself, but the Pharmacist was just as well. He wanted to save the Gourmet as a trump card in case there were any stronger aliens lying in wait.

The Pharmacist's mecha split as its chest plate opened. A beam of light

issued forth and deposited the powerful Adept in midair. The myriad swords she'd summoned returned to her like rivers to an ocean.

The Pharmacist adopting a fighting stance, hands in front of her. As the swords approached they tried to overlay one another and occupy the same space. As they combined the ten-meter long sword began to swell. With every copy it consumed the sword's aura became more oppressive. It bore a sharpness that filled the area with the promise of destruction. The progenitor's tentacles were suddenly hesitant to engage.

From the weapon's point, a beam of light issued up toward the heavens, and the sword began to rise higher. The woman's eyes were alive with scenes of the cosmos, and then her sweet voice called to the sword. "Banish the demons!"

A rune was scrawled in light at her back, burning against the darkness. Motes of errant light began to gather around her sword. The next moment it was off, leaving behind a glimmering after-image.

Night had fallen on Tempest, but was assailed and split by a beam of light. Occisus, headed right for the progenitor. The creature appeared to know the danger and writhed grotesquely. Its flailing tentacles did everything they could to try and keep the sword at bay.

But it was fruitless. A wake of smoldering fire and shimmering starlight was left behind in the sword's passage. The two-hundred meter long weapon carved through the night sky, ultimately burying itself in the monstrous bud and disappearing.

Time seemed to stand still. The creatures below were suddenly wracked with convulsions. Combat slowly ceased. The soldiers could feel the tremendous power radiating from overhead and lifted their eyes. Many of them could only stare in wonder.

This power...

Protogenia!

Lan Jue could feel the purity of it, like she was molding the essence of protogenia. She wasn't a Paragon, but she had long ago come to

comprehend her own protogenia. It was the first time he'd seen her use it.

Righteousness! Yes, the Pharmacist's power was virtue, a righteous heart! 'The universe is possessed of righteousness, which it bestows upon the myriad creatures. From the lowest rivers to the loftiest mountains; from the basest life to the soaring stars. In men it is called integrity, and it permeates everything.'¹

No wonder. No wonder she was accepted by the deadly Occisus. I relied on that righteousness and an invincible heart!

Just then, several glossy beams of light shot from the wound left behind by Occisus. It spread throughout and began to burst forth in blazing fissures. As the creature's exterior was ripped apart, the star-like brilliance within drawing every eye.

Within the bud was a second creature, but markedly differing from the others. Instead of being some towering beast, this one was roughly shape of a man. Albeit a stubby, bloated man. Its arms were noticeably shorter than you'd expect, and thick. They managed with some effort to lift the Pharmacist's glittering sword.

The creature's whole body shimmered with a crystalline violet light, absent the sickening quality of its children. Something flickered within its chest, visible only occasionally. Black, writhing veins ran up and down the length of its stunted legs. That must be how it sustained itself, and the black substance nutrition from its surroundings.

"Ey!?" The Pharmacist blinked in surprise. She raised her right hand in preparation to strike it down, when suddenly Lan Jue cried out.

"Wait!"

Thor was gone in a flash. It shot through the air in a golden burst of lightning and reappeared in front of the progenitor. The beast continued to struggle keeping Occisus at bay. Sparks of violet became more erratic and intense as the fight went on.

Thor came closer and was able to pick out more detail. Compared with the mecha, this crystalline beast was much larger. It looked weak

physically, but the waves of power radiating from it were fierce and powerful. Normal attacks likely wouldn't do it much harm.

Thor swept its enormous sword, issuing forth a boom of sharp energy. The blast crossed the distance quickly, but the alien wasn't its target. Instead it screamed through the air toward the black veins extending from the creature's legs. When they collided many of the pulsing veins were blown apart. Great geysers of purple-black fluid were flung into the air.

A corona of golden electric light buzzed around Thor, burning away any of the fluid before it made contact. Suddenly without support the beast appeared on the verge of collapse. It was brought to its knees and the crackling light burned even fiercer.

"Sister!" Lan Jue called out. The Pharmacist knew what he was going to say.

Thor reeled back, then plunged its mammoth blade toward the progenitor's chest. However, when it made contact Lan Jue was surprised to find how sturdy it's 'flesh' was. His sword couldn't penetrate.

An irritated grunt huffed from the mecha. Under Lan Jue's control Thor exploded with golden light that extended through its weapon. All of the electric energy concentrated at the tip until it blazed brighter than a sun.

Crack! At last the beast's skin split and the golden blade slipped through. In that instant the seven stars affixed to the Occisus glowed. Starlight flooded the beleaguered monster until it detonated into a fine dust.

Floating amidst the cloud of ruined progenitor, was an orb of gold. The remnants of Thor's piercing sword.

The ground below was a ruin. After Lan Jue cut away the creature's arteries the beast below had all toppled, dead. Their bodies melted away into the violet landscape. Thor blasted high over the battlefield. The mecha flipped it's sword and the tip landed squarely in its palm, along with something else.

Chapter 544: Another Vital Crystal

Lan Jue brought Thor back to hover by the Gourmet and Pharmacist. The Pharmacist was back in her suit and her seven-star sword had vanished in a flash of light.

Cries of victory rang across the battlefield, filled with crazed enthusiasm. They had seen the alien progenitor destroyed in spectacular and shocking fashion. Every soldier was brimming with pride.

Lan Jue's voice addressed them through a universal communication channel. "We have slain a progenitor and earned an alien core for the Star Division!"

He punctuated the declaration by thrusting Thor's robotic hand into the air. Behind the glimmering light was a crystal roughly thirty centimeters in diameter. It was surrounded by an undulating halo of violet light.

An Alien Core! Quite the treasure after only their second fight, how could they not be excited? One step closer to the exuvium process! However not everyone was pleased. The Gourmet, Lan Jue and the Pharmacist were dour.

This progenitor wasn't overpowering. It couldn't stand up to the full might of the Pharmacist. However, making the Pharmacist employ her full strength was telling enough. In terms of human equivalency, the progenitor was probably akin to a peak-level Adept.

"I got the feeling it was still gestating." This time, Lan Jue's words were reserved for the two squad leaders with him.

The Pharmacist replied. "I think so, too. The dark arteries we severed were providing it energy from the planet. That would mean the bud was its cocoon or egg, and the crystal monster inside was the product. That is to say, it was strong but not a mature progenitor. But if that's true, how terrifying would a fully grown one be?"

It was her first time seeing these monsters face to face, and what she discovered shook her confidence. This one was affixed to the planet as

well, and couldn't compare to the destructive powers of the ones that took out the North's seventh fleet. Not to mention they had the capabilities to fight in deep space.

Obviously they hadn't seen how strong these things could ultimately get. From the recordings, everyone had seen the three alien planets and what they could do. It was the stuff of nightmares.

The Gourmet added his voice. "We need to alert Skyfire Avenue right away. We'll send back all the data we've collected, too. Now that we've found one out here I'm sure there will be others. The Shattered Starfields lies right at the heart of human occupied space. If they can be here, then they can hit us anywhere. I shudder to think."

"Absolutely," Lan Jue agreed. "Let's sweep the planet and see if there are any more of them here. This is the third time these things and I've crossed paths. I can sense... something. These smaller aliens, the hundreds we fought, aren't really aliens. They're perverted life created from the planet's energies. Mutations that heavily favor genetic traits of survivability. Note that when we fought them they could attack and defend, but didn't have any higher order of intelligence. Outwardly they look different, but really they're just skin deep. They are real living things, they're more like puppets. That's likely why they don't have Cores.

"The situation we found on Taihua was very similar. I killed countless monsters there and none of them had one. It was only once the Wine Master killed the progenitor hidden there that we got it. Now the monsters there were much stronger, and that's probably because of how much life there was on that planet. All the more for the progenitor to use in its gestation. It seems as though a progenitor lands and uses its own DNA to create these puppets. They, in turn, assist in devouring the planet's life. I don't really have any way to confirm this theory, but that's how I think the true aliens take over a planet."

The Gourmet's response was low and thoughtful. "It makes sense. We don't know a lot yet, but we're bound to learn more as contact increases. Send your theory back to the Avenue along with the other data for analysis. We need to prioritize bringing back a specimen. Third Brigade is

already collecting samples.”

“Good,” Lan Jue agreed.

Lan Jue’s communicator buzzed. It was Zeus-1.

“Boss.” Mika’s voice greeted him.

“Yeah, what’s up?” He replied.

“The infected area has started retreating. A quick look showed that it leaves barren land behind. Judging by its current speed, it should all disappear within a day.”

“Alright,” he said. Lan Jue then hung up and hailed Majesty. “Xiaosu, take Majesty on a quick scout of the planet and see if there are any more violet areas. Search the oceans as well. No stone unturned.”

“Aye,” she answered. Majesty’s radar was broader and more sensitive. It was well suited for seeking out any more foes.

First, Second, and Fourth Brigade set about searching the immediate area for any monsters that may have slipped through the cracks. They also kept an eye out for any indication of another progenitor. Third Brigade continued to gather specimens for research.

However, it wasn’t long before Third Brigade ran into a problem. Any sample they removed would immediately crumble to dust. Lifeless, drained dust. In fact the only thing they managed to hold on to were fragments of the arteries which were feeding the adolescent progenitor. Everything else defied their efforts. Experts from the brigade in botany and zoology concluded that the bogs were created when the alien introduced a substance that bonded with living material. Once the alien was killed and that substance deprived, the world quickly returned to normal.

In the end they had to be content with whatever they could box up. Any clue was a small victory.

Majesty made two circuits around Tempest, ultimately confirming that all alien life was extinguished. Tempest’s scans were clear of everything. The Desert Tempest Pirate Clan seemed to have vanished into thin air. It

was noted, though, that the battleship they were reported to have was nowhere to be seen, even though there were several more ships still in the hangars. Sadly they were too corroded for use.

Their consolation prize came when scans picked up the pirate's treasure cache. It was buried underground, as pirates seemed to prefer, in an underground warehouse. It was protected by thick alloy walls. There were signs of damage as well, but not as extensive. Soldiers estimated it would take ten direct hits from a battleship to pierce those walls.

There had to be something good in there.

Of course where a battleship failed, Occisus would not. It wasn't the sharpest of the Banishing blades, but a godly weapon nonetheless. Warehouse walls were not a problem. When the Pharmacist was done, the Desert Tempest pirates' greatest treasures were revealed to them.

Tang Xiao, as Lan Jue's disciple and a squad leader, had come over to observe. When he saw what was inside, his first reaction was to blurt out, "space piracy pays damn well!"

His comment earned a number of sidelong glances, but that was just until they saw the riches for themselves. The cache was more than ten times the size of the Poison Wasp Clan's. Advantages of being an established pirate clan.

The first thing to draw the eye was the fifty mecha suits, perfectly maintained, standing in solemn silence. Star Division soldiers were spoiled, but they still recognized quality when they saw it. Crates of weapons were stashed nearby.

Lan Jue couldn't help but look impressed. The Desert Tempest was strong. In the end, though, the alien was stronger. Its strategy was insidious, hiding until its strength was gathered then attacking without warning. By the time they sensed something wasn't right, it was already too late. The pirates had all their gadgets pointed at space and weren't defended against an enemy from within. Their hubris ultimately lead to their doom.

Yet, there were still questions. They were an established pirate clan, but

this made them seem weak. They should have had no less than five hundred mecha pilots. Assuming they could mount a defense, it wouldn't have been too difficult to get all their ships off the ground. Under circumstances like that, could they have really been so easily obliterated?

Lan Jue pondered the troubling question as he led the others into the warehouse.

A section was reserved for stacks of power gems, meticulously organized. The fist-sized stones pulsed with enough energy to power a standard mecha for three hours. Best guess, there were two thousand of them here. This was a good day's work.

Chapter 545: Another Fortune

Several boxes were stacked in the far reaches of the warehouse, surrounded by non-perishable foods. When the boxes were opened, they found them filled to the brim with more power gems.

The majority were C-rank. Two of the crates were B-ranked gems, and only a handful were A-ranked. From where Lan Jue was standing, it looked like the costs for sending out the Star Division had already been recouped. The Shattered Starfields were two pirate clans poorer, and they were sitting on a good haul. These gems and suits would fetch an excellent price.

“Commander!” The Bartender hurried over to his side.

Lan Jue nodded. The Bartender continued with a wry chuckle. “The Desert Tempest were being bankrolled by the North. I did some digging and found traces of serial numbers on the mechas that hadn’t been completely filed off. They were all manufactured in the North. Five hundred suits is a whole lot. How could they manage it without someone high up in the government to help them out? They’re good suits, too, standard kit for Northern infantry. Twenty of them are upgraded versions we can probably use.”

The Driver interjected. “The heavy suits are suited for long-range, those should go to Second Brigade. You can divvy the rest among yourselves. “

“Shameless,” the Coffee Master complained. No one saw him approach. “What use are the others except to sell? You treacherous bastard!”

The Driver snickered. “Slander. The desire comes making the best use of the equipment we find. Second Brigade is specialized in long-ranged attack. It makes sense that they should go to us.”

“We’ll spread the wealth later,” Lan Jue ordered. “Get everything on the ships.”

Lan Jue had practically abused his relationship with the Wine Master, extorting him for the best equipment available. Among that were

interdimensional storage arrays to collect and store their booty. These pockets of space between realities weren't simple to create. It wasn't a matter of money or power gems. One needed a high-level Adept skilled in the Discipline to set them up.

The Wine Master was just such an Adept. In fact, aside from the Cosmagus' aunt there was no human alive with more command of interdimensional space. Lan Jue had no qualms tapping that resource. So, even though this warehouse was full to bursting, moving everything to their own coffers would not be a problem.

Third Brigade was put in charge of organizing transport.

As they exited the warehouse, the Pharmacist addressed her commander. "This place seems as good as any. Will you join with them here?" He knew she meant the sword-spirits Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi.

But Lan Jue shook his head. "No. I still sense something isn't right. This isn't the best place for it. The amount of treasure they have suggests their crew is larger than we thought. They have to have more than fifteen hundred pirates. Populations always grow over time as families are made, then pair that with the level of infrastructure. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than ten thousand people here, wives and kids included. You don't get to be that big without having your systems complete. That means that even if the alien caught them unprepared, they would still be able to fight back. Yet, there's no signs of struggle. Their battleship is also conspicuously absent. It's not right."

The Pharmacist was a smart woman. She picked up on his concerns right away. "So you're saying there's another alien. One that can fight in space and shot the battleship down?"

Lan Jue nodded. "That's why Majesty is still airborne. Consider the progenitor we fought. If the beasts and bog come from it, where did it come from? Who brought the seed of the alien here to gestate? Whatever did must be powerful to make the trip here from those alien planets. It's likely that alien is still around, and that's what destroyed the Desert

Tempest Pirate Clan.”

The Pharmacist nodded thoughtfully. “It’s as good a theory as any. If you don’t plan to join here, then where? Other planets aren’t sure to be safe, either. The Starfields are full of pirates and we can’t be sure what we’ll run into.”

Lan Jue put her at ease. “We’ll do the joining here, just not now. First let’s make sure everyone’s safe.”

The Pharmacist frowned. “The universe is vast. We can’t be sure another alien is here or will come back!”

Lan Jue offered a placating smile. “We don’t need absolute proof, just stick to the plan. We establish a temporary base here to rest and resupply. Then we radiate outward, picking off the smaller clans. First let’s make sure we get the base up and running, then we can revisit the issue. If the carrier alien returns it won’t hesitate to attack and we’ll need to be ready. Once we know we can defend ourselves, the joining can continue.”

A pretty smile stretched her lips. “Fine. The wisdom of experience. Don’t worry, I’ll guard your back no matter what. Just let another one of those things dare attack. I’ll handle it, and we’ll have another Core to add to the collection.”

He nodded, however a mysterious look flit behind his eyes. What he didn’t share was the question of what they would do if the carrier alien attacked from orbit.

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It didn’t take long for Star Division to establish a base of operations. A lot of the infrastructure from the Desert Tempest remained. Although damaged by corrosion, some equipment could still be used. They also installed the radar system from the Poison Wasps. Most of the work was done by a host of construction droids which got the job done in no time.

Zeus-1 was docked at base, but Majesty was nowhere to be found. In fact, even Brigade commanders weren’t told where it’d gone. They were busy setting up the base on Tempest.

After several long flights and two battles, everyone was tired. Tempest was a planet not hostile to life. The oxygen content was lower than humans were accustomed to, but a few puffs from an oxygen tank now and again was enough to stave off hypoxia. The food they'd pillaged from the warehouse became their dinner and the base's interior became a hive of activity.

Space travel wasn't a new experience for these soldiers, but only a few of them were ever involved in plundering. It was a novel experience for most. Their victories and riches fresh in mind, the base was filled with sounds of joy.

Lan Jue stood on the second story balcony of a building, looking out into the distance. He had an arm wrapped around Qianlin.

Qianlin's eyes stared blankly at nothing. She stood there like a beautiful statue. Occasionally Lan Jue would straighten her wind-tousled hair or stroke her bright face. A look of contentment filled his face.

Qianlin's condition was steadily improving. A lot of what was once impossible, she could now do with only a little help. It helped save Lan Jue a lot of effort in caring for her. Still, he never left her alone for more than a moment. Other than official duties or battle, he was by her side.

She still couldn't talk or respond to him in any way, but Lan Jue felt enriched by her presence.

"Are you ready?" A voice called to him from behind.

Lan Jue turned his head. Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi had arrived. They were both dressed in breeze white garb.

Lan Jue looked at them, then looked at Qianlin by his side. "I've been ready."

"Then we must begin as soon as possible." Both men flickered with a faint, ethereal light. As sword-spirits, the chance to bond with a master and embark on a new era of life was the most exciting prospect. It was preferred over fading into nothing.

Lan Jue led Qianlin back into the room. Inside the Pharmacist was

already waiting, along with all of First Brigades' Ace Squad. Soundlessly they fanned out to protect the room from without. The Pharmacist remained.

The Gourmet wasn't present, since his responsibility was to watch for any signs of the alien. For now the base was the site of widespread celebration, but that was on the surface. The soldiers were ever wary, and now that the base was established they could react at any moment.

The Pharmacist offered a stern reminder. "Open your body and heart as much as you can. No matter the pain you experience, keep your mind sharp and your willpower firm. Lose control for a moment and it will fail. Fail and your body will suffer the consequences. Do you understand?"

Lan Jue nodded. He took Qianlin's hand, and the two of them walked to the center of the room. He turned to face her and then, looking deep into her eyes, leaned in for a gentle kiss. Her pink, plump lips were infatuating. Lan Jue's eyes were full of love.

The Pharmacist turned away, just enough so they were out of view. She couldn't stand to watch these public signs of affection. Her pained heart inevitably wondered if she would ever see that familiar silhouette again.

Chapter 546: Uniting with the Banishing Blades

In a flash of light, Qianlin vanished. Lan Jue's aura swelled as he rose to peak level.

He nodded toward the sword-spirits. "What do I need to do?"

Jun Yongye responded. "There are stages. First I will join with you. Then, Xuanyuan and Qianlin. Once our spirits clash you will experience the fluctuations in Captus, then you will perceive the dissolution as two become one. I will help you as much as I can."

"Got it!" Lan Jue nodded resolutely.

Jon Yunye motioned. "Please sit."

Lan Jue sat cross-legged on the floor with hands on his knees. His back was straight and tall.

Jun Yongye's face became serious. Xuanyuan Shishi retreated to stand by the Pharmacist's side.

Clang! The ringing sound was harsh against the ears. Lan Jue felt his very soul reverberating from impact. His focus immediately sharpened to a razor's edge, his eyes bright and vibrant.

A faint red light began to radiate around Jun Yongye. An unfamiliar sensation flooded the room.

Everything around Lan Jue vanished. It was as though he'd slipped into a separate reality. Lan Jue stared, but the outside world seemed murky and different.

Before his eyes, Jun Yongye fractured into a host of beaming lights. They arced up into the air. His red aura deepened until, all of a sudden, everything went dark. A single beam of red light was all that was left.

It was dark as a black hole. The stark red that split it in two was breathtaking.

The fabled blade, Captus, descended through the light, blade first. It was a bright red from hilt to point that pulsed incessantly. The moment he set his eyes upon it Lan Jue felt himself caught in its influence. His soul was painted with the red light of the sword.

It was marvelous. He made no effort to resist and simply experienced the sensations.

And then reality warped around him. A flash, then a slash of red light was racing right at him. It struck Lan Jue directly on top of his head. He shook violently as the light pierced him, impaling his soul. The power contained within him threatened to burst out of him. He felt like he was being torn into a hundred thousand pieces.

It was definitely not marvelous. The obliteration of one's soul was not something one could just grit their teeth and endure.

Lan Jue threw his head back and screamed at the top of his lungs. Glorious rays of red light erupted from every pore. He couldn't stop shaking, and with every painful jerk lightning burst from him.

Bolts of golden lightning appeared and vanished, colliding constantly with each other around and through his Core. It poured its energy in wild abandoned, like a dam that had burst.

Lan Jue suddenly knew what it meant when they said a pain worse than death. This is what they were talking about. Pain, unendurable pain the likes of which could break a man.

Everything was spinning. Lan Jue could feel his own body caught in the wildfire that was Captus. More precisely it was like a black hole in the pit of his stomach. It was sucking in bone, blood, organs and meridians.

"Clear your heart, focus your mind! You are joining with the sword spirit. You must endure it no matter what. Be strong and you will succeed." Jun Yongye's disembodied voice called through his mind. It helped root him in the moment.

The pain was excruciating, but Lan Jue clung to a single image. A pair of eyes, heavy with unwillingness and dismay, filled with agony. She didn't

want to leave him!

They were Qianlin's eyes, moments after receiving the killing blow meant for Lan Jue. The poison had stolen her ability to speak, leaving just her eyes to try and impart her final words.

How could any physical or ethereal pain match such agony? How could it compare with nearly watching Qianlin die? To the videos from she and Hera?

In that moment Lan Jue fixed on the thought. The pain his body was separate like it belonged to someone else. In his heart was only the boundless love he felt for Hera and Qianlin.

From the Pharmacist and Xuanyuan's perspective, Lan Jue had been consumed in a cocoon of glaring red light. The image of him wracked with pain was burned into their minds. Xuanyuan Shishi watched with knitted brows, while the Pharmacist nervously clenched her fists. She had experienced precisely what he was going through. She knew how much it hurt. Worse, it was insidious. The more you focused on the pain the worse it became.

Judging by the look on his face, she judged his process was more difficult than hers. This was to be expected, for the Banishing Blades were not equal in strength. Xuanyuan Shishi had told her once that Jun Yongye was the strongest sword-spirits to arise in the last ten thousand years.

He'd revealed that Jun Yongye had held back during the tournament, and that was the sole reason for Lan Jue's victory. The stronger the spirit, the more dominating the weapon – and the more painful the joining. Lan Jue had a tremendous weight on his shoulders.

This was the premise behind Jun Yongye's insistence of joining with Lan Jue first. Helping Qianlin bond with Xuanyuan Shishi would be an easier endeavor.

Their nervous gazes eased when they saw him begin to stabilize. His face was no longer a mask of pain, like he felt it no longer. It was replaced with a sentimental smile. He still shook from time to time but remained still and straight, seated on the floor. The red light flowed freely from his

pores, and the aura he released was firm. The light that surrounded him was cross-shaped, like a sword.

Xuanyuan Shishi's voice was joyful and relieved. "We have made the right decision. The results are even better than we'd hoped. The first one was the worst, what comes will be easier. He was a strong will."

The Pharmacist's face revealed a knowing smile. "Experienced men know how to overcome adversity. He's known suffering in his life. I had no idea he would channel it for fortitude."

The sword-spirit smiled and nodded. "They are fine candidates for mastering the Harmonious Swords."

This earned a surprise look from the Pharmacist. "You two were unable to learn the style? It's obvious both of you have studied the sword to near perfection!"

Chapter 547: Thunder Essence

Xuanyuan Shishi's face fell. "You shouldn't tease, sword-sister. The Banishing Blades have creates spirits out of balance. Only one of us is female, Occisus. It would be.... Strange for us to perform a style based on such affection. As we have both trained profoundly in other styles, combining them is also difficult."

The Pharmacist's eyes were wide. "So that's the way it is? I thought you two could combine harmoniously. No wonder you two fled so quickly when the Terminator showed up."

Xuanyuan Shishi was trying to keep his composure. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't always have to point out the truth, sister."

"Huh?!" Their conversation was interrupted as the Pharmacist suddenly exclaimed, and snapped her eyes to Lan Jue.

At some point, they don't know when, a white light had begun to spread from him. It was a gentle light was settled just over his skin and muscles like a film. It was only visible in passing, swelling and contracted with his breath. It gave Lan Jue a strange, ethereal quality.

This...

It wasn't the destructive power of Captus, nor was it Lan Jue's own Discipline. His Thunderbolt abilities had already been overcome and scattered by the Banishing Blade before being absorbed. The white light was none of this, and it permeated his whole body.

"That must be Qianlin's power." The Pharmacist offered after some consideration.

Xuanyuan Shishi was uncertain. "But hasn't she lost consciousness?"

She rolled her eyes. "Haven't you ever heard of lover's instinct?"

He stared blankly at her. "I'm a sword-spirit. All I know is that love is strange."

She grunted. "That's instinct."

The white light eased and supported Lan Jue. Captus' corona of red energy had vanished within him. Lan Jue sat cross-legged and unmoved, like he was in a trance. The seconds passed in silence until they became hours.

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"Lan Jue!" A low voice shook him from his focus on Hera and Qianlin. When he opened his eyes, he found himself still in that dark pocket of reality where nothing existed but the red sword. The red light it exuded surrounded them like a cocoon in the darkness.

"Yongye, is it you calling me?" Lan Jue asked, but did not speak. It was a thought given voice in this strange place.

"Yes. I am still in the process of joining with you. But there is a problem. There are some properties that do not meld well, and forcing them will make the process incomplete. We will need some outside help. If you have a power gem with thunder properties, I can try to channel myself through it as a means of transformation. That should solve the issue."

Lan Jue's face scrunched in thought. "Thunder gems are rare. The ones they find are all a-ranked. In fact I have one stored in Thor's Promise. Would that do?"

Jun Yongye's voice rang out once more from the sword. "Unlikely, it doesn't have the potency we need. Filtering my power will be difficult, but let us try."

Captus flashed, and Lan Jue was surprised to find Thor's Promise react in kind. Its pale green light flickered and danced among the steady red light of the sword. Another flash, and the sizeable contents hidden within Thor's Promise was laid bare.

The Banishing Blades were dimensional weapons. It would stand to reason their interdimensional control would extend to something like Lan Jue's ring.

Flash! The thunder gems in Lan Jue's collection hovered in the darkness between man and sword, twinkling in a rainbow of colors. "They're all

roughly the same; impure, weak... ey? Wait!”

Flash! Something else joined the stones. A box, with a strange metal nestled within. It was a light blue color itself, but deep sapphire specks of blue twinkling around it. Stranger still, at almost looked like it moved. Just a little – an incessant buzz back and forth – but enough to make it seem alive.

“This is...” There was hesitation in the sword-spirit’s voice.

Lan Jue’s eyes sparkled. He remembered it the moment it appeared. “Living metal. Nothing like it has ever been seen in the Three Alliances. I still haven’t been able to figure out what it does, but it seems to involve amplification. Injecting it with even a little inert energy doubles its potency. I also suspect its movements help make unstable energy easier to control. I got it in an auction, I don’t know any more specifics.”

“Oh, right. This is a type of metal only detected on Lyr’s seabed, salvaged from twenty thousand meters below the surface. It is likely there is nothing else in the universe like it, and if there is another in the future it’ll be different. As far as we know these living metals are possessed of a single element. They are also unyielding, resistant to any efforts to break it apart. I bought it in the hopes it could be made into an Astrum when I ascended to Paragon.” This was all that he knew of the strange prize from Lyr.

“You’re luck is unbelievable. This, this is thunder essence!” Jun Yongye’s infinitely calm voice was a pitch higher.

“Thunder essence? What metal is that?” Lan Jue asked curiously.

Jun Yongye explained. “Thunder essence isn’t actually metal, but a purified element of the planet. Legends talk of a time when great beasts roamed the land. They would grow so powerful that they threatened all life. In those dire times, there appeared the divine Empyrean Lightning. If the lightning’s support is strong, then the beast becomes an immortal and rises to the heavens. If it cannot then the process continues. Empyrean lightning was said to come in sets; four, six, or nine sets of nine. Only when the ninth bolt of the ninth strike is just enough to empower a

creature with lightning properties is thunder essence born. The creature rises to immortality, and though they leave only a fraction of their life force behind, it is the strongest, purest element in the universe.”

Lan Jue listened in stunned silence. “I am lucky! So should I use it for my future Astrum?”

“No, impossible! Thunder essence cannot be molded to suit your needs. Instead...”

Chapter 548: Thunder Essence is Absorbed

“Thunder essence cannot be molded!” Jun Yongye’s deep voice boomed from Captus.

Lan Jue was curious. “Then what is its purpose?”

“Absorption,” he answered. “It resonates with your thunderbolt Discipline. You should combine it with your core to make it a part of you. With time you will absorb the empyreal lightning and the essence of the life form that ascended to godhood.”

Lan Jue was still surprised by all he was learning. Are these things real? This empyreal lightning? Becoming an immortal?”

Jun Yongye nodded resolutely. 1 “Of course they’re real. You did not used to think the Banishing Blades were real, and yet we are. Our existence is to restrain the power of these immortals. With the Banishing Stance, even Da Luo2 would be easily vanquished. Although this thunder essence is wonderful, it cannot hold a candle to the strength we blades possess. Even when you break through to Paragon, you will be capable of harnessing no more than a tenth of my potential. As you grow in strength, so too will you draw more upon me.”

Lan Jue was veritably slack jawed. It was like a whole new reality opening up before his eyes.

“What should I do?” Lan Jue asked, desperate for instruction.

Jun Yongye’s deep, calm voice obliged. “First you must accept the thunder essence. Let it become a part of your Core. In this way it can nurture and protect you so that the joining will be easier. Once this is done, my concerns will be addressed and we can proceed. In the future you can use it as a supplement to your cultivation. With time it will become an integral part of your Discipline and make it stronger. Once absorption is complete, my estimation is you will be capable of commanding twenty, maybe thirty percent of my strength.”

No wonder they were considered ancient treasures. A Paragon capable of using only a fraction of its strength spoke volumes. What were these things ultimately capable of?

“Begin.” Jun Yongye urged with some impatience. The state they were in was a construct of Lan Jue’s mind, created with help from Captus. It was draining to his will, and couldn’t be maintained for very long.

Lan Jue nodded. He flicked his right hand and the box floated over to him. He opened the glass lid and took the thunder essence into his palm. His careful study of the object was put to the side when things started to become complicated. His road to Paragon had lengthened, so he’d put an Astrum out of mind. Now, it seemed like it was the proper moment.

The essence’s glossy exterior was a magnificent sapphire blue that twinkled in the light. Moments after picking it up, the malleable substance flowed over and coated his hand. It felt cool and smooth to the touch, much like a metal. However, there was still no sign or sense of energy from it. This was why the LYrian scientists were so stumped. How could a normal man, even a scientist, understand empyreal lightning or the immortals? How could they command that power?

“How?” He looked at the sword.

Jun Yongye’s voice answered. “Protogenic blood.”

Lan Jue shuddered down to his bones. He knew what he meant. Lan Jue lifted his other hand and it began to glow with a resplendent golden light. His Discipline had been reduced to chaos by the sword, but with Jun Yongye’s restraint he was able to command some portion of it. The accumulated protogenia slowly diffused outward. He drew upon the righteous power of his Ascension as the reservoir for this power. In this way, he was similar to the Pharmacist. The difference was in his versatility, culminating in the Ascension commands. The Pharmacist’s powers were pure amplification. One was general, one was specialized – which was better, it was hard to say.

Her path was undoubtedly decided by the presence of Occisus. The sheer lethality of it paired with amplification meant she didn’t need to rely on

any Domain. A single thrust could pierce anything. That was her path. Lan Jue was different. He adhered to the tenet that man was an inexorable part of nature. I am heaven, and heaven is me. Everything was connected.

As the crux of his protogenic comprehension continued to flow through his hand, Lan Jue's aura changed. It became vast and towering, turning the darkness around them into a fairyland of color. It was a hypnotic, engrossing world.

Lan Jue quickly flicked two fingers against one another, producing a small, vivid trickle of blood from their tips. The beads of blood were a pale golden hue.

This was protogenic blood, when the entirety of one's protogenic comprehension was infused into their essence and blood. It was only a few drops, but already Lan Jue's face was becoming pale and drawn.

The thunder essence sensed something, and began to shake more vigorously. It pitched and rolled, trying to get to the drops of protogenic blood. Lan Jue crooked his finger and shook it, splattering a single golden drop against its surface.

Almost immediately, the thunder essence stiffened to its previous globular state. Where it was a liquid before, now it looked more like a natural sculpture. The darker blue specks of color on its surface shimmered with an internal light and the shaking intensified.

Inert moments before, Lan Jue was immediately assailed with a torrential blast of some terrifying and indescribable.

It was an aura, not energy that he felt. And yet, Lan Jue felt like something had him by the throat. He couldn't breathe. In the face of that aura he was afraid he would be blown apart.

But then the familiar red light returned, seeping from his pores. As the light went out the vacuum left behind drew in the surrounding nimbus. It began to shake. Lan Jue was aware that this process would have been much more difficult without the Banishing Blade's help. After all, this was the product of mythical powers and immortal beings! With Captus and its sword-spirit at his side, he need not fear any storm.

The essence reacted, too. It melted in his hand and spread until it covered Lan Jue's whole body like an extra layer of skin. Soon nothing was left uncovered.

Lan Jue was a silhouette of glittering blue. The rest light from within him blazed brighter as Captus unleashed its dimension-fracturing power. The pale blue material vanished in an instant, and all that was left were the sapphire blue dots that peppered his skin. Even though, though, remained only a moment longer before they were sucked into his pores.

All of a sudden Lan Jue felt his body go numb. Normally he was the one inflicting this upon his enemies. It had been a long time since he experienced the discomfort himself.

The numbness wasn't constrained to his body either. It penetrated to his consciousness and spirit, flowering toward his chest. The more it moved inward, the more feeling returned to his limbs.

Lan Jue was right. Even at peak rank, it would have been practically impossible to try and absorb the essence. He couldn't withstand the power it held. Thankfully he had Captus and the strong sword-spirit in several generations to give him aid. They acted to restrain the essence and bear it in to the body, then seal it so its power would not release all at once. Together it made the process survivable.

Lan Jue didn't need to try and coerce or direct it. The essence flowed straight for his Core. Captus had punctured his Core with the intent of remaking it, but instead leaving it fractured. Thankfully, this would make things better.

The thunder essence flowed through the cracks and wormed its way into his Core. It reacted by releasing a flood of blinding light. The spindle-shaped Core warped under some unseen pressure to become rounded. Its golden light now had a pale blue hue that shimmered within, interspersed with pinpricks of darker sapphire light.

Lan Jue passively observed as the origin of his Discipline was subtly influenced before his eyes, to where even his protogenia was affected. This was certainly not a comfortable experience. Protogenia underpinned

everything Lan Jue had built, and a chance in that comprehension shook him to the pillars of who he was. It affected his future potential as a Paragon.

His internal energies surged. Any more, Lan Jue thought, and he might even break through to Paragon. This was worrisome, because the sudden change in his protogenic comprehension would make further growth difficult if rushed. Once Adepts became Paragons, there was no going back. Whatever they brought with them in terms of protogenia would be a part of them forever.

What could he do? Lan Jue's mind raced for a solution.

But just then he sensed another light within his chest. It was the familiar red of Captus, and a beam of light shot through the top of his Core all the way through to the bottom. The feeling of pressure, like he might explode, inexplicably disappeared. This was followed by a blinding display of red light that burst out – bringing with it the excruciating pain of the joining.

Captus was trying again!

With the thunder essence present to filter and soothe Captus' chaotic power, the pain was duller. The joining proceeded with no further issues.

Chapter 549: Sea Cucumber

Lan Jue awoke from his quiet contemplation of Hera and Qianlin. He suffered the pain of the joining with no more trouble. He had begun to change, influenced by the power of the sword. Under Jun Yongye's direction the thunder essence and Captus melded flawlessly to wash through Lan Jue's body and soul.

His skin flickered with red light, flashing from his pores. Skin, bones, blood, meridians... everything felt changed by the harsh addition of this light. Soon his whole body was a blazing red dot in the darkness. Sometimes it was strong, sometimes soft, and it brought to mind the young progenitor they'd recently slain.

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The Gourmet stood nearby, staring into the sky. He silently allowed the energies of the planet to flow around him like a river. Upon becoming Paragon, many changes reforged an Adept. They were no longer purely human, but beings of energy. This extended to their perception, which was thousands of times better than even a normal Adept. That's why a peak Adept couldn't content with even the weakest Paragon. Breaking through was to evolve into something else. It was a whole new world.

The Infernal Vanguard, the Gourmet – a newly made Paragon! He wasn't old either. There was room for growth in his future.

However, there was regret in the depths of his heart. Regret for a wasted youth. Once he'd become the Infernal Vanguard his thinking changed. His mind opened, and that allowed him to eventually realize that his painful past was manufactured – designed specifically to hurt him and his family.

At one time he was the greatest hope of the Hades Bloodline. He was to be their next Paragon, and was destined to lift the family back to its former glory. The Dark Citadel was very aware of this. However, while everyone knew Satan was ruthless, cunning and evil, they'd seen how he treated Mika. He was a protective father, how could such a man ever visit harm upon his own blood?

It wasn't Satan, and it wasn't his own family. Then who? The Gourmet had his suspicions, and even guessed the aim. In the end he'd achieved Paragon status, but the damage was already done. After more than ten years he didn't have the gall to face his family, nor could he represent them as Hades.

He was the Infernal Vanguard now, watching in defense of his former family though years of depression had weakened him. Breaking through had seemed sudden, but it was an accumulation over years. Even now his comprehension was as solid as it should have been. There was still time for growth, but the Gourmet suspected his limit would be second level.

But that was by no means a slight. Paragons who were Reflections of Heaven and Earth were among the strongest beings in humanity. Even the Terminator was second level. However, there was something about Lan Jue... about Lan Qing, too, and even Chu Cheng.

Lan Qing, Chu Cheng and Hua Li all left Skyfire after the meeting with the Clairvoyant. Before he left, Chu Cheng's revelations changed him thoroughly.

Because of this, the Gourmet sat and spoke with his nephew at length. He shared everything he'd learned from years of experience. It was time to pass the mantle to the next hope for the Hades bloodline, Chu Cheng.

From his Paragon's perspective, they were all powerful potential leaders. But even though Lan Jue was the weakest of them in Discipline, in the end he would surpass them all. He watched the young Jewelry Master explode in strength and display a deep and comprehensive understanding of the world. When it rains it pours – it was just as true for Paragons. The Pharmacist was the same.

He saw it during the tournament. So long as Lan Jue and the Pharmacist kept improving, they would join the ranks of those like Jue Di and Celestial Master Qian – the next generation of super humans!

The thought brought a small smile to the Gourmet's face. He was eager for the day they would grow into a leadership role. He was looking forward to a long vacation with the Seamstress, where he could forget about his

long years of gloomy solitude. He'd earned some relaxation time.

Just then his spine straightened, and the Gourmet's eyes snapped to Lan Jue. The Seamstress, seated beside him, yelped in surprise.

"What is it?"

The Gourmet looked back at her, with a complicated and awe-struck look in his eyes. "Such a strong aura."

The Seamstress was no slouch as an Adept, but her perception could not compare to her lover's.

Another shock came when the base's alarm system started wailing. Ree! Ree! Ree! The urgent bells were deafening. The resting soldiers were immediately on their feet, Disciplines flaring. Contingents of mechas rushed to prepare for battle.

"This is Majesty. This is Majesty reporting in. We've picked up an unidentified object closing in on Tempest. Preliminary data suggests an alien carrier ship, one thousand two hundred meters long. Power readings are similar to a human capital ship. ETA one hour before it enters Tempest orbit. Prepare for battle!"

The Gourmet's eyes became hard and cold. "You stay here and make sure they mount a stable line of defense. Don't act rashly. Let me take a look at what we're dealing with."

Even before he finished speaking, the Gourmet dissolved into a beam of light and shot into the sky. He didn't bring his mecha. If he had to fight, the suit would just get in the way. He wasn't sure he'd be able to take an alien that large. It was capable of interstellar migration, after all.

Their fears would soon be confirmed. The alien was an enormous oblong thing that was crimson red from front to back. Its whole body seemed to slither through space like an accordion, contracting then expanding rhythmically. It raced ahead at subluminal speeds, its six crimson eyes fixed on Tempest.

Su Xiaosu stared out of the bridge's windows. "What's the analysis?"

The Accountant's fingers were feverishly jabbing away at the controls. "According to the data recovered from the Jewelry Master's first encounter, it's a ninety-one percent match – only stronger. Data indicates two levels higher. We have no other way to scan for information or energy readings."

Majesty hovered above the planet. With the Blinding Stone equipped and running only on essential systems, the ship was virtually a specter. They were taking all precautions to remain unseen by the invader.

"Charge the main cannon!" Su Xiaosu barked the command. She knew Lan Jue was in the middle of the joining. It fell to her to make sure this beast didn't interrupt her boss' cultivation.

Meanwhile the Accountant and his team deftly controlled their flagship, bringing everything online. Their objective changed from observe to intercept. The cannons hummed as they prepared to block the creature's advance. Confidence in their ship and its crew was high.

A lazy, admonishing voice chattered through the ship's speakers. "There's no need for that cannon yet. Let me take a look. I need a chance to move these old bones."

The Accountant, upon hearing the familiar voice, relaxed immediately. He chuckled and brought his hands back to the armrests. Su Xiaosu saluted from the center of the bridge.

On Tempest.

The Gourmet soared through the sky. In a blink he was five hundred meters above ground, any higher and he'd be in the stratosphere – then space. That was precisely where he was going to fight this thing. As a Paragon he had the ability to fight and survive in space. He wasn't sure which direction the alien was approaching from, but the Gourmet wasn't out to look for it. He just had to protect Lan Jue.

Then something caught the corner of his eye. A red dot was quickly getting bigger. Half a moment later the undulating, oval figure was in full

view. It had already pierced Tempest's atmosphere and was falling fast.

It was here!

The Gourmet took a deep breath and spread his arms out at his sides. The skies around them darkened and were quickly replaced with a swirling world of grey. The Paragon immediately called upon his Domain.

He would hold no punches in keeping this thing at bay. But where was Majesty? Why hadn't it intercepted it? Could it mean the ship was already...

He didn't have time to think about that, there were more pressing matters. His heart was anxious, but that didn't stop him from preparing for an all-out confrontation.

Here it was! At last the beast surged in to view. As Gourmet, once his eyes fell upon it he was consumed by a singular thought.

That's one hell of a sea cucumber.

The world of grey ignited, and a burst of energy like a supernova issued forth.

The Alien creature sensed the danger from below and slowed its approach. Its body swelled up defensively. Below the Gourmet watched as the burning hell he'd created grew sluggish. The patch of inferno above his head was invaded by a strange pink hue. Then, a deafening crack!

The fires leapt to life, burning normally. The pink was gone. So, too, was the alien...

How could it be? The Gourmet's surprised eyes searched the sky but found nothing. Some kind of shift?

"Little cook, relax. It's taken care of." There was a flash of light, and someone else was with him in the hellfire. The pink camera caught his attention first, but then he saw the dark-rimmed eyes, like they'd slept poorly.

"You..." The Gourmet just stared dumbly at Luo Xianni.

She fiddled with the camera hanging around her neck, then sang, "Take

advice from Luo Xianni, a camera is all you need.¹ What? Don't you feel well?"

Chapter 550: The Joining, Completed

“Yes! I’m convinced, you’re the best!” The practiced phrase came almost unconsciously to the Gourmet’s lips. He actually had no idea the Photographer was on board Majesty for this trip. How could she have gone so long without anyone knowing about it?

The Gourmet may not have known, but Lan Jue did. That was the only way he had the confidence to begin the joining here. If Luo Xianni couldn’t protect him, then there was no one in the galaxy that could. This was still human space so there wouldn’t be a lot of these things appearing suddenly. A few of them before a mighty Paragon was nothing to worry over.

She hadn’t come at Lan Jue’s request, but of her own volition. At first the Jewelry Master didn’t know, either. Jun Yongye and Captus’ sensitive perception had alerted him. When he confronted her, the Photographer’s reasons were simple; she wanted to protect her son. Her exact words were ‘So long as Bupang isn’t around, I’ll protect you. Nothing’s going to happen to my baby.’

She was taking to her stepmother role with gusto, despite Jue Di refusing to acknowledge her self-given title. Lan Jue had needed her before, but now at the cusp of this important moment, he called upon her for help. Because of her assistance, the world-destroying, capital ship sized alien invader was now just a picture.

“How’d you kill it?” the Gourmet asked.

“Don’t rush,” she chastised. “When my boy wakes up we’ll talk. He’s the commander, after all. I’m going back to bed – ah, sleep has been so good lately. Sleep is very important for women, you know. It keeps them beautiful.” She wagged her hand in farewell to the Gourmet, and was gone in a flash.

The younger Paragon shook his head at the spot where she had been. She was a sneaky one! But also, there was no one he’d rather have on his side!

The Star Division had taken a lot of resources from the Avenue. However, their existence and location were still a closely-guarded secret. Although they'd left the Avenue without an army, they did still have the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Keeper and Bookworm to keep them safe.

Ever since the Clockmaker's return, the Avenue has continue to rise in strength and status. Although they'd lost a powerful guiding light in the Clairvoyant, the loss was countered by the return of the Photographer. With the Clockmaker back home, the Avenue was even more a force to be reckoned with.

They were also united in defense against a common enemy. Neither the North nor West had the time or resources to put behind a campaign against Skyfire Avenue. The competition now was in seeing who could come up with a functioning exuvium process first. Who could get the most alien Cores?

Ultimately, success in perfecting the exuvium process was good for all humanity regardless of Alliance. It would be a boon for the species as a whole. Everyone understand that, and it was that knowledge that fueled the research and preparation. Scientists everywhere were throwing everything they had at the problem.

Purely from a technological standpoint, the Northern Alliance was head and shoulders above the pack. The West wasn't far behind. However, the East had its own advantages in the race. Eastern scientists had started research long before the other two, and the Neptune's Tears they needed were only produced on Lyr. Their sale was already tightly controlled. The Keeper and the Bookworm were also great minds who were Paragons. The things they could test went far beyond the capabilities of a normal researcher. They had also used themselves as guinea pigs for the first round of the process, which all together added up to a good head start for the East.

The East may not have had it all figured out, but everyone knew this was their golden age. The North had coveted the Eastern territories and their riches for ages, and if they could use this as leverage for more power and influence, that would turn a dire situation into a beneficial one.

All of this had been the backdrop behind the Eastern government's steadfast support of the Star Division. They spared no effort in giving whatever it was they needed for the guarantee of riches in the future, in the form of alien Cores.

They were the crux of this life-giving process! Without them, everything was a waste of time.

The Gourmet settled back on Tempest's surface and gave the order to shut off the alarms. With the crisis overcome, he could relax a little.

Lan Jue was unaware of everything. He was focused on maintaining concentration and battling the deadly pain of Captus.

After consuming the thunder essence, he could sense that the joining process was speeding up. The inherent powers of Captus were too great for it to flood Lan Jue with it directly. In all likelihood it would kill him. Luckily those who had come before knew how to do it safely; join auras, wills, and finally spirits.

After this had been completed, and with Captus carefully policing its own energies, Lan Jue could manage the pain. As Jun Yongye had instructed, the deeper his comprehension became, the more of the sword's power he would be able to command. Now he could only sustain himself through sheer force of will.

For Qianlin! To avenge Hera! No matter what, the joining had to succeed. To stand as a model for human accomplishment he needed strength. He yearned for it, for power. He would pay any price for it.

The seconds ticked by until eventually the red light around him began to dim. Slowly, the light seemed to recede back into his flesh. The erratic fluctuations were gone, replaced with an aura of peace and stability.

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Joy lit up Xuanyuan Shishi's face. "He's done it," the sword-spirit said to the Pharmacist. "It looks like everything went smoothly! I'm surprised they were so compatible. I always thought Captus would require an Adept with a dimensional-type Discipline."

The Pharmacist heaved a sigh of relief. She'd undergone the joining herself, but couldn't tell from the outside if it had finished. Xuanyuan Shishi's assurances put her at ease.

"I thought it was strange, too. Why would Jun Yongye choose him? His Discipline is Thunderbolt. Could they not have joined entirely?" The Pharmacist asked.

Xuanyuan Shishi looked back her way. "He was chosen in part for his strength and potential. More importantly, though, was his character. Our final determination was made when we saw the footage from Taihua. He was willing to sacrifice his own life to save others. That is the type of person we require as bearers."

A twinkle of admiration flitted through the Pharmacist's eyes. "He did a wonderful thing. The Clairvoyant said he had been in great danger. Qianlin and her Queen of Heaven powers saved his life. If not for her, he would have been consumed by his own Talent."

"The universe rewards the good. I can sense that he and Yongye have joined well." Xuanyuan Shishi nodded thoughtfully. "It's not as easy as it looks, as I'm sure you know. It's likely he had some treasure squirreled away to help him through. Once it's done, his Thunderbolt discipline should have tendrils of dimensional power within it. You have work to do, sword-sister. You can't let him surpass you. Heh heh..."

The Pharmacist answered with a soft smile. "If he manages to surpass me, that'll be a happy day. Why should I struggle against that?"

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The red light around Lan Jue continued to decline until it eventually disappeared. When it did, he became the picture of peaceful meditation. His body was slick with sweat, but it wasn't dirty. His body was purified from Qianlin's influence and his own daily wash of protogenia during cultivation.

The aura of light around him receded, too, until it retracted back into the top of Lan Jue's skull. A strange rune flickered in the center of his forehead for a moment before vanishing.¹

At last, Lan Jue's form was again revealed to the others. His aura was calm and even without any noticeable differences from before. His Discipline hadn't changed, either. He was still sitting at peak-level.

Lan Jue's eyes popped open. They glowed with a dim red light.

Looking down on him, the Pharmacist felt her spirit stir, like it wanted to stand up and just go. She focused inward to calm her emotions.

Xuanyuan Shishi chuckled, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Congratulations on your success."

The red light slowly faded. The Jewelry Master looked perfectly normal. He smiled. "Thank you. Are you ready to join with Qianlin?"

The sword-spirit's smile widened. "You're impatient. There's no rush, rest for a moment. Recover your original qi and we'll continue. If not how are you going to protect her!"

"Alright." Lan Jue took his leave, going for a shower.

He sighed contentedly as the warm water ran down his body. From outside there wasn't any different in his discipline, but Lan Jue could feel that he'd crossed an important threshold.

And that was Paragon!

Chapter 551: Lan Qing Wavering

Not really Paragon. Rather, like the Pharmacist Lan Jue found himself with one foot in the Realm of Protogenia. All he needed was a little more cultivation, and the desire. He could become a Paragon any day.

The thunder essence, through the catalyst of Captus, had deepened his comprehension of pure bolt, the protogenia-laced evolution of his Discipline. It would take time and cultivation to fully comprehend, however.

Lan Jue was beginning to understand his brother's situation. If his brother wanted, he could attempt to become a Paragon immediately, and would have a high chance of success. But he chose not to, instead taking it one small step at a time. He was tempering his willpower, and shoring up his foundation. Now that his ascension was assured, he had to prepare for future growth.

Jue Di's instruction was also priceless. While normal Adepts dreamed of the day they may become Paragons, Lan Jue and his brother were adopted by one. For them, becoming a Paragon was never in doubt. What would be difficult was what came after. They had to become stronger than their father, and do it fast.

The longer they stood at the cusp of Paragon, the deeper their understanding became. It was an investment in their future progress.

Lan Jue's face betrayed a soft smile. "Maybe now I can catch up, brother."

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An Lun.

Lan Qing walked down a corridor from a meeting that had just concluded. He rubbed his tired face, heading for his quarters.

The super soldier never demanded much in the way of outer comforts, something he and Lan Jue did not share. Lan Jue appreciated the finer things and sought them out. Lan Qing's focus had always been becoming

a soldier. Service and discipline was how he built his character. Lan Jue would never catch up because it wasn't in his character.

Training for the Bloodiron Khans had been going well. Lan Qing was lauded for his performance upon inspection by the top brass. But perfection came at a cost. Lan Qing was feeling from the pressure from the added responsibility. Now that they knew his program was successful he would receive more resources. More resources meant more responsibility and expectation.

An Lun orbited a star right on the border between East and North. It was an important strategic location. They didn't know where the aliens were going to strike, but it was safe to assume it would come from outside the periphery of human occupied space.

He knew about small-scale incursions from Lan Jue, but those were relatively easy to handle. It would be impossible for the real threat – one of their home planets – to sneak by their perimeter defense. With the intel at their disposal, it was most likely that the planets would make first contact in the North. That didn't mean that the East or West were in the clear, though.

An Lun was at full combat readiness. Scouting sorties and probes were busy at all hours. Tension was thick in the air because everyone knew that at any moment the enemy could appear at their gates.

Lan Qing's Discipline was also embroiled in an important crossroads. Every day he inched closer and closer to his breakthrough. He struggled mightily against it, fighting for every hour of preparation. However the mind was powerful, and influenced his cultivation. When he'd heard of the attempt on his brother's life, it had taken every ounce of will not to break through right there.

The Astral Phantom wouldn't dare remain on Skyfire, but his whereabouts were always a secret. The bastard was far too cunning. He could appear almost anywhere, at any time, and disappear into the shadows just as quickly.

One day I'll end him with my own hands! A light of murderous promise

blazed in Lan Qing's eyes.

He stepped into his quarters and pulled the door shut. His uniform was removed and carefully put to the side. He ate a simple meal, nutritious and bland. Then he sat cross-legged on the ground and began to meditate. This was his routine, when work did not demand his attention.

"This is not the son I know." The sudden voice made Lan Qing immediately tense up. He shot to his feet and swung his shocked eyes to its origin.

He sat in a chair, leaning against a nearby chair lazily. His jumpsuit was dirty and his hair was tousled.

"Father.... You're here..." Lan Qing's voice trailed off. He couldn't sustain his normally chill and emotionless exterior. A surge of feeling flitted through him.

Jue Di smirked. "You don't have time to visit, so I thought I would come by. Who's going to stop a father from seeing his son, eh?"

The rush of emotion had quickened Lan Qing's breath. His heart beat hard against his ribcage. If his subordinates saw Prometheus, the An Lun Super Soldier like this, it might put them in a coma.

"I'm thirsty!" Jue Di complained.

"Oh, oh." Lan Qing snapped awake and hurried to fetch his father a glass of water.

Jue Di took his time, taking a sip before placing the glass on the table. His eyes then returned to Lan Qing, looking him up and down. He nodded. "You look like you're struggling with something."

Lan Qing nodded. He couldn't hide anything from his father.

"When A-Jue was attacked by the Astral Phantom I nearly lost control. Mother intervened, but ever since my condition has been unstable."

"Mother?" Jue Di looked at him, stupefied. "When did you get a mother? Why don't I know about this?"

Lan Qing gave him a strange look. He told his father everything that had

happened on Skyfire.

By the end, Chi Bupang looked deflated. He chuckled ruefully. “This woman, goddamn! I never figured se’d use my own kids against me. Hmph! Never mind, let’s not talk about her. Let me see what the Clairvoyant gave you.”

Lan Qing pulled down the neck of his simple white shirt to reveal the pendant fused to his chest. There was no way to take it off, and it was as connected to his Discipline as it was to his skin.

Jue Di scowled at the flickering pendant. After a few moments of silence he spoke up. “He’s quite the handyman, isn’t he? Damn shyster. It should help you when you’re ready to break through. You don’t need to be concerned. Strengthen your faith, stick to the plan, and control your growth. Only when you can overcome yourself will you become truly mighty. You and A-Jue are different, you tread different paths. Astral Phantom, was it? Right! Mess with this old man’s kids and this old man will make you eat your own spine.”

“Father!” Lan Qing cried.

“Eh?” Jue Di looked back at his son.

Lan Qing met his gaze with a steely one of his own. “Let me, don’t get involved. This is a challenge for A-Jue and I.”

Jue Di’s face changed, and he smiled back. “Alright, it’s up to you. Whatever he throws at you, kill him with it. Now soothe your spirit and cultivate. I’ll be for here a little while. Do you guys need a mechanic?”

“Ah?” Lan Qing blinked at his father. His chest was filled with a happiness that was difficult to describe. Dad was sticking around?

He had grown under the strict, sometimes harsh guidance of Jue Di. Quietly he suffered whatever was necessary to please his adoptive father. So it was, day by day up to this moment. It wasn’t just respect, or admiration, or fear. He adored this man and worshipped him as a role model.

Jue Di was the strongest human in the universe. He was the sole victor

in the legendary battle of the Paragons. There was no equal under heaven. Lan Jue was desperate to catch up with his brother, but Lan Qing's singular desire was to surpass his father. So he fought with himself every day, working himself harder so that he could become strong. To protect his brother, to protect the East. It was his obsession.

Yet no matter how tremendous his power grew, a part of his heart would always remain soft. As the threat of foreign invasion loomed he was buried beneath a mountain of responsibilities. He could feel fatigue creeping into his bones. His dad chose now to come stay by him. He didn't need to say or do anything, just having Jue Di close helped. Even if all three of those alien planets were to show up right now, with his father at his back Lan Qing could face anything.

"Father, you..."

Jue Di gulped down the rest of his water and stretched. "You know I've always been restless. All this news of aliens and life-extending procedures – interesting stuff! Why wouldn't I come take a look? Maybe I'll grab a few of those Cores myself. They should be especially useful for pure lives like ours, eh?"

"Excellent!" Lan Qing's exhaustion was gone. Suddenly he was in high spirits.

"Where's A-Jue, anyway," Jue Di asked.

Lan Qing explained. "He's in the Shattered Starfields, clearing out pirates and training soldiers for his Star Division. And relax, the Gourmet is with him."

Jue Di nodded. "He's a sad and sentimental kid, compared to you. But he's damn lucky, and there's something about him that draws people. That's probably why that shyster picked him in the first place. 'Link' my ass... you just wanted my kid's power, and his connection to me. Ah, you old shit. You spent your life making plans, even got me caught up in it. But since you're dead I guess we won't make a fuss."

Chapter 552: Chu Family

Lan Qing wasn't qualified to offer an opinion on the Clairvoyant. But his little brother's face swam up to his memory. "I don't know why, dad, but I feel like these past couple days things have felt off. I'm afraid A-Jue might have run into some trouble again. I've got no way to get in touch while he's in the Starfields."

Jue Di shook his head. "It's fine, you don't need to worry so much about him. That shyster was bold but skillful. If your brother was destined for an early death, the bastard wouldn't have put so much responsibility on his shoulders. Take care of yourself first. Enough of that now, it's time for some exercise. Let's see where you can improve."

"Alright!"

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Planet Luo. Chu family estate.

Chu Cheng sat alone in a dark room, unspeaking, unmoving. He hadn't moved since coming back from Skyfire. The chamber was composed of stone. More specifically, it was composed of power gems – a fact that would deeply surprise your average Adept. They weren't the best gems, but making a room out of them was extravagant.

The benefits were in the fact that the internal energies couldn't escape. Even a pulse of protogenic energy would be leached away by the thick stone walls.

He was clad in simple, thin clothing. Around him a flickering aura of red would appear and then vanish. The flashes of red were in the shape of a lotus flower. Emberblossom – the Clairvoyant's pendant – burned bright against his chest.

Outside, two men watched. They looked through the translucent layers of stone as Chu Cheng meditated.

"This kid... when the time came, he stepped up. I'm surprised the Clairvoyant saw this in him." The one speaking was a craggy old man with

waves of white hair, somewhere in his eighties if his looks were anything to go by. Old though he was, he was not lacking in vitality. There was a quiet strength within him, and an even temperament.

“Unstable, but consistent improvement. This revelation will help him lay a solid foundation.” He was talking to a middle-aged man who stood nearby. That was Chu Cheng’s father, the patriarch of the Hades bloodline and the Gourmet’s older brother.”

He was overjoyed beyond words to see his historically lazy son so engrossed in cultivation. He was at least a hundred times more proud than he had been during the tournament.

The old man was Chu Cheng’s grandfather, former patriarch of the family Chu Yun. He himself was a peak-level Adept.

In the North, the Cheng family enjoyed a fine reputation and some considerable clout. The Perennial family enjoyed abundant riches and influence that extended to all three Alliances.

Chu Yun smiled. “Of course he’s doing well, I taught him after all. He’ll at least be stronger than that bastard brother of yours. It won’t be long before we wrest back control of the Dark Citadel.”

Chu Dong’s face was even, but he didn’t dare speak what was in his heart. He harbored an unspoken criticism of his father. Yes, it was true his son was taught by the elder Chu, but what did he teach him? To indulge in the unimportant, and shirk your duties. He was born with potential and if he had worked hard from the beginning, he’d have a chance at Paragon by now.

“You still blame me, don’t you? I know you do. You understand nothing.” He only had to glance at his son to see the disapproval on his face.

“No, how could I blame you?” The question sounded insincere.

Chu Yun scowled. “Enough. You’re my son, you think I don’t know what you’re thinking? You say you don’t blame me, but you do. I do, too. I saw so much go wrong with your brother. He was too pure, too easily deceived. If he’d had more experience in society, more time with people, then the

results would be better today. The wound he suffered was too deep, and it cut him to his soul. We were blessed with Chu Cheng, a second great Talent in as many generations. If I didn't try my best to correct after a loss, I would have been unworthy as a leader of the family."

"A-Cheng may have learned the distractions of life from me, but he has been a part of interstellar culture since he was small. He's experienced a lot, sown his wild oats as it were, of course he'd be resistant to settling down with a woman. Even if it becomes a problem later, he's more capable of handling it than Xi was. He won't be like him, a single setback won't tear him from his path. No matter what you think the proof is before your eyes. A-Cheng is much better than Xi was at his age. My guess is he'll awaken from this meditation at ninth rank. With his comprehension of Hades Blade and protogenia, I suspect he'll break through in no more than three years' time. Then the sky's the limit, ha ha ha ha!" Chu Yun threw his head back and cackled at the heavens.

Chu Dong winced. Ah, father... all of Chu Cheng's idiosyncrasies he learned from you. If you could just...

Lately Chu Yun's mood had been particularly good. He was well pleased. And for good reason. The Hades bloodline had been under Satan's thumb for generations. They've had to watch as he reaped the benefits of his pillage. It had been so long Chu Yun had begun to give up hope. You didn't get where they were without knowing some shortcuts, and they employed the experience and wealth of the family to get them this far.

But there were no easy roads to Paragon. You needed understanding, luck, and talent.

The Gourmet was Chu Yun's second son, Chu Xi. He was their great hope. A symbol for the return of the Hades bloodline. Who could have fathomed a woman would come and drive him away to distant parts of the galaxy. Vanished, for years.

After that, Chu Yun sunk into depression for a long time. He relinquished management of the family's affairs. He shook himself from the fog once Chu Cheng began to display tremendous talent.

And now? His grandson was on the cusp of that coveted title, and his estranged son had broken through in secret. He was part of the Paragon list – low on the list, but that didn't matter! He just broke through, who didn't start from the bottom? What was most important was that the family had a Paragon.

The Gourmet didn't have the stomach to face them and didn't come, but Chu Yun didn't care. At least he gave himself the name 'Infernal Vanguard.' I meant he would remain in self-imposed exile and keep watch over Hades. He still thought about the family, and if there was a problem he would come to their aid. To Chu Yun, that was enough.

If Chu Cheng broke through soon they would have two young Paragons. With enough time they could recapture the Dark Citadel from Satan's control. It was within his sight. Just thought often woke him up at night, giddy with anticipation. He was mad with joy.

Chu Cheng was not aware of how long he was in meditation. He sat alone, engulfed in the fires of Hades. Emberblossom had shown him a glimpse of fire's true face. From the instant the pendant fused to his skin, a deluge of knowledge filled his mind. In the center of it all was that single kernel of deep understanding.

Hades' Hellfire was made of the stuff of death, but was not death itself.

Legends told of Hades' realm, the world of the dead where souls ran rampant. Hades existed to control them. Just as the end of death was life, the Dark Citadel would burn bright again with the light of hellfire.

Life and death, dark and light. The deeper his thoughts ran the clearer it became; his Path. He was already in control of his Hades form, and the bottleneck that was keeping him burst to a new level of comprehension.

This feeling was as profound as it was wonderful. He needed more time to find it, and so the moment he returned from Skyfire he sunk back into meditation.

The deeper his understanding became, the more he could see the connections between life and death, light and dark. He felt remade body and spirit by the revelation.

This was an incredibly important event for Chu Cheng. Hypothetically speaking, if his potential capped at Paragon, now he had a chance at finding his specific Domain. It wasn't confined to the realm of Death. There was more to it than that.

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Planet Cobalt.

The blue planet circled quietly in the depths of Western Alliance territory. It got its name because of its striking hue.

Ninety-five percent of the planet's surface was covered in ocean. They were remarkably similar in composition to the seas on mankind's original planet. What few splotches of land did exist were spread apart as various islands.

Although Cobalt was within Western territory, it wasn't a part of the Western Alliance. In fact it belonged to all three Alliances, and one single powerful family. Or rather, group – the Poseidon Group!

Chapter 553: Poseidon's Palace

The Poseidon Group was the first to discover the planet. By then they were already a famous family, with a third for the secrets of the universe.

When their discovery was relayed to the West they demanded it become property of the government. Against everyone's expectations the Poseidon Group refused. Instead they chose to flex their muscle, stating that if they took the planet their family would no longer be affiliated with the Western Alliance. Their headquarters and assets would be moved to the North. It would make them an enemy for life.

If any other family had dared to threaten them this way the Western government would have laughed in their faces. They wouldn't shy away from more underhanded measures if they became necessary. However, the Poseidon Group was powerful and had their fingers in everything. Their influence resonated through all levels of government. If they did leave, it would have collapsed Western economy.

On the other hand, giving up a planet clearly rich in resources would undermine their credibility among their own people. The damage to their prestige would be disastrous. This, too, would reflect very poorly in their economy.

Parliament wasn't sure how to respond. They were prepared to deal with such a suddenly and openly hostile former ally. While they debated, the Poseidon Group used their connections in government to propose several stipulations. Included were assurances that half of the planet's mined resources would be sold back to the West at a reasonable price. In addition, the Poseidon Group would design and manufacture a Bastion ship to offer in trade.

The money and resources needed to create these cosmic fortresses was astronomical. In all the years previous the Western Alliance had managed three with great effort. These humongous machines were the symbol of human power!

The West noted this contribution and stopped any further efforts in

retrieving the planet. It was formally transferred to the Group's control. They, in turn, agreed to pay taxes and swore not to create any weapon of war stronger than a stellar cruiser.

For the Poseidon Group to have enough resources to build their own Bastion ship was a problem. If they applied themselves toward unbridled development, they would become a threat to the control of the Western government. With so much wealth they would need an army to protect it, hence the West's insistence on a stipulation to control their military. They were allowed as much firepower as the North had had in their Seventh Fleet.

The Poseidon Group lost a great deal of capital in that deal, but earned their own planet. They stayed a part of the West, and their reputation continued to grow until it was a shining gem among humanity. A single family that could bargain with a government, that was crazy!

Over the next fifteen years the Poseidon Group toiled to create the most modern Bastion ship the West had ever seen. They called it a Poseidon-Class Bastion, and to this day it patrols the West's borders.

The gift was a benefit for the Poseidon family in several ways. Most notable was the fact that much of the ship's crew were members of the Poseidon family. In order to protect their sizeable investment – and with the blessing of the West – a large portion of the Bastion's military personnel had to be from the family.

Another way to put it was to say a good portion of that ship was still under Poseidon control. Building a ship took resources, but keeping it running was just as pricey! Taking into consideration the family's government connections, it wasn't too much of a stretch to get their numbers up to one third the total personnel. The commander didn't have any connection to Poseidon – at least on the surface. Whether or not he had any sort of relationship with the universe's most powerful family was impossible to say.

The Group's business headquarters was on Europa, but the true heart of the family was on Cobalt. The planet did not have to adhere to any higher

government, so whatever the Group did was completely hidden from inquiring eyes. The West sent a representative once every year to make a cursory examination, and that was it.

Indeed, the Poseidon Group had spread across all of human space. They were a fact of life in every industry. In the West their influence was only getting stronger. Sharp-eyed specialists were often quoted as saying, 'The future of the West is Poseidon.'

But they were smart, and worked to keep themselves away from government backlash. They avoided becoming a target by reigning in their ambition. Their military was only half of what was agreed to and were only used as protection for merchant vessels. Every business had to deal on some level with the family, but they never got themselves involved in military. They kept themselves sharply separate from the other Adept groups, and restricted their financial endeavors largely to the West. This restraint earned them a fair amount of goodwill. By keeping everything strictly business, the Poseidon Group continued to win allies instead of enemies.

They were quick to open their coffers for humanitarian aid as well. To use their own words; 'For the People.' The Poseidon Group often liked to call themselves a charitable organization.

Satellite images affirmed that the surface of Cobalt was very calm. There were signs of manufacture and development on every island, but it was kept small. Only three of the islands were just large enough for a ship to land on.

This was largely symbolic, most people suspected. The planet's primary feature was its vast kilometers of ocean. But was that true?

The Poseidon Group called the ocean Achanis. Its surface was perfectly still, like a mirror. But underneath it was an entirely different world.

On the seabed, twenty thousand meters below the surface, the pressure was strong enough to kill most living things. However, a dim blue light existed in the darkness.

Enormous fields of light hung over more than twenty square kilometers

of sea bed. Strange as that was, one didn't see the brilliance until they got closer.

It was an underwater palace!

Simply for it to exist beneath the crushing pressure was a testament to their deep pockets. It was hard to imagine the kind of technology and resources they would need to pull this off, but that's just what they did.

Stranger than the shield was the building it protected. It was not a modern structure, but instead prescribed exactly to the myths of the Grecian sea of Poseidon. It was like peering into the past.

Naturally, it was called Corinth.

Only the heart of the Poseidon family were permitted to enter. In fact, the only ones to know Corinth existed at all were part of the family bloodline. That was how they built it, with the power of their ancient lineage. Their dramatic adherence to this ancient tradition was an inspiration.

Poseidon's bloodline was the seat of the family's power. All of the riches they accrued later was the work of careful management.

Hua Li stood quietly in a circular room. It was an enormous room in every sense of the word. Its ceiling stretched up thirty meters, supported by scores of pillars that stretched to the far walls. The Monarch stood before a beam of blue light that shot up from the floor at its center and seemed to penetrate the roof.

The beam of light was fifty meters in diameter. A soothing, soft blue nimbus radiated from its center. The room was filled with the rippling power of water.

"Have you at last come to take the Baptism? Have you had your fill of fun?" A deep voice demanded.

Hua Li turned toward the source of the voice; a tall, middle-aged man walking towards him.

They looked practically alike. The only difference was a hardness that

underlined the older man's expression.

"Father." Hua Li bowed respectfully. This was his father, the Poseidon of the last generation, Hua Xu.

The patriarch was clad in a flowing golden cape, draped over the traditional Grecian garb of the gods. Upon his head twinkled an ornate golden crown. He was a living remnant of that ancient religion.

Slow steps took him across the expansive room until he stopped a few feet from his son. His deep voice returned. "Have you made your decision? All you must do is submit to the Baptism of the Blood and birth an heir."

"Yes, I have made my decision. Only, must it be Mo Xiao? I don't wish to hurt her." A bitterness crept in to Hua Li's face.

His father's imperial gaze remained fixed upon him. "If you truly wish no harm to come to her, then she is who you must chose. It is her destiny to be your bride. To be the mother of the next Poseidon. This has been her choice. You may let her down, but you do not have the right to deprive her of that honor. You knew this day would come."

Hua Li's fists clenched. Waves of erratic energy flowed off of him.

"If you wish to pursue all that you desire, this is something you must undergo." There was a faint note of compassion in Hua Xu's voice.

Hua Li took a deep, calming breath. The conflicted look in his eye gradually faded. He offered a resolute nod. "Alright."

Chapter 554: The Ceremony

Hua Li turned back, his face calmer. His clothes fell away to reveal his perfectly sculpted form. A blue light suddenly shimmered to life between his brows. It looked like a drop-shaped power gem.

A gentle blue light enveloped his entire body. With a single step, Hua Li was swallowed into the beam of blue light. As he vanished into it the star-shaped pendant on his chest, Cerulea, seethed with wisps of pale blue power.

Hummmmm. The column of light intensified, as did the buzz of power. The people in Corinth all stopped and turned to face Poseidon's Palace.

A massive pillar of light shot from the palace into the sea above, through the shield and the vast fathoms to pierce the sky. The whole city began to shake as waves of water elemental energy converged on that point. A flood of blue light responded that covered all. The central beam blazed majestically.

The people here were either progeny or servants of the Poseidon bloodline. As the light fell upon them, one by one they piously fell to these knees in praise. This was the ancient rite passed down from generations, the ceremony that heralded the birth of another Poseidon.

Hua Xu stood just outside the column of light. Slowly his hands rose, lifting the golden crown from his head. All the while, a faint smile of pride turned his lips.

Although he wasn't perfect, he was his son. Hua Li was destined to take this step just as his father had before him. And he achieved it five years earlier than his father had.

He hadn't attended, but Hua Xu had watched the Great Adept tournament from start to finish. He saw the emergence of many talented young Adepts. But where there were riches, there must also follow tragedy. He had also heard the Clairvoyant's prophecies.

The future belongs to you, the youth. Go, my son, and put down your

burdens. Chase your wishes. In my day I lacked the courage to seek what I desired. You are a stronger man than I was.

A dark figure appeared silently at Hua Xu's shoulder. The only people allowed in this place now were those involved in the ceremony.

"It is too late for regrets. He says he owes you too much." Hua Xu turned slightly to face Mo Xiao, clad head to toe in black.

She was exceptionally beautiful today. Her full length black dress made her porcelain skin seem to shimmer. Upon her head sat a beautiful silver tiara, but that was all. That was all it took to make her look regal.

Her eyes took on a far off look as she faced the pillar of light. Hua Li remained suspended within, surrounded by motes of light. She murmured softly, "I was destined to be his wife from the moment I was born. If he doesn't agree, or refuses for any other reason, in my heart that does not change the fact. I am his mate, forever. I will bear his children, and they will be the glory of the Poseidon bloodline."

Hua Xu nodded slightly at her affirmations, but said nothing further. He turned away, but looked back once more to look upon his son, and Mo Xiao as her form became like crystal.

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Lan Jue's consciousness returned to the room where the joining had commenced. All evidence of past tribulations were gone. He moved even easier than he had before Captus carved at his Core.

The Pharmacist narrowed her eyes and focused on him. She could tell he was still at the peak of ninth level. She couldn't be sure how much his Discipline had improved when not joined with Qianlin, however she could sense that Lan Jue seemed completely different. It was a sensation she only ever felt from Paragons. Even then there was something unique about it, a gentleness that radiated around him. Even someone of her capabilities had to admire it.

What she felt wasn't something that could be given by a Banishing Blade! The Pharmacist was surprised, for she could only compare it to her

own joining process. His was much smoother and more complete by comparison.

Part of the reason was Lan Jue was stronger than she and her husband had been when they attempted it. Jun Yongye was also a more vibrant spirit than the one who guided her. Then there were other reasons.

What the Pharmacist saw, Xuanyuan Shishi saw as well.

The sword-spirit looked carefully at Lan Jue. “You must have taken something, some special treasure. I can sense the essence of an immortal around you. Impossible! The immortals have left the realm of men long ago and passed into infinity. Things are different now – it is inconceivable an immortal could be born!”

Lan Jue smiled. “Under Jun Yongye’s instruction, I consumed some thunder essence. That aura you feel isn’t mine, it must be from the essence.”

Surprise was clear in Shishi’s voice. “The product of empyrean lightning, thunder essence?”

Lan Jue nodded.

Xuanyuan Shihi gasped in amazement. “Your luck is unbelievable! I couldn’t fathom how you joined with Captus so well, but the thunder essence explains it. You’ll be able to support Qianlin in the joining without any trouble. Very well, it’s time to begin.”

Lan Jue looked back at him. “What do I have to do?” This time it was Qianlin who was receiving the sword, so he wasn’t sure how the process would be different.

Chortles issued from the spirit. “Nothing, just relax. I will take care of everything, you just need to shoulder the pain. I must find her spirit. Don’t worry, I will be careful. Who knows, you may be surprised.”

Lan Jue was solemn. “I only have one request. No matter the outcome of the joining, do whatever you can not to harm Qianlin.”

Xuanyuan Shishi answered with a nod. “It’s alright, everything will be

channeled through you. It cannot fail. I will warn you, though, that what you feel will be different from what you experienced with Jun Yongye.”

“Fine, let’s get going!” He was eager, and confident he could handle whatever was coming.

The typical, lazy smile was gone from the sword-spirit’s face. Instantly his aura changed. To Lan Jue, it was as though the world around them became dim and indistinct. He watched as Xuanyuan Shishi fractured into several copies, then rushed at him.

It felt like being stabbed by needles from different directions. They were like his muscles were trying to twist themselves in knots, causing insufferable spasms. Lan Jue shuddered, and then the needles buried themselves deeper into his body. Then it felt like they reached his veins. The stabbing pain immediately flowed all through him, making him shake. Outwardly it looked worse than his joining with Captus.

“Demortus is ever changeable, able to adapt and overcome. Steady the Core, bolster your will!” The Pharmacist’s urgent advice filled Lan Jue’s ears.

He could sense the flickering red light from his Core. A quiet and unassuming aura radiated around it. In response, Demortus’ boring trek into his body seemed to slow. Captus was giving him an opportunity to get his bearings. Jun Yongye was very familiar with Xuanyuan Shishi and this process. He chose to involve himself now, at the beginning when the pain was most severe.

Lan Jue’s aura stabilized and the pain receded, but he remained steadfast and prepared. Qianlin had faced down death for him. It was his turn to suffer on her behalf. He knew she was strong, so the joining wasn’t just to protect her. He knew she also wanted to grow and improve. That way, when she awoke she would not be far behind.

Captus stabbing pain had been constant, strong and unique. Demortus’ pain was like a hundred thousand biting cuts, all different but equally agonizing. It would appear first in one place, then appear in another half a heartbeat later – like there was a barbed needle for every pore on his body.

However, after the initial shock wore off, Lan Jue settled in to the discomfort. He had the experience of surviving Captus. And with the benefit of the thunder essence, he didn't have to fear damage to his Core as Qianlin underwent the joining.

Lan Jue was pleased to find that as the process continued, Qianlin appeared to join with the sword seamlessly. Qianlin's Discipline was inherently adaptable and accepting. There was no conflict as their two spirits met. The sword was met with the genuine desire to be interconnected.

Lan Jue silently nodded his admiration, not for Qianlin, but for the sword-spirits. They had indeed chosen well, as one might expect of a legendary sword.

The rest of the process went uncharacteristically well. Under the sword's direction their Cores split; one was Lan Jue's, and the other was a milky white hue with innumerable specks of blue swimming within.

Neither Core was the same as they had been when together. They seemed to yearn for each other, rely on one another. Qianlin's Core was the shadow image of Lan Jue's, the other side of the coin.

The strength of their Discipline did not change. It remained steadfast at the peak of ninth level. Demortus exhibited remarkable precision in keeping them from Paragon. However, the changes were evident.

Lan Jue was starting to understand the situation the Pharmacist had been in. She had just reached ninth level when she decided to join with Occisus. Ever since they were inseparably joined – she was a part of the sword. Cultivation became a very difficult exercise in resolve, as you constantly fought against the dominating will of the Banishing Blade.

Chapter 555: The Joining is Complete

Lan Jue and Qianlin were lucky. The sword-spirits guiding them were wise and powerful, helping them navigate the many problems in their path. They inhibited each other's tremendous power to ease the process. Together, they were also much stronger in Discipline than the Pharmacist had been. After-effects of the joining were few, and Lan Jue could feel Captus within him, everywhere and a part of everything.

A gentle hum arose, rousing Lan Jue from his meditations. The stabbing torment spread from head to toe, a sign that Qianlin and the spirit were one. This pain was his own from a body battered by the power of the swords.

"Is it finished?" The Pharmacist asked in wonder.

Lan Jue took a deep breath. The energy inside of him was like a raging tide, healing his damaged meridians. He smiled. "The joinings are done. Though it will take time for me to understand everything."

The Pharmacist returned his smile with one of her own. "You are much stronger than I was. It took me seven days and seven nights to complete my joining. You did it in three, with two swords. Rest and recover, I'll be right here to look over you."

"I will in a moment," he said. "I should see how the troops are doing first."

Three days joining with the swords meant his people had been sitting around for three days. These soldiers weren't here to help him cultivate, they were on a mission, and that had to take precedence. Besides, he had finished what he'd come to the planet to do.

It wasn't until after the process that Lan Jue understood the swords' insistence on finding a suitable planet. They'd needed a stable place where the tides of energy and space were consistent. There was too much in flux out in space, which was dangerous when the swords contained world-cleaving power. A momentary loss of control could mean disaster.

When he stepped out, the first thing that met the eye were mechas from all four brigades busy with drills. Star Division didn't have many – maybe eight hundred, half what you'd expect from a normal mecha division. Star Division still earned the name because it did more damage than a normal mecha division.

There was a flash, and a shadow appeared by Lan Jue's side. He turned his head to spot the Gourmet.

"Finished?" The Gourmet looked Lan Jue up and down. He was a little surprised to find little different on the kid after three days in meditation. Other than the fact his essence was gathered inside, there wasn't much else to speak of. It was his keen senses as a Paragon that told him there was something below the surface that was new.

Before he was called an outstanding Adept of his generation. Now, he could sense that this young man was already on his level. He could feel the threatening power wafting from him, and the only ones to make a Paragon feel that were other Paragons. And yet Lan Jue was clearly still ninth level. Something was special.

Lan Jue smiled and nodded. "You've worked hard. Have there been any more alien sightings?"

The Gourmet shot him a thumbs-up. "Your guess was spot on, a carrier alien showed up not long after you started meditating. It seemed strong. We were its target."

Lan Jue looked at him curiously. "Seemed strong? You didn't fight it?"

This earned a wry chuckle from the Paragon. "I didn't even have a chance. What a terrible thing to hide from me, why didn't you say something earlier?"

It was Lan Jue's turn to chuckle apologetically. "I only found out when we were in Tempest's orbit. Anyway the old lady was in deep sleep, I couldn't count on her to be reliable."

The Gourmet chuckled. "I'd be careful with your words. You don't know how good a Paragon's hearing is."

Lan Jue's face went white as a sheet. "I-I-I didn't say anything! Tell me what happened with the alien."

The Gourmet fought his laughter. "Take advice from Luo Xianni, a camera is all you need!"

He gaped at the Gourmet. "Even that thing she could just turn into a picture?"

"You haven't reached Paragon yet," the Gourmet said. "You don't know what the true power of a Paragon is like. That woman is probably only just slightly weaker than Jue Di. Forget aliens, with a thought she could turn me into an ugly selfie. I remember once the Wine Master telling me the story of the time Jue Di came to the Avenue. He took the opportunity to test himself against the Photographer. Jue Di was at a disadvantage through the whole fight. She was called Skyfire Avenue's secret weapon for a reason. With her back, the Avenue is really back to its former glory."

Lan Jue took a breath. He was learning more all the time about the woman who called herself his mother-in-law.

He pulled up his arm and dialed a string of numbers into the communicator. "Xiaosu, Driver, Bartender, Coffee Master. Time for a meeting."

The Gourmet looked at his commander. "So what's next on the agenda? Pirates, or aliens?"

Lan Jue's response was quick and resolute. "We can't know if there are any more in the vicinity. And if there are, we won't know where they've taken a planet. Our only objective can be pirates. They also find the most hospitable places for life. If the aliens were looking for nutrient sources, they'll be looking for pirates as well. Stick to the plan, and if we run across any of the monsters we take them out. If we don't we still have miscreants to kill. For me I should stay put for a little while and stabilize the two swords. The Star Division doesn't have that luxury. Coming off the high of victory we need to keep their morale up. They need a new mission."

It wasn't long before the leadership of Star Division was assembled. Lan Jue told them his plans.

Su Xiaosu had long since prepared a plan of operations. “Let’s just stick with our plan. We leave a small force here, and the rest go out hunting pirates. We’ll sweep the surrounding systems using Tempest as a base, what do you think?”

Lan Jue nodded. “You know these tactics better than anyone. The Division is under your command. There won’t be many needed here, just leave First Division’s Ace Squad and Zeus-1. You take the rest. With Majesty, I’m not worried about you.”

Su Xiaosu was a resolute and decisive leader. She immediately set about arranging everything.

The Driver watched her go and huffed. “What kind of chick pheromones are you using? Beautiful women all around, each one more capable than the last.”

The Coffee Master Chortled. “Capable. Yeah, that’s the word.”

“Screw off.” Lan Jue scowled dubiously at the Coffee Master, who danced away with a snicker.

Xiaosu was, as always, remarkable efficient. It wasn’t long until Star Division was ready to board Majesty and embark on their next adventure. Lan Jue had the Gourmet go with them as well. Tempest would be left to the Pharmacist, Lan Jue, and his Ace Squad. He left Xiaosu in command of First Brigade.

Majesty descended from above. Its ventral hull spat out a traction light that swallowed up the soldiers below one by one. Once aboard the ship returned to stealth mode and vanished into the dark sky to continue their hunt for pirates.

“Ah, it’s always best with your feet on the ground.” The voice was drawled and lazy. Lan Jue didn’t have to see to know who it was.

“Mother, why did you stay behind?” Lan Jue faced the Photographer, who’d surreptitiously arrived from who knows where, with a pleasant smile.

She pursed her lips and muttered like a malcontent child. “So

inconsiderate, you miserable child. Don't you know I'm here to protect you? Chu Bupang, that lousy bum, he can throw you to the wind but I can't. It was a chore just to meet you, I need to make sure you stay safe."

It was indisputable that Luo Xianni was a few flowers short of a bouquet, but her words were a comfort to Lan Jue. He'd never had a mom, or knew what a mother's love felt like. It was nice.

"From now on I'm going to call you Ma," Lan Jue announced. 1

Luo Xianni looked at him, stunned. Their eyes met, and she saw the sincerity in their depths.

Lan Jue was careful to address her respectfully up to this point. He spoke to her in that way because of her relationship with Bupang. These words, though, were from the heart.

"Good, good!" Luo Xianni laughed happily as she replied. The rims of her eyes had begun to get a little red.

He did mean it and everything the word implied. Without Luo Xianni he and Qianlin would be dead. The whole reason she'd come on this long, uncomfortable journey was to make sure he stayed safe. She was a Paragon who had reached Nirvana! Everything she was doing was out of that inexplicable desire to protect him. How could he not be moved by that?

Lan Jue approached her and took Luo Xianni gently by the arm. "My brother and I are orphans. After Jue Di took us under his wing, we spend all of our youth training. We had no one to turn to when it got hard. When we started going to school, the worst part of the day was always just before and just after classes. We'd watch other kids get picked up by their parents. We just had each other. He's never said anything about it, but I know Lan Qing saw it the way I did. Those were the times we wished we had a mom and a normal family. Now I have a chance to look after you as you grow old."

Luo Xianni reacted to his sweet display by rapping her knuckles against his skull. "What do you mean grow old?! You think I'm old? Go and cultivate, I'm going to have a look around." She pointedly wrenched her

arm from Lan Jue's grip and then vanished in a blink. The only evidence she'd been there were a couple drops of water.

Chapter 556: The Destructive Power of Captus

Lan Jue's hand snapped out and caught the drops in midair.

He sequestered himself again. This time it wasn't just for his body or Discipline, but also to more deeply understand the sword he'd joined with. He wanted to see how the thunder essence had changed him, too. He needed time to process and understand it all, on top of seeing how Qianlin was reacting to the process.

Qianlin had entered a strange state after joining with Demortus. Lan Jue found it difficult to sense how her energy changed. Her Core had been separated from his, and now she was as though lost in a deep meditation. He wanted to release her back into the world but found he couldn't. Thankfully Jun Yongye said this was to be expected, otherwise he'd be worried.

Star Division continued to clear out the pirates from around Tempest. The more experience they accrued the more efficient and masterful their raids became.

Su Xiaosu treated every skirmish like a war. No matter the foe, everything was meticulously planned and no punches were pulled. Any unit that dared to slack off was harshly dealt with, and those that performed well were rewarded with praise and commendations.

Over time the Star Division's strength increased. They worked better as a group.

Tempest was a remote planet, in the fringes of the Shattered Starfields far from the three primary planets. The magnetic disturbance of the Starfields made communication over such distances hard. It was good news for the Star Division, who were thus still a secret.

Xu Xiaosu still had contacts on the main planets feeding her information. From what they could gather, no one had any idea their crew was out here. The only thing out of the ordinary was the suspicion that the

Poison Wasp clan might have been taken out. They were a small crew, though, and no one was all that troubled. Clans took each other out all the time. The Moonfiend Pirates didn't rush to look into the matter.

This emboldened the Star Division, and their exploits reflected it. In twenty days they abused Majesty's speed to destroy more than twenty pirate clans of all sizes. They'd grown fat with plunder. None of the clans were larger than the Desert Tempest clan, and most were smaller.

They were halfway home when Lan Jue briefly left his hermitage to lengthen their mission. After twenty days of intense cultivation, he was like a new man. Lan Jue could already summon some of Captus' power.

"If we're going to keep this war up, then we're going to need to make a shift. We've taken care of most of the pirates in the area, we should start moving into the center of the galaxy. There are pirate clans in there who would be more deserving enemies." Xiaosu delivered the info and looked to him for guidance.

He nodded. "You're right, it's time to change things up. We've been here too long. Tell everyone to start packing up and load whatever's valuable on the ships. We're going deeper into the Starfields."

"Boss, don't you need to finish your meditations?" Xiaosu asked.

"For the time being, no," he answered.

She smiled. "Good, I'm happy to transfer command back to you. Too much pressure for me."

This made the Driver laugh. "Sure, I didn't see any evidence of that. On the battlefield you were a Valkyrie and you were rock solid through every conflict. Which battle have we walked away from with anything less than a flawless victory? Have any of our people been hurt?"

Lan Jue's answer was mysterious. "Do you want to see what I've been up to?"

The others looked sideways at once another. The Coffee Master was the one to respond. "Don't tell me you've broken through!"

Lan Jue shook his head. “That’s still a long way off. No, I’ve been learning to control a new weapon, I thought I’d show you the result. Strengthen your resolve.”

The Star Division’s biggest problem was that individually, they were too strong. To command a strong army, you needed first to suppress that strength for the benefit of the team.

Lan Jue had locked himself away for over twenty days. The soldier’s commander had to make an appearance, and he also was eager to see how far he could push himself with Captus.

Under everyone’s curious gaze, Lan Jue soared into the air overhead. A pale golden aura surrounded him like a rising star. Several of the nearby soldiers stopped to watch.

Suddenly the sky grew dark. Before the shocked eyes of the onlookers a colossus figure emerged from nowhere. It was over a thousand meters long, with skin that was a violet-purple hue. A host of megafauna like the beasts they fought before writhed around it.

Every eye was airborne now, shocked by what they saw. Soldiers rushed to summon and enter their mechas, ready to fight.

But they were stopped when a fierce red light appeared.

Lan Jue stopped, hovering high above ground. The golden aura had become red and then was gone. If the belly of the behemoth there was a flicker of crimson. Faster than one could breathe the light spread like a pestilence, spewing bursts of red light until it covered the monster from head to toe.

The humongous beast writhed and screamed. Cavernous wounds spontaneously opened across its body and spewed chunks of mangled flesh. Seconds later, that nightmarish beast was in tatters.

A red flash lit up Lan Jue’s hand, and reality gave way to a black hole. Space and time rippled around it in protest. As the beast struggled in its last throes of life, the event horizon severed it into countless billions of slivers, thin as an atom. Then it swallowed them up.

It happened in the blink of an eye. From the moment it appeared to its final death rattle, only a minute had passed. Lan Jue had needed only two motions to put it down.

The red light receded and vanished back into his body. Lan Jue returned to ground.

“Sorry, I just wanted to give the new sword a try.” He explained no further then returned to where he’d been sitting to wait for them. He was neither red faced nor out of breath. It was like nothing had happened at all – everything was perfectly normal.

Everyone just stared at him. A couple forgot to breathe for a moment. What the hell wasthat! That red light?

The others didn’t know where that beast had come from, but Su Xiaosu recognized it because she’d seen it from Majesty’s deck! After the beast had disappeared from their radars no one had known what was going on, but Lan Jue gave them the all-clear. Now it suddenly appeared out of the blue, only to be carved apart in a single minute, it was incredible.

In reality Lan Jue was also stunned by the results. What the others didn’t know was that just those two waves of Captus power drained his energy by eighty percent. Still, what power! The pillars of heaven shook with each movement of the banishing blades. ‘Frightening’ didn’t even begin to describe the sensation.

At Paragon – if what Jun Yongye said was true – he’d only be capable of using one tenth of what Captus could do. At his stage of cultivation he wasn’t yet able to join his Discipline with Captus. He shuddered to think of what would happen then.

He underestimated how much he’d have to work to kill the alien. When he faced the beast, a peculiar facet of the sword’s power was revealed. The aliens didn’t seem to have any way to shield themselves from it.

After so long captured as one of Luo Xianni’s pictures it was bound to be weak. However, it shouldn’t have been long enough to strip its natural defenses! It had evolved to exist in the unforgiving environment of space. Even so, two strikes from Captus was all that it took.

As if summoned, Jun Yongye's voice reverberated in the back of his mind. "Not bronze, not iron, not steel. Once hidden beneath Mount Meru. What can refine this? What fire can temper sharpness? We are the weapons meant to kill the unkillable. What paltry defense could these base creatures offer?"

Now he understood the source of the Pharmacist's awesome power. The Banishing Blades were even closer to legend than he'd imagined! He couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement. If there came a day when he could command all of its power, what sort of herculean feats could he achieve? He might even be stronger than his father.

Jun Yongye had become a part of him. Lan Jue's ideas were the sword's ideas. Yongye replied to his thoughts. "You will only be able to access all of Captus' strength if you became as strong as the ancient Da Luo, greatest of the god-immortals. Or, if you find the Banishing Stance. With the Stance, you could call upon all of our power."

Lan Jue was at a loss. Da Luo? Could he even imagine such a level of power?

Jun Yongye's voice returned. "Unless I am mistaken, the one you call father is on the cusp of immortality. He holds himself back, teetering on the precipice of a new reality. However he will not join the ranks of immortality. Their time has passed. The empyrean lightning flickers no more. Even if it were possible, the tiers of immortals were many. Ordinary immortals, celestial immortals, golden immortals and then at last you will rise to the power of Da Luo golden immortal."

Chapter 557: Envy Lovers, Not Immortals

“Alright,” Lan Jue said helplessly, “you’ve sufficiently dashed my hopes. I know I’ll never get that strong.”

The Voice of Jun Yongye chuckled. “Actually, it’s not entirely out of the question. You have the benefit of Captus and the thunder essence. If you reach the strength of your father, then there would be a chance at becoming an immortal. We could find a planet that is young and full of its primary qi to seek the empyrean lightning. These days the world of immortals has passed. If you were to reach the status of immortal, I’m not sure what would happen to you. At the very least your life will be extended by around three thousand years.”

“Three... three thousand years?” Lan Jue’s internal voice was thick with disbelief. No wonder people in the old days were so desperate to become immortals. Three thousand years put the exuvium process to shame!

“What about Qianlin? Could she reach that level?” Lan Jue hurriedly asked.

“For her, I fear it is impossible,” Jun Yongye replied. “Only you took on the properties of the thunder essence. You need need to find another treasure housing the spirit of an immortal if you want her to succeed. Or, you can try to have her reincarnated – but I strongly advise against that. The dangers are too great.”

Lan Jue sighed. “Yeah. If that’s the case then I won’t try it either.”

“Why? You’d be willing to give up life as a god?” Jun Yongye would be well pleased if Lan Jue lived for so long. The Banishing Blades could have only a single master at a time. Having chosen Lan Jue, he would do everything he could to help his new master improve. The longer Lan Jue lived, the longer Yongye’s consciousness would persist.

Lan Jue smiled. “Haven’t you heard the phrase, ‘Envy lovers, not Immortals.’ What would be the point of living for so long without the woman I love by my side? Life would be long, but wasteful.”

Jun Yongye was quiet for a moment. “Then you must strive to find another artifact like the thunder essence.”

Lan Jue was a little surprised. “The Banishing Blades are the strongest weapons that ever existed. You don’t have immortal qi as part of you?”

“Ha ha ha!” Jun Yongye burst into a string of guffaws. Lan Jue found it uncomfortable to be on the other side of mocking laughter.

When Jun Yongye regained his composure, he explained. “Of course not, not even heavenly qi. Our power is derived from time immemorable. Even the greatest Buddhist immortals discovered us and were afraid. If the Banishing Blades are gathered and their power revealed, any immortal nearby would be eradicated. So you tell me, would we bear such an essence?”

“Got it, you’re amazing!” Lan Jue said in resignation. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

As he sat there, lost in thought, the Star Division was in disarray. The dramatic scene from moments before was still fresh in their minds. It was dead? So quickly? The four brigade leaders furiously chattered among themselves. They were all Adepts of considerable power. That monstrous beast had blot out the sky, its power surging like tidal waves across the land. And then, it was chopped up like a brisket.

If it had been the Gourmet, then the beast probably would have been taken care of even quicker, but it wasn’t the Gourmet! It was their commander, who had just come back from three days of retreat. Did it mean the Star Division’s commanding officer had broken through to Paragon?

That was the only explanation any of the Division’s leadership could come up with. In fact any Adept who knew Lan Jue even superficially had the same thought.

If he did break through, then how many Paragons did the Avenue have, now? That wasn’t even considering the Division itself. A second Paragon at their back meant there were practically assured victory in whatever they chose to do.

There was a subset of soldiers who weren't in the know. For them, the question always persisted as to why Lan Jue was their commander, and not the Infernal Vanguard. Their questions were laid to rest after their commander's display. After what they saw, even the Gourmet may not be able a match for the Jewelry Master. With someone so strong at the helm, they were a force that would shake the faith of all their enemies!

Su Xiaosu, the Driver, the Bartender, and the Coffee Master each shared furtive looks, sharing their unspoken confusion. They sat across from Lan Jue who seemed lost in thought. No one dared speak and disturb him.

The Driver was particularly struck by what he'd seen. He and Lan Jue were old friends, drinking buddies. They'd cultivated together while searching the properties of their yin-yang Thunderbolt Disciplines. After blowing up a hotel room they didn't cultivate together any more, but his Talent had still improved.

The Driver always knew Lan Jue was stronger than he was. He was blessed with an almost unnatural streak of luck, too. This, though, was more than just a rank or two different! He must be cheating!

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Once Majesty and Zeus-1 left with the soldiers, Tempest had grown quiet. Their riches were already worthy of song, so there wasn't much on Tempest to keep them there. As their mission progressed, the likelihood of coming back to this distant planet was practically zero.

Lan Jue stood before the bridge's expansive windows, smiling softly. He turned his head toward Su Xiaosu. "What's our next objective?"

"The Red Widows," she answered. "They're one of the top ten pirate clan in the Shattered Starfields. After a month the soldiers are all working well together, it's time for them to face a stronger opponent. It'll stimulate their growth."

"Alright." He didn't press for any more information about the Red Widows. He trusted Xiaosu.

Normally, as commander of the Star Division, he personally managed all

matters no matter big or small. However, after his meditations things were different. First of all, Xiaosu's command and responsibility was no less than his own by this point. In the future Lan Jue would need to put more of his energy into cultivation, and he wouldn't have the mental or physical energy to deal with the multitude of problems that come with running an army. So, without making it widely known, Lan Jue went about expanding the responsibilities of his subordinates.

Once their destination was confirmed, Lan Jue returned to his quarters and returned to meditating. For the last few days he'd felt ill at ease, especially when he came out of his hermitage. Ever since the joining, he and Qianlin have been unable to separate.

Ever since accepting Demortuis, Qianlin had fallen into a strange state, almost like hibernation or meditation after deep understanding. He had to wait for her to snap out of it before they could separate. But could he wait? There was no other option.

Because they were still joined, Lan Jue was unable to tell how much his own Talent had grown. He was in no hurry for Paragon and wished to wait for Qianlin, so the bulk of his cultivation was spent trying to grasp the secrets of the thunder essence, controlling Captus, and stabilizing his own Discipline.

Jun Yongye applauded this period of relative peace. Joining with the Banishing Blade was only the initial step. If he wanted to become the sword's true master, then they had to be in complete harmony – completely symbiotic. To get there would take time and patience.

Two days later, Star Division was closing on their next target.

The Red Widows were different than the clans they'd faced before, in part because their base wasn't a planet, or even several planets. Strong though they were by comparison, they still didn't even come close to threatening the Moonfiend Pirates.

In fact their base was on a sizeable asteroid, which itself had captured three smaller space rocks in its orbit. The quad-asteroid set-up endowed them with natural barriers to protect themselves, and the bases on each of

the smaller rocks were capable of mounting a tenacious defense. At the first sign of danger the smaller bases would react, sending in whatever reinforcements they needed. Most of the clan's might was focused on their outlying bases because the planetoid had its own defense system that even extended to protect the asteroids.

According to Xiaosu's information, the Red Widows had two battleships, more than twenty patrol ships, and a well-equipped mecha division. They were also equipped with a planetary defense system which allowed them to bring a good slice of the Starfields under their control. That's how they earned their top ten spot on the pirate list.

The Red Widow Pirate Clan didn't have a very long history, maybe only fifteen years. In fact, the vast majority of pirate clans didn't have much of a history to speak of. They rose and fell faster than the ancient dynasties.

The Red Widows had caught Su Xiaosu's eye back when she had been the Moonfiend Empress, but she had been careful to not act rashly. It would have been very costly to deal with them, so she opted to permit their existence.

That was, until now. The Star Division needed a target.

Majesty and Zeus-1 stopped a few thousand kilometers from one of the clan's asteroids. With the Blinding Stones equipped, they were indistinguishable from the black expanse of space.

When Lan Jue entered the war room, his commanders were all gathered. Everyone agreed on the plan of action. It was time to press the attack. Lan Jue was settled in the captain's chair with Su Xiaosu at his side. The whole plan was hers, after all, it only made sense for her to lead the charge.

Chapter 558: Red Widow's Iron Curtain

Su Xiaosu tapped the table before her. Immediately, a three-dimensional image sprang to life in front of them. It was their primary base, on the rock they called Arachnid behind the asteroid belt.

“Arachnid’s planetary defenses are all-inclusive. Thanks to its asteroids, they have a considerable system of attack and defense established. If we go after one of the outlying bases, we’ll have to contend with the defenses and reinforcements from the other asteroids. If we go after their main base, the considerations are the same. This deterrent is what has kept the Red Widows safe. There’s no way to approach them.”

Su Xiaosu’s eyes were trained on the image as she spoke. She spread her hands, and the image enhanced.

“So, you have to overwhelm them with superior firepower. All four brigades could launch attacks on all four targets at once. If we can prevent the outlying bases from recovering, then our task is half done. Our intelligence says the Red Widows are three thousand men strong, with a thousand fully equipped mecha suits. Their fleet is spread through the bases, but their mecha are all on the main asteroid. Clearly their strategists are smart.”

The Driver chimed in, brows scrunched tightly together. “We’ve only got two ships, how are we going to fly four missions? Also if we don’t destroy the planetary defenses first thing, we’re likely to face casualties. The kind of firepower that things has, mecha suits won’t stand a chance. We’ll be routed.”

Xiaosu met his question with a mysterious grin. “You’re right, so the perfect plan isn’t available to us. We’ll have to resort to more drastic measures. We solve the little problems first, then we deal with the rest.” She pointedly indicated the largest asteroid, where the main base sat.

“Relatively speaking, our biggest concern is the planetary defense system. Majesty and Zeus-1 are fine, but if our mechs join in the fray we won’t be able to avoid losses. What we need to solve then, is that

particular menace.

“According to what I’ve been able to find out, the Red Widow Clan’s defenses are almost perfect. With their resources, no one could do it better. Their defenses are equipped with an electromagnetic field. That means that the Blinding Stone’s effects won’t help us once we get past the atmosphere. They’ll see it right away and engage their planetary defenses.”

The Coffee Master looked flustered. “And the pirates themselves? What are they doing hiding beneath their tortoise shell?”

Xu Xiaosu laughed. “Preparing to deal clean up when it comes to people like us, out to clean house! I can’t imagine how many pirate clans have been repelled by their defenses. So this is what we have to do...”

As they listened to her plan, the leaders of the Star Division each nodded in understanding. Cruel smiles spread across their lips.

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The Arachnid Asteroid Cluster.

One of the four enormous rocks spun quietly through space. It was mineral-rich, but hostile to life. Still, the Red Widow pirates paid a lot to have a base erected on the unforgiving surface. More than a few thousand souls occupied the planet now, along with a battleship and five smaller ships.

The Red Widow commander was a cautious man. While they were creating this place he was often prone to outbursts of anger. He was a strong man in his own right, but feared keeping this miscreants in their proper place. As time progressed the pirates came to understand that his caution kept them alive.

They didn’t go out to plunder often, but chose their targets well. They would leave for a few days only to come back with ships heavy from plunder. They would hit hard and disappear.

No one knew the history of the Red Widow’s origins. There were whispers that they had their start in the Northern military. After some misconduct a group of them left before being court marshalled. At first

they didn't do very much looting, and used what they did gather to establish their pirate clan.

Ten years later, they were already among the strongest clans in the Shattered Starfields. The Red Widow himself earned the love and respect of his people. They were given hot food, good drink and a life, they couldn't ask for much more than that. Ever since, their numbers have grown.

Now, all of the Arachnid asteroids' stores were full of riches, especially food. They were able to get a portion of that from their surroundings, but they were pirates. There weren't many here with agricultural know-how. A lot of it had to be bought from elsewhere.

Pirates were a greedy bunch, but they were also wise. There were always merchants willing to trade with the clans in exchange for 'protection.' Cheap food and drink from the Alliances would find its way out here and suddenly become invaluable. The Shattered Starfields were also rich in resources, which they used to trade. The desperate drive for riches made people take risks they normally wouldn't.

All of the pirate clans in the Starfields built supply lines like this, and the Red Widows were no exception. It took a lot of food and drink to keep things running, and they were getting more people every day. They had people coming constantly to resupply.

They didn't bring any of these resources right to the main asteroid for security reasons. Policy was that anything they off-planet had to go through the three surroundings asteroids, first. From there, the Red Widow's own people brought it to the main base. Outsiders were strictly prohibited from entering, otherwise they would have to face down the planetary defense.

Su Xiaosu's intelligence showed that the Red Widow clan had a wealth of battle experience. How else did they get enough capital to purchase a defensive system like this?

Arachnid-3 – one of the asteroids – was under the command of Mai Ken. He'd been at the Red Widow's side from the beginning, and had become

the pirate leader's right-hand man. The Red Widow was a suspicious man, and there were only a handful of people among his crew that he trusted.

Mai Ken was the commander of Arachnid-3, and also the captain of the battleship stationed there. The position was awarded to him by the Red Widow. He was precise, and disciplined. He didn't inundate himself with women or alcohol, and performed all of his duties fastidiously.

"What's the word on the recent resupply," Mai Ken asked one of his subordinates.

"Checks are completed, boss. No problems found. Who would dare try and poison the Red Widows?! I don't understand why we have to check every shipload." The pirate chortled in self-confidence. Although they didn't agree with what they saw as unnecessary caution, they followed orders. At Mai Ken's request, they checked again.

After everything was in order, Mai Ken nodded. He allowed their transport to the main base.

Pirates didn't use transport ships – they were cumbersome, a liability. Instead they used their battleships, which were much faster and capable of defending themselves against pillagers. The Red Widows were no different, though they used a blacked out patrol ship with a red widow painted on its side. Half an hour after the goods were checked, the ship was on its way to the main base.

The clan had a protocol for checks, to make sure that enemy didn't sneak in. For instance, the pilot was expected to remain a specific, constant speed. Any deviation in the prescribed plan gave enemies away. They were very particular about their safety.

A series of checks and passwords allowed the ship to traverse the space between asteroids in peace. They moved slowly through the dark with a skeleton crew of engineers. It only took five people to fly a ship of this size. Most crewmen were stationed on the main base.

It was a process, but the pirates were used to it now. They recognized the need for Red Widow's caution and embraced it.

Lan Jue sat in the pitch-blackness, with a resigned look on his face. He was the crux of Xiaosu's plan because he was the only one who could infiltrate the main base unseen. It wasn't her preferred method, because sending a single soul into the tiger's den was irresponsibly dangerous.

But after Lan Jue broadened his understanding and joined with the sword, everyone looked at him differently. So, when Xiaosu offered up the idea they unanimously agreed. Lan Jue didn't have any say in the matter. After his flashy display, he could only say, he played himself.

Really, Xiaosu's reasons were sound. Lan Jue going in alone was the best way to avoid casualties. Only he could sneak in and open the door.

Not long after, much to his dismay, Lan Jue found himself crouched in the belly of a pirate ship.

Even sneaking aboard had been somewhat of a chore. Although Lan Jue was capable of spaceflight at his level of cultivation, he still needed a mecha. Without one he would have to expend a great deal of energy. After all, he wasn't a Paragon. Yet.

Chapter 559: Scout Lan Jue

Lan Jue had approached one of the outlying asteroids via Zeus-1. Under cover of the Blinding Stone, Lan Jue made landfall. He took pains to hide any signs of his power or presence while sneaking through the base to the resupply ship.

Su Xiaosu knew a tremendous deal about pirates and how they got their goods. Where others would find sneaking onto a pirate ship impossible, she knew it wouldn't be difficult for Lan Jue. So long as there was electricity, the Monarch could find a way in.

That's what got him to this point.

He was surrounded by metal boxes. Pirates being who they were, the one Lan Jue chose to hide in was filled with booze. The others were mostly food. Sadly the alcohol wasn't very good. The flight would have been less miserable with an in-flight drink.

The ship kept to its prescribed speed and route. All Lan Jue had to do for now was meditate quietly, and wait for his chance.

Lan Jue's level of cultivation allowed him to hide his Discipline from all manner of instruments. It was simple; those instruments used electricity, so Lan Jue need only release a specific frequency to blanket himself in white noise.

The patrol boat shook, indicating they'd entered the small asteroid's atmosphere. Lan Jue awoke from his meditations, his eyes burning in the darkness of the supply crate.

The Star Division commander didn't offer up any resistance when the mission was proposed. He hadn't participated in any of the dozen or so missions prior, and Lan Jue felt it important for a commander to lead from the front.

Half an hour later the ship shook again. They'd landed. A pale blue light hung around Lan Jue's body as he waited, unmoving, in the box.

Sure enough, moments later an inspection apparatus was shining its

beam on the supply crates one by one. They weren't looking for stowaways as much as they were making sure the deplorable pirates didn't steal some of the goods for themselves.

Lan Jue couldn't help but be impressed. The Red Widows were completely different from any of the other pirate clans Lan Jue had encountered. Their practices and bases were informed by Alliance military training. Back during his days as the Mercenary King, he doubted he could have destroyed them himself.

The scan was finished. Robots came in to move the cache from the ship's hold. One by one the boxes were lifted up and put on a small transporter. Lan Jue did not rush, waiting patiently in the metal box. He spread his perception out to gather what information he could about the surroundings.

The Red Widows' defensive measures were most stringent around the airship hangar. It would be unwise to slip out now. He would have to wait until the transporter moved them to a safer place.

It wasn't that Lan Jue couldn't handle himself. With his new heights of power the likelihood of danger was small. Still, this was an important lesson. Prudence was an important skill, especially the stronger one became. It would keep him alive.

If he had been more cautious on Taihua, he could have avoided a great deal of trouble. That was even before he considered how much it had impacted Qianlin.

A sharp pang of regret stabbed Lan Jue's chest. He missed caring for Qianlin. He desperately wished for her to snap out of her coma and separate. At least then he could see her!

Sometime later he sense the area was safe. Lan Jue pressed his hand to the box's interior, dissolved into lightning, and appeared outside of the box a moment later. He slipped out of the transporter and hid himself in a dark corner.

He lifted his head and peered into the sky. It was a huge base, made up of several large metallic buildings. This was exactly what he wanted – a

bunch of metal where conduction could bring him wherever he pleased.

He pressed his back against the metal wall. A flicker of electricity, and he was gone. When he reappeared Lan Jue was in a large empty room.

An airship hangar?

He spotted a patrol ship parked within. It looked brand new, never flown. The Red Widow must have just bought it.

Lan Jue stuck a small metal orb out of sight in a small corner. It was a signal emitter, one that Majesty could use to get a read on the asteroid from a distance. So long as they kept out of the asteroids electronic defense perimeter, the ships could avoid detection and learn all they needed.

Lan Jue moved through the area, placing the signal beacons in various hidden spots before leaving the hangar.

Not even Su Xiaosu had credible information on the Red Widow's base. Thus, Lan Jue's first objective was to act as an advance scout. Scouting was an integral part of any military endeavor, something Lan Jue knew well.

Checkpoints and scanners were erected throughout the base. These restricted areas would be more troublesome for Lan Jue to traverse with his conductive powers. Over time, though, he managed to get a comprehensive look around.

The Red Widow's main base camp was larger than he thought. He couldn't help but admire what they'd built. Even if a progenitor showed up, it would be almost impossible for it to make landfall without suffering direct resistance.

However, there wasn't anything here that would interest the creatures. Nothing lived on the asteroid's surface aside from pirates, nor was there any water. Anything a progenitor would be interested in had come from off-world.

Clearly Red Widow had taken pains to find the perfect spot to build his Clan. It was organized into several large districts. One was residential, but the others seemed to focus on different aspects of military industry.

Everything was organized and compartmentalized. Lan Jue also came across mecha pilots in the midst of drills. Their training regimen only confirmed that the Red Widow commander was former military.

The next step in his mission was to locate the planetary defense hub. Once the electromagnetic defense was offline, they could proceed with the next step. Su Xiaosu called these clandestine missions, where he was to infiltrate the base and hit targets without alerting the enemy.

Half a day passed quickly as Lan Jue worked. He transmitted all the information he gathered to Majesty using an encrypted frequency. The Accountant had been the one to set it up, and no matter how safe they thought their system was, it didn't mean anything to one of the East's preeminent scientific minds.

"Jewelry Master. We suspect the defense systems are housed in the spire at the center of the base. It's very well protected. Every floor needs a security key card. All of their physical and electronic checks are top of the line. It's likely the building is also insulated. They really thought of everything! Finally, an interesting enemy." The Accountant's jittery voice sputtered through Lan Jue's communicator.

Lan Jue responded in exasperation. "So what do I do about it? If it's insulated I can't get in."

"What makes you think that?" the Accountant challenged. "They only insulate walls, there are bound to be other routes. All you need to do is find a power outlet. It shouldn't be much of a problem. After that, it's up to you. Do your best not to destroy the defense system, we're going to want it. Heh heh. I can hardly wait."

"You wanna come get it?" Lan Jue shot back.

The Accountant chuckled. "If I could, you think I'd still be your gopher?"

Annoyed but otherwise powerless, Lan Jue cut the connection. The Accountant wasn't the only one excited about the mission, Lan Jue felt it too. A strong enemy motivated one's potency.

Lan Jue studied the map for a moment and planned his infiltration. The

sky had gone dark, plunging the base into darkness.

Lan Jue made his way through the pirate-infested base building by building, relying on his electric powers to convey him to the central spire. Soon he was standing right outside.

Lan Jue what he felt was a suitable spot and pressed his hand against the metal wall. He became lightning and slipped in.

That was when he encountered the insulation.

Thick rubber filled the wall's interior, blocking any path for him to slither through. He returned to his human form and followed the wall until he found a power outlet. Only, it was dead.

This is one hell of an iron curtain!

What could he do? Lan Jue's brows furrowed as he thought.

As he did, Lan Jue spied a nearby elevator open. One of the surveillance systems was running a scan.

What's this? It looks like a thermal reader and infrared scanner. Goddamnit, guy, why are you making this so hard?

His hopes of using the elevator to get in were dashed.

A tall, sturdy man clad in a black flight suit stood inside. A Red Widow emblem was stitched to his chest. As Lan Jue watched, the man's communicator flashed in response to the scanning device. When the check was finished he left.

It looked like he needed a change of plans! Lan Jue had an idea.

Chapter 560: Infiltration

The pirate stepped out of the elevator and paused to stretch. “Argh! So tired... I need a break.” He tapped at his communicator while muttering to himself. It rang a few times then was answered. “Sister Jia, do you have any openings? Alright, arrange one for me, I’m heading over for a few drinks. A meal, too! See if we still have the sweet shrimp from the West. I’ve been wanting some more of that for a long time. Heh, alright, alright. Excellent!”

The conversation continued as he walked into a nearby warehouse. A few moments later, a verticar exited and rose into the air. The pirate was in the driver’s seat, whistling pleasantly.

“You and I need to have a chat.” A low voice the pirate wasn’t expecting gave him a scare. He didn’t turn around, instead fiercely slapping his hand toward a button on the car’s console.

The interior of the car flickered with an intense blue light. The pirate’s whole body went numb.

Verticars didn’t have the automatic steering even small airships had and yet the car held steady. The pirate then noticed the golden-masked man in the seat beside him.

He tried to speak, but the numbness extended all the way to his tongue. “Wh....who a’..... y-you.”

Lan Jue’s response was cold as death. “You don’t need to know who I am. Your job is to behave yourself and answer my questions.”

The stubborn pirate grunted and turned his face away.

Lan Jue chuckled. “If you decide not to cooperate, don’t blame me for what you will suffer. I’m fine with it – I’ve learned a few new tricks I’d like to try out.”

He gently stroked a hand along the pirate’s arm.

Immediately the pirate shuddered, and then began to scream like a pig at slaughter. Even Lan Jue was shocked at the reaction, and he initiated it.

hardly did anything! He thought. All he'd done was briefly stimulate Captus' power. It was hardly one tenth of a percent of what he could draw from the Banishing Blade.

Still, it seemed even that tiny amount was more than the pirate could stand.

Lan Jue considered himself a benevolent person. He saved the pirate from the pain he's summoned. He spoke pleasantly to the suffering soul. "Well?"

His prisoner took great gasping breaths, unable to speak. This sort of pain wasn't something you endured and then got over. He wanted to die, he couldn't stand even the memory of it.

"Stubborn. Even after that you don't want to talk. Fine, let's try something else." Lan Jue nodded and lifted his hand again.

"Stop!" The Pirate yelped helplessly.

Lan Jue's hand stopped halfway between them. "Hm?"

"I'll... I'll talk, just let me catch my breath." The pirate's haggard voice was downtrodden and defeated. How could he refuse? Vestiges of that agony still wracked his body. If he wanted his brief life to remain-pain free, he'd talk.

Lan Jue's eyes peered out the passenger window. "We're not far from the residential area. You don't have a lot of time."

What came next from the burly man could only be described as diarrhea of the jawbone.

The verticar soared through the air, eventually reaching its destination in the residential area. It touched down without any fuss. When the door opened, a man in a black suit with a Red Widow emblem climbed out. Lan Jue fastened his newly acquired communicator with a small smile on his face. He strutted toward the residential buildings.

A lot had been revealed by the chatty pirate. Firstly, capable as their defenses were there were spots it didn't cover. Obviously the hub of the

planetary defense system was the most severe, other areas didn't see the same amount of protections. After all, this was a pirate base and not an Alliance military installation. Imposing too many restrictions on these scoundrels would have the opposite desired effect.

This was a home to degenerates of all sorts, who came together to get everything their evil hearts desired. Women, drink, tobacco, drugs – whatever they wanted.

Lan Jue already shared his information with Majesty, adding to the plan they were calling Operation Bugle Call. Tomorrow it would be underway, and he needed something from where the lions slept.

From the pirate, Lan Jue had learned that every pirate had an identifier implanted in their communicators. It was among the more advanced defensive measures pirates had, but it wasn't strictly enforced in areas of play. Once you got past the security, there wasn't a lot they marked essential. Hard exterior and a loose interior; that was what the pirates had built here. If they tried to enforce discipline the scallywags would just revolt and that was no good for any pirate clan.

As Lan Jue stepped through the doors, the brisk and inhospitable environment changed. He was immediately struck by the scent of marijuana that made him scowl.¹

The roads running through the district were lit up with dim red lights and women sat listlessly in the doorway.² Sounds of raucous revelry filled the air. Most of the pirates were in normal clothes here, leaving their flight suits at home.

Lan Jue had removed his mask before exiting the car. His handsome features and physique attracted no small amount of attention from the female pirates.

“Hey cutie, you new? Your face is so white! ³ Let big sister here give it a touch.” The proposition came from a woman who looked at least forty. She reached a hand toward Lan Jue.

He scowled at her and slapped her hand away. “Screw off!”

“Hey! We’ve got one with a nasty temper!” The woman’s face changed, became hard. She blocked his path.

Another pirate joined, at least two meters tall, strong as an ox with ebony skin. He stood behind the woman and glowered dangerously at Lan Jue.

“Kid, you’re lucky Sister Tarantula likes you. But if you wanna die, my friend here will show you what his fist looks like.”

Tarantula, as she called herself, delightfully poked him in the chest with her finger. “Get on your knees and lick my feet, or we’ll see how fast it takes pig-head here to turn you into paste.”

Ripples of laughter surrounded them. Pirates like action, and bullying greenhorns was as fun as anything. Lan Jue was young, an easy target.

“Fuck off,” Lan Jue growled.

Both Tarantula and her enormous companion were struck dumb. In the depths of their hearts his voice seemed to resonate, bypassing their resistance. Saying nothing further, they stepped aside and let him be.

Lan Jue paid them no further mind and walked on.

“Ey, Tarantula! Look at you, so convincing! You must really like that pale-faced kid.” The other pirates were just as surprised. Tarantula was not risk-averse, why’d she let him go so easily?

She shook her head, trying to clear the fog. She didn’t know what happened, only that she had to do whatever the guy told her to do. She snapped her head around to look for him, but Lan Jue was already gone.

What she could not know was that she was a victim of Lan Jue’s voice of command, a watered-down version. If Lan Jue wanted her to kill herself, he could have made her do it.

Lan Jue turned a corner, and a large bar came in to view. In the world of pirates, bars were the places of choice to spend their down hours. They had good booze and good women, making it one of the most boisterous places in the district. It was the perfect place for rascals to unwind.

Coming part and parcel, of course, were the less reputable means of entertainment. Fights were a daily occurrence.

The moment he entered Lan Jue's brows knit tight. The atmosphere was foul, thick with smoke and old booze. He was a fan of tobacco and drink, but not the fair pirates preferred. What he preferred was a quiet place where he could enjoy them, where pretty girls delivered the drinks to his table.

The Monarch paused to take in the environment. Night had fallen, which was peak time for these sorts of establishments. It was safe to assume every bar on this asteroid was full by now. That was exactly what Lan Jue wanted.

He briefly rose on the tips of his toes, and a bolt of lightning raced through the floor. It emerged just behind a particularly beefy looking reprobate. The man wasn't aware until he felt the explosive power strike him in the back. He was thrown forward into the pirate in front of him.

"Bastard! Who the hell pushed me?!" The pirate who'd been struck by lightning scrambled to his feet, turned, and threw a metal table into the crowd.

Pirates didn't mind trouble, they sought it out. It helped them let off steam, especially when there wasn't anything to do. Right away the whole bar was a flurry of wailing fists and curses. Since the fight had started in the middle of the bar, it wasn't long before it swept everyone up in it.

No one paid attention to the lone man wandering through the crowd. He looked like he was part of the action, but no one even got close enough to land a blow. He wandered the bar, picking communicator's off of pirates' wrists and stoking the fires.

By the time Lan Jue stepped out of the bar, more than ten communicators were safely stowed away in Thor's Promise. He made his way back to the car, the pirate still unconscious within. He activated the verticar's navigation systems to lead him back to the defense control center.

Now it was time to really get things underway.

He parked the car in the warehouse they'd left from and walked out. He was in no hurry, and leaned back in the chair. He shut his eyes for a few moments of rest. There was still some time before Operation Bugle Call was slated to start. He still needed to get in that tower.

Chapter 561: Moving Out

No matter where in the universe, dawn was the time when people were at their most sluggish. Awakening from deep sleep, it takes everyone time to clear the haze from their mind. As the sky brightened, however, the base gradually became darker as a shadow fell over it.

Lan Jue's eyes popped open. He glanced at the time, then got out of the verticar. He stretched and got his fluids moving as a smile crept onto his face. He was looking forward to this.

Destroying the Red Widows was a given – it was going to happen, and the Star Division was more than capable of it without his help. However, their goal was to obtain experience with zero casualties. Pulling off a flawless victory was more difficult to do.

Beside the verticar hanger was the main entrance to the defense spire. According to the pirate he interrogated, there were always twenty mecha on patrol and another eighty personnel on standby. That meant that at any sign of danger, a hundred mechas could immediately be mobilized. Beyond that, the area was thick with monitoring equipment and security checks.

To Lan Jue, that last part wasn't much of a problem anymore. He walked up to the elevator he saw the pirate exit from and pressed the call button. Then, he dissolved into lightning and slipped through the walls. The insulation was just as thick here, so he couldn't move anywhere, but at least he could remain unseen.

The elevator arrived, and with it the familiar beam of sweeping light. Lan Jue's hand appeared jutting from a corner of the wall with one of the pirate communicators strapped to his wrist. Despite the strange angle, the security check picked it up right away.

The light vanished, it was safe to enter. There was a soft flicker of electric light and Lan Jue reappeared. He stepped into the elevator.

Like the rest of the building, the elevator was metal. He hid within the walls as he'd done before which kept him away from the prying eyes of

cameras. One of the buttons inexplicably lit up as it was pressed, then the elevator began to descend.

The control center was underground, as well as those twenty patrolling mechas. However the lower he went the better Lan Jue felt. The world of metal was now free from the insulation of the higher floors and opened up space to move around.

The pirate's information proved credible again when he quickly found the master control room. Outside were four mecha suits facing away from the door with weapons at the ready. For the Red Widows, this was the very heart of their whole organization.

Unfortunately for them, they weren't ready for electricity.

Lan Jue buzzed through the wall, reforming on the other side. More than twenty pirates were busily working the various systems. He could see right away that it was an advanced set-up, no less impressive than what could be found in the Three Alliances. They must have paid through the nose for it.

He casually walked across the control room as he looked around. He spotted his objective quickly; the planetary defense controls. They were somewhat of a misnomer, because they were actually an integrated design. Aside from coordinating defense, it also constituted early warning systems, probes, counter-attacks and so forth.

The electromagnetic field around the planet was part of its detection and warning systems. When an enemy entered the field, it immediately tripped the alarms and the system reacted.

Lan Jue's purpose right now wasn't to blow things up. All he needed was an opening for his people to bypass that field. He quickly sent a message to Majesty to be ready.

"Ugh, I'm so tired. Shift's over soon, you wanna grab some grub?" A pirate stretched, looking fatigued.

"More'n eat. We've been burning the midnight oil, I need to relax. Let's grab a drink. A glass before bed is relaxing. Whaddaya guys think?"

“Nice, sounds good to me. Shame there aren’t any fat-ass women around in the morning to make that drink go down smoother.”

“Give it a week and it’ll be better. Next week we’ve got the day shift, then we’ll have the nights to ourselves. Compared to our brothers on the other asteroids we’ve got it good. They only rotate back here once a month. We can get practically whenever we want when we want it.”

“Well it’s about that time, next shift should be here soon. Man the night shift is tiring.”

They started arranging everything to pass on to the next shift when, suddenly, every screen flickered and went black.

“What the hell is this?” The room was plunged into darkness for a moment before the emergency lights kicked in. The pirates were a flurry of confused motion. This was the first time they’d encountered this problem. Power was steady across all the asteroids, and they had three backup generators. Total power should not have been possible!

They clambered over one another to try and pinpoint the malfunction.

“Quick! Let the commander know!” One of the pirates ordered.

However, right then all the lights and screens came back online with an electric buzz. Everything was normal. One of the pirates – the one who was going to report to the commander – looked around surprised for a moment then dropped his communicator.

“Should I still call him?” He asked.

The one who was apparently in charge was also unsure of how to proceed. They all knew how important this place was, to the clan and to Red Widow himself. They didn’t dare shirk their duties lest they risk being punished.

“Check the systems first. See if there are any problems.” Their leader answered. Red Widow pirates weren’t military soldiers, so their incentives weren’t to deal with problems head on. He chose the safer option, for his own hide, and decided to see how bad things were first.

One by one the pirates reported no problems in any sector.

The leader pondered for a moment. “Maybe it was an electron flare that shorted everything. Everything looks good now, there doesn’t seem to be any problems. Stick to it a little longer and see if you can find any anomalies on the planet’s surface.”

“Nothing, everything’s normal. Not even a fly.” Another one of the pirates called out to him right away.

What they didn’t know was that flickering was a sign. All their images and communications were now being streamed directly to a monitoring device that wasn’t part of their system. Someone else had access.

Lan Jue was long gone. He was back inside the verticar. Luckily the pirate he’d snagged from the earlier had been someone of some importance to have this car to get around in. It made Lan Jue’s life easier.

As he rose into the air and flew off, he got in touch with Majesty. “Did it all work out?”

The Accountant’s voice answered. “Of course it did. If yours truly is on it, it gets done right. We’re in the base’s airspace, I’ll send you the coordinates. First Division Alpha Squad has boots on the ground and are waiting for you to arrive.”

“Alright, be there soon!”

He tore through the air toward Majesty. With coordinates in hand, finding the invisible ship wasn’t difficult. It was in a restricted zone.

The asteroid had several restricted zones that were flooded with radiation. You needed special permission to get in, and then had to follow a specific path to make your way through. Without special approval, no pirates were coming through this way.

Of course, this didn’t stop Lan Jue. He flew the car to the borders of the quarantine and used his Discipline to get past the walls. As the Monarch poured his Talent into his speed, a golden aura buzzed around him. He flew so fast through the irradiated wastelands that satellites would only see a streak of dim light. This early in the morning, anyone seeing that

light would be too groggy to recognize what it might be.

In a blink he was at the coordinates. The faintest eminence of energy tickled at his senses, and it was there he went. A flash of electric light, and he vanished near the source of the pulses.

“Here!” Lan Jue reappeared to find Alpha Team waiting nearby, led by the Pharmacist. They were joined by another woman. Judging by her uniform she was part of Fourth Brigade. She was here because her Talent made groups of soldiers invisible. A priceless addition to their mission.

“Put ‘em on.” Lan Jue passed out the communicators he’d pilfered from the pirates. The soldiers did as they were told. Moments later they were heading back the way Lan Jue had come.

Mechs guarded each of these restricted areas, but the one Majesty chose was remote. The path to and from was only big enough for a ship or a few mechs as well. Because danger seemed so unlikely from this location, only two mechs were stationed here to keep watch.

They crept to the gates under the cloak of invisibility. When they arrived, Lan Jue called them to a halt with a gesture. “Stay here. I’ll deal with the guards.”

He didn’t wait for acknowledgement. Their commander became a bolt of lightning and disappeared.

The two mechas guarding the area stood outside. As dawn broke and the shift change neared, the pilots were sleepy and looking forward to bed. The only thing keeping them awake was the punishment they’d receive if they were caught sleeping.

Neither understood why there were here guarding a gate strong enough to survive a nuclear blast. To them, it was a waste of time and their abilities.

Suddenly, both of them felt a numbness penetrate right to their hearts. They clutched feebly at their chests for a moment before slipping into unconsciousness. It was virtually painless.

“Open the gate.” Lan Jue gave the order through his communicator.

“Got it, right away!” The massive door creaked as it opened a crack. Just enough to let a series of dark silhouettes slip through.

Chapter 562: Bugle Call

The base's shields and doors were tied to the planetary defense system, and thus were located in the master control room. The Accountant's backdoor access gave him sway over it, and everything else.

However, he had to be wary. The pirates' defenses were all-encompassing. If anyone in the control center saw anything out of the ordinary, they could immediately shut down any access outside of their servers. Lan Jue didn't dare let them know that he had his fingers in their pies. They weren't safe until they had total command over the control center.

Alpha team slipped into the base. Lan Jue waved them over. "On me!" He started off into the sky. There were too many for the verticar, so they'd have to make their own way.

The Pharmacist took up the invisibility specialist and lifted off the ground. The others of Alpha team followed and raced after Lan Jue toward the interior of the Red Widow base.

The Accountant's people infiltrated their systems. They fed live intel of troop movements to the ground team's communicators.

Lan Jue looked at the Pharmacist. "When we get there you take the team and clear the halls. I'll deal with the ones inside the main control room, then the operation will official begin."

"Got it." The Pharmacist nodded and smirked in anticipation. This whole thing was a novel experience for her. She was eager for the new adventure.

Disciplines as strong as they were no longer needed to fear the planet's defenses, after penetrating so deep into the base. If they wanted to, they could obliterate the control center with a wave of their hands. However, they would deprive the Star Division of their training. They had to learn, step by step, according to plan.

Lan Jue called the elevator. In contrast to his initial sneaky ingress, he marched into the elevator with his team, tall and regal. The Accountant's

work continuously scrubbed the videos to keep them hidden.

The elevator began to drop. Ding! The doors opened.

Lan Jue vanished in a flash. He crackled through the alloy walls toward his objective. Meanwhile the Pharmacist gestured for her soldiers to sweep and clear. Eyes snapped to communicators and off they went to hunt down the patrolling mechas.

Lan Jue returned to the main control room. This time, there was no need for subtlety.

The pirates showed no sign of distress after the brief outage. It'd given them a jump but the system checks had been all clear. The threat of punishment for a screw-up, though, had filled them with adrenaline. None of them were sleepy anymore.

The one who was their leader muttered. "You guys did good today. When we get off, I'm buyin'."

The other pirates loudly voiced their appreciation. Of course they knew it for what it was; a bribe to keep any word of that hiccup from getting out.

Among them was a voice they did not recognize.

"Gentlemen, the show is about to begin. Goodbye."

Before anyone could react they lost all sensation. One by one they hit the ground, dead to the world. The thought of tripping an alarm didn't have time to cross their minds.

Lan Jue pulled over a chair and took a seat. He used the base's comms to connect with the Accountant. "We have the master controls. Commence Operation Bugle Call."

The Accountant's delighted voice answered. "Roger! You stay there and leave the rest to us!"

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Red Widow rubbed his sleepy eyes and sat up in his bed. Yesterday's raids had been draining, but they hadn't stripped him of his appetites. This was evident by the sleeping woman beside him.

The sky was brightening outside his window. The planet's three satellites were great for defense, but he had a more personal reason for choosing the asteroid as a base. It's day-night cycle was just where he'd grown up.

The guesses about his history were true. Red Widow had indeed been a former Northerner, enlisted in their army. He'd reached the rank of colonel before defecting.

Ever since he was small he was gloomy and dark, a character very much like a spider. Once, when he was small, someone had stolen a girl he'd loved. He swore that day to become strong and exact revenge.

Later, he became an honored soldier within military command. He was especially adept at planning assassinations and other wet work. He was himself a sovereign-ranked pilot at the time. There was no doubt he had a bright future.

What he could never expect was that his sworn enemy was the son of an important military family. The day came when he would make his move. He stole into his nemesis' house and massacred every single person. The chips imbedded in their bodies, regular measures for military families, were activated. He immediately became public enemy number one.

His training and prudence was what saved his life. He'd had a plan in case he was found out, to escape. The man that would become the Red Widow slipped away, mere inches from death.

In the North, he became persona non grata overnight. He was a man without a nation. He then decided to gather some people and carve a home from the Shattered Starfields as a pirate king.

Thinking on it now, he couldn't help but regret some of it. Perhaps if he had been more cautious, had not done it himself, he could have gotten away with it. Good prospects were lost. Even general wasn't out of reach back then. He'd been a rising star...

One day, I'm going back! Red Widow fiercely assured himself.

He got up, poured himself a glass of ice water and stretched. He walked over to the window and looked out over his domain.

The stringent defenses and Red Widow's history were obviously closely connected. He lost a lot in being discovered, but he'd learned how to watch his back.

Now, ten years after the fact, his Red Widow clan was flourishing. They stood on a strong foundation for growth. There were benefits to the life of a pirate as well. If you didn't like someone, you could end them without a second thought.

You also got to pick your targets. His clan focused mostly on Northern merchants, and never left anyone breathing. This was eye for an eye for him, cruelty knew no bounds.

"Huh?" The pirate commander's eyes peered toward the military district. It was about time for the morning training routine. But something was off.

It was the air. It warped erratically, almost like hot air. And a strange sound...

What the hell?

Red Widow was wide awake. He threw on his flight suit and pulled his communicator up to his face. "Control. This is Red Widow. Is there something going on with our detection systems?"

Boom!

His response was an explosion that shook the base. The Red Widow stood there for a moment, his mind blank. An enemy attack?!

The roar of the explosion ripped through the base. The Red Widow scrambled out of his building and look up just in time to see the colossal form

Goddamn! That's a...

A battleship? If it was it was an odd one. How could this be? How could a whole battleship suddenly appear a few dozen feet above my bed? Why wasn't it stopped by the defenses? Why wasn't there an alarm!

The Red Widow was completely and thoroughly confused. He felt powerless against what he saw before him.

Four great columns of light shot out from beneath the ship. Dark figures began to descend within the beams. Mechs. When they made landfall, they spread out in all directions like a plague.

Red Widow clenched his jaw. He knew he had to keep his cool. This was his house, and he knew how to cause a little damage himself. He just needed the proper response – he still had a chance.

The pirates proved their reputations. When the blast was heard, they'd begun to mobilize. Already there were groups of mechs converging to meet the enemy.

What came was the apocalypse.

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Brigades one and two were responsible for routing the pirates' main force. Third Brigade was cleanup and rescue. The living area was left to Fourth Brigade. However, the planning was so complete as to involve every unit. They each had their objectives to contribute to the whole.

Second Brigade starting taking the high ground while First Brigade sent their troops to the base's interior. The base had gone from a lazy morning to a tide of destructive energy in a matter of moments.

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Red Widow's mecha was red, his preferred color. He gathered what men he could and raced off.

He didn't know how they got in, but they obviously had prepared. When he saw a group of his people mowed down by a single unit in less than ten seconds, it was clear; this was more than they could handle. He had to get out to the satellites and mount a counterattack. With the help of his own battleship he could recapture the base.

But even as he thought it the pirate leader knew it was naïve. If the enemy could show up in the heart of his organization, they must know it well. They had to have an answer in case of off-world reinforcements.

Red Widow's attention snapped back to the present when he saw a huge

golden orb heading straight for him.

“Block his path!” Red Widow roared. He needed time. No matter what was happening here, he had to get out first before he could take the next step. He had a ship here, newly refurbished. It was fast, and if he got out there was a chance to get these bastards back.

His reputation was good in the Starfields. He had allies in other pirate clans. His mind raced for opportunities.

Chapter 563: Sweep and Clear

The Red Widow had no idea how this enemy could suddenly appear. What happened to all their defenses? After all that money, it was like it had no use at all.

Inside he was enraged, but he kept a clear head.

Six of the mechas that were guarding him broke off and engaged the metallic orb. They fired wildly at it, but their long-ranged attacks harmlessly bounced off. Then, as they watched, the orb grew several sharp and spindly protrusions. They appeared just in time, as the orb came crashing into the pirate mechas.

Peng! Bang! Two pirates were turned to slag as the orb made contact. The energy it struck with felt like it would level a mountain. The spikes launched out and pinned the remaining combatants to the floor – dead.

“Ai-ya, weak sauce.” Tang Xiao loudly complained. His round body catapulted into the air, changing back into a war machine. The Star Division unit commander chased after Red Widow.

The pirate leader was obvious. His bright red suit was better than the others, and his cunning tactics were common for someone who’d spent their life as a deplorable scum.

However, before long the red mecha was gone. Vanished without a trace.

“Where’d he go?” Tang Xiao asked his sister, he was nearby.

Tang Xiao’s unit was special. Using his metalmorphosis Discipline, the ten-member team became a singular weapon. The only teams that could outdo their damage output were Alpha Squads.

Tang Mi was just as confused. “I don’t know! Some sort of mechanism? Forget it, there are other targets. Every target is worth it.”

In terms of sheer numbers, the Red Widows outnumbered the Star Division. Quality, though, was a different story. In that regard the Star Division had a tremendous advantage. Plus, the speed and ferocity of their attack meant that many of the pirates’ mecha pilots were still groggily

wandering the residential area and weren't in their suits.

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Lan Jue sat before the large screens of the central control room. He watched as the action unfolded, sweeping up the rest of the base. He couldn't help but feel a little bored.

This was turning into a one-sided slaughter.

He figured one of the top ten pirate clans in the Starfields would put up more of a fight. Perhaps he underestimated what the Star Division could do.

After over ten missions, every brigade in the Division was working better together. Individual fighting squads were the most improved. Every ten-man team had at least one sovereign-ranked pilot or ninth level Talent. They had enough of both to go around.

The Adept-turned-pilots were a force of nature when behind a mecha suit. With Talent and technology as one, the pirates were mowed down like wheat.

Before long Lan Jue's communicator started receiving reports. One after the other, the important sectors of the base came under Division control.

"Should we launch the distress signal, Jewelry Master?" The Accountant asked.

"Do it." Lan Jue replied.

A ship blasted off into the sky once the command was given. Right away it was through the atmosphere and climbing.

"Ah, running away?" The Accountant's face bore a disdainful grin. His fingers danced mesmerizingly across the keyboard in front of him. Outside of the base, its perimeter rail guns slowly began to retarget.

Lock. Fire!

Boom—! A silvery-white light fired into the sky. The beam twinkled as it vanished into the distance. The fleeing ship was right in its path, and as the particle beam swept by the ship was atomized. Nothing was left to

prove it had ever existed.

Red Widow was dismayed to find their mighty defenses turned against them. In the moments before his death, he still couldn't understand what had happened. As the silver light approached and set his ship ablaze, he just didn't get it. These were their own weapons.

The Accountant's distress signal was, of course, for the three satellite asteroids. He made it look like a call to arms from the pirate commander himself. Soon they were sending a fleet of ships down to the main base while he watched.

Three battleships. Fifteen patrol boats. It looked like the pirates were throwing everything they had at them. Unfortunately for them, they were greeted by the planetary defense system they relied so heavily on. Each blast from a railgun rivaled the power of a battleship's main battery.

If there were doubts as to why Xiaosu didn't want to attack the asteroids head-on, this put them to rest. It wasn't that it was impossible – Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and the Gourmet could have handled it themselves if they threw all their power behind it. But that would just deny these soldiers invaluable battle experience. She didn't want that.

Their future enemies weren't going to be this easy to overcome. The battle against those aliens on Tempest wasn't so easy, for instance. Xiao Su's three secret weapons – the Gourmet, Lan Jue and the Pharmacist – had all tipped their hand to deal with the Progenitor. That one was young, and still had power equivalent to a peak-ranked Adept. They also knew precious little about these foreign adversaries.

To be prepared for the fight ahead, they needed as much practice as they could get right now. They needed to be a strong, well-oiled machine. It was the only way to serve their people.

An hour had passed since Operation Bugle Call had commenced. Three battleships and sixteen patrol boats were now space debris. The Red Widow pirate clan was no more.

The battle was over.

Unfortunately, the clan was quite a bit poorer than they thought. When they found the pirate cache it didn't even match up to what they'd found from the Desert Tempest pirates. Evidently, most of it had been used to build these bases. So while they didn't have a lot of toys, they did have an astronomically expensive planetary defense system. It was bulky, though, and took up a lot of space. Lan Jue considered leaving it behind, but he'd forgotten something. A click of the Photographer's camera, a familiar phrase and snap! A whole system's defenses were safely packaged in a Polaroid photo.

The rest of the resources they came across hardly required a thought. Railguns and planetary shields were a moment's concern, all the rest even less so.

Stripping the base took them about a day.

The campaign was flawless, almost textbook. With little effort and minimal time, they'd taken the four asteroids without even giving their enemies time to counterattack. The reason? Clandestine operations.

Without Lan Jue's involvement Majesty wouldn't have been able to reach the asteroid's surface. They wouldn't have caught the pirates with their pants down, unable to respond.

Clearly the first one to honor for the Star Division's victory was their commander, Lan Jue.

A day later, Majesty and Zeus-1 were in the air again. The asteroids were left behind, stripped and silenced, as they headed for the next objective.

The soldiers were in high spirits after their win. But Xiaosu was good at keeping them in check. Morale was important, but pride was deadly. Debriefs were given after every fight, and Xiaosu made a point of highlighting where everyone could have been better. In that way she ensured they kept improving.

Over the next month, Majesty and Zeus-1 stalked the Starfields. Whatever foe they encountered was quickly silenced.

However, eventually news of the Division's exploits became known.

After all, pirate clans were disappearing right and left. One of the strongest went dark and no communications had been heard for ages. It was starting to get everyone's attention.

Especially the Moonfiend Pirates.

Shattered Starfields, Planet Moonfiend.

"Where the hell did these people come from? They appear out of nowhere and vanish like ghosts. According to this we've lost contact with more than twenty groups. We have to assume they fell to nefarious means. Whoever they are, their bloodlust has started to creep in to our domain." The pirate who spoke was tall, with a downtrodden face like he was the victim. The bald ruffian's most striking feature was his enormous red beard.

He stood across from another man. This one was tall, too, but sat and glowered at him with a morose expression.

Were Lan Jue here, he'd recognize the man. It was his old friend, Gabriel, one of the Pontiff's Archangels.

The seraph narrowed his eyes. "So many clans, whoever they are is on a mission. Redbeard, do you have any more specific information?"

The one called Redbeard replied. "According to our intelligence, only one person from the Black Widow clan managed to get eyes on them. Hey prefer to engage with mecha ground troops. Their ships are equipped with some kind of cloaking capability as well. They get in close, and the mechas strike hard and fast. They overwhelm the defenders and take over. Because of the cloaking no pirate patrols have found them out in space, no way to engage. Right, and their insignia is some kind of flame. They all have them, just different colors.

"A flame insignia?" Gabriel's face darkened as he thought.

Chapter 564: Target: Three Planets

Gabriel's insights were different from the pirates. What did it mean for a ship to cloak itself? It meant equipment – expensive equipment. They would need at least an s-ranked power gem. Those were still more expensive even than Tears of Neptune.

To be able to carry so many mecha suits, you'd need something the size of a battleship. Capital ships and others weren't out of the question, but were a rare sight in the Starfields. The planetary debris would keep them from finding smooth passage.

A fire insignia... to Gabriel's knowledge, there was no clan or group of any importance with a flame insignia.

"And what do you think, Redbeard," Gabriel asked.

Redbeard used to be the second most feared pirate in the Shattered Starfields. However, once the Pontiff's Citadel took control of the Moonfiend pirates, they began to swallow up all the smaller competition. Now Redbeard's crew were part of the Pontiff's forces. All three of the Starfield's primary planets had come under their control.

The Pontiff's Citadel was an Adepts' organization, but it wasn't like Gobi Entertainment. It didn't have the resources to build its own army. Out here, though, no one bothered them in their work. It gave the Pontiff plausible deniability.

But where they couldn't built their own military force, the Pontiff's Citadel did have enough resources and influence to make a pirate armada. They didn't have larger ships, but it was enough to create a good supply train. If needed, they could turn right around and become a guerilla resistance. Out here, the darker side of the religious order was on full display.

That's why they installed the Morning Star here, to oversee their work. They didn't count on her being so independent and headstrong. She was removed because of it.

Now that the three primary planets were under Citadel control, the Moonfiend Pirates were stronger than ever. The Pontiff was concerned with outside threats, so he sent Gabriel here to conduct their business personally and deal with any problems. After all, the men and women they were dealing with didn't subsist on loyalty. If they wanted to keep the pirates under control, they would need to keep their interest with riches and power.

Redbeard answered. "This sort of thing happens every now and again. Out here it's not unusual for clans to take each other out. What's different this time is the bastard's reach. He's got everyone looking over their shoulder, and pirates don't like looking over their shoulders. They'll group up to find him and cut out the threat. We don't need to rush in and involve ourselves. If their gear's anything to go by, they don't look like normal pirates, either. Maybe they're getting support from your enemies. I think we should sit back and stick to the plan. We'll make changes if they need to be made. They wouldn't dare think of coming at us directly."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes, pondering the words before nodding in satisfaction.

Redbeard looked your typical brutish pirate from the outside. Truthfully, though, he was quite clever. Su Xiaosu had given him so much trouble because she overpowered him. When it came to outthinking, though, he was hard to beat. Now he had command of the Moonfiend Pirate forces. Smart as he was, of course he knew the benefits of siding with the Citadel. Gabriel didn't doubt his loyalty.

"And if they do the unthinkable, and come here?" Gabriel pressed.

This brought a glint to the pirate's eye. "Then let them come and see what greets them. The Moonfiend Pirates aren't the strongest in the Starfields for no reason."

Gabriel smirked. "Bearing vigilance against sinful men is ceaseless work. You must prepare."

Redbeard chuckled. "Relax, master Gabriel. I wouldn't dare be careless with the safety of my brothers. Right, and when are we getting that railgun

you promised, eh?! These planets are the best in the system, and the only ones that support life. We have to keep them protected!”

Gabriel’s tone grew irritated. “You think those things are like picking out cabbage? Pick out whatever you like, however many you like? There are a hundred and twenty already installed here, and you need more? It’s already enough to withstand a frontal assault from an interstellar fleet.”

Redbeard chortled. “Can you have too many big guns? Look...”

“Enough.” Gabriel cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Ten more are on their way. There should be here in a few days. Install them on the main planet. They’re the last of them, do you understand? I have no more excuses to give the Pontiff. Also, make sure you pay close mind to those people I brought. There mustn’t be any mistakes, do you understand?”

“Yes sir, I’ve got it under control!”

Gabriel stood. “Then I’m off to cultivate. Pay attention to your duties, do them well. Gather as much data as you can on these pirates with the flame insignia.”

“Aye.”

Redbeard watched Gabriel go, and couldn’t keep the slightest scowl from creeping onto his lips. Pale-faced little shit... he doesn’t understand a thing. This is pirate territory.

Majesty. War Room.

“Are we really going after the three planets?” The Gourmet’s face bore concern. He looked at Lan Jue and Xiaosu waiting for confirmation.

Lan Jue gave it with a nod. “All our training has been to prep them for this, but none of our enemies have been strong up to now. Those three planets have been our targets from the very beginning, but now the Star Division is tempered enough to do it.”

The Driver chimed in. “But this is completely different from other missions. This tri-planetary system makes coming at them from several angles impossible. They’re like three watch towers. After consolidating the

pirate clans, they have over thirty thousand people ready to fight. They're damn strong. Beating them won't be easy, we just don't have the people or ships to do it."

Lan Jue retorted. "You're right, if we face them head-on we'll pay dearly for it. But we're the Star Division. From the day it was created we said we weren't a normal military organization. I will say that this mission will be a real test of what our troops can achieve."

The Coffee Master added his voice. "I agree. I think my Third Brigade and Fourth Brigade should show 'em what we're made of."

"Not just Third and Fourth," Su Xiaosu corrected. "We're all going in. They're strong, and we're weak. They have the numbers, so we need to minimize contact with the enemy as much as possible. We need to initiate on their turf, feet on the ground is where we're best. Then we need to put out scouts and wait for reports to plan our best move. The focus will be data on their defenses."

Lan Jue nodded, showing his approval of her plan.

The Monfiend Pirates were indeed a force to be reckoned with. Never in the history of the Starfields was there a more powerful pirate clan. They'd have wept to imagine commanding more than ten thousand mecha pilots and a hundred warships.

But this also presented problems for them. In private, Xiaosu informed Lan Jue of dissatisfaction within the ranks, before she was taken. The Pontiff's Citadel ruled by an iron fist which smashed opposition and caught all three primary planets in its grasp. But their presence was new, and the pirates were many. They hadn't had time to ensure their control was stable. In addition, the Pontiff's men all bore the same sin; pride.

Under these circumstances one learns that the gargantuan beast that is the Moonfiend Pirates, isn't in fact so invincible. There were dozens of clans, big and small, that weren't part of any structure. They had no chain of command, or communication with others. They operated as independent cells. Assaulting the Starfields wasn't impossible, all you had to do was find the kink in the armor. Even the greatest beast has a soft

spot, and that's where you strike.

What the Driver said was true. This fight was different. It wasn't going to be like their training missions, this time they needed to fight with everything they had. Lan Jue had to pay special attention to this one.

Victory would only come if the Star Division could prove their strength. That had to be their top priority.

Su Xiaosu hadn't been gone from the Starfields for long before Lan Jue had busted her out. She still understood it better than anyone else. So long as her strategies were followed to the letter, there was always a chance of success.

To further perforate the image of impenetrability, their planetary defense wasn't any better than the one they'd seen Red Widow use. There were parts the system didn't reach. There was a constant flow of ships of all kinds shuttling back and forth, with no electromagnetic barrier to stop them. It would be too restrictive. Allowing access one by one would waste a tremendous amount of time and energy.

The three planets were suitable for life, and humans have exploited as much of them as they could.

This gave Lan Jue sufficient opportunity.

Majesty was too large to land on the surface. Even with the Blinding Stone its energy signal would be picked up the moment they entered the atmosphere. Zeus-1 would prove its worth here. It was small and fantastically equipped, and virtually silent. If they were cautious, they could sneak right in. It would take a few trips, but that's how they'd shuttle their people to the surface.

The three planets served as sentinels in each others' defense. The main planet was larger than the others, but not by much. The other two were perhaps two-thirds its mass. That meant the tactics they used for the Red Widows didn't apply in this case. They had to get on all three planets at the same time.

At least in terms of manpower, the Star Division was stretched pretty

thin.

Chapter 565: Turning a Planet into a Photograph?

Su Xiaosu's eyebrows drew together. "We have to take the main planet as quickly as we can, to avoid casualties. I know that personally. Most of the clan's power will be concentrated there as well. If we can take them out then the battle is half won. Our main problems right now are the battleships docked on the other planets, and the planetary defense system. Assuming we take the main planet without any problems, they'll have their fleet heading out way before we can respond. We'll have a hard time fighting them off. The two satellite planets and their defenses will cancel out whatever benefit we get from the main planet."

The Drive nodded at her determinations. "I don't recommend breaking up. We're already a small outfit. If we separate it gives the enemy a greater chance at routing our people. It's dangerous."

Su Xiaosu replied. "I'm also worried about this. Without soldiers, the damage we can do is limited. When I established the defenses we did it in layers. The first line is attack, and the second is defense. If they don't outright destroy the enemy it at least slows them down. We're going to encounter resistance from without and within. We'll need time to get our troops going. We must find a way to keep their battleship's from launching. Majesty and Zeus-1 will be fine, but those on the ground won't have anywhere to retreat to."

The Bartender was next to share his views. "So what you're saying is we need a way to keep the other two planets pinned down while we deal with the main one. Once we have control of it we can use the planetary defenses to protect ourselves from counter-attack."

"Not only that, remember that the pirate clans of the other planets aren't so well organized," Xiaosu said. "Their first instinct will be to scatter, not engage. They aren't soldiers, so a quick and hard attack will shake morale. We just need to hit the main planet hard and hold on to it. We'll keep Majesty on patrol. The pirates wouldn't dare throw themselves

on their swords for the Pontiff's Citadel.

"The Bartender is right. We focus on the main planet and use it to fend off the others. Especially with Majesty's speed and weapon systems, taking one planet shouldn't be that hard. But, I haven't thought up an answer to the satellites yet. Zeus-1 will be too busy ferrying troops, and doesn't hit hard enough at any rate."

Lan Jue listened with thoughtful expression. "How about I go in with Alpha Squad? With the Gourmet that should be enough." The three of them – Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and the Gourmet – had enough destructive power between them to handle the planet's defenses. The Gourmet was a Paragon, while Lan Jue and the Pharmacist were nearly there themselves. They didn't shy from direct confrontation.

"I've thought about that," Xiaosu revealed. "Troop strength is considerable on the main planet. We also have to assume the Pontiff has one of his people here to watch over things. Strong as we are I'm afraid we could get caught up in a lengthy fight. This is their turf, if we get pinned down we'll be surrounded and overrun in no time. If we start sustaining casualties it may be too fast to control – then we bite the dust. All this needs more thought. It doesn't work yet. I think we should hit nearby target and search for an opportunity. If one doesn't reveal itself, we retreat. Safety has to be the priority."

"It's just one piddly little planet, isn't it? What's the problem, just leave it to me." This time it was a lazy, somewhat irritated voice that answered. The newly awakened Luo Xianni appeared from wherever she'd been hiding, and plopped down onto a nearby chair.

"Ma, you..." Lan Jue looked at her questioningly.

"What?" She snapped. "Am I not part of your little Star Division, hm? Have I been flying around in this miserable tub with you for no reason? Your mother needs a little exercise too, you know. Have to move these old bones. Just point out the one you need me to deal with."

Lan Jue meekly pressed her further. "What do you plan to do?" He realized his step mother was a little off the rails. He saw things differently

than normal people. He had to consider everyone's safety before giving her free reign. Strong as she was, a slight problem could become an unmitigated disaster.

Her response was tepid. "Turn it to a photo, what of it? Let them suffer for a while then let them go."

"Y-... the whole planet?" Lan Jue's jaw nearly struck the floor. Even his voice cracked.

Su Xiaosu was too stunned to speak. The cigar perched between the Driver's lips tumbled to the ground. The Coffee Master was shaken that coffee in his hand spilled all over his white shirt. The Bartender fared better, only choking on his own saliva. He launched in to a fit of coughing.

The Gourmet's face twitched. The Pharmacist wasn't present. She left the decision-making to the others, and was content to just execute the plans.

"Ma, are you sure that's even something humans are capable of?" Lan Jue forced himself to find the words for his question.

Luo Xianni's aggravation was still clear in her voice. "Smelly runt, are you saying your mother isn't human, ey?! How could you call yourself my son? If that reprobate you call a father were here he could turn all three of those planets into space dust by himself. You think we got where we are by only taking the easy pickings? What are a few planets, they don't mean anything. You've got three hours to take control of the main planet. Leave one of the others to me. Just remember that heaven demands morality. Don't kill for no reason, there are bound to be workers and families that don't deserve to die. I'll help keep them boxed up, but I won't participate in a massacre."

Paragons – especially Paragons as strong as she was – rarely showed their strength. They especially loathed taking life for no good reason. At their levels of power, their bodies and souls were steeped in the true nature of the universe. If they killed negligently protogenia would take revenge on their own bodies.

Jue Di was a good example. In his youth he took a great many lives. Ever

since he'd lived in seclusion, trying to cleanse his soul.

Lan Jue swallowed as he thought on it. The Driver couldn't help but insert himself in the conversation. "Aunt... no, can I also call you mom? I swear fealty."

Luo Xianni rolled her eyes. "Not just anyone can call themselves my son. You're too much of a ruffian for me. Right, you children go on and plan the rest then. I'm going back to sleep. Call me when we're ready to get started."

She stood up and sashayed out of the room before anyone could reply.

The Driver turned to the Gourmet. "What a woman, amiright? You're a Paragon, why can't you blow up a planet?"

"I..." The Gourmet felt like he'd been punched in the gut, but couldn't think of a comeback. Be it strength, cultivation, or potency, he couldn't hold a candle to the Photographer. Even as a Paragon himself, he could hardly believe she was capable of doing what she said she could.

He was excited to see her do it! A whole planet, for three whole hours.

Lan Jue stood and turned to Su Xiaosu. "Keep working on the plan. I'm going to rest."

"I'll rest as well," the Gourmet added.

The Coffee Master looked up from frowning pitifully at his soiled shirt. "Rest of what?" 1

Lan Jue returned to his cabin and sat cross-legged atop the bed. He focused his attention inward and attempted to summon the sword-spirit. "Yongye."

"Hm?" Jun Yongye's voice filled his mind. Lan Jue's body was suddenly surrounded by a pale red light.

After their joining, Captus' power had settled into a deep slumber. Only when he called upon it did the Banishing Blade flare to life. It was the same for the soul of the weapon. Jun Yongye spent his days cultivating, still and silent unless Lan Jue was in danger.

Just as Lan Jue was not strong enough to command Captus' full strength, neither was Jun Yongye able to call it all at once. He had to improve as much as Lan Jue did, so that the two together could master the godly weapon. They complemented one another.

Lan Jue told him about what the Photographer had said.

"Is that possible? Can an interdimensional Adept really seal an entire planet away from reality?" Lan Jue asked. He was still surprised by the mere idea of it. He was scared of Luo Xianni before, but if what she said was true it totally changed the way he looked at Adepts and protogenia.

Jun Yongye muttered. "If she says it, then it must be true. I don't know what she's capable of. There are no limits to what humanity is capable of. If one day you are able to draw upon fifty percent of the sword's power, you too would be capable of laying waste to a planet. But where we destroy, she can seal. This is gentler. I sense that she uses something else, some special strategy that she uses in tandem with her Domain. It looks like a complete seal, but there's some trickery involved. To truly seal away a planet for long periods, one needed to be as powerful as the Immortals of old."

Lan Jue's response was resigned. "Let's stop using the immortals as comparisons. They no longer exist. Well, it looks like I'll need to keep working hard. Qianlin is still in a coma. Who knows when she'll awaken."

Two months had passed and there was no change in Qianlin's condition. He felt her life force, but consciousness still eluded her.

Chapter 566: Reaching Moonfiend

Jun Yongye's tone was chastising. "Don't you find it troubling, so ponder on these things every day? I've told you that she will be fine. She joined seamlessly with Demortus. This baptism takes time to remold the body. In addition, her regenerative abilities are strong. Her coma is probably a result of the healing process. You should spend less time fretting and more time on yourself. Her Discipline may outstrip yours by the time she wakes up."

The three primary planets of the Shattered Starfields were like three enormous airship bases. Every day a constant stream of ships came and went. Like the Red Widows' asteroids, the planets worked together.

The Pontiff's Citadel became more unscrupulous the more of the Starfields they controlled. A constant stream of resources trickled through what had practically become the Pontiff's backyard. Him and his organization injected the area with capital to help the fledgling pirate clans grow. Lately, with the Citadel's help, they'd begun constructing and repurposing battleships.

The largest obstacle in the Starfields was its makeup. Larger ships couldn't maneuver through the pirates' playground. The battleships they relied on were weaker by comparison. That's why many of them were refitted. After a sufficient amount of power gems were installed they packed quite a punch.

The Pontiff's Citadel was one of the West's greatest faith-based organizations. It was a powerhouse of industry. Money for these projects wasn't an issue.

Meanwhile the rest of the Alliances were too busy preparing for an alien invasion. Too busy, at least, to worry over a bunch of pirates. The Pontiff's Citadel saw the opportunity and seized it, hence why the Starfields had come under their control so quickly.

Back in the day, all three Alliances used to have their fingers in the Shattered Starfields. In those times conflict was constant as the Alliances

took shots at each other for control. Not to mention, the pirates weren't so easy to order around. No one was able to get an upper hand.

When Su Xiaosu was sent over, she didn't have the fear or reputation of the Pontiff's Citadel to help her. She relied on their backing and her own strength to establish what would become the Moonfiend Pirates. Now the Citadel had the pick of the litter, and regardless of everything else the power gems these three planets produced were enough to make the religious organization rich.

A top of the line patrol boat sailed through space toward the biggest of the three primary planets. It was transporting rare metals, with two more patrol boats just behind as its entourage.

"Planetary shields are opening. Entry permission granted." The electronic voice cooed through the ship's bridge. White light shimmered and dissipated away in to nothing, a sign that the shields were down.

The three ships quietly continued on their way.

The pilot of the ship scowled openly. "Why the hell do they have the shields up all the time, lately? They must be scared of that pirate clan."

Another pirate answered. "How could they not be? Two months and already we've seen more than twenty clan go dark. No one knows what's happened to them. We also don't know if all of it was done by this new clan, but witnesses say they have at least one sovereign-ranked mecha pilot. And Blinding Stones."

"Heh, they have the right idea. No better way to make money than to take it from thieves, right? Hit a few targets, then retire. Find yourself a nice, out-of-the-way planet and do whatever you please. That said we are too careful here. They have two ships, last we heard. If they're stupid enough to attack us here, that'd be like an old man eating a barrel of arsenic. Worse than throwing your life away."

"Caution is a virtue. Raising these shields is a good idea. Now every ship that comes and goes is checked so thoroughly they can tell the color of your underwear right there on their screens. Talk about nasty. Now shut up and stop complaining. We're almost there, get ready to move."

The three pirate ships deftly made their way to the airship hangar on the main planet and docked. Another boat, invisible to the human and electronic eye, slipped in right behind them. It did not dock, though, instead staying hidden over the settlement's airspace.

Su Xiaosu had assumed personal command of Zeus-1. With her intimate knowledge, she led Mika as the Amazon piloted them through the skies. Their destination was the planet's largest mountain range. 1

"The power gems mined here are c-ranked demon stones, named by the pirates. They're ground into powder to create some of the best catalysts for creation of alloys. It creates an enamel that can withstand temperatures up to three thousand degrees Celsius 2 It also serves as a reflective coating against energy attacks from a battleship. This is where they mine them. My old flagship's hull was covered in the stuff." There was a pang of regret in the former Pirate Queen's voice.

"Demon Stones are radioactive, so the mountain ranges affect communications. Even satellite images are dim and hard to read out here. This will be the best LZ we can find."

"Always with your eyes on the dollars," Lan Jue said, clapping a hand on her shoulder.

Xiaosu smirked. "I'm fine, I made up my mind a long time ago. Before I was a patsy. Now I live my own life and make my own decisions. Relax, boss."

So long as no one else was around, she preferred to refer to him the way his Amazons traditionally did.

The area where they mined for the Demon Stones was expansive. Zeus-1 hovered overhead until it found a smooth patch between the mountains. It stopped perhaps a hundred meters above the ground and stopped. Its tractor beam sprang to life and delivered the soldiers to the planet's surface. They spread out to secure the landing zone.

In order to speed up the process and avoid detection, Zeus-1 was overburdened with more than three hundred souls. They practically had to sit on top of one another, but it would take only three trips to get the

whole brigade on the ground.

The first round of soldiers were in place, hidden away within the mountains. Zeus-1 lifted back into the air and crept around until another opportunity to sneak by the shields presented itself. Just like the Red Widows, the defenses were good but not good enough.

Lan Jue referred to the map Xiaosu had given him, and ordered Alpha Team to move out. While they waited for the rest of their people, they'd would need to establish a presence here in the mines.

The closest settlement to the mines was still rather far. If they wanted to get more solid intel, they would need to hide their identities and get closer. Who better than indentured servants?

A lot of these workers were slaves, captured by the pirates from outside. The planet was developed in part so their forced labor could work more comfortably. The pirates also didn't mistreat them too terribly. It took manpower to make places like this work, and every pair of hands was precious.

So precious that they were worth the same as lower-end power gems. If you wanted to know how strong a pirate clan was, the easiest metric was to count how many people they had.

Chapter 567: Taking the Mines

There were around a thousand workers in the mines. It was a lot, considering modern mining technology. Big as the mines were, the workers were spread pretty thin. Taking the mines would be easier without them bunched together.

The greatest natural advantage of these mines was silence. No electronic signals could get through the stone, rendering wireless communication devices useless. It kept in touch with the town through an old-schooled land line.

The Star Division had the mines under control before the second wave of compatriots arrived.

The workers didn't offer any resistance. After all, they were slaves here, forced to work against their will. They were desperate to escape and return to their lies. Star Division enjoyed their unmitigated cooperation.

First Brigade busily gathered the slaves together, and found a number of maglev transport trucks. Lan Jue then ordered a few soldiers to be responsible for keeping an eye on communications with the town. For this, they needed the workers' help in case a supervisor needed more specific information.

"We've taken control of the demon stone mines. Waiting for your orders, commander!" First Brigade's Alpha Squad officer appeared in front of Lan Jue.

"Break off into units and keep things under control," Lan Jue said. "Establish an outpost on the high ground and wait for friendlies to arrive. No one is to leave the mines, and have everyone change in to worker uniforms."

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers were efficient, and quickly pulled their new disguises over their flight suits. Even if pirates did arrive, they wouldn't be able to tell them from the slaves.

The Pharmacist stood at Lan Jue's shoulder. She'd changed clothes too, and looked completely out of place in the simple garb.

Lan Jue couldn't help but smirk at her. The Pharmacist saw. "Laugh if you want to laugh. It looks like these Moonfiend pirates aren't even as well defended as the other pirate clans! There isn't a soul here defending their mines."

Lan Jue shrugged. "In the world of piracy this is normal. The Red Widows were an exception, not the rule. Pirates live for freedom and loathe control. Remember that the Moonfiend Pirates are also huge, and even the Alliances would find it hard to wipe them out completely. The Accountant saw a lot of railguns, too – three times as many as the Red Widows. Even Majesty wouldn't survive a direct assault. They aren't scared of anything."

A smirk curled the ends of the Pharmacist's lips. "They should be."

Lan Jue chuckled. "You've been so cheerful lately, sis. I'm glad to see it. When Jun'er sees you after we get back, she'll be so happy."

The Pharmacist rolled her eyes. "So what are you saying? I'm too serious?"

Lan Jue tripped over himself in his haste to answer. "I wouldn't say serious. Er, more like a romance novel. Sort of brooding all the time, a little sad." He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. He knew they would call back painful memories. "I'm sorry," he rushed to add, "I –"

She sniffed and shook her head. "It's fine. It's been years. If you can get yourself out of it, then why can't I? Anyway, there has never been any news of his death. There's always hope. You were right – when you get out and see the rest of the universe, your own problems fade away. Agreeing to join the Star Division was a good decision. Anyway, Jun'er may still be locked away in that museum when we get back."

Anxiously, Lan Jue continued. "Infusing her with so much knowledge... is it safe?"

The Pharmacist smiled. "You don't need to worry about that."

"Of course I'll worry, I'm Jun'er's father!" Lan Jue replied.

This made the Pharmacist's face redden. "The Clairvoyant spared nothing in his plans for Jun'er. Everything he's giving her she can surely handle. Who knows, she's likely to surprise us when we get back. The Clairvoyant told me that it would be at least a year before she realized her full potential, though. Once she does, her capabilities will soar."

Lan Jue listened intently, regret written on his face. "If it weren't for these aliens, I would never want Jun'er to bear these responsibilities so early."

But the Pharmacist smiled at his concern. "There you're wrong. Jun'er is different from other children. When she only just starting talking she asked me, since I cannot see will I be a burden on you? I cried, and said of course not. I told her she was the most important person in the whole universe. She didn't say anything else at the time, but I knew it bothered her.

"You don't know how happy she was when we took her to Luo. Between the helmet helping her to see and the awakening of her Discipline, she was ecstatic. She kept saying she wanted to be strong Adepts like us. She wanted to be useful. When the Clairvoyant told us what she'd need to do, Jun'er didn't hesitate for a second. We told her that studying under the Clairvoyant would make her a strong Adept, like her mommy and daddy."

Lan Jue didn't know how to react. "Jun'er is that motivated? How come I didn't notice...?"

The Pharmacist grinned. "That's because she's a sneaky little one you assumed she didn't know about our arrangement, but she knows everything. She just didn't let on."

Lan Jue shook his head in surrender. "Definitely the right choice for the Clairvoyant's successor."

Over the course of their conversation, Zeus-1 had returned. Second Brigade had arrived. Lan Jue ordered his men to pass out the worker

uniforms they'd confiscated. Second Brigade donned the disguises. Everything appeared to be going smoothly.

Half an hour later, Fourth Brigade had joined them on the planet's surface. Zeus-1 hid away in the mines and didn't return to orbit. Zeus-1 was a maneuverable, hard-hitting ship. It was a fierce protector for the ground team.

Su Xiaosu cast her eyes over the troops. She'd chosen to leave Majesty in the Accountant's hands and command from the front. She was the former Moonfiend Empress, and knew this area from memory. More than that, though, she'd built this clan with her own hands. The same hands would tear it apart.

The leaders of the Star Division gathered to discuss their next move.

Su Xiaosu indicated the holographic map reflected on the ground in the middle of them. "Bartender, you'll take your people and use the public transport. Scope out as many pirate installations as you can. Focus on this..."

Chapter 568: Channeling the Empress

Su Xiaosu turned to Lan Jue. “Commander. We will have brigades one, two and three break up and disseminate throughout Crescent City. Once we’re in, we can keep in touch through our communicators. It’ll take about an hour for a mecha to get from Crescent City to Luna, the inner city. Once we get there we regroup, then proceed to the next part of the plan.”

Eight hundred soldiers exited the mines. Fourth Brigade spread out to scout enemy positions while the rest made their way to Crescent City.

Pirate cities grew organically around their bases. There weren’t any checks and people were mostly allowed to go where they pleased. Slaves, though, were confined mostly to the slums.

The working class typically had ten days on and two days off. They were given a small salary as well, something Su Xiaosu fought to implement. She had always been good-hearted, and pitied their suffering. Under her direction the laborer population on Moonfiend lived long and comfortable lives. Uprisings were rare things.

Crescent City was the second largest establishment behind Luna. Pirates numbered a relatively small amount of the population here near the mines. Most were slaves.

Slaves, though the alternative would have been death. The Moonfiend Empress had tried to kill as few as possible. Instead her prisoners were brought here to help build the city they would live in. The capacity to adapt was in every human, and in times of adversity we relied on habit. To most, life was more precious than pride.

There was a reason Su Xiaosu chose to lead the troops in to Crescent City, of course. The slanted demographics worked in their favor – unlike Luna, which was largely occupied by pirates. It was calmer here, and easier for them to blend in.

Pirates would be pirates, and expansion was as true here as it was in any other part of the Starfields. Planet Moonfiend was the jewel of pirate

culture, and four or five cities had sprung up across its surface. Every one of them was still growing or opening mines or reclaiming land. Xiaosu's designs were inspired. With enough time she would have turned this planet into a metropolis as impressive as anything in the Three Alliances. It would have become a center of order and stability, radiating out through the system – for independence! The Morning Star had always been self-reliant, headstrong, and ambitious. Her goal had been to create a glorious pirate queendom.

But as it turned out, her dreams were impossible in the face of power. The Pontiff did not give her time.

Only consequences bring our failures in to focus. Su Xiaosu had to be betrayed and nearly killed before she would shed her pride. Lan Jue's daring rescue convinced her to give him her loyalty.

While Lan Jue did his business on Luo, Xiaosu locked herself away and focused on cultivation, to return to her former strength. She had had so much time to think, about everything. All that she'd experience was on display like an old movie. Being faced with it all made her conflicted, and depressed. She realized she needed a strong shoulder to lean on.

She knew Lan Jue had his heart set on another. He would never love her. Even if he was one to take several lovers, he had his Amazons. Mika and the others were amazing women in their own right. That's why she was so emotional when they'd returned to Skyfire Avenue. She could not be his lover, so she had to prove her worth. Otherwise, how could she measure up to the Amazons!

She returned to Planet Moonfiend. She paid her dues through hardships, freeing her people from the Pontiff's clutches with the help of Lan Jue's ship. Eventually she got to know of the Star Division. Her heart jumped for joy.

When the Archangels had her in their dungeons, they'd filled her with drugs to break her mind. However, they also spared no effort in keeping her body healthy. Su Xiaosu was the greatest military strategist the West had seen in a generation. She had proven her masterful command through

her efforts in the Starfields. Su Xiaosu knew the time had come to prove her worth.

The Star Division ended up surpassing her expectations. It was strong, adaptable, and in no time at all the soldiers were fighting like a veteran outfit. Step by step they were becoming a force to be reckoned with.

A single unit could take on a hundred enemy mechas and walk away unscathed. They were also individually capable, giving her space to be creative with her pirate tactics.

Once-in-a-generation tactician or not, her heart still swelled when she saw her city again after so long. She knew she shouldn't have any connection to this place, but she was just human, after all.

Because most of the slum's populace were workers, the streets were deserted at this time of day. Lan Jue's soldiers were disguised well, and no one gave them any mind as they gathered within the city.

"Xiaosu, are you alright?" Lan Jue turned his concerned eyes to the former pirate queen, standing beside him.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Once we get settled here, the next target is Luna. We'll spread out all through the city, and once everyone's in place the first place we hit is the Moonfiend Palace. That's where they keep the planetary defense hub. Once we have control, we hold this place with everything we got. I designed the Palace like a castle with all the tools we'll need to stave them off. Meanwhile, a second force will head for the airship hangars where they'll disable battleships controls. When those two things are done, planet Moonfiend is ours. The pirates will come at us, so all we need to do is fortify this position and wait until they exhaust themselves. Then we make our move."

Lan Jue nodded. "Good. That's the plan."

The Driver suggested taking the pirates' battleships and using them to take the city. It was more direct, he argued. However, Xiaosu vetoed the idea for the simple reason that they didn't have the people. Trying to man as many battleships as were here would leave no ground troops. Then there was the time it took to get the ships in the air.

Once they took control of the ships news would have spread to the pirates. Suddenly they would have the entire pirate fleet against a few battleships, and that would throw off all their plans.

Blowing them up was easier. A few timed explosives was simpler than flying a hundred ships around.

After careful deliberation, everyone decided to go with Su Xiaosu's original plan.

The troops settled down in the slums. They ate their own food and spent time in rest or contemplation, waiting for deployment. It would be some time before that happened, too. They had to wait for intel from Fourth Brigade.

Going in blind was a recipe for disaster.

Xiaosu approached Lan Jue. "Let me take in to the city, boss. After this operation, the Moonfiend Pirate Clan will be wiped from existence."

Lan Jue saw the reticence hidden in her eyes. "Xiaosu," his deep voice replied, "we aren't taking everyone. I'd like to, but we have to consider everybody's safety. Our operation will not affect civilians. When we leave there is sure to be around pirate clan that wants the real estate. They'll need people, too. You don't have to worry."

"Yeah," she answered with a soft smile. "You relax too, boss. I've made up my mind, or have you forgotten? I used to be the heartless and cruel Moonfiend Empress. I just want to take a final look at what I made. No matter the outcome of the battle, this is likely the last time I come here."

"Alright, I'll go with you." The two, dressed in their dirty worker gear, walked further into Crescent City.

A lot of the construction here was similar to other pirate bases; squat buildings made of metal. Metal was the most durable, easily produced material they had. Occasionally there were stone structures, peppered here and there. They had more personality.

There were even fewer people the further into the city they went. Xiaosu explained that those who lived here usually had specific, specialized skills.

Pirates, like anyone else, needed talent if they were to advance.

As they wandered the streets, Su Xiaosu heaved a sigh. “So eager for quick success.”

Lan Jue cast her a sidelong glance. “What’s that?”

“Not much has changed since they took me away,” Xiaosu said. “The population might have decreased. It means they aren’t sticking to m plan. When I was in charge the population doubled every year. This was the epicenter, and other cities were dreamed up within these walls. At that pace we would have been self-sufficient in no more than ten years. It would have made up even stronger.

“But the ones at the top were only ever interested in swallowing up as many pirates as possible, as fast as possible. It didn’t matter if they could work together. They ignored the problems within and just let them fester. They think its power, but they contribute nothing. Instead they are like a cancer, rotting away from inside.”

Lan Jue smirked. “You sound like you’re channeling the Moonfiend Empress!”

Xiaosu blinked and shook her head. “You’re right! I guess you can never really stop being a pirate queen. Oh my, look at that woman’s figure.” As she spoke, Xiaosu’s eyes panned ahead.

Chapter 569: The Perfect Girl

Lan Jue followed her eyes to the pretty girl heading their way. Just as Xiaosu had exclaimed, she had quite the figure. She was around a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, with an hourglass figure from the front and the sides. Every slope and curve was a treat for the eyes, making his heart race.

From where Lan Jue and Xiaosu were standing they could only see her in profile. She had a pale face and long eyelashes that curled up like an old pinup poster. Long red hair reached all the way down to the crest of her buttocks. She lithely moved down the street looking at the storefronts. Her alluring silhouette slithered tantalizingly beneath her black flight suit.

Lan Jue grinned. "I didn't expect there'd be a woman on your level anywhere else in Moonfiend. Do you know her?"

Xiaosu shook her head. "I don't know why, but something seems strange about her. A woman like that is very rare in a pirate clan."

"Oh? Why?" Lan Jue asked.

Xiaosu replied. "These are pirates, very different from the men of the three Alliances. Even as Queen it was impossible for me to stop my people from pillaging and taking women. These ladies become depressed and hopeless – playthings for men of power."

She pointedly looked at Lan Jue as she finished the last sentence. Lan Jue pretended like he didn't understand. "So you're saying she belongs to some strong pirate?"

She shook her head. "No, she clearly doesn't. Otherwise how would she still be a virgin?"

"A virgin?" Lan Jue looked back at his tactician, shocked. "How do you know she's a virgin?"

The commander rolled her eyes. "A practiced eye. I'm surprised you don't have it, surrounded by a cloud of beautiful women like you are."

Lan Jue rubbed his nose and chuckled sheepishly. "I don't get it! I felt

some energy from her but not much. She seems like a second or third level Adept – very average. If she's still a virgin then that would explain things. Not a strong female pirate, but a girl. Probably protected by someone to keep her out of trouble."

Su Xiaosu's face scrunched as she thought. "Maybe, boss. You aren't enticed when you see a girl like this? She really does have quite the body! She's.... fuller than Mika, such a tiny waist, long legs. One can't help but appreciate what they see."

"We're here to do a job," Lan Jue said, annoyed, "not for you to play matchmaker. Let's turn back, it's about time."

The woman that was their focus moved on, too, headed for a nearby building. After Xiaosu's constant teasing, he couldn't help but get a closer look at her. She looked like she wanted to go inside, but something stopped her. She turned her head, and her pretty eyes met instantly with Lan Jue's.

When their eyes met Lan Jue froze. She really was something else.

She was the kind of beauty that made men forget to breathe. Her eyes were as captivating as the rest of her. Indeed, 'gorgeous' was the only word Lan Jue could think of to describe this twenty-something pirate princess.

Pretty as her eyes were, though, there was no emotion within them. She dragged her eyes away from Lan Jue, looked at the door for a moment, then walked into the building.

Curiosity flashed in Lan Jue's eyes. "You're right. There's something different."

His fellow commander snickered. "I bet you want to get a closer look."

Lan Jue rapped his knuckles against her forehead. "I don't mean anything like that. Even from far away she could feel my gaze. At my level of cultivation, I can hide my Discipline from most. Only level two or three, but she knew it. Impossible, unless that's her Discipline. And she seems a little too perfect. There's no such thing as a flawless beauty in reality. She's incomparable, hardly human."

Xiaosu smiled. “Alright, boss. You say you’ve got no interest but the way you’re describing her, it’s like she’s a fairy. Let’s head back, we’ve seen what there is to see. Now we have to set about tearing it apart. We should get some clothes and change, first. It’ll be hard getting into Luna dressed as laborers.”

“Yeah.” Lan Jue didn’t want to create any more problems than he already had. Strange as she was, she was a pirate and that was that. He still had business to take care of.

The two of them got back to the slums as the sky was darkening. Several of Fourth Brigades recon teams had begun to trickle back. Each one came with another piece of information for them to mull over.

Su Xiaosu’s knowledge helped inform the scouts of where to look and what to look for. By the time night had fallen, everyone was back. They had what they needed to proceed.

Lan Jue convened the Division leadership for a meeting.

“Things aren’t bad, but they aren’t good either. From what we’ve been able to dig up, there are more than thirty thousand pirates stationed on this planet alone. Among them are enough pilots to make their own Division, over a thousand mecha suits combat-ready. For air support they’ve got twelve battleships and twenty patrol boats. Altogether, that’s about fifty percent of the Moonfiend Pirates’ total strength. The rest are disseminated across the other two planets.”

“The most troubling fact lies in how dispersed they are. There are several areas that work independently, centered around the airship hangar. There were three hangars, but now there are five and they’ve all got targets we want to hit. The biggest one used to be exclusively used for Moonfiend Pirate ships. It’s got enough space for seven battleships. If we want to cripple their ability, then Third and Fourth Brigade aren’t going to cut it.

“On the other hand, having them separated means that the nearby city’s defenses can’t cover everything. It’s unlikely they’ll be checked, too, so getting in won’t be too hard. What we need to discuss now is how we’re

going to pull this off.”

Su Xiaosu offered her suggestions. “The more targets there are to hit, the harder it is for us. We need to focus on priorities. Battleships in particular can do a lot of damage, and if we let them get airborne we’re likely to face casualties. Even a ninth level mecha pilot wouldn’t survive a blast from a battleship’s main guns.”

The Coffee Master, his face hard with concern, joined in. “Third Brigade doesn’t have enough people to pull it off. A single big hangar would be no problem, but five separate targets... it’ll be hard to keep track of all those spinning plates.”

The Bartender was nodding in agreement. “It’s a real problem. I’m not sure we can take control as fast as you need. With this being the case, you’ll need to make a choice – see if Zeus-1 can handle one of the bases itself. With its Blinding Stone, it should be able to hit them hard and take the hangar out before they know what’s happening.”

Xiaosu rejoined. “Zeus-1 could probably handle a hangar on its own. The biggest one is protected by a shield. A head-on attack is impossible, and sneaking in would require a lot of people. We’d need a team for each ship there, probably most of our Division.”

If there had been only three airship hangars, as they’d thought when the plan was made, then Third and Fourth Brigade would have been able to take one each. Comparatively, it was a much easier operation; Majesty and the Photographer deal with the other planets, brigades one and two take the palace, while three and four take the surroundings. All they had to do was deal enough damage to erode the pirates’ chain of command. If they didn’t know where to go or who was after them, they’d scatter.

However, that was the old plan. Now there were more problems than they could manage all at once. The addition of just two new targets threw everything out of whack.

The Gourmet’s thoughtful voice joined in. “Leave one to me.”

The Pharmacist spoke right on his heels. “And the other to me.”

This made the Driver laugh. “I’m not a big one for people acting the hero, but here they are when you need them.”

Lan Jue looked at his two volunteers. “It’s dangerous. You’re facing battleships.”

The Gourmet grinned back at him. “No danger there. If it gets a little hot, I can always disengage. At any rate we’re here to sabotage, and you haven’t seen the kind of damage a Paragon can do if they put their mind to it.”

“Speed is what’s most important,” the Pharmacist reminded them. “I won’t have any troubles in that regard, or in destroying their control systems. I’ll need more information on precisely where those controls are, then I’ll be good to go.”

In more ways than one, the Pharmacist was just as formidable as a new Paragon. With the Banishing Blade and her own Discipline he had nothing to fear. This went double for the Gourmet, who was a true Paragon.

Lan Jue nodded decisively. “Very well, then it’s decided. Bartender, you and your brigade are responsible for taking the largest hangar. You’ll have command of First Brigades’ Alpha Squad as well. Other the Pharmacist who has her own mission, you can feel free to spread them out as you see fit.

“Coffee Master, you and your people will be here. Handle this base as quickly as you can and if possible try to spare one of the battleships. Use it to give support to the Bartender. You have to make sure there’s nothing left, no ships for the pirates to escape in. Lay it all to waste then wait for news. When the job is complete, it’ll be time to move on Luna.”

Chapter 570: Another Encounter with Beauty

Both the Coffee Master and the Bartender nodded in understanding.

Lan Jue turned his attention to the Driver. “We will lead the First and Second Brigade in an attack on the Moonfiend Palace. We need to get it under our control as fast as possible.”

The Driver nodded, but turned to speak to Xiaosu. “How much opposition can we expect in the Palace?”

“It looks like a fortress from the outside, and it is,” Xiaosu said. “A lot of its defensive measures are buried underground. They will also have around a thousand mecha pilots as guards. There is also a small railgun hidden in the buttresses that can fire a projectile over ten thousand meters. It’s a third as strong as the main guns they use for planetary defense.”

The Driver looked at her with eyes wide as saucers. “You’re shitting me! Installing a railgun like that in your own fortress, are you crazy? Fire that thing once and the radiated energy will fry everyone.”

Xiaosu seemed a little embarrassed. “We have plenty of radiation shielding, I’m confident it works. I installed it in the event of invasion. So in short, that means we aren’t walking through the front door. That’s asking for trouble.”

These sorts of guns were standard for planetary defenses systems, as well as Bastions. Like any other weapon, they came in various calibers.

Lan Jue remembered when they rolled out the latest version of their railgun. It was part of their Arachnid-class Bastion’s warfare suite. One blast from that would obliterate anyone and anything. Even Jue Di couldn’t survive a direct shot.

Naturally your average defense system wouldn’t have a gun that powerful. But even a standard-caliber railgun could rip through a battleship’s shields. Three blows was all it took for those guns to turn

their ships into slag. One could imagine what it'd do to a person.

Used on a planet's surface, a railgun blast had the same force as a neutron bomb, without all the nasty radiation. Any human caught in the explosion would be evaporated. All that at just a third of what the technology could do! If they turned it on a mecha division, the soldiers would be routed in moments. Assuming, of course, they stood all together.

Railguns used in planetary defense were strictly forbidden for use on planet surfaces. With how much strain they produced, too many blasts could rip a planet into pieces. As such, railguns were all installed facing outward so they couldn't ever be turned on their own.

Su Xiaosu's gall was evident with this revelation. She didn't put a full railgun in her palace, but at a third of its potential there was nothing on the planet's surface that could match it.

"Leave the palace's railgun to me," Lan Jue said. "I'll deal with it."

Lan Jue's involvement was insurance. He was the third strongest member of Star Division, outside of the Paragon and the Pharmacist. The Photographer didn't count.

Xiaosu went on to underline their plan. "The first wave we send in has to be the strongest. These are the areas we need to control..."

She quickly went over the strategy, indicating the important areas on the digital map she provided. Copies were downloaded onto everyone's communicators so they could follow along.

There was an air of apprehension this time that wasn't there for their earlier missions. This one was different from a simple sweep and clear excursion. Star Division needed to bring its A-game.

Of course, Su Xiaosu and Lan Jue were being conservative. Many of the pilots were strong enough in their own right, and in teams they were even more formidable. After all, a ninth level Adept in a tricked-out mecha could do real damage. However, everyone agreed to keep to small groups to ensure safety. As much as possible, they wanted everyone to come back in one piece.

Safety first. With the right instruction and guidance, they had nothing to fear.

The war meeting went on until late into the night. Again and again they went over the information and the plan until every detail was discussed. This was going to be a defining experience for the Division, more so than any mission that had come before. There was no room for negligence. If one part of the plan didn't go smoothly, the whole thing was in danger of collapse.

When the first light of day began to paint the city, the meeting concluded. Leaders went their separate ways for some rest.

Third and Fourth Brigade went out into the city and bought new sets of clothes. Thus concealed, they spread out through Crescent City to prepare. Then it came down to First and Second Brigade.

Even as a pirate planet, there was a fairly good infrastructure of public transportation between cities. Even scheduled transport ships were a common site, where in all the rest of the Starfields they would be unthinkable. They were only used on-planet, though – it was too dangerous to have the slow craft out in space, where any number of pirates would be eager to take a chomp out of it.

Tickets were available to move people where they wished, but prices were stifling. They did it to keep the population under control. Pirates did not need to pay for transport. There were more than five hundred soldiers who made up First and Second Brigade. It took over twenty trips and the better part of a day to get everyone into Luna.

In stark contrast to Crescent City, Luna's streets were absent the metal shacks. Here the homes were indistinguishable from places on an Alliance homeworld. But as they walked the streets, Lan Jue and Xiaosu saw no less than three brawls. This spoke to a crime rate much higher than the city's upscale look let on.

The former Moonfiend Empress hid beneath a hoodie, with a mask concealing her face. She was taking every effort to keep her identity concealed.

“Security doesn’t seem to have changed,” Xiaosu said to Lan Jue in a low voice.

The Monarch grinned. “In a moment that’ll be the least of their worries. Lady Empress, we’re about to walk back into your palace. How do you feel?”

“You’re teasing me,” Xiaosu grumbled. “How should I feel? My only desire is to see the thing I made destroyed by my own hand. It’s better to let it die than live enslaved to a tyrant. As part of the Pontiff’s Citadel, we heard constantly of Satan’s evils. Today we know how hypocritical all that is. The Pontiff is much more frightening than Satan could ever be. Their poison is hidden behind a smile. Darkness in a shell of light.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Don’t think about it too much. I hope putting this clan to bed will wound the Citadel deeply. If not for the fact these aliens could show at any moment, I would have spread news of their actions to every Alliance. Now isn’t the time for in-fighting.”

Xiaosu shook her head in response. “It wouldn’t matter. I know them, they always have a plan. Those poor people, their ‘experiments’, have already been moved. They’re too slippery to get caught.”

They drew near to the Moonfiend Palace. The Empress’ former abode was a proud, lofty fortress in the center of the city. The area around the palace was bare of any other buildings to hide their approach.

Xiaosu spoke furtively to Lan Jue. “When the fortresses defenses are activated the whole structure rises a hundred meters into the air. The area there with no buildings are defense rings, with mechas stationed in each in addition to counter-insurgency weapons. The railgun’s on the highest tower.”

She went on to explain the rest of the palace’s layout in detail.

“I also designed an escape tunnel. They may have found it, but if it hasn’t been destroyed that would be perfect. It’ll lead us right to the heart of the palace.”

“Good,” Lan Jue said with a nod. “Do you need me to go with you?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll go alone. Stay close and wait for me to get back.”

That said, she slipped into a nearby ally and vanished.

Lan Jue didn’t stand around. He walked down the street until he found a coffee shop and ordered a cup. It was expensive, but that couldn’t be helped. All the materials had to be brought in from out of the system.

Even the coffee’s scent was bland. Lan Jue feared that if the Coffee Master were here, he’d throw a fit. Call it undrinkable. Lan Jue just wanted to blend in, so he choked it down and suppressed the scowls.

It was still afternoon so there were only a few people peppered around. The occasional customer would pop in, but everything remained pleasantly quiet. Lan Jue preferred this sort of environment.

Then, his eyes narrowed. A figure caught his attention from down the street.

Her?

Indeed it was, the attractive woman he and Xiaosu had seen from earlier. A sharp whistle turned his eye to a group of pirates who’d seen her as well. They were moving in to block her path. He didn’t need to read minds to know they had bad intentions.

Lan Jue watched with knit brows. The girl seemed unconcerned, ambivalent, confident in her safety. But this was the pirate world. Some of these men didn’t care about anyone’s rules. When you ran into a group like that, trouble was sure to follow.

Three pirates spread open their arms to bar the girl from walking any further. She turned and tried to walk around them, but the men wouldn’t be denied. They swung around faster than her, not giving ground. All the while they smirked and said foul things.

Ever since the Empress lost control, this sort of thing was happening more frequently. No one was going to stop it.

Chapter 571: I'm Not Your Woman

"Hey gorgeous, you've got some damn fine curves! See what you're doin' to me baby, c'mere and let me see what ya got. I gotta know if those are real. Your cheeks look so soft... beautiful. Know what, real or not I don't care. Let me enjoy your goods, beautiful. You've aroused my interest."

The pirate stretched a hand toward the woman's face. She glared at him with an icy-cold stare and stepped just out of his reach.

"Move!" Her voice sounded strange. Sweet, but awkward.

"Where we goin'?" The pirate asked with a grin full of dark promise. Then, he lunged forward to grab her.

"Screw off." A dark voice growled from nearby. A moment later the offending pirate felt an intense power tear through his chest. The others around him watched as the pirate was fired away like a missile.

Lan Jue stood where the scallywag had been. The leg that had launched him away slowly returned to the ground. The Monarch positioned himself between the other pirates and the young woman. The light in his eyes promised violence if they tried anything else.

"Bastard!" The remaining two pirates tried to rush him.

"I said, screw off!" Lan Jue's eyes flashed brilliant gold.

The two men staggered to a stop, like they'd hit a wall. Dumbfounded, their hearts filled with an indelible terror, they began to retreat. In the pirate world, power was the most important currency. They didn't know why they were suddenly so frightened, but they knew it had to mean this newcomer was a strong Adept.

"Daring to touch my woman, are you guys tryin' to die?" Lan Jue's eyes flashed again. These guys were stronger than average. His first word of command didn't completely overwhelm their will.

This time, Lan Jue let his aura flare. When the radiance of his strength washed over the pirates, they didn't dare say anything else. Both of them turned around immediately and fled.

Lan Jue also surprised himself. He seemed incapable of not getting involved when a pretty damsel was in distress. The Amazons were proof of that. He shook his head in resignation and turned back. The woman was still standing there.

“If you want to avoid trouble, you should cover up. Hide your figure. There are pirates all over, after all.” Lan Jue offered.

She looked back at him blankly. Eventually she awkwardly responded. “I’m not your woman.”

“Oh..., that was just a red herring.” Lan Jue lamely explained. She was a naïve one.

She blinked at him. “What’s a red herring?”

He looked back at her, helpless. Naïve didn’t begin to describe her.

“It means I was trying to keep you out of trouble. I lied on purpose. I’m off, take care of yourself.” He didn’t want to spend his time involved with the young woman on the eve of their operation. He was able to confirm her strength, standing so close. Definitely second or third level.

She watched him go back into the coffee shop. She thought for a moment, then strode off.

In the end Lan Jue couldn’t finish the murky water that passed for coffee before Xiaosu returned. Lan Jue exited and seamlessly fell in step beside her. “How’d it go?” he asked.

“Not bad, we can use it.” she answered. “When I snuck in everything seemed normal. None of the traps were tripped, so it looks like it was never discovered. But go ahead and guess boss; what else do you think I found?” A strange look flitted across her eyes.

“What?” He asked.

She set her jaw. “The ones from their prison.”

Lan Jue almost staggered. “The ones from the Citadel? It’s destiny!”

Xiaosu was, of course, referring to the poor children they’d found in the dungeons of the Citadel – the ones she was sure had been moved. How

fortuitous that they'd choose to bring them here. It was a wise decision on their part. Who would believe that the Pontiff's dirty secrets would be out here in the Shattered Starfields? If they get caught, they can punt the responsibility on to the dirty pirate menace. All this before one even took into account how strong the Moonfiend Pirates were, how much clout they had in the area. The Pontiff's Citadel was protected out here.

"Boss, I'm not going to make things harder for you." Su Xiaosu suddenly affirmed.

Lan Jue fixed her with his gaze. He understood what she was saying, and shook his head. "No, anyone with a shred of decency would do this, because it's the right thing to do. No matter what happens, we're going to get them out of here."

It had been on Lan Jue's to-do list ever since they discovered the Citadel's dungeons. He was too weak to take on the whole organization, but here they were presented with a golden opportunity. How could he pass that up? This was his responsibility as a human being.

Xiaosu hung her head. "You're too soft-hearted, boss. I appreciate it."

Lan Jue looked into her reddening eyes. "We need to rework our plan if we're adding a rescue. Is there anything like a safe room in your palace? When the fighting starts we won't be able to spare anyone to protect them, they'll need to be somewhere locked away. At least until the battleship arrives."

"Yes!" She was suddenly fervent and resolute. She fluidly slipped back into being Empress.

Lan Jue nodded. "Excellent. Modify the plan, and let's get back so we can tell the others what we discovered."

First and Second Brigade had gathered in several of the more popular night attractions throughout Luna. They were the best places to escape notice. The Adepts of the Star Division went out of their way to show worth, silently slipping into the city by whatever means were open to them. Some slipped in through invisibility, others transformed their bodies as needed. They did what had to be done because that was the

mission.

Jin Tao, for instance, transformed into a mastiff. Another one of the soldiers who looked like a pirate led him through, like a pet. Tang Xiao was even more flagrant. He morphed himself into the image of a pirate mecha, but hollow so that his team could fit inside. The pirates themselves loaded Tang Xiao and his team into a ship and ferried them to Luna.

These were only a few examples of the Division soldiers' tricky exploits. One by one they slipped in, unseen and ignored. After all, what was a few hundred people? The Moonfiend Pirates commanded tens of thousands, with over ten thousand mechas ready at any given time. What did they have to fear from numbers so small?

Confidence in strength was why security was so lax. For all they knew, there wasn't anyone in the Starfields that could challenge the Moonfiend Pirates for dominance. Defense changed with psychology.

Their biggest concern was the pirate fleet. If they could avoid them, everything would be fine. If, on the other hand, they did show up, then the planet's defenses would give them something to consider.

Lan Jue and Su Xiaosu made their way to Luna's biggest bar. Right away they spotted the Driver, playing a drinking game with a group of people. Lan Jue smirked and muttered to Xiaosu, "It looks like he was born for this life."

The tactician chuckled. "So it seems. He's an arrogant man, and there are a few he looks up to. You have his respect."

Lan Jue smiled, and nodded his head. "We're friends, it's not about respect."

"Ey? If it isn't Lil' Lan come rollin' in? Come have a drink with Brother Sai, yeah?" The Driver waved and shouted boisterously. His naturally vocal nature was catching a few sidelong glances.

Lan Jue sighed. "Can I take that back? I don't want to be his friend anymore."

Despite the complaints, he made his way over to his drinking buddy.

“Ah, this is the famous Brother Sai!” Lan Jue bowed and scraped dramatically. Brother Sai? The hell kind of address is that.

The Driver’s face went stiff for a moment, but he quickly recovered. “Take a seat, little Lan. The booze here isn’t bad. Hey there, girl, we’re gunna start my friend off with five Long Island iced teas, that’s a fair start.”

It was Lan Jue’s turn to wince. Five Long Islands! Did he want to kill him?

The name was a deceptive. Long Island iced teas were among the most destructive cocktails created. It was a mix of several types of booze that when imbibed, tasted no different than a sweet and refreshing beverage. You couldn’t even taste the alcohol.

The delayed effect was infamous. Even seasoned drinkers were floored by their third one. Five was clearly an assassination attempt.

“We don’t need that much, venerable elder. One is enough for me. I actually have something to talk to you about.” Lan Jue looked at his brigade commander pointedly.

Just then an explosive presence joined them. A fiery woman, svelte and beautiful, laid a hand on the Driver’s shoulder. “If Brother Sai offers you a drink, it’s to give you respect. He offers a drink, you drink. You don’t want a drink, you drink!”

She was dressed in a way that spoke to her flagrant personality. Her long legs were hidden beneath skin-tight leather pants. Her ample gifts were restrained only by a couple palm-width leather straps crossing her chest. Her skin was pale, and her face was caked in make-up. Still, Lan Jue could see she was attractive despite all that. Her voice was high-pitched, and several eyes turned to see what the commotion was about.

Lan Jue took a quick glance at Su Xiaosu. The pirate queen quietly shook her head. This woman wasn’t one of theirs.

Lan Jue then turned his curious gaze to the Driver. Damn! He’d managed

to snag a pirate girlfriend in a matter of days.

The Driver extended an arm and the women slipped into his embrace. He stuffed a freshly clipped cigar in his mouth and lit it. "Five glasses," he growled, "and not one less. Otherwise don't blame me for your loss of face."

Chapter 572: A-Mei

“Five glasses, then. I’ll help,” Su Xiaosu intruded tepidly.

The Driver sat with the busy women plastered against his chest, arms encircling his neck. “Who’s this skanky bitch,” she complained, looking Xiaosu up and down. “Skulking around, who the hell do you think you are? Get the hell out of here.”

Xiaosu answered the woman’s hostility with a small smile. “You want to know who I am?”

The woman disentangled herself from the Driver and rose to her feet. “I don’t give a shit who you think y-“ Before she finished her sentence, Xiaosu remove her mask and pulled back her hood.

The bar’s interior was dark, at first she couldn’t see clearly. Soon, though, Xiaosu’s face was revealed by the neon lights. The pirate woman visibly shook.

She tried to scream, but before a sound could come out, a giant hand clamped down on her throat. The five Long Island iced teas arrived, soundlessly placed on the table.

The Driver took a drag of his cigar before brazenly blowing the smoke into the pirate woman’s face. He nodded at Lan Jue. “Drink.”

Xiaosu didn’t wait for her boss. She snatched one up, and guzzled it down without a second thought.

The Driver, seeing this, chuckled and looked at her with respect. “She’s quick! Little Lan, are you gunna let a girl outpace you?”

Lan Jue, helpless to convince them otherwise, took one of the glasses himself.

The effect of the iced tea had already brightened Xiaosu’s eyes. “A-Mei... that’s your name, isn’t it? Redbeard’s woman. Back in the day you were quite the seductress. Hard to count how often you made poor Redbeard a cuckold. 1 Then you turn right around, and sick him on your poor unsuspecting lover. It’s a fascinating hobby! I hear you like to castrate

them too, before they die. Or am I wrong... you're that A-Mei, aren't you?"

The Driver jerked. With a cigar in one hand and A-Mei's throat in the other, he listened with increasing horror as Xiaosu revealed her identity. A chill ran up his spine.

"Goddamnit, your Majesty, don't scare me like that!" His voice was a little too loud. Several nearby patrons were still watching out of the corner of their eyes.

Xiaosu grinned. "Lying? Everything I've said is true."

She flicked her wrist, and suddenly the whole bar was illuminated by a column of golden light. The pirates within were accustomed to the dim interior and were blinded when it suddenly changed. What followed was a chorus of grunts and muffled screams.

Over the course of a few seconds, the light dimmed and the bar darkened once again. Now, however, it was eerily silent. The only people left standing were Division soldiers.

The Driver unceremoniously chuckled A-Mei to the side. "That big chest hides one poisonous bitch. I don't kill woman. Empress, it's up to you."

Mei shook uncontrollably. At first she'd thought she was wrong. She hoped it was a trick of the light. But when that golden column appeared there could be no mistaking it. This was the Moonfiend Empress.

When Xiaosu commanded the Moonfiend Pirates, A-Mei and Redbeard were some of her eldest enemies. Their clans battled often until the Moonfiend Pirates clawed themselves up from an inferior position. Little by little she wrestled control from Redbeard and his murderous lover, nearly killing him in one encounter. They were Xiaosu's mortal enemies.

"Empress..! Y-your Majesty!" A-Mei wailed.

Xiaosu regarded her with a cold, heartless expression. "Is Redbeard in the palace?"

A-Mei quickly nodded.

"And other than him, who else is there?" She pressed.

A-Mei's face twitched, but she didn't answer.

Xiaosu laughed and crouched so she was level with the pirate's face. Her small pink tongue traced a line across her lips. "I could make you very happy. Or, I can give ten days and ten nights where you'll wish for death. It's your choice, but you don't seem like the kind of woman who'd commit suicide. Especially when there's a way out... Think about it."

Su Xiaosu stood back up, after her ultimatum had been delivered. She snatched another Long Island iced tea, and swallowed it down without taking time to taste it.

The Driver shot Lan Jue a glance. "I'm just now seeing how dominating our Empress can be."

This made her smirk. "What do you mean, Empress? Just a pirate boss. And when you're a pirate boss, you have to be without scruples."

The Driver was seeing her with new eyes. Up to this point she had stood meekly at Lan Jue's side, like a kitten. She'd proven herself to be a brilliant tactician, but seemed to rely on Lan Jue like a servant. At last she was bearing her teeth, and his esteem for her and Lan Jue grew. For his commander to have a woman like her under his command, it meant he had some skill!

"I... I'll tell you." A-Mei pulled herself up on shaky legs. With a weak laugh, she added, "Your Majesty, beck to reclaim your crown. Good! That's very good. Kill them. Every. Last. One. Hah..haha! Haha hahaha haha!" She broke into a hysterical fit of laughter.

Xiaosu rapped her knuckles against a table to get her attention. She didn't want to waste any time. After a moment the cackling subsided and A-Mei spoke again, somewhat dazed. "Empress, may I ask for one thing?"

"Speak," Xiaosu replied curtly.

"When I'm dead, take my ashes away from this place," she said. "Out of the Shattered Starfields. Anywhere will do, just scatter me and leave. I don't want to spend an afterlife in this dirty, diseased place."

Su Xiaosu seemed struck by the comment. After a moment of silence,

she nodded. "Alright."

Mei went on. "You're here to kill Redbeard. Then you better be careful. There've been a number of strong people around him lately. I think I remember hearing they were from the Pontiff's Citadel. Redbeard's Discipline is his beard. He recently broke through to ninth level fifth rank. He's much stronger than he was when you fought him. More cunning, too. Redbeard doesn't get his hands dirty unless he absolutely has to, so only a few people know how strong he really is."

Thanks to A-Mei's unusual cooperation, the team was told everything about Redbeard's organization and the state of the Moonfiend Pirates today. She gave them everything with razor-sharp clarity. The dullness in her expression before was gone, and her eyes were bright as diamonds. Halfway through she even grabbed one of the Long Island iced teas, drank it, then continued.

"... There are two people of note around Redbeard. The obvious one is Knives. The one you don't see is called Shadow. Both are ninth level Talents, though Shadow is stronger. You'll need to be careful. Redbeard's also made some additions to your Palace. There's a hatch below his throne. At the push of a button it'll open up below him, and he can escape through a tunnel. I don't know where it leads."

Lan Jue and the Driver exchanged looks. They figured Xiaosu would get some information out of her, but this was a wealth of inside data. If all of what she said was true, it was going to make the scouts' jobs much easier.

"That's all I know, do what you gotta do. Don't forget your promise, take my bones away from here. I can't stand the thought of staying in this piss hole." She heaved a bitter laugh as two glittering tears rolled down her cheeks.

"What were you before you came here?" Xiaosu asked softly.

A-Mei reluctantly opened her eyes. "What does it matter?"

"If what you've told us is true, then I'll think about bringing your ashes back to your hometown," Xiaosu affirmed. "You know that the Moonfiend Empress' word is her bond."

“My hometown?” 2 A-Mei’s eyes sparkled, but quickly sadness overtook her and she shook her head. “No, no need. I don’t want to tarnish my family name.”

Xiaosu scowled at her. “If you know what you do is shameful, why do you still do it? At last count a hundred men have died painful by your hand. Every one of them tortured, mutilated. Your name is bloodier than anyone’s, even Redbeard’s.”

“Hahahaha! HAHAhahahaha!” A-Mei doubled over as she howled with laughter. This time tears flowed freely and splattered against the floor.

“You’re right, my reputation is well known. Over a hundred men were my victims, even I’ve lost count how many exactly. But do you know how they treated me when I was first taken? They took turn ravaging me, disgracing me, until there wasn’t a clean inch of my body left. They wouldn’t let me go. If I was any weaker, I would have died.

“I wanted to die. I keep living just so I can take revenge on these filthy animals. An eye for an eye. One by one I stalked them and took them down. What power did I have? I had to rely on my charms. The pigs couldn’t control themselves when they saw my body. Then I told Redbeard, hoping it would eat him up inside. But to my surprise he didn’t want to kill me. On the contrary, he loved it. That crazy bastard... he didn’t kill me, and instead I helped him kill many more. The manner didn’t both me – I was happy just killing pirates.”

Chapter 573: I'll Send Her Home

Tears trickled down A-Mei's face. Everything she'd lost flashed before her eyes. She had had parents she loved, a prosperous family, a childhood sweetheart... All of it was lost the day the pirates took her. It was like she'd fallen into the depths of hell. Worse, a world of pirates.

In three painful years she was transformed from a sweet girl to a deadly spider, willing to do whatever it took to get vengeance. By the end no man dared come near her.

Today had been dry until at least a new mark from off-world came wandering into her clutches. Good, she'd thought, another victim. It was the only thing that got her poison heart racing anymore.

The other soldiers looked on, silent as A-Mei wavered between sobbing cries and mad laughter. Their missions through the Starfields had filled some of them with hesitation. This had been a one-sided slaughter, and they hadn't seen much evidence of how terrible the pirates really were. This woman's story was a reminder of why they were here.

The Driver slowly rose to his feet. He pushed his seat back, and walked with heavy, thudding steps until he was in front of A-Mei.

"You're going to do it? That's fine, come on then. At least you're not a real pirate." A-Mei pulled her shoulders back and looked the Driver in the face. There was no trace of fear in her eyes.

Bang! The Drive pulled back a fist, then it came crashing into the bronze skin of his own face. Welts where his knuckles made contact were starting to show.

The pirate gasped and staggered back. The Driver's eyes never left hers. "I'm sorry," he growled.

He extended a hand and pulled A-Mei behind him before turning back to Xiaosu. "This woman is under my protection. I want to send her home."

Xiaosu regarded him with a hard gaze. "You agree to accept all responsibility for what she does? Have you thought about if she's a spy?"

Or if she kills again?”

The Driver was quiet for a time before answering. “She’ll be by my side the whole time, under my supervision. If she is a spy, I’ll kill her myself. For now, I’m protecting her.”

Unexpectedly, Xiaosu replied with a nod and a sweet smile. “Alright.” She wandered back over to Lan Jue. There was one more Long Island iced tea, and she had no qualms taking it for her own. She drank this one with slower sips.

The Driver looked at her with a dumbfounded expression. “That’s is?”

She wagged a hand at him dismissively. “She’s all yours, I’ve given my answer. What else do you want?”

He looked at Xiaosu’s placid expression, then to the motionless Lan Jue seated nearby. “Why do I feel like I’m being tricked,” he muttered.

A-Mei was just as surprised. She was ready to pay with her life for her crimes, but life had other plans. This large, scruffy man intervened to spare her and bring her home. And the Moonfiend Empress agreed!

Lan Jue nodded at the Driver. “When things kick off, bring her along. One more person in your mecha shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

The Driver shook his head.

Xiaosu then turned to Lan Jue. “Boss, we need to talk. With A-Mei’s information we can perfect our plan.”

“Hm,” he grunted in agreement

Su Xiaosu quickly gathered the Division leaders together in the bar. A-Mei stood beside the Driver in a daze. Where they really just going to leave her to her own devices like this? And was that man being honest? Was he really going to take her home?

“May I change my clothes?” She suddenly asked.

“Go ahead,” the Driver responded.

She didn’t move. “You’re just going to trust me? You’re not afraid I’m

going to run?”

“First, you can’t run,” the Diver said bluntly. “And if I misjudge you then I’ll gouge out my own eyes. I bullied you terrible when I ran into you. I hit myself as an apology. Relax, so long as I’m breathing you will get back home. I may not be a good man, but when I make a promise I stick to it the best I’m able. You’re also no fool, and you know the alternative is to stay here. Let me tell you, we are not pirates. We’re here specifically to kill them. Now go change clothes.”

The pirate mistress turned and left. The Driver didn’t even watch her go. True to his word, he trusted her.

A-Mei’s face was wet with tears even before she reached the back of the bar. Could this be the start of another dramatic change in her life?

Su Xiaosu got the meeting underway. She laid out everyone’s next tasks in detail. The attack would once again commence at dawn, when the pirates were at their least attentive. She shared their decisions with Majesty one and confirmed when to start.

Their primary target didn’t change, they were hitting the main planet first. Majesty and the Photographer were to handle the rest.

Everything had to work in perfect harmony. If a single thing went wrong, the whole plan could collapse.

Mei returned. When she went back to her spot at the Driver’s side, her new protector could only stare. He couldn’t draw his eyes away.

She was even more beautiful without all of the makeup. Purer, almost delicate. Her body was encased in a tracksuit like she was preparing for a spring stroll. With her new wardrobe she looked like she was in her mid-twenties. She certainly turned heads.

To think of what happened to her lit a fire in the Driver’s chest that threatened to explode. Redbeard, ey!

A-Mei didn’t stand around. She knew the bar well enough, and handed out drinks to the soldiers. Everyone treated her well. She found that when they looked at her, it was with pity, not contempt. The madness within her

fizzled away. No matter what was going to happen, they'd given her hope.

The meeting lasted an hour before the details were ironed out. Once it was complete everyone went about their own business. Aside from a couple guards to keep the curious at bay, the Star Division soldiers rested before the operation began.

Third and Fourth Brigades had also arrived at the bar. Zeus-1 was ready to lend support. The Gourmet and the Pharmacist were waiting near their targets.

Everything was in place.

Darkness hung over the city like a specter, bringing silence in its wake. Strange sounds would echo from time to time as illicit dealings happened in dark corners, but these were common. This was a corrupt city in a corrupt world.

Su Xiaosu sat by the entrance to the bar with her arms wrapped around her knees. She stared out onto the streets with a far-away expression.

"What's up? What are you thinking about?" Lan Jue took a seat beside her.

She sighed. "There are so many women in the Shattered Starfields with a story like A-Mei's. I can't tell you how many I've heard, each one like a dagger in the chest. Most women kill themselves after they've been raped. Only the beautiful and the strong survive."

"That comes from corruption and evil. When we've cleaned up the Starfields, all of that will stop. I know there will always be evil, but after the aliens are dealt with, they will be cleansed again. Whether it's five years, ten years, twenty years down the line, we will keep this place free from the nightmare these women had to live through. We'll erase the pirate infestation wherever it crops up."

Xiaosu's eyes lit up as she gently placed her head on his shoulder. "You know boss, I've always liked you. I love your kind heart."

Lan Jue jerked. He could tell she was in a vulnerable place right now. Did she not have her own life full of misery and despair? Only she knew the

breadth of torment she'd had to endure just to survive initiation into the Citadel. Every day in the perilous world of piracy was a test of willpower. Every decision had to be met with strength and ferocity or she would drown in their sin.

Right now she didn't need to be told no. All she really wanted was a solid shoulder to lean on.

Su Xiaosu shut her eyes. She stayed like that with her head on his shoulder, silent, hardly moving. Eventually Lan Jue felt her breathing deepen, and she fell asleep.

Exhausted didn't begin to describe the former Empress. She was the true force behind the Star Division.

Sometime later Xiaosu shot awake with a gasp. In a blink she was wide awake with murder in her pretty eyes.

"It's time!" She shot to her feet and let out a shrill whistle.

Lan Jue looked at the vibrant Moonfiend Empress at his side. Her enthusiasm brought a smile to his face. This was their true Queen! She never felt like she fit in before, but Archangel or Empress she did not wish to be lonely. Perhaps the Star Division would be what she sought.

Lan Jue stood as well, then silently launched himself into the air. He gently landed on the roof and cast his eyes into the distance. He could see them, shadowy figures racing through dark streets. It was starting!

The Driver appeared at his side. "Let's go. We've got this."

"Yeah."

The two of them rose into the air. Their task was simple; enter the palace and take the enemy's seat of power. When they had the palace, they had their hands on the controls, including the railgun. With the fortress' defenses they would be fortified for the next attack.

The Moonfiend Palace appeared on the horizon. Dawn was approaching, but the evening lights surrounding the palace twinkled charmingly.

Lan Jue and the Driver tumbled to the ground silently like leaves on the

wind. They vanished in the dark corners of the streets. Lan Jue narrowed his eyes, nodding at the Driver. The two men became bolts of lightning, and in a flash vanished from sight. The ring of lights surrounding the structure flickered, but quickly returned to normal.

When Xiaosu built the palace, she made it look like an old fortress. However, beneath the stones were a great number of metal instruments and alloy supports. They were for all intents and purposes storming a castle.

Chapter 574: In Full Swing

When the Pontiff's men came for her, they came in the guise of friendship. Had they been an obvious foe, invasion would have been difficult. However, it wasn't proving impossible for Lan Jue and the Driver. Any metallic structure was like a house with paper walls to them. Trying to insulate a place this large from electricity was difficult, there were bound to be openings. Xiaosu also confessed that it wasn't a concern for her when designing the structure's defenses.

She still remembered the architecture like the back of her hand. While they went over the plan, she'd drawn out maps for Lan Jue and the Driver. They used it to direct them to the fortress' heart, where the defenses controls were kept. It also showed them where the leaderships' chambers were located.

Their highest priority was disabling the planetary defenses. With their fortifications down, Majesty could take the fight to the other planet. They raced through the structure as bolts of lightning until they reached the control center. Because it was to be manned constantly, the center also boasted a fully equipped dormitory.

Fundamentally similar to the Red Widows' systems, this control room was responsible for the planetary and fortress defenses. However, its expanded scale needed thirty men to manage instead of a handful. At night, though, they split the shift in half.

Every corner of the control room had a mecha standing as silent sentinels. The roof was peppered with turrets – internal security measures. Xiaosu was a ninth level Talent, so she knew what kind of havoc an Adept of that level could do if they got in. She had no illusion that these mechas and turrets would stop an Adept. But they would delay them.

She told them that the control room was designed as a self-sealing prison. If the alarm was tripped everyone inside was locked in, but the defenses switched to autopilot. A strong upgrade from the one they encountered from the Red Widows.

The take-away; don't trip the alarm.

The Accountant was in charge of that. He designed their response to this problem using the building's circuitry. That's why Lan Jue and the Driver were necessary. Lan Jue's task was to disable all eight alarm triggers before they had a chance to go off. Meanwhile, the Driver stood by ready to insert the Accountant's code into the system once Lan Jue was done. That would give their jittery hacker complete remote access.

The two tasks had to be done at almost precisely the same moment. If not, the recursive system checks would spot a problem.

The mechas were a non-issue.

"Go!" Lan Jue whispered. Eight bolts of lightning slithered away in one blast. For a moment the control room went dark, but quickly returned to normal.

"What the hell was that?" The pirates had begun to doze off, but the sudden flash had shaken them awake.

"Am I going blind or did we have a blackout?" Another pirate asked.

"You're probably blind, it was nothing. Everything looks normal to me, and there's an hour left on our shift. Next time you'll know better than to drink so much before work."

ζ

Space around the three main planets.

The Accountant's face was lit by one of the many flickering screens aboard Majesty. His fingers were a blur as they made their way back and forth across the keyboard. Strings of data filled his eyes. The rest of his team were just as busy, silently toiling away at their stations.

"We have control. Battle preparations are complete."

"Locked on. Target; secondary planet alpha. Awaiting orders."

The Accountant didn't hear their reports. All of his focus was on the screen in front of him. Two minutes later his finger triumphantly jabbed the enter key. His screen became alive with scrolling lines of code.

“Got it! Whew, that’s one hell of an encryption. You’re lucky you know me. Anyone else, and this would have taken them three whole days. By then the whole system would have reset itself a dozen times.”

“Jewelry Master, it’s taken care of. Begin!” He shot a quick message to Lan Jue then took control of Majesty. Under the veil provided by the Blinding Stone, the battleship slipped through the darkness of space toward their target.

In the palace control room, two flashes of lightning heralded the appearance of Lan Jue and the Driver. In a brief hail of electricity, the pirates inside collapsed. The mecha suits began to react, but the two Division leaders were faster.

Lan Jue’s palm shot out, and a pair of golden lightning bolts impaled two of the mecha sentinels. They were normal military issue, and no hope of defending against his attacks. The controls inside were instantly destroyed. The Driver’s attack was the same, though his lightning was a bright silver in hue.

“Majesty. Control room secured.”

The Accountant’s voice replied. “I’ve shut off all monitoring and alarm equipment. You’re clear.” With root control of the systems, disabling anything was quick as a thought for the Accountant. Their defenses were frozen.

Lan Jue pulled his communicator up to his face. “Star Division, move out! Go, go, go!”

A host of dark figures converged on the Moonfiend Palace. From a nearby building Su Xiaosu opened a hidden tunnel that would lead her into the heart of her former seat of power.

Outside of the city, the planets’ five airship hangars also found themselves the center of unwanted attention.

The Coffee Master took the last sip of his Blue Mountain coffee. With a small, self-satisfied smile he waved his hand.

“Boom–!” A thunderous explosion shook the ground. An hangar some

yards away had its roof blasted clean off as flames belched from the ruin. The energy containment systems of one of the battleships had detonated. They were like fireworks. The blast was followed by another, and another, as the hangar became burning fields of debris.

Installing and detonating the explosives had gone without a hitch – smoother than the Coffee Master had expected. His Third Brigade consisted of thirteen units, each with unique sets of skills. One of them had an Adept, seventh level, who could travel through the ground and bring people with him.

Another Adept could condense their Discipline into a delayed charged electrical bomb. He could maintain them for three days, and detonate them with a thought. He was ninth level second degree, one of the Brigade's strongest.

Another had X-ray vision strong enough to penetrate anything up to the hull of a Mothership.

In combat, these Adepts had limited utility. However, they were perfectly suited for this sort of guerilla warfare. For instance, they had a sixth level Adept as well who was proficient with locks. Fingerprint, retinal, digital, combination – it didn't matter. With such a wonderful utility, installing the bombs took less than three hours.

The beautiful pillars of fire were their reward for a job well done.

"Start the ship, we've got places to be." The Coffee Master chortled.

With their mission complete, the soldiers piled into the battleship now humming beneath their feet. This was their prize, a trophy they could ride into battle.

In another hangar, the Bartender gave him commands at the same time. His dual-headed, red and blue hued mecha exploded into the sky. Two beams of lights were belched from the mechas mouths, reducing everything before it to rubble.

This wasn't the mecha itself that produced such destruction. The Bartender had coalesced his power while they waited. All of his power was

put into this one attack, strengthening it to the level of a battleship's main cannon.

Boomm-mm-mm. The rumbling explosion draw the eye. Where once was an airship hangar, now roiled a smoldering mushroom cloud. The pirates inside didn't even know what hit them.

Priorities were different out here. The pirates were trained to protect assets, not jump at the first sign of battle. There were only enough pirates to man the boats when they were preparing to attack. They did not anticipate a strike from within.

The Bartender was pleasantly surprised by how easy infiltration had been. His Fourth Brigade was specialized in reconnaissance. It was not difficult to stealthily sneak into the hangar and begin preparations.

Bahamut's attacks first made contact with the hangar's air control center. With it in ruins, the pirates had no way to contact the outside world. Their complete annihilation was assured. A series of explosions continued as the fires raged in what remained of the airship hangar.

In addition to the Coffee Master's group, Fourth Brigade only had enough men to man a single battleship. It was the only way to avoid problems down the road. More explosions ripped through the air as friendly mechas flew by, solidifying their hold.

Third and Fourth Brigade proved today how effective they were at commando missions.

Chapter 575: Underworld

Ten-man teams of mechas converged on the hangar, blowing apart anything in their path. The wholly unprepared ships were quickly dealt with. They also had plenty of explosives to get the job done. The Bartender and the Coffee Master had done their parts.

It was all too fast, too furious. They didn't even have time to respond before their lives were snuffed out, mounting no measure of defense.

The Gourmet was suspended in air, five hundred meters above the hangar below. It shed the darkness thanks to a host of flickering lamps. The Paragons face was calm as a lake surface. The hangar he was responsible for was the largest one.

His communicator vibrated. It was a sign – his eyes narrowed, and he pressed his hands together in front of his chest.

Waves of dull grey light gushed from the Gourmet, swallowing up the world around him. On a dark night like this, even pirates looking straight up wouldn't have noticed anything different. All of their detection equipment meant nothing when considering a Paragon.

Far far away they heard the rumble. Moments later, the hangar descended into chaos.

A tall pirate stumbled from his room, howling to his compatriots. "What the hell is that? Did two hangars just get attacked?"

The pirate brought up his left arm and hurriedly dialed in a number. "Attention personnel of Devil Razor hangar. Attention personnel. Man your ships as fast as you can. Engage, find the enemy and engage!"

Each of the hangars and their ships were placed under a single clan's command. This hangar belonged to the Devil Razors, who were famous for their speed and ferocity. Two battleships and a dozen patrol boats were under their command.

The leader of the small armada was also the pirate chief. They called him Archdevil. He was a ninth level, first rank Adept with a wealth of

combat experience and no moral compass. His masterful command was only matched by his poisoned reputation. Man, woman, young, or old – not a soul was left when he was dispatched.

Pirates began to burst out of the dormitories. The battleships hummed as they prepared for lift-off. Archdevil then ran to his flagship. They didn't have a plan or anyone to save but themselves. A pirate's priority was always their own safety first.

Startled at first, the pirate chief was calm and collected now. Two of the hangars had been attacked. He knew these clans and their leaders. His first instinct wasn't an outside foe, but internal conflict. After all, their planetary defenses were impenetrable! You'd need a lot of people to hit two hangars at once. How would you get them in unseen?

The Moonfiend Pirates had been in control for a while, but not everyone walked to the beat of the same drum. The Moonfiend Pirates were an alliance of clans that shared a common interest. As big as they were, they couldn't compare to a hundred smaller clans working against it. That's why many of the clans joined, but weren't behind them one hundred percent. Without Redbeard's decision to dissolve his own clan into the Moonfiend Pirates, there'd be a lot more unrest and cessation.

With these considerations in mind, Archdevil's snap judgement was that this was a purge – Redbeard clearing the deck of possible mutineers. He tried to get in touch with Luna for more information, but communications seemed to be down. They were in the dark.

The silence made him all the more nervous. Archdevil quickly boarded his battleship, his mind racing. At least as commander of the small fleet he had a bargaining chip. Fleeing was not an option, however. The moment they rose to a certain height the planet's guns would be trained on them.

Archdevil's mind raced, considering various strategies and consequences when suddenly he felt a crushing pressure bearing down on him. He was a ninth level Talent, with all the perception enhancements that came with it. He lifted his head and was surprised to find the stars hidden beneath an

overcast sky. That was where the pressure was coming from. An indescribable fear crept into his heart as he watched the ominous heavens.

What... what is that?

He cast his eyes further, toward the horizon. Far away he could see the stars twinkling dimly against the night sky, but here they were absent. The airspace over the hangar was blanketed by some ineffable power.

“The enemy is attacking!” His voice boomed across the field, empowered by his Discipline. In the same instant there was a flash as he summoned his mecha – a jet-black suit darker than a shadow.

He made the right decision. Battleships were lumbering, they reacted slowly. Although he didn’t know what this grey sky heralded, he knew it was beyond his scope to handle alone. In situations like this, you fled to fight another day. Mecha suits were more reliable for that than bulky battleships. Archdevil was confident his Discipline and the support of the suit would help him escape unscathed.

There wasn’t any time to worry about anything else. All he was interested in was staying alive.

He almost didn’t notice when the world around him changed. The lights illuminating the base brightened for no discernable reason. They glowed with an uncomfortable sanguine light.

The brighter the red light became, the harder it became for the pirates to move. They struggled mightily, but it was like trying to swim through molasses. Everything felt immediately claustrophobic. Some felt it hard to breathe. Now, every eye was straining to peer at the sinister sky.

The scene that greeted them was the strangest they would ever see. The air had become crimson, and orbs of dark red slowly descended from on high. They were dazzling, and shimmered with red light. Their interior was smoky and mysterious, like some mysterious power trying to disguise the light.

It all felt so strange, difficult for them to put into words. They watched

enthralled and helpless as the orbs descended upon the hangar.

The first orb silently fell upon one of the battleships. There was a saying that went, 'the heavens fall upon the highest point first.' This was proven true, as one of the pirate battleships became the first to enjoy the 'fun' these crimson bubbles bore.

"Poof!" The intimidating bubble popped in a way that would delight any small child. As it did, the cloud of mist it bore spread out. From the ground pirates watched in horror as the mighty hull of their battleship was soundlessly eaten away. It was as though the aimless cloud had taken an enormous bite out of it.

One after the other the bubbles fell. There were no explosions, or screams, or blasts. It was silent as the grave, and that made the scene all the more terrifying. The mist was as destructive as a magma flow. The pirates helplessly watched as they were devoured, piece by piece, by the slow-moving bubbles.

The smart and lucky ones – like Archdevil – were in their mechas before the bubbles started falling. They fought against the clinging air to escape before they could become victims of the evil mist.

The pirates in their battleships were the unlucky ones. They had nowhere to run. This was the Infernal Vanguard's Domain – the Underworld!

The Gourmet remained suspended in air. The red light poured out of him. He paid no mind to the pirates who attempted to flee, and in fact looked at nothing. His eyes were cast calmly into the distance. At this level in his cultivation he could command protogenia, but he also had to obey it. It was just as Luo Xianni said, Paragons had rules. They couldn't kill carelessly if they wanted to hold on to their humanity. So he let the ones who were fast enough escape unmolested. His purpose was to destroy the hangar. That would be enough.

Five minutes later, the skies were clear. There was no mist and no ominous red light. All that remained was a strangely jagged landscape. It looked like the hangar had been the victim of a meteor shower. All signs

of ships buildings or people were gone – swallowed by the Underworld.

The Gourmet grinned, then vanished. Stillness was all that remained.

The Pharmacist walked unhurriedly toward the metal door. It was locked, which was to be expected of an important pirate installation in the dead of night. Of the five hangars, this one was the smallest.

“This is a restricted area. Please vacate immediately.” A harsh electric voice called the warning. A red light snapped to life, illuminating the Pharmacist from above.

Chapter 576: Pitched Fighting

The Pharmacist was in her preferred garb, an old-style qipao. Aside from when necessary under Lan Jue's command, she preferred comfortable civilian clothes.

The stopped in her advance, fixing her eyes on the hangar's watchtower.

Within the airship hangar.

"Ey? Who's this lady? She looks like she'd be a good time!" The scene was revealed two a couple pirates, looking over the security monitors. They stared in curiosity.

"Should we tell the boss? It's weird for a woman to show up in the middle of the night like this." A somewhat older pirate asked.

"Ah, why should we. What do we get from telling them anything? Look, it's early, no one's around. I'm sure we could find a quiet place to show the lady around, you know what I'm saying? Would having a good time be such a bad thing? Then we get rid of her – what the boss doesn't know won't hurt him."

The pirate who was trying to coerce them was an obscene, evil man. Rotten thoughts swam through his head when suddenly, much to his surprise, the woman became the center of a blazing light. Then their screens went dark.

"An attack... ? Attack!" The few napping pirates in the surveillance room were sharply awakened by his cries. Alarms began to screech across the whole hangar. The sides of the watchtower nearby fell away, spewing dazzling waterfalls of sparks.

As the alarms rang, the Pharmacist was on the move. She rose into the air as though she were treading on clouds. In a few long strides she was inside the hangar.

Twinkling lights set stark shadows as seven brilliant stars blinked into existence. Radiantly they burned, an enormous sword appeared in their midst. Woosh! One of the patrol boats nearest to the weapon was sliced

cleanly in two. As the pirates looked on in terror, the massive sword fractured into hundreds of copies. Deadly whirlwinds of steel lashed out in every direction.

Staff in the monitoring room had engaged all of the small hangar's defenses. Curtains of light flashes as the systems reacted to the incursion. Shields crackled to life around the remaining ships. The Pharmacist soared into the dark sky and vanished from view. Yet the light she discharged, and the army of blades at her command, descended upon the hangar like the apocalypse.

Spears of light pierced everything, buffeting the hangar's interior with raging tides of energy. Many pirates were caught up and thrown hundreds of meters away from the force. None had an opportunity to get into the warehouse's mecha suits.

The shields proved to be worth their cost. Not all of the ships were immediately destroyed when the Pharmacist's swords made contact. At least, so it went for their initial contact. When the second wave of swords arrived the ships were reduced to strips of metal. Then the swords were headed for the battleship.

The first sword struck the shield. It flickered, but held. The second hit, then the third, and the fourth. Every single one struck in precisely the same spot. In the blink of an eye a hundred of them overwhelmed the shield.

Boom-!

An explosion ripped through the battleship, sending burning debris everywhere. A hundred more of the Pharmacist's frightening weapon carved at the beleaguered hull. By the time mecha reinforcements arrived, their battleship was an unrecognizable hunk of scrap metal.

Altogether, the small airfield was around a hundred square meters. The Pharmacist turned it into a junk heap with a flick of her wrist. Every living thing was summarily silenced. Their tomb was the jagged husks of their ships and mechas.

She didn't have the same restrictions that bound the Gourmet. She

wasn't a Paragon who had to adhere to protogenia's morals. Besides, her Discipline was rooted in righteousness. It was her path to Paragon, something she discovered with the help of her Banishing Blade.

Her conscience was clear. Let this be a massacre. Have these wicked men purged. Their work was good in a place consumed by evil!

She gave them no quarter. Every cutting sword was an extension of her will, going where she commanded. The hangar's defenses might as well have been turned off.

Fifteen minutes later the Pharmacist calmly walked from a silent air field. She looked like an old painting, a maiden taking a summer stroll through a courtyard. She dialed a number into her communicator.

"It's done. They've been exterminated."

"Prepare for battle!" Mika's fierce voice shouted through the bridge of Zeus-1. Engines roared as the ship took off from planet Moonfiend. Stealth was engaged the moment they were airborne.

There was a considerable gulf between the battle capabilities of Majesty and Zeus-1. They were different classes of ship, after all. However, Zeus-1 did have its advantages, and that was agility. It excelled for infiltration, evasion and combat on a planet's surface.

Majesty couldn't fight in confined quarters, for the fact that their weapons were too destructive. In such close proximity, there was a danger it could destroy itself. Majesty was better suited for orbital bombardment, or interstellar combat.

Lan Jue determined Zeus-1 was better for the job of laying waste to an airship hangar. In fact, Zeus-1 had the most important mission. Not only was it crew responsible for the base, they had to run support for the whole Division and support logistics as well. When the main assault began, Zeus-1 would be needed even more.

Their target was fast approaching.

"Charging is complete. Weapons are primed and ready!" Xiuxiu's sweet voice gave the report. Weapons systems were her and Ke'er's

responsibility. Lin Guoguo, the Psychic Tide, was their intelligence and communications expert. Mika had the master controls.

Zeus-1 soared through the air like a nightingale, a silent breeze. No radar would see them through the Blinding Stone. Hidden away from view were the crackling barrels of the ship's primary and secondary weapons.

After the Keeper and Bookkeeper got their hands on it, Zeus-1 was a whole new ship. Calling it an upgrade wasn't going far enough.

"All weapons, prepare to fire." Lin Guoguo sat in Lan Jue's usual chair. The familiar metal helmet was fitted on her head. Channeling her psychic powers through the ship, there was nothing in the airfield hidden from her sight.

Beeps chirped through the bridge, confirming locks on the pirate ships below. The unshielded battleship was in the center of their crosshairs.

"Fire!"

Beams of radiant blue light erupted from Zeus-1's weapons, turning the dim cannons into fountains of death. Sixteen turrets and its main gun released their payload all at once on the unsuspecting pirates.

Lin Guoguo set the targeting; five smaller turrets per patrol boat, and the main guns right on their battleship. In total, thirteen pirate ships were removed from action after the initial barrage.

Star Division prided itself on unconventional tactics. One could argue it was the key to their continued success. What enemy would expect to have the skies over their airfield open up and rain destruction on them, without any warning from their radar?

Cloaking was taxing for the ship's energy reserves, so it was mostly used to evade enemies during attack. However, there were circumstances when it could be used offensively. The suddenness and the violence of their entrance knocked the pirates off guard. The enemy ships were struck by the light-based weapons so fast their ships couldn't switch on in time.

The scene below Zeus-1's bridge was a vision of blooming fireballs. Explosions rolled like thunder. An afterimage of the main cannon's

payload burned a path all the way to the remains of a battleships. One pirate battleship remained.

If this had been in space with the pirate battleship's shields in place, a direct hit like that would have caused some damage. One could imagine what happens when Zeus-1 catches a ship unprepared.

Ke'er, her eyes ablaze, began charging the weapons for a second volley. Her hands gripped the table, and through it she poured her Discipline into the ship's systems. No ninth level Adept could match the destructive power of a battleship, but they could use their Discipline with one for tremendous results. Aside from piloting mechas, strong Adepts were also well suited for battleship weapons control. The technology in weapon systems for Command ships or better far outstripped what one or even two Adepts could conjure together.

Mika scowled. "It's like they're made of paper. No push-back whatsoever."

Xiuxiu smirked. "They're not weak, we're too strong! Too much for them to handle."

"Yeah," Mika nodded, accepting her sister's determination.

Previously, they'd been so careful to use their full strength during training. Their soldiers were still green, so they'd held back against the smaller foes. Typically, their earlier missions could have been finished in a matter of minutes.

This time was different. Everyone was involved, even the Gourmet. The full might of Star Division was on display. When Lan Jue said this would be a test of the Division, this is what he meant.

The campaign was in full swing. IT was time to show the Starfields was Star Division could do.

Chapter 577: Crossing Paths

Their mission was done. Most of the ships were in flames. The battleship that was spared Zeus-1's barrage sit in the middle of a burning ruin. Soon the ships beside it would explode. With the destruction that would cause, it would be days before the ship could fly. The air field's defenses were obliterated before they could be turned on.

On Luna, at the Moonfiend Palace, the mission continued.

The Driver and Lan Jue took over the main controls, then began passing orders to their troops. They still had a lot to do.

Lan Jue rushed to the main controls, connecting to Majesty to help decrypt the pirate's systems. Su Xiaosu had given the Accountant a wealth of information on them, which made cracking in a breeze.

"I'm in," the Accountant confirmed."

They could hear explosions in the distance. Alarms were going off all across their monitors. This was the central control room for more than just the palace. It monitors the planet's defense systems and satellites, too. Once an alarm was tripped on an airfield, it showed up on their screens.

A grin spread across Lan Jue's face. He shot the Driver a thumbs-up. The Driver responded with a nod to say he was ready.

"Xiaosu, how's it going on your end?" Lan Jue spoke into his communicator.

Su Xiaosu's voice returned. "We're in the tunnel, all set."

"Good. When you're ready." Lan Jue then turned back to the main controls. "Majesty, engage the fortress' defenses."

"Got it!" The Accountant was frugal with his words when needed. In fact he was less a man and more a robot. His eyes flashed erratically with strings of code, and a dim light hung over him.

Moonfiend Palace.

A deep, low rumble shuddered through the palace. The earth quaked and

shook dust from the surrounding buildings. Outside, the walls that separated Luna from the palace began to rise from the ground. The whole structure was lifting into the air.

Floodlights cracked as they sparked to life. They shone from the palace towers like a dozen eyes. Inside, metal walls shot up from the floor, compartmentalizing everything. A dim, reddish-orange membrane of light hung over the exterior.

A few minutes later, Moonfiend Palace was clear of the ground. Alloy walls and energy shielding turned the quaint castle into a scaled-down Bastion ship. As if to prove the point, a massive gun emerged from the peak of the palace's tallest tower. Slowly it extended, ominously preparing to annihilate whatever it pointed at.

Within the control center, Lan Jue turned to the Driver. "Head to the railgun, I'll take care of things on this end."

The Driver was surprised. "I thought the plan was to defend this place. Where are you planning on going?"

Lan Jue smirked. "I sense a presence; a presence of an old friend. I'll stay here, you go ahead. Don't delay."

The Driver was wise enough to know this was not the time for nonsense. He didn't know why Lan Jue suddenly changed the plan, but he changed into a bolt of electricity and shot toward his new target.

Star Division's objectives were straight-forward; take the Palace, and engage its defenses. First and Second Brigade were to flood the halls and deal with the pirates within. Once the Palace was under their control, they would use it to eradicate the remaining enemy forces. Moonfiend air fields lay in ruin. So long as the Star Division kept their cool, their chance at victory were good.

Of course, this was easier said than done. There were a lot of moving parts that had to work in perfect harmony. If any of the pirate ships got off the ground, it would put a great deal of pressure on the Division's ground forces.

Taking the palace was integral to their plans, but was not an easy target. The foes within were the best of the clan. Enemies would be strong, and numerous. The Clan' leadership was certain to be here. Taking it without losing a soldier would be tough.

Meanwhile, Majesty was responsible for pinning down a whole planet. The Photographer had to erase one from reality for several hours. Every cog in their war machine had to do their job flawlessly. It was the only way their plan would succeed.

As Lan Jue looked over the monitors, there was a flash of light in the control room. He was joined by another man. When Lan Jue saw who it was, he grinned.

"My old friend, it's been a while." He smiled amicably to the newcomer.

Gabriel's reaction to seeing Lan Jue was different. He was stunned, never having imagined he would show up here. The angel's heart sank.

The sudden alarms had interrupted his cultivating. He'd felt an ominous wave pass through him, an inexplicable fear that spread through his whole body. It had been a long time since he'd felt anything like that. He couldn't imagine what would cause it.

After his earlier correspondence with Redbeard, Gabriel later heard from the pirate that the main control room had come under assault. The fortress' defenses were under enemy command and they had to get them back. Gabriel, the Messenger of Death, rushed to the scene.

The last person he expected to run in to was Zeus.

Gabriel had been there with Michael and Raphael, right here on this planet, when the trap had been lain for Lan Jue. They had been dispatched here to kill him. The old adage rings true that every dog had its day, and fate had chosen now to bring these two old enemies together on a familiar battlefield. By why? Shouldn't Zeus have been on Skyfire Avenue? What was he doing all the way out here?

Gabriel was very much aware of how terrifying the man before him could be. He'd seen it with his own eyes at the Great Adept Tournament.

Honestly, the angel knew he was no match for the Monarch.

A corona of holy light sprang up around Gabriel. His shields.

“Why are you here?” Gabriel demanded.

Lan Jue replied with a smirk. “Why are you here, Gabriel? Strange that we should meet here – us and the most righteous Pontiff’s Citadel. My, if your followers ever found out it would be catastrophic.”

Anger flashes in Gabriel’s cold eyes. “Did you come for me?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “You think too highly of yourself. Certainly not special enough to have me drag myself all the way out here.”

The Archangel’s eyes narrowed, but expertly stifled his anger. “Then why in the galaxy have you come?”

Lan Jue tepidly explained. “I’m a bit of a confessed germophobe. If something’s dirty, I have a compulsion to wipe it clean. The Moonfiend Pirates used to be clean, but they’ve since come under new management. Things have gotten murky.”

Understanding dawned on the Pontiff’s man. “So it was your treacherous hand that’s strangled all those pirate clans. You...”

Lan Jue’s stare hardened. “Treacherous hand? Eliminating evil is the work of good men, or is that not something they teach you in the Citadel? Perhaps I should show you what I’m talking about.”

Gabriel’s heart was racing. His dark eyes were pinned to Lan Jue’s. “Your goals are exactly the same as ours, just different methods. If Skyfire Avenue is here to stake a claim I’m sure something can be negotiated. Have you forgotten our shared enemy? Did you know that I had gotten several of the pirate clans to agree to join in the defense of humanity when those aliens arrive? But you’ve slaughtered them all. Was that Skyfire Avenue’s intention?”

This made the Monarch chuckle. “Are you afraid? Nothing you say means anything. All I know, is that you need to make sure you’re running a tight ship if you want it to weather a storm. If we don’t cut out the

cancer of piracy now, they'll rise against us when the aliens arrive – right when we're at our most vulnerable. You're right – we share the same enemy. So if you behave yourself and stay right here, then I'll return you to the Citadel when we're finished.”

Gabriel was stunned. “You're that confident? You're standing on planet Moonfiend! It's called that for a reason. Do you have any idea how many pirates there are stationed here? My best guess is you've brought no more than three battleships!”

Another chuckle shook Lan Jue. He turned away from Gabriel and tapped at the keyboard before him.

Screens all throughout the control room flickered to life. Each one showed scenes of desolation and raging fires. Gabriel's time on Moonfiend was long, he knew he was looking at.

Gabriel opened his mouth to speak when suddenly a group of men burst into the room. A telling flood of energy surrounded them. Their leader was a large man with a fiery red beard, who looked to be in a very bad mood.

“Master Gabriel!” Redbeard was surprised by the angel's presence, but before he spoke further he noticed Lan Jue. The pirate leader's eyes narrowed, and in an instant his face changed. He saw the images of the screens, and like Gabriel knew right away what it meant. He'd only just gotten news of the attacks.

“Grab him!” Redbeard charged at Lan Jue with four of his men.

When the palace's defenses had suddenly engaged, Redbeard was shocked. He was used to these leisurely days now, the Moonfiend Pirates weren't near as vigilant as the Red Widows. After his communicator started to buzz and reports of attack came in did he come to his senses. He immediately gave the order to engage, informed Gabriel, and brought his strongest subordinates to the control room.

Chapter 578: One Swipe

Lan Jue didn't move, even as the four Adepts charged at him. They were abnormally fast, like four bolts of lightning. Each one of them bore a dark red dagger in their palms, which glinted in the light as they surrounded the Monarch. He had nowhere to go.

"Assassins are the absolute worst," Lan Jue sneered. A moment later the four attackers were flailing wildly through the air like sacks of grain. Golden electricity crackled across their bodies, causing them to jerk and shudder violently before being reduced to ash.

Redbeard, a few steps behind, stopped dead in his tracks. He was amazed by what he'd just seen. He was no slouch in his Discipline – ninth level fifth rank! The men he'd brought here strong, too. Two were over ninth level, and the rest were no less than eighth. They were his closest people.

Those four were quadruplets, very rarely seen. Each of them shared the same expertise in speed and a Discipline involving daggers. The four of them against a ninth-level Adept should have been easy pickings.

Redbeard couldn't feel any hint of Discipline from Lan Jue, and yet he'd witnessed his people incinerated. With a wave of his hand, four powerful Adepts saw their defenses overcome and their lives snuffed out, effortlessly. He'd never seen anything like it.

No wonder... no wonder Gabriel wasn't fighting! Now Redbeard understood. He staggered back a few steps until he stood beside the Archangel.

"Master Gabriel..." Redbeard offered uncertainly.

He got no response from the sour-faced Messenger of Death. Hesitation had him frozen. He had almost joined in when the four other Adepts surrounding Lan Jue. However, the flood of power he'd felt made him stop. It felt like a Paragon's.

Could Lan Jue have broken through?

Gabriel shook his head like a dog shedding water. He was seeing this

clearly, but that made the situation even more frightening.

Redbeard's communicator began to ring. Everyone's eyes went to him

"Boss! Boss, we can't hold them back. The enemy's come out of nowhere. They're too strong and too many. Their mechas –" The voice cut out after an ear-piercing screech.

The Moonfiend Pirate's new boss felt his breathing quicken. He snapped his head to Gabriel. "Master Gabriel, you have to make a decision. If we don't take control of this room our people outside can't get in to back us up!"

Gabriel took a deep breath. It was the moment of truth. It was time for him to make a decision.

Under Lan Jue's hard gaze, Gabriel took a step to the side, and hung his head.

The Star Division commander smiled. "A wise man submits to the tides of fate. No wonder they call you the Messenger of Death." This was precisely why Lan Jue sent the Driver off to deal with the railgun while he remained here.

Their enemies were many, and this place was the heart of their organization. The Driver's personality favored confrontation. With him here the potential for problems rose. As important as this place was to their mission, he chose to remain behind and handle things personally.

He'd elected to speak with Gabriel at length, in the hopes that he could avoid having to face every pirate. The control center was large, but not large enough for him to take on the whole clan. What Redbeard and Gabriel didn't consider was how desperate Lan Jue was not for these controls to get destroyed.

Redbeard was right, this place was the only location where you could control planetary defenses. With them engaged, the pirates from outside couldn't get involved and Star Division had all the time in the world. But if the controls were broken, things became a lot more uncertain. For instance, no one knew how the defense system would react without a

central control to direct it. Because of this, he had to protect the controls as much as control them.

Gabriel's promise not to interfere made dealing with the other pirates much easier.

Redbeard recognized his precarious position right away. He roared like a beast, and his body began to swell. His already impressive beard lengthened, while his muscles bulged. Even before Redbeard's battle cry ebbed, he'd become a three-meter tall behemoth. A Wildman.

No... a lion?

His Discipline was metamorphosis. He channeled the spirit of the lion, one of the strongest transformations for shifters. The remaining Adepts around him also flared their Disciplines threateningly.

Redbeard didn't know what agreement Gabriel and Lan Jue had come to, but he could see that the Archangel wasn't going to join in the fight. He had to fall back on his own capabilities, but they weren't enough! This new enemy was after the Moonfiend Pirate clan. As the current leader of the clan, he knew that meant him.

In this circumstance he hadn't any choice but to call on every ounce of his power. To mount a comeback, this man needed to die and this control room had to come back under their control. He fell back on his last resort, a final effort to win.

Mei's words returned to memory. She'd told him that Redbeard had a secret escape tunnel, but it wasn't here. Thinking back on her piteous cries, Lan Jue couldn't help but feel a surge of murderous rage. Punishing these men was righteous work!

Lan Jue hardly reacted. His right hand waved halfheartedly. Instantly, the whole room was filled with red light. Whatever strange power he'd called had an intense vacuum-force that tugged at everyone.

Gabriel wasn't in the light, but was greatly frightened by what he saw. He threw himself away as far as he could get. His holy shields blazed as he poured his whole Discipline into them.

Poof! The gentle sound was that of several pirates being reduced to dust. Several of the faster ones managed to summon their own shields. All the others were killed outright. Redbeard roared as he struggled forward. His temper flared out of control.

How could this be? Redbeard was at a complete loss. He was a shifter! His Discipline was strongest when he focused all of it into his transformation. Yet, beneath that red light even breathing was a struggle.

A sword had appeared in Lan Jue's hand. The dim crimson light surrounding it was strange to behold. Finally he moved, rising to his feet and taking a single step forward. The sword swept out in an arc, and from it came a flood of power more intense than a tsunami.

The flush of deadly power cleansed everything in its path. That which Lan Jue deemed unworthy was swept from reality. Redbeard, and all of his strongest allies, were gone. Nothing remained to prove they ever existed.

The greatest failings of these pirates was in their taste for war – or lack thereof. Ever since the start their foes had been hesitant. None of them fought with resolve, desperate to escape. In a single, effortless swipe of his sword Lan Jue put an end to their evil ways. Outwardly they could not know, however, that it was far from effortless. That one swing had consumed perhaps thirty percent of Lan Jue's energy.

Captus! A thousand strikes as one!

Gabriel watched it all. Even from a safe distance his body shook uncontrollably. A single swipe! He... he really has become a Paragon!

He was wrong, of course. Lan Jue still had a long path to walk before he became a Paragon. However, he wasn't entirely wrong. Lan Jue was peak-ranked with Qianlin. Adding the power of the sword, first degree Paragons would have a hard time besting him.

A number of pirates watched from outside because the room had limited space. After seeing their leadership slain, however, they didn't dare enter. They were stupefied after watching the red light erase their mighty leader – all at the hands of this young nobody. It was entirely outside of the realm of comprehension.

No one knew who started it, but suddenly the pirates started to scream and run every which way. None of them were particularly keen in joining Redbeard's fate.

However, unbeknownst to them their fates were sealed. Lan Jue's face bore a faint smile.

The fighting still raged, and his Division would need more time to get things under control. Further, the surviving pirates were beginning to come to their senses. Lan Jue guessed they had begun to break into groups and converge on the palace. It was likely the last order Redbeard had given before his death.

However, none of that was important now. The enemy air fields were destroyed and they had control over their fortress. The preliminary steps of their plan were complete. Now they had to wait for news from outer space.

So long as they could keep the other planets and their reinforcements tied up, this victory was assured. Already, he was sure, the smarter pirates were planning their escape.

Gabriel appeared absent-minded. When he eventually emerged from his haze, he wandered over to a chair and quietly took a seat.

Lan Jue continued on like the Archangel didn't exist. He pulled up his communicator. "Redbeard's been dealt with. Xiaosu, how are things on your end?"

Su Xiaosu's voice returned. "The rescue's complete. We have complete control over the Moonfiend Palace. The enemy was routed after the initial strike!" She sounded somewhat conflicted with her last words.

Was this organization so weak when it was under her control? They were like sheep to the slaughter.

Xiaosu's report made Gabriel quake. In order to retain any semblance of dignity, he sat listlessly in that chair. A rescue operation? Who were they rescuing?

Nevermind Gabriel, none of the leadership in the Pontiff's Citadel

expected this to happen. They thought the Starfields would be a safe place to put their captured experiments. However, Lan Jue had shown up and ruined all their plans.

Chapter 579: Battle in Outer Space

Gabriel knew that the survivors of their genetic experiments hated the Pontiff's Citadel. They hadn't been brain washed, their memories were fully intact. Most of them had already undergone the process to improve their potency. They were supposed to be the bedrock upon which the Pontiff's Citadel flourished. Now it was all over. All over...

Lan Jue ignored him. He focused on drawing in energy from the Phylactery Stone to recover what the Binding Blade had devoured. He put a little bit of his energy into the gem every day during his cultivations. Still to this day he hadn't managed to top it off.

Lan Jue felt much the same as the rest of the Star Division; this had gone a lot easier than expected. He thought back to Xiaosu's disappointment. He knew that if she had been in control, taking it would have been much more difficult. Their success so far was largely due to her expertise, and disunity within the pirate ranks.

After killing Redbeard in one strike, none of the pirates dared step through the control room door. With such broken spirits, how could they defeat the Star Division?

The Shattered Starfields, Outer Space.

The crew of Majesty watched as explosions sparked to life on the planet's surface. From where they sat, it didn't look all that impressive. However, they knew it meant the attack was underway.

"The main gun is charged!"

Excitement lit up the Accountant's face when he heard the report. "Our target is the first airfield on secondary planet alpha. Prepare to fire!"

Majesty remained in geostationary orbit above the planet. It was hidden from view thanks to the Blinding Stone. They didn't need to fear any radar giving their position away.

The front part of the ship rotated and parted, while from within an enormous cannon peaked its head out. The barrel of the weapon was fifty

meters in diameter. It was a dreadnaught's weapon, but not overly large. There were other differences that made it special. Jue Di had designed it personally: it was both anti-matter cannon and isolated energy gun.

Antimatter guns were like positron cannons. They were made specifically for use in outer space because the beams were fragile and exploded on contact. Firing one on a planet's surface would ignite its atmosphere.

However, by isolating the energy projectiles from the environment, the problem was resolved. Now they could rain anti-matter destruction on any target they wished.

"Fire!"

An incandescent color swelled then burst from the mouth of the cannon. It pierced the planet's atmosphere without a sound and found its target – the planet's largest airship hangar.

The planet was smaller and less developed than Moonfiend. Each of the secondary planets had two airfields each. Majesty's first target was the largest one.

The easiest way to stop them from coming to Moonfiend's aid was to destroy their ships. If they were grounded there was nothing they could do. Good enough for now. After the shot was fired Majesty blasted off into the distance without waiting to see the result.

The planet's defenses were nothing to sniff at. Although the Blinding Stone kept them hidden most of the time, it was easier for AI systems to lock on once they started their attacks. Staying still was asking for death. They had to keep themselves away from the railguns' crosshairs.

A white dot bloomed and grew across the small planet's surface. Before long it was a blazing white blemish visible from space. When it receded a crater was left behind, smooth as glass.

Golden light shimmered to life between the layers of the planet's atmosphere. That was its defenses kicking into gear. However, it was already too late. Majesty's blast wiped the planet's surface clean.

For the second hangar, Majesty didn't need to engage in combat. The ship silently expanded its orbit and waited in the darkness of space. Each of the hangars was supposed to have one battleship and seven or eight patrol boats as an entourage. If they dared to leave for planet Moonfiend, the Accountant would be there to meet them.

However, pirate courage wasn't something one commonly encountered. They were at their most arrogant when attacking cargo ships that couldn't defend themselves.

The pirates in the remaining air field were dumbstruck. The planets' defenses had immediately turned on, and at their highest levels. Safe Moonfiend? They'd gotten the message, but right now their own skin was more important.

"Ai, pirates are boring. I wonder how they'd react if they were a real military unit." The Accountant muttered the questions to himself as he stared at the screen, head cradled in his palms.

"Let's go. We'll be backup for Mistress Photographer." The ship maneuvered for an encounter with secondary planet beta. They lift a small stealth satellite behind to keep an eye on the pirates. Then, they were gone.

"Why aren't they here yet? Why aren't they here yet?" Luo Xianni floated lazily in the vacuum of space. She looked terribly bored.

It felt like she'd been waiting for half a day. She'd left Majesty when he announced the start of their operation, and took position out by the planet. There she waited.

If someone were to come across her like this, they'd be mortified. She floated in space without any suit or protective equipment. She wore a pretty dress, and that was all. She leisurely watched the planet below in the perfect silence. She was beginning to look resentful, and impatient.

"They've already started! Why hasn't anyone reacted over here? Ugh, pirates are so boring!" Luo Xianni complained.

"I wonder what Chi Bupang is doing. I'm sure Little Qing's told him

about what we're up to. Hehehe, Chi Bupang, just you wait. I'm never going to let you out of my palm. If these two kids are your charges, then they're mine too. Later we'll see where their affection lies! Hmph!"

Luo Xianni felt better. Now she could sit here and silently praise herself on her clever plans. Just then, she noticed things starting to stir on the planet's surface. Twenty ships were coming her way.

Luo Xianni had told them she could seal the planet, but after discussing it with Xiaosu Lan Jue felt it was unnecessary. The most dangerous were the pirate battleships. So long as they were handled and didn't get involved in the fight, they would be fine. So, her target changed from the whole planet, to just its armada.

"Stupid pirates. They could eat shit and complain about the temperature." They certainly seemed oblivious. She's received news from Lan Jue that all of the airfields were destroyed. Taking the Moonfiend Palace would be difficult, especially if the opposition didn't have any battleships to back them up. The battle was already decided. For them to come rushing over was stupid, simply put.

Luo Xianni flicked her wrist. Suddenly, the familiar pink camera was in her grip. She vanished, appearing once again a short distance away. What she saw was four battleships and twenty five patrol boats coming her way. But as an Adept who could shrink a planet to an inch, this was weak-sauce.

It wasn't that the pirates were slow to react. It took time to prepare a battleship for launch and get it airborne. In addition, their attack commenced at dawn when the pirates were deep asleep. They had to wake up and get ready, all under the specter of destruction from an unseen enemy. They could be forgiven for taking a little bit of time.

The near thirty-strong armada looked intimidating as it lumbered through space. Luo Xianni looked like a tiny speck beneath their notice.

That lasted only a moment.

Luo Xianni began to shake and quiver. Soon the tiny woman was a full three thousand meters tall. She'd been standing inconspicuously between

the two planets, then suddenly was a significant blip on the pirate radar.

“What... what the hell is that?!” The pirates were dumbfounded. They couldn’t believe what they were looking at.

A person, this big? ‘Giant’ didn’t do her justice, especially as pretty as she was. Where they witnessing some god, come down to the planets of men? Pirates were athiests, practically by definition. But whether they believed in gods or not, it didn’t mean they didn’t fear them.

A particularly fierce looking man was the first to come to his senses. “Kill her! Prepare the guns to fire!”

The armada hurriedly prepared to engage. The enormous woman lifted something in her hands. A pink camera.

Ka-cha! The clear and crisp click of a shutter rang in the ears of every pirate. Everything around them stopped suddenly – frozen in place.

The universe became a pink-hued cosmic storm, with the battleship in its center. Reality warped, chopped into a hundred million tiny slivers. Then it was gone, quiet as a summer breeze.

The Photographer lifted her enormous hand, which now bore an equally large photograph. Something as massive as a battleship would need a picture large enough to fit it.

The picture was a thousand meters long and eight hundred meters wide. It didn’t look quite so large in the hand of a three-thousand meter tall woman, though.

She looked at the photo in satisfaction. She didn’t even seem out of breath.

Chapter 580: Is She Even Human?

The Accountant sat in Majesty's bridge, watching everything going on outside. He was literally speechless.

Is...is she even human?

He wasn't alone. Everyone onboard Majesty stared in utter disbelief. Everyone who saw it was at a total loss.

The ship arrived just as Luo Xianni became her present size. By then Majesty was going hundreds of meters per second toward a sudden obstruction. To her, Majesty was about the size of an infant.

Luo Xianni waved pleasantly at Majesty. To a Paragon of her standing, Blinding Stones might as well have been glass baubles. Majesty obediently headed her direction and removed its cloak.

She gently patted the ship as it nearly. "Hehehe," she tittered. "This picture's for you, little math whiz. Do what you will, but I won't have blood on my hands." The picture was released and remained frozen in space in front of her.

"What should we do, Mistress Photographer?" The Accountant asked dumbly.

She smirked. "Attack! Destroy the photograph. Everything in it will be destroyed as well. I'm not doing it, understand?"

Luo Xianni then shrunk before their eyes back to her normal height. The Paragon sat cross-legged on top of Majesty and prepared for the show.

"Captain?" The members of the Accountant's team looked at him, at a complete loss to understand what they were supposed to do. It was the Adept in charge of the weapons systems that nervously called for his attention.

"Didn't you hear Mistress Photographer? Fire, all guns!" Majesty had been equipped with a number of luxury installations, like phylactery stones. Soldiers in charge of the vessel were under standing orders to charge them up when time allowed. It gave them an excuse to cultivate

more.

They held the energy of eight hundred soldiers, infusing them twice a day. One could imagine how much of a reservoir they were.

Majesty's main guns had charged on the flight over. Its cannon's flared to life again, unleashing a beam of energy right into the photograph.

The picture rippled from the impact. After the blast, it looked crumpled but otherwise unhurt.

Destroying one of Luo Xianni's pictures wiped out everything within it, even space. However, pictures like this had their limitations. By its nature the picture's sturdiness was proportional to what it was a picture of. Put another way, Majesty needed enough firepower to take a battleship if it wanted to destroy this picture.

Simply put, Luo Xianni only acted to seal their enemies away. She eliminated their ability to fight back. As a result her own side could fire to their heart's content. The battle was won, so long as they had the firepower to destroy their objective.

As far as control-type Disciplines were concerned, hers was among the best.

It took three blasts from Majesty's main gun to destroy the photograph. When it did finally rupture, the picture and everything around it was devoured into a black hole. Majesty crew were briefly afraid they would be swallowed up as well. They swiftly retreated, leaving nothing behind of the pirate armada.

Planet Moonfiend.

The Moonfiend Palace was surrounded. After all, the pirates who called this place home were the strongest in all the Shattered Starfields, even before you included the smaller clans it's incorporated. Planet Moonfiend was their playground.

The leaders of the clan spent the bulk of their time here, and some were allowed quarters. On the one hand it was a symbol of status, but it was also a means of control.

The smaller clan surrounding the palace got word of the attack, and began to gather their forces. They marched to retake the seat of their power. However, what they met was Moonfiend Palace's overwhelming defenses.

Their attack was coordinated. Pirate clans assaulted the palace's shields from every angle. More than five thousand mechas milled around like a host of angry ants. Beams of energy ceaselessly struck the shields, making them undulate. However when the shields were designed, they were made to withstand assault from battleships. Even the pirates' armadas would need time to break through, if they still existed.

The shields started to dim under the sustained attack. The pirates outside, though, were losing contact with more of their brothers inside. As they shouted into communicators their eyes were drawn to the palace's tallest tower. There, a bright flash blinded them as its cannon fired. Scores of other guns peaked out from various windows. The fortress was veritably bristling with firepower. They started to fire every which way, at anything that got too close.

Pirate mechas exploded all around the palace like fireworks. The palace's defenses were active, which meant their fortress had fallen into enemy hands.

The largest ray of light from the palace's tallest tower swept through the airborne mecha suits. After one pass the hundred or so suits were nothing more than wisps of steam. That was their railgun – a mini-railgun, to be precise.

Many of the five thousand pirates who'd come to retake their palace were taken off guard. As the Moonfiend Palace's defenses ramped up, the pirates that survived were the ones fast enough to engage their shields and find cover.

Within the Moonfiend Palace control center.

Su Xiaosu had replaced Lan Jue in front of the control panels. Her eyes were fixed on the screen while her fingers danced across the keyboard. The Moonfiend Empress' lips were pressed tightly together, making her

look irate.

Lan Jue sat beside Gabriel.

The angel was quiet as a monk. He watched the situation outside evolve, pirates running every direction like headless flies. He knew the clan was finished. After all the time, effort and resources they put into the Moonfiend Pirates, this was how they ended.

“No need for anyone to rush back. Instead go clear out the other cities on Moonfiend. They won’t be getting passed our defenses.” Lan Jue delivered his orders to Zeus-1 and Brigades three and four.

Star Division had total control over the palace now. The pirates who were within when the operation commenced were tenaciously hunted down and eliminated. The pirates they ran into were strong, but routed. They were fumbling to find a means to flee, and had no will to fight. Once they discovered there was no way out, their only option was to fight to the death.

Unfortunately they had met their match in Third and Fourth Brigade. The two brigades together numbered five hundred souls. Wherever they went, enemies fled in terror! Nothing the pirate possessed could halt the Star Division’s inevitable march. The fighting was quick.

The Driver was the one in charge of the railgun. He had control of the high ground, and was in contact with Lan Jue in the control room. His last blast had been at Xiaosu’s command. The gun was so powerful that it needed to cool down after each shot. It took around thirty seconds for it to be prepped for another round. However, in that one blast the Driver reduced the pirate’s fighting force by two thirds. The others weren’t eager to be vaporized.

“What in the world were you and the Citadel thinking? Light and righteousness doesn’t seem to be your aim – your boss has chosen to walk a dark path. Why?” Lan Jue was genuinely curious as he asked the question of Gabriel.

The Messenger of Death shot him a glance but didn’t say anything. Lan Jue was a predator, and saying anything to him wasn’t going to help the

situation.

Lan Jue patted Gabriel's shoulder, then stood and walked over to the former Moonfiend Empress. "Don't grieve," he told her. "The past is the past. When we leave here, it'll be the beginning of your new life."

She gently nodded her head, but a pain flitted across her eyes. "This place is a product of my blood, sweat and tears. It's hard to give it up." She kept typing as she spoke. Her fingers never slowed and the palace's defenses continued to wreak havoc on the forces outside. Their forces didn't engage the enemy, they didn't need to. So long as they kept swapping out old gems with new ones, the defense systems could fight indefinitely.

Lan Jue didn't say anything more to try and convince her. Some things had to be decided personally.

"The two secondary planets have been handled. The mighty tortoise has become an empty turtle shell. The armada for the other planet's been silenced." The Accountant's voice reported. Lan Jue's communicator was on speaker, everyone could hear him. Xiaosu snuck a furtive look at her boss and nodded her head.

It was a proclamation. It meant they'd won.

Zeus-1 and the battleships taken by the other divisions were scouring the planet, eliminating any resistance they found. Three battleships against a routed host of mechas – the results were easy to guess.

The pirates fighting to gain entry into the palace didn't have the firepower to do it. The railguns on the secondary planets couldn't reach them here. Even if they couldn't, they'd be firing blindly.

In the end this was different from their excursion against the Red Widows. The asteroids around Arachnid were more like satellites or small moons than partner planets. They were smaller, and closer together.

Chapter 581: Total Control

The secondary planets were planets in their own right, though not as large as Moonfiend. Still, they needed to maintain a stable relationship with their star the same as any other planet, lest they run into a whole host of problems.

The Moonfiend Pirates had reached their end. Already Second Brigade was divvying up their spoils from the palace. Su Xiaosu turned her head toward Lan Jue. “Boss, are we leaving when the operation is over?”

He nodded. “We’ll be done here. We’ve caused quite a dent in the pirate population, and I’m not looking for a genocide. News of what we’ve done here will get out. They don’t know where we came from, but eventually the West and North may react. When we’ve finished our mission, we’ll return to Skyfire Avenue. The troops need time to rest and recuperate.”

“Alright.”

The thunder of the cannons slowed. The third shot from the railgun turned the ground around the palace into a sea of fire. Just as a third of the city collapsed around the palace, the pirates’ morale crumbled. They fled, as far and as fast from the murderous palace as they could go.

Their first instincts were to head for the airfields. There they could board ships and make an escape. News of their destruction had never reached them, though. They were fleeing right into the arms of the enemy.

“First and Second Brigades, leave small units each to keep control of the palace. The rest, go out and clean up the remaining pirate forces.” Lan Jue gave the order through his communicator. It was time to take the fight to them.

Star Division soldiers set out to make sure the pirates couldn’t mount a quick recovery. Lan Jue wanted this place cleansed. It was inevitable that pirates would return, but any clan looking to dominate the planets would need time and resources.

Finishing the pirates off wasn’t as easy or quick as their initial attack.

They had to hunt them down first, which they did with the help of airships.

Meanwhile, Lan Jue ordered Zeus-1 to return. Their riches from the raid would be stored on the nimble ship. About the only thing that improved after the Moonfiend Empress' removal were their coffers.

Xiaosu counted it as three times what it was before she'd left. Densely packed riches won from Moonfiend's enemies. Ever since the Pontiff's Citadel had taken over, their path of destruction had been even more thorough than the Star Division's.

Why would so many pirates agree to subjugation? Simply put, the Moonfiend Pirates gave them no choice. They relied on superior resources and firepower to eliminate all the clans around them. It was join, or die.

The Pontiff's Citadel would be loath to give up these resources. They'd come to rely on the riches from the Starfields. They wanted to build it up as a subordinate state, so much that they expended tremendous effort to develop it. The railgun was proof of their commitment.

Lan Jue wasn't greedy. Although the big planetary defense railguns were powerful weapons of war, taking all of them would be impossible. There were enemies waiting on the other planets with their defensive measures at full strength. They would have to be happy with what they got from Moonfiend.

Star Division's commander wasn't much interested in the railguns, but they would fetch a good price. The East could probably use them in the construction of a Bastion ship. The soldiers left behind found themselves recruited as temporary porters. Boxes upon boxes of resources from Moonfiend were loaded up and stored in Zeus-1.

In times like these, having a master of interspatial Discipline was of great benefit. The Photographer had provided Lan Jue with something she called the Hungry Bangle. As she described it, there was enough space to fit the Wine Master's whole Reaper Arena inside. IF it weren't for this gift, it would take an armada to fly their winnings home.

However even with the Hungry Bangle, Zeus-1 couldn't take it all.

Luckily, they'd also spared a couple battleships that could take the spillover.

The Citadel's victims were directed onto Zeus-1. They'd been there when the Citadel dragged Su Xiaosu into the dungeons, and watched what how she was punished. They'd also seen her daring rescue. Now she was back with the savior to free them, so they gave her and her people no trouble.

These poor, tortured souls had been promising youths to survive this long. The fantascia genetica was heartless and deadly, but it'd made them strong. Others weren't so lucky.

Those that survived were injected with medicines that sealed this power. Before they were brainwashed into service, they were dangerous if left unchecked. Once they got back to the Avenue, it shouldn't take their doctors long to flush it out of their systems.

Gabriel could only watch in silence as Lan Jue gave his commands. All of their efforts, the result of their own hearts blood, were being undone with every word. He felt numb. A lot of the news going on outside was unknown to the angel, but it was clear Zeus had brought an army. A strong army, otherwise they couldn't have pulled any of this off.

Was this an arm of the Avenue, flexing to show its strength? He remained lost in silent thought, contemplating how wrong they were in assuming invulnerability. The moment he realized it was burned bright in his memory; he'd lost faith when he saw Lan Jue destroy Redbeard with a single strike.

There was no chance, not even the ghost of a chance. Putting up a fight would be suicide. All he could do was shut his mouth and open his ears. Hopefully someone would let something slip that he could bring back to the Pontiff.

Gabriel shuddered to think of the Pontiff's rage when he discovered what happened here. It would be meaningless, because no amount of rage would change what happened today. They would have to suffer this tremendous blow to the Citadel in silence.

It wasn't like they could petition the Western government for help.

Wrangling these pirates had been the Pontiff's pet project. What benefit would the West have in getting themselves mixed up in this?

They had been thoroughly knocked down from their perch. As far as Gabriel could see, the Citadel would serve as the Avenue's punching bag for a long time to come.

The Dark Citadel and the Conclave had similar misgivings. Losing the Epochrion was unforgivable to the North. Even if she chose not to lift a hand against them, losing a Paragon was a disaster. The Conclave could rely on nobody but the Terminator now.

By contrast, the Avenue was lousy with powerful Adepts. This one who was a constant thorn in their side was as strong as Metatron, or the fallen angel Lucifer. He might even be stronger. After all, Metatron and Lucifer had been striving for years to break through to Paragon. But the power he'd felt from Lan Jue was closer to the protogenic realm than what he'd felt from either of the two Westerners.

Even if Lan Jue wasn't a Paragon now, it was assured he would become one in the future. Gabriel knew that after seeing the tournament. The East was smaller and poorer than the other Alliances, but the Avenue was a force to be reckoned with. With these Adepts at their back and aliens at the gates, who would dare say the East wasn't a rising force?

Gabriel's mind was in chaos. His greatest worry was his own safety. It was only a year since they ambushed Lan Jue not far from here, and in a year he'd become a nightmare to the Citadel. No wonder he could defeat Michael, even then.

Lan Jue had no what idea what the Archangel was thinking about. The Star Division commander just sat nearby, and waited. A short while later another familiar face joined them in the room. The Infernal Vanguard, the Gourmet!

This is definitely a display of force by the Avenue! They're even sending Paragons!

A poisonous jealousy wormed through Gabriel's chest. The Avenue had so many Paragons they could just send them out thoughtlessly on

excursions like these. The Pontiff's Citadel? They had the Pontiff, still reeling from the chaos instigated by Lan Jue.

Skyfire Avenue would never have to face that problem. How many Paragons did they have now?

The Gourmet was not here to end lives, something he'd expressed to Lan Jue before. So, he would assume command of the palace. With a Paragon here, even a host of battleships wouldn't take this place back.

Gabriel felt thoroughly hopeless. He shut his eyes, trying to shut out the world.

Eventually day broke, revealing a gorgeous morning. Light from the Starfields' distant star illuminated and warmed the planet. However, the golden light only fell upon destruction. Two hours later, most of the city was stripped bare. Trenches where the railgun had made landfall smoldered, black and angry. The radioactive wasteland was frightening to look upon.

Star Division's work wasn't over. With the help of the battleships, they continued to sweep the planet and remove all traces of pirates. Majesty did not participate. Instead it remained in orbit and watched for any sign of action from the two other planets. Anyone who tried to get off the planet was quickly silenced by the Division battleship.

The Gourmet pulled out several small cakes from his personal interdimensional storage device that he'd made himself. Each one was about the size of a hand, and golden-brown. Even cold they had a faint, pleasing aroma.

Chapter 582: Nasty Middle-Aged Man

Lan Jue's eyes lit up. "Ah, how'd you know I was starving?"

The Gourmet gave him a flat stare. "Because I'm hungry. Would you like some?"

He replied with eyes wide with shock. "On what condition?"

Skyfire Avenue's chef chuckled. "I remember that cache we found with all the goodies. By the time I got there it was practically empty, but I seem to remember a bottle. The label was silver. A deer's head? I'm not sure I'm remembering that correctly."

Lan Jue looked at him indignantly. "You scoundrel! If you think I'm trading my Dalmore whisky for some cake, you're dreaming."

The Gourmet harrumphed. "Who says it's yours? That was won for the Division in war. As commander, aren't you afraid of how it looks when you line your own pockets like this?"

"Lining my own pockets?" Lan Jue whined. "I haven't even opened it! I was planning to share it with everyone when we got back!"

The Gourmet didn't appear to believe him. "With everyone, when we get back? How much did you get, exactly? Is there an inventory somewhere?"

"No one likes to drink it anyway," he weakly replied, scowling openly.

Passion crept into the Gourmet's voice. "You must be fair! Uphold justice! How can you convince your men you are righteous if you bend the rules for your own benefit?"

Gabriel's eyes popped open when he heard the Paragon's impassioned words. Surprise and hope briefly flitted across his face. If the Gourmet and Lan Jue continued their bickering – or if they got drunk – he might have a chance to escape. He knew they couldn't have taken the entire planet so quickly. Gabriel was confident that if he could slip away, he'd just need to wait until they left. Then he could return safely to Europa.

Lan Jue saw his friend's intractable bearing, and sighed.

“How much do you want?”

The Gourmet produced a platter from somewhere unseen. He placed the cakes atop it and cradled the metal container with his hands. They began to glow with a red-hot, infernal heat that warmed the treats. The control room filled with the smell.

Lan Jue wrinkled his nose happily when the scent reached him. “Did you use butter? IT smells amazing!”

Next the Gourmet took up a cut of spiced beef. With a knife in his other hand, he quickly sliced thin pieces off of the cut and over the top of the cake. Gabriel swallowed a mouthful of saliva. He hadn’t eaten, either.

Lan Jue helped himself to a piece of cake with a slice of beef draped over it. He took a might bite, anxious to enjoy the treat.

Su Xiaosu also slunk over. She blinked at the Gourmet with big doe eyes and a pathetic expression. The Paragon chuckled and motioned for her to help herself. “I’m not a miserly man. ISn’t that right, Jewelry Master?”

Lan Jue busily scarfed down the cake. When the Gourmet confronted him again he sighed. A wave of his hand and a bottle appeared.

The bottle looked a little like a clock pendulum. The liquid within caught the light, and glowed with a rich golden hue. The label was just like the Gourmet described; a silver stag’s head. It was definitely flashy.

Dalmore whisky, among some of the most expensive whisky in the universe. The taste was sublime – on a whole other level than the competition.

Dalmore whiskies were rarely found on the open market. They were produced in small numbers. Older bottles were especially scarce. The one Lan Jue produced had the number ‘thirty’ written clearly on the label.

Whiskies were different from other spirits. They were bottles and sealed at very specific times. The age of a whisky was how long it’d spent aging in barrels before being bottled. The years after bottling didn’t mean anything. Rather like rice wine, the taste became more mellow and savory with time. However, the differences were slight.

In fact, Lan Jue had found crates full of whisky in the hidden cache they'd confiscated. Apparently, that pirate chief was a real fan.

A lot of the ancient bottling techniques had been lost to history, and were likely never to be rediscovered. This bottle was one of a treasure trove they'd uncovered, full of a precious liquid most even from Skyfire Avenue have never seen.

The Gourmet picked up the bottle to open it.

"Wait, wait! Do you have proper glasses?" Lan Jue cried in a final, desperate gambit. High-class whisky needed the proper glasses to really enjoy. They trapped the spirit's aroma. That was the only way to fully enjoy it.

"Nonsense! As a self-professed glutton, how could I come unprepared?" In a flash, two traditional Scottish whisky glasses were on the table beside the bottle.

Lan Jue sighed, defeated. He had no recourse but to gnaw of the cake and beef in consolation.

"Add another glass!" The Driver's boisterous voice heralded his arrival. They turned their heads to see the rough-looking man stride their way.

"Not cool, you guys! You were gunna drink such a fine bottle without me! Don't you have any shame?" He roared.

Fight! Come on, fight! Someone inwardly prayed.

Unfortunately, another glass joined the other two. Soon they were sloshing with a sip of golden liquid, enough to cover the glass' bottom.

The Gourmet then recorked the bottle, and tucked it away in his storage ring.

"You're a thief! Who was just going on about fairness and righteousness and all that?" Lan Jue cried indignantly.

"Enough," the Gourmet coolly remarked. "I wanted this bottle, and was gracious to give you both a taste. There was never any sort of agreement about anything else. What are you doing, slandering me like that?"

Lan Jue paused, and the anger drained from his face. “Seeing as you’re the senior here, go right ahead.”

A spark of surprise lit up the Gourmet’s expression. “You have something better, don’t you?” The Gourmet didn’t see everything in the cache they’d found, only the empty bottle of Dalmore. He didn’t think there might be something better hidden inside. And yet, Lan Jue had been relatively quick to give up this bottle.

The Jewelry Master chuckled sheepishly. “Old bottles of Talisker and Bowmore. What do you think, do they match up to the Dalmore?”

Both of them were fine whiskies, but really they couldn’t match up to a fine Dalmore.

The Driver didn’t involve himself. He snatched up the glass, lifted it to his nose and took a deep breath. He looked enchanted by the aroma.

Lan Jue and the Gourmet followed his example. They each took a moment to appreciate the smell, then sipped.

Their first reaction to the whisky wasn’t the flavor or texture. It was a pleasant warmth that started in their bellies and spread outward. It took with it the heady flavors and aromas. The sensation was so pure it made the hairs on their arms stand on end.

No conflict, damn! Gabriel sat glumly to one side, his mind still searching for a way out. The alcohol was of no interest him, but the cake was a bit of a distraction.

Unfortunately for him, he’d been entirely forgotten by the others. In mere moments, it was all scarfed down by Lan Jue and the others while they enjoyed their drinks.

“Well, I’m going to look for the Seamstress,” the Gourmet stated, after he’d finished eating. “I got a message from her earlier. She should be somewhere nearby.”

People often considered the Seamstress a gentle and soft-spoken lady, but that was only part of her persona. In fact, she was an accomplished mecha pilot – god-ranked. She’d been called Windbreaker during the god

battles, and had given them the Monarchs a great deal of trouble piloting Skyshade. She'd hidden her identity so well everyone assumed Windbreaker was a man. She was also the Gourmet's wife.

With a fine drink in hand and a full belly, of course the Gourmet would want to go find his wife. As he got up and left, the Driver quietly watched him go. When the coast was clear, he scooched closer.

"So you got anything better?" He said, looking at his drinking buddy.

Lan Jue cautiously drew his eyes to the Driver. "What about those cigars I saw you snatch from the cache?"

"There's enough for you! Fair."

"Fine, then it's agreed! We'll split it up when we get back," Lan Jue said with a grin.

"I knew you two were up to no good!" There was a flash of light, and the Gourmet reappeared in front of them.

The Driver almost fell out of his chair. "Shit! It's a trap!"

The Gourmet grunted in irritation. His dark gaze settled on Lan Jue. "Come clean!"

Lan Jue threw up his hands, entreating silence. "Quiet! There are a lot of people who want this stuff. How about this, when we get back we split it three ways. Everyone gets a fair cut. How's that sound? And no one hides anything else. But! I would like some Australian lobster. Gourmet, it's on you."

The Gourmet's serious expression melted away and he chuckled. "No problem. Then it's agreed. I'm off!" He trotted out again.

Lan Jue and the Driver waited until his back was turned before flagrantly flipping him off. "That nasty old man," the Driver said, out of earshot. "So treacherous!"

Lan Jue sighed. "I blame you. If only you could have kept your mouth shut."

Gabriel closed his eyes, looking almost pained. These guys...

Blasts were still fierce and often. The fighting had spread out and pirates were being rooted out as they finished their drinks. Star Division's ships appeared above the holdouts heads and rained death from a safe distance. Every explosion eroded the pirates' resistance.

Chapter 583: The Death of the Barber

The pirates had weapons, certainly, but without the help of a planetary defense system they would never get through an airship's hull. All they could do was try and survive the beating. They had to watch as their fellow scallywags were reduced to ash.

All of the Star Division soldiers from every brigade were immersed in battle. They were strong together and alone. Whether they fought in groups or on their own, the Star Division soldiers swept away all opposition. Air support watched over them from above.

A day on Moonfiend was roughly sixteen hours long. Eight hours after dawn, when the sun was at its zenith, the sounds of fighting began to subside.

Moonfiend Palace, main control room.

"Boss," Su Xiaosu called, looking at Lan Jue, "it's more or less finished."

Lan Jue nodded back at her. They weren't trying to kill the whole planet. There were too many, and a lot of the population weren't pirates. Discussions were held on the topic of taking some of these slaves with them. In the end, though, they couldn't work it out.

There were too many people. With only the few ships they had, there wasn't enough space to take them all. Besides, there was nothing to stop pirates from hiding among them as normal folk. It was a recipe for future disaster.

They need a proper military to solve this problem. The Moonfiend Pirates were no more, and the Shattered Starfields no longer had a dominant force. When they returned, Lan Jue would urge the Eastern military to send a few ships and pick them up. It wasn't unthinkable that they would want to set up an outpost here.

The Accountant had been busy these last few hours as well. He'd been busy at the code for the defense system, supplanting their defenses with an encryption program of his own. It was phenomenally complicated, and

any would-be hacker would have to get passed it before they could assume control of the system.

“Tell people to start packing it up. Time to withdraw. We’re gather on Moonfiend then head out,” Lan Jue told Xiaosu.

“Aye.”

The battleships they’d captured from the pirates were theirs now, and though they weren’t large enough to take everyone they did afford them more space. The miners, for instance, were undoubtedly innocent victims here. Lan Jue had already ordered the Covfefe Master to head to the mines with his new ship and gather them up. Those unfortunate souls who were kept in the Citadel’s prison were also brought aboard. Those two groups alone filled Star Division’s two new battleships.

The battle for Moonfiend was easier than they’d thought. Su Xiaosu’s intimate knowledge of the terrain and enemy forces had been integral. The pirates were sluggish, untrained, and lacked unity. It was a recipe for quick collapse.

Of course this is not to detract from the skill of the Star Division. Months of excursions have made them a true fighting force. A string of victories had made them confident, and the benefits they reaped solidified their faith in the organization. Despite months of danger, Star Division hadn’t lost a single soldier. It was miraculous, and filled Lan Jue’s men with conviction.

Skyfire Avenue’s young warriors had been tempered in the flames of battle. Lan Jue’s Star Division was made out here among the broken stars. It filled Lan Jue with joy.

“Jewelry Master. Jewelry Master, if you’re hearing me, respond.” An urgent voice was calling him from the main monitor.

Lan Jue was stunned for a moment. Xiaosu answered and called up the feed. The Accountant’s anxious face came into view.

“What is it, Accountant?” Lan Jue asked inquiringly.

The Accountant’s voice was low. “See for yourself.” The sound of his

fingers on the keyboard preceded a change of video.

From the picture they could see an expansive asteroid belt. It was surging through space like a rocky tidal wave. Massive slabs of metallic rock smashed into each other at thousands of kilometers a second. As the space between them filled with debris, faint undulations in reality caught their eye.

“What is this?” He asked the distressed hacker.

“I have no idea,” the Accountant replied, “that’s what makes it so frightening. At first it just looked like cosmic turbulence. With so many small planets and asteroid fields to get in the way, though, that should be impossible! For safety I think we all need to get out of here right away. We can’t delay.”

“Got it!” Lan Jue snapped his attention to Xiaosu. “Send out the command, immediate evacuation. Get everyone back as soon as possible, have the ships ready to pick them up.”

“Aye aye.” The Division’s second-in-command didn’t question or hesitate. This was her first time running into cosmic turbulence. Everything the Accountant said was true, they shouldn’t have anything like that so deep in the Starfields!

Su Xiaosu shot to her feet once the orders were given. The Accountant took up remote control of the planet’s systems. She then turned to Lan Jue. “Boss, we need to go too. Mika will bring Zeus-1 around to pick us up.”

“Alright, let’s go.” The Driver and Xiaosu were on his heels as he walked out of the room. As he passed Gabriel, he muttered, “Are you coming with us or staying here? There’s cosmic turbulence coming this way.”

Gabriel, who had until then been sitting quietly with his eyes shut, jumped to his feet. “I’m coming,” he said without a moment’s hesitation.

Of course he hadn’t been meditating, though it had appeared that way. The Archangel had been quiet and attentive the whole time. He’d heard the exchange between Lan Jue and the Accountant. He didn’t believe it either, but better to doubt and live. What if it were true? It would mean

cosmic turbulence was bringing enough asteroids in its wake to obliterate the whole planet. Moonfiend's defenses couldn't contend with that.

The decision to leave with Lan Jue was an easy one. Gabriel was confident from their earlier exchanges that the Star Division commander didn't have any intention of killing him. It was humiliating, but it was better than dying.

Fourth Brigade followed their leaders from the palace, as did the units left behind by First and Second Brigade. The Accountant shut down the defenses around the palace to allow for approach. When Lan Jue stepped out with his people in tow, he was greeted with a landscape of devastation.

Su Xiaosu's eyes hardened. She'd built this place through her own effort. It would be strange if she felt joy at watching it burn.

"Xiaosu." Lan Jue put a hand on her shoulder.

She shook her head. "I'm fine, boss, relax. Tearing it down is better than giving it to them."

Lan Jue smiled supportively. "I like your thinking. You might have lost the Moonfiend Pirates, but you got the Star Division in return. We're a larger arena for you to showcase your skill."

Xiaosu smiled, and nodded.

There were still people on the street, though much fewer than there had been. He looked in the distance to see a familiar figure.

"Her?" Lan Jue muttered in surprise.

Purplish-red hair, matching leotard... it was the same beautiful young woman from before.

The others followed his gaze to the woman. The Driver's eyes in particular lit up. "Nice! I didn't girls who looked like that were in this pirate hell."

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. "I don't think she's a pirate. I saw her in Crescent City, then again in Luna. How did she get here?"

At first he'd felt compassionate for the young woman, compelled to

help. However, each time he saw her, Lan Jue felt something wasn't right. He couldn't say what it was, but the feeling was real.

"I'll take a look." A figure appeared at Lan Jue's side. It was one of Skyfire Avenue's eighteen councilors, the Barber. His eyes were bright, clearly interested in getting a better look at this beauty.

The Driver muttered. "Aren't you afraid the Beautician will be jealous?"

The Barber chortled over his shoulder. "There's nothing between us. She looks down on me. How do you think I'd look if I'm a savior, eh? What do you say, Jewelry Master. Let's bring her with us. Leaving someone so beautiful here would be a terrible waste."

He didn't wait for Lan Jue's permission. The Barber was adept at speed, and was off in a flash.

Lan Jue could only helplessly shake his head. "This guy. In such a rush..." He stopped mid-sentence.

The Barber arrived before the woman in a few short moments. Meanwhile, the girl was staring up into the sky, peering at something only she could see. As the Barber appeared she seemed to sense it, and waved at him with her hand.

A ray of blinding red light flashed. In an instant, the Barber was reduced to a cloud of blood. Whoosh! They watched in horror as what remained of the Avenue councilor was sucked into the woman, and vanished.

Lan Jue, the Driver and the others felt the wave of power from the ray. It washed over them, making every hair on their body stand on end. The tell-tale pressure of someone with a superior Discipline descended upon them.

"Barber!" Lan Jue screamed. He charged. Now he understood why she'd felt so wrong. That power was not something any human could produce.

How could the terror they felt be produced by any normal person? No wonder she was so unnaturally beautiful, and here alone in a world of pirates.

The Driver and Xiaosu were right behind him. They rushed right for the

Barber's murderer.

She had her head down as she slurped up what remained of her kill. A violet aura rippled around her that seemed to make her brighter.

Her eyes snapped up, and she saw Lan Jue heading her way.

Chapter 584: You Are Food

Golden light flashed behind Lan Jue's eyes. He didn't know anything about this woman or where she came from, but her actions clearly made her his enemy.

The Barber had been one of the weaker Skyfire councilors, but he was still ninth level third rank, maybe fourth. Yet, this terrifying woman ended him with a wave of her hand. How strong was she?

He was afraid she was a Paragon! Lan Jue asked himself, if he had to kill someone of the Barber's strength as quickly as he could, then he would have to rely on the power of Captus. She did it with her hand.

She watched Lan Jue rush toward her. Confusion was evident in her gaze, but Lan Jue was already there. A bolt of electricity as thick as her waist came crashing toward her.

The blinding lights flickered as they ran up and down the girl's body, making her shake. The violet aura around her flashed, and suddenly the lightning was gone.

The Driver's attack was on the heels of the first. Silver lightning lashed out like a deadly whip. However as the young woman's eyes narrowed the bolt was reflected back! It struck the Driver so hard he went flying away.

Golden light swirled up Su Xiaosu, then was ejected as a ray of holy light at their foe.

The girl frowned. The confusion in her eyes gave way to untamed ferocity. Her right hand shot out, and a beam of violet light fired toward the Morning Star. IT was the same attack that had slain the Barber.

Lan Jue threw himself between the ray and Su Xiaosu without thinking. In the same instant, his body bloomed with a searing golden light, like a small sun. Lan Jue's commanding voice rang out. "Harden!"

His voice of command had no effect on the death ray other than to make it pause for a breath before continuing. Lan Jue's arms rose in a circle, and within it was birthed a familiar vortex of black and white power. The yin-

yang vortex pulled at the ray, knocking just far enough off course so that it missed Xiaosu and landed nearby.

The building it struck was evaporated.

“Xiaosu, get the others to Zeus-1! The Driver and I will handle her. Go!” Lan Jue shouted.

He'd managed to cast off the last attack, but it had taken effort. His yin-yang abilities could only defend him so much. He feared that if her next attack was any stronger, he wouldn't be able to protect himself let alone another.

They were facing a fierce beast in human form!

Su Xiaosu was a military commander, and former Empress of the Moonfiend Pirates. She did not hesitate to take a life when she needed do. She was not known for freezing at decisive moments. However, as the ray of power from the young woman came her way the Morning Star didn't budge. So complete was the ferocious intent that every pore in her body squeezed shut. Only once Lan Jue broke the line of sight did Xiaosu recover.

This was more than she could handle. Finding reinforcements was the best way she could help.

Contrary to Lan Jue's expectations, the young woman did not continue her attack. Rather, she watched him with curiosity and interest, engrossed.

The Driver quickly returned to Lan Jue's side. He'd been struck by his own Discipline, so certainly he could defend well against it. Lan Jue could see him jerk from time to time, but there was no lasting damage.

“What the hell is she?” The Driver just looked at her stunned. He and the Barber hadn't been on the best of terms, but they were the same. Both of them hailed from Skyfire Avenue, both councilors, both soldiers in Division. The Driver watched him die without rhyme or reason, how could he not be affected?

Lan Jue shook his head. He was just as much in the dark as his comrade. What he felt from her violet aura was an intense fear. The blasts of energy

seemed like reactions, but were strong enough to be considered Paragon-level. Whatever her Discipline was, it was incredibly potent. Lan Jue wasn't sure his protogenia-infused lightning would be enough to deal with her.

His uncertainty called to Captus. A pale red aura swam around the Monarch. The woman's curiosity turned to shock when she saw the change in his aura. She stumbled back a few steps, appearing to be frightened of Captus' light.

"Who are you?" Her voice was strange, like she was unused to the words.

Lan Jue glared at her. "Why did you kill our friend?"

She looked back at him, confused. "What is 'friend'? 'Kill'? Ah, you must mean my last meal. You are also food, though I do not wish to eat you."

Food? Eat?

Lan Jue and the Driver exchanged confused looks.

Did she say she ate the Driver?

The odd, beautiful young woman frowned as though considering something. Then, without warning, her hand shot out to grab at the Driver's chest. Her arm stretched unnaturally, bathed in that violet light that made her arm look like it was cut from a gemstone.

Once more that overwhelming terror gripped the Driver. It felt like every nerve and blood vessel froze solid, going so far as to make his movements jerky and uncoordinated. However, the Driver was not the Bartender. Lan Jue wasn't the only one who'd gotten stronger after the Great Adept Tournament.

He bit the tip of his tongue, the sharp pain sharpening his focus. A blast of silver lightning erupted from him. Taiyin thunderbolts slithered over him from head to toe as he let loose a feral roar. His Discipline surged into his chest where it became a cluster of resplendent silver light.

The Driver coalesced his power into a pure barrier. The undulating line of silver was all that stood between him and that groping hand.

When they met, the woman's arm swiped away the lightning like it was paper. Errant bolts of lightning arcs into the sky only to disappear, others found their way to both the Driver and Lan Jue.

The woman seemed to be attacking directly, a slave to instinct. Each strike was heavy with lethal power, so much that everyone was almost too startled to speak.

But Lan Jue was prepared. Just as she lashed out for the Driver, Lan Jue's hand flashed red. Captus appeared in his grip. He swept his hand almost gently to the side, but what issued from the weapon was a rift of intense interdimensional collapse headed right for the woman.

She had no option but to retract that horrifyingly long arm. Her palm shot out instinctively to deflect the blow.

Poof! The interdimensional rift caused by Captus shuddered and made the world before them warp uncomfortably. Lan Jue felt the space around him constrict, and it was then he realized. She was not only deflecting his attack, but counter-attacking as well. He reeled back a few steps.

Lan Jue grit his teeth and forced himself to be still. He could not give her ground, not even an inch more. If he did she might grow bold and attack with all her strength. It wasn't just his life on the line, or the Driver's. They had ten units of soldiers who would be decimated if she got passed them.

The Monarch's eyes blazed, as reddish-golden light erupted from him. He drew upon every ounce of his power, planted his feet, gripped Captus with both hands and thrust himself forward blade first.

The young woman's wide eyes couldn't come away from Lan Jue. A flood of emotion crossed her alluring face. But through all of that, there was nothing violent. No fear or rage. Instead he saw confusion. She seemed almost pitiful.

Lan Jue grit his teeth and steeled his nerves. He would not be dissuaded by the enchantment of her eyes. After what he witnessed, what he felt, how could she be considered pitiful on any level?

The red light around Captus blazed. Along its blade runes shimmered

archaically. A column of reality collapsed where he pointed.

The Driver had been ready to join forces with Lan Jue. He remembered how strong their Disciplines were, yin and yang together. They could rely on that to contend with this surprise enemy. However, the moment he saw the red light of Captus, felt the flood of power that came from his commander, he knew he was no longer needed.

He dissolved into a bolt of silver lightning and retreated. Staying behind he was only good as a spectator. This fight was above his pay grade.

Just then the sparkling hull of Zeus-1 came into view. Without delay, its traction beam burst to life and began swallowing up the Division soldiers. Inside, one of the bridge monitor's beeped as its main gun locked onto Lan Jue's target. All the while the woman never noticed. She never took her eyes away from Lan Jue and the weapon he was pointing at her.

She won't defend? Something stirred in Lan Jue's chest. Just as it seemed the blade would impale her Lan Jue stopped dead. The woman's brows furrowed prettily for a moment, then she smiled.

She was visually perfect. Even under these circumstances her smile was stupefying. Two delicate fingers, soft as spring onions, pinched Captus' tip between them. All of a sudden it felt like he was against an impenetrable barrier. Captus couldn't move an inch.

She could stop a Banishing Blade, with her fingers alone?

Lan Jue stared at her, too shocked to say or do anything.

She tilted her head to the side as she regarded him. Her features were calm, charming. With a flick of her finger Lan Jue and Captus were flung a hundred meters away before crashing to earth.

The Banishing Blade flickered and shuddered of its own accord. Lan Jue's expression could only be defined as stupefied.

Since accepting Captus, Lan Jue's power had reached previously unknown heights. Until now, he had met no foe who could defy Captus' deadly edge. Never did he think he'd encounter someone capable of choking the sword's power – it was one of the Banishing Blades!

Chapter 585: The Violet Princess

Lan Jue knew the failings were not with the sword, but with how much of its power Lan Jue was able to command. The woman lifting her head and looked up at Zeus-1, hovering overhead. Mika had been appraised of the situation. She knew the Barber had been slain by this woman's hand, and now with her boss out of the way she had a clean line of sight.

Zeus-1's main cannon fires a dazzling beam of blue light!

Mika knew Lan Jue was in the strike zone at only a hundred meters away. She was counting on his peak cultivation to help him avoid the brunt of the attack.

Boom! A thunderous boom resounded. The resulting shockwave sent Lan Jue hurdling away once again. A massive crater where the ship had fired. All the buildings around it had been summarily leveled.

A red flick flickered around Lan Jue – Captus, protecting itself. Even with his constitution shored up by the Banishing Blade, the blast threw him a thousand meters from the crater.

A moment later, a dark red lung spread out over the sky. The crimson hue painted everything around them as rivers of lava tumbled from the heavens. The boiling rock converged on the crater.

The Gourmet hovered in the sky, hand in hand with Seamstress. His face was hard and imposing.

The ground still trembled from Zeus-1's blast. The crater it left behind was now a lake of molten lava. Its surface bubbled with poisonous fumes.

Lan Jue recovered from the two blow-backs and rose into the sky. There he hovered and watched his team take on their inhuman opponent. An inexplicable disquiet filled him, though. He suspected the woman wouldn't be put down so easily.

"Coffee Master, Bartender. When you've gotten everyone get back in atmosphere and meet up with Majesty." Lan Jue shouted the command through his communicator. He was beginning to suspect meeting her here

was no accident. He'd felt it in their clash. There was something familiar...

The blinding lights eventually receded. The waves of energy and clouds of dust settled. Clear skies hung over the red-hot lake of lava. But the beautiful woman was nowhere to be seen – like she'd indeed been swallowed up by the lava.

The Driver appeared at Lan Jue's side. His voice was low and uncertain. "Where the hell did she come from? A Paragon? She didn't seem like it! I didn't sense any protogenia."

Lan Jue frowned. "I don't know, either. But I feel..."

Before he could explain any further, both men snapped their eyes to the lake. Pfoo! A figure breached the bubbling stone and shot into the air.

The woman looked angry. A strange frost covered her face, but otherwise she seemed unchanged from the mighty attack. There wasn't any indication the lava touched her at all.

She cast a venomous glare at Lan Jue as she soared higher. Then, she whipped her hand out to swipe at the Gourmet. In the same instant her body erupted in a blinding red light that shot right for Zeus-1.

Lan Jue's battleship was shielded, but nevertheless careened out of the way of the red light. Thankfully, its upgraded defenses were comprehensive. The wild evasion maneuvers sent the ship reeling, but Mika's expert piloting kept them safe and in control.

The Gourmet withdrew a meter meters, pulling the Seamstress back with him. He retracted his hand from hers, and traced a circle in the air before him with his arms. Color drained from an extensive patch of reality around him. He thrust his palms forward, inciting a beam of pale-white light to fire out. The beam and the woman's encroaching palm met halfway.

Silent as the grave, the woman's arm started to melt when it clashed with the Gourmet's power. His Domain consumed her like snow in a furnace.

His protogenia was... corrosive? What power was this?

The Gourmet's face changed when he witnessed the effect. A guttural hum vibrated through the air while the grey light poured from the Gourmet like a font. His body adopted a similar ashen-grey hue, and an elaborate crown sat atop his head. The rules of life and death were perverted around the Infernal Vanguard. He pressed the attack, pumping his fist in seven successive strikes to erase the woman entirely.

But the beautiful monster clenched her fist, and punched through. She struck the Gourmet like a lightning bolt. He went flailing through the air, and the grey light of Domain dissipated like a host of spirits.

This...

Even the Gourmet, a Paragon in his own right, was no match for her. How strong was she?!

She was given no breathing room, as in the next instant a blast of white light was almost upon her. A roar like some unspeakable beast preceded it; the sound of air being ripped apart as the white light came crashing over her.

The woman looked on with wide, shocked eyes. Instinctively her hand shot up.

Boom—! The light – a hundred millions sword-strikes as one – hit her like a torrent. Then, it turned around and came back for another pass. She grunted as the violet light surrounding her flared. The aura protected her, forcibly shoving the deadly flood to either side. She lightly stamped her right foot, and in response the whole planet trembled.

The white light was scattered and the figure that summoned it staggered back. One moment the white light was searing through the air and the next it was not. She cut it off herself to keep her stability.

It was the Pharmacist, appearing in their time of need. The righteous light of Occisus made a nimbus around her.

The Driver gaped at her from Lan Jue's side in complete and utter disbelief.

Star Division's three mightiest warriors descended upon the woman one

after the other, and yet they were still outclassed. It was unlikely she'd summoned the whole of her power yet. And what power it was! Although she was no Paragon, it was the only means of comparison they had, and she was at least of the second degree. Maybe even stronger.

Lan Jue shot the Driver a telling glance. He knew it meant he was to fall back to the ships. Lan Jue then shot forward to join the Pharmacist.

The light of Captus and Occisus flashed and twinkled. They'd were hungry for the destruction of the beast.

The beautiful woman seethed with anger. She glared daggers at Lan Jue and, with a petulant pout, seemed almost resentful. "I didn't try to eat you! Why do you hit me?"

Lan Jue scowled. The girl seemed to measure her world in what could be eaten.

"Who are you?" Lan Jue demanded.

The woman was bewildered by the question. After a moment, however, her resolute answer was given. "The Violet Princess."

"The Violet Princess." Lan Jue stared at her. Princess was a rare title even among humans. Western Alliance royalty saw its frequent usage, but otherwise it was a novelty from the old world.

"Is this incorrect? In your human history, is it not proper to refer to your high status females as 'princess?'" Her words were strange, but she spoke with confidence and fluency.

Lan Jue's expression grew only more confused. "Are you not human?"

"I am," she said, "and I am not. My people eat yours." She delivered it as point of fact. And then, she opened her mouth wide...

It stretched grotesquely, revealing rows of razor sharp teeth. She belched a plume of violet air at Lan Jue and the Pharmacist.

Her attacks before were more reactions, self-defense. This time was different. This time there was intent. Her maw stretched over a hundred meters wide, and within swirled a vortex as violent as a black hole.

There it was. Now Lan Jue remembered where he'd felt this before.

Ashen pockets of air descended from above. They cut Lan Jue and the Pharmacist off from the Violet Princess' assault. The Gourmet came down to join his compatriots, but his was not idle. His hands tirelessly contorted into archaic runic shapes while behind him, a gigantic image flickered in and out of reality.

It was humanoid in shape, and peering deep into the surrounding darkness one could spy hair the color of bone dust. An ornate black robe concealed its figure, with dim silver light tracing designs cross its surface. He was majestic, imposing, and radiated with the essence of death.

This was...

Hades' Effigy! A phenomenon of the Reflection of Heaven and Earth! 1

But it was faint, and the effigy unstable. It was evident he hadn't reached the comprehension needed to master it fully. He was managing with every ounce of effort he could muster.

The nightmarish image behind the Gourmet extended a palm. A world-shuddering terror spilled out like a tide. The Violet Princess whirled and bit at the enormous ashen hand.

The effigy's light was devoured, but likewise the sea of violet energy within the princess' maw had also been extinguished.

"Withdraw!" The Gourmet grabbed up his two companions and shot into the air.

But the Violet Princess' figure shimmered and vanished, reappearing in their path.

"Delicious morsels. I can't let you go." She mumbled the phrase again and again, like a psychotic mantra. She waved her arms in circles, and the motion birthed an orb of red light. It fired itself at the three of them, a prison of crimson light.

The Pharmacist's first reaction was to bite hard on her tongue. She felt her mouth fill with blood as Occisus' resplendent light blazed around

them. The runes etched on the blade's surface flickered, while buffeting winds roared. The image of an enormous sword appeared in the air and cut the orb of light in two. It opened enough of an avenue for the Gourmet to pull them into another retreat.

Another hair-raising sizzle filled the air as Zeus-1 let loose another blast from its main gun. This time everyone could see clearly how she'd avoided the first salvo.

She waved her hand like swatting away a fly. Her aura thickened into a red shell that warded off the blast without a scratch. All it served to do was slow down her pursuit for a few seconds.

But an important fact was revealed. With her speed, dodging it would not be a problem. Instead she took every hit directly. Did she find them so beneath her that dodging was unnecessary?

Chapter 586: The Terrifying Violet Princess

“An alien. Her aura, it’s just like an alien’s!” Lan Jue’s voice wormed into the Pharmacist’s and Gourmet’s ears.

An alien? An alien this strong?

Their hearts sank. If this was true the princess chose her name aptly. She would have to be among the strongest of her kind. And if she was here, did that mean there were others?

The Violet Princess reeled at Zeus-1. She appeared to have lost patience. Throwing her head back, the alien screamed into the heavens. A pair of wings ripped open her back and spread wide. It was a precursor for an unfathomable scene.

The beautiful face was twisted in a mask of ferocity and anger. Lines of mystifying violet light slithered across her skin, while her body swelled to over three meters tall. Her figure retained its alluring shape, however layers of violet scales slithered out to encase her. She glared at Zeus-1 hovering nearby, then lashed out.

Suddenly the sky – no, everything around them changed. Their surroundings became painted violet. The fleeing Division leaders felt sluggish and the air was like moving through soup.

A beam of light erupted from the princess, coalescing into the shape of a mouth intent on swallowing up the airship.

“No-!” Lan Jue screamed, but he was helpless to stop it. He could hardly move in this violet universe. Even Captus’ light was dimmed.

Ka-cha! The crystal-clear click of a shutter hung in the air.

The color palette of their new reality shifted from violet to pale pink. On the heels of that sharp camera shutter came another sound. Awesome and dreadful, the violet light was stopped dead and shattered into a hundred thousand shards of glass. Pieces of it glittered as they tumbled from the

sky.

Zeus-1 fled like a robin from a hawk. It swung dramatically askew in its hurry to flee. Mika was just getting the writhing hellfire around her back under control. She had stared into the jaws of death. A moment later, and everyone onboard would have been smoke and ash.

It was unthinkable. Their complicated and daring raid of Moonfiend had gone without a hitch. Only in the final moments, as they made for a victorious departure, did they meet with disaster. How could this be? It was outside their ability to predict.

The Photographer didn't either. She'd saved the lives of everyone on that ship, but only just. She wasn't any more prepared than anyone else.

The Violet Princess' eyes were filled with incredulity. She looked at Luo Xianni with doubt written on her pretty face.

Luo Xianni hovered in midair, with her camera in one hand. She looked back at the princess, eye to eye.

Her sudden arrival made Lan Jue feel like he could breathe again. He called out to his mother. "I think she's an alien. Only, I don't know why she looks like a human."

An alien? When he said the words, the Pharmacist and the Gourmet shuddered. This beautiful woman, an alien? The level of power she displayed would back that up, as would her brutal aura.

Luo Xianni sniffed. She lifted her camera once again. But the Violet Princess sensed something was coming. Her beguiling figure trembled, then vanished. She reappeared in the next instant in front of the Photographer, throwing a fist toward her face.

Just as the attack was ready to land, her figure became dim. The princess swiped right through an empty image. The real Paragon was a thousand meters away.

Ka-cha! The familiar sound of her shutter came again. The skies went pick, and the Violet Princess felt her movements stiffen.

It didn't last. A tremendous burst of violet light vented off of her that halted the Photographer's power. It didn't extend to the pink skies, but for now the princess evaded becoming a photograph.

Every onlooker was struck dumb by what they witnessed. They had just seen the Photographer handily transform a battleship into a thin sheet! Apparently, the princess was too strong for even the mighty Paragon to seal away.

The Violet Princess thrust with her palms. A tide of violet energy surged from her, threatening to swallow up the vast pink sky. Forlorn humans watched the comforting pale hue began to dissolve. A shimmering figure appeared behind her.

It was a globe, enormous and violet as the rest of her kind. Despite its hazy image, they could see writhing tentacles lashing around the orb. Its presence boosted the princess' aura, making it stronger. She was calling on her full power.

Reality crackled where the embattled colors met. Cresting waves of energy filled all the space in between.

"Zeus-1, we're retreating!" The Gourmet said, making the call.

He knew more than most that they couldn't be around for what was about to happen. This fight wasn't one any of them could sway in any positive fashion. He was thankful the beast hadn't used her full power immediately, otherwise it would have been a very short fight.

The three of them withdrew as quickly as they could to the waiting airship. They were gathered up the by tractor beam and brought aboard. Lan Jue wasted no time making his way to the captain's chair and ordering Mika to get them out of there.

The planet's surface was too dangerous. They would wait for the Photographer in orbit.

Mika grit her teeth and navigated them through the tempestuous winds. When she caught a moment of calm air, Zeus-1's engines flared to life. An impressive wake of flame followed their escape.

Lan Jue's face was dark. Coming off their victory over the Moonfiend pirates, everyone had been ecstatic. Now the atmosphere was bleak and somber.

Lan Jue had seen all kinds of aliens; from progenitor seeds to common beasts. He felt like he had at least a working knowledge of what they were up against. The Violet Princess showed him how wrong he was.

He'd been operating under the assumption that the size of any given alien was proportional to their strength. Humanity was shoring up to steel themselves for a conflict, thinking they need only survive a simple assault. It would come down to a battle of attrition.

The Violet Princess changed the game entirely.

She was incredibly strong, seemingly invincible. The Photographer had become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and yet all she could do was dissuade the foe. Lan Jue determined that she must not be entirely familiar with her abilities. If she was, she'd have killed them all from the start, because she had the power of a Paragon as strong as Luo Xianni!

Chapter 587: Retreat

Neither Captus nor Occisus could harm the Violet Princess. She was on a whole other realm of dominance. If there were many like her in her species, then when the battle came...

Lan Jue thought back to the Clairvoyant and his earliest predictions. If this is what he saw in those visions, he could understand why the situation was so dire.

“Did you record the fight?” He asked Mika.

She nodded. “Everything after we arrived.”

Su Xiaosu interjected, standing nearby. “I have the first part on my communicator.”

Lan Jue’s voice was low. “Clean it up and send a copy to Majesty. Tell them to relay it to the Avenue immediately, highest priority.”

“Could she just be a powerful Paragon, not an alien?” The Driver said, hesitant to jump to conclusions.

Lan Jue’s lips turned in a bitter smirk. “I hoped so. But her aura, the savagery, her fighting style, the fact she ate the Barber... it all confirms my suspicions. We fought the aliens on Tempest. We know they can get into the Starfields. If...”

He trailed off when something outside caught his eye. His pupils contracted. “What is that?”

The others had been keenly watching when they saw his expression change. They followed his shocked gaze out the bridge window. Instantly their faces matched Lan Jue’s, filled with shock and disbelief.

Zeus-1 had shed Moonfiend’s atmosphere, and the vista of outer space was revealed from the airship’s windows. What they saw was the encroaching asteroid hail. Three swirling cyclones of violet energy had appeared among the crashing stones.

They were ten thousand kilometers across at least. From the vantage of

their tiny airship, it was a truly spectacular scene. Light stopped at they neared the borders of the vortexes, photons ripped apart. It was apocalyptic.

The Accountant's voice crackled through the bridge's speakers. "Zeus-1, Zeus-1! This is Majesty. Powerful, unknown energy fluctuations have appeared. Requesting permission to retreat!" His voice was beginning to sound desperate.

"Granted," Lan Jue affirmed. "Majesty and everyone else. Get out as fast as you can, make your way to Skyfire."

"Acknowledged. Jewelry Master, are you coming?" The Accountant sounded much relieved by the order to withdraw.

Lan Jue hesitated for a moment. "Yes, we're all pulling out."

"I anticipated your order and took the liberty of having the Coffee Master and Bartender take their ships back first. They move slower," the Accountant confessed.

"No time for that," Lan Jue replied. "Everyone needs to get out, immediately."

"Aye aye!" The Accountant felt a weight lift from his chest, appearing to have avoided Lan Jue's wrath. Majesty briefly shed its cloak and twinkled against the dark backdrop of space. The battleship then reengaged its invisibility and headed toward Zeus-1. Mika turned their ship around to prepare for their exit.

"I'm getting in the ejection capsule. Mika, shoot me out," Lan Jue ordered.

Her head snapped around to look at him. "Boss, you –"

He narrowed his eyes, catching the words in her throat. He didn't speak, he didn't need to. But Mika resolutely shook her head. "No. No!"

Zeus-1 picked up speed.

Lan Jue's voice was hard with anger. "So you're going to force me to disgrace myself? My mother's down there. You fall back, and I'll go down

to help. After a little while come back to pick us up.

“I’m going too,” the Pharmacist announced.

Lan Jue shook his head. “You have Jun’er to look after, we can’t risk you. Gourmet, everyone, I’m ordering you to retreat. No one will follow me. You’re all necessary for the war against these aliens. If you believe the Clairvoyant’s predictions, then no harm should come to me. I’ll just be there to support the Photographer as much as I can. Someone needs to be there to record what happens. I’ll make sure to send all the data and keep updates. I’m the only one who can do this. Now don’t worry, my mother’s strong. Even if she can’t defeat the princess, escaping shouldn’t be too difficult. When we’re out of danger, we’ll get in contact.”

Lan Jue was calm. He was addressing the leadership of Star Division.

The Pharmacist opened her mouth to protest, but the Gourmet put a hand on her shoulder. “Commander’s orders!”

Lan Jue was a God-ranked mecha pilot, and third strongest in their group. With Zeus’ help he could survive longer out in space than the Gourmet could. It was clearly the right choice.

Lan Jue looked at the Gourmet with a grateful eye. He turned and made his way to the ejection pod.

Suddenly, a soft voice caught his ear. “Don’t go. Don’t waste your effort, good child.” There was a flicker of pink, and the Photographer appeared on the ship’s deck. Her face was pale and she stumbled, nearly falling but for the support of the Pharmacist beside her.

Everyone was relieved to see her, Lan Jue particularly. He rushed to her side.

“Ma, are you alright?” He asked with deep concern.

She smirked at him. “I won’t die. Let’s get out of here. In all my life I’ve never seen interspatial fluctuations as strong as these – not normal cosmic turbulence. We need to get clear as quick as possible.”

Mika didn’t need to wait for instructions. When the Photographer

appeared she was overjoyed, and wasted no time in pulling Zeus-1 into an escape trajectory.

Lan Jue returned to the main control console. "Majesty, this is Zeus-1. Release all your probes and get as much data from the surroundings as you can."

"Aye aye, Majesty acknowledges!" Came the Accountant's reply.

Both ships made their final preparations then beat an escape as fast as their engines could muster. In no time they were tearing through space at the speed of light.

Probes silently spun in orbit around Moonfiend. Linking eyes watched the surrounding chaos and sent the images back to the Division armada.

On the surface of Moonfiend.

A violet shadow was frozen solid. A series of clicks issued from it over and over until suddenly, a burst of violet light erupted from it. The shadow was shattered, revealing none other than the Violet Princess.

There was confusion in her eyes. However, the pursed lips and irritated expression spoke to her displeasure. In another circumstance she looked like she might be a beautiful woman irritated with her boyfriend. It was an insidious mask, hiding the terror beneath.

The swirling whirlpools of energy around the planet continued to expand until the asteroid belt threatening Moonfiend was swallowed up and vanished.

Chapter 588: Transferring Planets!

The asteroid belt was gone, like it had never existed. One of the defining features of the Shattered Starfields was that at any given time, in any given direction you could find asteroid belts and dwarf planets in scores. The clearest band was near the galaxy's central star.

This area was traditionally not so lucky, and yet now the space around it was completely clear. That is, but for the three enormous vortexes. They swirled around the planet, emitting waves of energy that grew stronger by the moment, while they spun ever faster.

Lan Jue and his team weren't the only spectators. All the pirates and slaves left on Moonfiend, and especially its two sister planets, were spectators to the event. Unlike Lan Jue, however, they had no means of retreat. The surviving pirates had watched the destruction of Moonfiend from their surveillance equipment only half a day ago. Moonfiend Palace, the seat of their power, was under enemy occupation.

So they didn't dare move, even if they could. Whatever terrifying enemy obliterated Moonfiend was somewhere out the galaxy. Who knew what sort of devious traps they'd planned? This was especially true for the second planet whose entire fleet had been decimated. At least on the planet they had the defense system to offer protection.

Without warning, a massive column of violet light shot from Moonfiend's surface. It pierced the atmosphere and fired into the darkness of space. It was visible from the other planets with the naked eye.

The vortexes spun at incredible speed. Then, all of a sudden, they collapsed in on themselves like they could no longer sustain their existence. In a scene as strange as any in the last half a day, the cyclones of violet energy condensed to a single point of light. The buffeting tides of energy threatened to throw all three planets out of orbit. Rays of light struggling to fight their way out of that infinitesimally small space.

Zeus-1 and Majesty were far from the dangers of this turbulence. At light speed, even those deadly rays couldn't catch them. However, everyone's

eyes were glued to the monitors. They wanted to discover all they could about what it was they saw, to discover if the Violet Princess was indeed an alien. Not least of which, they needed to know what she was doing there.

Reconnaissance equipment was limited in how far it could transmit data. Although Majesty and Zeus-1 were comparatively small for their respective classes, their equipment was top of the line. They could maintain this speed for a full day and still see everything going on around Moonfiend.

When Lan Jue saw the whirlpools contract, his eyes went wide. He audibly gasped. In a few breaths all of that terrible power... stopped. It certainly was not normal cosmic turbulence.

What was left behind was something none of them would ever forget.

The three points of light seemed to gain in volume. They struggled and grew, reality around them warped erratically.

Then everything went dark. The probes were obliterated by the shockwaves.

On the bridge, you could hear a pin drop. It was like everyone's breath was caught in their throat. They'd seen it... they'd all seen it! In those moments before the probes were destroyed, they'd witnessed the scene with their own eyes.

The communication's controls flickered. The Accountant's voice broke the silence. "Jewelry Master, accept my feed," he said.

Mika connected the line.

The video that flickered onto their monitors showed the area around Moonfiend. He was still close enough to remotely access the main controls on Moonfiend Palace. With some finagling he could gain access all the way from Skyfire.

It was coming in handy now.

Lan Jue swallowed. "Did you see?" Lan Jue turned his head to look at the Pharmacist and the Gourmet.

They nodded, both their faces dark and solemn.

The Jewelry Master shut his eyes as though in pain. “Why... why does it have to be like this?”

The Pharmacist’s voice was curt and dispassionate. “We should consider ourselves lucky. We found out early. At least we can bring the information back and give them Alliances time to prepare.

The violet light became more distinct on their monitors. A yellow shell crackled over the planet – the planetary defenses engaging, under the Accountant’s command. The shields and railguns alike prepared for any encroaching threat.

The night sky was clear. All the asteroids had been blown away, leaving an obstructed view of the heavens. It made the three enormous shadows that much clearer.

Three gargantuan violet planets hovered in space, flickering with caustic light.

The three alien planets! These were the harbingers of humanity’s destruction they had been desperately preparing to meet. All of them had seen what happened to the North’s Seventh Fleet when they encountered these planets.

Planetary transfer!

This was one thing humanity was certain was impossible. But here they were, in human space, defying what everyone thought to be true. Alien invaders had flagrantly appeared in the heart of human occupied space.

This was the first news they got of the planets since the Seventh Fleet. Up this point they had disappeared without a trace. Some optimists suggested the aliens were never after them, and had moved on. The universe was large, there was space enough for everyone.

What they experienced proved this false.

Not only did the alien planets reappeared, they reappeared right in their backyard. They knew they could fly, now they knew they could transfer

through space. Lan Jue had heard of the ability before. The Wine Master had performed it, though he only transferred himself and the doctor. These aliens, meanwhile, had found a way to move three whole planets!

The leaders of the Star Division knew what that meant. Their enemy could show up anywhere, at any time. They could begin exterminating the human race tomorrow if they so pleased. They had seen what it did to the Seventh Fleet, and knew that each planet was about as strong as a Bastion Ship. This meant there were three hostile bastion ships that could be appear anywhere.

Human Bastion Ships could move, obviously. However, large as they were it took energy to get them moving even slowly. If their enemy could jump from one place to another, Bastions would never catch them.

The alien menace hadn't tipped its hand against humanity yet, but Lan Jue and the other Star Division warriors knew what was coming. Their hearts were filled with trepidation.

When the planets first appeared they seemed thin and transparent. Soon, however, they solidified. As real as the planets they were surrounding. The central planet – the largest of the three – shook softly, then began to approach Moonfiend.

It was at least five times larger than the pirates' playground, which was itself the largest planet in the Starfields before these foes arrived. It was comparable to the largest of the human planets, including Skyfire, Luo or Europa. 1

The column of violet light that burst from Moonfiend's surface gradually faded, and disappeared. The yellow shell that indicated the planet's shield was easily picked out.

The other two alien planets followed the first's lead and advanced as well. Their targets were the two other pirate home worlds.

Lan Jue and the others tapped into the planet's telescopes and watched the hungry planet approach.

"Are they going to collide with it?" Xiaosu wondered aloud. She clearly

still had affection for the planet she once led.

Crash? What kind of fighting style was this? It was inconceivable.

Everyone wracked their brain for answers. Every eye was glued to the monitors for any clue. As they looked on, the alien planet came within range of Moonfiend's railguns.

"Planetary defense systems, engage!" They heard the Accountant's voice call over the communications equipment. Flashes of light followed from the screens, as the railguns released their payload toward the encroaching threat.

Everyone was aware of how destructive a full-sized railgun could be. Even a Capital-class vessel with all its power wouldn't dare get within range of one of those guns, lest it was blown apart. Without question, Moonfiend had the most robust defense system in all of the Shattered Starfields. The Pontiff's Citadel spared no expense in protecting their assets.

Light from the monitors painted everyone's face in hard, stark light. The railgun blasts found their target.

But then...

When the blasts struck, the planet reacted by shimmering with violet light. When the light of the railgun blasts burned away, it revealed that no damage had been done. There wasn't even an explosion.

Lan Jue stared fixedly at the planet and its violet aura. He could feel it all the way from here, the sense of that strange aura. It was the same as the one he'd felt from the Violet Princess. The power made Lan Jue heave a breath.

It wasn't just defending. It was consuming the attacks. If the Division soldiers were shocked before, now they were petrified.

Chapter 589: Swallowing the Planet

As the Star Division leadership watched, the largest central alien planet split apart like a giant mouth. They'd witnessed these planets before after the Great Adept Tournament, when the North shared it' footage of their first encounter. At the time the video didn't have any frame of reference and they couldn't tell how gargantuan these planets actually were. Juxtaposed against the Shattered Starfields' primary planets, there was no more confusion. The planet descended like the maw of a hungry beast.

The planet had been moving slowing, but seemed to pick up speed. The surface of Moonfiend went dark as the alien planet blotted out the sun. Its atmosphere buzzed with yellow light as defense systems were dialed up to eleven, but as beams of light were siphoned from Moonfiend and disappeared into the depths of the alien planet, that darkness grew until it was absolute.

Worse than the darkness was what it heralded. It was simply an absence of light. Wherever the darkness touched, the earth was turned into a churned wasteland. Buildings collapsed as the crust of the planet heaved. Whole skyscrapers disappeared into impossibly deep fissures.

It took no time at all for the darkness and stillness to consume Moonfiend. Not a single light twinkled on its surface. Safely on the bridge of Zeus-1, the only sounds were the ship's crew manipulating controls. Aside from them, it was as though everyone's heart had stopped.

"It.... It ate it?" The Accountant's stunned voice broke the silence. It shook the others from their stunned disbelief.

Yes! Moonfiend had been eaten. That was the only way they could describe what they'd seen. But it wasn't a slab of meat they were talking about. Moonfiend wasn't a head of cabbage. It was a giant, fully formed planet that supported life! Regardless, it was swallowed up like an hors d'oeuvre.

The aliens were terrifying before this fact. This only solidified their reputation as the stuff of nightmares. Eating an entire planet? How were

they supposed to contest against that? They couldn't even begin to think of an answer.

They had been first hand witnesses to what these invading planetary bodies could do. Although they had no feed to witness the end of the other two planets, they could guess their fate. Three planets... three whole planets, gobbles up! The aliens had effectively taken the Shattered Starfields.

Lan Jue had been blessed with circumstances that rapidly improved his Discipline, culminating in joining with the Banishing Blade. He could clearly sense his proximity to the realm of Paragon. His Star Division had swept away their enemies with legendary efficiency. It filled him with pride.

However, all of that fled like a candle flame in a hurricane when they witnessed this scene. After what he'd seen, Lan Jue wasn't even sure his father could stop them!

"A-Jue, come here." Luo Xianni's voice sounded like it was right by his ear though she was in her room. Lan Jue regained his composure and hurried to where she was waiting.

When she returned from her fight with the Violet Princess, she'd immediately sunk into a meditative state. She had to recover the energy she'd expended. She was awake now, but her face was still sallow and tired.

Lan Jue rushed to her side. "Ma, are you alright?" He asked.

She shook her head. "I'm fine. That woman was very strong, but she seems unable to fully control her powers. I waited for an opportunity and locked her down before making my escape. I can tell you that the power I felt coming from her was no less potent than your father's. If he were here, he would be able to put her down."

No one knew Jue Di better than Luo Xianni. He'd been her hobby for years, she knew all about him.

Luo Xianni seemed to know Lan Jue's heart. She fixed him with an

earnest stare. “Do not despair. Given enough time humans are capable of overcoming anything the universe can throw at us. There is no other species with more intelligence or potential than us. I watched the creature carefully while we fought. I suspect she designed that body she wears. You’re right in that she’s definitely not human, you can feel the differences in her aura. Everything seems to point to alien, and one of their leaders if they can be said to have such roles. She devours life force to empower herself, that’s why she sees us as food.

“An Adept’s vitality is higher than an average human’s. Our kind must be particularly scrumptious to her. While I watched her, I wondered why she would choose a human body like hers. If she wanted to, she could have destroyed Moonfiend and no one would’ve been able to stop her. The form puts some constraints on what she can do, as well. It constricts her power, and it’s probably why she seemed so clueless all the time.

“According to evolution, every species develops and enhances the most beneficial traits. There’s no reason to believe the Violet Princess and those of her kind are any different. She didn’t adopt a disguise to immerse herself in human culture – that’s not what these aliens do. They’re invaders, and learning about what your food likes isn’t helpful. I think she must have chosen her body because it was advantageous. It was more than skin deep, too. Her body systems and organs – everything was the same as you or I. Similar, actually, to a Paragon, but not completely. What this proves is that we humans are admired by these beasts. There’s something about us that they want to emulate. Something that makes us better than them.”

Lan Jue was an intelligent man. He knew that Luo Xianni’s was earnest, but intended to keep him from losing faith. If her adopted child lost confidence, the outcome would be catastrophic.

“She’s right.” A light shimmered in the middle of Lan Jue’s forehead, projecting out into the room. The semi-transparent image of Jun Yongye appeared among them.

The Photographer was taken by surprise, she hadn’t expected a man to pop out of her son’s head. She recovered quickly, though. “A sword spirit?”

Jun Yongye turned his attention to Luo Xianni. His expression was crestfallen. "In ages long past, the demons of highest ability would take on human form. 1 They did so because their natural bodies couldn't survive the process of breaking through to new levels of power. The creature you fought can be considered a Greater Demon, is they styled them in the old days. They are not the same species as those monsters which roamed the old world, but their essence is the same. If we were to use the measures your ancestors created, I would determine that the Violet Princess strives for immortality. She has not reached the threshold, but she is close. She has likely chosen a human form for this purpose. When feeding on humans she must have sensed their potency.

"It is impossible for me to tell what her naturally body looks like. All I can say is it must have some benefit for her development. Her true power is likely much more awesome than what we witnessed. We know this simply because only the most powerful of these creatures take human form."

Upon hearing this, Lan Jue couldn't help but interject. "What do I have to do to defeat her?"

Jun Yongye was silent for a moment. "At her current strength, you would need to command at least five percent of Captus' potency to oppose her. If and when she comes to understand the nuances of her new body, you will need ten percent. This I so that you might stand a chance."

Lan Jue heaved a heavy sigh, because he recalled Jun Yongye's earlier words. When he broke through to Paragon, he would only be capable of handling one percent of what the Banishing Blade contained.

How strong, then, would he need to be to call on five percent? Ten percent?

"Except..." Jun Yongye suddenly added.

"Yes?" Lan Jue fixed him with a curious look.

"When you become a paragon, you shall be able to manipulate the sword. Your mastery of a sword style and your comprehension of the essence of the sword, will sharply enhance your combat prowess. You may

not need to draw so much on what the sword can offer, which changes our calculations. When you have learned the secrets of the focused flow 2 then your demands of the blade will reduce. If your lover awakens and you master the Harmonious Swords, then you both will have command of a tenth of your respective weapons. Together, you might be able to contend with her. If you ever witness the Harmonious Swords, you will understand.”

The Harmonious Swords?

Lan Jue’s eyes lit up when he heard it, but it was short lived. Directly afterward a depression set in his face. Zhou Qianlin was still in her coma, and he didn’t know when she would awaken much less learn the Harmonious Swords with him!

Jun Yongye looked at him with a steady gaze. “Do everything in your power to improve yourself. Take no shortcuts in your cultivation. The Greater Demon is strong, but she is not perfect. Her energies are muddled. She has found some way to separate herself from the dangers of it, but the dangers are still there. When you have absorbed all of the thunder essence, with its righteous lightning and immortal essence, you will be able to constrain the impure powers of the Violet Princess.”

The most urgent task ahead of Lan Jue was becoming a Paragon. Otherwise, the next time he met the Violet Princess he might not survive. However, even with as much potential as he had, becoming a Paragon was no easy feat. At any rate, he had to wait for Qianlin so that they could cross the threshold together.

Jun Yongye vanished in a flicker of red light. The spirit returned to its silent vigil within Lan Jue.

Chapter 590: Did You Birth Him?

Luo Xianni looked distracted, as though she were considering something. “The first thing we need to go is get the word out. Then, we need to find a way to get in touch with your father. He’s the only one who can face the Violet Princess. The scariest question now is, how many ‘princesses’ do they have? If there are enough of them they won’t need to rely on anything else. A handful of these Greater Demons and humanity will be wiped out.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Someone with Jue Di’s power could destroy a planet. His power was so terrifying that nearly all the leading Adepts of the time felt he needed to be killed. They were so convinced that they waged war against him.

What they saw from the alien today was on par with what Lan Jue’s father could do. One shuddered to imagine the damage she could inflict on humans when the battle began in earnest.

Third and Fourth Brigade were still in the dark. They had been ordered to retreat before the fight had really begun and were not aware of what had happened.

The Star Division had performed a miracle by defeating the strongest pirates in the Starfields without any losses. The Barber’s tragic death was as sudden as it was unexpected. Though he did not die at the hands of pirates, his was still a devastating loss for the Avenue.

The Barber had been one of Skyfire Avenue’s esteemed council members. He had been an influential voice, with the potential to reach as high as ninth level fourth rank. Youth was on his side, and already he’d been an influential voice among his peers. All of it had been senselessly taken away.

He never even got the chance to defend himself. How could he have known the monster beneath that pretty face?

The Beautician was attached to the Third Brigade. Her illusion Discipline allowed for very potent manipulation of the battlefield. Therefore, she was

with the Coffee Master on one of the battleships and still didn't know her partner was dead.

Lan Jue decided to keep it a secret. It would have to wait until they got back to the Avenue. Communication was difficult since the planets and their communication equipment were no more. The background noise of the Starfields and all its broken stellar bodies made the signal distorted. It meant they would have to bring the information back to the East, they couldn't transmit it from here. Luckily the alien planets did not give chase. Xiaosu navigated them into Eastern-controlled space as quickly as possible.

"Boss, I've got An Luo on the line." Xiaosu looked Lan Jue's way with a tired expression.

With the threat of alien attack looming over their head, Lan Jue hadn't rested for more than forty-eight hours. He had to be ready to react at any moment. As leader of the Star Division, whom the Clairvoyant placed great hopes on, one could imagine how much stress the Jewelry Master was under.

"Connect with Admiral Lan Qing," he said.

"Aye, calling him now."

Their screens were white, but eventually a figure appeared.

"A-Jue?" Lan Qing's surprised voice answered. The An Luo super soldier had given standing instructions to his communication officers to alert him immediately if the Avenue called. Still, getting word from Zeus-1 was a surprise.

"Brother." Just seeing Lan Qing's face on the screen made him feel better.

Lan Qing narrowed his eyes. Lan Jue almost never called him that in front of other people, especially since he was a military commander now. He could also see the fatigue in his sibling's face.

"What's happened?" He asked.

Lan Jue looked briefly at Xiaosu, then turned his eyes back to Lan Qing. “We managed to win a couple battleships, we were hoping to trouble you for some identification so they move around unmolested. I want to bring them back to Skyfire Avenue. In a moment you’ll be getting some images and data packets from Xiaosu. You have to get this to government leaders as fast as possible. Then, you need to prepare for invasion. Things have gotten bad.”

Lan Qing’s heart sank when he heard his brother’s report. He motioned for a subordinate to begin the download. “Where are you now?” He asked.

“We’re on our way back to Skyfire,” Lan Jue replied. “When I get back I need to get in touch with dad. We came across one of the leader aliens, we figure. She was incredibly strong, even mother couldn’t beat her.”

“Mother?” Lan Qing paused.

Luo Xianni suddenly appeared on another screen. “A-Qing, you ungrateful brat! Don’t pretend you don’t know who he means when he says mother!”

In an exceedingly rare display, embarrassment spread across Lan Qing’s face. “Now, don’t be angry. It’s just sudden, that’s all. I’m a little absent-minded. Oh, right – dad’s here.”

Prometheus was economical with his words, but that didn’t mean he was dim. He changed the subject as quickly as he could.

As Lan Qing hoped, this took Luo Xianni by surprise. Laugh wrinkles scrunched up around her eyes. “Oh, so suddenly Chi Bupang decided he wants to look after his kids, eh? He’s not so bad, that old coot. Let me talk to him.”

“He says he’s not here.” Lan Qing’s eyes darted off screen for a moment and he muttered something inaudible.

“You little shit, are you looking for an ass-kicking?!” Jue Di’s tyrannical voice shrieked through the speakers. Lan Qing flew out of frame.

“What do you want?” Jue Di’s curdled expression filled the monitor.

“Hey dad,” Lan Jue greeted ardently.

Jue Di just stared at him for a moment. He then fixed his hard eyes on Luo Xianni.

She, in turn, scowled. “Want? The hell would I want from you, you crotchety turd. Stop imagining yourself so sentimental. All I wanted was to see my son.”

Jue Di gaped at her. “When the hell did he become ‘your son’? Clearly you mean my son!”

Luo Xianni’s eyes narrowed to accusing slits. “Did you birth him?”

“Did you birth him?!” Jue Di indignantly shot back.

Luo Xianni flippantly replied. “Well, that was because you aren’t man enough.”

Jue Di looked like a choking fish. He fought with his words until they flatly eked out. “Not man enough?”

She sneered demeaningly at him. “If you were, how come you never got me pregnant?”

The Paragon was speechless. “I... How can... even at this age, know you no shame?”

Luo Xianni waved her hands as though swatting a fly. “‘At this age’ my ass, old man. Your whole family is old! Fine – fine. Let’s stop this nonsense. You are allowed to take them as children and for some reason you won’t allow me to. This is gangster logic. Why don’t you just focus on being a father, and I can focus on being a mother. How does this get in your way? When your son faced a damn demon, where were you? And you still have the nerve to say I’m not their family? Out of the two of us, who has no shame?”

“I...” This time, Jue Di really had nothing to say.

Lan Jue saw his opportunity to intervene. “Dad, mother’s been injured.”

Jue Di stopped, appearing skeptical. “Hurt? What in this universe can hurt her?”

“Horse-shit!” Luo Xianni spat. “Nothing’s hurt me more than you, don’t act like you give a shit.” She spun on her heel and left without giving anyone a chance to speak.

Jue Di stared at the screen for a moment, but recovered quickly. He suddenly looked like a man ready to handle business. “What in the hell is going on? Who hurt her?”

Lan Jue gave him the short version of their meeting with the Violet Princess. In truth, Lan Jue wasn’t sure if Luo Xianni was injured. However, it was clear that her condition wasn’t the best. Sometimes a little embellishment was unavoidable to keep those two on the same page.

Jue Di’s face gradually darkened as he listened. “Have you sent the video?”

Lan Jue nodded. “I sent them to Lan Qing.”

His father took a calming breath. His eyes narrowed. “Now it really looks like we’re in trouble. I’ll go take a look, then we’ll plan our next move. I’m off.” Like Xianni before him, he turned and trotted off before Lan Jue could get a word in.

Lan Qing’s face returned to the screen. He, too, looked dispirited. While his adoptive parents were bickering he looked over what Lan Jue had sent. It wasn’t an overstatement to say that the alien presence in the Starfields was catastrophic news for humanity.

Everyone’s eyes were turned outwards. Their guns and shields and ships were anticipating a foe from the depths of uncharted space. Suddenly that enemy was in their midst, and no one was prepared.

“Hurry back and we’ll figure out what to do about it. I need to report your findings.” Lan Jue’s brother gave him a nod, then added. “Take care of yourself.”

“Yeah,” Lan Jue nodded in return. The brothers looked at one another for a moment, each seeing their fear reflected in the other’s eyes.

Of course there would be fear. All of a sudden, the enemy was at their throat. To simply transfer, right into the heart of human territory...

unthinkable.

“Brother,” Lan Jue began, “if possible I think you should send some unmanned spacecraft to the Starfields to try and keep an eye on things and confirm our findings.”

“It’s serious, I’ll make sure it gets done,” Lan Qing affirmed.

His heart was heavy as Lan Jue hung up. If only he’d known what he had lead the Star Division into. Now humanity would have to reassess everything. War hadn’t descended upon them yet, but the strength of their foe was on full display.

Star Division’s two new battleships were quickly assigned An Luo identification hails. Passing through Eastern Alliance space, they would not be hassled. With them in hand, the four ships made for Skyfire as quickly as they could.

Their ships were laden with riches from their conquests. Most of the Division was well pleased with their haul. It had been months of grueling combat in hostile territory, but they’d gained more than just valuables – more than they’d expected.

For the moment, only a few people knew what fate had befallen Moonfiend. Lan Jue decided to keep it that way. Otherwise they risked a panic.

Chapter 591: The Beautician's Sorrow

The four ships docked on Skyfire's public airfield. The pirate battleships hardly fit in with the other ships, but there was nowhere else to put them. Skyfire Avenue had called ahead to confirm their arrival so as to avoid any problems. When they touched down, the Star Division turned the ship over to Avenue representatives. They didn't need them. Whatever treasures they pilfered from the pirates was divvied up among the Division and the Avenue.

The Division soldiers exited the ships in orderly lines. Each stuck with their Brigade and lined up to await further orders. After months in the trenches, they had developed an ironclad faith in their leaders, and it showed. Images of Commander Lan Jue destroying the alien carrier with one swipe had left a deep impression on them.

Lan Jue was surprised to find the Wine Master had come personally to meet them at the airfield.

"Why'd you come yourself?" Lan Jue asked when they got close.

The Wine Master's face was ominously downcast. "It couldn't be helped. The Eastern parliament has demanded you meet with them immediately. I will go with you. The information you sent back has caused a firestorm through all of the Alliances. Are you sure what you saw?"

Lan Jue smirked dryly. "If only I wasn't. Let me dismiss the troops and send them back then we'll deal with it. We still have to go through what we brought back. I intend to arm my people to the teeth."

The Wine Master gave a slight nod. "You don't need to worry about that, I can arrange it. You just need to make sure you can verify these claims. It's a service to your alliance. Although we didn't independently confirm it, the East has already sent a Bastion ship to the border of the Starfields in preparation."

Lan Jue heaved a sigh. "It's no use. If the planets can transfer at will, they could show up anywhere in the three Alliances. They'll be standing vigil over a pointless border."

The Wine Master reacted with a resigned grin. “I know, but right now we have no other choice. At the very least the people will feel better knowing a Bastion is keeping watch. If we had Bastions orbiting inside our galaxies, what would people think?”

Lan Jue’s brows furrowed as he thought. The sudden appearance of the aliens was a real problem.

“Hold on for a minute. Let me dismiss the men, then we can go.”

Star Division wasn’t a true military unit. After such a long period of hard work, they’d earned some good R&R.

Lan Jue walked to the head of the four Brigades, who were standing at attention nearby. “Everyone has worked hard these last few months. We have earned glory, and you have earned a well-deserved rest. Your exploits will be recorded, and your cut will be delivered as soon as possible. You’ve got a week, then we strap our uniforms back on and get back to work. Dismissed.”

A week off. They were ecstatic, but military training kept them in orderly rows. They exited the airfield by brigade, just as they’d exited the ships.

Then someone caught Lan Jue’s eye.

The Beautician, pretty as a picture, stood in place looking all around. She was beginning to look frustrated in not finding her target, and so she trotted over to Lan Jue.

“Jewelry Master, where’s the Barber?”

Lan Jue was silent. The Driver, who stood at the commander’s side, also couldn’t find the words. The Barber had been in Lan Jue’s Brigade, not to mention a friend.

She had been smiling, but when she saw their expressions the smile melted away. “Where is Little Clippers?” She asked again.

Lan Jue took a breath. He tried, but found no words could come out. The Driver came to his rescue. “The Barber, he... sacrificed himself.”

The Beautician looked back at him, stunned, as the color drained from

her pretty face. “No... no that’s impossible. Wasn’t he with you? Things were going so smoothly, and he was strong. What could have happened? How could he have died? You’re just playing with me, right? It’s not funny, have him come out this instant or I swear I’ll never speak with him again!”

Lan Jue’s eyes dropped to the ground, and the Driver had no more words for her. The Wine Master approached the small group, then. He’d learned of the Barber’s fate from Lan Jue earlier.

“We’re so sorry, Beautician. Unfortunately, the Barber –“

“No!” She screamed back at him. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks. “No, no, no, it’s not possible! He was so strong, how could a pirate kill him? It can’t be true, you’re lying! You’re all liars. Little Clippers, you bastard, get out here right now! Is this because I rejected your proposal? Is this how you treat me? Do you think this will make me change my mind? Stop dreaming! Get out here and I’ll tell you to your face! Do you hear me?!”

The other soldiers heard her choked cries and stopped to look back. They came back to see what was going on. None of them knew what had befallen the Barber, either.

Lan Jue placed a hand on the Beautician’s shoulder. “Please, get ahold of yourself.”

She slapped his hand away. “‘Get ahold of myself’?! Why? You assholes are just lying to me, right? I won’t forgive you, I’ll never forgive you! I won’t believe for a second that pirates killed him. Little Clippers, get out here! I’m telling you, mister sinister, if you don’t come out immediately you can forget about ever talking to me again!”

Su Xiaosu had been a few steps behind Lan Jue the whole time. The rims of her eyes were red.

“Commander, what’s going on?” One of the squad leaders couldn’t keep his curiosity silent any longer. Many of the other squads had also huddled close to see what was wrong. Even those that were first to leave wandered back when they saw the crowd.

Lan Jue allowed himself another sigh, then turned toward Xiaosu. “We’re back, it’s time to tell them.” He’d wanted to keep it quiet for a while and give his soldiers a chance to feel joy over their accomplishments. He couldn’t keep it a secret anymore.

“Jewelry Master,” the Wine Master interrupted, “this is a government secret.”

Lan Jue looked back at the Paragon with a resolute stare. “My brothers and sisters have a right to know. How can I explain, if I don’t tell them everything? First Brigade, cordon off the area. Accountant, send the video to everyone’s communicator. Have it auto-delete after five minutes.”

“Aye,” the Accountant quietly replied.

It took no time for the area to be cleared. When it was everyone’s face dropped to watch their communicators. Projector screens lit up the soldiers’ faces. Gradually everyone’s eyes were wide, and their breathing was haggard.

When the order to retreat had been given, they wondered at the fervor of it. Now they understood why they’d been so desperate to flee. The Bartender and Coffee Master were no exception. Cold sweat broke out on every brow.

What was this new danger? If they had been even a moment slower, the wild space of the Starfields would have become their tomb.

The Wine Master made no further effort to get in Lan Jue’s way. He stood quietly to one side and waited.

The Beautician suddenly swayed dangerously. Su Xiaosu was immediately at her side, with a hand on her arm to keep her steady. Her painted red lips quivered, and an indescribable pain dimmed her eyes.

“Why? Why did this have to happen? Why did you rush in like that? Why? Do you know why I said no? Our age difference. I’m so much older than you! Your future was brighter than mine, I didn’t want to hold you back. But how could you do this, and leave me this way?”

Her desperate, wounded voice was like a stab to everyone’s heart. Tears

glittered in the eyes of everyone within earshot. The Barber had been Star Division's first casualty, but his loss scarred them deeply.

Aliens. The word was bitter and poisonous in their hearts.

They'd fought the aliens on Tempest. Though they were strong, Star Division had still walked away without a scratch. Afterwards most of the soldiers looked at them as little more than wild animals with a nasty bite.

The Barber's death showed them how wrong they were. He was almost fourth rank, and still he was put down in one strike. Meanwhile, a whole planet was devoured. Who could have anticipated enemies this strong? This vicious?

"We have to get vengeance for the Barber!" Lan Jue couldn't tell who said it first, but the rest of the Division very quickly took up the call. Calls for revenge shook the airship hangar they were huddled in.

Lan Jue stood in front of the Beautician. "Don't cry. Crying won't bring him back. We have to turn our grief into strength. We have to give everything we've got to honor the Barber's memory!"

The Beautician slowly lifted her head. Tears covered her face. But where her eyes had been lost and pained, he watched as murderous resolve took over. The Barber's death had been a surprise punch to the gut, and the beautiful alien hadn't shown any resignation in taking his life.

Chapter 592: Parliament

“Aliens!” The Beautician hissed the word through clenched teeth. She spun around and ran from the airfield.

“I’ll go keep an eye on her,” the seamstress said to the Gourmet. She hurried after the Beautician. What the bereaved woman needed most right now was comfort.

Lan Jue swept his eyes over the gathered soldiers. “The Barber’s was the first life given to Star Division. I hope he’s the last. Go rest.”

“Commander, I don’t need to rest. I’m ready to continue training.” An Adept stepped out from the crowd, followed by a second, then a third. They didn’t say anything, but the resolution in their eyes said enough.

The Barber’s death was painful motivation. These men and women were as smart as they were strong. They recognized that war with the aliens was inevitable. They saw the planets transfer, and knew it meant they had total control of the board. They could devour any planet, any time they wanted. If this was their enemy and a clash was fated, then they had to make themselves the strongest they could be. IT was the only way to survive.

There were no tricks or shortcuts. The only thing you could truly rely on was your own strength.

Lan Jue saw the fervor in their gaze. He nodded. “Very well, you have two days to get things in order, then reassemble for training! Dismissed!”

Star Division dispersed, although the easy atmosphere had disappeared. The air felt ominous. The Accountant reminded everyone through their communicators to keep their mission a secret.

Lan Jue, the Gourmet, and Su Xiaosu followed the Wine Master toward the parliament building. Remaining members of the Division were free to return home.

The Eastern Parliament held their meetings in the center of Skyfire City. The building was in an old Chinese style, adherent to the old ways of feng-shui. It was very pleasing to the eye. By the time they arrived, a soldier

with a Lieutenant's insignia on his shoulder was already there to greet them. He gave the Wine Master a salute and led them inside.

The enormous rotunda where the Eastern government convened was a sea of people. In its center was a circular table around which sat leaders of government, headed by the speaker. Lan Jue and the others followed the Wine Master as he descended the steps into the rotunda and toward the middle. He stopped and sat in the first row, and they followed.

As Lan Jue took his seat, he spotted a familiar face nearby. It was the Chairman of the Eastern Alliance, Zhou Xue Guan. He spotted Lan Jue as well, and after a moment's pause nodded in acknowledgement.

Lan Jue returned the regards. In reality, he wasn't sure what his obligations were to the man. For all appearances he seemed to be the father of Hera and Zhou Qianlin, yet he knew the Clairvoyant had arranged that.

As the Skyfire Avenue delegation arrived, a hush fell over the chambers. Boisterous conversation became curious whispers. All eyes followed them to their seats.

Star Division's commander remained calm and dignified, like a placid lake surface. Underneath, however, his mind swirled with images of the heartbroken Beautician. She looked like he did after Hera died. Hadn't he been just as devastated? You never appreciate what you have until it's too late, and some things are lost forever.

His pain through those years, and hers in this moment. Where they not the same? How wonderful it would be if there were some cure for regret.

"Order!" A booming voice rang through the hall, followed by the sharp rap of a gavel. Silence quickly descended upon the congregation.

Lan Jue lifted his head to look.

The speaker of parliament was an elderly man with a head of grey hair. He looked to be in his seventies or eighties but his eyes were bright, and he looked well-kept with his slicked-back hair. A black Chinese-style tunic suite gave him a majestic and dignified air.

All eyes fell upon the speaker. His deep voice continued. “Two days ago, we received very startling news. It was decided immediately to convene this hearing. Due to the gravity of these findings, we’ve invited several leaders from Skyfire Avenue who participated in retrieving this data. It is our hope that they can tell us, in detail, what transpired within the Shattered Starfields. We have dispatched probes to discover more, and can expect updated intelligence in the next three days. In the meantime, we would very much like to invite the Skyfire Avenue representatives to share their findings now.”

As he concluded, the speaker pressed a button. Lights flickered overhead as a holographic image of Moonfiend shimmered to life. It appeared as it had before the attack.

Lan Jue looked at the Wine Master a moment. The Paragon answered his unspoken question with a nod. Skyfire Avenue’s Jewelry Master then rose and nodded his acknowledgment of the speaker, who in turn motioned for him to approach the round table.

It was Lan Jue’s first time being in middle of such lofty government proceedings, but he wasn’t nervous. As former Mercenary King, he was accustomed to matters of life and death. Legislation was in the realm of normal men. It gave him no pause.

“Hello, Mr. Speaker.” Lan Jue politely offered the man a greeting more suited to his station.

The speaker seemed a congenial man. “Hello,” he returned, “how should I address you?” You couldn’t determine the status of an Adept by their age. As Lan Jue was here representing Skyfire Avenue, he must be strong. As far as these ungifted humans were concerned, he could be some reincarnation.

“I am the Jewelry Master of Skyfrie Avenue,” he announced. “I am also the one responsible for the Star Division. We were in the Shattered Starfields during the incident.”

The speaker passed the remote for the hologram to Lan Jue. “If you would please tell us what you found?”

Lan Jue nodded and took the controller. He then turned to face the gathered assembly.

“Ladies and gentlemen of government, hello. I am Skyfire Avenue’s Jewelry Master. This is how you may all address me. Our ships have just landed at the public air hangar. I came as soon as we got the summons.”

He continued, pointing to the planet suspended over his head. “I imagine you’ve all had a chance to see the video we sent. Yes, we are the ones who witnessed this and brought it back, and if I had to describe the encounter I would say we were lucky. Before I saw it with my own eyes, I’m not sure I would have believed that entire planets could teleport. It goes against everything we know about physics and the energy requirements for moving something of their size. It’s no exaggeration to say it’s ludicrous. So believe me, I can understand that this may be a hurdle to overcome in gaining your confidence.

“However, I must assure you ladies and gentlemen, that everything in those videos is true. We paid for them with the blood of one of our own councilors. I must say before anything else, that these beasts are far more deadly than any of us thought.

“On the ride back I wracked my mind, trying to puzzle out how they could move entire planets. Having the capable to move even one is frightening enough, they could appear at will at any moment, in the heart of our most populated areas. If they can destroy Moonfiend, then no planet in the Alliances is safe.

“Skyfire Avenue’s late Clairvoyant was better known as the Eye of Tomorrow, one of the names on your Paragon List. He told me humanity would face a danger unlike any we’d encountered before. I always trusted what he said, but I couldn’t help but be skeptical. The achievements humans have made with our technology and tenacity are incredible. We have the ability to destroy a planet if it came down to it. It is our destiny to dominate the universe. I know there are many of you in the audience who share a similar idea.

“But seeing those planets appear out of nothing, that changed my

thinking. The Clairvoyant was right. If the aliens attacked tomorrow we couldn't defend ourselves with twice the number of Bastion ships."

Lan Jue pressed a button on the remote control, and the hologram changed.

The scenery changed to the streets of Moonfiend. It was their fight with the Violet Princess.

"What appears to be a beautiful young woman is the one called the Violet Princess, self-styled. We assumed she was human and had no evidence to the contrary. This was why one of our councilors known as the Barber approached her to offer aid. The planet was currently in chaos as we were training our soldiers by eliminating pirate clans. Such being the state of things, we worried for her safety. But..."

He trailed off when the video reached the final moments of the Barber's life. Everyone watched as the Violet Princess turned him into a cloud of blood.

"Presumably you've all seen this. The Barber made no hostile movements, the woman just struck him down. Judging by how easily he was defeating you might assume he was weak, but if you look into his records you will see that he was one of the representatives for Skyfire Avenue at the Great Adept Tournament. He was a ninth level, third rank Talent – a powerful man.

The chambers were a sea of hushed whispers once more. Few of the politicians were Adepts themselves, but they knew what an Adept that strong was capable of. Once Lan Jue mentioned the tournament, the audience also slowly began to recognize him. He had represented himself in the tournament as Zeus, but he'd won glory for the whole Eastern Alliance by being crowned champion.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," the Speaker said, "but are you the Monarch, Zeus?"

Chapter 593: Lan Jue's Suggestion

"I'm sorry to interrupt," the Speaker said, "but are you the Monarch, Zeus?"

Lan Jue answered with a nod of his head.

Chatter immediately rippled through the chamber with his confirmation. Zeus was recognized as a hero for the East, for humanity! It added tremendous weight to his words, and underscored his own strength.

The Wine Master had considered this and thus insisted on him participating. The Jewelry Master's exploits on behalf of the Avenue earned him glory and prestige. He was a fine example for the youth of Eastern Alliance. On the other hand it had been months since achieving victory in the tournament, where everyone saw his face. Some of the zeal around the revelation had dulled.

As he stood there now, Lan Jue reawakened the memory of his accomplishments in the minds of the representatives. Some of them remained skeptical despite the data and recordings. But when they saw the resolution in Zeus' eyes, it was enough to convince them.

Lan Jue took a breath. "I regret that I lacked the ability to protect my companion. His girlfriend was devastated when she heard the news. Please continue to watch."

The recording continued. It cut to scenes of himself, the Gourmet, the Driver, and the Pharmacist in combat. Each of them separately and all of them together couldn't best the Violet Princess.

"You can see me here. I can categorically assure you that I am stronger now than I was during the tournament. Allow me to introduce the others. The Driver you likely remember from the tournament, as well as the Pharmacist. This gentlemen coming from above is one of Skyfire Avenue's new Paragons. He is the Infernal Vanguard, known to us as the Gourmet. He has come with us today. I am confident that if you'd thrown the Terminator in there with us, we'd still have to retreat. We only narrowly escaped death."

Judging only by the video, most of the non-Adepts in the audience weren't completely sure what they were looking at. It was hard to compare when they had no frame of reference. However, Lan Jue's explanations captured the scope of the Violet Princess' overwhelming power.

The video stopped.

"You might find it strange that we fled when we did. In truth there's more to it than what's on the video. I would like to formally apply for recognition of confidentiality, since this involves Avenue secrets. At this time, all I can tell you is that a friend from the Avenue pulled us out of the fire. They managed to seal the Violet Princess long enough for us to escape, but not without sustaining injuries. We fled Moonfiend as fast as we could."

"I can attest to all of this," the speaker added.

The projection changed again. This time it was four separate feeds. Some were from the ships and their probes, and others were images from the surface of Moonfiend.

Lan Jue waited until the whole feed finished before talking. "Everything you witnessed is real. We'd hijacked the pirate defense systems during the raid to monitor the planets as they appeared. We've added the incident from our perspective as well as our probes in addition to the surface recordings. They tell the same – true – story. What we cannot know is whether the planets will remain in the Shattered Starfields, or when or where they might show up next. It's the one piece of information we desperately need."

The chamber was dead silent. Many of the representatives already believed, and those they claimed not to, knew it deep in their hearts the moment they saw the recordings. They didn't want to accept it. 'Disaster' couldn't begin to describe what they were witnessing.

Lan Jue chuckled wryly. "In fact, I hope they don't stay out there. The Starfields themselves are their greatest defense. With all the debris we can't reliably bring any of our larger ships to bear. This goes double for Bastion ships. If we station those Bastions around the Starfields, there's

nothing to stop the aliens from transferring right into the center of an Alliance system. You all can imagine the scale of destruction they could cause.

“I have spent the last few days in careful thought. One thing I can confirm for you all, is that the aliens absolutely have a structure of leadership. They are led by intelligent entities who likely determined the Shattered Starfields was their best point of ingress into human space. I have encountered these beasts before on Taihua. Their singular interest is gathering energy. Any living thing fuels them. To phrase it as the Violet Princess had, we are food. Their growth, development, and evolution all depend on outside sources of energy. This gives us a reason to believe, then, that although we don’t know the full scope of the alien’s strength, we at least can figure that they’ll need time between planetary transfers. The sheer amount of energy it requires is prohibitive.

“Hundreds of years ago, humanity discovered the law of conservation of energy. This law applies as much to us as it does to them. It stands to reason that they’ll need to gather energy before they make another transfer. Taking energy to move also limits the energy they would need for personal development. If this were not the case, and the aliens could transfer at will, then I fail to understand why we haven’t all been killed yet.”

Several of the representatives seated around the round table – including the speaker – were nodding in silent agreement.

Lan Jue went on. “There’s more. We can ascertain from their fighting style, patterns and the transference that they are organic. We don’t know about their history, whether they used to have the underhand if they’ve always been the strongest. Whatever the case, the fact that they consume energy for their own benefit is indisputable. Their appearance in the Shattered Starfields also gives us clues as to their motives. It prevents us from mounting an effective campaign against them. Starting with the three primary planets, it can move through the Starfields gobbling up whatever has signs of life and storing energy. Once they’re finished, that’s when they’ll turn on us. After all, there are no more verdant planets than

the ones in Alliance territory.”

Lan Jue’s explanation was a good one. His conclusions were reasonable and concise, and seemed to fit with what they knew of the aliens up to this point.

The speaker couldn’t help but press him. “What are your suggestions, Jewelry Master?”

Lan Jue’s low voice answered. “I have only suggestions with my limited understanding for your consideration. These aliens are interested in all life, not just humans. Plants, animals, anything that produces energy. Places like Taihua are precisely what they love. Now, if we want to protect everybody everywhere, it would be impossible. If you want to minimize casualties, then I suggest evacuating everyone to planets closer together. This will help our military protect as many as possible. We keep an eye on the other planets, and when the aliens arrive we hit them hard with a prepared military response. Since transference takes time, they’ll be sitting ducks. The planets we leave behind have the energy they need, but they’ll need to risk fighting Bastion ships for them. We reduce our losses and punish them at the same time.”

As he listened to the commander, his face changed. He neither nodded nor shook his head. The Wine Master at Lan Jue’s side shot him a glance. “Watch your words, Jewelry Master,” he whispered.

Lan Jue smiled disarmingly. “This is a hypothesis, and I’m by no means advocating direct action. Everything needs to be carefully considered. This is all I have to say, thank you Mr. Speaker for giving me this opportunity to address the assembly.”

He excused himself from the podium, and returned to his seat beside the Wine Master.

Lan Jue was certain that his plan was the most effective way to face the alien menace. But abandoning whole planets? How many people would need to be moved? How many people would this affect? It would doubtlessly involve leaders from government and business.

Despite how impractical it seemed, Lan Jue still felt as though it needed

to be said. If he didn't, it would have stuck in his throat like a fishbone. The speaker and the other representatives would make the ultimate decision. That was outside of Lan Jue's hands. His responsibility was to share his thoughts.

The remainder of the meeting didn't involve them. The speaker moved to vote on the veracity of the recordings. More than eighty percent agreed. As for Lan Jue's plan of action, they did not vote to adopt it immediately.

Once the meeting was complete, the Wine Master gathered them around. Before the politicians had an opportunity to ask them anything further, a silver light swallowed them up and they were gone.

When the world reappeared around the Skyfire Delegation, they were in the old Gothic Winery.

"Don't blame the speaker, Master. He's got it hard as well," the Wine Master said with a sigh.

Lan Jue quietly nodded his head. "I understand. Pull one's hair and the head will follow. But I needed to get it off of my chest. I am not a politician, and we aren't beholden to their determinations. I just had to share the best option, otherwise I couldn't have lived with myself.

Chapter 594: The Return of Zhou Qianlin

The Driver gave a bitter laugh. “Those politicians will never compromise. I guarantee they’re thinking just because the aliens have shown up in the Starfields, they may not show up in the East. They’re probably hoping they’ll show up in one of the other two Alliances and make it their problem. Why should we put our necks on the line if we aren’t really in danger? How much would it cost? I can almost hear it from here. I’m telling you, those are going to be their excuses. They won’t pay any attention to your proposal.”

The Gourmet nodded in agreement. “It’s the way of the world. Similar conversations are being had in the West and North, as well. Even if they all know it’s the right call, they won’t be the ones to make it.”

Lan Jue answered. “We just have to continue to do everything we can. At the very least, Skyfire and An Lun appear to be safe. Most soldiers will be stationed on these planets. It’s more important than ever that we make Star Division a powerful fighting force. You saw everything that happened, even railguns counted for nothing against those planets. While fighting her, I did notice that her species seem to be antithetical to Adepts. Put another way, our abilities seem particularly suited to harming them.”

“And yet to them we’re practically ants,” the Driver said with a fatalistic chuckle. “I

t looked like she could swallow up our whole division with that giant mouth of hers.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate your capabilities,” the Gourmet assured. “We simply need to improve ourselves. I, for one, intent to shut myself away in meditation for a while.”

The Wine Master nodded. “We live in troubled times. Star Division has ever mounting pressure to grow, but I believe they’ll rise to the occasion when they know what’s on the line. Now you all must be tired. Go back and rest, if you have anything to discuss it can wait until tomorrow. I’ll keep an eye on parliament and let you know if there’s any news.”

“Alright,” Lan Jue replied with a nod. He returned to his store with a heavy heart.

The Wine Master watched him go with an expression of gratitude. He muttered to himself, “Clairvoyant, I can’t deny you’re good judge of character. You chose well, he’s already set upon his path. Maybe you played with destiny, or maybe it was always supposed to be this way, but with him around I have hope.”

Zeus’ Jewelry Shop almost appeared deserted. When Lan Jue arrived, his four Amazons were busy tidying things up. Dust had managed to creep in during their extended absence.

That was inaccurate. There were now five Amazons. Su Xiaosu was there as well. For Star Division business, she kept the wheels turning as general commander of the force, but here she was the fifth Amazon. When she got to work she looked just like the other women.

“Boss!”

When he got back the ladies straightened up and greeted him with a smile.

He managed a smile after a moment. “You all have worked so hard lately, take a break. We’ll deal with the cleaning later.”

Mika chuckled. “No problem, this is our home. You can’t rest well in a dirty home. Isn’t that right, Xiaosu.”

“Yeah,” she replied with a nod.

Lan Jue was pleased to see them all getting along. Their experiences in the Starfields had brought Su Xiaosu into the fold. The former Moonfiend Empress had shown herself to be more than skilled in the midst of battle, but she seemed just as comfortable here in the store. Lan Jue was the same, Zeus’ Jewelry Shop was safe harbor. Just coming back helped settle some of the turmoil in his heart, but it also brought to the fore how bone tired he was.

Suddenly, for no immediately apparent reason, Lan Jue felt a pulse of energy. As he watched, stunned, his body emitted an unfamiliar blue aura.

The Amazons gaped at him and shied from the sharp waves of power radiating from him.

Lan Jue paused, then his face lit up with joy. He turned away from the women and raced toward his apartments in the back. "Don't let anyone disturb me!" He said before disappearing into his room.

Zeus' five Amazons looked at one another, confused. They had no idea what was going on.

"Is boss about to break through again? I've sensed him getting more and more powerful. We have to work hard, too." Ke'er pumped her tiny fists.

Lin Guoguo nodded firmly. "I need to meditate myself. IF we aren't strong, we won't be able to protect the boss. Ke'er, you haven't broken through to ninth level yet? Keep it up!"

"Soon, soon," she assured, "should be any day. Ah, I'm the last one."

Xiuxiu had also recently broken through, leaving the Baleful Tempest alone at the peak of eighth level. However, strictly in terms of Discipline the Morning Star beat them all. After her was Mika, and with her bloodline and battle experience, she wasn't any less of a nightmare on the battlefield than Xiaosu.

Lin Guoguo, Xiuxiu, and Ke'er finished out the list.

Ke'er hadn't reached ninth level yet, but her destructive capabilities were still overwhelming. She could release a punishing barrage in an instant. Once she broke through, her powers would make a dramatic leap in strength.

Lan Jue burst into his apartments and slipped into a meditative posture. He focused on the flows of energy pulsing in his body. There was a pale white light, when suddenly a figure appeared. Zhou Qianlin.

When he felt that ubiquitous aura of sharpness, he knew that Qianlin and Demortus had joined completely. Impatiently to see the results, he'd rushed back.

He hadn't seen Qianlin in two months, and he missed her dearly. He

tenderly covered her naked figure with a blanket before seeing if there was any change in her situation. She stood across from him, her big eyes staring blankly just as before. However, he could sense a change in her aura. A pale, almost translucent blue light hung over her skin and flickered. Her previously gentle waves of energy had become more robust.

“Is the joining successful?” Lan Jue couldn’t help but wonder aloud.

A pair of blue lights glinted in Qianlin’s eyes. A moment later, Xuanyuan Shishi’s voice filled his ears. “It is complete. She was as accepting and resilient as a rough diamond. There was no resistance in accepting my power. You had to use the thunder essence to assist you in accepting Yongye, but no such help was needed for her. There is no one better suited to join with me. You must protect her. I have already seared my knowledge of the Ten Thousand Swords as One 1, but she will need your guidance. I have no power over her body, but I can tell you that she does appear to have recovered somewhat.”

“Thank you.” Lan Jue looked dejected. He’d hoped that joining with Demortus would return Qianlin to consciousness. Now it appeared that was just wishful thinking.

“Qianlin.” Lan Jue softly called.

The blue light faded away from them, revealing big clear eyes. No hint of emotion came from them, though her pupils contracted slightly at the mention of her name.

Lan Jue sat beside her, and leaned her against his chest so he could take her into his arms. He didn’t want to ever let go. In these last few months if he wasn’t fighting, he was cultivating. But no matter how he kept himself busy, the pang of missing Qianlin never went away.

To see her again after so long, Lan Jue was filled with delight. But where there was joy, there was also sadness. All he could do was hold her this way, and listen quietly to her heartbeat. It was enough for now.

“You know Qianlin, I miss you. You need to wake up, I don’t care about what’s happened before. I will always love Hera – she taught me what love is. I love you the same. I’ll admit at first I took you as a replacement. Her

shadow. But I learned how wrong that was. I love you. Please wake up. Let's avenge Hera together, and hunt down the people that hurt her. It's too much for me alone. I need you beside me."

He laid them both down on the bed. He didn't dare kiss her for fear that she would disappear and he wouldn't get to see her anymore. They laid like that, separated by a blanket, with his head resting against hers. He closed his eyes. At last a sense of quiet came over his troubled soul, and he knew that she would come to him when he needed her the most.

His fingers gently ran through her hair. His eyes dimmed. Months in combat had drained Lan Jue to the point of exhaustion. At some point, despite his vigilance, Lan Jue fell asleep. Qianlin's eyes twitched, and then shut as well. The room was plunged into silence.

When Lan Jue awoke, his first sensation was the warmth against his chest. Warm, soft, and with a faint fragrance. It was then he noticed his body's natural response to the comfortable sensations.

When he looked down to get a grasp on the situation, his eyes were met with a waterfall of black hair. Somehow, he'd gotten wrapped in the blanket with Qianlin. Their bodies were pressed close together.

Lan Jue shuffled to try and extricate himself, but in his excited state maneuvering was difficult. He briefly pressed against her, but that was enough. The warm body dissolved into light and merged into his chest.

"Goddamn do I hate Bize!" Lan Jue whined. It'd been difficult just to get the chance to see her, but even the specter of affection was forbidden. What could be more tortuous than this?

Lan Jue lay atop the best, feeling his body surge to the peak of ninth rank. He didn't find it pleasing, this time. He still didn't know how strong their Disciplines were separately.

Chapter 595: Ninth Level, Seventh Rank

Body's mind and body were flooded Lan Jue hormones. Separating once again would be very difficult. He fumbled off the bed and into the bathroom where he got into a cold shower. The chilly water soothed the fires in his heart. Once he'd sufficiently calmed, he brought Qianlin back out and placed her atop the bed. He covered her in a sheet.

As Lan Jue came to accept Qianlin in his heart, he found her more and more difficult to resist. Just looking into her eyes stirred urges within him. The Monarch took several breaths and a few gulps of ice water to keep himself calm. He then shut his eyes, and focused his attention inward.

Ninth level, seventh rank?

Lan Jue was surprised to discover that his Discipline had once again increased. It was a significant leap, too. He was back to where he'd been before being bound to Qianlin. In fact he was stronger than ever. Re-cultivating purified his Discipline and strengthened his base.

Qianlin's Discipline became Lan Jue's next focus. Ninth level sixth rank! Lan Jue's eyes popped open and he stared at his lover with shock. Was she really so strong as that, now? Her improvement was almost frightening. Obviously, joining with the Banishing Blades had been a real leap in power for both of them.

Lan Jue felt something stir within him. There was a flicker of red light that hung around him like a blanket – Captus. However, there were pulses of energy coming from the sword. It was like a projection, like it wasn't really there.

With Captus' appearance there was a spark of blue in Zhou Qianlin's eyes. Demortus' image appeared in the air between them.

"Lan Jue, the two of you must begin to train your swordsmanship. Only once you've mastered the Harmonious Sword will you be strong enough to face your enemies. If you do not, then we fear that the next time you face a creature like the Violet Princess it will be our undoing." Jun Yongye's even voice floated through the air.

Lan Jue's brows furrowed. "How can we learn the Harmonious Sword when Lan Jue is in this state? Besides, the two of you are so strong. Finding a suitable place to practice is a problem."

Xuanyuan Shishi's voice came from the direction of Qianlin. "This is not difficult. Qianlin has lost her consciousness and memory, but her body still functions just fine. I can transfer my knowledge of the style to her. It will come down to you to guide her in using the Harmonious Swords. As for a place to train, we also have a solution. You can practice in our realm."

A moment after he spoke, there was a flash of blue and red. Reality shuffled around before his eyes, and a moment later Lan Jue found himself in another place entirely.

He was in a strange, misty dreamscape. It was almost like a mountain peak, piercing into the heavens. The ground was level, looking out over a sea of clouds. Zhou Qianlin was standing across from him.

"This is..." Lan Jue trailed off, looking all around.

The red and blue flashes of light returned. Lan Jue felt his arm grow heavy, and when he looked down Captus was resting in his grip. He looked across and saw that Demortus had also appeared and Qianlin held it fast. She flourished the blade in her right hand, while two fingers from her left jabbed forehead. She looked at Lan Jue.

"Be careful." Xuanyuan Shishi's voice cautioned.

Qianlin stepped forward, touching the ground with the tip of her toes before lifting weightlessly into the air. Demortus erupted, descending upon Lan Jue as ten thousand copies of itself. This extended to Qianlin as well, countless images of her filled the skies. Each one was saturated with the living intention of the Banishing Blade. He didn't know where she stopped and the weapon began, much less which one of those images was the real Qianlin.

Lan Jue looked up in awe. Then, sweeping Captus through the air toward the encroaching hail of weapons, a bloom of red light issued from the blade. It surged like a tidal wave, and the two opposing forces were poised

to collide.

Roaring waves of energy were expelled when the power of the two swords met. A great many of Demortus' copies were blasted away, however there were many more still intent on skewering Lan Jue.

"Xuanyuan, what are you doing?" Lan Jue angrily asked. An aura of golden light sprang up around him to deflect Qianlin's attack. Demortus' terrible sharpness tore his protective shell to shreds. He weaved and dodged, swiping fervently with Captus. He managed with some considerable effort to evade injury.

Xuanyuan Shishi's voice was thick with nefarious intent. "Practicing, of course! Be careful, you don't want to hurt Qianlin!"

In reality it was Lan Jue he had to be wary, it didn't seem as though Qianlin was holding anything back. Not only had her last attack covered all means of escape, each blade was a deadly dervish in and of itself.

Jun Yongye had imparted the secrets of focused flow to him, but Lan Jue hadn't had much experience using it in combat. Besides, he was facing Zhou Qianlin! The fact made it difficult to concentrate on form.

Lan Jue continued to swipe and cut. Fissures of collapsing reality ripped apart those swords that got too close. However Qianlin's onslaught would not let up, and his defense was not perfect. The ten thousand blades probed for any opportunity, and sometimes found them. Lan Jue was already covered in several small wounds.

"Compose yourself, strike." Jon Yungye's dissatisfied voice chastised him from the back of his mind.

Lan Jue suddenly felt his heart race. Almost subconsciously the sword lashed out, tracing out a circle in the air. The red aura around Captus was bright, but soft and inviting. It covered him from the rest of the hail.

"Ey?!" Xuanyuan Shishi's surprised yelp met his ears. The force of Qianlin's assault increased as she pummeled him with sapphire-blue copies of her blade. They cut and chopped and pierced, seeking ceaselessly for a hole in his defenses. They crashed against him like a chaotic wave,

with every strike like being hit by a mountain. Xuanyuan's signature sword style unfolded, ten thousand swords from ten thousand directions. Each one of those images was strong enough to do mortal damage.

Lan Jue appeared to have gotten his footing. One after the other, Lan Jue used Captus to carve circle through the air. The movements birthed orbs of red light that surrounded him on all sides. Strange, no matter how intense and ferocious Qianlin's attacks became, they were swallowed into these orbs and spat out off target.

He'd found a settled point in his heart. With a soft smile, Lan Jue continued to follow the flow of his own movements like running water. It was almost as though he was paying Qianlin's attacks no mind. He was simply moving to the rhythm of his own style. Wave upon wave of Demortus' fury rained upon him, but as they got close it was like crashing into the unyielding waves of a vast ocean.

It didn't take Lan Jue long to achieve the upper hand. He was stronger than Qianlin to begin with, and Demortus was slowly being overcome with Captus' dominance. Demortus couldn't produce its full potential. Qianlin was like a bird that railed against its cage, but the more she struggled the smaller her prison became.

"Stop, stop, stop!" Xuanyuan Shishi entreated. Lan Jue answered with a final flourish that spun Qianlin around and nearly knocked her off her feet.

"What sword style is this?" Xuanyuan Shishi asked, perturbed.

Lan Jue smirked. "Taiji sword style."

"And who told you to use it?" Shishi responded, irritated. "What about focused flow?"

Lan Jue chuckled sheepishly. "Come on, I'm fighting my better half, here! What if I hurt her? Taiji sword is better suited for defense, it seemed more appropriate. It seems to work especially well to constrain the ten thousand blades style."

Xuanyuan Shishi was silent for a moment. "You need to practice focused

flow, and only then can you achieve the Harmonious Swords! No one told you to use Taiji, is it really so amazing?”

Jun Yongye’s voice interjected. “Enough, Xuanyuan. You’re still so competitive. Lan Jue’s decision was correct, and his Taiji style melds well with Captus. Why didn’t you use it during your conflict with the Violet Princess? It would have helped you avoid being caught in such a tight situation.”

Lan Jue smirked. “I... forgot. I’ve never actually used it in a fight.”

Jun Yongye went on. “This style of yours is unique. It calls for much introspection and cultivation. However, Xuanyuan is also correct. It is paramount that you excel in the use of focused flow first. Taiji sword style was among the most potent styles in the ancient world – perhaps even more than focused flow. But if you can combine focused flow with the ten thousand blades, it could be the most effective weapons style known to man. You do not need to fear harming her during this training. Xuanyuan and I have sealed away the deadly power of the banishing blades. For all intents and purposes, they are average swords. Your natural defenses should be enough to handle them.”

“No one said anything...” Lan Jue protested weakly.

Xuanyuan Shishi harrumphed. “How can I keep the element of surprise if I tell you? Now hurry up, no more using that sword style.”

Lan Jue nodded. Now that there were no worries for Qianlin, he no longer had his hands tied. It was time to immerse himself in focused flow. Formerly he’d had no means to practice the skills Yongye had imparted. Now that he had a chance, he could begin to puzzle out the secrets of the style.

Jue Di’s instructions were still fresh from his time on Ziluo. Lan Jue’s progress was quick.

Chapter 596: Sword Practice

Lan Jue slowly began to uncover the profound nature of focused flow. It sought victory through vigor. Each strike was as overpowering as though it had a roaring river behind it. His movements appeared slow, almost lazy, but each swipe of his sword bore tremendous energy.

Qianlin's thousand sword technique was the opposite. Demortus' power wasn't focused in one place, but spread out. Cunning manipulation of the energy flows is what gave her tide of weaponry its power.

The two were calm, stable, ethereal. Neither was inherently stronger than the other. However, as their training continued Lan Jue entered into a marvelous state. He realized that the two styles were mirrors of one another, like feeling one's heart beat in someone else's chest. Every move was answered by the other person with perfect synchronicity. Likewise, Lan Jue moved effortlessly with each attack from Qianlin, masterfully deflecting the danger away.

Gradually, Lan Jue came to understand the rules. He could only pierce her defenses with just the right move at just the right time. Similarly, Qianlin learned his tricks. He would find a way to overcome her, and she would just as quickly change up her style.

The violent clashes of their styles became less intense with each meeting. Eventually, their interactions became almost friendly. They danced around each other like one was an integral piece of the other.

The more they trained, the more Lan Jue came to understand. Unknown hours passed before Jun Yongye interrupted them. "That's enough for today."

The two Adepts rested their sword arms. Lan Jue smiled as the light of their banishing blades played upon Qianlin's face. She still had as much expression as dirt, but Lan Jue could sense the cooperation in their training. To him it meant she was there, somewhere.

"When can we begin to train the Harmonious Swords?" Lan Jue asked.

Xuanyuan Shishi was the one who answered. “You both have a long way to go. Right now you train without the swords’ powers. As you learn more, we can begin to unseal their potency and allow Captus and Demortus to intermingle. You will also need to empower them with your own strength. Once you both can command the power without hurting one another, you will be ready to direct its tremendous power. Then you will know the Harmonious Swords. Did you think it was that easy?”

Lan Jue nodded ever so slightly. Xuanyuan Shishi was right. Clearly the Harmonious Sword style would need work. Having so much power at one’s fingertips, it was important that they were capable of handling it. What’s more, they had to be connected on a spiritual level.

He was starting to feel that already, after only the first day of training.

Lan Jue looked over Zhou Qianlin. She remained standing, peering sightlessly into the middle distance. “You’re tired,” he told her, “Let’s wash you up then get you some food.”

If the nine circles of hell were a real thing, Lan Jue wasn’t worried. There was no greater torture than giving Qianlin a bath. Three times they inadvertently joined before he could finish. He felt even more drained than he did after sword training.

With some effort, he got her dressed in Hera’s old clothes. He suddenly felt exhausted. Not physically, but deep down in his soul. Lan Jue cooked up a simple meal and fed Zhou Qianlin before having some himself.

The ritual was interrupted when Lan Jue’s communicator began to ring. “Hey, what have you been up to all day? We’ve seen neither hide nor hair.” It was the Driver.

Lan Jue answered. “I’ve been cultivating, of course. What time is it?”

“It’s dark out,” he responded. “Asking what time it is... do you want to get a drink?”

He hesitated, taking a look at Qianlin sitting quietly nearby. “Alright, but I’ll be bringing someone.” When not cultivating he didn’t join with Qianlin. It had to be better for her to smell the fresh air and see the world

around her.

“Come on over.”

Lan Jue changed his clothes, then guided Qianlin out into the shop.

Zeus' five Amazons were in the store. Each of their faces was different when they saw their boss leave his chambers, Zhou Qianlin in tow. None of them looked entirely pleased.

“I'm heading out, you all can head out.” Lan Jue's greeting was brief. He gave the explanation, and was out the door.

Su Xiaosu couldn't keep her thoughts to herself. “Little Mika,” she began, “what is going on with Qianlin and the boss?” She knew Qianlin, of course, but she was never told their whole story.

Mika glowered at her. “Don't call me little Mika. Big Mika, if anything. Sounds better. Ai... it's so annoying how single-minded men are.”

Ke'er whole-heartedly nodded her agreement. “No doubt. I don't mind being a mistress.”

“Hey hey, restrain yourself! Have you no shame? You're a woman!” Lin Guoguo couldn't help but share her distress.

“So what if I'm a woman?” Ke'er huffed. “Women are also entitled to the pursuit of love. At any rate, I'm not entirely a woman, am I? I'm a manufactured woman.”

Su Xiaosu looked among the women helplessly. “I can't stand men who are fickle in love. That's one of the reasons I like the boss.” She had no qualms expressing her interest in their employer.

“Polyamorous or no, there's no place in his heart for us.” Xiuxiu arose. Depression darkened her features, she moved to the back of the shop.

“Where are you going, Xiuxiu?” Ke'er asked.

She didn't turn back. “I'm going to clean the boss' room.”

Ke'er raced to her side. “You're too virtuous, sister. So much better than little Ke'er. I think we should probably just be lesbians, what do you say?”

“Screw off...”

Lan Jue led Qianlin down Skyfire Avenue by the hand. The surface world was as quiet as ever, and their footsteps rang against the sturdy granite stones that comprised the street. For Lan Jue, it was the comforting feeling of home.

“It would be great if there weren’t aliens to worry about. I’d take you out for a walk along the Avenue every day. We’d swing by the Gothic Winery and have a drink with the Wine Master. Ah, to see his pained expression every time we open a new bottle... priceless. Then we could visit the Seamstress. She would make you beautiful new clothes. The woman had amazing skill. If the Gourmet doesn’t agree to us bothering his wife, then he can cook us a fine meal instead. We finish off our meal with a nice glass with the Coffee Master. Then when we get married, we can go to mom’s place and have her take our photos. What do you think?” Lan Jue lazily walked down the street with her hand in his. Their arms swung back and forth as they made their way.

Zhou Qianlin dutifully followed, but nothing more. It appeared she was moving on instinct – going where the stimulus told her to. He didn’t know her heartbeat had sped up with his words.

Before long, they stood before the doors to the Seamstress’ shop. The Driver was already waiting for them. Today he was dressed in a sharp suit with dark vertical lines. He looked for all the world like a reputable gentleman.

“Guests, please,” He pulled open the door with a welcoming smile.

The Seamstress stood inside, also smiling. She nodded to the two of them as they entered. “Welcome to the two of you.”

As Lan Jue and Qianlin made their way inside, they noticed that the table was already set up. There were dried fruits, a selection of chopped fruits, and a plate of fermented ham. Slowly moistening glasses of ice water and empty wine glasses were also on display.

Lan Jue led Qianlin to a chair and they both sat.

The Driver looked his way, then looked at Zhou Qianlin. "How is she?"

"Better," he answered with a smile. "She'll recover with time."

The Driver nodded. "Do you want something to drink?"

"I think I'd like something mild today," was the Jewelry Master's reply.

The Driver grunted. "That would be the Auchentoshan, then."

"Alright."

Auchentoshan was a brand of whisky, with a mild taste that contained hints of cream. It was smooth as silk.

Once it was poured Lan Jue swirled the golden contents in his glass and watched. With a smile, he commented, "We've only been apart a day and already you miss me, eh?"

The Driver picked a slice of ham from the plate and stuffed it in his mouth. "You wish. I want the alcohol you promised."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I knew you didn't call me over here for a drink out of the goodness of your heart. You'll get it, don't worry. You think I can still screw you over?"

The question was met with a teasing chuckle. "Hard to say." He lifted the glass and knocked it gently against Lan Jue's. The two men drank their glasses dry.

A lull crept into the conversation as the Driver poured them another glass. Lan Jue took the opportunity to address the Seamstress. "The Beautician...?"

Her eyes grew gloomy and she sighed. "She's a little better. Strong. Right now she's propped up by the prospect of vengeance. You don't need to worry about her."

"Alright." Lan Jue gently nodded his head. He completely understood how it felt to have a loved one taken from you.

The Seamstress sighed again. "She regrets not accepting his proposal."

This made the Driver grunt. "Life is really too short to not be happy."

Right, Jewelry Master, I must say I've got quite a fancy for Su Xiaosu. You think you can put in a good word for me?"

Lan Jue stared at him blankly for a moment, but eventually nodded. "Alright. Just, I think it'd be better if you spoke to her yourself. She's got a powerful personality and a lot of experience. Steel up your courage, man."

The Driver stared at him, wide-eyed. "You're joking! You think I'm a wuss? Where is she now? I'll go this instant, invite her over here."

Lan Jue looked at him curiously. "Are you serious?"

The Driver thrust out his barrel chest, and straightened his fine suit. "Of course I am."

His friend nodded once he saw how serious he was. "She should be back in my shop."

He said nothing. The Driver got up to his feet, turned around, and walked out of the Seamstress' shop like a man on a mission.

Chapter 597: The Rejected Driver

The Seamstress shot Lan Jue a surprised look. "Is he serious? You think he's got a shot?"

To this, Lan Jue shrugged. "I have no idea. Not as good as he hopes, I'm sure." As he spoke, he stabbed a small piece of fruit on a fork. He delivered the piece to Qianlin and pressed it gently to her lips. She opened and accepted the morsel.

All the while the Seamstress watched his tender care. "Even now she's a lucky girl."

Lan Jue politely chuckled. "How could this be considered lucky? When she wakes up, then we'll be blessed."

But the Seamstress shook her head. "Sometimes it's dangerous to think on what it is to be 'really blessed.' Take yourself, for example. You're better now than ever before, is this not because of hardships? The Wine Master and the others pile tremendous pressure on your shoulders. Do you think they don't worry about you, how you'll hold up?"

Lan Jue smirked and rubbed his upper arm. "Well, that's because in their eyes I can handle it. It's fine, don't worry. I can definitely manage what's going on. There's just so much outside of our control. Even if we do know the right decision now, there are so many elements that could completely change the trend of events.

"The Gourmet told me what happened with Parliament," she replied, changing the subject. "Did they really dismiss your suggestion?"

Lan Jue shrugged. "I hope they come up with something better. I've been thinking, but up to this point I can't figure any other way to face to the alien threat. They're too strong."

The Seamstress nodded, fear evident in her gaze. "We've yet to experience the full might of these invaders. Your determinations seem sound; they absorb energy to make themselves stronger. It's a terrifying prospect."

Lan Jue nodded slightly. “None of this matters now, our only option is to face what comes our way. “Where is the Gourmet? You didn’t invite him?”

She replied through a smile. “He also feels the impending crisis, and has sequestered himself for meditation. He said he needs to firm up his cultivation.”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Here I only thought we young’uns got that ominous sense. The Gourmet feels it, too! That’s good. I need to do the same. Right now there’s nothing more important than strength. When humanity really starts to feel the aggression of our alien enemy, the only one you can rely on for protection is yourself.”

“Not just him, we all feel it,” the Seamstress assured. “You know I’ve never been much for cultivating, but I’ve put more effort into it myself. I was speaking with the Driver today about closing the shop and participating in the Division training full time. What’s your plan for the troops in the future?”

Star Division’s commander shook his head. “Right now I have no plan. I have to see how the situation plays out. We were out for a while as well, and learned a lot. We’ll need time to process and decide on our next move. We’ll use the resources we acquired to strengthen the Division, while the troops use this time of peace to prepare their minds and bodies for the next task. Originally I’d thought about going to An Lun and joining the process there, but it seems like staying close by is a better decision. We have no idea when – or where – those aliens are going to show up.”

No one need to worry about An Lun. With Jue Di there, the Violet Princess herself wouldn’t be able to take it.

The Seamstress rejoined. “I think that’s the right call. Step by step, assessing the situation as we go along. A better decision can be made when we learn more from the Shattered Starfields.”

The sounds of footsteps outside caught their attention. The Driver’s gloomy face was revealed when he pulled the door open. He shot Lan Jue a loathsome look, then pulled off his jacket and poured himself a drink. The Driver promptly empties the glass.

No one needed to ask, the answer was written clear on his face. He'd been turned down. The Seamstress was no fool and recognized it right away. She opened a fresh thermos of hot water and poured each of them a glass.

"I don't get it. What the hell is so good about you? Pretty, capable women just flock around you. Meanwhile, I can't find one for myself. Someone tell me, what the hell is going on! You have a woman, stop hogging all the others, alright?" The Driver bitterly complained.

Lan Jue sighed. "You think I don't worry about that? I don't want to steal their youths, either, but if I even bring it up they threaten to commit suicide or some nonsense. What am I supposed to do? All I can do is let it be, and hope they find someone for themselves."

The Driver scowled. "Oh come on. How much time have they spent with you? How are they supposed to find a replacement?"

This made the Jewelry Master smirk. "So you're saying you can't match up?"

The Driver sniffed derisively. "Bullshit. I'm a hell of a lot manlier than you."

Lan Jue rapped his knuckles against his whisky glass. "Last I checked your Discipline was yin-based. I dunno how manly that is." 1

The Driver gaped at him for a long moment before coming up with a response. "Well, every cloud has a silver lining, right?"

"So Su Xiaosu outright rejected you," Lan Jue said, shifting gears. "What did you say to her?"

"I walked in, and I said to her 'I like you.' Then I asked if she'd be my girlfriend." The Driver was to the point.

The Seamstress smiled at her friend. "Just like your soldiers – you only know the blunt method. Try a little finesse, won't you?"

The Driver sat straight. "Adepts at our level have hearts like mirrors. What's the point of 'finesse'? Would you rather relationships were like the

normal folk, all those games and nonsense? I'm not interested in any of that. If we're good, we're good. IF we're not, we're not. Simple and direct is my style. If I'm rejected, I won't give it another thought."

Here, he swung his eyes over to Lan Jue. "She told me she's only interested in staying in the jewelry shop. She said she wasn't interested in taking a partner, ever. She only wanted to be your assistant and serve at your side."

Lan Jue slapped his forehead, screwing tight his eyes. So be it, another one.

"What's your plan for these women? Keep them as slaves? Continue to order them about?" The Driver asked, ill-tempered.

"They are not slaves," Lan Jue protested. "They're employees, and in fact they have more stock in the store than I do. Can you call that slavery? As for what I'm going to do, I have no idea. They're married to this idea of paying me back and that's why they stick around. Plus, everyone one of them has complicated backstories. Skyfire Avenue is the best fit for what they need, I can't just turn them away. If I did, I'd have to go with them."

"There's nothing pleasant about drinking with you!" The Driver murmured into his glass. "I could do great things and still never find a girl."

Lan Jue frowned at him. "It doesn't help that you don't take good care of your appearance. Charitable deeds also bring good karma."

The Driver changed the subject. "Ah, right. There's something I need to talk with you about. Should we continue to try and join the yin and yang forms of lightning, like we did? If it succeeds we'll both benefit a lot. It'll make cultivating faster too, I'm sure."

"You've got that ominous feeling too, eh?" Lan Jue asked.

"You're damn right," he said. "You don't have a sour outlook after almost dying to that thing? We clearly don't have what it takes to face the aliens as we are now. IF we don't work hard to get better, what hope do we have?"

Lan Jue hesitated. “Right now Qianlin and I are cultivating together. This is why I haven’t sought you out to cultivate. I don’t know if we can join the two kinds of lightning while I’m joined with her. It would be a dangerous thing to attempt.”

The Driver shrugged. “Why don’t we go to the Wine Master’s Reaper Arena? We can give it a try. If it helps, great. Otherwise we’ve lost nothing.”

Lan Jue pondered for a moment. “Alright, but the Reaper Arena isn’t guaranteed to be safe. His pocket dimensions can’t handle protogenia, and if we succeed you can bet there will be a lot of that flying around. Wherever we go has to be capable of handling protogenic current. I’ll ask my mother, she should be able to find a place with no risk at all.”

The Driver slapped the table. “Excellent. Drink!”

The two of them ate fruit and ham, talking as they worked their way through the whisky bottle. It was gone in no time. The Driver was eager to open another but Lan Jue stopped him by shaking his head. “No more for me, one should know when to stop. Tomorrow morning I’ll come and get you, we’ll give it a shot.”

“Alright,” he replied.

He bid farewell to the Seamstress, then Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin stepped out of the tailor shop.

He had neglected the special relationship between his and the Drivers’ Disciplines. His speed and quality of cultivation had been tremendous after joining with Qianlin. Then, with the addition of the Banishing Blades he had more than he could handle, much less explore other avenues.

The Driver’s insistence reminded him of something his father said once. That yin and yang lightning joined could create an incredibly potent – and dangerous – thunderbolt. Jue Di’s hope had been that Lan Jue would find a wife with a yin-skewed Thunderbolt Discipline. That would have been best.

Now that was not an option, he already found Zhou Qianlin. What he

was interested in discovering most of all, was whether or not he and Qianlin could successfully cultivate with another while already joined.

It wasn't like he could just dump her either, and practice with the Driver alone. Lan Jue wanted to cross the threshold of Paragon with her together. Working separately would only increase the gap between them.

He would ask dad!

Lan Jue returned to the shop and turned on the holographic projection system in his quarters. He attempted to connect with Lan Qing. After a few moment, the projector's lights flickered and Lan Qing appeared in full military regalia.

"It's so late, what is it?" Lan Qing asked in his simple fashion.

"Brother," Lan Jue began. "I'm looking for dad. Is he around?"

Chapter 598: Jue Di's Discomfort

"He's here," Lan Qing affirmed. "Wait a moment." He turned to look for him, but then stopped like he'd remembered something. Lan Qing turned back to the camera. "I heard about the business with the parliament. Your suggestion was good, but it isn't feasible. At least not right now. The Parliament has their own plans as well. Don't be contrary."

Lan Jue chuckled. "I'm not a child, why would I be contrary? I'm a single person, and the best I can do is try to protect those who are important to me. Relax, I'm not upset. What about you? How have you been lately? Have you had any time to cultivate with all this going on? Don't let me overtake you."

Lan Qing actually managed a stiff smile. "If you didn't get in touch with me I would have called you. You should make a trip to An Lun."

Lan Jue's heart felt tighter in his chest. "What is it? What's going on?"

"It's nothing," Lan Qing confessed. "Nothing bad. You'll understand when you come."

Lan Jue relaxed. His worst fear was the alien planets appearing suddenly near An Lun. That would be a nightmare scenario. The forces stationed there were strong, but were they strong enough to defend against a universe-traversing alien planet that could eat other planets? It was hard to say.

"Wait a minute, I'll get father," Lan Qing said.

After a few moments, Jue Di appeared. He had a cigar clipped between two fingers. "It should be night on Skyfire about now. What do you need so late?"

The first thing Lan Jue noticed was that his father didn't look quite himself.

"Dad, are you alright?" Lan Jue asked, concern evident in his voice.

The old Paragon grunted. "Of course I'm alright, what could possibly be bothering me? I'm just surprised you remembered you have a father! You

have a mom now, I guess dad don't count for shit."

Suddenly it became clear to Lan Jue the source of his father's irritation. It was the fact that he'd accepted Luo Xianni as his mother. Lan Jue choked down a fit of laughter. "Dad, in theory there could be no child without father, nor could there be a mother. So, if I have a father I must thereby have a mother! Look, she's a good woman. Without her you might not have ever seen me again. At your age what are you trying to hide? You need company in old age!"

Jue Di narrowed his eyes. "Watch your mouth. I don't need to be told how to handle by business by some uppity asshole. Now just tell me what the hell you want or leave me the hell alone."

Lan Jue could see his father fuming, barely choking back the urge to wring the life out of him. He smirked. "That's the dad I remember."

Jue Di's face froze, then suddenly the fury melted away like snow before the sun. His voice came thick with shame. "Was I terrible when you were children?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "Not terrible. You used to say, 'spare the rod spoil the child. Success through hardships.'"

Jue Di perked up proudly. "And I was right! Now what is it."

Lan Jue obliged. "Do you remember when I told you I found an adept with a taiyin thunderbolt Discipline..."

Lan Jue went on to describe the conundrum, explaining their wish to join their opposed Disciplines with Qianlin involved.

The corner of Jue Di's eyes crinkled as he thought. "In theory, it shouldn't be a major issue. Just make sure that you extract and employ the purest form of your thunderbolt Discipline when joining with his. The joining of yin and yang is the way of heaven and earth. 1 It is the beginning of the universe and all the myriad beasts within it. The natural way. Within it you will discover things of great benefit to your protogenia. The advantages would apply to all of you. This should apply especially to you and the girl. The Clairvoyant was clever – the jerk. People thought Queen

of Heaven Discipline was extinct, but he found it one in a million. She can't really use it to attack, but it's the universal support. Her abilities are compatible with anyone's. Because of this restriction, Adepts like her have to learn other ways to be useful in a fight. For instance, by learning martial arts like I taught you. It doesn't matter how much energy is used, she should be fine. In addition, when you're joined her power enters and empowers yours. When you join your thunderbolt with his, on an energy level her Discipline will be involved too. You don't need to worry about her, but you do need to worry about getting it right.

"According to what you've told me, it sounds like your Discipline is stronger than the other guy's. You'll have to guide the cultivation process, use your knowledge of Taiji to manipulate the flow and bring them together. You mustn't be impatient. Gradually guide the powers, adapt to them, and then apply what I've taught you to control the flow of yin and yang within you. From there, it's all up to your level of control."

Lan Jue was hesitant. "But father, for this to work I may need to teach the Driver the ways of Taiji. Otherwise, I'm afraid he won't be able to work with me."

Jue Di frowned. "Fine, teach him. I have no pedigree to protect. But teach him only the methods necessary for moving power."

When he heard this, Lan Jue was very pleasantly surprised. Truth be told, he wasn't wholly convinced Jue Di would let him teach the secrets of Taiji to the Driver. It was treasured family knowledge! Even in the old days, there was typically only a few families who knew the mysteries of Taiji. 2

"Alright, so it I," Jue Di decided. "Oh, A-Jue's told you I'm sure. Hurry to An Luo, and bring your little girlfriend. Ah, and that guy the Driver."

"Alright, thank you father." Jue Di hadn't be straightforward, but of course Lan Jue understood his instruction. With his father's help, the product of their experience was sure to produce great results.

The conversation concluded and the holographic projector was turned off. Lan Jue turned to Qianlin, and pressed his lips to hers. The beautiful

young woman became white light and permeated into his chest.

In his mind's eye, Lan Jue saw the aliens as a lofty mountain. The weight of impending extinction grew heavier by the day. He couldn't delay getting stronger.

Planet Luo. Chu Family home.

"Father, A-Cheng's been in there for days and doesn't seem to have any interest of coming out. I went in to check on him and he was like a statue. I couldn't even feel an aura from him. Do you think there's a problem?" The Chu family monarch, Chu Dong, seemed uneasy.

Chu Yun huffed. "You good for nothing. I can't tell you how happy I am A-Cheng has locked himself away for so long. Why would you go in and disturb him? He has immersed himself in the ghostly realm, the domain of our ancestors. It is a sign of his great chances to become a Paragon. No one can disturb him. He must be allowed to cultivate on his own. When he has achieved what he set out to gain, he will come out on his own. Who knows, it may be possible that he emerges as the new Hades."

"That must be unlikely," Chu Dong said incredulously. "Before locking himself away he was seventh rank. Still a long way to go."

Chu Yun challenged his assertion. "Why should it be impossible? He is my grandson. A moment's insight can bring more growth than ten years of laborious cultivation. It's clear that the pendant he was given by His Majesty the Clairvoyant is of great benefit to him. So far it's been a few months. If he remains like this for a year, then he has a chance."

A fervent fire lit behind the old patriarch's eyes when he thought of the possibility. For his grandson to break through so young, they really did have a chance to retake the Dark Citadel within his lifetime. Who could say, their young prodigy could grow to be as strong as the likes of Jue Di!

Poseidon's Palace.

Hua Xu stood silently beside the dark blue column of light.

Within was Hua Li, suspended in air. He slowly raised his head, his arms outstretched to his sides. By now the singer's signature blue hair went all

the way down to his feet. The man looked like a crystal reflection of the light, otherwise.

Shimmering golden runes would appear occasionally on his forehead. They would shine and lift, only to face and disappear. Then they would show up somewhere else. They appeared to follow pathways like blood vessels. So far they extended down to his mid torso and back, creeping towards his waist.

Hua Li's eyes were closed, he was the picture of serenity. Like a sleeping child. His long eyelashes seemed to undulate with unseen waves.

Mo Xiao stood behind Hua Xu. She was clad in a long white dress with embroidered gold runes that made her look holy and pure. Her big eyes were filled with fervor as she watched the change overcome Hua Li.

"When the script of Poseidon covers him from head to toe, that is when he is ready to accept the seed of the ocean. Perhaps another half a month. You should prepare yourself, there can be no mistakes." Hua Xu warned.

"Yes," Mo Xiao respectfully replied.

A smile crept into Hua Xu's lips. "Once you have joined with the seed of the ocean, I will announce on behalf of the Poseidon group that you are man and wife."

Mo Xiao hesitated. "This news will affect his business reputation."

Hua Xu's smile widened. "When has the Poseidon Group fretted over such things? This is your due title."

Mo Xiao offered up no further protest, only nodding. On the contrary, she looked excited.

His wife? Although it'll be in name only, I'm still happy. A-Li, will you see me for how much I love you, one day?

"Sorry for troubling you, mom," Lan Jue said to Luo Xianni with a winning smile.

She waved him off. "Progress is always a good thing. No trouble at all. Oh, right, then you said you wanted to make a trip to An Lun to see that

old pile of refuse, right? He didn't say anything about me staying behind, did he?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "He did not, of course not. You know I see that he cares for you. I don't know what his hang up is, but I called him out on it."

Luo Xianni scowled, looking like a petulant young girl. "What does he have to be hung up about? The man's practically bipolar. Life has value, but love is priceless. If it were free people would just throw it around, but he's terrified of commitment. Does he think I'll tie him down? Hmph! He's an old fogey, it's not like I have to worry about him picking up young women. Whatever, forget about it. You two get to it. I'll watch over you and help. We'll make sure you succeed before you head out. We have to make sure that old bastard knows what you're worth!"

Chapter 599: Lightning of Yin and Yang

They stood within the center of the Wine Master's Reaper Arena. He looked displeased with the situation, but he couldn't say anything to the Photographer. The surge of power that resulted from their last attempt was at the front of everyone's memory. If not for his aunt's intervention, he would never have allowed them to attempt their experiments here.

Lan Jue and the Driver walked together to the center of the ring. There, the Star Division commander turned to face his subordinate. "I'll lead," he announced.

"Be careful," the Driver cautioned. "We don't want a repeat of last time."

"Relax, I know my limits," Lan Jue assured.

Over the last few days he had, in fact, experienced a great epiphany in his control of Taiji. Precise control over his body was becoming easier. Moreover, as he continued to absorb the thunder essence his Discipline was changing. It was becoming purer, and little by little shedding the wild nature of lightning. More exactly, he was subduing its reckless character.

Lan Jue lifted his hands. They were brought together before him in a circle, and as they connected a golden orb of light appeared. It extended forward from his hands and peacefully hung in the air. To the Driver it was a poignant display of his friend's superior abilities. His eyes lit up in appreciation.

The larger man followed his friend's example and brought his hands together. When the circuit was complete, a flickering orb of bright silver was birthed. Errant bolts of lightning writhed over its surface continuously. Lan Jue's golden electric orb seemed an entity in and of itself. There were no fluctuations – perfect control.

This expression of their Discipline was small to begin with. Lan Jue's hands flowed through the air and both golden and silver lightning alike danced along. After they traced out a sphere, the familiar glow of black and white appeared. The opposed flows of energy rotated around each other. They looked thick as milk. Likewise the gold and silver thunderbolt

energy swirled toward the center.

The Driver continued to carefully watch Lan Jue, vigilant for any sign of distress. He was careful, because he still remembered the enormous explosion that cut their attempts short the last time. Now their thunderbolt powers were purer and stronger. He shuddered to think of what would happen if they got it wrong this time.

Lan Jue calmly watched. Under his careful direction, the taiyin and taiyang thunderbolt Disciplines drew ever closer.

The true meaning of Taiji energy work was to strive for balance of yin and yang – to join the two in perfect harmony. The closer they came to achieving this perfection, the stranger the scene became.

Lan Jue noticed that as the Driver's taiyin powers met his taiyang equivalent, they didn't repulse one another. There was very little resistance from the taiyin, and the taiyang opened up to embrace it. It was entirely the opposite of their first attempt.

Recollections of conflict lingered in Lan Jue's memory from last time. It'd seemed neither Discipline had been fully ready to submit to the other, to give up superiority. Although they'd succeeded temporarily, in the process their Disciplines' explosive temper was agitated.

Strangely, those violent tendencies were entirely absent this time. Lan Jue struggled to understand.

Why would it be so different this time? He wracked his brain but could think of nothing. But as he looked on, he continued to witness changes.

Gold and silver began to meld into each other. A sublime corona of light radiated around them. The vortex of black and white that he'd summoned was like a black hole, drawing everything into its all-consuming nexus.

The Driver looked up and gaped when he saw Lan Jue again. He bore another orb of light, this one three times the size. It shone with dazzling blue – not the same lightning blue they were accustomed to, but a blue as clear and sharp as crystal. Flickers of energy were refracted endlessly inside. If he didn't know better, the Adept could have mistaken the orb for

an enormous cut gemstone.

The light lit up the whole field in ethereal blue luminance. Luo Xianni's eyes twinkled along with it. "So pretty!"

Pretty? Lan Jue didn't think so. He could it, that even one slip could unleash a torrent of energy that could evaporate them. The waves of power that radiated from it were as vigorous as they were threatening.

Life and death... there only ever existed a thin line between them. Something clicked in Lan Jue's mind. The thunder essence situated above his Core also sensed something and began to quiver in anticipation.

Lan Jue called over to the Driver. "I'm going to start trying to disseminate the essence into our bodies. Remember what I taught you, we can't afford even the smallest mistake. We have to be as careful as possible."

"Got it." Sweat had begun to appear on the Driver's brow, but resolve was clear on his face. The arrow was loosed from the string – there was no going back.

Lan Jue flowed forward a step, gently pushing his hands forward. The Driver replied with a deep breath, the silver light in his eyes flickering as he mirrored Lan Jue's movements.

The glittering and translucent globe of lightning reacted like water. It twined up Lan Jue's hands and stuck to the Driver.

Four palms joined. The Driver shook as he felt a surge of magnificent power race through his meridians. For a moment every cell in his body went numb. For years he'd known only taiyin power, and had never experienced the balance of Taiji. He steeled himself and accepted the energy throughout his body, joined it with his own, then returned the flow to Lan Jue.

In this way they became a circuit, passing the energy between them over and over. However, so far all they'd managed was a small amount.

The Driver was amazing by even this. He continued to infuse the power into his own Discipline, feeling it empowered. With just this small

experiment he could sense he was three times more potent than normal. It was swallowed up and absorbed without effort.

For Lan Jue, the process was even easier. When the power entered him, it seemed to flow naturally toward his Core. The center of his Discipline almost appeared to drink it in. When it reached the thunder essence, the mythical substance flickered like it was coming to life. As he continued to search within himself, Lan Jue sensed a surge of thunderbolt energy purer than any he'd experienced. It drained down from the essence into his Core.

In the next moment Lan Jue found himself shaking uncontrollably. His Discipline surged in power, even going so far as to affect his Core.

This was...

Every day since joining with the thunder essence, Lan Jue allotted time in during his cultivation to try and absorb it. It looked soft and malleable, but the power it contained was dense. In the weeks that had transpired he'd only absorbed a small amount. Still, even the small amount had had marvelous results.

However, what they achieved in this moment was more rewarding than ten days of contemplation.

The violent transformation his body had gone under as a result of Captus and the thunder essence made him tenacious, even compared to the Driver. Much to Lan Jue's benefit, any lightning-type energy that entered him was overcome and absorbed the thunder essence.

As a result, Lan Jue quickly soaked up a large portion of the yin-yang lightning. Once the Driver finished taking in his own piece, there was little of the joined essence left.

"This..." The Driver stared in shock at Lan Jue. "How did you absorb it so quickly? Aren't you afraid of an adverse reaction?"

But Lan Jue smiled. "Clearly you don't recognize a prodigy when you see one. Besides, Qianlin and I are joined to cultivate which helps. Naturally we'd be faster. How do you feel?"

The Driver shook his head helplessly. "It really is a bad idea to make comparisons! It feels wonderful. Even just that little bit had tremendous benefit to my Discipline. Cultivation feels faster, and I can sense a change in my lightning. My comprehension of protogenia has also improved a little. It looks like we're on the right track."

His drinking buddy nodded back. "I also feel great, so we might as well continue. But still be careful, we don't want to rush into disaster."

"No doubt," the Driver replied.

As they prepared to go on, the pocket dimension they were in rippled.

Lan Jue's eyes snapped to his training partner. "What was that?"

This, like several other parts of the arena, was a dimension that'd be created by the Wine Master himself. If there were interruptions in stability, it certainly wasn't a failing from the maker. It meant there was something going on outside. Neither of them were thinking of training anymore. Their eyes snapped to the Wine Master.

The Paragon's face had changed suddenly. In a flash his astrum appeared in his grip. The Cosmagus waved it through the air, and a silvery light enveloped them like a blanket. When it receded they were standing outside of the arena. Back in the Avenue, their improved senses immediately kicked in.

Lan Jue was stunned for half a moment, mirrored by the Driver, the Wine Master and the Photographer. One by one their faces lit up with joy.

"Quick! Call all your soldiers to the Avenue. I'll try and buy you some time." The Wine Master left no room for discussion. With his orders given, he was gone in a flash of silver.

Lan Jue quickly reacted, bringing up his communicator and dialing in a number. "Xiaosu, did you feel it? Spread the word quick as you can. The whole Division needs to gather on Skyfire Avenue. Right away!"

"Yes, boss." Su Xiaosu's voice was brimming with excitement.

The Driver turned to look questioningly at Lan Jue. "Who?"

A smile spread across the Jewelry Master's face. The air continue to change around him, growing thick with protogenia. "Guess."

Chapter 600: Taming Dragon Arhat

What sort of thing could make Lan Jue, the Driver, the Wine Master and even the Photographer joyous? What was so important as to call together the whole Star Division?

What they'd felt the moment they exited the arena was strong. It was protogenia, wild and untamed.

Only Paragons were capable of using protogenia directly, aside from the rare, exceptionally talented Adept like Lan Jue and his brothers. Put another way, they felt the residue of a Paragon's power. It was wild, uncontrolled, but not dangerous. Its range was limited.

Lan Jue had experienced this before. It was just the same when the Bookworm broke through to Paragon and took the name Karmic Scholar. The Jewelry Master knew the instant he felt it; another Adept was about to ascend to Paragon.

The Bookworm's ascension had been of great aid to many hundreds of Adepts, but they were exceedingly rare to encounter. After all, there were only a handful of times Adepts have become Paragons. Each event, when they happened around a populace at all, was a special event. Flooded with sudden insight, it was easy for Adepts to come to profound understandings of themselves and their powers. How could they give up an opportunity like that?

With such a boon eminent, of course he'd want to gather his troops and give them the chance for an epiphany. Even if only a handful came to see some truth it would be a quantitative leap for Division as a whole.

Skyfire Avenue was about to greet its second Paragon in under a year, a rare happening in all the history of humanity. Even the Clairvoyant and the Wine Master, and others of their generation couldn't remember the last time it happened.

It went without saying how good this was for the Avenue, to have so many Paragons arriving in succession. They were fast becoming a beacon of excellent throughout the Adept world. Who didn't want to make

themselves stronger? Who didn't want a chance to one day be a Paragon?

Easier said than done, certainly. However, the path was at least made a little smoother if you had the opportunity to be around a Paragon when they broke through. It was as true for young Adepts as it was for those like Lan Jue. Proximity had real appeal. 1

The Gourmet's ascension had been different. Due to restrictions of his Hades bloodline, he had sequestered himself away in the process. The shockwave of his breakthrough was dangerous, its dark nature wasn't suitable for many. What sprang from the Karmic Scholar was a wave of inspiration that took everyone by surprise. Lan Jue had been lucky enough to have the A.R.C. students with him at the time.

One Paragon was a lucky break. But two in one year? What did that mean? It meant Skyfire Avenue knew something no one else did. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist had proven their abilities during the Great Adept tournament, too. No one doubted they would one day soon be Paragons themselves.

Without question, Skyfire Avenue was becoming a mecca for Adepts.

Star Division's soldiers were members of Avenue as well. Although many didn't live on site, they all were close by. By the time Su Xiaosu spread the news, many of the stronger members had already sensed the change in the air. They had been on their way before she'd pressed send.

Before long, the area around the Avenue was a bustling scene. Adepts tried to get as close as they could, but only members were allowed in. Everyone else had to remain outside.

How close one was to the new Paragon when they broke through made a difference. Now was when An Liu and her security forces were most needed. They were the first line of defense to make sure only the people meant to be on the Avenue got in.

The Star Division commander became the soldiers' focal point. Everyone gathered on him.

"Arrange yourselves in brigades by rank and find a place to sit down.

Meditate, and prepare to accept whatever you experience.” Lan Jue’s instruction was calm and firm. A year before this sort of organization would have been a real shock. No one would have listened to the Jewelry Master’s commands!

Now, things were different. They’d been trained and seen combat. Individual Adepts had come together under a single banner. As quickly as they could, these soldiers found their places and silently waited.

Lan Jue and the Driver exchanged glances, then each took a seat. Opportunities like this were important to them as much as anyone else. Both of them were close to Paragon and every chance for insight brought them closer.

His soldiers’ training was impeccable. In the blink of an eye, eight hundred men and women were silently arrayed up and down the street. The Adept shops and markets underground were cleared out. Patrons would have to wait outside like everyone else.

It was a reaction to be expected. Members of Skyfire Avenue were overjoyed, and took pride in the accomplishments of their organization. Meanwhile, those who weren’t had to stew in their jealousy. Not that they had much time for regrets, the waves of protogenia had already begun to be felt. Faint though they were, it was better than nothing. All of the Adepts settled and turned their focus inward.

Before long, the thunderous and clear roar of dragons arose. Rolling clouds converged over the Avenue. As darkness hung over them, the overcast skies seemed to press down on them. Waves of protogenic energy were gaining in vigor and coming faster.

It felt like being in the midst of a hurricane. Energies raged through the skies, and yet within it was an alluring, perfect calm. That calm teased at the profound secrets of the universe. An extraordinary sense of peace descended upon everyone.

It was nothing like anything Lan Jue or the Driver had felt before. Both of them opened their eyes and peered toward the heavens. While the Driver didn’t know who was on the verge of breaking through, Lan Jue did.

Or rather, he had a guess.

Dragons' cries resonated throughout the whole city. Dense, dark clouds still roiled overhead, but as they looked on a single golden beam of light broke through. It blazed bright against the overcast backdrop.

In the same instant they witnessed a figure arise from one of the buildings of the Avenue. When it first appeared it was in the shape of a man, but quickly grew into the image of an enormous arhat.

Something peaked through the dark clouds above. An enormous golden dragon slithered in and out of view. It had five claws, with swiped at the air as the beast belched a plume of golden dragons breath onto the arhat.

The figure was immediately covered in an opaque golden shell, dazzling to behold. The golden light from above even seemed drawn to him, heavy with the sacred dharma.

A genial smile spread the arhat's lips. He nodded toward the gathered Adepts seated cross-legged below. His image flickered, and in the next instant he was seated in the skies above them.

Ethereal, mystical singing resonated from him. His voice seemed to beckon runes of deep Buddhist significance from the air. The fluttered around him, onto him, then joined with the arhat's body.

The great golden dragon came down from the cloud cover. As it approached it coiled into itself below the seated wise man, and transformed into a lotus flower.

A repeat performance of the singing heralded a silence that settled over every heart, stilled every thought. No matter how enticing, frightening, or nagging the thought it would not break their single-minded calm. It was absolute quietude.

Outsiders saw it as well. To the normal folk it was nothing short of a miracle, and to Adepts it was a rare opportunity! For the Avenue as well – they were about to be blessed with another Paragon. The Clairvoyant had moved on, but Skyfire Avenue was possibly stronger than ever.

Suddenly another figured joined him in a flash of silver light. He waved

the scepter in his hand, which caused flickering light to dance over his body.

“Ah! Look, that’s the Cosmagus.” Several cries rang throughout the Adepts outside of the Avenue.

Two flashes of white light followed, and two more silhouettes appeared on the arhat’s other side.

“Those are... the Keeper, and the Karmic Scholar!”

A polychromatic orb rose into the sky, distributing the Epochrion among them. With a conflicted look in her eye, she sighed and made her way to the Wine Master’s side to silently watch the golden arhat. Her apprehension could be understood. Over the course of a couple years, Skyfire Avenue had displayed a meteoric rise. Even without the Clairvoyant they still put the Citadels and the Great Conclave to shame.

The other Adept organizations had assumed – perhaps hoped – that Skyfire Avenue’s power would be reduced greatly after the Clairvoyant’s death. Who could have known that instead, the Avenue was getting stronger by the day.

The Karmic scholar and the Infernal Vanguard together couldn’t match the deficit of losing the Clairvoyant. However, the Epochrion knew that Luo Xianni had come back. She’d once been known as the single most potent Adept of her time! In a fight she far outstripped what the Clairvoyant could do.

The Epochrion ruminated over Luo Xianni’s return, conspicuously following the Clairvoyant’s departure. It was so much different from her own reasons, she thought.

Chapter 601: The Avenue's Seven Paragons!

It was veritably pouring Paragons for Skyfire Avenue these days, to where it was getting unthinkable. With this new Paragon on the rise, how many did the Avenue even have now?

The Photographer, the Epochrion, the Wine Master, the Keeper, the Bookworm, and the Gourmet. Adding the newcomer, that made seven. Seven Paragons!

The Photographer was a Paragon of the third degree, Nirvana. The Epochrion had achieved Reflection of Heaven and Earth. The other five were only just beginning their journey, but were Paragons nonetheless.

Even if you added the two Citadels and the Great Conclave together, they still didn't come close to what the Avenue boasted now. Besides, the Adepts here were numerous and promising. With members like the Jewelry Master and the Pharmacist, it wouldn't be too long before Skyfire Avenue had ten or more Paragons. What other Adept organization could compare?

Now was a fine example. They freely shared the wealth of knowledge they were about to attain, a fact which earned them a great deal of respect.

But even before considering enlightenment, safety was a major concern. The aliens could show up anywhere, but if they arrived at Skyfire at least these mighty demi-gods could stand between them.

As one can imagine, the future of Skyfire Avenue was bright.

As the Epochrion glowered, there was another flash of grey light, indicating the arrival of another. It was the Infernal Vanguard, who broke his hermitage to come join them. Other than the Photographer, each of the five remaining Paragons had arrived to bear witness.

Clearly safety wasn't a concern. Even if the Astral Phantom was nearby, seeking another shot, he wouldn't dare make a move. He was fast, but not fast enough to escape a gaggle of super humans.

The hymns were loud and clear, echoing across the horizon. Pulsing ripples of protogenic energy surged across the Avenue's surface.

Every Paragon had their 'own' protogenia. As other Paragons broke through, they released pure protogenia into the surroundings. This unchanged, raw protogenia helped them more deeply understand their own powers and helped prepare them for future growth. If they could learn something from it, then even these great Paragons could find their abilities empowered.

The A.R.C. students from the National Eastern University were particularly lucky since this was their second time experience an ascension. They had been present when the Bookworm became the Karmic Scholar. Under Lan Jue's guidance they had all benefited greatly from that. Now they had a chance to see another Paragon come into being, they wouldn't miss it for anything. Using what they learned last time, an epiphany would likely come easier today.

The Epochrion turned her head to regard the Wine Master. "Who is this?"

The old sommelier grinned. "This is the Pauper. It's likely you never paid him much mind."

Realization dawned on her. "Ah, so that's who it is. His protogenia is strange... his comprehension is deep, despite only now breaking through. He feels nearly as robust as the Terminator."

"The Pauper's cultivation method is unique," the Wine Master explained. "It was handed down, a legacy. We spoke about it once. He said it was called the Taming the Dragon Arhat 1, taught by one of the great Buddhist masters. It was in fact the monk of legend, Ji Gong, who lived a carefree lifestyle. The Pauper has been at the peak of ninth rank for many years, hiding away his abilities. At last this is the reward that comes to he who waits. By breaking through to Paragon it shows that he's mastered the Taming Dragon Arhat. He is indeed strong, stronger than those of us with normal Disciplines. He is a manifestation of Buddhist dharma, and so will very quickly enter into the Realm of Protogenia."

The Epochrion sighed. "This was all probably part of the Clairvoyant's plan. He really was a terrifying man."

The Wine Master grinned wryly and shook his head. "I couldn't tell you. We probably lay a lot at his feet simply because of what we think he could accomplish."

Eventually the thunderous Buddhist chants faded away. Great coronas of golden light pulsed from the Arhat in incessant waves. Everything they touched was painted gold, including the Star Division soldiers meditating below.

They all felt a strange energy penetrating into them, through their pores. From outside it looked like they were all covered in golden silk, as brilliantly gold as the Arhat himself. Everyone had been preparing for this moment, and as the Paragon's energies flowed through them they quickly were blessed with insight.

Lan Jue's understanding of his own protogenia was already quite thorough, so the Arhat's protogenia only helped him to confirm what he already knew. It was unlikely he'd learn anything so, so instead he sought to see which of his soldiers would gain the most from the experience.

To his surprise, the first one he felt undergo a shift was his chubby disciple, Tang Xiao.

He was illuminated by the golden light of the Arhat, along with the rest of his brothers and sisters. However as the light spread over his body, a wide smile split his lips. His bulging belly quivered for a moment with his laughter, and then he went still as a statue. Another strange energy, separate from the others, flowed out of him. It mingled with the Arhat's protogenia, moving with it. Tang Xiaos had clearly come to discover something.

Generally it was said the earlier the quicker the epiphany, the better its results. It came almost immediately after interacting with the Taming Dragon Arhat. That meant Tang Xiao likely had some sort of affinity – what an excellent discovery!

Several others discovered truths of their own a little while later. Adepts

didn't choose when or if they could learn from this, it was their Disciplines. Tang Xiao's Discipline was metalmorphosis, but metal didn't have a soul. The dharmic stateliness that he felt imbued his Discipline with a sense of spirit. He even felt it stir something deep within himself.

The golden light persisted for fifteen minutes when suddenly the Arhat broke into joyous, ringing laughter. He lifts his arms to sky and spread them wide, whereupon the clouds split like he'd torn them asunder. Beams of beautiful sunlight tumbled from a clear sky.

The Taming Dragon Arhat pulsed once again with golden light, so intense that the skies were tinted the same hue. From the street below people could hear Buddhist chants resuming. Each resonating note sounded like it was right beside them. Unconsciously, everyone folded their hands. Skyfire Avenue became a field of golden, meditating monks. IT was more comfortable than they could describe.

The light of nirvana illuminates all things. The Pauper had succeeded in cementing his truth of the Taming Dragon Arhat.

There was a flash of light, and the Pauper appeared among the others in the street. He pressed a hand to his chest and bowed respectfully to those gathered. "My deepest thanks, everyone."

"Hail, the Taming Dragon Arhat." The Epochrion had descending to join him, and greeted the Pauper with an amicable smile and a nod.

The Pauper's new title was not in doubt. Taming Dragon Arhat – a mighty name, but achievements deserve merit.

He chuckled and flicked his wrist. A ratty-looking fan appeared in his grip, which e flitted lazily from side to side. "It wasn't easy! I have been waiting for a long, long while. I must thank the Jewelry Master, if he hadn't taken me with him to seek out the gods of wine, I'm not sure I'd ever have taken this final step."

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly and walked over. "I guessed it was you. Congratulations, should I call you His Majesty the Pauper from now on?"

This made the beggar laugh. "Whatever you like, it's only a name. I have

been cultivating since we returned and only just broke through. Ah, it's unfortunate I wasn't able to send the Clairvoyant off."

His moment caused everyone's faces to fall in sadness. The Clairvoyant's loss was still a sore wound for the Avenue.

Lan Jue smiled and fought the depressed atmosphere. "The Clairvoyant spared no effort in his responsibilities for the Avenue. What's most important is that we strive to keep his dream alive. Your Majesty Taming Dragon Arhat, I think that's the most suitable name. You've been locked away for a long time, to you want to hear what you've missed?"

The Pauper paused, but quickly recovered. "Indeed! I'd appreciate you filling me in."

"Of course," Lan Jue assured. "Let's head to my shop for a bit."

The Wine Master watched Lan Jue with a resigned expression. He knew what the Jewelry Master's aim was, but he didn't make any effort to get in his way.

The Gourmet chimed in. "I'm going to continue my meditations, everyone."

The Keeper and Bookworm only shared a farewell before going their own way. They had borne witness to the ascension of the new Paragon, but now they had things to research and projects to complete. There was no one on the Avenue busier than those two.

Other than Lan Jue and the few of his subordinates that weren't present, the rest of Star Division was deep in meditation. A number of them would need time to fully comprehend what they learned.

Very rare opportunities like this only granted a glimpse of the truth, but even a hint was enough to noticeably improve their Disciplines. No one wanted to leave before they squeezed every ounce of potential from the opportunity.

Lan Jue brought the Pauper to Zeus' Jewelry Shop. There, he told him all about what had transpired since the gods of wine. He left nothing out, especially the aliens and their newest discoveries.

Zeus' five Amazons were with the soldiers on the Avenue. They were also seeking inspiration. As a result, the store was abandoned but for them.

Astonishment was evident in the Arhat's eyes. When Lan Jue got to the part of his story where the planet Moonfiend was eaten, his scowl deepened. "I had no idea they were so strong. Luckily you all reacted quickly and got everyone out," the Pauper said.

A sigh heaved Lan Jue's chest. "But I couldn't convince the parliament. They have their own agenda, but for us the biggest problem is anticipating where these planets will show up next."

Chapter 602: Persuading the Pauper

The Pauper shrugged. “It can’t be said the parliament is entirely wrong. If they decide to evacuate, that’ll displace more people than I can count – many will become destitute. If it isn’t handled carefully that situation can very quickly turn into a riot. Besides it’s like you said, we don’t know where and when those aliens will show up, or whether they’ll impact the Eastern Alliance at all. In situations like this it’s hard to be confident and quick in making decisions. My guess is the only thing they can agree on is to increase the military and prepare.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Subsequently we don’t have any choices. Like them we can only strengthen Star Division and be ready to hit back when the aliens arrive. What do you say, join us.”

The Pauper hesitated. “Me? I’m spoiled after living by my own rules for so long. I won’t fit.” Then the light of understanding lit up in the Pauper’s eyes. “Ah hah! I thought you were being kind asking me here to explain, Jewelry Master. Instead I find that you just intended on trying to sell me on the Star Division!”

A grin spread across Lan Jue’s face. “You’re a Paragon. The Division isn’t going to demand anything from you. Don’t forget about the exuvium process, either. The East has already determined that military members who participate in preparing the process will be given the option to undergo it. A Paragon’s life is limited, too. A few more years is just as important for you as it is for me.”

The Pauper chuckled. “Stop this nonsense. This process is being examined in all of the Alliances. I could go anywhere and as a Paragon they’d happily give me an opportunity. That’s no reason for me to join your Division.”

“It’s not my Division,” Lan Jue corrected. “It belongs to Skyfire Avenue. You really won’t join?”

The Pauper shrugged. “I’ll think about it. I’ve only just broken through, I need to stabilize my new abilities.”

“Who’s talking nonsense now,” Lan Jue retorted. “Your Discipline draws on the righteous dharma of the cosmos, it doesn’t need ‘stabilizing.’ Cultivating normally will open the door to the Realm of Protogenia, don’t think I don’t know what’s up. Relax, joining won’t mean anyone can tell you what to do – think of yourself as an adviser. You’ll have just as much freedom, you’ll just have a military distinction.”

Lan Jue’s former partner in crime pondered. He’d been a beggar, and he wouldn’t trade it for a crown. He had grown used to the lazy lifestyle, and wasn’t interested in any commitments. However, he couldn’t simply ignore the aliens and the threat they posed to humanity. He didn’t feel right refusing the invitation straight away.

Their conversation was interrupted by the buzz of Lan Jue’s communicator. He answered.

“When are you coming?” Lan Qing answered in his typical, no-nonsense fashion.

“I’m afraid it’ll be a few more days,” Lan Jue replied. “We just had another Adept ascend to Paragon here. Many of the Star Division soldiers are meditating on their findings and I want to watch over them. Then they come to I’ll head right over.”

Lan Qing paused. “Another Paragon?”

“Yup!”

His brother’s typically flat voice sounded a little pleased. “This is a good thing, but I’m telling you that I don’t think I can wait too long. It can’t be held back forever.”

It was Lan Jue’s turn to take a pause in surprise. He was a smart guy, and quickly put two and two together. “Bro, are you about to break through?”

“Yup.” Lan Qing replied. “With father’s instruction a lot has become clear to me. He’s helped assuage some of my concerns. After these insights, it’s become harder to keep the pressure from overwhelming me.”

Lan Jue took a deep breath. He sounded somewhat irritated. “I thought I’d be able to catch up to you, brother. I didn’t realize I was so far behind.

Hey! Do you think I could bring the Star Division troops? They're top-class Adepts, these protogenia-inspired epiphanies are very helpful for them. Last time I looked them over a tenth of them had come upon a profound insight. The others also got glimpses. Every Paragon's protogenia is different, and I'm sure your breakthrough will inspire a lot of people. It's important!"

Lan Qing replied. "If you can be here within the week, then get here."

"Alright. Talk to dad and see if he can help you resist for a little longer. I'll be there as soon as I can. Worst case I leave the meditating ones here and take the others. You'll definitely see me within a week."

"Alright." Lan Qing hung up.

Lan Jue's face was bright with excitement. His brother wanted him close while he broke through to Paragon. Indeed! Lan Qing had been a peaked-rank Adept for so long, it was about time. There was a moment of regret, where Lan Jue pined over his three years lost in depression. If he had kept to it, he certainly would not have been far behind his brother today.

This was tremendous news. Star Division was about to get another leg up.

The Pauper looked at Lan Jue in shock. "Your brother is about to break through as well? He is...?" He didn't know much about Lan Jue or his relationship with the man he'd called brother.

Lan Jue nodded. "... also an Easterner. His name is Lan Qing, have you heard of him?"

The Pauper shook his head. Lan Jue laughed. "It's really like you've been living under a rock. Look up 'An Lun super soldier' when you have a chance. My brother is part of their army."

The Pauper was stunned. "There are Paragons in the army? This is excellent!"

Lan Jue felt something stir in his chest. "Your Majesty Arhat, you've just broken through to Paragon but I can feel that you don't need time to secure your power. What you need is someone who can guide you

through the next steps. None of the Paragons here are suitable to help you, because they aren't familiar with the ancient martial ways. I know someone who might be able to help. At the very least he'll make your path easier."

The Pauper was both surprised and curious as he regarded Lan Jue. Then he smiled. "Jewelry Master, you don't need to resort to baseless boasts to get me to join your army. Just wait for my response."

The Pauper wasn't intending to be flippant, but he really didn't believe there was anyone around who could instruct him. There were many strong Adepts on the Avenue, but none of them were suitable for what he needed. He really couldn't think of who he could turn to.

A sense of disquiet filled Lan Jue's heart. Father, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to do some name dropping.

"You probably know my father's Paragon title. Jue Di." Lan Jue softly revealed.

The Pauper's smiling face froze. He looked like he was having a stroke.

"Jue... Jue Di." Taming the Dragon Arhat knew who Jue Di was, and his wisdom in regards to ancient martial styles. If there was anyone who could truly help him take his next step, it was Jue Di.

For most Adept Jue Di was more legend than man; the greatest Paragon to have ever lived, a peerless weapon of mass destruction. The Pauper was now a Paragon himself, but he felt he could never match the likes of Jue Di. If someone would have said one day he'd have an opportunity to be trained by the man, he'd have laughed. Jue Di had been gone so long.

Lan Jue earnestly nodded his head. "This is not something I'd ever joke about. He's with my brother now. You can come with us."

Skyfire Avenue's new Paragon audibly gulped, but waved his hand. "There was absolutely no offense intended, Jewelry Master."

His friend chuckled. "We're all family, that doesn't matter. Humanity has suddenly found itself faced with a terrible foe. Every capable human is a treasure for the species. Trust me, father isn't going to be too stingy with

what he knows. You're aware that he is a master of many martial arts, one of which is based on Buddhist faith. I'm sure he can help you."

Promises of instruction by Jue Di were very tempting. A few brief moments of thought convinced the Pauper to join Star Division. He did live here, after all. It had proven a fine shelter for many years, a place that had given him the peace he needed to break through.

Many were the Adepts that reached the final bottleneck and never broke through. It needed a lot of luck, and a lot of resources. Lan Jue and the Wine Master had guided him to what he needed, but without them would he ever have succeeded? If he were not on the Avenue, would there be five Paragons watching over him?

One important aspect of an Adept's transformation into a Paragon was the process itself. To some extent it went against the laws of nature. There were dangers. It was possible he could have lost his mind. An opportunistic enemy could have chosen that moment to strike.

However, the Pauper was lucky in that moment of vulnerability to be watched over by five great men and women. All of this was what Skyfire Avenue gave him.

Star Division's primary directive was the defense of Skyfire Avenue. Obviously there was more they were involved in, but that main reason was enough for him once he thought about it.

On top of that Lan Jue was dangling the tasty prospect of one-on-one training with the strongest human ever.

When Lan Jue realized he'd convinced the Pauper, he was very pleased. The Gourmet's sudden hermitage meant they were suddenly short one Paragon for the Division. The Keeper and Bookworm were too old and crazy to even consider. The Wine Master was busy keeping everything running. And as for the Epochrion, Lan Jue deigned not to ask. She'd just come from the North, after all. Who knew what she was thinking.

Lan Jue's mother was always available, of course. Having attained Nirvana, however, there were restrictions regarding what she could get involved in. Having another Paragon like the Pauper would be exactly

what Star Division needed.

Lan Jue sent the Pauper off then made his way to the Gothic Winery. As expected the Wine Master and Driver were there. The Epochrion's presence was unanticipated.

The Driver had been granted glimpses of truth through the Pauper's breakthrough. Especially after his experiments with yin-yang lightning, and considering the fact that the Pauper's protogenia didn't match his, glimpses were plenty.

"Did you succeed?" The Driver asked with a smirk.

Chapter 603: Stingy Men Find No Women

Lan Jue nodded. "Who are you talking to, of course I succeeded. He agreed, he's off cultivating now. By the way, I plan to bring Star Division to An Luo."

The Wine Master didn't expect the news. "Now?"

"My soldiers profited greatly from the Pauper's breakthrough," Lan Jue explained. "However, didn't kinds of protogenia are suitable for different kinds of people. The more we encounter circumstances like this, the better it is for everyone. My brother is about to break through, so I'd like to bring the Division by. Those who have already experienced an epiphany will stay. The rest of us will head out, and once their insights are experienced we'll return."

The Wine Master was ecstatic. "Our An Lun super soldier is going to break through? That's excellent news. No problem, take them with you. We'll look after the ones you left behind."

"Wine Master, you watched the Pauper break through. This is tremendous for the Avenue. What do you think, is it grand enough to drink a glass to?" Lan Jue asked playfully.

"Aren't you and the Driver going to continue practicing? Why would you drink?" he Wine Master challenged.

The Drive waved a hand dismissively. "Everything in moderation. There is time for work and time for pleasure, such is the way of civilian and military life. We've already succeeded to a point today, even learned something about protogenia. You know, Wine Master, stingy men find no women."

The Wine Master's eyes flit quickly to the Clockmaker who sat beside him. She appeared not to have heard, and simply remained still and silent.

"Very well, what do you want to drink?" The Paragon's tone was tight. He was fighting to hide his irritation.

Lan Jue made as though to rise. "How about I go to the cellar and pick

one out? Just whatever I find.”

“Over my dead body!” The Wine Master couldn’t help himself. His hoary response surprised even the Clockmaker. She lifted her head and looked at him.

His face reddened in embarrassment. “Sorry, I was a little excited. You don’t know, these fellas are hardly human when they come by here! They’ve helped themselves to nearly all of my best wines. I’m not being stingy, these ‘gentlemen’ are taking advantage.”

A gentle laugh curled her lips. “Good things are meant to be shared with friends.”

Skyfire Avenue’s leader paused, but ultimately nodded. “For the Clockmaker’s sake,

I won’t be cheap with you guys.” As he spoke the Cosmagus waved his hand. With a flash of silver light, several items appeared atop the table.

There was a strange but pleasingly classical wine decanter and four crystal glasses. And of course, a bottle of wine.

The Driver stared blankly at the bottle. His preference was for whisky 1. He wasn’t as much a fan of the old wines as the other gentlemen were. He was largely here just to enjoy their company. Lan Jue, though, was clearly pleased when he saw it. He turned his eyes, full of meaning, to the Wine Master. “Definitely for the Clockmaker!”

The woman paused, then looked at him curiously. “How do you mean?”

Lan Jue smiled. “Comparatively, there’s no better wine to please a woman than a sweet white 2 but the fermentation process sweetens them too much. It’s a fine drink for a man and woman who share a deep connection. It’s called Cos d’Estournel Blanc – from the second village of the Medoc region of France in 1855. The second village was a lauded producer of wines, no less favorable than the region’s main fields. It’s comparable to places like Leone and Ducru Beaucaillou.

The Clockmaker turned her attention to pink label on the bottle. “That’s this one?”

“It is!” Lan Jue replied with a nod.

Her face reddened ever so slightly. She understood what the young Jewelry Master was getting at. The Wine Master shot him a look. “According to you!”

He laughed. “You’re too aggressive. If no one said anything how would she have known? If she didn’t know how would she know your heart was in it? I’m your friend, so of course I’m going to help you wherever it seems you need it. Now, Cos d’Estournel needs a relatively long time to decant. Shall we open it?”

“Yeah,” he answered, but was careful not to look the Clockmaker’s way.

Old wines needed to be decanted. Oxygen catalyzes the fragrance and flavor, essentially waking it up. When decanting wines, each one was a little different. However, there were ways to speed the process up like funneling.

The Wine Master rose. In his left hand he took up the decanter, and in the other he cradled the bottle of wine by its base. He put the neck against the decanter’s opening and slowly tipped the bottle over. Little by little he drew the bottle further away from the decanter, revealing a stream of ruby-red liquid.

When funneling the wine in this way, the most important thing of course was not to spill any. The sommelier needed to maintain a constant, even stream. The further one pulled the bottle back, the most space the wine had to breathe and the better its overall taste.

Without question, the Wine Master was the most suited to the task. Soon the wine ended over end, and he held the decanter down below his waist. The trickle of wine remained unbroken. Its path through the air ensured it was as aerated as possible in so short a time.

The Clockmaker smiled as she watched. She gently flicked a wrist, and suddenly a strange energy swirled around them. The liquid reacted to it somehow, but it was hard to see just how. It didn’t interrupt the flow. The Wine Master gave her look that was both bemused and irritated.

Lan Jue laughed and gently clapped his hands. Using time-manipulating protogenia for wine. Extravagant!"

She smirked back at him. "They're my abilities and I've been wanting to use them. Nothing extravagant here. I'm anxious to try this wine you say girls like. I'm curious about the flavor."

Five minutes later, most of the wine was sloshing safely within the decanter. He left about a finger-width of wine left in the bottle. That sip was thick with tannins and other harsh tastes, so it would not be imbibed.

There was an unforgettable character to Cos d'Estournel. One could smell licorice and spice, with notes of cream, blackcurrant, blackberries and toast. The wine was full of body, pure and thick 3. The tannins had already melded perfectly with the wine.

"It's a little bland for me," the Driver said.

Lan Jue smiled at his drinking buddy. "You're used to drinking spirits, of course you'd think so. Next time we'll have the Wine Master bring us by for a Mouton-Rothschild. It's the most flavorful wine of the whole Bordeaux region."

The Clockmaker quietly sipped the contents of her glass. She didn't say anything or engage in their conversation. It looked as though she were lost in thought.

The Wine Master continued the conversation. "When do you plan on leaving?"

"Soon as possible," Lan Jue stated. "I don't know how long he'll be able to hold back his Domain. Dad's there, but it would still be a good idea to get there as soon as possible."

The Wine Master nodded. "Alright. The soldiers who weren't blessed with insight should be ready to wake up in a few hours. The earlier you leave, the earlier you can get back and resume training."

"Yeah."

Lan Jue's mind went back to the last time he brought guests to An Luo.

His A.R.C. students had fought valiantly against his brother's crack soldiers, and learned a lot from the special opportunity.

"Since I'm bringing them out there, we might stay for a little while. We've tempered them against the pirates, but I think it's about time they learned how to handle a straight fight. Since DreamNet and the sim pods have been upgraded, I think we can probably arrange that, we'll give it a shot."

The Wine Master thought for a moment. "Alright, you can keep track of your own time."

Just then, the paragon's communicator beeped. He dropped his head to take a look, when suddenly his face darkened.

"What is it?" the Driver asked.

The Wine Master's voice was low and solemn. "We've lost contact with the scout team in the Shattered Starfields. We got nothing back."

His dour expression was quickly matched by Lan Jue and the Driver. They both knew what this meant.

Lan Jue replied. "The North's scouts managed, they even sent a whole fleet. The planets must have some way of foiling spies, that's the only thing I can think of."

The Driver chimed in. "The benefits of military intelligence go without saying. We know so little about them, almost nothing – we're too passive. If it weren't for our lucky run-in, the aliens would probably completely control the Starfields by now, including Moonfiend. I think we need to alert the Alliances, and tell them that we need to improve reconnaissance no matter the cost. At the very least we need some warning before the planets teleport. If we don't, we're just sitting here waiting to get smacked around."

A sigh caused the Wine Master to heave his shoulders. "If only it were so easy! We sent our top scouts, and this was the result. I agree with the Jewelry Master's determinations. These aliens are intelligent, and they likely picked the Starfields because they knew we couldn't bring large

ships in. They can feed without worrying over whether we'd interrupt. Large ships can't get in, and small ships are destroyed outright. Then there's the magnetic field that prevents communication. This is a very big problem.

Chapter 604: I'll be the Scout!

"You'll go? Go do what?" The Wine Master asked.

Lan Jue responded. "I'll be the scout! The Driver's right, intelligence is incredibly important especially now. Without it we're sitting ducks. I'll take Zeus-1 – it's small, fast, and can cloak. It'll be perfectly safe."

"Unacceptable!" The Wine Master quickly answered. "You cannot go. Star Division needs your leadership and guidance. Do you even know your status among your soldiers? If something happens to you, how are we supposed to fulfill the Clairvoyant's prophecy?"

A smile touched Lan Jue's lips. "Don't be so worried. The Clairvoyant picked me because it's what he saw in his visions – because I would help humanity weather this crisis. If that man's prophecies were as strong as they all assume we are, then I won't be dying any time soon. There's danger, no doubt, but between the asteroid belts and the Blinding Stone, I can escape without much trouble."

The Wine Master's eyebrows screwed together. "It's still too dangerous. This is not your responsibility."

Lan Jue adopted an angry countenance. "You can't say that. I may not be military but these aliens are everybody's problem. I am capable, why can't I flex a little?"

The old paragon hesitated. "Let me think about it."

"He's right." The Clockmaster added her voice to the discussion. "We need as much information as we can get. Normal scouting parties can't do the job so we need to take up the slack. Compared to normal soldiers we've been blessed with a myriad of advantages that can help us. Even a paragon can't survive a shot from a capital ship, but a strong, individual Adept can do more than a whole contingent of soldiers. Scouting is a job he can do, and I'll go with him."

She fixed Lan Jue with her eyes as she spoke the final words.

Lan Jue paused, surprised by her sudden offer of services. As far as he

knew, the Clockmaker had hardly left her shop since returning to the Avenue. This was a wild departure from normal. With her along, their chance of success increased significantly, that was undisputed. She had the power to control time, and was a powerful Paragon in her own right. Her presence would be of untold value.

“You’re going?” The Wine Master looked at the Clockmaker in shock.

She nodded. “There’s no reason for me to just stand around here. I’m back and I want to help.”

The Wine Master was silent. After a few moment he lifted his head and looked at the Clockmaker. “Then I’ll go as well.”

The Driver and Lan Jue each looked at the Wine Master with strange looks. This guy, he cared more about his girl than he did his friends!

The Clockmaker paused, and her face reddened ever so slightly. “If you leave then who will take care of things around here?”

He waved away her concerns. “I can deliver major policy decisions from anywhere. The Gourmet will be staying back to cultivate, so I’ll speak with him about it. Anyway, once Lan Jue takes Star Division to An Lun there will be very little here to pay attention to at all. I hardly ever leave, and if we’re going to talk about using our powers, why can’t I?”

Lan Jue sighed. “I used to think you had some self-respect. I guess I was wrong.”

The Wine Master glared at him. “You scoundrel! We are going in order to keep you safe. Between us we control both time and space, you can ask for better company.”

“Who’s a scoundrel?” Lan Jue countered disdainfully. “My mother will certainly be coming with me to An Lun. Between you who do you think has more control over time, huh? Your presence makes no difference.”

“You...” The Wine Master was speechless, and of course he would be. What could he say? Everything he knew he learned from the Photographer. With Lan Jue’s mother going with him, there really was no reason for the Wine Master to tag along. He understood now why Lan Jue

was so set on scouting as well. The Photographer's abilities were among the strongest in history. If they couldn't kill what came their way, they could flee. It was no different than having Jue Di in your backseat.

The Clockmaker looked to the embarrassed Wine Master sitting beside her. "I'm going to start getting ready. Call me when it's time to leave." She punctuated the sentence with a nod to the two younger gentlemen, then she left.

The Wine Master rose sharply to his feet and sent her off. The Driver noticed and spoke softly to Lan Jue beside him. "Why'd you screw with him like that? It's hard for an old tree to spread new roots, and just as he was about to flower you go and make trouble."

Lan Jue laughed. "How am I making trouble? Don't you think he was coming on a little strong? I was trying to tell him to back off. If he doesn't he's gunna miss his chance."

"Horseshit! You little bastard, you come in here and drink my wine and then attack me! Have you got any conscience at all?" The Paragon was clearly furious.

Lan Jue sat back and spoke as though delivering some profound thought. "You should be thanking me. I'm trying to give you a chance to get close to the Clockmaker!"

"We already are, who the hell needs you?" He blurted out.

"Oh." Lan Jue and the Driver shared the expression as they were informed. The Wine Master's voice was dangerously calm, but still red from the shame and anger. "Now get. The. Hell. Out! NOW!" The sharp clap of his hands punctuated the words. He glowered at them in resentment.

The Driver and Lan Jue stood. "We're going. We won't cause any more trouble. We'll find somewhere else to practice."

Practice had strengthened their level of control. So long as they restrained the amount of energy, at least they wouldn't blow the place up.

After he saw them leave, the Wine Master couldn't help but chuckle. In

truth, ever since the Clockmaker's return he'd been in high spirits. Perhaps it was time for a little trip. There was an opportunity to meet the legendary Jue Di, after all. His aunt – so strong and haughty – fell head over heels for the man. He wanted to know what he was like.

Jin Tao's eyes slowly opened as he roused from deep meditation. He sensed that his Discipline was somehow different, but he couldn't pinpoint precisely what it was.

He scratched his head then clambered to his feet.

There were many of the Star Division left here now. The remainder were being looked after by the Skyfire Avenue security force. When they saw him awaken, they waved him over and led him away.

Jin Tao looked back to glance at Tang Xiao, who was still meditating. He saw flashing of golden light around his rival that took him by surprise. He looked like one of those fat happy Buddhas, complete with a small smile and everything. He didn't move – he didn't even seem to be breathing.

Jin Tao wasn't the 'dumb mutt' he used to be. He knew more about the world of Adepts than he had before. Did this mean his rival had found a suitable type of protogenia? Jin Tao couldn't help but feel a little envious. The two of them were both personal disciples of Lan Jue, and he had shared with them many specifics about the world of protogenia.

Jin Tao knew that finding the right protogenia was important. If you did, it meant ninth level was within reach. It was the first step on their Path to Paragon.

Results like this were part of why it was so beneficial to find an Adept breaking through to Paragon. It was a rare opportunity only a few Adepts ever got to experience. Insights gained from circumstances like this had a chance to tremendously boost an Adept's abilities. It was like trying to compile a computer program from scratch. You could work for three days and three nights and still get nowhere, but a single sentence from someone in the know could make it all clear.

Jin Tao admitted that he'd learned something from the new Paragon. However, compared to Tang Xiao it seemed his insights were less. It was

unfortunate, but that just meant he had to work harder!

Ever since meeting Lan Jue, Jin Tao had tread a path he thought he'd never see. Every day he was stronger, and that gave him inspiration.

He thought back to a year ago, when he was a trouble maker with no sense of societal responsibility. Now he was an eighth level warrior, reputable by normal standards. No one called him trash any more.

Lan Jue's words swam up through his memory, the requirements he'd shared the day Jin Tao swore fealty. He would become a soldier, and be a man of use and character! This had always been his deepest desire. Now he was among brothers and sisters who strove every day for greatness, and it filled him with joy and pride. The past was long forgotten, there was only the future.

His competition with Tang Xiao was also a motivating force. It irked him terribly that Tang Xiao was always in the lead, and he'd had to use the fantascia genetica decoction just to close the gap. But he was crazy and cowboyish, and that made him work harder than everybody else. He was happiest when he was cultivating.

When the others saw it, even Tang Xiao, they called him crazy. He wasn't normal.

"What are you thinking about?" Suddenly, a hand clamped down on Jin Tao's shoulder.

He was caught so much by surprise that he tripped, and went sailing through the air. He stayed there on all fours with eyes risen. He'd been careless to let someone get so close without him knowing.

Chapter 605: Lan Jue's Pride

“Teacher?” After a moment of stillness Jin Tao shot to his feet. He scooted to Lan Jue’s side with a sheepish expression.

Star Division’s commander chuckled. “You’re vigilant. That’s a good thing.”

Jin Tao cast a sideways glance at Tang Xiao then dropped his eyes to the floor. “Teacher, I feel useless. My comprehension is lacking. Tang Xiao has already discovered something, but I haven’t.”

Lan Jue wrapped an arm around the young man’s shoulders. “You think too much. Everyone has their own chance, in their own time. Who knows when that’ll be, I don’t. But remember that so long as you’re breathing there are opportunities. The trick is that these opportunities only come to the people who are ready. Frankly speaking when you first asked to be my apprentice, I wasn’t sure. Not because of your Talent, but because of your character. Today, I’m proud I made the decision. There are two sides to everything. There was a side of you who was a troublemaker in school, but you’ve flipped. Now you’re an excellent Disciple, and the single most determined person I have ever met. It’s true that you needed the decoction to help you, but not everyone can survive it. The fact that you did speaks volumes.

“Your teacher sees how hard you’ve been working. I know that the second you’re opportunity comes, you’re going to grab it with everything you’ve got. I didn’t have your strength of will when I was your age. Don’t doubt yourself. You can’t if you’re going to make this your obsession. Do you understand?”

Jin Tao looked up at his teacher, and that steely persistence flashed in his eyes. He nodded resolutely.

Lan Jue grinned back. “We’re moving out soon, there might be another opportunity out there for you. No more doubts, dogged cultivation is the right path.”

“Yes.” He affirmed.

Lan Jue swung his eyes to Tang Xiao. He's been surprised himself to discover how quickly Tang Xiao gained this insight. He knew his Disciple had only broken through to ninth level recently. To have such epiphanies early in the level was immeasurably helpful, a sign of his chances at Paragon.

For many Adepts, the speed of their cultivation was drastically reduced once they reached ninth level. At that point their bodies were at the limits of what human bodies could endure. The only way was comprehension of the universe, its ebbs and flows.

But fathoming the secrets of the cosmos is just as hard as it sounded. Luck played a large role.

Tang Xiao remained in place, beaming at nothing. Then it struck him, how similar it seemed to the Pauper's Arhat. Tang Xiao hadn't just uncover some secret of protogenia. He'd found a dogma. Lan Jue couldn't tell if that was what resonated with his student, but they were similar – Buddhist in nature. It wasn't everything, just a glimpse, but enough to be pleasantly surprising.

He felt like he deserved to be called the transformer the way these kids were turning out! Pride was clear in his face.

"Lan Jue." A voice called to him from off to the side. He turned his head to see a blushing face. When he saw her, Lan Jue's face went stiff.

Tan Lingyun walked over to him. Jin Tao knew when it was time to make his escape, and told Lan Jue he was going to cultivate before trotting off.

"Professor Tan." Lan Jue's greeting was polite.

She looked a little conflicted when she saw the look in his eye. She was also a part of Star Division, and in fact was a part of First Division's Alpha Squad. Her combat prowess and ninth level Discipline demanded nothing less. Lately her improvement had also been quick. He could safely say that in the last year she'd learned more than she had in the last half decade.

To her all of it was thanks to the man standing in front of her.

His sudden change of status to her had been dizzying. She'd called him

cowardly and useless. Then he was the Lei Feng who'd made her heart race. Next he was the drillmaster, and finally a hero.

When she first learned the truth, she was dumbfounded. How could she have known that someone who looked so pretty and – frankly – delicate, could command so much power?

During the tournament she was biting her nails right beside all of her students as they watched Lan Jue fight. She cheered him on just as hard, though perhaps not quite so verbally.

After he'd won the championship, much to their delight, Hua Li dropped another bombshell. He revealed Lan Jue as the hero of Taihua, and subsequently proved Tan Lingyun a total fool. Compared to him she'd contributed a pittance to humanity, he'd even saved her life. For months she continued to abuse him, each time worse than the last.

Tan Lingyun had been terribly conceited. Regret was not a word in her vocabulary. That was, until recently. Now she regretted her sour temper. She resented it when people called her the Savage Goddess. Maybe if she'd been gentler, thought before she acted, was less direct, then things might have been different.

She studiously observed Lan Jue during their quest to clean up the Starfields. His capable command and overwhelming strength were often on display. She also noticed the beautiful and intelligent woman at his side.

She was only one of five women who called her commander 'boss,' each one more impressive than the last. Be it looks or ability, every one of them was her superior. However, their 'boss' was always clear about his feelings.

When Tan Lingyun wasn't cultivating he was often in her thoughts. However, he always seemed to keep his distance. Unquestioningly, her previous treatment of him was still fresh in his mind too.

Today had been the first time she'd had an opportunity to approach him, to stand next to him. There was so much she wanted to say, but when she saw that stiff expression cross his face she couldn't get a word out.

Everything he'd said to Jin Tao, she'd heard. Yes! There were only a limited number of possibilities in one's life, you had to grab them when you can. That was the only way to success, otherwise you were doomed to mediocrity. Only the people who were ready and willing saw them when they came. Who was to say he wasn't her opportunity? But, how could she know if she was ready? How could she know if she could grasp it?

"Are you alright, Professor Tan?" Lan Jue couldn't help but ask after watching her stare into to space for a minute. It was the first time he'd seen her in any other state besides abject insanity. He could see the helplessness and pain in her eyes. It definitely wasn't like her.

"I'm fine," she answered, and shook her head. "I was just thinking, you and Qianlin..."

When her name came up, sadness flashed behind the commander's eyes. His love was on the right track but still hadn't awoken. And all of it was his fault!

"I love her. I only joined the university for her. She'd hired me as her bodyguard, and being an etiquette teacher was my cover. Who'd have thought things would spin so out of control. Qianlin was injured protecting me, ironically. She's still recovering."

Tan Lingyun was silent, stunned. She chuckled a little self-admonishing laugh. I never had a shot. He'd already known Qianlin.

No wonder it always seemed strange when she saw them together. Indeed, how could such a capable main remain single?

"I hope she recovers quickly and can return to her family." She smiled and nodded pleasantly at him.

"Thank you." Lan Jue wasn't sure how to respond to this new, gentler Savage Goddess. He sure as hell preferred it to how she used to be, though.

"How are you? Did you gain any insights?" He asked her.

But she shook her head. "I tried, but this kind of protogenia doesn't resonate with me. It was helpful but not the path I want to follow."

If there was any kind of Adept that hated these aliens the most, it was those like Tan Lingyun. Their natural, vigorous Discipline was in direct conflict with the beasts. She drew her powers from nature like they did, but used it to empower combat. She was directly affected by her environment. When she was standing on Taihua her Discipline must have been boosted a full rank. On the other hand these aliens fed off of vitality and corrupted it. Whatever was left behind was cancerous and sick. She found everything about their species particularly loathsome.

Lan Jue paused in thought for a moment. “You might have another opportunity, perhaps his protogenia will serve you better.”

Tan Lingyun was surprised at the news. “There’s going to be another Paragon?”

Lan Jue nodded. There was pride in his face. A grin spread across Tan Lingyun’s.

“How much better it would have been if I’d met you earlier.”

Lan Jue visibly shivered. “You mean try to break me earlier,” he blurted.

Tan Lingyun’s old anger flared. “In your heart, do you really think I’m so nasty?”

Chapter 606: Go Cultivate!

“Eh...” Lan Jue felt something shift in the environment. He hurriedly spoke up. “Of course not, you just tend to leave an impression. Anyway, we’re about the same age.”

Her face grew gloomy. “I’m going to go cultivate.”

“Alright.” Lan Jue didn’t give her any excuse to stay.

He watched her go. Secretly – and silently – he admired her. She wasn’t the most beautiful woman he’d ever met, but her figure absolutely drew the eye. He loved to watch her go! She glided down the street, every movement vibrant and full of natural allure.

“You’re too blunt, Professor.” Tang Mi’s voice interrupted his thoughts. She’s snuck up at some point when he hadn’t been paying attention. She grinned at him coquettishly.

“How do you mean?” He asked.

She grinned back at him. “Can’t you see Professor Tan likes you? I don’t believe it, you’re playing dumb aren’t you?”

Her commander maintained a straight face. “You’re so young, what do you know about affection? Go cultivate! Your brother is in the midst of an epiphany, what about you?”

“Don’t you rely on seniority,” Tang Mi countered. “If I’m so young what about Qianlin, huh?”

“That –” There wasn’t anything he could say. Where all young women so cunning these days?

Tang Mi crept closer and took his arm, while simultaneously extending one of the long legs she was famous for. “What do you think, Professor?”

He looked at her fatly. “Go cultivate!”

She sniffed. “Ugh, you’re so boring. Fine, I know you belong to Qianlin. But you know Jin Tao’s been chasing me. What do you think I should do?”

“Ah?” Lan Jue blinked at her helplessly. “Deal with your own emotional

issues. I can't teach you this."

Tang Mi retorted. "That's no good, you're his teacher. You know him better than most, I'm sure. Tell me, do you think he'll make a good boyfriend?" She looked genuinely lost.

She never gave the old Jin Tao more than a passing glance. However, she'd watched his spectacular transformation over the last year. Besides her brother, Jin Tao was the strongest one in the A.R.C. class. His persistence and dedication bordered on obsessive. It shocked her too see how much he'd changed from the dumb-mutt she used to know.

When she first met him, she thought Jin Tao was a waste of space with no talent or skill. How things change in just a year. Now he was stronger than she was. She didn't know how to react to that.

Lan Jue shook his head. "I don't know what Jin Tao was like before, but men change when they stop being boys. Take your time and think on it. If you're sure he wants to be your boyfriend, maybe test it a little. Give him a target and see if he reaches it."

Tang Mi's eyes lit up. "I like that idea. I know, I'll tell him that if he becomes a Paragon, then he can call himself my boyfriend. What do you think?"

Lan Jue feebly looked her way. "You're a Paragon, then? That's not so easy! Decades, maybe. Are you willing to wait that long?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "What, then?"

"Ninth level is good enough," Lan Jue said. "It's not too far off, and it'll serve your purpose. If you make it too hard he'll just think you're refusing him."

She bat her lashes at him. "Professor, will you accept me as your disciple? Look at what's happened to Jin Tao and my brother, I'm falling further and further behind. What do you think?" She playfully tugged at his arm.

"Absolutely not," he answered. "You and Qianlin are the best of friends. If I accept you as a disciple how will manage that? Anyway, at your level a

teacher isn't what you need. What you need is more personal insight. You and your brother have similar Disciplines, you should talk to him. I'm sure he can teach you a lot."

It took some persuading, but eventually Tang Mi went her own way. Lan Jue decided it was time to make a move as quickly as he could. If he stuck around any longer he didn't know what other trouble would come his way.

The orders were given; those soldiers who were awake were to gather tomorrow morning for another excursion. He'd considered leaving immediately, but figured the students would need time to process what they experienced. A few hours likely wouldn't make a difference, so he delayed their departure.

Lan Jue continued to train combining Disciplines with the Driver. It wasn't cultivating exactly, more like an evolution.

The Driver's gains were more profound than Lan Jue's. As they continued to meld and absorb these energies, he could feel changes in the state of his Discipline. Lan Jue benefited as well, but he was better helped by continuing to absorb the thunder essence.

The thunder essence reacted to the yin-yang thunderbolt powers. It somehow catalyzed it and helped him to absorb the essence faster. Its righteous aura and immortal qi continued to join with his own energies. It was causing some changes in his own Discipline.

The river also benefited indirectly from the thunder essence. Since they were exchanging the flow of Discipline between them, some of that immortal qi was transferred. Even in miniscule amounts it was very helpful for the Driver.

Changing one's own segregated energies into a combination of yin and yang was not quick. It would take quite a lot of cultivation to achieve. Part of the reason was its inherent danger. They could only combine a little bit of their Disciplines at a time, because if they lost control for even a moment it would be ruinous even with the help of Taiji.

The energies were the same when the two adepts joined them, but changed when they were absorbed. At the moment of creation, the yin-

yang lightning was a crystalline blue. It looks like countless gemstones flowing into and around one another, perfectly calm.

However, this state was quickly modified as it was assimilated. For the Driver, he was surprised to discover traces of purple in the crystalline blue light as it flowed into him. Yet to Lan Jue it was different. A pale gold infiltrated his energy, turning it brighter. There were flecks of light within like twinkling stars. That was undoubtedly from the thunder essence.

The more of the thunder essence he assimilated, the deeper he felt it. It was something he recognized, that he'd sensed at some point before. It was a boundless void, and yet was the root of everything. That was the only way he could describe it.

Jun Yongye had explained it to him that this was part of the tribulation lightning visited upon immortals. It was the germ of life and death – from which everything sprang, and to where it would all return. In this way, nothingness was just as much a part of being. This fundamental power was dangerous no doubt. However if you survived, if you held onto your core, you would be reborn. The realm of the immortals would be at your fingertips.

Chapter 607: Extermination Lightning

This lightning, laden with the substance of life and death, was terrifying. It was strong enough to destroy the great beasts of the ancient days. This tribulation lightning bore great opportunity, but it also wrought destruction. Whether man or monster, everyone shuddered at the flash of tribulation lightning.

As a lightning-based Adept himself, the chance to use this extermination lightning was wonderful. Jun Yongye's aim was to have him absorb the life-extinguishing lightning into his own thunderbolt Discipline. If he succeeded, than every attack from him would be like a blast of tribulation lightning.

Lan Jue's cultivation continued to improve by leaps and bounds. Through the process of manipulating the yin-yang lightning he could sense the rise and purification of his own energy.

But there was a roadblock. Namely, his state of mind.

Over the last year he had been blessed with one great insight after another. From the Banishing blade and being forced to recultivate, to yin-yang lightning, lightning essence, Taiji and now extermination lightning. All of them had been an important step along his path, giving him hints at the nature of his protogenia.

It was undoubtedly a great thing if an Adept came to recognize protogenia, but Lan Jue had experienced so much in so short a period. Initially he thought he knew the righteous course his thunderbolt Discipline demanded. However, righteous came in many forms. He'd experienced a plethora of different kinds of protogenia, and although it has empowered him it was difficult to keep stable when so much was in flux. The things he'd undergone changed him, not just his Discipline.

His cultivation had also become a search for a suitable path. Once an Adept broke through to Paragon there was no going back. He had one chance to get it right.

The next morning Majesty and Zeus-1 left Skyfire, under the guise of

military secrecy.

They'd only gotten back and they were off again. It was exhausting by any standard. Only, this time they weren't leaving to fight, and they had been motivated by the arrival of a new Paragon. Even now, all seven hundred Star Division soldiers were in their bunks cultivating. They were all looking for that elusive opportunity.

Over a hundred Division soldiers were left back on Skyfire, those that were still working to understand the insights granted by the Pauper. Even small insights needed time to sink into the mind.

They were fewer in numbers for this excursion, but they were ludicrously protected. The Gourmet stayed behind, but he was replaced by the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Photographer and the Pauper. Four in exchange for one, totaling more than half of Skyfire Avenue's strongest fighters.

The Pharmacist didn't join them this time. She's been separated from her daughter and wished to remain near her. Jun'er was still cloistered away to cultivate. She was young, but had tremendous focus. No one knew where she and the Clairvoyant were in the process of transference.

"Should we take a break during the flight?" Lan Jue asked the Driver, who seemed excited.

But the excitement changed to stern reprobation. "Of course not! A boxer never sits on his hands, and a singer's notes don't stay in their mouths. We have to strike while the iron's hot! Don't you want to evolve your Discipline as soon as possible? Look, when the transition is complete I'll stop bothering you. Alright?"

"There are hundreds of souls on this ship," Lan Jue pointed out. "One mistake and this ship explodes. That's hundreds of corpses."

The Driver was beginning to lose patience. "We've been at this for so long already, you're just making excuses. We're wasting time – three months at the most and the transition will be complete."

The Driver had the same misgivings, but to him this opportunity was too good to pass up. He hadn't had the wealth of good fortune Lan Jue had

enjoyed, especially in the sense of improving his Discipline. He'd only just begun to comprehend the flows of protogenia. Through the yin-yang lightning, he'd begun to establish his own thunderbolt protogenia. His Discipline and his heart were both racing for the same goal.

At first the Driver was never sure he had what it took to become a Paragon. However, now he was convinced that if he could absorb the yin-yang lightning then would join their illustrious number in the not too distant future. It was too enticing for him not to doggedly pursue.

Lan Jue went on. "I've been thinking about the changes we've noticed. Our combined Disciplines are different, of course, but they're different because of what leads them. For me, yang is the predominant force. For you, it's yin. I think this accounts for the change in color."

The Driver nodded. "I had the same thought. It's not important, though. What's important is that we complete the transition as quickly as possible. Once we thorough grasp the nature of this lightning, it'll be lightning equivalent to what a Paragon commands."

Earlier in the morning after their cultivation and before boarding the ships, Lan Jue and the Driver attempted to use the yin-yang lightning. The Driver in particular was surprised at what they found. The result wasn't flashy, but everything the lightning touched was obliterated. It was at least three times stronger than what they'd experienced the first time. It reminded him of the blast created in his fight as Skyshade during the miracle god-battles.

Instantly he understood why Lan Jue's Taiji borrowed force was so overwhelming, to the point where the Clairvoyant hadn't been able to ward it off. The union of taiyin and taiyang lightning transcended the Adepts that used them. It became protogenia.

Lan Jue entreated caution. "You shouldn't be so hasty. I asked father and he said you could only really master yin-yang lightning after you've achieved Paragon. Until then there was no way to really comprehend its nature.

The Driver nodded. "Fine, but the first step is transforming our

Disciplines. When we eventually become Paragons, understanding it will be a cinch. Our Disciplines will be ready when the time comes, and they'll get even stronger"

A grin split the Jewelry Master's face. "The Driver I knew was never this diligent."

He chuckled in response. "Guess you missed the change. Besides I didn't have the same goal I do now. Only an idiot would give up this chance. Honestly, thank you."

Lan Jue chortled at his friend. "Come on, I can't stand your thanks. It feels weird."

Majesty and Zeus-1 left Skyfire's orbit and tore through space, with no concern for fuel economy. They had to get to An Lun as quickly as they could.

Chapter 608: Reaching An Lun

Their stay on Skyfire had been too short from them to use any of the resources Star Division had taken from the pirates. But they did have energy in spades. The worth of all the energy crystals they brought back with them was hard to quantify. They'd gone after the strongest and richest pirates of the Shattered Starfields, culminating in the Moonfiend Pirate clan. Their last campaign had been the most profitable of them all, including resources directly from the Pontiff's Citadel.

The poor souls that the Pontiff had experimented on had been settled on Skyfire, and the Keeper set about eliminating the poisons in their bodies. Obviously, none of these people were eager to run back to the Pontiff and report on what they saw. They didn't even want to return to the West. For the time being a place was arranged for them, but when the question of their future came up Lan Jue and the Wine Master agreed to let them find their own way.

Despite their terrible treatment, these young Talents would emerge from detoxification at sixth level, at the very least. These were meant to be molded into the Pontiff's reserve forces. They weren't weak, but the crimes they had to suffer were similarly intense. It was impossible to tell what sort of effect it had had on them psychologically.

What they needed was guidance and freedom. Until then they couldn't know if they would be a danger to society. Su Xiaosu had approached him, saying that she could convince them to join Star Division, but after some thought he refused that idea on the same premise.

They had been captives for years, their longing for a life of freedom was certainly stronger than any normal person's. If they solicited them now in their time of vulnerability many would accept, but it would be perilous for their spirit. Besides, Star Division was already strong, and padding its numbers wasn't the way to make it stronger. After widespread discussions with the likes of the Gourmet, the Wine Master and others, the consensus was to let them go their own way. It could be addressed again later, when it was clear how they were reacting, psychologically.

As for Gabriel, Lan Jue had kept his promise and allowed the Archangel to leave. He'd been present for the Pauper's rise to Paragon status, and in fact had received some benefit from the experience himself. This was all news he was certain to bring back to the Pontiff.

Skyfire Avenue had entered a golden age, and the Pontiff's Citadel had made no efforts to cause trouble any more. Right now, the focus was largely on the enemy at their doorstep. It didn't serve anyone for them to throw their strength behind hopeless pursuits. They'd suffered a terrible blow, and surely the Pontiff would be angry. But as far as Lan Jue was concerned, everyone had to suffer the consequences of their bad decisions.

The Pontiff's Citadel had chosen a dark path, and it was up to them alone whether or not they would turn back. What was certain was that Lan Jue's actions would seriously impact the Citadel's development for years to come. They wouldn't even be able to contend against Satan and his ilk.

Back on Skyfire, the Keeper and Bookworm had had to divide up the labor. With the wealth of alien Core's Lan Jue had returned with, and thanks to their earlier efforts, Skyfire Avenue's exuvium process was nearing completion. All it needed now was experimentation to test results. The Confucian Scholar took on the work of that himself. Meanwhile, with his free time the Keeper was developing weapons for Star Division.

Their campaigns in the Shattered Starfields had indeed been lucrative, but had also revealed flaws. The first was their embarrassing lack of really big guns. They were woefully unprepared technologically for these aliens. Both ships had wonderful capabilities but were similarly deficient in firepower. The mecha suits had been customized for the students, but were still not packing the punch they needed.

Although Star Division was a force for quick hits and rapid movements, it just meant their destructive powers had to be twice as hefty. Infiltration meant nothing if you didn't mess things up while you were in there. They couldn't continue to rely on Paragons. What kind of fighting force would they be then?

The Keeper made it his goal to get them all properly outfitted.

Star Divisions' trip to the Starfields had been a tightly kept secret, but their results were widely lauded. Before even taking into account everything else, the fact that they brought back information on the aliens was an incredible achievement. That alone proved their usefulness, for now humanity at least knew where their enemy was, and how strong they were.

Support from the government for Star Division was not a concern. The Avenue was itself doing well economically, especially after the haul from the Starfields. What they needed now was more people.

Scientists and researchers from all over Skyfire converged on the Avenue, and under the Keeper's direction they began developing weapons. When they were completed they would be given to the Division first, and the surplus would be provided to the Eastern forces.

The Wine Master reported to the parliament that Lan Jue would be setting out himself to scout out the alien forces. When they heard this, the politicians happily awarded the Avenue ten rare s-ranked power gems as a token of support.

At top speed, it took Star Division's ships two days to reach An Lun. Looking down on its surface, nothing much appeared to have changed. A grim atmosphere hung over everything just as it had before. They deorbited and were directed into the heart of the military complex.

Only a few of the people coming with Lan Jue this time had visited An Lun before. The military and Adept worlds were very separate, but that didn't mean they were ignorant of one another. An Lun was still famous in the East for what had transpired on its surface and in its mines.

It was also where the youngest admiral in Eastern history, the An Lun super soldier Prometheus, had his command.

An Lun had been the center of some of the East's greatest battles in history, and was an integral piece of its defense. Ever since news of the aliens, their numbers had swelled. Even though, though, they topped out at three hundred thousand soldiers.

Among them was the newly formed Bloodiron Khans.

The Bloodiron Khans were arranged in two parts; the main force, and reserves. Each were ten thousand fighters strong, and were the highest grade of soldier they could find. However, few if any of them had ever seen any actual combat, so it was impossible to tell how effective they would be when the time came.

The soldiers on An Lun were widely regarded as the best in all the Eastern Alliance. A whole fleet was stationed there as well that they called the Yanhuang Fleet. 1 One could tell by the name how highly the fleet was regarded.

The East had always been behind the other Alliances in the realm of technology and strength. Turning that around was not something that happened over night. So, thirty years ago the government enacted policies to change that, including the creation of a crack contingent of soldiers.

We don't have the numbers of the North and East, so we have to make sure we have the strength to match their armies. 2

The An Lun army was also established as a result of this need. So, even though there was only a single fleet stationed here, it was the result of generations of sweat and blood. Yanhuang Fleet wasn't an iota less impressive than its Northern counterpart, and was likely stronger in a fight.

It was precisely the An Lun army's presence here that protected this important Eastern resource from repeated attempts to take it from the North. They were the watchers that kept the Eastern territories safe from aggressors.

For all of these reasons there was a deep and abiding respect for the men and women of An Lun. It was true for normal soldiers as it was for Adepts. Now the metal world of these defenders was flitting below them. The excitement was palpable.

Now they were soldiers too, part of their own army. Who was better? What was the An Lun army they'd heard so much about really like?

Their minds full of these questions, led by their commander and four powerful Paragons, they disembarked.

Lan Qing stood nearby with a welcome party. He was dressed for war, with two golden stars glinted on his shoulders. When he saw the Wine Master and the other four Paragons exit the ship, he and his soldiers immediately snapped to attention.

The Wine Master returned their respectful address with a nod. The Wine Master's station among the military was at the highest levels, equivalent to a chief of staff. It was only proper for Lan Qing to greet him as a superior.

"We're happy to welcome Star Division." Lan Qing took a step forward and grasped the Wine Master's hand. He then went down the line, shaking hands until he reached Lan Jue. The two brothers clasped both their hands together, and at once Lan Jue could sense the chaos raging within his brother's body. Waves of protogenic energy pulsed from him, while his own energies felt oddly fractured. It was a sign that his resistance was failing. He couldn't hold back the transformation to Paragon much longer.

"Congratulations," Lan Jue greeted joyfully.

Lan Qing's hard face bore a small smile. "You're right behind me. I'm sorry I couldn't wait for you to catch up."

Lan Jue laughed. "Don't be so cocky. It won't be long before we're shoulder to shoulder."

The An Lun admiral led Star Division to quarters that had been arranged for them. The Paragons and officers of An Lun met for supper together in the mess hall. The fare was simple military food, bland and nutritious. Certainly there was no alcohol, it was strictly forbidden here.

"We'll have to use tea in place of wine tonight. Welcome after your long journey." Lan Qing was on his feet, and lifted his small glass respectfully to his guests.

Chapter 609: Where's That Old Jerk Chi Bupang?

"Where's that old jerk Chi Bupang? Why didn't he come?" Only the Photographer would dare talk about Jue Di in that tone. Her sharp eyes had been sweeping the crowds looking for him the moment they touched down. So far he'd alluded her. Her perception was mythical, so there was no way he could be hiding.

"Father's cultivating," Lan Qing explained. "He'll meet with everyone tomorrow."

Luo Xianni sniffed. "I don't care about the others, but I'm seeing him right now. Bring him to me, or don't blame me for the trouble I'll cause!"

"This..." Lan Qing was a man of the military. Orders had to be followed, structure had to be maintained. However, his title as admiral did nothing for him when faced against Luo Xianni. She had a passionate streak, to put it mildly. However, even Lan Qing felt his father had done her wrong.

"Chi Bupang, you get out here this instant. Don't make me take out my frustration on your children!" Luo Xianni was entirely nonplused by the scores of eyes watching her. She wasn't shy to call the old man out. Her voice did not boom dramatically, but it did echo harshly through every crest and valley of An Luo. Clearly the product of interdimensional tomfoolery. However, only an Adept of a particular strength would be able to pick the sound out. The normal soldiers were, so far, not bothered.

"You're a special kind of crazy, aren't you." Jue Di's defeated voice answered her.

When they heard him, the collective eyes of the other three Paragons contracted. Was this that legendary man, the strongest of all the Paragons? Was that the voice of Jue Di?

Luo Xianni grunted. "You call yourself a man? If you were you wouldn't be hiding like a coward."

There was a flash of light, then Jue Di appeared before the gathering

with a face as dark as a thunderhead. He slowly pointed an accusatory finger at Luo Xianni. "We're all supposed to be adults here. Are you incapable of acting your age? You're not off the ship five minutes and you're already causing trouble. And then threaten my kids!"

Luo Xianni thrust her shoulders back and faced Jue Di with the same indignant menace he showed. "I'm right here threatening you, what about it?! You wanna hit me? The others are afraid you, some sort of living legend. Bullshit! This old lady ain't scared of nothing! If you got a problem then bring it!"

But Jue Di could do nothing. Before his only recourse had been to hide, but he couldn't do that anymore. Alien invaders threatened their very species, and his children were in the thick of it. So long as Luo Xianni was guarding one of them, he wouldn't be rid of her.

When they'd parted ways Jue Di's companion had been uncharacteristically gentle. She came at him teeth bared this time. It took him off guard.

"Pardon us, Majesty Jue Di!" The Wine Master hurriedly intervened to try and smooth things over. The Clockmaker and the Pauper each offered the famed Paragon bows of respect.

At Jue Di's arrival, not a soul was caught lounging. Lan Jue shuffled over to the two of them and placed a hand on his mother's arm. "Ma, maybe there's a better time for these family matters, right? Others are laughing..."

She turned on Lan Jue, her personality flipping faster than the pages of a book. She regarded him with a wide, beaming smile and ruffled his hair. "Such a good boy, he knows how to talk. And you, screw off and don't sit near me!" The last part of the sentence was spat at Jue Di.

Lan Jue's father could hardly bite back his anger, but in front of so many he had no choice. He also knew that no matter what he did, it wouldn't matter to Luo Xianni. Could he even really hurt her if he had to? He trundled over to his eldest son's side and slumped into a seat. Jue Di glowered at nothing in particular and stayed quiet.

Luo Xianni shot Lan Jue a mischievous look, her pretty eyes sparkling playfully. Clearly verbally abusing his old man brought her a special kind of joy. He looked back at her with a helpless expression. My old ma, he thought to himself, she's got a child's temperament.

Lan Qing coughed in a bid to refocus attention. "Everyone, let's eat."

With Jue Di here, no one's mind was on the food. It could have been a ten course spread of delicacies and it wouldn't have mattered. They were sitting at the same table from a nearly mythical man.

... he didn't look like much, really.

He was dressed in dirty mecha mechanic overalls with stains on the front. Stubble peppered the leathery faced of an average-looking middle-aged man. Why was he dressed like a mechanic? Where was the splendor they'd imagined?

Despite his appearance, this didn't impact the respect displayed by the Wine Master, Clockmaker or Pauper one bit. They were all Paragons, and they could sense the threads of protogenia that seemed interwoven through the man. They could not, however, sense anything from Jue Di himself.

To their perception Jue Di was as void and limitless as the universe, unfathomable. Protogenia seemed to be absent from him, but in its stead certainly was nothing. To the Skyfire Paragons he felt like a reflection of universe, its avatar in the flesh. The sensation they felt wasn't oppressive, but awe-inspiring.

He was indeed the strongest human alive, more perfect than any human to have come before!

Luo Xianni cheerfully munched at her food and didn't pay the glowering super human any further mind.

"Eat! Let's go eat up, don't be polite. My kid prepared this." Luo Xianni urged the others on, occasionally giving Lan Qing nods of satisfaction.

"Will you stop with this 'my kid this my kid that' nonsense?" Jue Di snarled, no longer able to hold his tongue. "They my kids – you've got

nothing to do with it.”

Luo Xianni wasted no time in firing back. “We’ve got over this, you aren’t man enough! If you were you’d give me one of my own. I remember you used to have trouble...”

There were certain sure-fire ways to injure a man’s pride. It was as true for the normal man as it was for Jue Di. It was bad enough to hear about it, but nothing was worse than making it public.

“You bitch!” His eyes flashed, and in their depths arose a flashing golden light. Everyone but for Jue Di’s children felt every hair on their body stand on end. The only way to describe the sensation was like watching the eminent explosion of a super nova. The promise of immeasurable ruin was so potent it even curdled the Paragons’ protogenia in their veins, rendering them defenseless.

Jue Di was gone from his seat, too fast for anyone to track his movements. A yelp from Luo Xianni drew their eyes, and that’s when they saw her cradled under Jue Di’s arm.

“Continue eating,” Jue Di tepidly offered. He turned and made to walk off, and then he and Luo Xianni vanished in a flash of light.

The Pauper swallowed hard. The Clockmaker was so stunned she dropped her chopsticks. The Wine Master fumbled to catch them.

Who was the Photographer? She was the strongest member of Skyfire Avenue in all its history! Yet before Jue Di she was like a little girl. She couldn’t do anything when he plucked her up and took her away like a sack of potatoes.

Her natural resistances had been tripped, though. When Jue Di’s awesome aura descended upon them, wisps of pink light flickered into reality around her. However, in the next instant and faster than anyone could have seen, Jue Di somehow slipped passed her subconscious defense and snapped her up. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Of all the known Paragons Jue Di was indubitably the strongest. Right after him was the Photographer, Luo Xianni. The two of them were vastly

stronger than anyone else, but even then the gulf between them was immense. As Jue Di displayed.

“It’s fine, we’re fine. Let’s eat,” Lan Jue said, trying to salvage the meal.

The Coffee Master and Driver who sat on either side of Lan Jue had no further desire to eat. They both looked like they had stars in their eyes. It wasn’t like galaxy-altering power was a new thing for them – Luo Xianni had offered to seal away an entire planet for them before. It ended up being a small fleet, but nonetheless incredible. She had delivered them planet Moonfiend on a proverbial platter.

For the strongest person they had ever met to be so quickly subdued, it was...

“My idol... it’s my idol.” The Coffee Master could barely contain his excitement. His hands were shaking so fast they were leaving afterimages.

Lan Jue chortled. “Alright, enough. Stop exaggerating. Mom and dad will figure their own stuff out.”

A laugh came from the Wine Master. “Hell even if they couldn’t, who would want to get in the middle of that? Eat, come on.”

His contact with Jue Di had thus far been brief, but the Wine Master was already thoroughly convinced. Jue Di might have looked like a hog, but the unmitigated power he’d felt left no doubt in his mind that the man was every bit what people said about him. Only a man like him was worthy of his aunt! No wonder she was acting this way, how could she not? After meeting him, what other man could catch her fancy?

The rest of the meal passed beneath an awkward atmosphere. Jue Di’s arrival and dramatic exit was on everyone’s mind. Lan Jue turned to his brother.

“Have you got everything prepared?”

Lan Qing nodded. “Now that you’re here, we can begin tomorrow.” A glint of excitement shone in his normally stoic face. What could be more exciting for any Adept than joining the ranks of Paragon?

Lan Jue nodded back. Great, tomorrow it is. We'll help look after you, but it seems your powers are stabilized. Do you anticipate a problem?"

Lan Qing shook his head. "None."

The Wine Master interjected with a friendly grin. "Let us be the first ones to congratulate you. We very much look forward to your success. Have you chosen what you will call yourself?"

Lan Qing nodded. "I will tell it to you all tomorrow."

Something stirred in Lan Jue's chest, a similar sort of inkling he'd experienced during the Pauper's rise. "Brother, is dad helping you shore up your protogenia?"

This made his older brother grin. "He is! We've been looking forward to this day ever since we were kids. Now that it's time I'm nervous."

A laugh escaped Lan Jue's lips. "Are you capable of feeling nervous? Never once in all the years I've known you have I seen you act nervous. I think that's still the case."

Chapter 610: About to Start

“I’ll do my best,” Lan Qing affirmed. “I’ll be content with whatever the result may be.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “That’s not like you at all! If you don’t hurry up I will catch up to you. I’m not lying, I’m coming up fast.”

Lan Qing gave him a flat stare. “Cocky.”

Lan Jue smirked. “In fact, you can’t even contend with me these days. Yeah I’m cocky – there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Lan Qing didn’t dare show his hand. He was at the cusp of a breakthrough, and drawing on even a little of his power might make him lose control. He had to find the perfect moment for this important event, one where he was prepared to face whatever would come. He couldn’t prove his little brother right, right now.

Lan Qing continued to stare. “We’ll talk again when I’ve broken through.”

“I like the pressure,” Lan Jue shot back. “When you break through then. Let me see how strong you end up.”

The Wine Master was curious himself. How strong would he end up? The God of Wisdom, Prometheus, was an Adept versed in the element of Wind. His protogenia and Paragon title would most likely have to do with that. What wasn’t clear was precisely what form and strength his Domain would reveal.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni didn’t return for the duration of the meal. No one knew where they’d disappeared to, and none of them were eager to go looking. When the food was gone everyone went their separate ways to cultivate and prepare.

For Lan Qing, now was the time for him to stabilize his cultivation as much as possible. Lan Jue didn’t bother his brother, and instead sought out the Driver. Lan Qing’s success was a catalyst for his own urge to catch up.

The two of them trained for about three hours before they had to stop. Their bodies couldn't sustain any more yin-yang lightning for the day. They cultivated on their own, with Lan Jue returning to the realm where Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi could teach him and Qianlin swordplay.

Lan Jue was more diligent in his cultivation now than he ever was as a child under Jue Di's strict guidance. He continued until the sun came back to light up the sky. He then meditated for an hour to rest and recover. For someone of his Talent, an hour was all he needed to arise refreshed.

The atmosphere surrounding the Star Division troops was abuzz. After their time fighting pirates, every unit had become like tight-knit family. There was healthy competition between units to keep spirits high and the soldiers hungry, inspiring them to push themselves as far as they could go.

Such was the way of man, if you were by yourself you grew lazy. IT was especially easy to fall into that trap the stronger you got. Few had the willpower and talent to keep up the pursuit for perfection. However, if you surrounded yourself with others who worked hard and were stronger than you, it was easy to keep up the effort.

That was the case for Star Division now. Lan Jue and the other leaders, along with the Paragons were undoubtedly powerhouses of the Division. However, there were also a number of ninth level Adepts and more eighth level Adepts than they could count. It was a crisis for the less naturally endowed warriors.

Every one of them hoped to earn enough through conquest to afford the exuvium process. Who knew how many alien Cores there were, or how many were needed for the process to be successful. The closer they got to the front of the line, the better their chances. For that reason, their military achievements were very important.

Fighting out in the Starfields taught the Division soldiers that how they performed on the field was directly proportional to their strength as an Adept. And not just their individual strength, but their strength as a unit. Every operation relied on the hard work of ten people. That was to say that if there was even a single weak link, it undermined everyone's ability to do

their job.

Who didn't want to live longer? With the pace technology was increasing, a few more years could buy them enough time to see another life-extending process discovered. Eternal youth wasn't unthinkable. The more years they had to live, the more time they would have to cultivate as well, and thus a higher chance at Paragon.

A Paragon's lifespan stretched at least two hundred years, a fact that all Adepts were familiar with. Because of all of this, no one needed to urge these men and women to keep working hard. Especially after watching the ascension of the Taming Dragon Arhat and failing to grasp an insight, they were hungry. Jin Tao had eagerly begged for instruction, and he was hardly the only one desperate for improvement.

In the last year, Skyfire Avenue had produced three new Paragons. They practically grew out of the soil! It served as inspiration for many who thought that becoming a Paragon was a ludicrous dream. Others could do it, they thought, why not them? All they needed was hard work!

Seeing their companions blessed with epiphanies only made their desires stronger!

Naturally, this environment had been deliberately constructed by Lan Jue and Su Xiaosu. Now that they'd created a positive feedback loop they didn't have to work to maintain it. All they had to do was let human nature take its course. Over the course of the last few months a large number of sixth and seventh level Adepts had broken through to new heights.

Another benefit of being part of the team was structure. Each unit had to have a high-level Adept as a commanding officer. Their job was to keep everyone in line and motivated so they didn't fall behind. This helped the lower level members especially.

Up to now, no one outside of Division command knew what they were doing on An Lun. Lan Jue was careful to keep it a secret. It was revealed to them by message, when they were told to gather early in the morning and prepare to accept insights.

It was vague, certainly, but ‘prepare to accept insights’ were four words that could only mean one thing. Another chance to gain insight from protogenia? For these soldiers, it was a dream come true.

This was why, when Lan Jue exited the buildings for the trainings fields, he was greeted with the sight of all four Brigades neatly arrayed and ready. Every soldier had an excitement and fervor in their eyes.

The Driver, Coffee Master and Bartender were there with their teams. When they saw him coming they stepped forward to meet him.

“Boss, our people are all here.” Su Xiaosu approached from another direction, quickly trotting over to him.

“Good. They can relax in place while we wait for word from An Lun,” Lan Jue replied with a smile.

“Aye,” came her answer.

None of the Paragons had arrived yet. Lan Jue also noticed with some distress that neither of his adopted parents were around either. His father had a famously violent nature, and he’d gotten into physical altercations with his mother before.

Mid-thought, a flash of silver split the sky and three figures were deposited before him. With the arrival of the Paragons, the eyes of Star Division’s soldiers were bright with respect or envy.

They all felt safe, too, with so many of their best in attendance. They’d seen what the Gourmet could do, and now they had three with the lauded Cosmagus and Epochrion among them. Both of them were on the higher end of the Paragon list.

“How was your rest?” Lan Jue greeted them.

The Wine Master answered with a smile. “Not bad. It’s my first time coming to An Lun, it’s certainly different from what I’m used to.” He was right. This world of metal smelled of steel and gunpowder. An everlasting, ominous atmosphere hung over everything. As Paragons, their heightened perception could sense things from miles away, of course they could feel the tension.

The Pauper chortled. “Are you planning some joint military exercises with the An Lun boys, Jewelry Master? This is a great opportunity for it!”

“If we do it’s going to have to wait until they’re done here,” he answered. “I’ll talk to Admiral Lan about it.”

“Oh let me participate,” the Pauper said, jittering like he had ants in his pants. “Let me participate!”

Lan Jue frowned. “Stop, if you participate what’s the point of drilling maneuvers? You’re strong enough to take out a Division by yourself unless they’re equipped for it. If we let them put on the gear then it puts our guys at risk of getting hurt. You’re going to have to sit this one out.”

“No fun at all,” the newest Paragon grumbled.

A smirk split Lan Jue’s face. “You’re looking for fun? Easy. I’ll take you somewhere interesting, a place I promise you’ll like.”

The Pauper, suspecting no nefarious purpose, lit up in a smile. The Wine Master shot Lan Jue a glance, but held his tongue. The Epochrion smiled to herself.

Humanity was living under the dire threat of destruction from an alien force. The ascension of another Paragon was met with great joy because it meant a new protector. Lan Jue was bold, but he was also prudent. This wasn’t an opportunity he was about to miss.

Just then, two figures approaching them from the side caught his eye. When he saw them, Lan Jue couldn’t help but smile.

Luo Xianni had her arm linked around Chi Bupangs. She had a sweet smile on her face, which itself was an alluring shade of pink that made her look all the more beautiful.

Jue Di’s face was expressionless, though he had at least changed his clothes. Today he wore a black outfit that made him look like a rugged, battle-scarred veteran.

“Mom, dad!” Lan Jue hurriedly walked over to meet them. The other Paragons were fast on his heels.

Soldiers of the Star Division also curiously followed the volatile couple with their eyes. They didn't know who the two were, but watching their commander and the other Paragons rush over spoke volumes. There had to be something special about them.

Luo Xianni let go of Jue Di's arm and wrapped Lan Jue up in a hug. "Keep it up, kid. Don't be discouraged, it'll be your time to break through soon."

Chapter 611: Jue Di's Fear

Lan Jue chuckled. "Do I look discouraged? I'm thrilled that my older brother is breaking through, it's only a higher target for me to reach. I'll keep working hard, don't worry."

Jue Di fixed him with a stare. "So long as you mean it. We'll see how much you've improved later."

"Heh, dad, you can feel how strong I am now?" Lan Jue said through a smirk. He was the only person who would dare talk about strength to the likes of Jue Di.

His father growled in irritation. "Stop your bullshit. You think I don't already know where you got that power?"

Lan Jue shrugged and paid no more attention to his dad. He leaned close to Luo Xianni and muttered "Did you put him in his place?"

She gave Jue Di a flat stare, who groaned dramatically in response. Of course he heard what Lan Jue asked.

"You know it." She gave a resolute nod with a face full of satisfaction, though a bit of pink had crept into her cheeks.

Lan Jue gave her a thumbs-up. "Impressive!"

Even with as few scruples as Jue Di had, even he couldn't help from blushing slightly. "You shitty little brat, screw off!" he barked. He waved a meaty hand and an invisible force came tearing through the air toward Lan Jue.

The power that was released was as breathtaking as a mountain vista, but also bore an enigmatic sense of oppression. It was as though the universe had decided Lan Jue was no longer wanted. He needed to be removed.

Lan Jue's face lit up, eager to see how far he could push himself and his new powers. A sparkling golden-blue light flashed in his eyes. His right hand shot up and a red aura hovered over him as he traced a circle in the air. Immediately the interior of the circles collapsed in on itself, leaving

behind a clear golden-blue plane.

Under Captus' guidance, Jue Di's blast of force was drawn into the circle and vanished. Then, a moment later, the hole in reality belched a one-meter thick ray of golden-blue light right for Lan Jue's father. A peal of thunder shook the whole field.

For a moment shock shone in Jue Di's eyes, and then his whole face changed. It was like he'd seen a ghost. He vanished.

The ray of light burned a path one hundred meters through the air before it stopped. Not vanish or explode, just stop like it was frozen in place. It eventually faded away, but there remained sparkling pockets of silver light that hung in the air for a long time afterwards.

Jue Di wasn't the only one effected. Luo Xianni hadn't been the target of Lan Jue's repost, but her face was deathly pale. She was hiding behind the Wine Master.

"You moron, are you trying to kill your parents?!" Jue Di's voice roared. There was another flash of light and the Paragon's furious face appeared in front of Lan Jue's. He was obviously keeping well away from the flecks of silver light.

Lan Jue gaped at the two of them and their reaction. What was going on? Was that attack actually capable of hurting them? Why did he run so fast?

He wasn't the only one to find it strange, the three Avenue Paragons were equally confused. Jue Di's reaction certainly was not in line with what the legends said of him! He was a man of inconceivable power, who turned tail and fled at the attack of a mere Adept. It certainly wasn't the image 'living legend' brought to mind.

Jue Di still looked shocked as he regarded his son. Shock, and a little fear.

"Dad, what is it?" Lan Jue asked.

His father was a little breathless. "What has happened to you? Why is your lightning like this?"

“I’ve been practicing yin-yang lightning with the Driver!” He replied. “That’s what you wanted me to do, wasn’t it? We’re trying to integrate it into our Cores to evolve our Disciplines.”

“No, that isn’t what I’m talking about. It’s within your thunderbolt Discipline – when did it adopt the force of empyreal lightning?” Jue Di’s voice was low, urgent.

“Empyreal Lightning?” Suddenly he knew what his father meant. “Oh, I stumbled across some thunder essence. Ever since I’ve been slowly absorbing it, and it’s had some effect on my Discipline.”

“Thunder essence?” Jue Di was even more surprised, but also less afraid. A wry grin spread his lips. “I’m going to need to keep my distance from this damn kid. No wonder the Clairvoyant chose you if you’re just ‘running into’ things like thunder essence. That’s unnatural good luck, there.”

“What is thunder essence?” Luo Xianni asked. She had been just as afraid as he’d been a moment ago. The other three Paragons were baffled by the whole scene.

Jue Di explained. “In the ancient days, when the great beasts reached incredible heights of power, they had to undergo nine strikes of mystical empyreal lightning. When the beasts and the immortal qi from the lightning combine, they leave behind a special metal – a treasure among treasures. I’d only ever read about it in old books, I never thought they could be found. Absorbing it has put some of the power of empyreal lightning in your attacks. I thought tribulation lightning had come for me, you nearly scared me to death.”

Lan Jue looked back at his father with wide eyes. “Father, are you hoping to cross over?”

Jue Di snorted derisively. “To immortality? Idiot, no human can cross over.” He seemed both irritated and despondent over that fact. “If I was still on the mother planet and she had the vigor of her youth, then maybe there would have been a chance. Do you have any idea how much preparation was needed, how many rare treasures were required to cross

over? Be they man or beast. They even had their magic items we call Astrum these days, and after all of this they still needed a lot of luck. These days there is no way for man to ride the lightning up to the heavens. The realm of immortals has passed, empyreal lightning no longer exists and so there is no way to cross over to something that isn't there. At the level I have attained, you can only increase in the quantity of power, not the quality of it. Celestial Master Qian was my contemporary and reached the same state. He committed himself to uncover traces of the immortal realm, searching for a way to cross over. Up to today no proof of its existence has been found. Those time seem passed."

This information was given quietly to Lan Jue alone, though the Paragons could hear if they listened carefully.

"Father," Lan Jue then asked, "if I manage to completely absorb the thunder essence and change my Discipline into empyreal lightning, if I blast you with it could you cross over?"

"Moron!" Was his father's response. "You think that trifling bit you've found can match up to empyreal lightning? Do you have any idea? A blast of empyreal lightning can erase something from existence. A few blasts could obliterate a planet, let alone nine. The only thing that kept Earth intact was its natural surplus of energy."

Lan Jue stuck out his tongue. "That strong eh? Will absorbing the thunder essence cause you trouble?"

Jue Di shook his head. "No, chalk that up to good fortune. Master it to the best of your ability. That immortal qi within it is incredibly special, a piece of their strength. If you study on it I'm sure you can glean some insight. As for what will happen once it's all absorbed, who can say. At that time you can show me the immortal qi you've gathered."

Lan Jue nodded. "Alright."

Jue Di rolled his eyes, and then suddenly his face changed, like something was suddenly clear. "Oh, I finally realized!"

The sudden change from solemn to smiling took Lan Jue off guard. He narrowed his eyes at him. "What did you think up that's made you so

happy?”

“I have always known the dharma A-Qing was suited for,” Jue Di said, “but with you I could never find what fit. There’s something missing between you two. Lan Qing inherited some special power, but you did not. However it seems the thunder essence has made up for that deficiency. I just realized what you’re in for. Heh.. hehe...hehehe.” He couldn’t help but snicker to himself, a laugh full of meaning and peril.

“Chi Bupang, what’s with that sinister cackling? You’re thinking of something nasty, aren’t you?” Luo Xianni accused.

He smirked back at her. “The kid’ll find out soon enough.”

“Soon enough?”

Jue Di nodded. “First, this is Lan Qing’s day. You’ll know what I’m talking about when the time comes. If this were the old days I would love to see their faces, hahahaha, hahahahaha!”

Everyone else exchanged uncomfortable glances as the world-destroying super human cackled, seemingly for no reason.

The crunch of boots met their ears. A contingent of troops were approaching quickly from the distance. Their formation was tight, precise, ready for battle at any moment. Altogether there were maybe a thousand of them, with Lan Qing leading the way.

All of them bore the insignia of the Bloodiron Khans. The aura of their Disciplines flickered around them – Adepts! All one thousand soldiers were Adepts. Lan Jue remembered hearing his brother talk about the Bloodiron Khans, and how their top Adepts would be formed into their own division. They were hand-picked, the best from all the East’s armed forces. It seemed as though that’s who he brought with him, in the hopes they could gain some insight too.

This was the first time Star Division was greeted with the sight of the Bloodiron Khans. Both sets of troops were Adept armed forces, but there were significant differences.

The faces of the Bloodiron Kahns were all the same, still and

emotionless. Footfalls were almost perfectly in-step and they raced ahead like a single entity. There were no wasted movements of frivolous acts. It was a level of Discipline Star Division couldn't match.

Their single-minded actions and purpose were amplified by their conformity. One thousand men and women breathed with one breath, and moved like an unstoppable force. They descended upon Star Division like a majestic tide of war, like a disciplined inferno.

Chapter 612: Lan Qing Ascends to Paragon

This was the An Lun army? A fervent light shone in the eyes of the Star Division soldiers.

“Halt!” An officer called the command and his soldiers froze instantly in place, still perfectly in position.

“Sit!” They dropped to the floor, cross-legged with straight backs.

Everyone who watched them was impressed by how precise and disciplined they were. Even the Paragons had to nod in appreciation. Turning soldiers into warriors like this may just be a matter of time, but it was different for Adepts. To turn these talented men and women into a singular force, a singular mind, was a herculean task.

“Indeed worthy of the An Lun army name!” the Wine Master praised.

“Yeah! Incredible. If I didn’t broke through so early I would have loved to test myself against them,” the Pauper lamented.

Lan Jue laughed. “You’ll have your chance. We didn’t only come here for some insight, this is a joint military exercise. We’ll check each other out and see how we do things differently. At least in terms of individual strength I think we have them beat, but level of training and military experience it’s hard to say.”

The Pauper replied, “Won’t know till you try.”

As he spoke the Pauper twitched the side of his mouth surreptitiously toward Jue Di. Lan Jue smirked at his friend, a signal for him to hold on.

Lan Qing came running over their way. “I’m sorry to keep our honored guests waiting.”

An Lun’s admirable was different today. The waves of protogenic energy they’d sensed the day before were gone. He seemed perfectly calm and in control. His face bore a small, easy smile however every movement he made felt peculiar.

He almost seemed to glow with an internal light. Naturally he drew

everyone's attention.

The Pauper looked at him with surprise. "Admiral Lan, suddenly the strength of your aura feels so close to mine."

Lan Qing smiled at him. "The Taming Dragon Arhat is being polite, we'll find out the truth at the height of the show."

Lan Jue also felt like his brother had somehow changed significantly. His typically severe countenance was gone. He seemed calm, dare he say relaxed.

Jue Di's deep voice intruded. "It's time, prepare to begin."

"Yes!" Lan Qing nodded his head, resolute.

Lan Jue concentrated his attention on his brother. He'd witnessed the rise of Paragons before, but his brother was a different story. They were blood, grew up together. It was deeply affecting for Lan Jue to watch someone so close achieve their dream. If he were to gain insight it would undoubtedly be very beneficial because of their connection.

Ln Qing took a step forward and immediately lifted into the air. He slowly rose over their heads while a pale cyan light radiated out around him. Set in the center of his chest, the vibrant green light of the Clairvoyant's pendant flickered.

The field they were in was underground like all the rest of the An Lun military base, but it was the air strip their ships launched from. High overhead the rocky ceiling split into a yawning fissure that gave them a glimpse of the sky. Powerful shields kept the inhospitable alien atmosphere out.

The higher he rose, the brighter Lan Qing's cyan Discipline flared. However bright as the light was it did not stab the eyes. It fell gentle on their vision like a comfortable glow. All the soldiers no matter their banner stared at the scene, trying to remember every moment.

Star Division soldiers recognized him, Prometheus the God of Wisdom, An Lun super soldier. This was the man about to become the East's newest Paragon. It was a spectacular happening for their Alliance, one that would

catapult their army into a whole new realm of might.

The East had never enjoyed a Paragon acting in their military in an official capacity. They were overjoyed, and were prepared to immediately grant the title of Fleet Admiral to their super soldier once he succeeded.

Tendrils of cyan light interwoven with protogenia coiled around him. Lan Qing's eyes were closed and he bore a contented smile. His palms were pressed together in front of him and he sat cross-legged in mid-air.

Lan Jue stared raptly at his older brother. It'd been years since he'd cultivated with his brother, so he had no idea the path he'd chosen. The process of breaking through was more important for a Paragon than for any previous breakthrough an Adept underwent. It solidified their powers, and there was no way to change them when the process was complete. You had to be sure of yourself before taking that final step, otherwise you would be fighting yourself forever.

A measure of a Paragon's dominance ceased to be about their Disciplines. The depth of their knowledge of the universe was what defined them, their ability to sense the tangled weave of protogenia in all things. It was a quest for absolute perfection of oneself and their connection to everything – to be a part of everything.

And so, when a man became a Paragon he was no longer completely a man any longer. He became a conduit of protogenia, an inexorable part of that realm. Becoming a Paragon was not the end, either. The end was something no longer within the grasp of their species. He knew it from Jun Yongye as enlightenment, as the old immortals experienced.

So, as Lan Qing took this step the choices he made for his final form of protogenia was incredibly important.

Jue Di stepped forward, the small movement bringing him dozens of meters through the air to arrive at his son's side in mid-air. He placed his calloused hands upon Lan Qing's back and fixed his eyes upon him.

The other Paragons did not move. With Jue Di present, what could they offer to the process?

Lan Qing sat still, but waves of protogenia radiated out from him and shone down upon the people below. They could all feel the subtle change it wrought on reality around them.

Lan Jue folded his knees beneath him and sat with eyes closed, quietly reflecting on the sensations. His brother's process was important to himself as well, for soon he would be taking his own plunge. The smoother he could make it, the better.

For the two brothers it was never really a question of whether they could become Paragons. The question was always how far as Paragons could they go. But the journey of a thousand miles required a single, solid first step.

Dad was laughing because he saw my future. He couldn't go into it because of Lan Qing's breakthrough, but he also said I would learn something from this.

The corona of light around Lan Qing grew ever brighter. Every corner of the base was illuminated by it. Strange, though, was the change that came over it. As everyone watched that cyan color change from pale yellow, to bright yellow, to resplendent gold.

The light washed over them like a searing wave, undeniably comforting. It sizzled on their skin like the pleasant light of the summer sun. The soldiers' bodies and souls felt refreshed, their energies moving smoother within them.

"Well done, impressive!" The Pauper couldn't help but voice his acclaim. He had benefited from the Taming Dragon Arhat lineage, it had given him a structure to help him on his path to Paragon. IT wasn't a codified dharma, and it wasn't as stable as others, but his insights of the process were deeper at the time of his breakthrough than any Paragon in recent memory.

The Photographer, Clockmaker, and Wine Master had broken through long ago, the act was dim in their memories. This was not so for the Pauper. He could sense the protogenia infused in his aura were guided by an underlying structure.

It was usually said that Adepts, as they broke through, released the floodgates of their protogenia. It surrounded and immersed them, completely altering every fiber of their being. However, controlling this fundamental powers was much more difficult. It took years of careful cultivation, searching for the rules that governed this new realm. Is these are revealed a Paragon defined their own dharma, the ultimate extension of their Path. When a Paragon became a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, that was when their powers were said to wholly form.

One could be fooled with the simplicity of the phrase, to collate one's dharma, however you only need to look at the Wine Master to know the truth. He'd been searching for twenty years but had yet rise to the next level. Uncovering the secrets of the universe as they applied to oneself was tough work.

The Pauper's inherited dharma played a major role in his breakthrough. The Taming Dragon Arhat was itself a system of rules, so they came naturally to the Pauper as he crossed the threshold to Paragon and served to prop him up as he did so. These truths were not uncovered by the Pauper through grueling years of self-reflection. He merely had to understand what he'd been taught and he would rise to the next level.

Lan Qing's Discipline was Wind, as everyone knew. What showered them now did not have the characteristics of Wind as they expected. Instead they saw the close-knit strands of protogenia covering everything.

This meant one of only two possibilities. The first was that he had immediately become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, the second degree of Paragon. Second, it could mean that – like the Pauper – he had been blessed with an inherited power.

Taking into account what Jue Di had told him, Lan Jue suspected the second possibility was more likely the case. But he couldn't know for sure.

The look of surprise on the Clockmaker's face was even more evident than the Pauper's. She had already achieved Reflection, and could sense that those weaves were in fact the result of dharma.

It'd taken her seven whole years to uncover the rules that governed her

perception of the universe. Now this young soldier, in the moment of his breakthrough, was starting with such incredible insight. Could it mean he would... ?

People couldn't tear their eyes from the dazzling golden light pouring from Prometheus. As the waves of protogenic power pulsed, the light seemed to flow with it and eventually coagulate around him. When he'd started it was just a golden light, but it condensed and brightened until it became a searing nimbus behind his head.

Ding! After a moment of rattling the pendent set within Lan Qing's chest shattered, dissolving into motes of light that floated on the wind. They rode the eddies and gusts until they flitted into the space between Lan Qing's eyebrows. Suddenly, his aura changed. The energies he used as an Adept ceased altogether while the surge of protogenia rose. The tidal wave of energy filled them sensation that was difficult to put into words. A image slowly began to take shape.

Chapter 613: Codifying the Dharma

When the Pauper broke through, the image everyone saw was encoded in his bloodline, the icon of the Taming Dragon Arhat. It was the manifestation everything he had been taught.

For Lan Qing it was different. When his protogenia coalesced around him it revealed a solitary, illusory figure.

By now Lan Qing had already crossed the threshold and was a Paragon. He had achieved the dream of countless Adepts. From outside it looked effortless, but it was just beginning.

The soldiers below, cross-legged and silent, drank in the powers as they washed over them. The light was like a guide, opening a door to countless possibilities. Things that were faint and unclear before were suddenly brought into sharp clarity.

The God of Wisdom was bestowing his namesake upon them, it seemed. No matter the Adept, they all enjoyed stunning insight into their nature. At least in this way, Lan Qing's rise to Paragon was more beneficial than any that had come before.

Absolution! That was how Lan Jue described the breakthrough his brother had undergone. His powers were no longer wind or even wisdom as they had been when he was an Adept. That Lan Qing was gone.

It was prajna ¹! Lan Jue was sure that was the basis of his brother's breakthrough, wind was a vestigial power. Prajna was an underpinning facet of the Buddhist faith, which would explain the energies that flooded out of him. The gentle sense of connection with the universe was unparalleled.

So that's the road you've chosen, brother? Keep it up!

The golden aura around Lan Qing began to subside, and in fact his whole figure gradually became transparent. He looked like a crystal carving. Meanwhile the silhouette behind him was clearer.

Like him, it sat cross-legged in mid-air. A halo of light blazed in a circle

behind its head, and the image of a lotus flower bloomed beneath it. A Buddha! It wasn't clear yet, but at this point they could guess that Lan Qing was condensing his protogenia into the image of a Buddha.

Jue Di let his hands fall from his son's back. He looked on him with obvious surprise. It was coming to the most crucial moment, but Jue Di's assistance wasn't needed. It spoke to how deep Lan Qing's comprehension of protogenia was.

The ethereal chanting grew louder, sharper in their ears. Lan Qing's mouth moved with the guttural hum like he was reciting a mantra. He was as majesty and as lofty as a mountain, seated in the sky. His transparent form glittered as protogenia continued to gather around him.

The Clockmaker gasped. Beside her, the Wine Master's face wore a wry grin.

"I've been trying my whole life to achieve what he might succeed in doing right now," he said to her with a shake of his head.

The Clockmaker glanced his way. "I've never in my life seen anyone with more grasp of protogenia than this An Lun super soldier. And the dharma he's weaving already... terrific! The most comprehensive I've witnessed. If you put mine and Davis' together it still wouldn't be this complicated. Our paths were flawed from the beginning. At the moment you rise to Paragon the protogenia is enormous, pure. We didn't have the control necessary to take advantage of it. He was wise enough to use this flood of power to solidify his dharma. Frankly speaking, we may very well have another Jue Di in the making. What else could be expected from the man's son!"

A sigh caused the Wine Master to heave his shoulders. "Who would have thought we'd stumble upon it all the way out here? The ones to benefit the most aren't the Adepts. It's me and the Pauper. Lan Qing is showing up how to take the next step."

Yes indeed, Lan Qing was solidifying the image of his protogenia immediately, crafting his dogma. Disbelieving eyes were fixed on him, and every change in the environment around him.

The Wine Master had been stuck for many years, and this was precisely

what he longed to see. In truth he wasn't far from reaching Reflection of Heaven and Earth, he'd already figured out the characteristics of his protogenia. What did not have was a goal, or any thought of where he wanted to go. Originally simply breaking through to Paragon had been his goal. Back then the Photographer hadn't been around to provide guidance, and to this day he still struggled to make progress.

Witnessing this transformation with his own eyes was priceless. He watched the energies coalesce and solidify, the boundlessness of it. And yet it was commanded by principles, that much was clear. Although these truths were different for every Paragon, there were elements of similarity.

Of course, coming to insights oneself was much more effective and impactful than having them taught. By seeing the process in person it was sure to save the Wine Master a great deal of time and effort in continuing his own journey.

At present the only humans with a codified dharma were Jue Di, the Photographer, the Terminator, and the Epochrion. If Lan Qing succeeded in his attempts, he would immediately join the list higher than Satan or the Pontiff. Acquiring a dharma shot up a Paragon's strength dramatically.

For the Pauper, this was even more magical an opportunity. Having just broken through, he was still at his most sensitive to the flows of protogenia. It appeared as though Lan Qing's chosen dharma was similar to his as well. All of this could be applied to his process with very little modification. His first thought was his appreciation for Lan Jue. If the Jewelry Master hadn't had pressed him so hard to come, would he ever have found another opportunity like this? Even before considering the possibility of personal instruction by the great Jue Di, witnessing the birth of one's protogenic image was a once in a century chance.

Lan Qing's figure seemed less and less a part of their reality, even his shadow flickered on the verge of disappearing. When an Adept broke through their bodies became joined with protogenia, it filled every fiber of their being. In the creation of his dharma he was knitting the protogenia in specific patterns and then taking them back into himself.

The sheer amount of energy he was releasing was overwhelming, and it was beginning to destabilize his body. If Lan Qing failed to fully weave the protogenia it could grow catastrophically unstable and cause him tremendous harm. It was a risk, but the rewards were undeniable.

Just then, a pale turquoise light began to radiate from the center of Lan Qing's forehead. It was the light of Aeries. It swirled in front of him like a vortex, and by its light he changed. Everything slowed way down. His translucent form became a little clearer, more stable. The figure at his back continued to take shape.

Throughout the process, the ethereal hum of singing came from Lan Qing's lips. "Om – nan mo ba he wa de, sa er wa, duo er ga da, ba lie shao da na, luo zha, da ta he da ya, a er ha de, san mu ya san bu da ya, die ya ta. Om – shao da na, shao da na, sa er wa, ba bang, bi shao da na, xu die, bi xu die, sa er wa, ga er ma, bi shao da na, ye suo ha." 2

The strange sounds, the mystical vocalizing, although they couldn't understand the words they were thick with a sense of harmony. Fear, sorrow, pain and all other negative emotions were washed away. Everyone's soul was laid bare to themselves, revealing its purity and inclusion. A few couldn't help but prostrate themselves before the image of their commander.

"This is..." The Pauper stared wide-eyes, trailing off into silence.

The Wine Master shot him a reproachful glance. He feared the interruption might impact Lan Qing's process.

But the Pauper seemed nearly out of control. He immediately dropped to the floor and began to mutter. "The world purifying chant... that was the world purifying chant! His Dharma is... it's.. by the heavens! It's unbelievable!"

World Purifying Chant? What was that?

The Photographer, Clockmaker, and Wine Master were Paragons just as the Pauper. However, when it came to Buddhist ritual they didn't have the knowledge he possessed. However, by the Pauper's reaction alone they could tell this was a special chant. Somehow, it had to do with the creation

of his dharma.

There was a glint of uncertainty in the Photographer's eyes. She was at the level of Nirvana, but even so the waves of power from her adopted son had a clearly restrictive effect on her. Not suppression really, just a sort of separation.

The protogenia around Lan Qing blazed with light, streaking clearly through the air as they weaved intricate patterns. More protogenia was absorbed from the environment, purified and made part of the weave.

Jue Di smiled. He didn't laugh, or make a sound, but there was incredible pride in his eyes. He looked on as Lan Qing's form continued to solidify, along with the image of his dharma.

It was a Buddha, as expected, seated in full lotus posture. Upon its head shone the crown of five wisdoms. Half of its body was covered in bracelets and armlets of metal and jade, and its hands extended in a mudra of instruction. The index finger of its left hand was pointed up, while the palm of the right gripped it. The whole of its body was a resplendent white.

A rotating wheel of light appeared behind the Buddha's head. It flashed, and the light it emitted illuminated all things. A golden light gleamed brightly to meet and surpass it, landing upon the soldiers below then quickly painting the whole of An Lun's military base a heavenly gold.

Every eye on the base in all corners turned toward the light. It washed over them like a cleansing rain. Their various ailments and discomforts vanished. Soldiers watching the probes were shocked to note a pale golden light embracing the entire planet!

You could be sure they weren't the only ones to see the satellite images. The North constantly had their long-distance telescopes trained on An Lun. They knew everything that happened on the surface. This was sure to turn some heads.

However, no one cared. No efforts were made to hide it. The soldiers were all facing the source of that incredible light with hands pressed together in worship.

Lan Jue slowly opened his eyes and turned them to his brother and the glorious Buddha at his back.

*A final note from TJSS; 'heihei, have you guessed? I dropped a bunch of hints in this chapter.'

Chapter 614: Vairocana!

Obviously the giant Buddha was the image of Lan Qing's dharma. Suddenly, Lan Jue's eyes filled with shock. He had also suffered Jue Di's edification, and it'd prepared him with a working knowledge of the ancient Buddhist faith.

"This is... Vairocana dharmakaya !! How is this possible?" Jun Yongye's voice was in Lan Jue's ear, absent his usual calm. His audible shock confirmed Lan Jue's suspicions.

Vairocana was one of the primary buddhas of the ancient faith. He bore a status higher than any other. He was the dharmakaya, the true body of the Buddha. As a primordial Buddha he was a founding pillar upon which the faith rested, and sat at the center of the five wisdoms.

The Pauper remained cross-legged on the floor, and a golden aura flickered around his body. Everything about him seemed to change as the image of the Taming Dragon Arhat revealed itself. He pressed his hands together in respect toward the image of Vairocana.

Lan Jue looked up at his brother with a tight smile. Brother, is it wise to play at such great power? How am I supposed to catch up?!

Lan Qing had been paused at the peak of ninth level for a long while, three years so far as Lan Jue could remember. In that time he had purified himself, perfected himself to reveal the scene they witnessed now. His brother leapt passed the first degree of Paragon to immediately become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. And most amazing of all, his dharma followed Vairocana Buddha!

"How... how is this possible?" Jun Yongye's startled voice continued to demand.

Lan Jue replied. "Why shouldn't it be possible? What's the problem?"

A bitter mirth crept into Jun Yongye's voice. "Problem? There's a big problem. Do you know what it meant in the old days to coalesce the image of the dharmakaya?"

“What does it mean?” He asked.

“It’s the reincarnation of the Budda.”

“Wha...” Lan Jue’s eyes went wide. “That... isn’t real, is it? You’re saying my brother is the reincarnation of the Buddha? What about me?”

“Its impossibility is precisely why I find it strange!” Jun Yongye blithely commented. “The ancient faith has its roots in the oldest days. They hold that a Buddha has three kayas – bodies. All together they are nirmanakaya, or the physical body; sambhogakaya, their limitless spirit; and dharmakaya, the fundamental truth and our connection to it. Vairocana represents the last, and the most powerful. However, to my knowledge the Pure Lands of the buddhas disappeared when the realm of immortals did. How can we have a reincarnation if they no longer exist? It must have been latent in his blood, awakened once his cultivation was strong enough. It makes sense, but never would I have imagined that bloodline would be Vairocana dharmakaya. He has summoned the might of the greatest of buddhas. If he can step into the Womb Realm, then he will be as indomitable as the immortals who came before.”

Lan Jue’s own smirk spread wider. “So what sort of dharma do I need if I want to surpass my brother?”

Jun Yongye flatly began to list his options. “Celestial Master Yuan Shi, Celestial Master Lingbao, or Celestial Master Daode. No less than one of the three Pure Ones, or perhaps one of the Great Emperors. Enough of that nonsense. I return to sleep. I require silence.”

The sword-spirit’s reaction spoke volumes as to what Lan Qing was accomplishing. The other Paragons also looked on in stunned silence.

Suspended in air, Lan Qing slowly opened his eyes. They shimmered with a warm golden light. Through a small smile, the super soldier continued to deliver chants and charms. Gradually he slipped backward into the image of the Buddha behind him.

Vairocana’s eye’s opened, and his hands opened in a sign of acceptance. The whole base shook with a deep, throaty hum. Everyone below was awakened from their insights just as the great Buddha became a column

of golden light. Its ubiquitous glow hung over all of them for a long time before fading away.

When it did, Lan Qing appeared seated on the field among them. Only an hour had passed, but he seemed like an entirely different person. The chilly exterior was gone, replaced with an ineffable kindness.

“Ah-hahaha! Ahh Gautama, Gautama... I bet you didn’t guess my son would create your dharmakaya! It’s too much, oh it’s hilarious!” Jue Di’s booming laughter would be heard by the Pure Ones themselves if they still existed. He looked like he was on the verge of dancing.

Lan Qing simply smiled. He arose, only to turn toward Jue Di and bow. “I thank you father, for my success.”

Jue Di waved away the appreciation. “This had nothing to do with me, only your own hard work. You still need to stabilize your dharma, continue to gain insight into the nature of protogenia.”

“Yes,” Lan Qing replied respectfully.

The other Paragons gathered round. The Wine Master full of praise and admiration. “Congratulations, Fleet Admiral Lan.”

The Photographer made no effort to hide the beaming pride in her face. She lunged forward and wrapped him in a hug. “Good boy, you have a lot of promise. Right to the dharma, heh. That’s really something.”

The Clockmaker and Pauper in turn offered their congratulations to the new Paragon. Lan Jue met him with a helpless expression. “You’re not leaving me with a lot of opportunity here,” he complained.

His brother smiled softly. “You speak of opportunities. Everyone had their own path to follow. Do you know why I always work so hard?”

“Why?”

“Because when we were young, father always said my Talent was inferior to yours,” Lan Qing revealed. “If I didn’t always work hard, you would quickly get better than me.”

Lan Jue turned shocked eyes to Jue Di. “Is that true?”

Jue Di shrugged. "Of course. If you put forth half the effort your brother did we wouldn't still be waiting for you to make your own breakthrough."

The Clockmaker, Wine Master and Pauper felt uncomfortable being privy to the conversation. Was this man incapable of simply having a nice chat? How old was he...

Of course, none of them dared open their mouth in protest. The results of his parenting were right in front of them – Lan Qing was the youngest Paragon ever known, much less the youngest to become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

The Pauper looked around. "I'm afraid they're really going to need to reorder the Paragon list. Admiral Lan, how shall we address you?"

Lan Qing shook his head and looked at his father. "I haven't been able to pick one. I was hoping father could help me decide."

"How about Siddhartha 2," Jue Di offered.

Everyone looked at him in abashed powerlessness...

Lan Qing forced a smile.

Lan Jue chuckled and interjected. "Dad, let's settle on something a little more standard, you know..."

Jue Di grunted. "How is this not up to standard? We've got the Pope, Satan even. Why shouldn't he be called Siddhartha?"

Lan Jue was quickly losing ground. "Do you ever want grandchildren? What woman will sleep with him if he's got a name like Siddhartha?"

Jue Di clearly had less than savory reasons for choosing the name, but he stuck to them. "There's a reason. But remember kid, you've created the image of the Buddha, you aren't really his reincarnation. Don't let it influence our next generation!"

A tinge of embarrassment crept into Lan Qing's face. "Father, I've barely had time to deal with my own things. It's been so busy, I can't even –"

"Sooner or later." Jue Di didn't frame it as an option. "Now that you're a Paragon you'll notice difference. Thirty years will pass and you'll hardly

seem different at all, but that doesn't give you license to keep me waiting! If you come across a good opportunity you grab it kid, you hear me? A-Jue, you've got all those pretty girls around you, find one suitable for your brother."

Lan Jue shrunk under the instruction. "I am a pure man, alright! Anyway it's easy to find the right match for him. Any girl that can run three circuits around the planet has what it takes."

Lan Qing chuckled. "Stop your nonsense."

Jue Di interrupted. "Alright, A-Qing go rest. Stabilize your dharma as quickly as you can. You skipped a grade so you're bound to have weaknesses in your foundation. You'll need to discover what you're lacking quickly."

"Yes," he answered.

Lan Jue slithered up to Jue Di's side. "Now that you've taught my brother the dharma of Vairocana what am I supposed to do? Don't let him go yet, he still hasn't decided on a name."

Jue Di slapped a hand against his forehead. "It's age, I'm getting amnesia." Both Lan Jue and Lan Qing looked at their father with sharp eyes.

Luo Xianni giggled. "Alright, you two don't worry over nothing. He's as strong as a dragon and as nasty-tempered as a tiger. He's never dying."

Jue Di's face went slightly red. "Woman, have you never learned the word restraint?"

Sne sniffed derisively. "This old lady was plenty restrained when she was younger. It was a waste of time. Now pick a name for your son, alright? If you don't then I will."

Jue Di pondered for a moment. "Vairocana separates the darkness from the light. He gives rise to the beasts of the earth. His light neither gives life nor takes it away, and his brilliance blazes brighter than the sun. Thus he is also named the Light of Wisdom or the Radiant Light. This light covers and embraces all things through time and space, through morality it binds

them. It is as inseparable as day is to night, and its bounty is delivered to all the myriad sentient and non-sentient things of the universe. As the foundation of Buddhist faith, it is beautiful. The ‘Commentaries of the Mahavairocana Tantra’ states, ‘When the Light of Wisdom shines on the realms, the roots of virtue will grow and all endeavors shall succeed.’”

He paused for a moment, then continued. “If you insist that A-Qing’s name cannot surpass the Buddha’s, then we shall call him the Peerless Light.”

The Peerless Light? The thought it strange at first, but the name instantly called to mind the luminescence that had poured from Lan Qing during his breakthrough, and the bounty he delivered unto An Lun.

“No, that doesn’t sound any good.” Luo Xianni complained. “Peerless Light, might as well be ‘I am Awesome.’ That’s not suitable at all, can’t you think of something that sounds better?”

Jue Di narrowed his eyes. “Sounds better? You think of one, then.”

“It at least has to do with his dharma,” she snapped. “I don’t know, how about the Warrior Buddha? Or maybe ‘Great Sage, the Equal of Heaven.’ How do those sound, Jue Di.” 3

Jue Di grunted. “Not my ideas.”

Warrior Monk? Great Sage, Equal to Heaven? When they heard the names the other Paragons froze. For the first time they were beginning to get a glimpse into Jue Di’s dharma. 4

Chapter 615: Commander of the Eastern Forces

Even Lan Jue and Lan Qing, as Jue Di's children, didn't know what their father's dharma was. A strange look overcame the younger Lan. It would explain why his father had been so happy a moment ago. Wasn't the warrior Monk that one who was so long oppressed by the Buddhas? If that was Jue Di's dharma then his son's name and protogenic image was a sort of spite.

All signs pointed to this being the case. Jue Di was a master in the ways of Buddhism and the Dao. He was good at everything.

Luo Xianni thought for a moment. "Vairocana is the image of the Buddha's true self. We can call him the Emperor of Middle Heaven. It's more aggressive."

"No good! I still like the Peerless Light!" Jue Di grumbled.

Luo Xianni didn't care. "Emperor of Middle Heaven! What do you think A-Qing?"

"It's..." He was caught between a rock and a hard place. He didn't want to offend either.

Lan Jue was struck by inspiration. "There aren't any rules for a Paragon's name. How about this – we use both. His name will be: The Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven. Pretty good! It shows how strong my brother is."

Lan Qing looked at his brother as though betrayed. "Brat," he whined, "is this you helping me?"

"It's got an aggressive sound to it," the Pauper said approvingly.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni exchanged a sideways glance. Neither one wanted to give ground to the other.

Jue Di eventually broke down. "Fine! So it is."

Another sniff was earned from Luo Xianni. "It'll serve. At least my half

of the name makes up for your lack of creativity.”

Jue Di looked to Lan Qing. “Little Qing, what’s with that face? You don’t like the name we picked for you?”

“No, it’s great.” Lan Qing forced a smile but they could almost hear his teeth grinding.

It was true there weren’t any rules for Paragons names, but they at least tried to keep to brevity; Cosmagus, Terminator, Jue Di. Meanwhile, his name...

Thanks to the unreliable decision making of his parents, the mighty new Paragon was given a name – the Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven. Lan Jue quietly affirmed to himself that it was integral he had his own name ready when the time came. He absolutely did not want to go poking around in his parents’ brains.

Lan Qing then broke into a smile as he thought of something. “Father, mother, I really think this lengthy name is exceptional. When A-Jue breaks through I think he needs something along the same lines. Something to designate us as brothers, strong and unified.”

Lan Jue’s eyes nearly rolled out of his head. When did his brother get so good at scheming?!

Jue Di chortled darkly. “Oh I’ve already thought of his. I agreed with yours because his name is just as long!”

Kill me! Lan Jue’s heart lamented. He was going to side like a moron.

Lan Qing never took his eyes from his brother, and never let the smile slip from his face. “I should go cultivate, honored Paragons. I take my leave.” He bid farewell to them all and left.

When Jue Di saw Lan Jue’s beleaguered face he spoke up. “Come with me, brat. Did you see how well your brother did? Relax, your dad’s thought up a good dharma for you as well. In the future you’ll fare just as well.”

Lan Jue’s eye sparkled. “You’ve thought of one for me? It can’t be any worse than Lan Qing’s!”

“Of course not,” Jue Di replied proudly. “You think I’d be cheap with my own son? I figured it out last night.”

Lan Jue’s excited face suddenly seized. Last night? Are dharmas just picked out of the air like that?

Jue Di saw his face, reached out, and gave him a firm smack on the back of the head. “You dare doubt your father? Once I knew you had the thunder essence I was able to pick out your most suitable path. But if you want to succeed with this dharma, you need to start absorbing it now. That’s the only way to get the most out of the thunder essence. Come with me.”

Jue Di took Lan Jue from the field, and others also went their separate ways. The wine Master and Pauper were especially quick to return to their quarters. They were eager to meditate on what they’d learned from watching Lan Qing. The soldiers from both companies were meditating quietly, reaping the tremendous benefits from the light of Vairocana and the creation of a dharma. Overall, much more helpful for them all than the Pauper’s breakthrough.

There were only a few soldiers who were granted epiphanies. All of them, though, had their souls washed clean by the purifying light. Their body’s energies were cleansed by it, preparing them for future advancement.

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“What? A change on An Lun?” The Terminator’s face drew tight when he got the news from his subordinates.

“That golden light didn’t release any form of energy we could read. For a light like that to appear without any sort of readable signature is very strange. So congress wanted your assurances. They wanted to know if you could determine what that was, and if it had to do with Adepts in some way.”

“Let me look at the data,” he replied.

The holographic projectors hummed as they came online. The barren

rock that was An Lun appeared in the air before him. After a moment the whole planet was covered in a soothing golden glow. It's peaceful bearing was evident even through the video.

"Protogenia!" The Terminator gasped. Surprise was clear in his face. "This is the protogenia released by a Paragon, and if it can cover a whole planet it means they've reached Reflection of Heaven and Earth. There are two known Paragons of that level – me and the Epochrion, and the Epochrion's dharma does not look like that. It wouldn't be that color. Could it mean one of the Skyfire Paragons has risen a degree? That's the only determination I can make without more information. We can assume one of the Paragons has assumed personal command of An Lun. We must be careful. Bring them my recommendations."

"Yes, sir." The subordinate snapped to attention then rushed off to deliver the message.

The Terminator glowered at the slowly turning holograph. The Clockmaker's departure had been a deeply wounding blow for the Great Conclave. However, she had always warned him that the day may come when she would leave. Now she was gone, and how could he have stopped her? He couldn't have. Although he commanded more destructive power, her specialty was time. If she wanted to leave, he was powerless to stop her.

The unprecedented rise of Skyfire Avenue continued. Now they were welcoming another Paragon to new heights of power, though he didn't know the specifics. They had also been the ones to provide the worlds of humanity with integral information on the aliens. The North was constantly sending patrols to gather what they could, but they always failed to return. Their disappearances only proved the Avenue's information true. The three alien planets were on their doorstep.

Planets that could move through space at will and swallow whole worlds. The concept was almost more terrifying than he could put into words. As the leader of the North, all of that fear and pressure landed squarely on his shoulders.

Lan Qing's prestigious ascension made confidential by the East. Only the highest members of government were away of the details. They had prepared to make him Fleet Admiral, but in a break from tradition they canceled that ceremony.

Now, Lan Qing bore the title of standing member of the War Committee, Four-Star General and Commander of the Eastern Armed Forces. There was no higher military rank.

There were relatively few Adepts who promised their lives in military service. These men and women were blessed with abilities that outstripped their normal human counterparts, and the military imposed restrictions on that. Thus, the stronger the Adept the less likely they were to suffer someone else's commands. The thousand or so Adepts of the Bloodiron Khans were painstakingly sought out from the entire Eastern army. Even for all this, though, they still didn't have the individual strength of Star Division's fighters.

'Happy' didn't even begin to describe how Lan Qing's breakthrough made the Eastern military feel. Lan Qing had already been their God of Wisdom, their super soldier. Now as a Paragon, his prestige and subsequently his followers were sure to grow. It was impossible to say how much this would ultimately benefit the Eastern Alliance. Moreover, he skipped the beginning stage of Paragon. What could this mean for them?

Few Adepts chose a life of politics, but lawmakers were well-versed in their world. They knew that if Lan Qing was a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, he rivaled the Great Conclave's leader, the Terminator. Perhaps not quite as strong, but at least on the same level.

Just as the golden light spread all over An Lun, the implications of it sent shockwaves through the Eastern government. Lan Qing's meteoric rise to military dominance was quickly decided by the government once word got to them.

However whether it was Lan Qing's breakthrough or his new title, all of it was kept a strict military secret. They would only reveal it at the perfect

moment, when the truth was for their benefit.

Three days and three nights after Jue Di took Lan Jue away, the boy's father emerged. He told them Lan Jue would be sequestered away for cultivation, though it would not be for long. Jue Di estimated another three days.

Lan Qing also shut himself away in order to solidify the foundation of his power. He would need time to make sure he was on stable footing.

The Pauper found time to get instruction from Jue Di, along with the Driver. The mighty Paragon was not prudent with his knowledge, and the two benefited greatly from his help.

As for the Clockmaker and Wine Master, Luo Xianni served as their instructor. As the strongest Dimensional Adept in human history, she was better suited to teach them the mysteries of space-time.

Chapter 616: What is Lan Jue's Dharma?

The Wine Master learned the most from his experience. At last he saw how the creation of a dharma was performed, he just needed time to let it sink in. Once they returned to Skyfire Avenue, he was determined to give it a try.

The Adepts of the Bloodiron Khans and Star Division completed their meditations after seven days. Star Division's soldiers were particularly helped, since an Adept's ability to comprehend protogenia was directly related to their individual strength. Their depth of understanding depended on how much they could control.

Fourth level was the minimum the Bloodiron Khans would accept. Comparatively Skyfire Avenue demanded sixth level. Based on that alone there was a significant difference in quality. However, the nature of Vairocana's light was enlightening for everyone.

Lan Jue sat in meditation for three entire days. His father's instruction had opened a door to a new world of understanding.

Dharma was a reflection of one's own protogenia. Understanding a Paragon's dharma gave insight into their underpinning truths, the trend in their protogenia. Lan Jue had never considered these matters, he assumed being a Paragon was a straight path up. He was waiting to deal with it until after he broke through.

Lan Qing's display was a motivating force, however. He hadn't known that this pure protogenia could be coalesced in a situation like that.

One step strides the sky – his brother cast a very long shadow! He commanded every ounce of natal protogenia, wasting none of it. Easy street to the next level of Paragon.

But what dharma? That was the most important factor.

Lan Qing's Vairocana dharma was clearly a middle finger to the old gods from Jue Di, but it was already inherent in his brother's blood. He succeeded because the truths had been passed down in his DNA. Dharma

was the single most important factor of a Paragon's ultimate strength, so one could imagine what awaited Lan Qing.

Traditionally, Paragons took the protogenic energies of their breakthrough and channeled them into themselves. This remoulded and evolved their Disciplines into Domains, catapulting them into stratospheric levels of power.

However, this limited the path of future growth for these new super humans. The struggle for insights became harder and harder.

Jue Di was able to become Jue Di by coalescing pure, natal protogenia into an dominant dharma – the Great Sage, Equal Of Heaven 1. After he formed the Warrior Buddha dharma, he achieved Nirvana within ten years. Five years after that – the Infinite!

Once Lan Qing had reached the peak of ninth level, Jue Di had begun to impart his knowledge of dharma creation. It took three years of careful cultivation, which resulted in his meteoric rise today.

Lan Jue was not at the peak of ninth rank, but his insights into protogenia were many. He had been changed by the thunder essence as well, and its echoes of empyreal lightning. Jue Di used this knowledge to puzzle out the most suitable dharma for his second son. Something that would fuse well with his Taoist training and thunderbolt Discipline. He would even use the immortal qi of the thunder essence for its basis.

Lan Jue's greatest hurdle lately was the search for a Path. He had experienced so much, there were too many options for him to see clearly which served him best. In three days, Jue Di solved this problem for him, ensuring his future would be smoother.

Three days of consideration opened Lan Jue's eyes to truth. This was the benefit of having a wise master. Many were the torturous and wicked roads, and if Lan Jue had chosen himself he would never have found the right way. He would have no reference. But that was not the case. A fortuitous meeting with Jue when he was young, the things he was taught, the treasures he uncovered... things that were useless to the world at large, but priceless to an aspiring Paragon.

A clear blue light shone from his eyes, illuminating the room. Motes of silver danced on waves of deadly energy. After absorbing only a small amount, already Lan Jue's Discipline had undergone a significant transformation. Completely transformation would require time, but the absorption of the yin-yang lightning was speeding up. Once his Discipline became the yin-yang lightning, he would dissolve the thunder essence faster. Breaking through to Paragon could be expected soon after.

Lan Jue was most surprised to see how it affected Qianlin. With the accepting nature of her powers, it didn't matter what energies flowed through them during joined cultivation. She was able to use whatever methods he was to improve herself. It was a burden off his shoulders, since he didn't have to worry about her keeping up.

The blue light faded away until everything in the room returned to normal. Lan Jue unfurled his legs and rose to stretch. It'd been days since he awoke from meditation, but even still the thought of his brother's success inspired him. Once Lan Qing mastered his dharma, it was unlikely there would be any Paragon that could contend with him! He shuddered to think of what his three mantras could do then.

I need to make sure A-Cheng and A-Li hear about this, Lan Jue thought. I shouldn't be the only one to feel the pressure of falling behind. He trusted both of them implicitly, and didn't fear either of them letting his brother's success slip outside of their circle.

He dialed in Chu Cheng's number. Soon his friend's lazy voice answered. "Hello, this is Chu Cheng. I'm cultivating and can't answer your call right now. If you have something that needs my attention please leave a message, but it will be a while before I get to it. Sorry."

Cultivating? A-Cheng was still locked away? He hadn't spoken to either of his close friends since returning to Skyfire, but he would have thought Chu Cheng would have awakened by now.

He tried Hua Li's number and got a similar result.

Lan Jue couldn't help but smile. Could this mean his distant brothers had also come to some realization of themselves? First my brother and

now them. It's starting to look like I'm at the back of the line!

Unfortunately he couldn't stay here and cultivate. The alien menace still loomed large and humanity needed as much information as they could. He still had a job to do. They'd already spent six days on An Lun, and every day the scouting mission had been on his mind.

He stepped out of his small dorm and got in touch with the Wine Master and Su Xiaosu. Lan Qing was still meditating and was unreachable. Soon afterward all of the Paragons converged, including Jue Di and Luo Xianni.

"Are you ready to go?" Jue Di asked.

Lan Jue nodded back at him. "We need to head in for a recon mission on the alien forces, and get back as quickly as we can with some information. We need eyes on them if we want to be prepared for their next attack."

Su Xiaosu was definitely going with him. Her knowledge of the Starfields was unparalleled, and that would come in useful whether they were advancing or retreating. His Amazons were coming as well along with their resident tech genius, the Accountant. This would serve as their base scouting party.

The Wine Master and Epochrion had also pledged to come for security. The Pauper was also committed. He had just become a Paragon and was itching to try out his new powers.

"You don't need to come, mom. You stay here with dad." Lan Jue told her. He didn't know what she did it, or maybe it was Jue Di, but lately the two were as inseparable as new lovers.

"Of course that's not ok. I'm going with you." Luo Xianni's refusal was immediate. "Those aliens are very dangerous. The only way I'm not going to worry is if I'm with you. You don't call me mom for no reason! I'm responsible than others I could name."

"If you don't mock me, does it hurt?" Jue Di asked, honestly curious.

She gave him a mocking stare in reply. "I have years of complaints backed up."

Jue Di just sighed. He knew that in a war of words, Luo Xianni would beat him handily every time. She had absolutely no filter, anything could come out of her mouth.

“I’ll go as well.” Jue Di said.

“What?” Lan Jue looked at his father with surprise. He hadn’t anticipated his father would want to come.

Jue Di explained. “A-Qing has completed his breakthrough. He is more than capable of protecting himself now, there’s no need for me here. I’m curious how strong these aliens are.” A cold, hard light shone behind the ultimate Paragon’s eyes. A flood of murderous intent hung over everyone, making them shiver.

Both the Epochrion and the Wine Master were thrilled by the news. With Jue Di with them safety was no longer a concern. Also, Jue Di’s power was known to them only by disreputable reports. It was said he was able to destroy whole planets by himself. IF that were true, what was to stop the man from dealing a killing blow to the aliens while they were out?

Lan Jue was, of course, ecstatic. Their party was a small but immensely powerful one. In fact, you couldn’t find a more capable team in all of human space. The Paragons with them spanned the gamut; one who walked the Infinite, one immersed in Nirvana, one Reflection of Heaven and Earth and two within the Realm of Protogenia. After them came a slew of ninth-ranked Adepts. At least in terms of individual ability, this was humanity’s dream-team.

“Don’t forget me! I’m coming!” The Driver was late getting the news, and came trotting over to them.

“You shouldn’t,” Lan Jue said. “With all of us gone the Star Division needs a commander.”

The Driver was firm. “No, I’m going. Star Division still has the Coffee Master and Bartender, that’s good enough. Besides we’re just leaving them here to drill.”

Of course he would be determined to go. After only a few days of instruction from Jue Di he felt the difference. Just like before, he wasn't going to let this opportunity pass him by. Not to mention, he and Lan Jue still had work to do with the yin-yang lightning. This trip was going to take some time, perhaps enough time for them to complete the transformation of their Disciplines.

Chapter 617: Together

Jue Di had told the Driver about the yin-yang lightning. He'd said that by its nature, it was typically only used from the outside. That meant it was used for battle and not normally transferred into one's own powers. However, because Lan Jue absorbed the thunder essence it had begun to evolve the nature of his energies. Now it was more like a derivative of empyreal lightning, far outstripping the capabilities of their taiyin and taiyang thunderbolts. It was small, but the wisps of mystical power stuck to them like glue, feeding them what they needed to grow as Adepts.

The Driver was a strict believer of 'never let an opportunity pass.' The things he learned from Jue Di, and the things he was accomplishing with Lan Jue strengthened him beyond expectations. Becoming a Paragon one day didn't have to be a dream!

"Fine, if you feel that strongly then we're all going together," Lan Jue answered.

Lan Qing was not with his troops, but they were taken care of. The Coffee Master and the Bartender were left behind to care for Star Division while Lan Jue was gone. Rest was important, but they had also come to test themselves against the mighty Eastern army and learn from their training methods. The two groups were slated to drill together for mutual improvement. Everyone would return to Skyfire Avenue together once Lan Jue and his team returned.

Before long, Zeus-1 was tearing through the sky like a blue hawk. A tail of water vapor traced its exit. Lan Jue had a soft-spot for this particular ship. They'd been through a lot together.

It wasn't as spacious as Majesty, but there were a few crew quarters to take advantage of. Jue Di and Luo Xianni would have one, obviously. The Pauper had helped himself to one already for cultivation, while Lan Jue and the Driver needed space to continue their process. With Jue Di present they didn't need to be afraid of losing control.

That left one room open, and two Paragons; the Wine Master, and the

Clockmaker.

Lan Jue gave his old friend a knowing look when they realized the problem. The Wine Master stammered a response. "Perhaps I should find the Pauper, squeeze in with him."

But Lan Jue's gaping expression stopped him. This old man was the leader of Skyfire Avenue, a master of space and time. How was he so stupid when it came to women? How was he not losing his mind over this chance that fell in his lap?

The Clockmaker shot him a look. "You can come with me. You and the Pauper have different Disciplines, I'll help you find the road. When we go back you can try to create a dharma, too."

"Huh?" The Wine Master's head shot up as he looked her way. The Clockmaker had already turned around and was heading back to her – their – new room.

"Will you stop being so stupid?" Lan Jue looked at his friend with resigned irritation. "How can you ever hope to even hold a lady if you keep acting like this? You'll be a bachelor the rest of your life."

"You don't understand anything," the Wine Master fired back. "She is a woman of high moral integrity. She has never agreed to contact with a man before. I respect her for that."

Lan Jue was losing patience. "Crap. When you're chasing women you need courage, caution, and a thick skin. Respect is when you make them your wife. Until then the greatest respect you can show a women is how much you like her. Don't waste time pussy-footing around, you've got to get out there!"

His voice was loud, enough so that the others could hear. He spied a pair of hard, sharp eyes sweep back toward him.

"Ehm...." He felt the bitter, soft, but indignant eyes pierce him. Then he ran. Personal safety was more important than yelling at the Wine Master.

The Wine Master couldn't help but chuckle as he watched him flee. It didn't hide the racing of his own heart. Did she... did she really invite me

to cultivate with her in her room? He thought to himself. Like in most ships, cabins were very small. Space was limited, so two people together...

He took several deep breaths, then followed after the Clockmaker with resolute strides. Lan Jue's words had motivated him.

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"That nephew of yours is rubbish." Jue Di was lying on the best of his cabin, frowning at nothing.

Luo Xianni was lying beside him with her head on his arm. She laughed. "You aren't? Who was it that made me wait so many years? You relax, when we get back I'll stay at Skyfire Avenue. Whatever you want to do, I won't stop you. I can't ask you to give up your freedom." She always knew in her heart that she would never completely control this man. It was better to stay close, and be together for as long as they could. At least she could see him from time to time.

Jue Di pulled her close and sighed. "Maybe I really am getting old. I'm less interested in freedom these days, more afraid of being lonely. You know me, with my character do you think I'd be calling my sons back? I started to miss them, and discovered that all along I was missing someone else too. I let you down."

Luo Xianni's body trembled. She looked up and stared into his face. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, that those words were coming from Jue Di's mouth.

After so many years she knew this old man well, or she thought she did. This wasn't something the Chi Bupang she knew would say. She gently ran her fingers across his face. "You're not old," she said, "you'll never be old."

He smiled at her, at the warmth she was giving him. "I've been too stubborn, and it's cost me a lot of wonderful things. Things get clearer as you age. When this alien business is over, come wander with me. We'll explore the universe together, find a nice planet for our kids. Maybe a place like Earth, rich in original qi – a trace of the immortal realm."

She watched the determination rise in his eyes. “You... don’t mind me coming?”

He took her face in his hands. “So long as you don’t abandon us, I want you to be the real mother of my children.”

Luo Xianni bit her lip to fight back the flood emotion, but lost. She threw her arms around her neck and pulled him close.

She had waited for these words. Waited for so many years!

Jue Di laughed. Now he looked back at his obstinance and thought it was stupid. He preferred this feeling, warm and sweet. With her it felt like he had a home.

Ever since running into Luo Xianni on Ziluo, he’d felt out of sorts. He’d raised Lan Jue and Lan Qing, taught them, but since they left he’d been living on his own. He had always been a lone wolf, but emotions were a universal trait. He was just as susceptible to missing his children, but he couldn’t tell them.

He’d known all about Lan Jue’s pain when Hera died. At the time he thought it was weak, it made him angry. He wasn’t going to reward such weakness with his attention. It took years, watching Lan Jue pull himself out of it step by step, hearing about him from Lan Qing. Only until his amazing performance at the Great Adept Tournament did Jue Di realize how much he missed his family.

He’d raised those two boys himself from the time they were children. They were his boys as much as they were his disciples, and he treated them like it. He was stern and unforgiving, but now as he got older he saw how these two young men fed his soul. Now, watching them continuing to improve every day was enough.

Jue Di longed for a closer relationship with them, but he knew it wasn’t in the cards. Who knew the strongest human ever recorded could be so sentimental.

But that day when Luo Xianni showed up with his son, it was strange. Something more appeared between him and his son when she was

around. He'd heard someone say it in the factory once, and immediately recognized what it was. Without a mother, they never felt like a family. It had been an awakening for him. He saw the truth, a woman was the glue that held a family together.

Later, as he learned more about Luo Xianni and his son, and how they worked together, he saw everything clearly. She made him so angry sometimes he couldn't speak, but he found he liked the life he led now. They spat barbs and their kids managed the casualties – that was family.

The words he told Luo Xianni sounded simple, but they weren't. They were the result of long hours of thought, and difficult sacrifices. Now, with her wrapped up in his arms, he had no regrets. On the contrary, he was overjoyed with his decision.

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That cabin was full of sweetness and honey. Next door the room was silent.

When the Wine Master stepped inside he spotted the Clockmaker already seated on one side of the bed. Her eyes were closed, like she was meditating.

He wavered for a moment, but steeled his resolve and walked over to stand in front of her.

“Ah, ehm... I'm here.” He stammered.

Her eyes fluttered open. Nothing was said, she just looked at him with smoky eyes.

Her look seemed to put him on edge. The Wine Master straightened. “If you feel like this is uncomfortable, I can leave.”

She let him flounder for a moment, then turned her eyes to the side. The Wine Master, crestfallen, turned to go.

“Get back here!” The Clockmaker's voice was harsh.

“Ah?” He turned around to face her.

She glared back. “The Jewelry Master was right. Really a waste.”

The Wine Master grinned awkwardly. "I'm sorry, I... I'm afraid."

The Clockmaker paused. "What are you afraid of? That I'm going to eat you?"

The Wine Master sighed. "I'm afraid you'll leave. The last time you did, you were gone for years. My heart ached every time I walked passed that empty store. Missing you was a curse. I couldn't focus to cultivate. The only time I could think about you was when I drank. The beauty of the wine always reminded me of you. I developed a taste for the richness of it, and the way it dulled the mind. I missed you every day, so every day I would drink.

*A note from TJSS; The fervor of youth alive in the hearts of the old!
Even the Wine Master has his spring. Yes, for the Wine Master's Spring, I beg! 1

Chapter 618: I'll Never Leave Again

"I never thought you'd come back. Do you have any idea how happy I was to find out I was wrong? I didn't touch a drop of wine. I just stood in the winery, watching you go back and forth on your errands. I told myself no matter what, I wouldn't let you leave again. That's why I'm afraid, because if I offend you you may leave Skyfire Avenue. You might leave me. So long as I get to see you every day, that's enough for me.

"I came with you even though there is a lot to keep me busy on the Avenue. I realized I can't go a day without seeing your face."

The Clockmaker was silent, and dropped her head. "I'm sorry. Now I understand why you haven't created your dharma, even though you were always more talented than I was. It was... because of me?"

He smiled. "This isn't important. You need to be in the right frame of mind to create a dharma, and confidence. I'm just an alcoholic, I don't deserve a dharma."

The Clockmaker lifted her hand and extended it toward the Wine Master. He looked at her in surprise, but this time did not hesitate. He slipped his hand into hers.

She pulled him closer, next to her.

"Time may be my realm, but that doesn't mean I can control it. If I could I would make time flow backwards. I can't say what was right or wrong, all I can do is promise you that I'll never leave again."

The Wine Master smiled, his first real, satisfied smile in years. There was real joy in his face.

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Zeus-1 was on its way at top speed. The Blinding Stone was activated, engaging their cloaking systems. They didn't have to worry about being spotted by any radar. Lan Jue was very vigilant, especially since they'd once narrowly missed the main blast of a Bastion ship heading a similar route.

After two day of travel, Lan Jue returned to the pirate haven they'd vacated only ten days earlier. Su Xiaosu guided them through the least dangerous passes of the Starfield's shifting landscape. Lan Jue and his team inched closer to the galaxy's heart.

Lin Guo guo, the Psychic Tide, was seated in Zeus-1's captain's chair with a helmet pressed to her head. She channeled her perception through the ship and out into space around them. No one knew if the alien planets were still here, or where they might suddenly appear.

It wasn't unthinkable for them to stumble upon the enemy at any moment. That was their greatest fear.

Zeus-1 reduced speed, choosing safety over efficiency. The slower the ship ran, the less it affected its environment and the smaller its energy signature. With the Blinding Stone they were practically invisible.

Lan Jue was by the ship's controls. Once they'd entered into the Starfields he couldn't keep his concentration on cultivation. He had to be ready to react the instant danger reared its head.

Asteroids flitted by their windows constantly. Every few seconds one of the lumbering giants would pass at several thousands of kilometers per hour. If it weren't for a crack pilot and someone who knew the lay of the land, they'd be in real danger of being smashed to bits.

The asteroids varied in their gravitational pull. It was important to know how much distance was needed to clear them. It was not common knowledge.

"How far are we from where the three main planets used to be?" Lan Jue asked Su Xiaosu.

Her voice was soft. "At our current speed, about a day and a half."

"We aren't in a rush," Lan Jue explained. "Safety first."

"Aye." She nodded.

The Driver came walking over with a whisky glass in hand. He handed another one to Lan Jue. "Relax. We aren't going to run into the aliens so

quick.”

Lan Jue didn't even have time to refuse before Xiaosu's voice interrupted sharply. “Boss, look!”

His head snapped to the radar screen. There was a red dot rapidly closing in on their location.

“Analysis says there's an eighty-six percent chance it's alive,” the Accountant cried.

Lan Jue drained the contents of his whisky glass in a single gulp, then turned to the Driver. “You're a goddamn harbinger!”

The Driver shrugged back at him. “You're going to blame this on me? I wasn't serious!”

They bantered, but Lan Jue's mind was sharp. His eyes were plastered to the windows. He didn't have to wait long before it showed up on the horizon.

The purple, shuttle-shaped body lurched into view. It was one of the carrier aliens, like the one they killed before.

This one looked bigger, and in his experience size was a good indicator of strength for their species.

“It's really a damn alien. You want me to deal with it?” Excitement was clear in the Driver's eyes. He and Lan Jue already had a basic grasp of yin-yang lightning, and a tenth of his energy had been transformed already. He wanted to know the limits of this combined thunderbolt power.

But Lan Jue shook his head. “We mustn't act in haste and alert the enemy to our presence. It doesn't know we're here, so we avoid it. It looks like the alien planets have chosen to use the center of the Starfields as a base. They're sending out feelers to find other life-bearing planets in the system.”

Their mission was reconnaissance, not elimination. They had to focus on bringing back all the information they could about their foe. An alien that size was sure to have a crystal, but Lan Jue didn't want to gamble their

mission for greed.

A host of nervous eyes watched the alien slip through space. Its torpedo-like shape convulsed and contracted as it flew. Like the one before it, it belched plumes of gas to propel itself forward. It could reach several times the speed of light that way. Soon it was passing close by Zeus-1.

It was none the wiser. Lan Jue called out. "Maintain normal speed."

"Aye!"

"Boss, be careful. I can sense a consciousness." Lin Guoguo warned.

Her boss' eyes lit up. "Speed up!"

Su Xiaosu and the Accountant burst into action. Zeus-1's engines flared as they were opened wide and shot off at three times speed. A dark purple beam of light tore through the space they'd just vacated. Cold crept up everyone's spine.

With these Paragons gathered they could survive with a broken ship, but they only had one. It was a dangerous situation to be in, and one Lan Jue wanted to avoid.

The Driver, his jaw set, turned and entered into one of the ejection capsules.

"Be careful!" Lan Jue called at him.

"Relax!" He growled back.

Zeus-1's attack capabilities were limited. Lan Jue had tried to use them to fight these aliens before to little effect. Their abilities as Adepts were far more damaging.

"Personnel cannon, preparing first stage."

"Preparing second stage!"

"Third stage. Fire!"

A beam of light fired off the bow of Zeus-1 just as the ship veered to the side. It narrowly avoided another one of the alien's attacks.

As the Driver raced through space his body was covered in an aura of

silver light. In the next instant he was safely cradled in the cockpit of his mecha, Thunderclap.

The suit had undergone enhancements since the God Battles. Its hull was thicker, and no longer the same blinding bright color. Now it was bulky and dark.

Two rays of white light radiated from the machine's eyes. It changed direction in midair and shot right for the alien carrier. A massive spear was gripped in its metal hand. It was white, and as the mecha held it a corona of power radiated three meters around the tip.

Lan Jue watched carefully from the bridge. He wasn't too worried for the Driver's safety. There were five Paragons on board ready to assist at a moment's notice. They could dispatch of this problem with a wave of their hand.

As he watched the light blazing around Thunderclap's spear, he nodded silently to himself. The Driver had improved quite a lot recently. That light was a sign of his control. Before his Discipline was taiyin based, but now he could draw out the lightning element and condense it into its essence. It was a wonderful achievement!

The carrier alien sensed Thunderclap's approach but didn't pay any mind to the tiny creature. Its lumbering body was still heading for Zeus-1.

Lan Jue turned to Ling Guoguo. "Analyze the consciousness you felt. How was it able to find us?"

Lin Guoguo replied. "It was a special kind of psychic pulse, sort of like sonar. It seems able to resonate with our own psyches, and it's strong. It doesn't appear to do any damage, but it's wide-reaching. It didn't see us, but it did sense us and attack."

Lan Jue frowned in thought. No wonder all the earlier recon missions failed. They had top of the line cloaking equipment, but so long as they were people on board, the aliens could sense their consciousness. But what about the unmanned drones? There must be another reason they failed.

As his mind raced, Thunderclap clashed with their alien foe. Being ignored by the beast had sent him into a rage. His mecha became a beam of intense light as he picked up speed, enough to overtake the monster and bar its path. Thunderclap stabbed with its blazing spear.

Poof! The weapon cut into the alien like there was no resistance. Ripples of silver light undulated out from the wound. The resulting explosion flung the enormous alien away.

Chapter 619: The Might of Lightning

The alien roared in pain. Its massive body was well-defended, by the Driver's taiyin lightning swept right passed its guard. More proof that an Adept's Discipline was the antithesis of these creatures.

These alien monsters consumed energy to survive and evolve. Adepts were similar in that their Disciplines relied on vital energies. However, the aliens harmed that which they took in.

The creature's whole body shook and a purple aura sprang up around it. Thunderclap was quick, retreating quickly a thousand meters away. Thunderclap could outpace Thor when it came to speed.

The Driver brought his mecha back around, and pointed his glimmering spear at his target. The machine was surrounded by light, but the tip of its weapon wasn't the same as it had been. The light condensed and became translucent at the blade, like a purple gemstone. Flickers of lightning buzzed within.

He was going to try.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes and paid close attention. He was also eager to know what measure of damage the Driver's combined lightning could inflict on their foe.

The carrier alien contracted, then with a burst of air thrust itself toward Thunderclap. Its nightmarish maw opened wide, revealing a hell-scape of razor-sharp teeth.

The Driver didn't try to escape. A blinding electric light erupted from behind him, and Thunderclap was launched forward at top speed. As he raced ahead the light of his spear brightened until it hung over Thunderclap like a membrane of light. It parted the air in front of the mecha, creating a protective wake.

From afar all they could see was the purple light vanish into the creature's body. They held their breath, but didn't have to wait long. In a blink the light revealed itself again bursting out of the alien's far side, then

slowly faded into the darkness of space.

The carrier's inertia sent it sailing into the distance. Soon it was almost too far to see clearly.

But then thunderous blasts, loud enough to wake the dead, broke the silence of the cosmos. A purple explosion blinded the eye. It was so fierce that all of the asteroids around it were disintegrated. A patch of clear space was left where the alien had been.

Thunderclap lowered its spear. It hung heroically in the middle of space, with the purple light of its handiwork reflected off its metal body.

"Why the hell are you posing? Get the crystal." Lan Jue's irritated voice interrupted the Driver as he was basking in how awesome he was.

"Oh... I forgot. I was tryin' to be handsome." The Driver cleared his throat then rushed over to the site of the explosion.

Back on the ship's bridge, Lan Jue peered over the destruction and nodded his head. The yin-yang lightning was as strong as was promised. Strong enough to overcome an alien's defenses.

As the aliens' strength corresponded to their size, it was easy to imagine how strong an interstellar carrier would be. However, with the power of their combined thunderbolt Disciplines, the Driver split the beast from head to heel. Then to rub salt in the wounds, the monster detonated in an explosion to rival the death of a star. Overall, more impressive than the fireworks from the one Lan Jue killed.

Few were the men and women who saw these beasts and lives. Most ended up like the many scouts or the North's Seventh Fleet – devoured. The alien threat had always existed, but the war was only just starting. Humans still understood so little, but Lan Jue was growing wiser with each encounter. He could see that Adepts, more than the technology of man, were the most crucial weapons in the fight for their survival.

Take the Driver as an example. He was a powerful Adept, with exceptional piloting ability, amplified by a great mecha. He could take on a battleship and win. Take that same battleship and pit it against a carrier

alien. The battleship had a good chance, but the Driver could put it down in half the time.

All of this data was priceless. The Accountant was quick to record everything he could for analysis. In the coming war, scores of soldiers like the Driver would be needed. This information would be used to train Star Division to fill that need.

“Boss, there was a massive psionic spike, something’s searching in this area. We should already be able to see it.” Lin Guoguo called over.

Lan Jue’s heart skipped a beat. He shouted at the Driver through the ship’s coms. “Get back as fast as you can, there are more coming.” He had to remind everyone that they were a recon squad. If they exposed themselves here, the losses would outweigh the gains.

The Driver urged Thunderclap back to the ship at top speed. The tell-tale purple flicker of a vital crystal pulsed in its grip. As he was boarding Zeus-1 specks of purple light flashed in the distance. They were getting bigger, and heading right for the ship’s location.

Lan Jue sucked in a breath. The radar showed at least three hundred of them, of all sorts. Some of them were over a thousand meters long.

“We’re surrounded, they came in from all around us. 1” The Accountant’s anxious voice cut in. “Our chances of getting out without a fight are less than three percent. Some of them are faster than our ship.”

Lin Guoguo reported again. “Another psionic sweep, it’s strong enough that they’ll know we’re here. Boss, what do we do?”

Lan Jue’s eyes hardened. “Full speed, Head to where they’re most spread out. Arm the shields, and prepare for battle.”

“No need, I’ll handle it.” A familiar voice contradicted the commander.

Lan Jue turned his head to find the Wine Master had snuck up at some point. His scepter glimmered in his hand.

Without waiting for an answer, a silver light bloomed from the Cosmagus. Zeus-1 was revealed to the dark universe, but enveloped in a

mystical silver glow. The light flickered, and all at once, the ship disappeared.

Empty space was buffeted by waves of psychic force, searching for something no longer there.

Before long the alien force had converged, and hovered over a wide swath of space. They slithered and squirmed among one another, looking. There was no trace for them to find.

Far in the distance, behind a lumbering asteroid, Zeus-1 reappeared in a flash. Its main engines roared to life, and they fled before the aliens could sniff them out. When they were a safe distance, Lan Jue shot the Wine Master an appreciative gaze and a thumbs up.

There were real benefits for taking Paragons along. Now the commander knew he could rely on his old friend to help them flee if a similar situation arose. If he hadn't been here, Lan Jue was ready to fight. But that would have cost them. Thankfully all it took to solve the problem was a well-placed dimensional transport.

Fear didn't tie Star Division's hands. They had five Paragons ready to back them up in a fight. Killing so many would have alerted the alien planets, however, and subsequently would affect their reconnaissance. Retreat was the best option.

Lan Jue turned to his intelligence officer. "Accountant, look into how that first alien discovered we were there."

The door to the bridge hissed as the Driver entered. He held a large vital crystal, over a foot long. Waves of rich vibrant energy pulsed from it occasionally.

He held one of the most valuable objects to his species. The black market was already purportedly selling vital crystals for obscene prices. A piece like the one the Driver gathered could buy him a fully equipped battleship.

He grinned at the eyes that came his way. "Spoils of war. Not bad, not bad. I'll just hang on to it for now, I promise I'll give it back when we go

home.”

“Stop screwing around,” Lan Jue answered. “Half a second later and we’d be buried in aliens. I think we can assume they’re trying to establish themselves in the Shattered Starfields. We aren’t out in the far reaches, but we’re not at the galaxy’s heart either. It looks like they’ve already spread pretty far.”

The Wine Master nodded. “This is not a happy situation. If they can see through our cloaks getting close enough to learn anything is going to be a challenge.”

Lan Jue’s lips were turned in a frown. This was a problem. They couldn’t fight their way in, even with all their Paragons. The Violet Princess was stronger than Luo Xianni, and they had no way of knowing how many of her kind there were! There was only so much they could handle before it got too dangerous.

The Accountant called out to him. “Preliminary analysis is complete. It wasn’t that easy for them to pick us out.”

“Eh?” Everyone looked his way.

The Accountant explained. “According to my readings, we were first discovered by the alien because we got too close. Psychic pulses like that are a kind of energy, and one which required a lot of effort to employ. We may be a different species, but they can run out of steam just like us. So, they likely use it rarely and only in a limited scope. It’s deliberate, they have to energize their perception to scout long distances.”

Chapter 620: Simulated Pulse

The Wine Master nodded. "It figures their scope of perception would be limited."

The Accountant went on. "So it's likely we were only spotted because we stumbled into one another. It felt us when we passed close, and focused its perception afterwards to cast it farther. Then once it locked onto us, it attacked. They must have some way to communicate with one another that we don't know about it. Or maybe when one dies it releases a powerful psionic pulse, which called its friends and they started searching. It was a cluster of problems that lead to that situation."

Lan Jue nodded. "That makes the most sense, but we'll need to confirm it. If your analysis is correct, than we can still slip in to continue the mission. We just need to keep our distance."

The plan was amended, and they continued to penetrate deeper into the Shattered Starfields.

A few hours later they came upon another alien, drifting through space. They maintained a distance of about fifty kilometers away which appeared to be enough to keep them concealed. "It seems our determinations were correct," the Wine Master said, as the beast vanished into the distance.

A speculative look crossed Lan Jue's face. "I don't think it's that easy. The Accountant is likely right, but we have to remember that there are different sorts of these creatures. The scope of their perception will also be different. Consider how quickly we were spotted by these. Now think about the alien planets. If size is power, how close is too close before one of those things see us?"

The Wine Master's heart fluttered. This was a big problem, and if it wasn't solved it could put them all in jeopardy.

"Stupid, can't you simulate a psionic pulse?" Jue Di's gruff voice drew their attention. It came from all around, though the man himself wasn't present.

“Simulate a pulse?” Lan Jue inquired.

With a flash both Jue Di and Luo Xianni appeared in the bridge. Jue Di stared directly at his son. “Moron kid, a psychic burst like that is just another sort of energy. A thought given form. Theoretically you could manipulate energy to mimic an alien consciousness. We also have one of their cores, how could they tell the difference?”

Lan Jue smiled apologetically. “But... how do you simulate a pulse?”

“You can’t,” he replied, “but that girl there is a psychic. She should be able to mimic it after experiencing the sensation a few times. Not a problem.”

He was, of course, indicating Lin Guoguo.

“Guoguo.” Lan Jue looked at her.

She nodded. “I’ll try.”

She was already adept at psionic manipulation. With the ship as an amplifier her Discipline rose to frightening heights.

Lan Jue gave her instructions. “You’ll need to get close enough to feel it. Search for peculiarities. Xiaosu, we’ll pause our ingress, switch the search to any nearby aliens. We’ll proceed once we’ve got our cover.”

“Aye!” Su Xiaosu responded. She quickly went about enacting his commands.

The Starfields were indeed rife with aliens now, it didn’t take long for them to find another target. This one was different from the others, however. It was a hexagonal shape a hundred meters in diameter and flat that spun unceasingly.

Zeus-1 crept to within ten kilometers of the monster before they felt its consciousness.

Almost immediately the alien inflated, expanded to several times its former size. The edges crept over and around Zeus-1 in attempts to envelope it.

“Xiaosu, evasion maneuvers. Guoguo, learn what you can.”

Under Xiaosu and Mika's command, Zeus-1 darted around, keeping a safe distance from the alien but not letting it get too far. The alien couldn't physically see their ship due to its cloak, but its perception wasn't fooled. Luckily it seemed this breed wasn't equipped for long-ranged battle. It needed to get close.

Zeus-1 used the advantage of its speed and small size to evade. The two rolled around one another like a game of cat and mouse. Lin Guoguo's eyes were closed and a pale golden light surrounded her head. She was channeling her psychic power through the ship to learn what she could from the beast.

As she learned, she continuously tried to mimic what she was feeling. The world of phycics was particular, and stratified. Specific mental energies had a frequency, and these frequencies were unique.

The chase continued for an hour. By then Lin Guoguo was drained.

"Should I go deal with it?" the Driver offered.

Lan Jue shook his head. "This time I will."

They could have used the Wine Master's powers to escape as they had before, but part of scouting was to discover what they could about the different alien breeds. You learned the best way to kill them by actually doing it.

"I'm going!" the Pauper announced.

Lan Jue couldn't bring himself to deny the eager new Paragon. He could only let him go.

The Pauper exited the ship. Once out in space, his body immediately started to glimmer with a blinding golden light. He drew his hands together in a circle, and from them was birthed a golden dragon. The mythical beast flung itself at the encroaching alien.

When the dragon first appeared it was only a few meters long. However, the farther it flew the longer it became until was several hundred meters in length.

“Aaaaaggghhhhhrrrr!” The thunderous dragon roar was so intense that they could hear clearly it through Zeus-1’s thick hull. The two crashed into one another.

The alien responded by contracting, swallowing up the dragon inside of it. It shook and shuddered, and a purple light radiated out from it. As they watched, the alien grew larger.

“Wha?!” The Pauper yelped. Surprise was clear in his shocked expression. The alien’s defenses were staggering, and when his taming dragon palm exploded, the beast only got bigger to accommodate. The Taming Dragon Arhat hadn’t left a scratch.

What a guard! For it to swallow up a Paragon’s attack, it was must be stronger than most of the creatures they’d encountered before. The alien wasn’t fast, and it had no ranged attack, but it could take one hell of a punch.

The Pauper didn’t simply watch. He thrust out with his palm again, sending another golden dragon toward his enemy. This one reached the beast as the blast from the first was still raging inside. As the second dragon detonated, its intense release of energy was enough to obliterate it. He waved his hand, and a Core about the size of his fist appeared in hand. He returned to Zeus-1.

Everyone on the ship knew what was coming. They wasted no time, Zeus-1 set all the engine to full throttle and escaped as fast as they could. Lan Jue didn’t want to give their enemies any chance to sniff them out.

“This vital crystal seems different than the others.” Once the Pauper was back on the bridge, he showed what he meant to the others.

Jue Di took it from him, peering at it carefully. It was a hexagon, like the alien itself, and it flickered with that familiar purple energy. He was quiet for a time as he sensed the forces within it. “It contained natural energies, pure and strong. There are very few impurities and it’s tightly concentrated.”

The Pauper gave his report about the fight, and what he felt. Everyone agreed that this alien was one of the more powerful kinds. If those longer

carrier aliens were scouts, than this one must have been a defender.

“The taming Dragon palm strike is full of my perception,” the Pauper stated. “Within the monster it had some sort of sucker that drank up the energy. It releases some as well in the form of a corrosive air. It was strong enough to influence the protogenia in my attack. If I were a normal man that air would dissolve me into nothing. From what I could tell, the thing was meant for close combat. If that stuff fell over a battleship, it would eat away its energy shields in a hurry.”

Lan Jue nodded. “This is exactly the kind of information we’re out here to get. The more data we get the easier it’ll be when we have to fight. However, if I might give his Majesty the Taming Dragon Arhat a suggestion?”

The Pauper looked at him inquiringly. “What is it?”

“Let’s rein it in next time,” Lan Jue said. “We all know how strong you are, but we’re here to find their weaknesses, we can’t all blow them up with golden dragons.”

“Oh... alright.” He scratched his ratty head of hair. The Pauper was so eager to see how far he could push himself that he forgot their reason for coming.

Lan Jue turned his attention to Jue Di. “Father, this has given me an idea. I think we should skim the boundaries of the Galaxy’s interior before rushing in. We should focus on discovering the different types of aliens, I think that data would be priceless. With so many of these things around, we can already be sure the planets are nearby.”

Jue Di shrugged. “This is your business, you’re this outfit’s commander. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Alright,” Lan Jue said submissively. He knew it was his father’s way of teaching him, but it certainly added to the pressure!

Zeus-1 continued to skirt the edges of the Starfields’ interior. It had plenty of energy stored, and an energy recycling system as support. Running out of fuel wasn’t one of their worries.

After consulting with Xiaosu, they settled on a decaying orbit around the outskirts that would bring them closer to the center with each orbit. As they did, the search would continue for new sorts of aliens to dissect.

Chapter 621: Scout, Hunt

Their new plan resulted in quite a lot of success. In under twelve hours they'd managed to hunt down and kill eight different kinds of aliens. Each one was unique, with different abilities. They encountered some that were fast, attacked at range, defense, and close combat.

The rule held true that an alien's size corresponded to their strength. Across breeds, the larger they were the more damage they were capable of. They came in different shapes, too.

The Paragons were too overpowered for their purposes. Lan Jue and the Driver handled the creatures as they were found. They noted that none of them called for help, they just lashed out. It may have been, though, that they were underestimating Zeus-1's small size. Lan Jue was relieved to discover the trend, it made their job much easier.

Battle also gave Lan Jue and the Driver a chance to practice their combined lightning. Of all the types they encountered, not a single alien was able to defend against it. One after another, their empowered thunderbolt Discipline destroyed the aliens. The yin-yang lightning destructive capabilities surprised everyone.

Especially for Lan Jue. Thunder essence had filtered into his abilities, infusing it with immortal qi and the echoes of empyreal lightning. His attacks were breathtakingly strong. His victims didn't explode, they were disintegrated. Their size mean nothing in the face of Zeus' punishing electric fire.

This did not mean Star Division's scout team didn't encounter problems. Space was choked with the creatures the closer they came to the galaxy's center. Several times they had to break off a target because there were other aliens nearby.

Shadowing the monsters revealed that their targets were larger planets. Clearly they suspected those planets were more hospitable to life.

It was hard to guess how many of the creatures there were, but they could at least affirm that there were many different types. They

encountered one that they didn't dare engage. It had been too big a target, and the corrosive aura around it was powerful. They fled the instant it came into view.

It was three thousand meters long at least, with a long dark purple body. Great triangular scales covered it from head to tail. It looked like some sort of mutant, winged toad. They witnessed it belch an asteroid which struck a nearby small planet. The crater was visible from hundreds of kilometers away.

This kind of alien had to be their equivalent of a Paragon. They had no choice but to keep their distance and watch.

"We should find a place to rest for a while. People have been on edge for too long." Lan Jue said to Xiaosu. Both of them were on the bridge.

For twenty-four hours straight they'd been hunting prey. Her day had been a blur of meditating to recover mental energy, then expending it to learn the intricacies of alien sentience. She continuously clouded them in similar psionic bursts to keep them hidden. Their achievements in the span of a day were outstanding. Lin Guoguo was able to perfectly mimic the pulse of several weaker aliens.

However, it was an exceedingly draining process for her. She couldn't hold it for very long, only thirty minutes if she put all her focus towards it. Afterward she would need time to recover.

Su Xiaosu opened up a map of the area. With her knowledge of the Starfields, she was quickly able to identify a suitable planet.

"This planet used to belong to a pirate clan, but there are no signs of life now. It's prone to magnetic storms, so the pirates abandoned it. We can rest and prepare there, the aliens won't trouble us."

"Alright," Lan Jue affirmed with a nod.

Zeus-1 broke off course, and dove into a nearby asteroid field. Despite her exhaustion, Lin Guoguo remained attached to the helmet. When any sign of alien presence was detected, her immediately sent out a pulse to mask their passage.

Much to everyone's relief, their trip to safe harbor went smoothly. They didn't run into any aliens they couldn't avoid. They arrived at the abandoned planet and touched down.

Their landing site was a small area ringed by mountains. Between natural cover and the Blinding Stone, they were well hidden.

As the engines cooled, Lan Jue sharply clapped his hands. "Alright, everyone take a breather. We'll take turns on watch, I'll start. Xiaosu, let's take a look at the star maps."

Lin Guoguo immediately removed the helmet and began to meditate. She would have more time to recover now. It was exhausting, but on the upside she could definitely sense her powers strengthening faster than mere cultivation.

Lan Jue looked over the maps. "How far are we from where the three main planets were," he asked Xiaosu.

She indicated a space. "Another twenty four hours if we keep the same course. Direct flight will be closer to twelve."

He nodded. "Alright, we'll rest for a while then stick with the plan. Keep the same pace."

The Accountant chimed in. "Should we send back what we learned on a UAV? They release electronic signatures, no signs of life. They shouldn't be discovered by the enemy."

Lan Jue nodded his way. "Very well, we'll give it a try. At least we'll see if this is a good method for passing information. If it does that'll come in useful for future scout missions."

"Alright, I'll take care of it," the Accountant replied.

The young genius was a lot more reliable after following Lan Jue around for so long, and especially since joining Star Division. The Accountant was now one of the most integral people on Lan Jue's team. Every day he toiled without complaint, a far cry from the whining boy he used to be. Even the Keeper, crotchety though he was, was well pleased by his grandson.

Lan Jue continued to Su Xiaosu. “You all rest first, I’ll stand watch here. Someone will relieve me in three hours. We’re wheels-up in six hours. Accountant, make sure we record the location of this planet, we may need to come back here. It’s safe.”

“Definitely not bad,” the Accountant agreed. “This place has a unique magnetic field that interferes with other kinds of energy waves, psionic pulses included. If aliens want a good look at this planet, it won’t be easy. Not to mention there’s nothing here to pique their interest.”

The others left to rest and recover after their long watch. Lan Jue remained behind in the bridge, silently watching the screens. There wasn’t much in the way of scenery. The swath of sky he could see was blotted with asteroids. On occasion the light of the galaxy’s star peaked through the rock. The day here was a mottled patchwork of light and shadow.

Situations like this were common in the Shattered Starfields, and one of the reasons so few chose to live out here. Humans needed sunlight and water, neither of which was abundant here.

As Lan Jue looked up at the undulating sea of stone, he thought about the three alien planets. They’d made a good choice in taking the Starfields first. If they hadn’t been discovered, they could have stayed here for ages, gaining strength.

There were few places suitable for life in the Starfields, but it was an enormous system. Few was relative when it spanned so many dwarf planets. It all added up, so for the aliens it was a place rife with potential.

How could they defeat these creatures? This wasn’t a battle of righteousness versus evil. It was about two species trying to survive. To the aliens, humans were food – no different from the vital energy of the planets they lived on. If humans wanted to live, they had to struggle. Who came out victorious in the end would depend on who was stronger.

The three alien planets were the greatest threat. They counted as alien creatures themselves, and given their size it was likely they were more dangerous than a Bastion Ship. If they wanted to destroy them, it would take the accumulated strength of humanity. They could surround the

planets and give it all they got, then maybe they would have a chance to keep living.

He had to admit that their current course was satisfying. They were gathering essential intelligence, and with each alien they killed it was one less they had to face later. Taking those vital crystals weakened their enemies and made humanity better.

“What are you thinking about?” A soft voice interrupted his reflections.

Lan Jue smirked. “Just thinking about the best way to deal with these aliens.”

The Wine Master took a seat nearby. “More and more I’ve come to respect the Clairvoyant’s foresight. You truly have become the focal point of all of this.”

Chapter 622: Teleport Base

Lan Jue laughed. “Enough of that, I’m just one person. I rely on the people around me.”

The Wine Master rejoined. “What have you thought up, then?”

“Understanding,” he said. “That’s our greatest deficit right now. Right now they know a lot more about us than we do about them. Think about it, you remember the Violet Princess? To take on human form they must have studied the DNA of humans, understood its complexities. She even learned human speech. Just this proves how far behind we are.”

The Wine Master nodded his agreement. “We’re too spread out, humanities numbers are in the billions. We’ve colonized planets in dozens of star systems. It’s impossible to keep the aliens from infiltrating our worlds. However, I expect that your Violet Princess was one of their leaders. If any of these things can look like us, we might as well not bother to fight. The war is already lost, we should just flee.”

Lan Jue sighed. “My only hope is that they don’t suddenly appear in the Eastern Alliance.”

The Wine Master frowned. “Humanity as a species is struggling for survival. Aren’t you being selfish?”

He chuckled. “I never said I wasn’t!”

The Wine Master couldn’t help but smirk as well. “I suppose that makes me selfish, too.”

However, Lan Jue’s smile was short lived. “Actually I’m anxious. The Clairvoyant’s dying vision wasn’t random or contrived. From what we’ve witnessed these things are strong, but I don’t think that’s the whole story. If this is all they got, I haven’t seen ‘species threatening power’ yet.”

The Wine Master replied with a bitter nod. “Indeed, I worry about this as well. That’s why I chose to come with you. You need sufficient ability if you want good information.”

But Lan Jue’s lips curled down in a frown. “Oh come on. If the

Clockmaker had stayed home, would you have come?"

The Paragon chuckled. "This is what they call 'killing two birds with one stone.'" His mood had been quite good over the last few days, since his relationship with the Clockmaker was growing closer. To him it was like a blessing from heaven.

Lan Jue answered. "Wait until we get closer to the center. I have a feeling we'll really need all of your help then. 'Seek not accomplishments, but freedom from faults. 1.' We'll need to do our best to avoid a fight. Guoguo has gotten very good at mimicking the pulses, hopefully that'll be enough."

The Wine Master looked through the window to the scenery outside. "This planet isn't bad, good for staying out of sight. What if we made this a forward scouting base? So long as the aliens are in the Starfields, we can use this as a center of operations."

Lan Jue paused. "A base point? I don't think there's any point! If we're caught out there they'll just follow us back. Plus, who's to say we can get back here? Nothing stays the same out here, routes change. As this planet drifts through the system and the aliens continue to wreak havoc, who knows how the landscape will change."

An enigmatic grin split the older man's face. "Of course it's not that simple. I'm talking about its immediate establishment as a launch point. I can set a rune array here."

Lan Jue's eyes lit up. "A teleportation array? But, how far is its limit?"

"That depends on how much is put into it," the Wine Master explained. "The information you brought back on your last mission was vital for the Alliance, and it proved the worth of Star Division. I used this opportunity to request resources from parliament. I can set up a long distance array here with what we were given, but it will take ten days. It requires ten s-ranked interspatial power gems, and an addition one with each use. However, it will be stronger enough to transfer us out of the Starfields completely. So long as we remain within range, we can flee at the first sign of danger right back here."

The Wine Master spoke calmly as though discussing the weather, while Lan Jue stared at him with wide eyes. “Since when have you been able to this?”

The Wine Master chuckled. “Just me? I can’t, but with my aunt here we can manage together.”

Lan Jue a deep breath. The Wine Master’s suggestion was promising safety, as well as an excellent springboard to continue their mission. Having a succor point would bring the danger way down, and their flexibility way up.

Indeed, an s-ranked gem for each use was a steep price, but worthy. The information and vital crystals they obtained would more than make up for them.

“What are we waiting for? We’ve got work to do!” Lan Jue said, his way of agreeing with the idea. There was nothing better for the success of their mission than establishing the teleport array. It’ll be here for a long while after, too, in case they needed it.

“Oh, right, I have to ask – how much can you transfer?” Lan Jue asked.

“Zeus-1 will be no problem,” he said. “If it was Majesty, we would need three times the resources but it would also be possible. But if we did have to transfer something of that scale, it would be very taxing for my aunt and I. We would need a long time to recover.”

Lan Jue shook his head. “We won’t need anything the likes of Majesty teleported. Zeus-1 will more than serve. You know, I suddenly had an idea that’ll make us all rich.”

The Wine Master grumbled in annoyance. “Since when did you get so interested in making money? You’ve become addicted to the life of a pirate.”

Lan Jue laughed. “Isn’t war just a grab for cash and resources? Don’t you still owe me for all the power gems I brought back from the North? Can anyone live without money? Once your array is set up our safety is pretty much guaranteed, we can safely go right to the galaxy’s center and get as

much intelligence as we need. All of you Paragons together, if you pull out all the stops, could eradicate an untold number of these things – and thus gain a whole bunch of vital crystals. These crystals are one of the most valuable resources ever discovered. After all, what else is out there that can promise a longer life? According to the Keeper and Bookworm, a man can stay young forever with enough of them.”

The Wine Master paused. He hadn’t thought about it that way. The transportation array was for safety and scouting, but what Lan Jue was saying made sense. They thin the heard and gather the precious crystals, a win-win for humanity. Why pass up an opportunity to grow rich doing the right thing?

The Wine Master could help but nod at the logic of it. “It certainly seems possible. Let’s talk more about it when the array is completed.”

“Alright!” Lan Jue replied. Lan Jue’s twinkling eyes met the Wine Master’s, and they shared an unspoken thought in that gaze. If this worked out, it wasn’t just good for the Avenue. It was a chance to lift the whole Eastern Alliance above its competition!

Humanity’s progress was built on population, talent, wealth, and food. The most important was people, and if you had talented people than you had it all.

Life death, sickness and health, it was the natural way of the universe. Be they beggar or Paragon, everyone feared death. So one could imagine how enticing the exuvium process was. Obviously the continued existence of humanity was important, but the real underlying drive to find these planets for the West and North, were these crystals! You’d never hear it is the news, but the Alliances had begun to compete for them the moment the universe knew of their existence.

Skyfire Avenue was likely the most richly endowed in crystals at present, including the very first one Lan Jue got from Taihua. It was responsible for what they knew about the crystals, and ultimately the reason why the East was leading the research by more than a year. The things that could be accomplished in a year were many, not least of which was success in

extending both the Booker and the Keeper's lives. The Bookworm used part of it to break through to Paragon.

A single vital crystal enabled all of that. So, imagine what a warehouse full could do for the East. The decision was made, they were no longer here to rest for a while. They had an array to build.

Lan Jue denied the Driver's request to proceed with the scouting mission on the grounds of safety. Once the protection of the array was behind them, they would continue.

Over the next ten days the two of them continued to train yin-yang lightning. The Wine Master was kept busy constructing the array with the help of the Clockmaker and Luo Xianni.

Lan Jue and the Driver practiced under the eye of Jue Di. With his guidance their progress felt like a thousand miles a day. Lan Jue continued to do all his cultivation joined with Qianlin. He shared the benefits of his training with her, including the immortal qi gained from the thunder essence.

Lan Jue could sense that Qianlin's consciousness was slowly improving, day by day. Every now and again they paused so the Driver could meditate on what they learned. When he did, Lan Jue and Qianlin practiced the blade. Her swordsmanship was coming along quite well. In fact, everything looked to be on an upward trend. Her total recovery was only a matter of time.

After ten days of sporadic training, both Lan Jue and the Driver saw incredible changes to their Disciplines. Lan Jue's energies were about fifty percent transformed, thirty percent for the Driver.

Chapter 623: Primordial Lightning

The Driver benefited tremendously from the practice. Although the thunder essence was absorbed by Lan Jue, a small amount of it was transferred to him through their shared cultivation. Just that small amount helped to create a foundation that would support his rise to Paragon. It helped him to discover his own Path.

Lan Jue's quantifiable strength didn't improve much, though he had been actively trying to curtail the speed of his improvement. Star Division's commander was focused on purification of the energy rather than accumulation of it.

Jue Di helped his son navigate the intricacies of his own path to Paragon. Lan Jue was calmer, which aided his cultivation. Currently their problem was Qianlin. If they were intended to break through together, how was that possible? Qianlin didn't have the presence of mind to seek her Path. His only recourse was to stop his progress and await the happy day got back to normal.

"All set!" The Wine Master's voice was calm, and his face lit up in self-appreciation. He'd clearly succeeded.

Lan Jue peered through the window at the expanse of barren mountains. "Where?"

"If you could see it, it wouldn't be very hidden from aliens would it," the Wine Master snapped. "I used dimensional fragmentation to hide them."

"Does it need to be tested?" Lan Jue asked.

The Wine Master stared at him. "Testing would require an s-ranked interdimensional power gem. Relax, my aunt and I have checked it several times, and tried with a small amount of energy. There won't be a problem. If you want to try it, wait until we need to use it."

"Fine," he replied. "So we should prepare to leave."

The Wine Master nodded. "That's right, there's no time to waste. We've been held up here for ten days, and we have a lot we still need to learn."

Right, did the unmanned information drones get back ok?"

Lan Jue's brows knit together when he thought of them. "They didn't. I don't think there's a way for us to send information back alone. There are many dangers in the Starfields and no human consciousness to guide them. Then there are the aliens to consider. UAVs can't cloak. Altogether it starts to look unlikely drones will be much help to us."

"Then we just need to make sure we get what we can and bring it back quick." The Wine Master said.

Twenty minutes later, Zeus-1 was in the air. IT shot off toward the alien planets, leaving a column of diffused light in its wake.

They abandoned their circuitous route for something more direct. He ordered Mika and Xiaosu to bring them to the Starfield's heart as quickly as they could. Caution could be relaxed now that their safety was assured.

"Boss, aliens have appeared on our radar, three of them. They'll be within range in twenty minutes. Should we use the pulse to cover ourselves?" Xiaosu asked.

Lan Jue shook his head. "No need. Who wants to deal with them?"

The Taming Dragon Arhat curiously looked his way. "You don't want to keep your distance? It could call others."

Lan Jue smirked. "Orders have changed – we're a Fire Scout troop. We hit the enemy and record how they react. No more need for stealth."

The Wine Master frowned. "It's a little early, no?"

Lan Jue looked his way. "I'm not saying we're rushing in. It's fine, your responsibility is to help us lock the aliens down if we need it. Guoguo, you should prepare. Wait for our order."

"Aye," in Guoguo replied. The helmet she used to connect with the ship was already descending onto her head.

"I'll go!" The Driver stood, eager to jump at the chance.

"Alright." Lan Jue nodded his way.

The Driver was thrilled with the power coursing through him. Even at an eighth-rank Adept he felt like he was improving markedly every day. Once he completed the transformation of his Discipline he would be at peak level. Poised to become a Paragon.

From the ship's windows they could see three figures separate from the darkness of space. They were the aliens, each one at least a hundred meters long. The two on either side had long black bodies, and purple depression all over them. They looked particularly fierce, but were approaching at only a moderate pace.

"A swordfish and two Reefs." Su Xiaosu shouted the report over her shoulder. They'd seen these kinds before.

The alien they called the 'swordfish' was a warrior of their species. It was going slow now, but they'd seen what it was capable of. IT was actually one of the fastest aliens they'd encountered. Tactically it approached problems simply, with a full-on rush. It attacked with mad ferocity, in attempts to overwhelm its foe.

They saw one drill a perfectly smooth hole through a one-kilometer long asteroid, and pass through like it wasn't there. Lan Jue determined that the worst place to be was right in front of one of those things. Even a Paragon might not be able to take a direct hit.

The two 'Reefs' as they called them, weren't terribly friendly either. The divots on their body shot out destructive light that protected them within a range of twenty kilometers. They dissolved and consumed whatever they touched. If they struck anything organic, it was destroyed and absorbed immediately.

They were strong, and when facing three the Driver only had one option; get in close and put them down before they had a chance to respond.

Thunderclap appeared in the vacuous depths of space, hidden by a hundred-meter long asteroid. Its glimmering spear was clutched in its hand, waiting.

From experience they knew these aliens could extend their perception up to ten kilometers and maintain it. You had to be close already if you

wanted to avoid detection.

The light around Thunderclap's spear began to change, turning from silver to a translucent purple. The spear's shaft was clear as crystal. A purple light also flashed in the mecha's eyes. Compared to the last alien he fought, his battle experience had risen to a new level.

The aliens were closing in, twenty kilometers from Thunderclap's location. The Driver burst into motion. The mecha lifted its hand and slapped the surface of the asteroid. Tons of space stone went hurdling toward an inevitable collision with the beasts

Swordfish reacted fastest. It swerved just enough to put it in line with the asteroid. Then, when the two met, the clash turned the asteroid into a cloud of debris.

However, at that same moment there was a flash of purple. Thunderclap appeared beside the alien, then vanished in a blinding eruption of purple light!

Fast as lightning, loud as thunder; it perfectly explained the Driver's trademark fighting style. He flashed in close then let them have it with his thunderbolt Discipline. Only, this time it was his taiyin thunderbolt he was using. The yin-yang lightning had evolved it into an empowered purple adaptation.

The Driver had listened to all these old sorts of powers from the ancient world that kept getting discussed. He settled on his own name for his unique variant – primordial lightning. It was nowhere near as destructive as the real stuff, but it looked like it.

From their vantage on Zeus-1, the purple light seemed hazy and small. However, it was a large enough explosion to engulf all three aliens.

They were stunned, but the initial attack had failed to destroy them outright. Instead they grew sluggish like they were trying to swim through soup. Especially swordfish, it struggled and lashed from side to side to try and free itself to no avail. No matter what it did, it couldn't rid itself of the confining purple light.

All three of the creatures melted away beneath the force of the blast. They were dissolved, they were purified.

Thunderclap spun like a top, and the primordial lightning became a vortex of destruction in response. The remains of the creatures were sucked into its depths and devoured.

The Taming Dragon Arhat watched with surprise. “When did this guy get so strong? What is that purple lightning?”

Lan Jue smiled. “He calls it ‘primordial lightning,’ I guess that’s its name.”

Many average Adepts probably weren’t familiar with the concept of primordial lightning, but the Pauper had the blood of the Taming Dragon Arhat 1. He had quite a wealth of knowledge regarding the old world.

“Nature’s primordial lightning? He’s got some gall! Honestly, though, his Discipline has reached an almost protogenic level. He isn’t even a Paragon, how is it he’s able to control something this powerful? In a straight fight I’d need to fight my hardest to beat him.”

Lan Jue looked at his friend with a mischievous, instigating grin. “You should give it a try when we get back.”

The Pauper chuckled, but didn’t fall for it. “We’ll see.”

Thunderclap made its way back to the ship, bearing three more vital crystals for their collection. However, the Driver didn’t dock. Instead he coaxed the mecha to the front of Zeus-1 and hovered in front of the windows.

“Whadda ya think? That primordial lightning is something else, right?” The Driver’s arrogant voice crackled through the ship’s speakers.

The Wine Master called back. “Your lightning can inhibit the aliens. The swordfish and reefs are strong, but they didn’t have a chance to fight back. It was like your lightning froze them up.”

A chuckle was returned. “Of course, it’s the primordial lightning. The seventy-two primordial lightnings that could kill immortals!”

Chapter 624: All-Heaven Lightning

“That’s enough singing your own praises, reign it in,” Lan Jue said. “If you could really use primordial lightning than these aliens would no longer be a problem. Go ahead and just wipe them out for us.”

Primordial lightning. Generated by the natural energies of the universe, the seventy-two primordial blasts were said to be able to kill immortals. There were eight systems: Yi Mu Righteous Lightning, Bing Huo Yang-Lightning, Gui Shui Yin-Lightning, Geng Jin Destructive Lightning, Wu Tu Umbral Lightning, Evil Execution Lightning, Godslayer Mystical Lightning, Violet Extinguishing Lightning ^{1 2} Each system had nine layers, and everyone had a natural disdain for the realms of the Buddhist pantheon. This terrible power wasn’t used to cut down the beasts of the world. Its purpose was to rebel against the powers of the gods. ³

Something so powerful it could sear the heavens, how could the Driver really control that? The tribulation lightning of the old days was said to be a part of this thunder magic. Suffering the nine layers of primordial lightning was the tribulation.

Lan Jue speculated that the thunder essence he was absorbing was the result of this lightning. A great beast sometime in the distance past did not survive when the tribulation lightning came for it. The likelihood of real primordial lightning existing somewhere inside was high.

Meanwhile this shameless guy went right for the lofty name. Not to be outshone, Lan Jue was determined to find an even more arrogant name for his own Discipline. He settled on the next level up from Primordial lightning – All-Heaven Lightning.

All-Heaven Lightning, the product of Pan Gu himself ⁴. Ranked below only the Five Thunders ⁵, it was used during the creation of heaven and earth to eliminate chaos.

In the face of these arrogant youth, Jue Di was encouraging. The paths they’d chosen for themselves were the correct ones. Everything was borne from the same source, so who was to say their Disciplines couldn’t reach

these levels with time and effort? Especially since Lan Jue was absorbing immortal qi from the thunder essence, his chances of evolving his Discipline into such godly heights wasn't unthinkable. His yang-style thunderbolt served as a good foundation. Of course, Lan Jue would not be able to fully control it unless he became an immortal himself.

Zeus-1 was finished evading. It was headed right for the center of the Shattered Starfields, where the three alien planets awaited. Their tactics when encountering aliens remained the same. The ship's radar revealed them as they neared.

"One hundred and fifty seven of them altogether. They're coming from all directions, headed right for us." Su Xiaosu reported.

"Several unique psychic pulses have buffeted us already. Should I respond?" Guoguo asked.

"No need," her commander replied. "They're delivering themselves to us on a silver platter. What do you say, mighty Paragons? Who wants some exercise?"

The Wine Master could not participate. He had to keep his strength in case they needed to flee. However, the Epochrion and the Pauper both stood. "We'll go, and the Driver as well. Each of us will be responsible for a direction."

Lan Jue shot her a thumbs-up. "Workin' hard!"

Zeus-1 reduced speed and eventually came to a stop. It hovered in the blackness, awaiting the enemy's arrival. A flash of light drew the eye outside of the ship's bridge as the two Paragons exited.

They joined the Driver outside, and gave him a nod. The three of them headed out to keep some distance between them and their ship.

Tendrils of white light stretched from the Epochrion and waved around her like strings of silk. Out in the vacuum of space, she looked like an immortal from those ancient days.

As the crew of the ship watched, those white lights coalesced behind the Paragon until she vanished entirely. What remained was the avatar of her

Dogma, a hundred meters tall and blazing with light that painted the heavens.

The avatar was enormous, clad in snow-white robes of samite. Silken ribbons swirled around it with strange shadows flitting between. It was liking watching the threads of time.

The image of the Epochrion's dogma looked precisely like her. Waves of protogenic energy radiated out from her with such intensity that it seemed the stars trembled.

Inner Dogma! Lan Jue could see it right away. It was the most common dogma in the realm of adepts, the kind developed by oneself. Typically, inner dogma were weaker than the sort that was passed down. They were established from scratch, through untold years of self-reflection and searching.

The benefit was that it was suited perfectly to the individual. No absorption or training was needed, it all came down to the truths as the adept saw them. Inherited dogmas took time to become accustomed to, to understand. Another's teachings had to become the core of their being. Only then did its strength surpass inner dogma.

In the distance, aliens began to creep into their line of sight. No less than ten swordfish led the charge. They had a lock on Zeus-1 already, and were quickly bearing down on them. However, when they noticed the giant human in space their target changed.

The ripples of protogenia were comparatively weak, but all living things had instincts and the aliens were no different. They were inexorably drawn to the enticing lights. The swordfish stopped, long enough for the other aliens to catch up.

Just then, the Epochrion lifted her right hand and swept it before her. An enormous grandfather clock appeared. It flickered with a pale golden shine. Around it swirled a host of other colors, which within them bore strange and fantastical images.

She reached out again and pinched the giant clock's hour hand between two fingers. Just as the aliens arrived, it stopped. The hour hand stopped,

the minute hand stopped, the pendulum stopped. Everything seemed to freeze in time.

The aliens were suddenly thrust into a dimension of black and white. Everything around them stopped dead in its tracks. No matter how strong they were, or what talents these beasts possessed, it all meant nothing. They couldn't even think or feel.

From Zeus-1, all they saw was the Epochrion reach out. Afterwards, the aliens just... stopped.

The other two reacted immediately and flew in opposite directions. The Pauper soared upwards, and as he did his own dogma was again revealed. He grew until he was as large as the Epochrion, an image of the Taming Dragon Arhat bare to the waist. His hands had also swollen to gigantic proportions.

He struck with his palm. The sound of a dragon's roar answered. Several of the encroaching aliens couldn't hope to defend themselves and were instantly destroyed. He never used his Domain, only direct attacks. The Taming Dragon Arhat's strength was on clear display for everyone to marvel at.

The Driver's charge bore similar results. Thunderbolt's entire body buzzed with translucent primordial lightning. He swung his spear vertically and horizontally. Everywhere the purple lightning fell, the monsters were slain.

In only a few minutes over a hundred alien creatures had been dispatched. The Driver was beginning to show signs of fatigue. His Discipline was nearly at the protogenic level, but his body wasn't prepared to sustain it. He wasn't a Paragon yet, after all.

"That's a fortune right there," Lan Jue mused with a smile. Aliens of this size, who could travel and fight in space, were sure to each possess their own vital crystal. Star Division just earned over a hundred of them.

"Boss, more than a thousand aliens headed our way now. It looks like three waves, and one of them is over three thousand meters long." Su Xiaosu gave her report while watching the radar.

Lan Jue's face changed. Obviously killing so many aliens would attract some attention. "Call them back," he said. "Let's get out of here." Despite their headlong rush into the fray, their goal wasn't to engage with the enemy's main force. They were, after all, really just here to scout.

"No need." This time, it was Jue Di who spoke.

Buzzzz! A strange, unnatural sound rattled their ship. The Pauper, Driver, and Clockmaker all seemed to shake.

In the distance, the gargantuan form of an alien appeared.

In all his encounters with the aliens, this was the largest he'd seen aside from the alien planets themselves. He'd also seen one like it in the recording of the Seventh Fleet's destruction. Its outward appearance was similar to a chameleon, blown up to nightmarish proportions. A giant bulge swelled at the back of its head and its whole body was covered in thick purple scales. Sixteen eyes looked every which way, each of them shining with different intensities of purple light.

It had seven fins altogether, six for flight and the last one on the back of its tail for steering. Every one of those fins were composed of chutes, whose ends were wreathed in a pale violet halo. They appeared to act much like Zeus-1's engines.

An entourage of aliens follows in its wake. Compared to the main one, however, the others looked like children. That screeching buzz had been this colossus' roar. 6

"It's a Basilisk!" Lan Jue breathed in awe.

They were rare to see, and thankfully so. They were strong. Once they'd come across another of its ilk, only a thousand meters long. Lan Jue had given it a wide berth. He'd named it Basilisk because of its appearance.

The Driver, Pauper, and Clockmaker were approaching the ship. The Driver's voice rang through the bridge. "We've got quite a few coming, what should we do? Are we making a run for it? That big one doesn't look like an easy scrap. The Epochrion said it's their version of a Paragon. It looks like we really kicked the hornet's nest!"

“We’re not retreating just yet. You protect yourselves, dad is going out there to deal with them.” The news was like a shot of adrenaline to the Driver. For a second he didn’t utter a word, but then relayed the information to his two companions. The Paragons shared a quick glance, and spied the surprise in each other’s eyes.

Jue Di was going himself?

The near-mythical superhuman, gone for these many years, was going to deal with the threat. What could they expect to see?

The aliens come closer with every passing moment and their numbers swelled. There were ten times as many, now.

Chapter 625: Deva-gati

Although the creatures were still far away, they could see the scales on its back writhing. The purple halo around it was bright and getting bigger and enhanced the purple lights burning in its sixteen eyes. As the humans looked on, the beast opened its enormous maw. Suddenly a vacuum force tugged at them.

The Clockmaker's protogenic grandfather clock radiated a pale golden light that expanded to encompass the Paragons and the Driver. Her Domain helped to stabilize them and protect them from being sucked up.

Then the suction force suddenly stopped.

A flying cloud, gold and blinding, appeared out in space. It bore Jue Di to their side. He looked entirely different from the worker they'd first met. His face was calm, and he gazed upon the encroaching monsters like they were insignificant insects.

"Shut up!" He shouted at the Basilisk in irritation. Strangely, the monster did as instructed and fell silent. To the humans, the creature almost looked nervous.

Jue Di clenched his hand into a fist, and slowly extended it toward the aliens. It was almost lazy, a simple punch – like a child might.

"Huuunggg—" The guttural sounds of Buddhist prayer echoed through space.

In the next instant, the three Skyfire Avenue fighters were surprised to find they were no longer out in space. They looked around to see the vaulted spires of a Buddhist temple. Their entire world was painted gold. Bodhisattvas, Arhats and other holy men surrounded them.

"Deva-gati!" The Pauper's voice quavered. He'd heard of this, a legendary Buddhist Domain called Deva-gati after the world of gods. It was said to be capable of guiding the enlightened. Of course he'd never seen it, but the scene before them had all the signs.

The deep Buddhist chants continued, however the world of gold slowly

began translucent and vanished. The Pauper and the others recovered their senses. The Driver actually fared best, since he still hadn't come to understand the world of protogenia. He could not feel the deep, abiding power that Jue Di had commanded.

The Clockmaker, usually calm and composed, literally gaped. She held a hand over her mouth. At some point the grandfather clock she'd summoned disappeared, along with the image of her dogma. She was back to her normal size, floating with the others in space. The Pauper fared about the same, but he was breather faster than the Epochrion.

All three turned their eyes in unison to the distant aliens, but there was nothing to see. Seconds earlier a thousand aliens had been bearing down on them, only to vanish in a single punch. Only a cloud of purple light remained.

"How about someone heads over to pick up the remains," Jue Di said indifferently.

The others snapped out of their shock. The Pauper reacted first, disappearing in a flash and reappearing where the creatures had once been. What he found was a vital crystal ten meters long, the source of the purple light. He was still a distance from it, but he could clearly feel the vital energy pouring from it. It was, frankly, terrifying.

A single punch...

All it took for Jue Di to eliminate a thousand world-devouring monsters was a single punch. He made it look so simple. And his Domain – the legendary Deva-gati!

For those watching from Zeus-1, things were unclear. All they'd seen was a flash of golden light, and suddenly their radar was coming up clean. Jue Di returned, said he was going to take a nap, then disappeared into his cabin.

The aliens were nowhere to be found. When the Pauper, Clockmaker and Driver returned they didn't utter a word. All three were silent, trying to comprehend what they'd witnessed. Now they understood what strength was. They understood why Jue Di was a living legend, an

unparalleled powerhouse.

What Jue Di had shown them was far outside of what they thought possible.

The Pauper shook his head, trying to shake the shock from his brain, then found a place to sit. The Clockmaker was taking it hardest, though. She knew she would never compare to Jue Di, but the true discrepancy between them was astounding. His Domain had overtaken everything to the point where her own Domain was instantly drowned out, even her dogma.

Put another way, if Jue Di desired it he could slay her with a single finger.

This fearsome power was beyond the scope of his legend. If Jue Di had been this strong during the paragon battle all those years ago, no one would have lived to tell the tale.

Lan Jue saw it differently. It warmed his heart to see such tremendous strength. His father was hale and hardy.

“Pick up speed, horizontal bearing. Let’s get out of here.” Lan Jue commanded. They had put down no small number of aliens, the aliens planets were definitely aware. Nor had it been as easy as it looked. It took three Paragons and Jue Di to get them this far.

But that punch... it was like it had been empowered by the curse of an angry god. When Lan Qing used his curses, they didn’t come anywhere near his father’s.

That was strength. Real strength!

Lan Jue stood in a daze, not moving a muscle. He allowed the residual energies to wash over him and sought to learn what he could. Though he hadn’t been out there with the others, but the hull of a ship couldn’t dream of obstructing even the shadow of his father’s brawn.

In the recesses of his mind Lan Jue could feel Captus hum. Both it and Demortus were reacting to something.

Zeus-1 continued to pick up speed and race through space for a full half an hour. It gave everyone time to collect themselves and recover.

When the Wine Master and the others had first met Jue Di, in truth they'd been slightly disappointed. They were expecting a legend but got a mechanic. Now they saw the legend, and then some.

Jue Di, this was Jue Di! The only known Paragon to reach the Infinite, the fourth degree of protogenic mastery. Watching that punch hadn't just shocked them, it had given them tremendous confidence. Even the Wine Master was starting to think that his ten days of labor setting up the teleport array wasn't necessary. With the god-like Jue Di on board, what alien could harm them? Jue Di simply had to want to, and even those alien planets were at risk.

In his cabin, Jue Di sat at the foot of the bed. Luo Xianni sat beside him, concern writ clear on her face.

"Hnnghh...." Jue Di sighed and closed his eyes.

"What is it? Are you alright?" She asked with some concern.

He grinned and shook his head. "I'm fine. It's been so long since I've lifted a hand. I didn't expect that. 'Time and tide wait for no man'! In the end, though, there is no path forward."

Luo Xianni scrunched her face in thought. "Could you use A-Jue's abilities to help you take that final step?"

He shook his head. "No. He's still too weak. Even once he's absorbed all the thunder essence, I'm afraid it still won't be enough. I have spent years searching, do you think it would be so easy?"

Her face became serious. "You shouldn't have gone out there. I don't want you to do that again."

He shrugged. "I only wanted to see where I am at. It's been more than ten years since I've lifted a finger. It's why I didn't want to be with you. If we're forced to part forever, could we handle it?"

Luo Xianni threw her arms around him. "I don't care. All I want is to

spend all my time with you. If that day comes, I'll go with you."

Jue Di gently stroked her hair. "Stop that nonsense. There's still so much you want to do. I just hope A-Jue comes into his own before I go. He and his brother are much further along than I was at their age. I can only give them my experiences, and show them the way. Especially A-Jue. The thunder essence has changed his thunderbolt Discipline. Not primordial or all-heaven lightning, but whatever it is will help him when it comes time to break through. How could I ask him to help me, at such a crucial time? When he's strong enough, he could use this opportunity for himself."

Luo Xianni vigorously shook her head. "Let's not talk about this. I just want to hold you like this."

Just then, a terrible consciousness drew its attention to the spot where Zeus-1 and the aliens had been. It swept across the empty space, then spread out into the distance. Jue Di's eyes hardened and he sat up straight.

"What is it?" Luo Xianni asked.

His eyebrows were knit tight. "I felt a powerful wave of energy. It originated far from us, but it's still so strong."

Luo Xianni looked at him with concern. "Was it mechanical, or...."

He shook his head. "It felt like a consciousness. It came too fast, I couldn't feel it clearly."

"For you to say something is strong... is it your same level?" She asked.

But he shrugged. "I don't know. The universe is boundless, it wouldn't be unthinkable to encounter something like me. I'm just concerned it's that alien."

Luo Xianni was beside herself with anxiety. "Should we tell A-Jue, tell him not to keep going toward the planets?"

He replied with a mirthless laugh. "The aliens came to the Starfields to prepare for the assault on humanity. If we leave them alone, do you think they'll just leave? Sooner or later, we're going to have to face them."

“But, you...”

Jue Di waved her off with his hand. “I’ve been a bully my whole life, you think I’m prepared to accept this bullshit?”

“Right,” she said, suddenly thinking of something. “Those vital crystals are no use to you?”

Chapter 626: Prying

Jue Di shook his head. “We’re on different levels, it has limited use for me. I would need crystals from something as strong as I. It’s the same for you. Those Paragons in the Realm of Protogenia, or who are Reflections of Heaven and Earth, they can use them. But for those like you and me, we’ve already surpassed natural restrictions and are connected to the universe at large. Only creatures with a similar connection can supplement our energies.”

A faint, bloodthirsty light shone in Luo Xianni’s eyes. “Then we’ll search until we find that alien, something that’ll work for us!”

Jue Di nodded. “This is also one reason I wanted to come along. If such a chance exists, I’m not going to let it slip.”

When she heard his affirmation, her mood improved. “You will definitely succeed,” she said through a smile. “You’re invincible.”

Zeus-1 took a distant, circuitous route from the scene of their last battle before continuing toward the galaxy’s center. The last encounter had left them flush, so much in fact that the Wine Master was having trouble keeping calm.

Altogether they’d gathered one thousand seven hundred vital crystals. Among them was the ten-meter long one from the Basilisk. If they managed to bring all of these back to human worlds intact, the response would be overwhelming. The cost to create their teleport base paled in comparison. They would be the cornerstone of the Eastern Alliance’s future dominance!

After preliminary calculations by the Accountant they estimated more than ten thousand people could use these to extend their lives, if the energy they released was any indication. This was on the conservative side, even before considering the Basilisk crystal.

The asteroid belts were beginning to look familiar. More and more aliens were appearing on their radar. However, now that they were closer to the planets he didn’t engage. Scouting was the main priority at the moment,

seek and destroy only if they had time.

They relied on Lin Guoguo's psychic pulses to keep them hidden when an alien came too close. She'd become quite adroit at mimicking alien consciousness after so many days of practice.

"We'll nearly be there once we cross the asteroid field." Su Xiaosu's somewhat nervous voice called to Lan Jue.

He walked over to her side and looked over her shoulder at the radar. Sadly its scanning range was soiled by the chaotic energies and magnetic disturbances of the Shattered Starfields. They couldn't see much beyond the tips of their noses.

"Wine Master, prepare to evacuate us at a moment's notice." Lan Jue said.

The Wine Master nodded. His dimensional scepter was already in his hand. The Epochrion and the Taming Dragon Arhat were in their respective cabins, preparing for a fight.

"Guoguo, how long can you keep this up?" He looked her way.

"At least an hour with no problems," she answered.

He nodded. "Full speed ahead. Accountant, make sure all our scanning equipment is ready to go."

"Aye aye!"

Zeus-1 leapt forward, barreling over a large asteroid on its way to clear space – and its target, the three alien planets.

At top speed it didn't take them long to traverse the belt. As the last space rock rolled past, the rest of the galaxy was revealed. At last, they'd reached their destination.

Except, everything was not what they expected. When they arrived at where the three primary planets had been, only one planet remained, hovering in the spot Moonfiend had once occupied. The other two were gone, with no trace left behind.

Xiaosu gasped. "They've already teleported away?"

Lan Jue placed a hand on her shoulder. “Not necessarily, don’t panic. Move in closer and scan the area. Remember that these planets can move. Maybe the planets split up to cover more area. After all, out here even one of these planets are invincible. Let’s move in and take a look. Mika, call my parents here to look. Assuming only one of the planets are here, maybe we can cause a little chaos.”

Jue Di’s apocalyptic punch had stunned everyone, and was a font of courage for Lan Jue. If his father could put down one of these three fatal worlds, it could mean the difference in humanity’s coming crisis.

Mika rushed to fetch them, while Zeus-1 slowly crept closer. The Psychic Tide continued to put her full effort into maintaining their camouflage.

From afar the planet almost looked like a human Bastion Ship, floating quietly by itself. A hive would be a more apt description, though. Scores of alien creatures could be spied leaving and returning from its surface. It swallowed them up and spat out others, keeping the flow steady.

Undoubtedly the creatures were being dispatched to gather more life energy. When they returned, they delivered that energy to the planet itself.

It was the first time Lan Jue was close enough to see the process clearly.

The surface of the planet was entirely purple. Its surface was pockmarked with craters, mountains, and strange fold-like valleys. A pale purple haze surrounded it, like an atmosphere. That was all he could tell with his eyes alone. He couldn’t see or sense much beyond that.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni arrived at the bridge and walked to his side. They looked out at the scene.

“Just one?” Jue Di’s brows wrinkled in thought.

Lan Jue nodded. “We can only see one. The other two most likely moved on. Now we know they can move and fight separately.”

Jue Di’s eyes narrowed. He was thinking of something, but there was no telling what.

Lan Jue continued. “From our previous encounter we can determine that

these planets are living creatures. They're like brood mothers, and can spawn aliens for their needs. They use life energy pilfered from elsewhere to empower themselves. The one we found on Taihua, the one we called a progenitor, was essentially a scaled-down version of this thing. It also spawned aliens and sent them out to drain the planet. It was using that energy to get bigger. We suspect that's how these things develop."

Jue Di nodded, expressing his agreement.

"Father, we have no way of telling how strong this planet is. If you were to fight it, do you think you could cause some damage?" Lan Jue asked.

"Absolutely not!" Luo Xianni answered for him.

Lan Jue paused. Everyone's eyes turned her way.

Jue Di stared at her for a moment before answering. "I can't tell. The planet's atmosphere is hiding its energies from me. I'd need to get in there."

Chapter 627: Exposed

Lan Jue was a smart guy, he could immediately from Luo Xianni's reaction that something was wrong with his father. She didn't hesitate to veto his idea. Lan Jue spoke directly to Su Xiaosu. "Keep a distant orbit around the planet. Scan and record everything we can."

"Aye aye." She pulled the ship into position and continued scanning their target. This was already enough, as they certainly weren't going to risk talking a stroll on the planet's surface. Heaven only knew what lay beneath that toxic atmosphere.

Lan Jue didn't want to confront his father about it now. He gave the order to keep their distance without hesitation. There would be time for questions when they were in less dangerous territory, but Luo Xianni's reaction had planted a seed of anxiety in his heart. No one knew him better than she did.

Their scans weren't only directed at the planet. Information was gathered on the flow of aliens that came and went as well. Their cameras were trained on them from a safe distance, hungrily lapping up every detail. The data they were getting was priceless for the future war effort.

As they continued their orbit, an alien creature blocked their path.

It was a breed they'd never seen before. The top of it was wide and thick, making it look like a giant umbrella. Dozens of spindly tendrils hung down from a body that rose over a thousand meters and stretched five hundred meters across. In terms of size, it was among the largest yet recorded.

Zeus-1 stopped. They looked for a way around it, but that was when they noticed the alien behemoth stop as well. Then the powerful psychic pulse came.

"Aah!" Lin Guoguo screamed, oscillating flashes of golden light glimmering around her. She tore the metal helmet off her head.

"We're exposed!" Lan Jue was the first to react. Su Xiaosu wasted no

time turning the ship around and trying to dash back the way they came.

The alien was on the move again, and picking up speed. Despite its size, it moved incredible fast and the tendrils below it splayed out behind like wisps of hair. Meter by meter the gap between them shrunk. The humans onboard looked at their radar screen in horror as a host of blips appeared.

Among them were swordfish, reefs, spiral aliens and more. They tumbled out from underneath the cap of the jellyfish-shaped monstrosity and charged at Zeus-1.

Clearly this one could carry smaller aliens with it. It somehow was able to store them in interdimensional space. Whatever breed this was, the creature was certainly among the peak of its kind.

A haze of golden light hung over the ship, and the host of enemies froze. In the same instant Zeus-1 blasted to full speed toward the asteroid belt they'd approached from.

The situation wasn't yet dire enough to use the Wine Master's teleporter. Lan Jue was also hesitant to show their secrets to their pursuers. The one who'd bought them time was the Epochrion. Through her command over time, she'd slowed them to a stand-still. Out in deep space she was in her element, it strengthened her protogenia.

The others sensed something wrong and swarmed for the ship. By some unknown means they were able to instantly communicate, so that the aliens that sped in from afar knew precisely where to go. In moments they were surrounded. Space was thick with writhing alien bodies.

According to the radar, in the span of a moment there were now ten thousand aliens bearing down on them.

Woosh! A swordfish sailed right across their bow. Zeus-1 was barely able to evade its charge. Lan Jue had taken over the controls from Lin Guoguo. He channeled his powers through the ship, monitoring and enhancing it.

"I'll try short-range teleportation first to see if we can shake them," the Wine Master called out.

The aliens swarmed thicker and closer, and through the undulating

purple flesh flashes of silver blinded the eye. There was a burst, and then Zeus-1 was gone.

When it reappeared, the ship was on the dark side of a large asteroid. They didn't stop, racing into the distance the moment they got their bearings. But then an orb of purple energy appeared in their path. As it grew every asteroid contained within was disintegrated. Even space-time seemed carved into slices.

They felt a heavy consciousness descend upon them and lock on the ship. It didn't bear the threat of direct attack, but it did overwhelm Lan Jue's mind. His face changed as a dizziness consumed him.

More of them were quickly approaching. Streaks of dangerous purple light were surrounding them again everywhere they looked. Another powerful wave of psychic force struck them and made the Clockmaker grunt. She staggered, but the golden light protecting them only got stronger.

It was time for Luo Xianni to get involved. She waved her hands and everything around them changed. Zeus-1 was covered in a pink hue, in and out. Whoosh! Reality ripped apart in front of them, and then they were gone. Her powers were like the Wine Master's, but as a Paragon of Nirvana level hers were far more effective.

When space reconstructed itself the aliens were gone, replaced with a sea of stone. They were back in the asteroid belt.

Lan Jue gave his mother a thumbs-up, but when he looked at her she seemed uncomfortable. He frowned. Jue Di's eyes narrowed, like he was concentrating on something.

The universe changed again. The asteroids were gone, and Zeus-1 was thrust into a world of purple, the natural color of this new reality.

"Humans!" A deep and rumbling voice arose. It bore a harshness like flesh on gravel. Everyone but Luo Xianni and Jue Di trembled uncontrollably at the sound.

They trembled because the voice came from within them. Within their

own minds.

Outside the windows something appeared floating in purple nothingness.

Su Xiaosu adjusted the radar, spreading its radius.

It was a man, or looked like a man. He was tall and strong, maybe in his twenties. His form was covered in deep purple robes, and the flesh that was revealed bore a pallid color. Despite that he bore himself majestically. He was perfectly proportioned, but a frigidness lived in his violet eyes.

It was his hair that struck Lan Jue. It evoked memories, visions of the long curious hair of the Violet Princess. This man was indeed one of the leaders.

“I’m going!” Luo Xianni growled.

“No!” Jue Di lifted his hand and placed it upon her shoulder. Looking into her eyes, he shook his head. “You can’t. He’s like me.”

Luo Xianni’s eyes widened. “You mean...”

Chapter 628: A Change in Fortune

Luo Xianni's face was almost excited. If this creature was as strong as Jue Di, its vital crystal would be enough to extend his life! She wasn't worried about her lover's ability to defeat the alien. In her heart, Jue Di was invincible.

Jue Di nodded. His voice was low and solemn. "When we make our move, the rest of you try to escape. I'll catch up with you at the teleport base."

He saw the hesitation in his son's eyes. "Don't imagine yourself immune. If there's one of these things around, there's likely to be a second not far behind. Safety for everyone has to be our first priority."

He didn't wait for a response. Jue Di's body was consumed in a flash of light and disappeared. Reality reacted, becoming brighter. A torrential flood of golden light surged in every direction with Zeus-1 as the center. The oppressive and terrifying aura of the alien was pushed back.

Lan Jue looked at Luo Xianni and the Wine Master. He nodded. Now wasn't the time to be cheap with their resources, they had to go – especially with so many alien crystals on board.

His father had spoken true, they had to keep everyone safe. They didn't dare involve themselves in a battle between two demi-gods. Not to mention, if the Violet Princess or others like her joined in, they would have no way to flee.

Luo Xianni's eyes glimmered with pale pink light. A silver halo sprang up around the Wine Master. Skyfire Avenue's Photographer placed her hands upon her nephew's shoulders and channeled her own powers through him while he traced intricate patterns in the air with his scepter.

Waves of enigmatic silver light flooded the ship. It radiated out through the hull, creating a pocket of interdimensional power. Pink light shined down upon it like light from a cherry blossom sun. Zeus-1 erupted into a shower of pink sparks, and was gone. All that remained was a shell of silver light and shadows of mystical runes.

Jue Di stood proudly in the purple universe. The aura of his power covered Zeus-1's escape. The alien paid the fleeing ship no mind, all of his attention was on the newly arrived Jue Di. They looked at one another warily.

"You are... human?" The violet-hued man queried.

"That's right!" Jue Di replied.

A strange expression crossed his face. "You are the strongest prey I've met."

Jue Di answered with a haughty sniff. "We'll see who is whose prey."

The creature lifted a hand and pointed at itself. His words were jerky, like he found them to be unnatural. "I. Violet Prince!"

Jue Di looked at him with hard eyes. "And who is the Violet Princess?"

This caused the alien to tilt its head to the side and pause to think. After a small while, he answered. "Little sister!" After he said it he thought again for a moment, but eventually nodded. "Yes. Sister! This is what humans say. We were produced from the same.... Parent. She is my sister."

Jue Di continued. "You do have parents, then?"

Again there was a moment of consideration before the Violet Prince answered. "Factual. King, Queen. Second Queen."

Fear gripped Jue Di's chest. They were emulating humans, and if the prince was this strong what could he expect from his parents? He could see some of his own fear reflected in the eyes of his adversary when he made mention of his parents.

"Why do you act like humans?" Jue Di asked.

The Violet Prince glanced at him, then as though he'd thought of something, said, "This I must not say. It is secret. You are food, and when I eat you I will be strong like Queen."

He was no longer interested in conversation. The creature moved on Jue Di, and the world they found themselves in suddenly became the eye of a terrible tempest. Surges of purple energy lashed out at the human

champion. Reality rippled in protest as the burst of power grew closer.

A brutal pressure descended on Jue Di from all sides. Space around him collapse, and the Paragon found himself in the center of a vacuum that was gobbling everything up.

The Violet Prince reappeared among the buffeting winds. He stretched out a hand that had grown to ten times its original size. The center of his palm was a jet black orb like a black hole, swallowing everything in its path.

Jue Di watched him come, unmoving. But when the Prince lifted his hand, Jue Di charged at him with a fist pulled back.

In contrast to when he attacked the alien horde before, there weren't any flashy lights or images. All of his strength was contained in that gnarled fist, turning it a radiant gold. It bore the same mysterious power, but it somehow felt different.

The vortex of energy from the alien stopped suddenly. His oppressive aura shattered like a pane of glass. Surprise widened his eyes as Jue Di's golden fist came right for his chest.

The deluge of power had hidden the alien's attacks from Jue Di's view, but the Violet Prince had had enough time to pull him arms in and press his palms together. A crackling sound filled the air, the Violet Prince's body was painted with threads of gold. In a blink he he was a hundred meters away, fast as a golden bullet and out of harm's way.

Jue Di grunted. His own body swayed and in the next instant he was chasing the Violet Prince, right on his heels. He lifted his right hand, and a staff appeared in his calloused grip ¹

"Big!" With the word of command, his staff exploded to several times its size. Likewise the Paragon's own figure stretched to over a thousand meters. The staff was gold at the ends with a silver body, and as it swung through the air toward the Violet Prince it seemed like it could pulverize anything it met.

Spectral images of the staff exploded through the purple universe,

obliterating asteroids in its path. If the Wine Master or Epochrion could see this power, who knew what the shock would do to them.

Boom-! The strike hit the Violet Prince head-on, but his reaction was not what Jue Di expected. The human form of the alien dissolved into a purple mist. Not only did the staff attack fail to knock the creature away, its gaseous form simply parted around the attack.

However this lasted only for a brief moment. As the gas tried to intertwine itself around the staff, it erupted with power to rival the creation of the cosmos.

For the Violet Prince, it was as though everything around him changed. He no longer was in a purple universe of his creation, but on the surface of some unknown planet. When the golden light receded he saw a clear and bright sky, a deep blue sea. But as he looked on the picturesque scenery melted together.

“Ahhhh....” The Prince’s blood-curdling scream tore through the air. Its gaseous form tried to escape, desperate to flee in any direction, but the golden aura of the staff kept it contained.

Jue Di’s body changed, too. His hair and eyes had become gold, his muscles bulged. The muscles of his jaw corded as he strained, body bowed like he was bearing the weight of the universe.

This strike had a name; UpEnder. One of the most forceful attacks in Jue Di’s arsenal. There was enough force behind that single attack to completely destroy a planet! Even when he was in his prime, it was rarely used. However today, facing this mysterious Violet Prince, he pulled no punches. He started the fight with the full force of his abilities.

The alien prince was on the verge of destruction. Suddenly, a terrible roar arose.

A beam of magenta light erupted from the distant alien planet. It was headed right for Jue Di’s staff.

Jue Di scowled. His enormous body fractures in to hundreds of golden mirror images that spread across the heavens before recombining. The

destructive power of his UpEnder attack was gone, like it had never existed.

The beleaguered Violet Prince reconstituted himself from the mists. He no longer bore the composed, heroic bearing he had had. His features were monstrous, his maw large and stilted. What was a perfectly proportioned human body swelled grotesquely, culminating in a hideous magenta beast over ten thousand meters long.

The Prince's new form brought to mind the ancient Tyrannosaurus of old Earth. However, the features of its head were grossly exaggerated. It took up almost half its total mass.

Its great mouth opened wide, revealing an all-consuming blackness. Hurricane-force winds tugged at Jue Di as the beast approached to swallow him up.

When the myriad copies of Jue Di recombined he did not pause. The Paragon shot backwards in retreat so quickly he became a golden light. Soon that, too, disappeared.

The Prince bit into thin air. When it discovered its target missing, it let loose a bellowing cry. It was so intense nearby asteroids were shaken apart and reduced to dust. A large swath of space was cleared. A creature of this size and strength could likely clear the Shattered Starfields if it stayed in the area for a thousand years or so.

"Aaaagghrrrrrrr!" The creature's roar ripped across space like a wave of force. Its whole body shook in rage. Not yet ready to give in, it bristled as beams of violet light were spewed from its armored form. The area attack was grandiose and far-reaching, a burst to flush his enemy from hiding.

In the distance, the beam of magenta from the alien planet deepened to a pitch black. The sickly hue quickly spread over the celestial body until it was almost invisible against the dark backdrop of space.

When that tyrannical power enveloped the Violet Prince, both it and the creature vanished. Everything became silent, still. Nothing remained to speak of the battle, and all that was left was a pocket of empty space in the middle of an asteroid belt.

Chapter 629: Not Even the Same Level

An intense discomfort washed over everything as reality was torn apart and put back together. Thankfully, it lasted only a moment. The bizarre sensation passed and the universe returned to normal. Zeus-1 was quietly settled on the surface of a small planet, like it'd been there the whole time.

Lan Jue scowled, fighting to dispel the affliction. As though in response, a cool and refreshing energy spread out from his chest like being submerged in spring water.

The Paragons seemed fine, but Zeus' five Amazons each reacted differently to the teleportation. Lin Guoguo seemed to have fared best, while the others were in various states of discomfort.

The oppressive power that had enveloped them was now gone. Their slice of the cosmos was still and quiet.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh. The s-ranked gem consumed to perform the teleportation was well worth it. It'd gotten them out of an extremely dangerous situation.

But he didn't know how his father was. Anxiety began to gnaw at him. Neither he nor his brother had ever seen the full extent of their father's strength, because he had had no cause to. They could only guess by the residual energies they sensed. Now, just as it was when they were kids, no one could compare to the invincible Jue Di.

"Relax, he'll be fine. That creature isn't strong enough to defeat your father. Even if it was, he knows when to run." Luo Xianni gently patted his shoulder and spoke in a calm voice.

Lan Jue turned his head to look her way. Although she spoke with confidence, he could see his own anxiety reflected in her eyes. Now was not the time to be discouraging, though. Besides she was right, his father would be fine.

The others of their party were in better spirits, especially the Wine Master. They'd gained much in their short excursion. They'd learned a lot

about the hostile planets, and managed to flee in the face of an alien horde. Many were put down in the process, adding to the growing number of vital crystals in Star Division's possession. Cash couldn't buy the treasures they'd reaped.

"Jewelry Master, should we return to the East when Jue Di returns?" The Wine master asked.

The young commander nodded. "That's what I'm thinking. We've already managed to get a lot, it's imperative we bring back what we learn. We still don't know what these planets are capable of, but we've learned much about the aliens and their types. We also know they fear our Disciplines – they are invulnerable. On the other hand we've discovered another one of their leaders, who is at least as strong as Jue Di. Stronger than the Violet Princess. In the future it will be this 'royal' family we'll need to be most wary of."

The Wine Master nodded slowly, as though thinking deeply. He'd seen Jue Di's power with his own eyes, ending a host of foes with a single punch. If the one they found was of similar status to Jue Di, it meant it was just as strong. That was more frightening than he cared to think about.

A creature that strong was far beyond what humanity's weapons could contend with. Whether they infiltrated the population or attacked head on, the aliens could do tremendous damage. That kind of destruction could split a planet.

The Accountant had by now recovered from the discomfort of teleportation. He had been the busiest of them all, constantly collecting and analyzing the data that crossed his screen. He was about to return to work when his eyes caught something on screen. "There's a wave of energy coming at us from the planet's location."

When the Accountant delivered his report, everyone's face changed. They were still within the Shattered Starfields, but far from where the three primary planets had once been. Feeling residual energy from this far away could only mean an incredibly powerful event!

Even the stoic Luo Xianni reacted. This power must have come from Jue Di – or maybe, the alien.

Lan Jue looked at her again. “Ma. Father, he...” The question he wanted to ask was obvious. Was this from Jue Di, so far from where they left him?

She shook her head. “I don’t know, either. It may not be just his. Whatever the case, he’ll definitely be coming back.”

He heaved a sigh. Luo Xianni’s affirmations were thick were her own hopes, and weren’t necessarily coming from a place of clear thought. Right now, though, they had no choice but to hope what she said was as true as she made it sound.

Everyone’s mood was gloomy. Jue Di was the strongest human ever! He was their trump card, their final line of defense against these terrible creatures. If he fell during a simple scouting mission the results would be catastrophic. No one wanted to imagine that scenario.

There was nothing they could do but wait – wait for their hero to return. Lan Jue was commander of the excursion, and as such his most important job was to command. However he couldn’t keep his hands from clenching into fists quivering with frustration. If he was by himself, he’d rush in at the first sign of distress from Jue Di. He would live or die by his father’s side. But he had others to consider. He’d come with students, soldiers and companions that he was responsible for. His wishes and desires didn’t override that responsibility. So, all he could do was wait, and not for long. If his father didn’t show up in a reasonable time frame, they’d have to leave without him. The data they’d acquired had to get back as soon as possible.

Despite his anxiety, though, he did believe in his dad. He was a hero, and heroes squeak by danger to save the day. It was faith – faith in the best of humanity.

After a little while, people were beginning to get impatient.

Just then there was a flash of golden light, and the ship’s bridge had an extra passenger. Jue Di.

“Dad!” Joy filled Lan Jue’s relieved call.

Outwardly his father looked fine, no different than he had when they left but for a dark look in his eye. He was thinking about something. He nodded toward his son. “Let’s go, time to head back.” He said nothing further, returning to his cabin.

Lan Jue looked at Su Xiaosu and nodded. She wasted no time, and Zeus-1 was in the air a moment later. They were headed for the border of the Shattered Starfields at top speed.

Lan Jue turned to look for Luo Xianni, but only caught her back as she hurried after Jue Di. Lan Jue hesitated, but in the end didn’t follow. If his father had something he wanted to tell him, he’d do so. If he didn’t, he had his reasons.

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“What is it?” Luo Xianni followed Jue Di back to their cabin. Her voice was low and secretive. Out of everyone in their scouting party she had been the most anxious for his return. She knew the truth.

Jue Di shook his head. “I couldn’t do it. I was right, that creature is as strong as I am. If I could get its vial crystal then it could help. But he isn’t the strongest. Just when we were beginning our fight a burst of energy came from the planet. It was even stronger than he was. I had to flee.”

“Stronger than you?” Luo Xianni asked, aghast.

Jue Di stared at her. “Not even the same level. That’s why I haven’t told them, it won’t help anything now.”

The Photographer didn’t know how to respond. Not on the same level, what did that mean when Jue Di was stronger than anyone? The only thing she could imagine was the immortals of old.

Jue Di went on. “But that doesn’t mean I came back empty handed. I learned a little from this self-styled ‘Violet Prince.’ I suspect they emulate humans because it benefits their evolution. The human body is the most highly evolved organism in the known universe thus far. That’s why they want to learn about us. Our mannerisms, knowledge, faith... they want to

know it all. They chose us as a target not just for food, but because their future depends on it. Our DNA is the key.”

Luo Xianni’s brows furrowed. “It looks like this fight is inevitable, and we’ll need to fight tooth and nail.” She was a Paragon who had reached Nirvana, and the destructive capabilities she commanded were staggering. For a creature stronger even than Jue Di to appear before them, what human invention could contend with that?

“This will need further thought,” Jue Di mused. “The more we learn, the better we’ll be able to fight them. Not to mention a fair bit of a luck.”

The return trip went smoothly. Aliens crossed their path, but it wasn’t difficult to evade them, or hide with the help of Lin Guoguo’s psychic pulses. They didn’t risk a fight. Eventually they made their way out of hostile territory, and back into human controlled space.

Lan Jue’s first order of business was to establish contact and deliver the data they recovered. As expected, what they learned was invaluable. He shared it with An Lun first. They had better communication equipment than Zeus-1. And Lan Jue trusted his brother implicitly.

“You’re back?” Lan Qing’s face appeared on their screens. His face was calm, but there was relief in his eyes. The most frightening thing about these aliens was the amount they didn’t know. He was worried because he didn’t know what to expect. If they were in contact, at least it meant they’d escaped the Starfields.

Chapter 630: Safe Return

“Yeah, we just escaped the Starfields. Our first move was to get this data to you. Send it to the Eastern government as quickly as you can. We’ve learned a lot this time.” A smirk spread across Lan Jue’s face.

”Alright!” Lan Qing Replied, then cut the connection.

The data was uploaded to An Lun under the Accountant’s direction. When the progress bar hit one hundred percent Lan Jue allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. They had succeeded, their scouting mission was over. In the end they were more shaken up than anything. Small wonder for a team of five Paragons. If they’d failed with so much overwhelming firepower behind them, humanity would be lost.

Zeus-1 sailed toward An Lun as fast as they could to collect the rest of Star Division. There would be more missions for them once the Eastern government analyzed what was gathered. However, before all that they had to bring the vital crystals back and determine how much they’d gained.

They would give some of these crystals to reliable members of the Eastern government, in order to maximize their profits. As more of these crystals were recovered their worth would decrease. Until then, they could be exchanged with the North and West for essential goods – like battleships. Strength would determine who would be victorious in the fight against the aliens, the East had to keep that in consideration.

Once the file transfers were complete, Lan Jue allowed himself some personal time. He continued training with the Driver, determined to complete the transformation of their Discipline. Once it was, they could truly say their powers were the stuff of Paragons. Lan Jue wouldn’t let his brother get too far ahead.

At first Lan Jue thought he was comparable to Lan Qing while he and Qianlin were joined, especially with the addition of immortal qi and Captus. Of course, no one could have imagined Lan Qing would break through to Paragon and immediately become a Reflection of Heaven and

Earth. It'd filled Lan Jue with happiness, but also a sense of urgency that only deepened the more he learned about the alien menace.

As an Adept, Lan Jue was among the strongest of them. But when it came to Paragons his strength was a drop in a bucket. It was a deficiency, one he knew he had to correct by sparing no effort or expense on his own progress. If he wanted to help when he was needed, he had to be as strong as the best of humanity.

If he was alone, Lan Jue knew that becoming as strong as he wanted would be a long process. He would need to achieve at least Nirvana, like the Photographer or the Violet Princess. But he wasn't alone, he had Qianlin by his side. If they could become Paragons together, with Captus and Demortus they could carve bloody swaths through even the strongest of these creatures. It was still possible. After his recultivation, an abrupt rise like his brother's was still in the cards.

Zeus-1 returned to An Lun without incident, and was greeted at the docking port by Lan Qing. Now that he'd broken through, his standing in the military was entirely different. He was the youngest commander, youngest admiral, and the youngest supreme commander in military history. He could lay claim to all of these records with pride. It also meant he was one of the most powerful men in the Eastern Alliance, and that was before considering his martial and Adept prowess.

Before Lan Jue and his team left for their scouting mission, the Eastern government had decided to send their Fourth Fleet to An Lun. It was now considered a permanent fixture of the planet, under Lan Qing's direct command. With an entire fleet – nay, a whole planet – under his personal direction, Lan Qing was the most famous commander in the whole history of the East.

War was on the horizon, no one was running care-free through fields of flowers. The soldiers were well-trained and continued to push themselves. The fleet was equipped with state-of-the-art equipment. Already, Lan Qing had them training with the rest of An Lun's soldiers to make sure they were up to par. There was no question that the Fourth Fleet and An Lun's warriors – as well as Lan Qing himself – would become one of the

strongest factions of the Eastern resistance effort.

The East was comparably weak, and suffered from its own internal political strife. However, compared to the other two Alliances the East was much more unified. No one stood in the way of the government's work to protect themselves from these aliens. Everything they did was to strive for the survival and expansion of the East. Of all the Alliances the East had been the first to react to the threat, and were the quickest in making the necessary changes. After publishing their findings on the exuvium process, flocks of talented individuals had begun to immigrate into the East, searching for opportunity. Of course, this was done privately.

"Brother." When he saw Lan Qing, Lan Jue felt his pride in victory flush through him. His brother had spent the days after his breakthrough perfecting himself, smoothing the rough edges of his dharma. He was calmer, and the waves of erratic energy were gone. He looked and felt like any normal man, entirely ordinary. It was a potent example of his abilities. In so short a time he was able to reign in the raging tides of protogenia and bring them under his control. Such tremendous talent!

Lan Jue wasn't the only one to notice it. The Pauper, Wine Master, and Clockmaker saw it as well. Inwardly the Wine Master sighed. He was an old Paragon, and even still the gap between him and Lan Qing was vast beyond measure. The young commander may not have had the experience he possessed, but he was like a child when it came to comprehension.

"It's good you're back. The information you brought back is priceless." Lan Qing nodded at his brother before offering his regards to the Paragons.

Jue Di was the picture of calm, standing tall with his hands clasped at the small of his back. However, his eyes said he was thinking about something.

"Father!" Lan Qing walked over to stand in front of Jue Di.

He nodded in greeting. When he spoke, his voice was full of satisfaction. "Not bad, it looks like you've brought your powers under control. Keep striving. I may have recommended your dharma for less than savory

reasons, but it is one of the most potent. When you learn to communicate with heaven and earth, when you achieve Nirvana, it will serve you well. Perhaps one day you'll discover the long-lost Western Paradise.”

Lan Jue interjected. “Don’t you want grandchildren? Are you trying to make my brother a monk?”

“Dharma isn’t faith,” Jue Di said in irritation. “Monk my ass. You have as many pretty girls crowding around you as clouds in the sky, but you don’t introduce any to your brother. I’ve never troubled you over that, yet you have the gall to try and call me out?”

Lan Jue just shrugged. “His standards are too high, what am I supposed to do?”

This earned a glare from Lan Qing. “You must be tired. Rest. I have everything prepared.”

In reality, everyone had had ample time to rest on the trip back to An Lun. However mentally, they could only begin to relax once they were back on the base. The Wine Master, Clockmaker and the other Paragons had been especially harried to say nothing of the team’s commander. But Lan Jue could not rest, and once he got back to his room he summoned the Bartender and Coffee Master to make their report on the Division’s training.

He was surprised to learn that his soldiers took to An Lun’s environment quickly. They worked very well with his brother’s Bloodiron Khans and had already undergone two expansive joint military exercises. Both times Star Division had emerged victorious. If it had been a real fight, it would have been difficult to overcome the Khan’s superior training and teamwork. On the other hand, Star Division’s advantages were obvious. Firstly was their individual skill. There were over eighty ninth level Adepts in the Division, and each one could take out a squad of Khans. They weren’t as unified as their brothers in arms, but don’t forget that their experienced was forged in the fires of ruined pirate bases.

From the beginning, Lan Jue had trained his people like a pirate fighting force. Ten people to a squad was the best organization to play off of their

individual strengths.

So it was that as a traditional military organization, they weren't as structured as most, however it did come with a unique set of advantages. Squad mates worked well together as a solitary fighting force. Adepts that made up the Division were among the best the East had to offer and were organized well so that each soldier supplemented the others of their team. It wasn't perfect, but there were improvements too. Each squad was as disciplined as an army, as harmonious as a family. Whenever they were together, a squad's first concern was how to make the team stronger. Their competition was their brothers and sisters in other squads.

Chapter 631: The Power of Star Division!

Star Division had improved far beyond Lan Jue's expectations, be it strength, cooperation or discipline. When they were faced with the Bloodiron Khans, it broke into its individual cells to harass and surprise attack the enemy. In this way, they gnawed away at the Bloodiron Khans until they collapsed. If they tried to push the offensive, Star Division focused its strength to turn guerilla strikes into full-on raids.

After experiencing the epiphanies of Lan Qing's breakthrough, Star Division had undergone another sharp rise in capability. No small number of troops used what they learned to smash through bottlenecks. The number of sixth level Talents was shrinking as they advanced to seventh and eighth. Their equipment only continued to improve, making them a nightmare to contend against.

The strictly disciplined Bloodiron Khans grumbled and quietly nursed their grievances when the games were done. They requested better mechas after finding their own were insufficient. However, there wasn't anything Lan Qing could do to help them. How did Star Division earn their impressive gear? They took it themselves. Star Division was laden with riches, and was the most affluent military outfit in the East. A national organization with limited government funds couldn't compete. Star Division's mechas were custom tailored to suit their soldier's Disciplines. They were choked full of the best power gems available to enhance those Disciplines. It gave them a nearly insurmountable advantage.

An Lun's soldiers weren't alone in their displeasure. Lan Qing was similarly perturbed by the results. He had personally commanded his troops during the second exercise, but the results were the same. There was nothing for it – the difference in equipment and individual ability was too great.

Currently Star Division was so flush with ninth level Adepts that each squad was led by one. These exceptionally talented soldiers were also empowered by their mechas. Even though they weren't all god-ranked pilots, they were head and shoulders above any normal soldier. Lan Qing

had to watch as his own soldiers were cast into disarray by Star Division.

Lan Qing knew that if his soldiers were as strong individually as his brother's soldiers, under his command they would have more than a solid chance at victory. For now, however, the chances were simply too remote to entertain. He could have joined in himself and single-handedly turn the tide of battle – but what would be the point? Didn't Star Division have Paragons of its own? They just weren't present at the time.

Lan Qing's final analysis of Star Division was that it was an incomparable Adept fighting force. He secretly admired Skyfire Avenue for taking the risk in its creation and training. Establishing a small army the likes of this took tremendous resources and iron determination! It was no easy feat.

As it turned out, Skyfire Avenue had a singular vision. You couldn't describe Star Division as a normal mecha division by any stretch. Gathering all these adepts under one banner and giving them the full support of Skyfire Avenue resulted in the fastest creation of a major military installation ever.

Aside from everything else, what normal person could boast being present for the breakthrough of two Paragons? Until recently the occurrences were rare and available only to a select few, and normal humans didn't benefit at all. By contrast Star Division was proud to find that many of their soldiers gained incredible insights from these experiences. The best of them acquired the most.

Lan Jue was pushed on by the success of his brother. What he didn't know was that Lan Qing was inspired by adversity as well. Lan Qing yearned for the impossible so that he might overcome it. How else could he have achieved so much at such a young age? Talent alone wasn't enough. Strength of will and unwavering determination blazed the path.

As Lan Jue listened to the Bartender and Coffee Master's exulted reports, a strange expression came across his face. An immense surge of pride filled him. So long as they continued on this path, his soldiers would grow in strength and ability. All he had to do was mention the wealth of crystals

they'd recovered and morale would skyrocket. Now that it was confirmed their Disciplines were effective against the aliens, it also affirmed that Star Division would be an integral weapon against the invaders when the time came.

"What about the ones we left back on Skyfire?" He asked.

The Coffee Master replied. "They've all come around after their insights. That fat disciple of yours seems to have gained the most from it. I could even sense faint waves of protogenia coming from him. It really chaps my ass! Even being by your side for so long, I still can't even see the realm of protogenia on the horizon."

Lan Jue scowled at him. "Enough nonsense, you seem happy enough with where you are not to work hard. You think your potential is somehow inferior to anyone else's? 'Fastest Hands Under Heaven'?"

The Bartender sounded curious as he joined in. "What you're saying isn't entirely accurate. These days potential isn't enough. Without grueling work you don't have a chance. You haven't seen what the teams do, they're constantly competing. Not just with others outside of the Division, but among each squad. They're constantly testing themselves. We know that's what you want encouraged so we've thought up an inter-Division competition. The winning team will be put on the list for the exuvium process, what do you think?"

Lan Jue was taken aback. "How did you think this up?"

This made the Coffee Master chortle. "Our soldiers have too much pent-up energy and nowhere to let it out. We were trying to think of something for them to put their effort toward. It'd be along the same lines as the Great Adept tournament, with them initially separated by brigades. It'd take place in DreamNet, ten on ten. Ace squads would participate too, against two normal squads. We figured it was fairer. In the end the winners are put on exuvium list."

Lan Jue laughed. "Excellent idea! But the soldiers in Ace squad are too strong. Even if you broke the squad in half they could still handily defeat a normal squad. Break them up and have them compete as individuals,

among one another. At the same time, each squad can elect one person to fight in single battles. We have two competitions going simultaneously, one for teams and one for ace squad members. Brigade commanders can participate in the individual fights as well. Paragons, of course, can't. Neither can I or the Pharmacist."

The Bartender gave an approving thumbs-up. "Much more thorough. So be it, we'll call this part of their training. Give us half a month to get things in order."

Lan Jue nodded. "We can make it a common thing, these competitions. We can use it to inspire them to work harder. The rewards will be different each time. Right now the Avenue isn't hurting for riches or equipment."

The three of them hammered out the remainder of the details. They expected it would cause a fierce competitive spirit to emerge. Of course, safety had to be considered and their training with the Bloodiron Khans would continue. Real life battles weren't needed anymore, DreamNet was enough of an analogue for real life.

With this in mind, Lan Jue set off to find his brother and suggest the two groups continue to train together. Perhaps leave the Star Division here for a while longer. At any rate it would take time for the East to digest the information they brought, and share it with their colleagues in the West and North.

Predictably, Lan Qing was very busy. But he made a point of carving out some time for his little brother. "What is it? I have a meeting in a little while." Lan Qing said, wasting no time.

Lan Jue launched right into it. "I was hoping to keep Star Division here for a little while. I'd like them to continue training with the Bloodiron Khans, I think it'd benefit everyone. We can continue the joint battles in DreamNet, that way we can practice in different terrains and conditions. Get them ready for anything."

Lan Qing gave him an accusatory sideways look. "You haven't won enough? There's too much difference in individual strength and

equipment. It won't help my people very much to keep getting trounced. It'll only undermine their morale."

Lan Jue grinned at him. "When did you lose faith? If you're worried about that we can reduce the numbers participating. We can't downgrade their gear because they used it all throughout their training, it's a part of their strategy. It'll take away too much of their effectiveness."

A hardness flashed through Lan Qing's eyes. "You think I can accept this sort of scorn for my people?" Ever since taking command, he never had to ask his opponents to go easy.

Lan Jue shrugged. "Those are the facts. And anyway, you shouldn't be discouraged. Your men are facing the greatest Adept army in history – the epitome of Skyfire Avenue's strength! Each soldier is strong on their own, with a mountain of money behind them. Facing a smaller group doesn't mean you're losing face. The whole point is mutual improvement, surviving the alien invasion and making them pay for what they've done. How does saving face help this?"

Chapter 632: Do You Want to Torture Me?

Faced with his younger brother's sass, Lan Qing laughed. "Very well, you've got your wish. On one condition; we fight, in front of all our men."

Lan Jue froze for a minute, then burst out. "Do you want to torture me?!"

Lan Qing's irritation flared. "You come to me for the help of my men and this is how you react?"

Lan Jue's eyes nearly rolled out of his head, but after a moment he nodded. "Fine, it's agreed. Losing to my brother doesn't mean anything, I'm not concerned about face. Only, you're an illustrious Paragon now. You'll earn no glory from beating me. I should fight with Qianlin, I think you'll agree to that. Two on one."

"Alright!" Lan Qing agreed straight off. His intention wasn't to abuse his brother. Ever since breaking through he'd been unable to find anyone of comparable level to contend with. He was immersed in a whole new realm of capability he had no opportunity to test. Outwardly he looked calm, but he was struggling with an itch he couldn't scratch.

"Tomorrow, then!" Lan Jue promptly decided.

Lan Jue was also curious what his brother could conjure up as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. The effects his breakthrough had on An Lun were still fresh in his memory. The East had been clever in concealing the truth, stating that the strange aura that had hung over the planet was the implementation of a new defense system.

The Bloodiron Khans had been struggling with their recent losses to Star Division, especially since they'd lost under the command of their illustrious super soldier. Their morale had taken a significant hit. Their training was second to none, but every one of them knew that overcoming the powerhouses from Skyfire was almost impossible.

It was in the midst of this gloom that they learned Star Division would contend against them with fewer numbers. The shame and indignation they felt nearly made them choke. They were the Bloodiron Khans! Since

when where they the ones looked down on? But they had no option but to swallow their pride.

Early the next morning, both armies gathered on the An Lun training grounds.

Star Division's soldiers stood as one, imposing and full of stamina. Their faces were bright with self-confidence. They'd first joined Star Division for profit, some of them because of an affiliation with Skyfire Avenue. But over time, after sweeping through the Starfields and defeating the Bloodiron Khans, after developing relationships with teammates, they felt like part of something. Most importantly, they could clearly see rapid improvement after joining up. Every squad was under the direction of a ninth level Adept that guided their betterment. They trained and cultivated together. With the addition of the Avenue's resources, and the opportunity to witness a Paragon's breakthrough, all of this together was far beyond anything they could have accomplished by themselves.

With things as they were, none of them pined for the old days. Who didn't want to stronger? The smart ones knew how dangerous the coming fight was going to be. Backed by strong allies, they were more likely to achieve the success they desired. Skyfire Avenue was a haven for the strong. If they couldn't be safe there, then humanity was closer to destruction than people thought. Star Division's soldiers were flush with confidence.

An Lun's Bloodiron Khans stood in precise formation, but a closer look penetrated the discipline to reveal the resentment beneath. A few furtive glares were thrown toward their Skyfire compatriots across the field, thick with hostility. Finally meeting an insurmountable foe dug at their ego.

Lan Jue and Lan Qing appeared simultaneously in the center of the field. Both brother regarded each other with a chilly calm. Qianlin stood beside Lan Jue, hand in hand.

Peppered among the Skyfire soldiers were many of Lan Jue's A.R.C. students. When they saw Qianlin, they almost gasped in surprise. Only a few even had an inkling of the relationship between them, and when they

discovered his true identity many couldn't help but lose a little respect for the Demon Drillmaster. After all, he was their etiquette teacher! Qianlin's sudden and complete absence had also made many of them curious. Now here she was, and the revelation shocked them.

Tan Lingyun's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. She had a boisterous and overbearing personality, but she was still a woman. The gentleness in his eyes when he looked at Qianlin was proof enough, she didn't have a chance. But dwelling on it served nothing, her only purpose now would be to become the strongest she could be.

"The purpose behind our joint exercises is to make one another better. Commander Lan Jue and I have spoken, and decided that over the next month, we will be conducting these exercises every two days. Half of Star Division will contend with the full might of the Bloodiron Khans. As we continue, we will analyze the results to make adjustments as necessary. Khan, if you wish to recapture your reputation, you will need to examine yourselves." Lan Qing's voice was soft, but his words were like a fire in the hearts of his men. A fierceness sparkled in their eyes.

Lan Jue and Qianlin stood behind the Commander in Chief, never speaking a word. However, his easy smile and encouraging expression inspired the Star Division soldiers. They'd defeated the undefeated An Lun super soldier!

"I suspect we all know what it means for Adepts to compete against one another. In a moment, Commander Lan Jue and I will exchange blows. We hope you all will find it enlightening. Everyone, sit." Lan Qing's soft voice commanded.

Every one of the Bloodiron Khan's obeyed, practically in a single motion. Star Division didn't move a muscle. Lan Qing was the An Lun super soldier, leader of the Bloodiron Khans and commander of the Eastern armies. What he wasn't, was their commanding officer.

"Everyone sit," Lan Jue quietly ordered. They looked upon their leader with fervent, burning eyes. In the eyes of his brigade officers, however, Lan Jue could see pity. It was no secret to them that Lan Qing had immediately

become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. It seemed ludicrous that Lan Jue would agree to this fight when anyone could guess the outcome. It was masochism! They just waited for it to be over.

Lan Jue slowly swung his eyes back to Lan Qing. Lifting his free hand, he beckoned for him to begin.

Lan Qing lifted his own arm, but to speak into his communicator. "Tell them to cut off all satellite surveillance footage."

Their fight couldn't take place in DreamNet because the system couldn't handle protogenic energy. As a result, their contest would take place in the real world. Lan Qing's aim in making the planet dark was, of course, to confound the West and North.

With his commands given, Lan Qing gave his brother a final look, laden with unspoken meaning. His body shook, then suddenly became a beam of turquoise light. It cleaved the air, racing into the heavens and disappearing from view.

Lan Jue looked to Qianlin who stood quietly beside him. His hand tightened around hers, and they shot up after him. The three fighters were invisible to the armies waiting on the ground below, however as they vanished a holographic projection flickered to life. It focused on Lan Qing, Lan Jue and Qianlin so that they didn't miss a moment. As the promise of a spectacular fight hung in the air, their mutual animosity was gone. Everyone's attention was fixated on the hologram, especially the Bloodiron Khans. They might have lost, but their high commander wouldn't!

The Khans knew about Lan Jue. They'd watched the Great Adept Tournament like everyone else. Meanwhile the analysts of An Lun had busily learned all they could about Star Division – and especially their Grand Champion commander.

Champion of the Great Adept Tournament against the An Lun super soldier. Who would win? For the Khans the answer was clearly their general. After all, he was a Paragon of the second degree!

Lan Qing continued until he was hovering in the stratosphere. For one with powers strong as his, this was effortless. For Qianlin and Lan Jue it

was also posed no threat. A crackling aura of thunderbolt energy surrounded them and kept the suffocating pressure of space at bay. They weren't the least bit slowed and kept pace with the Paragon.

Excitement smoldered in Lan Jue's eyes. He could test his powers against his brother at last, and why wouldn't he be excited to show off how much he'd accomplished? He and the Driver had managed to transform about half their Discipline to the powerful yin-yang lightning. While they'd both benefited greatly, Lan Jue was quicker and smoother through the process because he could endure more of the energy at once. Both he and Qianlin had been in a constant state of development. The immortal qi was penetrating all the way down into their DNA. Its effects had been particularly evident in the last few months, like they'd reached a new level.

Chapter 663: Battle of the Brothers

He wasn't yet a Paragon, but Lan Jue's mastery of protogenia was singular. It was more vibrant and cooperative than it ever had been. Although he couldn't command the power to manifest a Paragon's Domain, his failure certainly wasn't for lack of comprehension.

Qianlin's Discipline had grown over time as well. Her progress wasn't fast, but rather steady. She managed to keep pace with Lan Jue. However, swordplay was another matter. As they continued to train, Qianlin's skills had flourished. The unfortunate state of her consciousness didn't inhibit her at all, to the point where she even surpassed Lan Jue. Xuanyuan Shishi claimed it was her nature. The Queen of Heaven Discipline was the purest energy in the universe, and the closest to the immortals of old. An innate understanding of these old secrets lived within her, which resonated with the inherited knowledge imparted by the sword spirit. As they practiced the bonds only strengthened. For Qianlin, all it took was a step at a time.

Lan Qing led them high over the An Lun base. Below, soldiers from two armies watched via satellite. Holographic images shone with crystal clarity in the center of the An Lun training field. Meanwhile, monitors in the West and North shrieked and returned nothing but white noise. Something was blocking their signals.

No one blinked an eye. This was common circumstance when watching An Lun. They did this any time they were holding exercises. It never lasted long, scramblers cost a lot of energy to keep running.

Lan Qing turned toward the two of them. He sighed. "Is she any better?" Lan Jue's character was no secret to him. Lan Jue was talented and smart, but he had a clear weakness. He was emotional and quick to action. The moment something caught his passion it took over his thinking. Those raging emotions sunk him into depression for three years.

Lan Jue struggled to catch up with Lan Qing, but he never knew how much it cost for his older brother to maintain the lead. Lan Qing knew he didn't have his brother's talent, that's why he pushed himself so hard.

It warmed his heart to see his little brother with someone he loved, standing shoulder to shoulder. The battle fervor diminished in the face of joy, and uncertainty. Was power really so important? Or, was it more important to live your life with someone you loved?

Lan Jue quietly watched. He spotted every micro-expression that crossed his brother's face. When a glimpse of sadness revealed itself, Lan Jue replied. "Better. At least... on the path to being better. Her Queen of Heaven Discipline has a strong regenerative power. She will recover. She will!" Certainty rang in his voice.

A smile crept onto Lan Qing's face. "I wish her a speedy recovery. You also mustn't put too much of the burden on yourself. That's my job."

Lan Jue blinked. He'd never heard his brother talk like this before. "Hey, are you alright? Don't tell me you're scared you can't beat me."

It was such a rare occurrence to see his brother's romantic side, Lan Jue wasn't sure how to react. Ever since Lan Qing broke through, he was like a different man. Before, 'stick up his ass' would have been an apt description of the admiral. Now he was looser, almost calm. That made Lan Jue very happy.

"Come, show me how you've been spending your time. Father has a lot of praise for your abilities." All expression drained from Lan Qing's face, his voice was flat. It was the familiar mask of the God of Wisdom. It was the face of Prometheus.

Lan Jue smirked. This was the Lan Qing he knew. He gripped Qianlin's hand, and a soft blue light began to radiate from him. His blue eyes swirled with eddies of gold, and his imperious gaze was as godlike as his namesake.

Qianlin became a brilliant beacon of white light. Flecks of silver rollicked through the snowy expanse. Her life was lived by instinct, but through her telepathic link with Lan Jue he could guide her.

Lan Qing's eyes also brightened, but there were no flashes or changing colors. Instead, his body was surrounded by a strange gleaming aura. It was he was a part of everything around him, and he could seamlessly

merge into the universe at any moment.

For a moment, Lan Jue felt like it was he and Qianlin against the whole universe. It was far from pleasant. A nameless pressure crushed him from all directions. It wasn't strong, but it eroded his confidence, convincing him it was hopeless. Everything was under his opponent's control.

Lan Jue couldn't hold back for even a moment, not against a Paragon. A flash of blinding golden light burst from his eyes as he stepped forward. Suddenly a wave of terror gushed from him. Beams of gold erupted all around him threatening to consume everything. That overbearing presence felt like it was simultaneously a part of and separate from its surroundings.

Lan Jue did not speak the words of command. Instead, without warning the radiant columns of gold dispersed, becoming motes of golden light floating away in the wind. Lan Jue's aura vanished, but the pressure from Lan Qing's did not take its place. It, too, was gone. In that moment of stillness, a slash of red split the sky. When it materialized, reality quivered.

Lan Qing squinted his eyes. Sharp-eyed soldiers watching the hologram could spot the general's hair rustling, like something was tugging on him. The red light coalesced into a sword a hundred meters tall, tumbling right for the top of Lan Qing's head.

Space seemed to collapse before the tip of the weapons as it fell inexorably downward. Everything was torn apart and gobbled up! A vast chasm of nothingness was left in its wake. At this point it was no longer a sword. It was hell, come calling for Lan Qing's soul.

Lan Qing watched it come. He nodded, as though he were judging the attack and found it worthy. As the weapon came barreling down, he remain suspended in the air, but not idle. Extending his hands, the Paragon pressed outward. A keen flash crossed his eyes, and suddenly a strange scene emerged. Lan Qing seemed to merge into the rippling space around them. As it moved, so did he.

The soul-crushing swipe of the sword raced through. Lan Qing became translucent and his body warped furiously. However, a moment later he

phased back into reality like nothing had happened.

Immediately upon the heels of the sword, Lan Qing's face was lit up by a blazing blue. The silvery display was as dazzling as the tail of a comet before it detonated. Swirling tendrils of power shot off in every direction, expanding and lengthening until they covered the Paragon completely. A hundred million sword-swipes danced among each other – as beautiful as it was deadly.

If the red sword was a hellish visitation, this blue glow was a torch from the immortals. Mysterious, perplexing, stunning.

The intertwining colors cracked Lan Qing's famous calm. He splayed his arms out in wide semicircles before bringing his palms together before his chest with a clap. A flash of gold rushed from behind him, bearing a fervent aura that penetrated into the soul.

Resonating chants bore the weight of timeless faith. Its arrival swept away blue and red, leaving no trace of their passage. As unmovable as a mountain! Prometheus was gone, replaced with Lan Qing the Buddha. His holy manifestation demanded everything before him prostrate in worship.

Waves of gentle golden light radiated from him out into space, casting light upon the darkness. While the universe was painted a radiant gold, shadowy silhouettes appeared in contrast. The throaty chants of Buddhist monks intensified. It imparted a kindness that made Lan Jue feel sluggish and unwilling to lift his arm in attack.

Domain... this was Lan Qing's Domain? It wasn't as strong as the Devagati shown by Jue Di, but it was full of unspoken power. The entirety of the past and the future washed over them, borne from the image of Vairochana seated in the exact center of this pocket universe. Everything revolved around him, worshipped him. Struggle was futile.

"Prajna-paramitah!" The deep chants cried. They were loud, but sharp and clear like they spoke directly to the heart. Captus shivered in Lan Jue's grip as he fought the urge to fall to his knees.

Prajna-paramita was one of the most powerful sutras of the Buddhist faith. Lan Qing did not attack or take advantage, for with a single phrase

he had collapsed Lan Jue's will to fight.

Before absorbing the thunder essence, this would have spelled the end. Now, though, a flood of energy thrilled through him, clearing his mind of the booming sermons. He lashed out with the sword, and a sweeping arc of sword-energy swept them up and away to safety.

Where the cutting blue light passed, the golden couldn't help but recede. Its destructive force was so intense, it shook Lan Qing's Domain to its core.

Chapter 634: Stronger

Lan Qing froze. He knew that his brother had obtained thunder essence and was absorbing the immortal qi within. He knew Lan Jue was in the process of transforming his thunderbolt Discipline. The ancient, mystical lightning was real and he could feel it in the younger Lan's power. He knew he couldn't contend with it at his current strength, but Lan Jue couldn't sustain it, either.

As Lan Qin stood still, stunned, Lan Jue escaped from his Domain with Qianlin. Down among the soldiers, two more figures joined in watching the hologram. Jue Di had changed into his favorite pair of overalls. He watched the two brothers compete with a grin plastered on his face.

"Who knew A-Jue could break free of A-Qing's Domain! It looks like he's underestimating his brother." Luo Xianni mused out loud at Jue Di's shoulder.

Jue Di shook his head. "No, he didn't underestimate him. It's A-Jue's Thunderbolt. It isn't true All-Heaven Lightning, but his luck is other-worldly. The thunder essence bore the residuals of the real stuff. Whatever creature it used to be must have been strong. Strong enough that the old immortals chose to bring it down with All-Heaven Lightning. Now that it's a part of Lan Jue, no average Domain can contain it. Taking into consideration that Lan Qing isn't completely familiar with his Domain yet, and he didn't know what to expect from Lan Jue, we can see how A-Jue managed to escape. Keep watching, let's see what other surprises they have hidden up their sleeves."

Lan Jue managed to free himself and Qianlin from Lan Qing's Domain, but he didn't relax. Now that he'd experienced it, he knew Lan Qing's Domain wasn't just energy oppression. More frightening was its psychological and emotional assault. Indeed, his brother's powers were physical and mental both. No wonder he rose so sharply through the ranks of Paragon.

Lan Jue remembered something his father had taught him. The

strongest Domains had a psychological component, able to suppress the enemy's thoughts and actions. Not only did it undermine one's foe, it also boosted the self. At some point the imposing aura becomes strong enough to completely cow the weak-willed and empower one's ability to new heights.

Their clash had been brief, but already Lan Jue was beginning to understand what he was up against.

Lan Qing reappeared. He didn't seem the least affected by watching Lan Jue cleave apart his Domain. On the contrary, he was calm as ever. Lan Jue was learning about Lan Qing's Domain, but at the same time he was discovering what he could about Thunderbolt Discipline. The two brothers eyed one another from a distance, sharing a moment of quiet understanding.

The soldiers couldn't say their first clash was very exciting. To them there was just a flash, two flashes, and then they were watching each other. Only the few ninth level Adepts among them could glimpse parts of what had happened.

Lan Jue slowly lifted Captus, gripping it tight. Beside him, Qianlin released his hand. Demortus appeared in a flash to fill the void. Both of them pointed the god-blades toward Lan Qing.

Without physical contact, both Lan Jue and Qianlin felt their powers rapidly decline. However, Lan Qing had the inexplicable feeling that right now, these two were even more dangerous.

The sword in Lan Jue's hand lashed out. What followed was a torrent of ghastly power, a tidal wave that raced for Lan Qing. At first it looked like a straight column, but as it approached Lan Qing saw it as a sea of energy. He became the focal point for the full force of it.

Zhou Qianlin attacked in tandem. Her strike fractured into ten thousand glimmering swipes. Like leaves on the breeze they flowed through space, descending on Lan Qing from all directions. While Lan Jue's attack was a focused flood, hers was a torrential downpour. Individually her strikes were weak, but they were relentless. Every opening, every weakness was

found and exploited. As the red and blue lights shone brighter, the two sword-bearers vanished.

Ten Thousand Swords as one, and Focused Flow! Zhou Qianlin and Lan Jue! At last their knowledge combined as a singular overwhelming assault on the An Lun super soldier!

Lan Qing sensed the purity in their sword dance. Neither could call upon the full power of their swords, but he dared not hesitate or underestimate what they could do. Hands he'd kept pressed to his chest were thrust out in a dual-handed push. His chanting stopped, everything went silent. But his body did not remain still. The general's figure exploded to a hundred times his normal size, blazing gold like a Buddha. A pale and unimpressive light shimmered behind his head. Although he did not change in appearance, an incomparable sense of shock struck Lan Jue like a train.

The Three Prajna Mantras! The Great Spiritual Mantra!

A Paragon-level Great Spiritual Mantra!

An enormous golden palm appeared. It blocked the red and blue sword-strikes, mingling with them, and blocking them from proceeding.

Ruin, penetration; wide as the ocean, thin as a needle. Lan Jue and Qianlin could not enact the Harmonious Swords, but nonetheless what they created in their union was baleful. The focused power of Cpatus and Demortus roiled over one another until they carved a path through the golden palms. They blazed a path for Lan Qing.

The An Lun general didn't speak, and didn't run. His hands arose, fingers splayed like picking a flower. His fingers waggled.

"Ding – ding!" The two ringing sounds came one after the other. The two Banishing Blades shuddered as their waves of power were parted to either side of Lan Qing. Next he stepped forward, and the motion seemed to free him from the golden aura. It fell away like a shed skin, and in its place Lan Qing was a homogenous cyan.

In the next instant Lan Jue felt like he was in the eye of a tornado. Lan

Qing's pervasive and overbearing power underwent a dramatic upheaval. The wave of force swept passed him, thrusting him a hundred meters away. Qianlin – who had been standing by his side – was gone.

“You...” Lan Jue was too surprised to speak. He raced forward to regain the lost ground. However, every centimeter gained was contested by whirling cyan winds. One concentrated storm after another buffeted him, and as they continued to come they took on the form of hideous bloodthirsty dragons. Lan Jue was forced to rely on Captus' power to fight them off.

The tip of his weapon danced in circles as Lan Jue drew upon his Taiji sword knowledge. He flooded the sword and its movements with All-Heaven Lightning. It was enough to carve up his brother's attacks, but were very draining.

When the dust settled he looked for his opponent. He saw instead Qianlin, captured in a column of cyan light. She valiantly slashed with Demortus, but couldn't penetrate the curtain of power. Of course, without enough strength she couldn't summon enough of the sword's abilities to free herself.

“You... you're protogenia isn't Vairochana?” Lan Jue looked at his brother with surprise clear in his gaze.

Lan Qing was once again the familiar, intractable figure of Prometheus. The same, only much stronger. The swirling waves of power from him continued all around, only now they were the essence of wind.

Lan Qing smirked. “They come from the same source, not much different from one another. It is an intrinsic part of me, why not employ it? It was my Discipline. Vairochana and Wind... there is no conflict. Do you understand?”

Lan Jue just looked at him. Of course he didn't understand. He couldn't grasp how his brother seemed to change so completely. Could a Paragon use two separate kinds of protogenia? How was this possible? But despite his disbelief the proof was right in front of him. He'd seen both from his brother, but that didn't make it any less inconceivable. He'd been caught

off guard and separated from Qianlin. He certainly was no match for general now.

Gusts of cyan wind roiled around Lan Qing's body, once more becoming gold. Prometheus became the golden Buddha, and with the new appearance returned the crushing aura. Again, Vairochana! The change was instantaneous, like it was subject only to the will of Lan Qing.

Lan Jue's shocked expression gradually gave way. Something was becoming clear to him.

There was a flash of turquoise and Qianlin was deposited back to Lan Jue's side. When he took her hand their psychic connection was reestablished. Both of them felt their Disciplines surge to the peak of ninth rank. After a moment of quiet thought, Lan Jue spoke up. "I need to go back and think on this." The words were absent-mindedly murmured by way of explanation before Lan Jue took Qianlin and left back toward An Lun.

Lan Qing's face revealed a small smile. This was exactly the result he was looking for!

What could two ninth level Adepts do against a Reflection of Heaven and Earth? The point wasn't to beat Lan Jue. All of this was his way of imparting the things he'd learned, to bestow his knowledge upon his little brother. With luck it will shorten his path. That was all Lan Qing had aimed to accomplish.

"He knows how to make the best of the situation." Jue Di nodded in satisfaction, after which he turned and left the field. Luo Xianni laughed, overjoyed at what she saw. How could she not? These two brothers propped each other up, they would go much farther than the generation that guided them.

Lan Jue took Qianlin back to base, and directly back to their room. There, he sunk into quiet contemplation.

There was no question that Lan Qing had won their fight. It served to stoke the fires of competition among the Bloodiron Kahns and Star Division. They didn't need any more motivation words from their

commanders. Soon they could test themselves in DreamNet, and a single-minded thought consumed every soldier. Get strong. Stronger. Stronger!

Chapter 635: Parliamentary Disagreements

Planet Skyfire, Parliamentary Assembly Building.

The Speaker sat stony-faced in the silence after the holograms ceased.

“This is the latest information brought back by Commander Lan Jue and his Star Division. It’s the only information we’ve received at all. So far the data’s already taught our researchers a lot about the aliens. Most importantly know is crafting a strategy. What we’ve learned from commander Lan Jue is that these creatures are much stronger than we’d assumed. Our people will suffer and pay with their lives wherever this enemy chooses to emerge. While I understand that the commander’s earlier suggestion – to evacuate the people to better defended areas – is difficult, that it will affect the plans we have crafted and even undermine the foundation of this assembly, I believe in the interest of preserving lives it is the best course of action.”

Murmured conversation followed the Speaker’s remarks. The strength of these aliens had been revealed to them in the images from Star Division. Even Paragons couldn’t stand against an invading army that large. The Accountant’s analyses were particularly troubling. Many aliens were spied on the alien planet’s surface that could rival human capital ships. However it was the planet itself that was their most fearsome weapon. It could be anywhere at any time, swallow entire planets, ending all life in an instant.

A choice had to be made. Commander Lan Jue had called for a mass evacuation. Smaller and verdant planets had to be cleared as high-risk targets while their citizens found succor closer together. They could wait out the battle in relative safety. Until the armies of man fell, their citizens would not suffer the brunt of alien hostility.

But, what about when it was time to go back? This troubles the politicians greatly. It was a question of unity and obeisance. Western and Northern governments were likely having a lot less polite conversations

around this decision.

“Mister Speaker!” An elderly parliamentarian called out for his attention. “According to the information before us, we know that these aliens are dangerous. In fact, they are a threat to our continued existence. I also support the suggestion put forward by Commander Lan Jue. However, we must be cognizant enough to view the problem from a wider perspective. For instance, how could we respond if we evacuate these planets, only to have the West or North occupy them in our stead? If the aliens pass us by then not only have we suffered tremendous loss, our sovereignty may be at risk. Remember that the planets which are most attractive to these beasts are also the ones that empower them. We evacuate these planets and leave them to their fate – strengthen our foes.”

The elderly man paused, after a moment beginning again with a valiant expression of determination on his face. “There will need to be sacrifices for the future of the Eastern Alliance. To me, it seems the best method is to quarter our interstellar fleets within Eastern space. If the aliens show, we will be capable of an immediate response. Although this plan will put several important government planets and their people at considerable risk, it is the best for our Alliance overall. In the end, we must also consider there is a one-in-three chance the aliens will even come our way.”

It sounded cruel, to sacrifice these planets for the security of the majority. Leaving them behind as fodder. Several faces in the chamber went pale.

“I cannot accept that.” Eastern Alliance’s Prime Minister Zhou Xueguan shot to his feet. His booming, indignant voice rang through the chamber. “Every single life is priceless, and the most sacred duty of a government is to defend its people. How can we even consider leaving them in the path of danger? I am in agreement with the Speaker; I would rather suffer a loss of resources, than to lose our people. Let the West and North do as they will. If they choose to take advantage of us in the face of this apocalyptic threat, then they shall reveal themselves as an enemy to humanity.”

The parliamentary assembly erupted into a shouting match.

Zhou Xueguan stood amid the chaos, his face hard as he thought. The East was supposed to be better off. At least when it came to the aliens there appeared to have been some kind of understanding. The news he was receiving out of the West and North made him even more nervous.

All of the data recovered from An Lun was poured over. Sensitive material had been redacted, but otherwise the Eastern government was quick to give everything they could to their counterparts in the other Alliances. Initial reports, however, revealed that many contested the reality of these reports, accusing the East of deliberate fabrication. Some were even going so far as to denounce the East as enemies.

The loudest detractors came from the West. In some regards this was to be expected considering the scandalous way in which the wedding between Richard and Qianlin had ended. The Austin family had a great deal of political clout in the West, and their rancor for the East was no secret. They were lobbying as hard as they could for the Western congress to ignore any further correspondence from them about the alien threat.

Zhou Xueguan and his administration was keeping this information under wraps, though. Revealing the West's distrust would only make matters worse. At the same time they could find no means to convince them otherwise. The West had thrown a lot of resources at scouting but weren't looking in the right place. They believed, like all the others, that the aliens were going to come from outside human space. They even reputedly had some data from deep space, a fact that rendered many members of the East speechless. Both sides were working with different numbers, each distrusting the other.

The aliens hadn't made their move, but already humanity was in disarray. Discord was the worst situation they could find themselves in, but here it was.

Now was not the time to deal with Western skeptics, though. Once their own people were safe, others could be considered. The war hawks in parliament may be callous, but at least they're willing to confront the truth. Unity in the face of a foreign enemy was something they could count on, at least. Their struggle was finding the best way to proceed.

“Silence!” The Speaker slammed his gavel, combating the chaos that had come over the assembly. A few sharp bangs was enough to capture most everyone’s attention.

The Speaker’s solemn voice filled the quiet. “There is another matter that needs to be addressed. Skyfire Avenue’s Star Division, under leadership of commander Lan Jue and the Avenue’s dignified Paragons, returned from their scouting expedition with some vital crystals. I’m informed it’s not a small number, enough that there will be a surplus when we’ve taken what’s needed for research. Skyfire Avenue has recommended that we use them in trade for weapons and other materials from the West and North. It’s a decision that must be made quickly. General Li Si, as head of the armies what are your thoughts?”

General Li Si occupied the row closest to the Speaker’s podium. Various luminaries from the many branches of the military were arrayed by rank. The Li family was well-known as a perennial military family, and in fact the new, youngest general in history had once been his disciple. Indeed, General Li had fought vociferously for Lan Qing’s promotion.

Li Si was seventy three years old this year, but he had the bearing of a man half his age. Tall, with a straight back and a quiet strength, when he stood the chamber was completely silent. Everyone’s attention fixated on this venerable old warrior.

He was sixteen when he joined the army and had been a part of the company for nearly sixty years. In that time he’d participated in ten separate campaigns and earned himself the name Predator General. Every officer he cultivated shared his ferociousness, and a dogged desire to guard their borders.

“I endorse this plan. The exuvium process is a breakthrough in prolonging life in times of peace. But this is war. We must ensure that we are adequately prepared to protect ourselves when the alien menace comes. In addition, strength of arms directly correlates to obtaining these vital crystals. From the data collected we have discovered that the most effective deterrent against these creatures, are adepts and mechas that can empower them. They consume vital energy, but fear the products of it. In

the eyes of Adepts the East has become a promised land. Skyfire Avenue boasts five Paragons, more than any other organization. If we've managed to bring back one haul, we can get another. Our most pressing focus now must surely be shoring up defenses. One way to do that is to increase the fleet. Then we could protect more planets."

The General turned away from the Speaker, addressing the rest of the assembly. "I have listened to your debates. There is merit to each side. Know that I am being upfront with my allegiances. I am a military man. For us, our first responsibility is our duty to the nation. We will fight for whatever this governing body decides. However, a soldier's duty is also to protect the homeland. All of it. We cannot face sacrificing one group to protect another. We will fight to the last drop of blood, to keep all civilians safe from harm."

General Li let his words hang in the air for a moment. Then, he turned back to the Speaker. With a small nod of respect, the soldier retook his seat.

His words weren't just a vote for the Speaker's plan, but an affirmation of their martial code. He was telling everyone what the Eastern military stood for. Their strongest advantage had always been unity, and the general was a shining beacon of that. Now after witnessing the rise of his disciple Lan Qing, no one questioned this man's status.

The Speaker's low voice returned. "We will have a ten minute recess then reconvene for a vote on how to proceed. I hope in that time everyone can agree on a plan of action."

Chapter 636: Good News and Bad News

Half an hour later the Parliamentary session had come to an end. Afterwards a proclamation was released, ordering the evacuation of all metropolitan worlds. Their resources would be reallocated to the war effort, and any troops were told to be on alert. Part of their responsibilities would be to assist moving goods and people closer to the center of Eastern space. Many would also remain to look after government interests against the other Alliances. As for how this enormous amount of people were to be moved, parliament said that would come when all the options had been examined.

Lan Jue knew about the decision right away. He heard it from Lan Qing, when his brother summoned him to An Lun's leadership headquarters.

"What do you think?" Lan Qing's stony expression cracked just enough for a smile to sprout.

Lan Jue answered with a dramatic thumbs-up.

"Didn't expect it, did you?" Lan Qing openly smirked now.

Lan Jue nodded. In fact he'd already chalked it up to a lost cause. A decision that would hurt so many bottom lines must have been caustic for a room full of self-serving politicians. If it hadn't been Lan Qing to tell him, he'd say they were joking.

Lan Jue had never been a fan of lawmakers, but he was proud to find they at least had a sense of comradery. Only when the home front was stable and happy could they face a foreign foe!

"However, there is also some bad news." Lan Qing's expression fell, as did his voice.

"What is it?" Lan Jue asked.

"The West has sent scouting crews to the last stand of the North's Seventh Fleet. They claim there are signs an alien planet is nearby, even fought some of the creatures. Leaders continue to deny the veracity of your scouting reports and have turned down any further correspondence."

Lan Jue scowled. “Why would they even think like this?”

Lan Qing explained. “It certainly involves you. The West has chosen to make us enemies and resist our progress. A lot of that is fueled by influences from the Austin family, which I imagine is somewhat your doing. Relations have taken a sharp dive since the wedding between Richard and Qianlin was called off. Some of this distrust is a grab for profit, but a lot of it was incited by your actions.”

Lan Jue dropped his eyes helplessly. “There wasn’t anything I could do. I was polite – at least I let Richard live. After the amount of times he got in my way I’d say that’s fair. I admit I stayed my hand because of guilt, and pity. Qianlin never wanted to marry him, it had all been part of the Clairvoyant’s plan. Now if the West left us alone and focused on their own issues it would benefit everyone. Anyway, that doesn’t mean there’s no way to combat their thinking.”

Lan Qing chuckled softly. “Yes, there are still ways. Whatever your thinking the brass has already planned out. Some things are inevitable.”

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Western Alliance, Europa.

Set in the center of Europa’s capital city was a famous landmark, an old hexagonal building that served as the seat of the Austin family’s power. An insignia affixed to the top of the structure caught errant rays of sunlight. An oval with maple leaves, the Austin family crest. It sparkled so brilliantly you could spot it from miles away.

Sylva Austin was this generation’s leader for the Austin family. His office occupied the top floor of the striking family building, glass from wall to wall. He felt like he could see all of Europa from here.

He busied himself with administrative affairs while sitting behind the enormous office desk. He was the President of the Western Alliance and the business of running an interstellar nation often kept his busy past dusk. He was also expected to be social, which left very little time for relaxation. All of it was in service of the Austin family. Politically, there was no more connected family than his.

“Mr. President.” A melodious voice interrupted him, chiming from a nearby speaker. The only one permitted to disturb the man was his trusted secretary, Judy.

Sylva’s brows furrowed. He knew Judy wouldn’t trouble him unless it was important. “What’s happened?” He asked.

“Urgent news, sir,” she replied. “I was asked to brief you face to face.”

“Come in.” He knew she was already waiting just outside of the door.

When the door opened a blond haired woman in a black business suit and black-rimmed glasses was revealed. Her high-heels clacked against the floor as she brusquely entered. “Mr. President,” she said without ceremony, “We’ve received news from the East that they will be holding an international auction. The items on offer are vital crystals. However the West has yet to receive an official invitation. So far only Northern government officials and important families have been told to attend, and the Gobi Entertainment group from our alliance. All other organizations, even government representatives, have received nothing.”

A cold smirk split Sylva’s face. “Their response to our stance. Pay no mind. When the aliens come we’ll have plenty of vital crystals for ourselves. What’s the sense in paying them for any? Besides, it must have cost them to get so many. None of this is outside of my predictions.”

“But they’re auctioning more than one hundred pieces. This is more than anyone has gotten ever since we learned about the alien planets.” Judy’s voice bore a faint note of urgency. She was as professional a secretary as one could find, but the promise of a longer life appealed to everyone.

“What did you say?” Sylva’s voice came in a sharp his, disbelief widening his eyes. “The East brought back more than a hundred vital crystals? How could they kill so many aliens, much less bring them back?” The President’s breathing increased. Obviously the East’s actions were directed at the West. Everyone knew the benefit of the exuvium process, but crystals were needed to perform it. Eastern leadership was too smart to throw away so many crystals out of spite, so that could only mean they

had more than they needed for research.

Taking it a step farther, he could infer they must have found a great many aliens to come back with so many crystals. It had to be true, everything they were claiming. The East had found where the aliens were hiding.

That simple fact was like a mortal wound for Sylva Austin. He had been the one most vocally against them. He'd convinced his colleagues the East was lying, and orchestrated their harsh response to the news. This auction was like a smack to the face. He could almost feel it burn.

However, Sylva was an old hand when it came to dirty politics. Surprise overtook him for only a moment, and soon after he was a picture of calm deliberation. "Send a correspondence to the East, asking why we weren't provided an invitation. These vital crystals are a priceless resource for all of humanity, and are integral for the shared progress of our species. As such, it is imperative all three alliances participate in uncovering their secrets. There is nowhere else they'll find more talented geneticists than in the West. We would be very open to participating in this auction."

"Yes, sir!" Judy's eyes lit up as she answered. She was already formulating the communique in her head.

Sylva rose from behind the massive desk and turned toward the window. He was quiet for a moment and let his eyes sweep out over the city's horizons. He loved to stand here and enjoy the view. It made him feel in control.

"Send another to the North. Ask them for help in applying pressure to the East. If we work together we can get the most and give the least. Then send a note to the generals that we want a scouting mission scrambled and sent into the Shattered Starfields as soon as possible. We have to confirm the alien's location if we want to explain things to the public."

From the outside it looked passive, but President Austin was doing the best he could under the circumstances. He hadn't suspected the East would use these crystals as a bargaining chip to undermine the West. How could he have known this might happen? Who would have guessed the

East would suddenly become flush with vital crystals? Their actions were the sort taken by a group confident in their strength!

Proliferation. That was the goal of any race. This international auction the East was holding was just that – proliferation. It was the purpose of life, and hope for any living thing. The Exuvium process was still a long way off, but proof of concept was already well known. Even powerful Adepts could benefit from it. Further research was needed to see how it would affect normal people.

Most current reports claimed that the process could extend someone's life by a thousand percent. The average lifespan would catapult from a hundred years to a millenium.

A life ten times as long! It wasn't a literal fountain of youth, but it sure was an improvement over their own bodies' limitations. Influence, money, beauty... none of it was more important than life. Without it, what did all the rest mean?

So it was that the moment word of the exuvium process got out, it captured the imagination of every living creature. The only thing that stood between mankind and hundreds of years among the stars, were these vital crystals.

Chapter 637: Return

For those in positions of power, the mystery and danger of the alien invaders was of no importance. Their single-minded interest was whether they could get their hands on enough vital crystals. At least for now, the exuvium process didn't look like a privilege everyone would have access to. For many, there was nothing taboo in their pursuit to join that lucky group. They were desperate to extend their lives at any cost. Eventually humanity would puzzle out a way to achieve the same ends without vital crystals. However, you had to live long enough to see the technology succeed.

Every politician's imagination was on fire with the possibility of eternal life. How could they not scramble at the chance?

Word of the auction had spread quickly, and everyone's attention was on the East. Clearly, this meant the data they had on these aliens was true. If it were not, how could they have so many crystals?

"Chairman Zhou, we would be very happy to participate in your nation's auction. However, we will need to examine the cargo, to verify the quality of its contents." A patriarch from one of the North's ruling families grinned at Zhou Xueguan.

The Chairman responded with a smile. "Of course. We hope to put everyone's misgivings to rest before the auction begins. Take heart, you will have an opportunity to verify the cargo."

"Thank you very much, Chairman Zhou."

Zhou Xueguan was surrounded by representatives from the North's financial and political elite. He had patiently answered every one of their questions, including the origin of the crystals. However, there was ever an air of secrecy about him.

On the second day, the rules of the auction were announced. It sent the Northern dignitaries into an uproar.

Money would not be an accepted form of payment throughout the

auction. That was not uncommon for auctions of particularly treasured goods. In those cases it was more common to use power gems in exchange. However, the East had taken things to a new extreme. This time, the chosen method of payment would be measured in war ships.

Yes, war ships.

More specifically, every time someone bid higher on an item the minimum increased bid would be a standard scout ship fully equipped for duty. Ten scout ships equaled the value of a standard battleship; ten battleships added to an expedition ship; ten expedition ships equaled a dreadnought. Ten dreadnoughts were equivalent to a Capital Ship.

To add insult to injury, the East also offered a buyout option; all one hundred crystals, for one top-of-the-line Bastion. When the auctioneers saw that, they had to fight their first instinct to just walk away.

The worth of these war ships to any nation was clear. This was especially true with the threat of alien invasion on the horizon. Certainly the East was leveraging their surplus crystals to shore up their strength. It put everyone else in a very difficult position. Trading in ships was very different from exchanging war assets.

But the East had them beat psychologically. It wasn't only government officials who had been invited, but any organization with the money to participate. After all, everyone dreamed of a longer life. Even though they were all from the North, there were too many people with too much money, too desperate to let their chances be dictated by others.

With all of the drama, no one paid any mind when a small scout shipped slipped virtually unseen into the Skyfire public airship terminal. No one paid any mind when the small group walked out.

Walking at the head of the group was Lan Jue, who'd changed into a smart blue suit. He disembarked hand in hand with Zhou Qianlin. The Epochrion, Wine Master, Pauper, Driver, Zeus' five Amazons, and the Accountant followed in a quiet procession. Naturally, Jue Di and Luo Xianni were the last to quite the ship.

Star Division had been left on An Lun to train, but Lan Jue and his

scouting team had come to back to Skyfire to deliver the vital crystals. Considering how much these crystals were worth, Lan Jue felt they needed a sufficiently strong escort.

“Have you arrived?” Lan Jue muttered into his communicator.

“Yeah I’m here,” came the response.

A smile spread across Lan Jue’s face. “Good, we’ll see you in a bit.”

“Right to business the second we touch down? When are we going to have time to cultivate? This is no time to dally! The longer we wait the slowly the transformation becomes.” The irritated complaint was, of course, from the Driver.

“The impatient burn their mouths of hot burn curd,” Lan Jue instructed. “I’m more anxious than you are, but you need time to process everything. I’m heading out for a moment then I’ll be back, I’m not dallying. You’re being too hasty. Remember that the strength of your foundation directly affects your chance to breakthrough to Paragon. Besides that’s not even our limit. Not unless you want to stop at the Realm of Protogenia? Aren’t you interested in how far you can go? Take it easy.”

The Driver rubbed his beard and stared off into the distance as though thinking. “I understand.”

He had indeed been impatient lately. Excitement from absorbing even some of the thunder essence thrilled him. Although the growth of his Discipline had slowed, the quality of it was evolving continuously. Any Adept would fall head over heels in pursuit of a chance like this. If he were being honest, he’d felt the instability within himself even before Lan Jue pointed it out. However, the Driver figured that making small adjustments once his Discipline became primordial lightning would not be too difficult. Lan Jue’s words brought him back to reality and caused him to break out in a cold sweat. If he rushed now, it would only create bigger problems after he achieved Paragon status.

When Lan Jue saw the consideration and contrition in his friend’s eyes, he knew he understood. Adepts at their level were all intelligent, they didn’t need much explanation.

Verti-cars from Skyfire Avenue were already waiting. They filed into the vehicles and headed back toward home.

Lan Jue led Qianlin and his Amazons back to the Jewelry Shop. The rest of the scouting party went their separate ways. The Wine Master and Epochrion took the vital crystals under their watch. Nothing short of an army would have a chance at taking them.

As the hours ticked down to the auction, representatives trickled into the Avenue. More detailed information was revealed about the auction. The entire thing would last two days. Day one would consist of registrations. In addition, every interested party was permitted to send their own appraisers to verify the auction items. The second day would be the actual auction.

Joining in the auction wasn't so easy, even with an invitation. In order to ensure the safety of the items, and to ensure a smooth auction, everyone was required to put down collateral. It was mandatory in order to confirm participation. If there was even a hint of trouble, the East had promised to cancel the auction without returning this holding payment.

But, what would count as collateral? War ships, of course. In addition to reserving a party's place in the auction, it also served to prove their capability in paying. Only then could they make a bid. Northerners found no fault in this. After all, this was the first time an auction like this was being held – it was wise to be cautious. For Westerners, however, it was a different story. This was because the East's rules for them were completely different.

Other than Poseidon Group and Gobi Entertainment, the East did not extend an invitation to any government official or rich family from the West. Initially the West maintained their instance that the news was fake, but assurances from the North changed their tune. Over time the clamoring from Western dignitaries only grew louder.

The exuvium process and the vital crystals it needed were a budding science, but the rich and powerful had already caught the scent. They knew how important they would be for all of humanity. No one wanted to

pass up a chance for a longer life, especially the rich. They were all just as keenly aware of how hard getting their hands on these crystals was.

The exuvium process wasn't complete, but the fundamental principles had been proven. Scientists knew the vital crystals were its most necessary component, needed to complete study of the process and ultimately employ it. Without them, any study was a waste of time. To get them, though, you needed to kill aliens. Easier said than done. No one was going to be putting these crystals on the market, so a rare auction like this was the only opportunity for the rich and powerful to get the jump on a longer life. Their clamoring was justified.

Paying one's dues in war ships may have been hard to swallow, but compared to the benefits of the crystals it was a price worth paying. Ask any of the old leaders wringing their hands as the auction neared. No amount of money or weapons of war could extend their lives. At least, not until now.

Chapter 638: Collateral

With the premise of an extended future in mind, everyone's heart ached for the chance. Western politicians resisted the calls from their own people, but only briefly. Before long the Western Alliance had released a number of official protests. In flowery and diplomatic language, the West decried Eastern attempts to keep them from the auction. They made the case that although it was the East who recovered the crystals, they were a precious resource for all of humanity. The West had as much of a right to buy them as anyone else.

Zhou Xueguan's administration gave an even more clever response. Because the West had refused to accept these crystals as real, their invitation was rescinded to avoid conflict. Harsh words were flung back and forth, but as the time for the auction neared Western politicians had begun to walk back on some of their rhetoric. Politicians wanted to live long lives as well, and behind every politician was a group with money. If those silent partners pulled support, they would be reduced to nothing. Vital crystals would be the least of their worries.

In the end the West had to admit defeat. They acknowledged that the East had indeed found and recovered accurate data on the alien creatures. They also had to make concessions in other areas, and on top of all that required a higher collateral payment.

For Northerners, the buy-in was a single battleship. For the West, they required an expedition cruiser – ten times the worth of a battleship. Only twenty seven parties from their Alliance could even afford to join. But for the East, that was already twenty seven expedition ships! Not a single crystal was sold, and already the East had the value equivalent of two dreadnoughts. There had never been a higher buy-in for an auction.

In the end, the West was permitted to participate. However, that was just a chance, not a guarantee. Obtaining these crystals from competitors would be daunting, and trust did not come easy. No one side wanted the others to know how much they paid or received. The West elected to participate anonymously. Of course, participating openly was also an

option, if the buyer elected.

First to suffer fallout from the West's public shaming was the Austin family. Both directly and indirectly they had been the loudest skeptics. Consequences as biting as these would need to be answered for, and those in power were quick to put the loss on the Austin's shoulders. Thankfully the East had only increased their buy-in. If the political cost had affected direct bidding, Sylva would have had hell to pay.

Undoubtedly, the East was using the pricelessness of these crystals for political gain. They dangled them like carrots before the Western government's collective noses. For the first time, weak little Eastern Alliance was in a position of absolute authority.

The long-awaited day of inspection had come. After paying so much just to participating, the rich and powerful were eager to hear from their representatives. Because of how much was at stake, every representative was either experienced with the exuvium process or had gone through it themselves. Everyone agreed to adhere strictly any rules the East imposed. If anyone dared to break those rules – for instance, by attempting to steal a crystal – their delegation's invitation would be revoked and their pay-in kept. These rules were meant to be restrictive and strict, but also fair.

Where the inspections were held was kept a secret until the day before. When delegates learned where it would be held, they couldn't help but scowl to themselves. For those with less honorable intentions, they news was even more distressing.

Skyfire Museum!

A plain and simple name, but what it represented made Adepts shiver. It'd been the seat of the Clairvoyant. Although the one called the Eye of Tomorrow was gone, he was famously enigmatic. Who knew what surprises the old seer left after his passing? Beyond that, anyone familiar with Skyfire Avenue knew what choosing this location meant. Anyone who dared step a toe out of line would immediately suffer the full force of the Avenue's ire.

As an organization, no one could doubt its dominance. In recent years

the Avenue not only produced a number of Paragons, but also put its bright future on display in the Great Adept Tournament. One of its young leaders even walked away Champion. All analysts were in agreement that Skyfire Avenue was in the midst of a meteoric rise. It already far surpassed the two Citadels and the Great Conclave.

Among the Northern dignitaries were representatives from the Chu family. Chu Dong, as patriarch, had come personally. It was his first visit to the Avenue. His son had told him a lot about it, but seeing it all in person was very different.

He took a shine to the Avenue the minute he walked in. Chu Dong was a traditionalist and loved the old style. Each antique building lining the road was exquisite. Be it the elaborately carved balustrades with fantastical Chinese beasts or soaring gothic towers passing solemn judgment, he saw a striking beauty in them all.

Each step drew him deeper in. He looked bewitched, and for a moment forgot what they'd come here to do. Then something caught his attention. Four eyes met and all at once his pleasant stroll came to an end.

It was him.

Any appreciation in Chu Dong's eyes fled, chased away by inner conflict. But of course he'd react like this. How many years had it been? How long since he'd seen him, face to face? He'd lost the fiery attractiveness of youth, but had gained a more stately and wizened demeanor instead. He was a Paragon now, but the years had still left their mark.

The Gourmet stopped three meters away from Chu Dong.

"Older brother..." Simple words, but in this moment the Gourmet had to struggle mightily to find them. His voice sounded strained, there may even have been a shake in his tone. His eyes were red and moist already.

When they were small, Chu Dong and Chu Xi had been inseparable. Chu Dong was eight years his senior and diligently looked after his little brother. But though he was younger, Chu Xi was always more talented. Chu Dong had to work harder for less, but he was never jealous. They were family, and together they would recover their former glory.

Even during his darkest period Chu Xi never hated his brother. The one pulling the strings was their father, the cold-blood Chu Yun. Chu Xi couldn't remember how many times his brother helped him bear the cruel punishments of their patriarch.

All of that happened more than twenty years ago. Old words written on yellowed ages.

Pow! Chu Dong punched his little brother square in the forehead. ¹ The Gourmet staggered backward a good eight meters before regaining his footing.

Chu Dong appeared before the Gourmet in a flash, snatching up fistfuls of his shirt. "You bastard!" Chu Dong spat, inches from his face.

The mighty Infernal Vanguard looked like a sullen child who'd just been spanked. His hands hung limp at his side, offering no resistance, eyes plastered to the ground.

"Do you have any idea... -" Chu Dong's eyes were red.

The Gourmet's body shook. The punch hadn't had any power behind it, just muscle and indignation.

"Do you have any idea how much I've missed you!" Chu Dong relaxed his hands and hugged tight to the brother he hadn't seen for twenty years.

For a moment the Gourmet didn't know how to respond, but quickly embraced his greying older brother with as much zeal.

"Brother, I'm sorry." Those two words felt like a thousand pounds. He'd carried that weight in his heart for so long. Since becoming a Paragon, he had come to understand so much. He studied the old, painful memories for truth and learned a lot, like the fact that the Chu family could not have had anything to do with it. How could they frame someone and leave no trace?

When they released their grip, Chu Dong pinched his eyes. His tears steamed away as his fiery Discipline fluttered. "Why didn't you come back? You must understand what happened by now. You know father's temper, and if you continue to act like this you're just like him - more

than I am. Would it really be so difficult to go back, once? He's old..."

He had to stop with the final words. Tears welled up in his eyes again.

The Gourmet's voice was pained. "It wasn't that I didn't want to. I couldn't face everyone. I didn't know how I could stand in front of all of you again with everything I know now. Even today, I hesitated... I thought for a long time whether I could come out and see you. Brother, I must ask you to tell him I'm sorry. I know I was wrong, but what's done is done. I..."

Chapter 639: I'm Going Back

“Quit your nonsense.” Chu Dong’s tone was harsh with the Gourmet. “If you really want to apologize go home and do it yourself. A heart-felt sorry is enough. Do you think he’s the same man as before? Did you witness him crying hi eyes out, twenty years ago? Then he was fine, until the day he heard you became a Paragon. I saw his eyes get moist when he heard your name; the Infernal Vanguard. In his own clumsy way he told us he was lost. And why not? He misses you, but he’s old and can’t say anything. He very loudly claimed he was going to come here himself to represent the Chu family at auction, but I forced him to stay behind. Won’t you give the man this little bit of pride in his old age?”

The Gourmet was completely dumbfounded. The image of a powerful, dictatorial, stubborn man collapsed in his mind’s eye. In its place was an old man, pale faced and infirm.

“I’m going back! When this auction is over, I’ll go back with you!” The words tumbled from his mouth. Seeing his brother and hearing his admonitions was too much to bear.

Chu Dong silently nodded his head, and patted the Gourmet’s shoulder. “I have vital crystals to buy.” He turned away and began to walk toward Skyfire Museum.

“Brother, wait a moment!” The Gourmet called out, trotting to catch up.

“Hm?” Chu Dong turned back.

“You don’t need to bid,” the Gourmet said. “I’ll think something up for the vital crystals.”

A voiceless appreciation sparkled in Chu Dong’s eyes. After a moment he answered with a nod. “There’s a lot of politics surrounding this business, I’m anxious to broaden my knowledge of how these games are played. I’m confident we’ll be fine.”

“Alright,” the Gourmet replied.

Ordinarily Skyfire Avenue was a temple to silence, but today the walls

rang with boisterous conversation. Standing at the front doors, security was being directed by none other than the head of Skyfire security, An Liu. Inside, security personal wandered the rooms with watchful eyes.

An Liu was dressed in a bright silver flight suit, no different than any other day of work as far as she was concerned. Cold eyes scanned everyone who crossed her path. Guests required an invitation and a pat-down before they could come in.

All three Alliances were represented by eighty four delegates. Only affluent Eastern families had come to participate, since the Eastern government had all the crystals it needed already.

An Liu's eyes suddenly narrowed, inexorably drawn to large figure coming her way. He had bright yellow hair, and was clad in white from his suit to his pocket kerchief. Handsome as he was, and with such a striking figure, he earned quite a lot of attention. However, An Liu was most interested in his eyes. They were deep, turbulent eyes that defied age. Wisps of power radiated from him that were hard to distinguish, but beneath them one could feel a vast tension.

As the middle-aged man walked toward the museum, he stopped and lifted his head. As his peered upon the old structure, he looked almost disappointed. For a moment he stared, then approached the door and produced his invitation.

"Hello, Sir Metatron. Please come in." An Liu extended an arm, welcoming him in after looking over the man's invitation.

Indeed, this white-suited man – elegant and profound – was the Lord of Archangels for the Pontiff, Metatron. He was the manifestation of the Pontiff's will, half a breath from Paragon himself. But that final breath had already eluded him for many years. The reason was simple; he'd used fantascia genetica. The decoction catapulted an Adept through the levels, but when they reached their peak it caused problems. For twenty years Metatron had struggled, but he was still no closer to a breakthrough.

The Archangel smiled, and offered a polite nod. He was the perfect public face for the Pontiff's Citadel. Since each organization was only

permitted to send one inspector, they had to send their best.

Another figure silently appeared before An Liu. Like Metatron, he bore a supernatural allure. In contrast, however, he was clad from head to toe in formal black attire. His short, dark red hair was a little disheveled, but it also added to his roguish charm. He had dark, sad eyes – fatally attractive to young women who were furtively stealing glances.

“Your invitation?” An Liu calmly asked.

A ly grin split the man’s face. “Can’t I come in without one? Maybe we could have a chat, discuss some way for me to find a way inside?”

An Liu narrowed her eyes. This was the first person bold enough to step out of line. He was a man everyone knew by name and reputation.

“Sir Lucifer, if you’re here representing the Dark Citadel then I ask that you produce your invitation.” An Liu’s voice was somewhat colder this time.

Right on the heels of Metatron had come the Fallen Angel Lucifer.

He looked the security officer up and down. “A dual-Disciple Adept hm? Unless I’m sensing this wrong, there is a little darkness in you... a rare elemental attribute, and pure. Would you have any interest in being my woman? You know we have many methods to extend a person’s life back at the Citadel, even without vital crystals. Train with me and you can be as strong as I in no time. Through your dark purity I can rise to Paragon, and when I do I can bring you with me.”

An Liu glared at him with eyes sharp as icicles. “Not interested.”

Lucifer might have been called the fallen angel, but he had more arrogance than any of the Archangels. A fervent look flickered passed his eyes. “Are you sure you won’t consider my offer? It’s a wonderful opportunity for you – think about it.”

An Liu’s voice was low and even. “I said I am not interested. If you’d like to participate in the assessment then produce your invitation. Otherwise please leave, you’re blocking the way for those who were invited.”

Lucifer regarded her with a lascivious smirk. "Very good, little girl. You're the first woman to turn down my advances." As he spoke, long spindly fingers plucked an invitation from his breast pocket. Lucifer handed it to her. His eyes – sparkling with Discipline – lazily dragged up and down her figure.

"If you dare make a move, I'll make sure 'the Fallen Angel' is erased from everyone's memory." A hard voice, full of violent promise, interrupted his leering.

Lucifer froze. He couldn't tell where the voice was coming from. Almost unconsciously his eyes snapped to a nearby figure.

He was tall, lithe, and also dressed in black. However the stranger's garb wasn't a suit, but military attire. It was the uniform of a high-ranking Eastern officer, functional and made of the best materials. What struck Lucifer the most were the four golden stars pinned to the stranger's lapel.

Military insignias were more or less the same throughout the universe. Four stars – a general? Among the army's highest command. For pilots they would call him an Admiral, but the meaning was the same. However, this man was far too young to be a general. That didn't stop Lucifer from feeling a wave of fear from the man's presence.

Lucifer wasn't any weaker than Metatron in regards to Discipline. He was considered lower in total power because the Archangel's power naturally restricted darkness. If the two were involved in a fight to the death, it would be impossible to tell who would come out breathing. Both of them were the strongest Adepts could be before becoming Paragon, stagnant due to the same problem. They pushed themselves further than their potential, and now progress was almost impossible.

Lucifer's advantage lay in combat experience. In terms of ability and understanding of the Adept world, the Fallen Angel was in the top twenty in the whole universe. Even so, a single look at this army man filled him with dread. He could remember only a handful of time he'd felt this. Lately only the Pontiff scared him so.

This stranger was like a beacon of holy light, so dazzling that Lucifer felt

like his soul was burning. The indescribable discomfort filled him from head to toe. As an Adept of darkness, light was his greatest enemy. This man's power seemed to be pure light.

"Who are you?" Lucifer unconsciously staggered backward a step, closer to An Liu. If this man really did mean him harm, than relying on An Liu's character as a guardian of the peace wasn't a bad method.

But he was wrong.

Dizziness swept over him as Lucifer felt a crushing pressure descend. This must be what it felt like for a vampire to stand outside in midday, he thought. He tried to gather darkness like a shield around him, but the light burned it away. If he tried to move forward, the pressure only got stronger. Sometime in the midst of his trance, the man had taken up position between he and An Liu.

Chapter 640: Lucifer's Terror

"I wasn't going to do anything. No ill-will. It's all a misunderstanding." Lucifer raised his hands and sputtered the words. He was practically falling over himself in capitulation.

"That's good." The general answered in a soft voice.

Lucifer shot a glance toward An Liu. "Can I go in?"

She suddenly remembered his invitation in her hand. She handed it back. "Go ahead."

Lucifer painfully noted that An Liu didn't look once at him. The whole time she only had eyes for the golden general – like she was fixated. It made him even more furious. With a dissatisfied grunt and long strides, he stomped into the museum.

"Why are you still staring? Don't you have a job to do?" The general glanced her way. The moment their eyes met a deep red crept into An Liu's cheeks. Her subordinates noticed, and could only stare slack-jawed. It was the only time they saw their boss they called the ice queen act like a woman at all. Was this real? Who was this guy who could make her act this way?

"If I have time I'll come and find you for a cigarette." The general offered the sentence quietly, before leaving her alone in silence.

An Liu hadn't managed to say a single word. She also never once took her eyes off the army man.

It's him... it's him. It's him! He came...

She felt a flutter in her chest. An Liu's cold, aloof heart was suddenly afire. She could hear it thump against her chest, faster and faster.

What is going on... An Liu, what are you thinking? It was only a cigarette!

Lucifer stumbled into the museum. Unlike the others, he wasn't interested in the majesty of the building's interior. A lingering fear kept

him looking over his shoulder at the door, waiting for that man to enter.

A Paragon! That man was certainly a Paragon, strong enough to end him if he'd wanted to. But, how could he not know of this mysterious Easterner? What's more he was a part of their military. It made him feel like there was much more about this Alliance he didn't know.

Keeping a low profile was the best course. It was a shame about that woman, though. Her Discipline was pure, rich with primordial yin energy. If only they could cultivate together, the benefits to his progress would be significant. Evidently that was not an option, however. Skyfire Avenue was famous for its secrets, he had to tread carefully.

Skyfire Museum was a press of people from all over. They'd arranged a waiting area, and the various assessors milled around waiting for everyone to show up before they could begin.

When Lucifer walked into the waiting area, he immediately picked out several familiar faces. First among them was his old foe, Metatron. The others were all Adepts as well, and strong ones. No one was more sensitive to the energy fields surrounding them than Adepts, making them the perfect investigators. Every powerful organization was desperate for Talents, especially those who had experience with the crystals first hand.

He looked over at the Archangel. Metatron sensed his stare, and looked right back. Neither of their faces changed, but the hatred in their eyes was unmistakable. A surge of rage welled up inside Lucifer, and he strode toward the Pontiff's representative.

Metatron regarded him with a guarded demeanor. "Get away from me," he said.

Lucifer replied with a dry chuckle. "You think I want to waste my time with a hypocrite?" His words were harsh, but the Fallen Angel still took up a spot on the sofa beside his enemy. They hated each other on a fundamental level, so Lucifer chose to ease his own irritation by getting under Metatron's skin.

As for Metatron, there wasn't anything he could do about it. This was Skyfire Avenue – he wasn't about to start trouble.

People continued to stream in. Eighty-four representatives meant eighty-four interested organizations carefully paying attention. Most of those eyes were on Lucifer and Metatron, but when the next person entered their focus shifted.

The Terminator's hard, cold eyes slowly drank in Skyfire Museum. He was an in immaculate tailored suit, but it still looked like someone tried to dress up an iron statue. A Paragon and one of humanity's leaders had come himself to represent his people.

Metatron muttered under his breath in surprise. He came himself?" Neither the Pontiff nor Satan had come because they knew they were high-value targets. They would be walking onto foreign enemy territory, surrounded by the strongest humans in the universe. Evidently this didn't trouble the Terminator. It was a testament to his faith and self-confidence. He believed nothing would happen during the auction.

As the Terminator walked in, another figure descended from the museum's second floor. Spectator's turned their focus from the Paragon to this very small newcomer.

She couldn't have been taller than a meter and change, her head barely peaking over the bannisters. Bouncy little steps brought her before the Northern leader. "A long time, Big Uncle! How have you been?"

When he saw her, the Terminator's calm eyes were suddenly a little distraught. But his dark expression gave way to a smile. "I've been well, and how about you Jun'er?"

"Very well, thank you," Jun'er answered happily. "But I have been very busy. A have to study a lot every day. I still can't see, but teacher says that because I'm blind once I become Clairvoyant things will be clearer than ever." Her eyes were sightless, but from the outside you couldn't tell. She didn't look like a blind person; her eyes were full of light and life.

The Terminator shook his head, battling the gloominess in his heart. She had been chosen as the Clairvoyant's successor after all. He'd questioned his decisions before, but seeing this vibrant young woman now any regrets were gone. How could he bring himself to destroy something so beautiful

with his own hand? Anyway, Skyfire Avenue's rise was already assured, and that meant the East would rise with it.

"Terminator. It's been some time." A deeper voice caught the Terminator's ear. He lifted his head and spied the Wine Master heading his way.

The Cosmagus was dressed as fastidiously as ever, but the real eye-catcher was Jun'er. She was enveloped in a long dress that sparkled with gemstones of all sorts and sizes. She sparkled like a little universe beneath the museum's soft lights. The Terminator kneeling before her was a striking image to everyone who looked on.

As the two Paragons appeared, no one remained seated. They all rose to their feet and offered their respects to the leaders.

The Wine Master addressed everyone. "Thank you for your patience. Wait for just a while longer. Once everyone's arrived we can begin."

A few more figured descended from the dais above as the Wine Master made the announcement. Sharp-eyed guests recognized them quickly. Gasps were quickly muffled as people tried not to call attention to themselves.

The Epochrion led the group. Once a Northern Alliance Paragon she now represented Skyfire Avenue. A step behind her followed a gentlemanly pair. Beyond being mighty Paragons themselves, the two were famous throughout all of human society. Of course, they were the Arcane Magnate known as the Keeper, and Skyfire Avenue's Bookworm, the Karmic Scholar.

Four Paragons stood among them as standard bearers for Skyfire Avenue. This was real power! No one dared dream of causing trouble.

The guests had all more or less arrived. An Liu slipped in and nodded at the Wine Master.

The Epochrion walked until she stood before her old partner. She greeted him with a gentle nod. The Terminator spoke first. "How does it feel to be home?"

The Epochrion heaved a sigh. "I've always loved it here. I was always a part of this place, and it will always be a part of me. I don't suspect I'll be leaving again."

"Oh but Auntie Clockmaker, you're still so young. Not old at all," Jun'er tittered. She couldn't see, but her perception far surpassed any normal person's. She knew everything going on around her, though not as sharp as one who had working eyes.

"So long as you like it. When you get as old as we are, it gets to be even more important to do the things that make you happy." The Terminator said with a smile.

"Yes," the Clockmaker replied, nodding.

The Wine Master's voice interrupted. "Thank you for waiting ladies and gentlemen, it appears we're all in attendance. In just a moment we will give you all an opportunity to verify the items we will be auctioning. I will warn everyone a final time, any transgressions will be met with a punishment ten times the cost."

The promise was particularly potent coming from a Paragon. After witnessing four such powerhouses appear at once, no one dared make a move for fear it could get them in dire trouble.

"Jun'er, you are our leader. You should start us off." The Wine Master gave her a small nod.

"Alright." Jun'er replied in bubbly tones. She flicked her wrist, and something appeared in her tiny hand.

It was a crystal orb, with flecks of silver suspended within. Its light shimmered alluringly, and everyone in the museum couldn't look away. Silvery images came and went, detailing the past and revealing the many paths of the future.

Chapter 641: The Appraisal

Ju'n er smiled, a soft smile that touched the hearts of the surrounding Adepts. She muttered a few inaudible words, and a flash of white light issued from the orb. A silvery portal had appeared among them.

The Eye of Tomorrow, one of the Clairvoyant's artifacts! Studied Adepts knew what they were looking at. OF course, this little girl was still far too young to employ the object to its full potential.

A Paragon's astrum was even more alluring to normal Adepts than the vital crystals. The Eye of Tomorrow in particular was astounding. The Clairvoyant had used it ascend to Nirvana. Inheriting it was how the Clairvoyant earned his title.

Of course the Adepts could be covetous, but none would dare try to snatch the artifact from Jun'er's grip. Four steely-eyes Paragons were watching everywhere at once, waiting for someone to make a move. Besides, not just anyone could snatch up an astrum and make a run for it. Who knows what sort of dangers were in this powerful crystal ball?

Jun'er regarded everyone with a small smile. "Please enter." She was the first to step through, showing everyone it was safe. The Epochrion took her hand and followed without hesitation.

Everyone else passed through the door in a trickle of twos and threes. Since the Terminator, Metatron, Lucifer and other powerful Adepts were in attendance, the less famed appraisers weren't too worried for their safety. They represented some of the richest and most powerful organization in human space, after all. Even Skyfire Avenue wouldn't be so bold as to attack directly.

As they stepped through the portal, the visitors found themselves suddenly in a strange and fantastical world. Errand beams of light shot through empty space in endless treks into nothing. Overhead was the limitless expanse of a starry sky. Stepping through the door of light was like striding out into the embrace of the universe. However, there was air to breathe, and this spot felt particularly rich with the planet's natural

energies.

Was this... a Domain?

The Clairvoyant's Domain had been called Ocean of Stars. How else could they describe this scene? Paragons were able to leave behind wondrous things in their passing but fewer and fewer knew this skill. If there was any Paragon capable of maintaining their Domain once they've moved on, though, the Clairvoyant would have been one.

Jun'er waved her little hand again, and once more the scenery changed. For a moment every Adept felt a rush of power, like they had been dropped into a sea of energy. Several gasped as they felt every cell of their being filled with vibrant potency.

This was... vital energy?

They started to see the purple crystals suspended in space. Each one of them was a different shape or size, but all of them radiated with a similar, substantial aura of vital energy. That wave of power had come when these crystals were all collected in one place.

The vital energy wasn't particularly pure, there were vestiges of other powers within. However the sheer amount was staggering. By now the appraisal process was a formality. Several of the appraisers already had a greedy light in their eye.

Vital crystals... all of them were vital crystals! With so much power hidden within them, no wonder using them with the exuvium process extended a life for so long.

Greed was not shameful, at least in some circumstances. Even the Terminator was eyeing a particularly large vital crystal with some interest.

"One hundred and eight crystals are available during this auction. The differences among them are because they come from different alien breeds. The only way to determine their strength is to record them individually. We've done this for you, and each crystal has been assigned a serial number that corresponds with their asking price. Now we invite you to take a look for yourselves. No one appraiser shall have access to a

single stone for more than five minutes so that everyone has a chance to look. I will remind you all that generally the size of the crystal corresponds to how much power it contains. However, that is not the case all the time. One of these crystals contains a tremendous amount of power, but is smaller than the others. Very well, that's all I need to say. Feel free to look around." The Wine Master concluded his speech with a wave of his hand.

Skyfire Avenue's guests had stopped listening already. The moment they were given permissions, representatives scrambled over one another to get their hands on the crystals.

With over a hundred crystals and only a little over eighty representatives, everyone had a chance to get up close to the items. The rules also assured everyone would have ample time to see what they needed, so no one complained.

Lucifer snapped out with keen eyes and nimble fingers, snapping up the crystal closest to him. It was about the size of his fist. For an Adept of his level the check took only a moment. He flooded the crystal with his consciousness and examined the pulses of energy within.

Right away he felt his psyche embraced by the dense vital energy. He struggled against the urge to drink it all up into himself. He knew that if he did, the impure nature of the crystal would cause more harm than good. That was what the exuvium process was for. For all he knew, absorbing the energy directly might turn him into one of those alien beasts. Besides that, there were four Paragons who were looking for any excuse to use their powers.

A small number of assessors had seen these crystals before. However, even for them they had never come across crystals so vibrant as these. Knowing that the potency of a crystal was a sign of an alien's strength, it was a clear display of power that East had so many to give away.

Among all the representatives, only the Terminator remained still. He didn't even take a crystal to examine.

"You don't want to take a closer look?" The Epochrion asked her old comrade.

He shook his head. "What's the use? In reality this whole process is unnecessary. If these crystals were fake the East would be taking a foolish gamble holding this auction. As far as I'm concerned, we're here so that these people can justify spending so much."

The Epochrion smiled back at him. "I don't know about any of that. The Wine Master is in charge of everything."

Of course the Terminator was right. If you didn't let your customers see the goods, how could you expect them to pay what they were asking? The crystals had all gone through rigorous inspection and selection before coming to auction as well. There were crystals of all kinds, strong and weak. A few were even very rare crystals from stronger aliens. They were smaller, but could be picked out by their richer color and energy.

The truth couldn't be hidden from the people in this room, even if they wanted to. Luckily they did sense things clearly and it was making them excited.

Jun'er was interested in the crystals, too. She weaved in between her guests as they examined the crystals. She looked like a little adult, walking absently back and forth with a concerned expression on her face.

Metatron was increasingly surprised by what he was feeling. The energies were so dense they looked thick as ropes. He busily recorded a few serial numbers for tomorrow's auction.

Time stretched on, with everyone having an opportunity to experience the vital crystals. The more they felt, the happier they were. Many were powerful Adepts in their own right and knew the secrets of vital energy. This was especially true if they understood their own powers. At least they knew that vital energy was integral for extending life and keeping strong.

War ships were costly, but what better use was there for resources than to extend one's life? The men and women with handfuls of crystals may have been representing powerful people, but their personal excitement was on full display. Just one of these had the ability to dramatically extend their lives. A creaky old death was no longer to be feared. Exuvium, it remade you right down to your genes. These vital crystals forced an

evolution in the human body that likely even helped their Disciplines.

Beep-beep! The Epochrion's communicator rang. She dropped her head to spy the number, then turned toward the Terminator beside her. "I'm sorry, I have to take this. Wine Master, if you'd come with me for a moment?"

The Wine Master approached her side and said something quietly in her ear. She answered by gently shaking her head, and then the two walked off to be by themselves.

Most were still absorbed with the vital crystals, and didn't notice the two Paragons separate from the crowd. The Keeper and Bookworm were still standing vigil to watch for thieves. Not that any would dare, this was the Ocean of Stars, a Paragon's Domain.

As the Epochrion and Wine Master talked among themselves, several of the guests staggered and nearly fell. A deep blue-purple crystal was clutched in their hand. The energies contained inside were particularly dense, almost thick. The bearer was overwhelmed and almost couldn't handle the power contained within.

Chapter 642: A Trap

The person stumbled and nearly collapsed, but no one paid any mind. Everyone's total attention was on the vital crystals, what did the other appraisers mean to them? All but Jun'er, who was standing in the path of the representative.

The small girl's eyes did not work, but her other senses compensated. "Be careful," she squeaked. A tiny hand extended to help. Only just then the representative jerked away. To the outside observer it looked like they were trying to avoid bumping into the girl. Something in it grabbed the attention of the Keeper and Bookworm, though.

"Nobody move." A deep, gravelly voice hissed through the air. All eyes turned to the dagger pressed against Jun'er's throat, throbbing with purple light. The culprit's free hand shot out, and ten vital stones suspended nearby shot into his grasp.

Suddenly a wave of crushing power filled the area, pouring from the Avenue's two scientists. The suffocating aura ripped through like a tornado, swallowing everything up.

"I said, don't move. You're smart enough to know what kind of poison is on this dagger. A clean cut through her aorta, and no one could save your precious little Clairvoyant." His voice was grim and low. The expression on the thief's face never changed.

"Astral Phantom!" The Keeper's face went pale. He knew it because he could feel the protogenia flowing from him, the aura of a Paragon. Between the Keeper and the Bookworm, their holding aura was enough to make escape difficult. However not to comply was putting Jun'er in danger.

The Astral Phantom's current face wasn't his real one. The Paragon never revealed what he really looked like. His appearances were rare, and this one seemed foolishly planned. With so many Paragons, getting away seemed impossible. But the best methods were often the most direct. One little girl was stronger than a whole room full of Paragons. She was the

future of Skyfire Avenue, and the Phantom knew that. He was unaffiliated and didn't fear the wrath of Skyfire Avenue. Besides, his attempt on Lan Jue's life already put them at odds.

"What are you going to do now?" The Keeper growled.

The Astral Phantom's voice was cold, dead. "Nothing extravagant. You're going to give me every vital crystal in this place, and then I'm going to go. Once I'm safe the child goes free. You all know when I say something I mean it."

The Keeper responded with a huff. "You have two choices. First, surrender. Pledge your support to the fight against the aliens and you can have leave with a vital crystal. Submit to a series of restrictions, and when we fight the aliens maybe your deeds will outweigh your crimes."

The Astral Phantom regarded the scientist flatly. "Has dementia already set in? I'm the one in control of this situation. Keep your Alzheimer's to yourself."

The Keeper continued as though he hadn't heard. His voice stayed calm. "Your second choice is to face them. Beat them and you're free to go." He casually pointed to where two figures were standing, not far away.

The two bore expressions promising similarly brutal deaths, but through different methods. One was cold as ice and hard as a mountain. The other had a more elegant and refined bloodthirst. Four golden stars twinkled on the fiercer one's shoulder. His companion was also smartly dressed, but in place of stars he wore a mocking grin.

They were ready? The Astral Phantom's face went dark. If this was a trap, he'd fallen for it. But what about the child in his hand?

"You're pretty foolish, Uncle. I am a prophet, how would I not know when I'm in danger? I knew this would happen days ago." Her voice sounded small and piteous. The naïve tones of a child made the words much more cutting.

A light flickered and Jun'er vanished from the assassin's grip. She reappeared in the distance, bathed in ethereal starlight. The Ocean of

Stars Domain was an inheritance from the former Clairvoyant. Although the manifestation of power was permanent, it only existed here in the museum. However, so long as Jun'er stayed here she had access to all the benefits of a Paragon's Domain. Benefits like teleportation and concealment.

Lan Jue smirked at the Astral Phantom. "When Jun'er said she felt danger, you were the very first person I thought of. You're the only one with the skill to masterfully sneak in, then immediately do something stupid. You've assassinated our people, and today those accounts will be paid."

The steely-eyed general was Lan Qing. He had come to Skyfire to participate in a high-level government meeting. His mocking companion was, of course, Lan Jue.

Jun'er had told Lan Jue she didn't feel right the day before. It didn't take him long to puzzle things out. The only person mad enough and good enough to be a danger to Jun'er was standing right in front of them. When it came to profits death did not concern the Astral Phantom!

Lan Jue's eyes were strangely absent any hate as he regarded the assassin. There was only a heartlessness in his cold stare. If it weren't for this man, Qianlin wouldn't be in the state she was in. He had almost succeeding in taking the second love of his life from him, not to mention the many times he'd tried to kill his brother. Jun'er had predicted his arrival and here he was, the infamous killer. Today their disagreements would be settled.

The Astral Phantom flicked his wrist, sending the vital crystals he'd stolen tumbling back out into the air. The movements were calm, almost flippant. Like he was capitulating for the greater good, rather than the potential danger.

"If I beat the both of you, I may leave?" He didn't look at Lan Jue. The killer only had eyes for Lan Qing. He could feel it; this thorn in his side, who had survived so many attempts on his life, had broken through. His progress and determination were enviable.

“So long as you don’t run, you’ll only have to deal with me.” Lan Qing took a step forward, his voice even.

When he spoke everyone looked his way. The An Lun super soldier wasn’t known to everyone, but he did have a reputation.

“Prometheus, God of Wisdom and hero of the Eastern military. He is challenging the Astral Phantom?” Someone asked.

Lucifer’s ears perked up. He knew those names and titles well, and the moment he heard them his face changed. The An Lun super soldier, great hope of the East – was it really him? Hadn’t he been vice-admiral? He’d heard nothing about Prometheus becoming a Paragon.

The Terminator was similarly blindsided by the revelation. However, his mind immediately turned to reports of An Lun satellite images. Was that golden aura a result of this young man’s protogenic power? If that were true...

Ordinarily Lan Qing would not have tipped his hand and revealed his ascension. Typically this information would remain secret to keep an advantage over the West and North. Now, however, things were different. The worlds of man were upended with the alien crisis, as well as the discovery of vital crystals and the exuvium process. It was as much a danger as it was an opportunity. The East – being the weakest of the Alliances – was seeking to exploit and profit from these opportunities. Surely they hoped the East would eventually surpass its two neighbors. Perhaps now wasn’t the time for secrecy, instead it was time to flex muscles and make a show of what the East could achieve. With the alien menace at their doorstep, at least they didn’t have to worry about overt Northern or Western aggression. The West’s presence here was proof; despite their hateful rhetoric, how could they pass up the chance for a few vital crystals? How could they want them and at the same time say they were fake?

“Very well! It looks like you’ve been promoted. Now show me how strong you’ve become.” The others around them scattered back to give them space. Still there were many who were visibly frightened. This was a

Paragon battle, collateral damage was likely.

However their fear was only short lived. In the starry expanse above, a single celestial body flared brightly. The star's gentle light enveloped Lan Qing and the Astral Phantom. Right away both of them appeared to shrink. From the outside they looked like miniatures. To them, it was like they'd been cast into a pocket dimension. Completely oblivious of everything happening outside.

Inwardly the Astral Phantom was in a sour mood. He was too bold, too careless. It was foolish to underestimate the Clairvoyant! He was dead, but managed to leave behind such a powerful tool even from beyond the grave. Too risky – in the future, he thought to himself, he would need to be more careful.

Lan Qing's figure floated in the dark expanse of this pocket universe, facing his foe. For a moment he just regarded him. A gentle cyan light radiated around his body.

Chapter 643: Fighting the Astral Phantom

These two could be considered old, bitter foes. The Astral Phantom figured he knew Lan Qing's powers well; that Wind Discipline that refused to be shut out, that powerful ancient martial style, and his near super-human insight. Most importantly, though, was how often he'd escaped the Phantom's clutches. Things would be different now that they faced each other face to face. A lot of the assassin's ploys didn't apply. He was not worried about safety, however. After all, he'd been a Paragon far longer than this upstart soldier. He wasn't a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, but years of experience as a Paragon had taught him a great deal about staying alive. He put his chances of escape at twenty, thirty percent, however he knew the rules and limitations of those who commanded protogenia. It wasn't easy for people like them to go back on their word, lest protogenia revolt like it did against unscrupulous killers. Because of this, even assassin's like the Astral Phantom had rules he had to abide by.

So what if he was a Paragon? What did it mean to him if Lan Qing was 'gifted'? The Astral Phantom had faith he could best this upstart. It was just a shame he couldn't kill him. The pay-out for Lan Qing's head was hefty indeed.

The Astral Phantom made the first move. At first he didn't seem all that fast as he rushed for the Eastern general. His body was enveloped in a thick, mysterious purple light. It was important to remember where the assassin stood among his fellow Paragons. He had been considered stronger than the Gourmet, the Bookworm and the Pauper the day he ascended. Although he had yet to succeed in becoming a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, years as a Paragon assassin meant he was a master of his skills.

Lan Qing ducked and spread his arms out to his side, like an enormous eagle spreading its wings. Formless yet oppressive, the general's aura sprang to life. Coiling eddies of cyan energy swirled around him until suddenly they burst out, illuminating everything.

Rookie mistake, calling on your Discipline when it wasn't necessary. The

Astral Phantom regarded the move with disdain. He didn't move or avoid the general's encroaching Domain. On the contrary, the Astral Phantom picked up speed and bore directly into the face of Lan Qing's power.

The result was strange and unexpected. As the Astral Phantom met Lan Qing's Domain, the cyan universe split to let him pass like cloth before a pair of sheers. A number of gasps arose from the spectators as they looked on. Such power!

Six shadowy figures appeared behind the Astral Phantom, following in his wake. A pair of black daggers had appeared in his hands. Since the blades didn't reflect any light, they could only be seen from specific angles.

These were the weapons the Astral Phantom was famous for; Soulbright. No one knew how many lives these two dark blades had taken.

A flash of purple light temporarily blinded everyone who watched. The Phantom and his six copies spread out every which way. They arced out, surrounding Lan Qing, then charged in from every direction. His Domain seemed to exist in name only, as the assassin and his copies effortlessly plowed inward.

As the evil daggers bore down on the young hero, many in the crowd audibly gasped in dismay. One of them was An Liu, her pretty eyes wide and full of fear. But just then, the Astral Phantom began to despair. It was too easy.

How could it be this easy? They'd crossed blades a number of times, and although the Phantom had the advantage, Lan Qing always got away by virtue of his smarts. He'd escaped so many impossible situations that the Astral Phantom started to wonder if he was even human. Was the 'God of Wisdom' really just going to stand there and wait to get stabbed? The Eastern super soldier didn't react at all, even as his Domain was being torn up around him.

When he looked up, he saw the ridicule in his opponent's eyes.

Something's not right! The Astral Phantom stuck to his gut instinct. Three of the copies continued their headlong rush toward Lan Qing. The three others joined with the original before breaking off into four separate

directions.

The cyan light became more intense as a vortex appeared without warning near Lan Qing. The vortex itself was crystal clear, but waves of green energy poured from it. Every pulse was full of a vital energy that made the heart race. From outside the vortex seemed unmoving, but the truth was revealed when the assassin's copies were caught in its pull. When the images were swallowed up, their bodies were sliced away into a hundred thousand pieces by some invisible force. Half a breath later, nothing remained.

How is this possible? Is it actually...

The Astral Phantom craned his neck mid-flight to stare at the scene. He was able to sense the power of the vortex through the last moments of his copies. It was protogenia, wind protogenia. Lan Qing had managed to master the essence of his own element and melded it seamlessly with the waves of cosmic turbulence abound. His mirror images had no way to escape and were summarily destroyed.

How could someone who'd just become a Paragon be so strong? He couldn't come up with an answer, but that wasn't important. In a flash, Lan Qing appeared behind the Phantom.

Countless edged gusts gathered around the general. They were so thick in the air they left his enemy no way out. The wind-weapons were condensed cosmic turbulence and as such were heavy with pure wind element. Not even a Paragon would dare test how sharp they were.

The Astral Phantom was taken by surprise, but he didn't hesitate. He steadied his heart as the truth of his unfathomable foe was revealed. His retreat stopped, and as the Astral Phantom turned he lashed out with the Soulblight daggers, quick as lightning. He cut at the wind daggers, and when they collided Lan Qing's weapons dissolved into their elemental essence. Little by little the Phantom danced among the cosmic flows, carving out a safe circle.

As for the other three copies, they seemed to have simply vanished into the vacuum of space.

Wind daggers continued to sail toward the assassin, birthed from Lan Qing as he remained suspended in place. The Astral Phantom was in the center of a deadly tempest, and each gust was a piercing dagger at his weakest points. No dodge to the left or dash to the right freed him from the prison of air. They were locked in a battle of stamina.

The Terminator swung his eyes toward the Keeper. "Congratulations! The East produces another Paragon. Why is it we Northerner's don't have such luck?"

The Keeper answered with a knowing smile. "Because you've chosen the wrong path. The mysteries of the human body can't be answered by installing technology. To truly understand ourselves we must reduce, not add to. It only happens through hard work, step by step, day by day. While manufactured and altered Adepts rise quicker and are stronger in the early stages, everything's different after ninth level. You were looking for numbers. We have only ever pursued perfection. Our results speak to the righteousness of our path."

The Terminator grinned. "Maybe. Though I contend our technology just hasn't caught up, yet. If one day technology could reveal the potential we contain, everything would be different. When that day comes we can make Paragons. That is when humanity will be the true masters of the universe."

The Keeper didn't engage him further. This was an ideological rift that went beyond the two of them, and both knew the other wouldn't be swayed. Each had their own truth.

In the depths of their pocket universe, the rivals continued their battle. In a short span the clash had reached a fever pitch. The Astral Phantom was gone beneath the constant purple flashes of his defenses. All he needed was a break in this never-ending flood of cyan, then he could get through. But he couldn't, the daggers never stopped. Both of them continued to throw everything they had at one another.

Cosmic secrets had been revealed to Paragons, and they were capable of bending the rules of reality to their whim. However, they weren't gods. Their powers had limits, as did their stamina.

From outside, spectators might assume the more practiced Paragon had the advantage here. After all, he had years of cultivation under his belt. However to those with more combat training, they saw that the fight was just getting under way. Everything up to this point was feeling each other out.

The Astral Phantom had already guessed that the cyan power was not Lan Qing's Domain. The vortex was. Lan Qing deserved the praise, he thought. He was strong for a newly arisen Paragon. But at the same time the Phantom was starting to read the situation. Perhaps it was because Lan Qing was new to his powers, but his attacks were uniform.

Unerring, time was needed for a Paragon to learn how to integrate their protogenia into their fighting tactics. The Astral Phantom had tread this road, he knew how things were. As far as he was concerned Lan Qing was too tender. He'd been holding back since the start of the fight.

Meanwhile the Phantom's preferred style was more like a viper; wait for just the right moment, then strike. One blow to shake the pillars of heaven. Both Lan Qing and Lan Jue had been instructed in how lethal that style could be. Lan Jue had nearly met his demise because of it.

Enough! Time to show him a little muscle. A cold light flashed in the Phantom's eyes. His Soulbright daggers were surrounded by a caustic purple light, then leapt from his hands in either direction. They started small but the farther they flew the larger they became. Eventually they were enormous, big enough that they threatened to slice apart the universe containing them. Both slashed their way toward Lan Qing.

Chapter 644: The Power of the Astral Phantom

The daggers of wind tore themselves apart the moment the purple light touched them. Lan Qing felt the forces of chaos unravel his elemental Discipline. The strange power from the Phantom's daggers were accompanied by a low rumble. Its resonance made the tempest unstable, and dissipated Lan Qing's attack.

If Lan Qing's daggers were solid wind than the Phantom's daggers were acid. Everything the purple light touched was wiped away without a trace, like the protogenia was just erased.

Only protogenia could contend against protogenia! The Astral Phantom was only a first-degree Paragon, but he knew the mysteries it entailed. He was more versed than young Lan Qing in the control and use of these powers. Here was where his advantages began to be revealed.

However Lan Qing was not put off. A pale cyan light shimmered around him like a shell, and the next moment he shot off like a bullet to avoid the daggers. The air around him reacted as tendrils of purple energy grasped and groped. Each one of them seemed sharp enough to cut space-time apart. In fact Lan Qing's rapidly retreating body froze, and suddenly he was back where he was a moment ago.

It happened in the space of an instant. Lan Qing hardly knew what was happening.

Spectators watching outside were also surprised, not least of them the Wine Master. Those purple tendrils were definitely having an effect on space-time. They'd cancelled Lan Qing's retreat like it'd never happened.

It demanded masterful control to counter another Paragon's protogenia with one's own. No wonder the astral Phantom was respected for his long years as a Paragon. It was a trick, to lull Lan Qing into a false sense of security. He'd seemed weak, and revealed his strength at just the right moment.

A smug grin spread across the assassin's face. This child thought he could face up to me. Too bold, kid. Let's see if you can block the combined might of heaven and earth – my Daemon-cleaver!

There was nowhere Lan Qing could flee to. The roaring aura of the Deamon-cleaver attack ripped his defensive shell away. Terrifying to behold, there was also a sense of beauty in watching protogenia so expertly castrated. It was akin to the sounds of a frantic guqin, springs buzzing with sound until all at once they snap – sad, shrill and beautiful.

Ding-ding! In the final moment, just as it seemed the Astral Phantom's daggers would cleave Lan Qing in two, the crowd gasped. An Luo's super soldier reacted in a way none of them could have expected.

He lifted his hands, and using nothing but his calloused palm swatted the daggers away. A soft golden aura surrounded them, flesh white as polished porcelain. In fact his whole body was illuminated by an internal glow.

The Astral Phantom stared incredulously as Lan Qing batted his daggers away. The incomparably sharp Soulbrighter daggers didn't even get passed that thin gold aura around his head. It was like trying to pierce cast iron.

How could this be? Although it hadn't been the Phantom's deadliest attack, it was among his strongest! How was it possible it was swatted away like an irritating fly? With two bare hands? Even the leaders of Skyfire Avenue wouldn't have been able to do that. Why was he different?

Combat was about living in the moment. Lan Qing didn't give his foe the luxury of time, and thrust forward with his palms before the Phantom could recover. A wall of invisible force bore down on him.

It sent the astral Phantom spinning wildly through the air. He sailed out of control for a good while. When the would-be killer finally came to a stop he could only gape in disbelief. Whatever power Lan Qing used, he couldn't comprehend it.

How could this be happening? What did I get myself into? My daggers, just ignored like rubbish by a fresh Paragon.

But then he took another look, and his mind went blank. Lan Qing was completely different.

The gusts of Discipline had been restrained. Although he calmly floated just as before, he was now surrounded by a pale golden aura. The ethereal, aloof face of Prometheus was spread in a mellow smile of content.

Once an Adept became a Paragon their protogenia could not change. It wasn't just nonsense told to them by trainers. It was equally impossible to see someone's protogenia spontaneously evolve. Yet, that's what the Phantom's eyes were telling him.

Lan Qing regarded the Astral Phantom calmly. Then, one hand curled into a loose fist and he thrust a punch at his opponent.

Sinister determination hardened the Phantom's face. If he'd underestimated Lan Qing before, things were different now. Anyone who could block his attacks the way this young soldier did was a formidable enemy.

Lan Qing's punch looked weak but the whole space around them warped because of it. From the Astral Phantom's perspective, Lan Qing got larger and larger until he took up his whole field of vision. And yet, it seemed strange, false like an illusion. He didn't know what was real or not anymore. This punch seemed to go beyond the constraints of protogenia.

The Astral Phantom reacted. He thrust his hands behind his back and shut his eyes. All of a sudden, his whole body became translucent, like an amethyst. The assassin dashed forward like a bolt of lightning, right into Lan Qing's formless punch.

Tssssssshhhhh! A strange sound thundered from every direction. Waves of wild energy crashed against the boundaries of their pocket dimension. The Clairvoyant's Domain appeared to react, and soon resplendent starlight was twinkling all through the room. Separate though they were, spectators could still feel the feral and ferocious power of their collision.

When the ripples passed and reality settled, the Astral Phantom was the first one they saw. His battered form hung in the emptiness of space. When they spied Lan Qing in the distance he looked no different. Clearly

the general had won their exchange.

Representatives who did not know Lan Qing couldn't hide their shock. It was inconceivable that a young Paragon who just broke through could stand toe to toe against the Astral Phantom and emerge unscathed. It was a glittering endorsement of his strength and potential. The Representatives clambered to get a better view of the display.

Lucifer, the Fallen Angel now understood why he'd felt such pressure when their eyes met. Only someone on an entirely different level could give him that sense of dread!

Archangel Metatron didn't look any better. He'd spent a fortune in research after Zeus revealed his identity at the Great Adept Tournament. Lan Qing and Lan Jue were brothers, and the younger of the two was already at the top of the Pontiff's black list. Now, however, they see a big brother stands behind him. The pressure this added to the Citadel could be imagined. How would they contend against a foe like this?

The Astral Phantom still hadn't gotten over his disbelief. He'd thrown real power behind that attack. However, he knew that neither of them knew the truth about the other. The Astral Phantom's secret was his protogenia. It wasn't poison, nor was it his speed. In fact, the assassin's greatest power was his perception. Perception was his chosen path to Paragon.

Cutting perception was what had allowed him to manipulate the Soulbliht daggers to resonate at just the right frequency. That rendered Lan Qing's wind daggers useless. Total situational awareness was his strong suit, with poison and speed used to get him the advantage.

He'd focused his perception on Lan Qing's punch in the hopes of gleaning some clue as to how to beat it. What he saw was a perfect sphere, seamless and without a weakness to exploit. It crashed onto him like a stone curtain. Flawless.

It was simply impossible. A Paragon's protogenia was the integration of natural principles, powerful energies and the Paragon's comprehension. However for Lan Qing's power there was no border from one to the other.

It was a total, unbroken whole. It went against everything the Astral Phantom thought he knew about Paragons.

Yet the truth had been painfully demonstrated to him. His only recourse was to counter his foe's attack with one of his own.

Lan Qing shared some of his foe's surprise. The Astral Phantom was stronger than Lan Qing would have guessed. He'd used his speed to amplify the strength of his protogenia. He'd lashed out with the Soulblighters, and their power was cast out in seven shadowy copies. When they converged on the force of the punch, they were strong enough to carve a path through. They was even enough energy to reach Lan Qing. However, it was so weak by that point the General avoided it with ease.

Chapter 645: Buddha's Revelation

The two combatants stopped again. A flickering aura appeared and disappeared around Lan Qing, and a thoughtful expression was on his face. Was it really as simple as it seemed? After all, Lan Qing was called the God of Wisdom! Evolution was an integral part of Lan Qing's chosen path. Through training and battle he constantly evolved toward the most perfect version of himself.

Of course his protogenia couldn't change. But Adepts were more multifaceted, like layers of an onion. At the heart of Lan Qing's abilities was the Prajna curses and Varochana. Wrapped around that was Wind. In effect, the general had been fighting with one hand behind his back.

Jue Di had told Lan Qing that the universe shrunk after you became a Paragon. There were so few like you. A situation like that, new Paragons needed a whetstone to hone their abilities. Friends and training partners were no use. Paragons were exceedingly precise and sensitive, and only real danger catalyzed their potential.

The Astral Phantom was a perfect whetstone. Lan Qing wasn't going to put him down so quickly. He used this opportunity to understand the deeper truths of his protogenia.

The Phantom's body vanished in a flash of purple light. He didn't wait around for Lan Qing to attack. The Astral Phantom was a killer, a master assassin as they were called in the old days. No assassin worth their salt attacked a target head-on. Attack from the shadows, that was his specialty.

Just as the Phantom vanished, a light arose in Lan Qing's eyes. He pressed his palms together at the center of his chest. Though his body didn't disappear, his aura ceased to be felt. The Phantom, however, was completely gone.

Ting! The Astral Phantom appeared from the shadows behind Lan Qing's right shoulder. Lan Qing didn't have time to turn and face the assassin, the Phantom was too quick. All he could do was twist his ribs away and block the stab with his back.

Sounds of shock rippled through the onlookers. The Astral Phantom's name and reputation were widely known. His strength was not in question, nor was the lethality of his Soulbright daggers. Meeting him was like being served a death warrant.

Every ear perked to the sound of ringing metal, and wide eyes stared in disbelief. The Phantom's dagger didn't pierce the skin. A blinding halo of golden light appeared behind Lan Qing's head, and his heroic form swelled to several times his original size. He dropped to his knees and knelt among the glittering stars. A golden lotus appeared below to lift and support him. An impassioned hymn arose, rumbling all around them.

When the Astral Phantom reappeared, it was far away from his target. He gaped at Lan Qing. "Reflection of Heaven and Earth. But how.... You..."

Lan Qing's face remained even and placid. He spread his hands away from his chest, palms facing heaven. All of a sudden the chants grew louder. Lan Qing's golden halo became brighter. It expanded and shot out rays of light like a miniature sun. Wherever the beams of light swept past, nothing was hidden. The light illuminated everything within its scope. The Phantom was revealed and he was left nowhere to hide. He darted into the distance like a terrified ghost.

This was his Domain! Buddha's Revelation!

Indeed this was the true realm of Lan Qing's power, far more potent than what he'd felt at the beginning of their fight. The brilliant light of the Buddha revealed everything to the young Paragon. The Astral Phantom's Domain was what he'd just revealed, blinking. Within the scope of his power he could instantly move from any one point to another.

Unfortunately for him, Varochana's power abolished all things duplicitous and negative. Their pocket universe was reset to its purest and simplest state.

"Great Prajna Curse!" Lan Qing retracted his arms, then pressed forward with his hands. The pure light of the Buddha intensified still further, until the spectators outside could sense nothing from within their pocket dimension.

The Astral Phantom juked and dodged as best he could. No matter how fervently he disbelieved, Lan Qing was showing the abilities of a second-degree Paragon! That's the only way he could have blocked the Soulbright daggers with nothing but his own skin. No wonder he was so eager to fight! Did he really jump an entire degree? The Astral Phantom didn't know what to believe. He couldn't understand why he'd been stuck for dozens of years, but for this young man it seemed effortless. It seemed too impossible an idea to entertain.

He raced as fast as he could, searching for a way to escape Lan Qing's Domaine. No matter how fast he flew or how far he went, he couldn't get free enough to summon his own powers. Even if he could, the difference between first and second degree Paragons was outstanding. This was pure protogenic force. He had to get free if he wanted a chance.

However, once Lan Qing croaked those three words, everything around the Astral Phantom changed. No matter where he turned or how fast he fled, the image of Varochana followed. Eventually the pure light swallowed him up entirely.

There was nowhere to go!

The Phantom took a deep breath then came to a halt. He knew nothing else would come from running. He knew that his own Domain would be suppressed by the overwhelming power of the general. He was completely at his prey's mercy!

He reacted by throwing his arms back, although this time his shoulders were thrown back as well. The action was so sudden and violent it looked like his arms would be pulled out. Then he began to move. A shadow copy was left behind in his wake. His actions looked almost slow, so much that the spectators could see every movement clearly. The sharper among them, though, noticed how when he moved he seemed like a shadow. He wasn't really going so slowly.

Thirteen! Including himself there were thirteen shadowy assassin's racing straight for Lan Qing. As the Phantom picked up speed his copies kept pace. They would occasionally collide with each other, and when they

did the new copy was more defined. In front of him, the purple light of his empowered weapons blazed a path. It, too, seemed to become sharper and more real the farther he flew until it was carving apart space-time – and the pure light of the Buddha.

This was the real power of the Astral Phantom. Assassins were known for keeping their deadliest attacks to the last. How much more terrifying was a Paragon assassin once trapped in a corner? The Astral Phantom seemed committed to showing everyone.

He appeared to be little more than a gloomy shadow, somehow able to deny light from reflecting off of him. All of his strength, Discipline, perception, poison, speed, and Domain – all of them were focused on a single point in space. This was it; do or die. If this strike failed to finish his target, he wouldn't have enough energy to a second try.

It demanded a full twenty percent of his total energy. Twenty percent of concentrate death.

Cosmic Smite. This was the name he'd given the attack he used only in time of absolute necessity. In all his years he had never had to use it. Although, he'd never before tried to kill a Paragon.

It was without pomp, without drama. It was pure, deadly power. Everything hinged on the tip of this strike.

Lan Qing's hands shot out, for he felt the light of Varochana above him dim. The overwhelming sense of danger told him the precise moment to move.

Supreme Incantation! Lan Qing's strongest Prajna Curse!

Palms forward, sturdy as a mountain! No I, no they. In the boundlessness of the Buddha, with no up nor down, there is no fear.

Suddenly Lan Qing's entire body took on the image of the Buddha, like the second coming of Varochana. The heat was so intense that distant stars melted in the face of it.

Dang--! The crisp sound, like the call of a grandfather clock, hung for a long time in the air. The whole of the universe seemed to vibrate in

response.

Lan Qing's Varochana projection also shook. A large white scar appeared on it, stretching across the forehead. When he saw this Lan Jue rushed forward, but the calloused grip of Jue Di held him fast.

"Prajna-paramitah!" The guttural chant filled the air, rolling like thunder. It was clear as a bell to everyone.

The Astral Phantom was revealed again. His true form was picked out from the shadow doppelgangers. He'd been half-hidden before but was once again fully revealed – though, he was different. The emaciated assassin's suddenly grew to several times his size. Without warning his frail body filled out.

Golden light enveloped him just as the resounding chants of Buddhist monks deafened the ear. The pale scar on Lan Qing's forehead disappeared. Meanwhile the Astral Phantom dropped his arms beneath the power of a blazing sun. The incessant blaze burned away the purple light surrounding the assassin.

Lan Qing's dharmic image came to an end. When he reappeared his face was pale, and he looked drained. He'd sensed the mortal danger from the Astral Phantom's attack. He'd only just managed to protect himself from annihilation with his curses and defense.

After all, Lan Qing was still very young as Paragons were concerned. He still hadn't grasped the full breadth of his abilities, especially since he'd jumped a degree. On the other hand, the Astral Phantom's Cosmic Smite was strong enough to nearly pierce a second-degree Paragon's defenses. In terms of attack power, the Paragons ahead of him on the list may not necessarily be his superiors. With all of the Phantom's strength focused on that one strike, Lan Qing had had a very literal brush with death.

Chapter 646: Fealty or Death

Lan Qing sensed something as the powers of life and death intertwined around them. His body had reacted suddenly, expanding the image of his dharma to ward off the attack. It also served to deepen his personal understanding.

Yet none of this made any difference in the shocked look on his face. Nothing could have prepared him for the truth.

Beneath the searing fire of Varochana, the Astral Phantom had to draw on the last vestiges of 'his' energy. In fact 'he' was no longer 'himself' – the disguise was slipping.

Long purple hair was the first thing revealed, followed by a sleek and slender figure. A pair of royal purple eyes burned with rage and disbelief. Varochana's fiery light continued to devour the remnants of purple protogenia. What lay beneath was a beautiful face, cold and sad.

A woman?

Lan Qing wasn't alone in his shock. Who among the spectators – especially Skyfire's Paragons – would not be similarly flabbergasted? The knife in the darkness, heartless and malicious, a killer for hire. The Astral Phantom, bringer of death to so many men – was a woman?

Speculation over the Phantom's true face was always fuel for the imagination. However, usually the stories painted him as a wretched old man. But a woman? And such a beautiful woman, at that. Only Zhou Qianlin was her rival, with the Epochrion a close second. She was also a Paragon, something Qianlin could not yet boast.

Lan Qing quickly recovered, his face adopted that familiar frigid expression. The fact that his opponent was a woman didn't give him any cause to relax his guard. He pressed his hands together once again, and the Buddha's Revelation Domain manifested anew. The all-consuming heat of Varochana continued to broil the Astral Phantom.

The assassin had no way to strike back. She only had enough energy to

fend off Lan Qing's Domain. She knew that if this continued for much longer, Varochana's rays would burn her away.

She glared at Lan Qing with such a deep, abiding hatred that he could feel it. If looks could kill, he'd be slain twice over. But he faced her with stony disinterest. Her wicked stare washed over him like a statue.

Outside of the pocket universe, it was silent as the grave. The fight was over, Lan Qing's victory was clear. To witness the breakthrough of a Paragon was rare, but it was rarer still to watch one die. It seemed likely it might happen now. The appraisers representing humanity's most powerful organizations watched, expressions as varied as their patrons. And yet, they all had the same thought; it would be wise to follow the rules during the auction.

A sound caught Lan Qing's ear. He paused, then peered into the distance with a golden light in his eyes. His vision pierced the protective Domain created for them to spy Jue Di. He stood beside his brother, who both gave him a solemn nod.

An Luo's general swung his eyes back toward the Astral Phantom. "You have a decision to make. Release your protogenia, allow my light to mark your soul. Swear fealty. Or, die."

Only the Astral Phantom could hear him.

IF it had been left up to Lan Qing, this choice would not have been offered. He wanted the assassin put down. But Jue Di offered an alternative. He looked at Lan Jue because this was their enemy. Lan Jue had even more cause to hate her after what happened to Qianlin. Lan Jue's nod was in agreement with Jue Di.

The fiery Domain around her set her shocked expression in stark light. She gaped at Lan Qing incredulously. "You want me to submit?" The fury in her eyes threatened to set her eyes on fire, bordering on madness. It was an insult, an affront! Paragons were known for their pride. Swearing service to another was unthinkable.

Lan Qing regarded her with unfeeling eyes. "You don't have long to make your choice. Fealty, or death!"

“You think you can kill me?” The Astral Phantom spat back.

He answered with a scornful smirk. “You’re a Paragon, you live for your own interests. You’ve undertaken tremendous risk for those interests. You’re not conceited, but you have a singular focus on potential profit. You are sinfully selfish. I think in your heart you’d chose life over honor. However I’d be just as pleased for you to prove me wrong. So Phantom, do you have so much pride? Am I wrong?”

“You..!” Poisonous words welled up in her throat, but a flash in Lan Qing’s eyes stopped her. The burning hell she found herself in got a few degrees hotter. The lapping flames didn’t scorch like normal fire. It was, in fact, much worse. They were spouts of pure, cleansing energy. This unfeeling purification burned passed energy, passed the body, right down into a victim’s soul. The danger the Astral Phantom faced was the obliteration of her body and soul. Escape was not an option, with so many Paragons watching.

What could she do? Her mind was in chaos.

Lan Qing was right. Avarice was her drug of choice, there was nothing better than a new pretty bauble. She commanded the greatest organization of criminals in the history of humanity, and yet she still wasn’t satisfied.

The Phantom was a sixty year old woman in truth, but looked like she was in her twenties. A result of many rare treasures, which used together allowed her to break through without effort. It was a feat that required skill and a fortune in resources. All so she could keep her good looks forever as a Paragon.

She had been overjoyed at the news of vital crystals and the exuvium process. Paragons had to die like any other living thing. The exuvium process changed all that. A single crystal wouldn’t mean much to her, but a whole lot of them, or even just a particularly potent one was enough to extend her life. And through those extra years she could grow stronger. She’d been stuck at the Realm of Protogenia for so long already with no signs of progress. This time she acted out of desperation.

Still she’d been cautious. She’d watched and listened for a long time, had

a series of meticulous back-up plans. Yet never occurred to her was one hateful little girl. Skyfire Avenue was prepared, rendering all her back-up plans useless. She walked right into their clutches.

At this moment of mortal danger, she did feel pride. But what could compare to life? You had to live to see a future. In death you lost everything – gone in an instant.

It was only seconds but it felt like minutes of agony. An unending flood of fears and questions ran through her mind. She wracked her mind for any way to wriggle out alive.

But Varochana's light was too strong. She could not shed it.

Chapter 647: I Swear

A bitter pain stabbed at the Phantom's chest. She'd had the gall to infiltrate Skyfire Avenue because she thought only the Epochrion was a problem. She was the only Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and thus the only one who could pose a threat. The other Paragons mostly new to their powers. Under those conditions fleeing wouldn't have been difficult.

But who could have anticipated the arrival of that freak, Lan Qing. A Reflection of Heaven and Earth immediately after breaking through, while she was still stuck.

"Stay your hand!" The Astral Phantom cried.

The aura around Lan Qing dimmed, and Varochana's burning light receded. However, the whole universe around her seemed ready to detonate at a moment's notice.

The Astral Phantom was red faced, and ground her teeth in fury. "I will absolutely not swear myself to you, but I will swear to three things, whenever you need them. I'm a Paragon, I have my pride..."

The pure fires sprang back to life before she could finish her thought. Their crackling cacophony drowned out her words.

Lan Qing addressed her with a calm voice. "You aren't in a position to negotiate. You will die, or you will serve! Those are your only options."

She couldn't form the words, she was putting all of her energy toward warding off the holy flames. Her belligerence seemed pointless in the face of the God of Wisdom. An Lun's super soldier was completely immovable.

Varochana's flames dimmed again. The assassin took great gulps of breath, but only in part from the strain. She felt like she had been on the edge of a precipice, about to be swallowed up. The fear still seized her chest.

"I have limited patience. This is your final chance to make a decision." Lan Qing's keen eyes never left her.

The Phantom's chest heaved as she fought to regain her breath. She

wanted nothing more than to make Lan Qing stop breathing, but she when hanging over a ledge you didn't bite the hand holding you up.

"Ten!" Lan Qing's eyes were bright and firm.

"Nine!"

"Wait! What are your intentions?" The Phantom asked.

"Eight!" He ignored her entirely and continued the count down.

"Seven!"

"Wait! I need time to think. Give me time!"

"Six!" Lan Qing's eyes were hard. His hands slowly rose and the fiery sun behind his head got brighter. Everything the light touched could hear the bone-shuddering chants of invisible bodhisattvas. It was so peaceful, but for the Astral Phantom it sounded like the inevitable march of death coming for her soul.

"You..." The struggle was clear in the Phantom's eyes. She knew what it would mean if he marked her soul.

"Three!" Lan Qing's hands rose higher.

"Wait a minute! What happened to four and five?!" She whined.

The flames got higher.

"Two!" Lan Qing had her shaken to the core. Why would he give her room to breathe?

"Wait – fine, fine! I agree!" Every inch Lan Qing's hands rose her willpower eroded. Eventually when it seemed he would move, her defenses collapsed. Nothing was more important than life.

The fiery lights around Lan Qing's hands dispersed. His face changed. "Submit your spirit, and don't think about pulling any tricks. I don't have the patience to fight you anymore. If I feel like anything isn't right, you won't get a second chance."

The Astral Phantom looked at him, conflicted. Her breath was rapid from exertion and fear. She was filled with regret. Why did she have to be

so greedy? Avarice is what led her to this point. Everything would have been different. Her cherished life would not have been so upset.

“When... when you make the mark... if you wouldn’t...”

The aura around Lan Qing’s hands flared. “I said no negotiations.”

“Fine! Ruthless!” She glared bloody murder but daredn’t delay. She genuinely feared a change in Lan Qing’s mood. He might kill her at any moment.

Her heart was unwilling, but a decision had to be made. She took a deep breath, grit her teeth, and closed her eyes. The purple aura that had surrounded her was gone. Moments later a small vortex appeared in the center of her forehead. Flecks of black swirled through the outer edges, while in the center knelt the cloudy image of a silver man.

Soul essence! Only a Paragon was able to manifest an image of their own souls.

The fierce and bloodthirsty expression was gone. Now the Phantom was a ghost of pain and sorrow. When she opened her eyes they were wet with tears. Her piteous expression and beautiful face tugged at the heart.

“Such a big man, bullying a weaker girl. I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

In another circumstance, with another man, her desperate plea might have meant something. Unfortunately, Lan Qing was unmoved. He did not hesitate and pointed with an index finger. A beam of golden light issued forth with spiraling lines of archaic runes in tow. Each strange symbol pulsed with Buddhist mysticism. The golden light was peace and calm, delivered into the purple vortex.

The tide of the vortex lurched in protest, but almost instantly the Phantom felt the burning fires of Varochana lapping at her skin. The vortex stabilized shortly thereafter and allowed the light to pass.

The silver silhouette within the vortex became more distinct. A shrill cry from the depths of her spirit followed. The golden light struck it right on the forehead. It blazed a path, leaving a golden 佛 behind. 1

The sudden, intense pain caused the Astral Phantom to fall. She shuddered uncontrollably, drenched in sweat.

When a Paragon applied their mark, it meant the victim had to do everything they commanded. If they refused, the Paragon could erase their soul with a thought. By that point it didn't matter how strong she became, the mark was there forever. There were very few instances where a mark like this had been placed. A Paragon's dignity was sacrosanct. In the end it wasn't that the Phantom was lacking in dignity, but that her love of life was too great.

The golden light persisted for about a minute, then vanished. Shortly after the burning light filling the universe receded into the image of Vairochana behind Lan Qing. The bodies of both combatants returned to normal size, and their battlefield vanished back into the Clairvoyant's Domain.

Chapter 648: The Tragedy of the Astral Phantom

The Astral Phantom was slumped on the floor. Her long purple hair was splayed all around in a mess, concealing her face.

Seeing her collapsed upon the ground like this, Lan Jue couldn't help but feel something unexpected. This was so much worse than just killing her. It seemed so unlikely to succeed.

Lan Qing noticed Lan Jue's expression and nodded his way. Lan Jue smiled. "Brother, it looks like you've found yourself a fine bodyguard."

Lan Qing walked over to the Astral Phantom and plucked her up, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of rice. "Surrender the vital crystals," he growled.

The Astral Phantom answered weakly. "I'm already your slave, can't you leave me some dignity?"

Lan Jue's face twitched. He could hardly believe she was still gambling her life! All for these crystals.

Smack! Lan Qing gave the Astral Phantom's rump a firm-handed slap. This elicited a surprised yelp from his captive. Several vital crystals tumbled out from her clothes. Lan Qing gave the surrounding Paragons a nod of respect, then he and the Phantom disappeared in a flash of light.

As An Liu watched them go, a strange sensation gnawed at the pit of her stomach. It was something sour, but not a flavor.

The Keeper's calm voice broke the silence. "Alright. Now that we've seen tonight's entertainment you may all continue with your examinations. All the vital crystals are accounted for."

Capturing a Paragon was hardly a common occurrence. Although most of the spectators didn't see how the fight ended, it was clear Lan Qing was the victor. The Astral Phantom had been arrested, the universe's foremost assassin in the hands of the Eastern military.

In a moment, the atmosphere had changed. The appraisers gave each other nervous sideways glances. They couldn't feel the waves of power thanks to the Domain's protections, but they didn't have to. It was such a visual spectacle that the fear and power were without question.

Everything they thought they knew about the Avenue had to be thrown out.

They were unassailable! The strength Skyfire Avenue showed was staggering, how were they to compete with them? The scene before them was evidence of how much clout they held.

The rest of the viewing continued under this unspoken pressure. Anyone with a thought of causing trouble had it banished from their mind after watching the spectacular fight.

The first part of the auction concluded without further event. Soon after, news that the An Lun super soldier was a Paragon spread across the human worlds. Now the news outlets were just waiting for any indication of what he chose to call himself. It was a spectacular story – a meteoric rise straight to Reflection of Heaven and Earth! Who knew, he might be the next Jue Di. One powerhouse usually didn't represent an alliance, but he was An Lun's commander. His presence made causing trouble more difficult for the West and North.

Even the Astral Phantom was bested. Who could stand against the An Lun super soldier? No other Alliance could boast having a Paragon commander! In an instant people's perception of Eastern might changed. It was another stinging slap to the West's face that ruined all their plans.

Now all eyes were on the vital crystal auction. Information about the specifics had already been released, and appraisers had given their backers their reports. These crystals were pure, better than any that had been discovered before. A few of them were clearly from a higher breed of alien. What it meant, only the clever could deduce.

Never before had crystals like those been seen in human space. What were they capable of? How were they different from normal crystals? All of this needed careful study to understand. Of course, to study them they

would need to be purchased first. Puzzling out the exuvium process would also need a large number of crystals for experimentation. These were new issues for them to consider, but first they had to have the crystals in hand.

Certainly, the fact that the East was auctioning so many of these off meant they had a surplus. They also must have had enough for research. It was clear to everyone that the East was leveraging these crystals to bolster their military strength – but what could they do? This was a wide-open strategy no one could do anything about. This was one pit they were destined to tumble into, the crystals were simply too precious.

After the showing demand for the vital crystals was at a fever pitch. Representatives from the rich and powerful were nearly rabid with lust. Whoever had the most crystals could position themselves for future profit and influence.

It was evident that the North and West could not match the East for vital crystals. However, they did have faith in the skill of their researchers. The East may have the raw materials, but technology wasn't something that fell in your lap. It needed study and man hours. So they had trust in their science. Despite their late start, the other Alliances were confident they could catch up.

This was the atmosphere that filled the air as the auction day arrived. It would be held at Skyfire Museum, and the auctioneer would be Skyfire Council's chairman, the Avenue's Wine Master, the Cosmagus himself!

It went without saying that this auction was held by the joint efforts of the East and Skyfire Avenue. The East's presence was at the Avenue's behest.

Lan Jue arrived in a wine-colored suit with a black tie, and a white shirt beneath. The outfit was accented by handmade brown leather shoes and a white kerchief stuffed in his breast pocket. He looked like the essence of a gentleman. Beside him was his brother. At Lan Jue's request, the An LUn super soldier traded his military uniform for a sapphire suit. They looked so alike in some ways, but were as different as apples and oranges. Lan Qing exuded an air of wisdom and consideration. Lan Jue had an elegant

sort of genteelness. The both of them captured a lot of attention.

Most of those eyes followed the newly arisen Paragon, Lan Qing. After breaking through directly to Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and defeating the Astral Phantom, he was immediately put within the top four of the Paragon list! Jue Di remained solidly at the top, but the Terminator and the Epochrion sat just below him. Before Lan Qing's arrival, they were the only two known second-degree Paragons remaining. Now there was a new name to add. Although he was part of the Eastern military, he was still marked under the banner of Skyfire Avenue. It meant the Eastern Adept organization added another Paragon to their ranks, and all the power that came with them. Skyfire Avenue was already considered the promised land for anyone with Talent.

After the last stretch of time, the Avenue had accepted a great many new members. Most of them were unaffiliated Easterners looking for instruction, but there was a fair number of defectors from the other Alliances as well. These foreign Adepts had to submit to strict scrutiny before gaining entry. This undoubtedly also served to make the Avenue stronger.

The Great Conclave and the Citadels were aware of what was happening, of course. There wasn't anything they could do about it. After all, you needed strength to be considered. How could they be strong enough to confront the Avenue? How many Paragons did they have now? If the West didn't have their decoctions and the North their technology, the power gap would be staggering. And Skyfire Avenue would have even more potential members.

Lan Qing and Lan Jue walked to the first row before the auction block. The other participants parted to make way, and they took their seats.

Only Eastern government officials and Avenue higher ups were allowed to sit at the first row. Besides Lan Qing and Lan Jue, representing the Avenue was the Gourmet, Epochrion, and Pauper. The Wine Master was leading the auction. The Keeper and Bookworm were not in attendance. They were absorbed in their research. The high-quality crystals recovered from the Shattered Starfields had been wonderful news for them.

A dark figure arrived, clad in black robes from head to toe. Their features were hidden beneath a shadowy cowl. They approached the front row and took a seat on the far end of the table. Their mysterious image and arrival earned a few whispers from the others. The auction paddle in their hand meant they were supposed to be here. Whoever they were, they had to be from the Northern government. Adept organizations from the West and North had been assigned to the second row.

The Terminator didn't appear to feel one way or the other about it. He was seated in the center of the second row. Although he represented both the government and the Great Conclave, the North decided to send separate representatives to show on behalf of the two organizations. This meant he had to sit one row back. Amusingly, Lucifer and Metatron sat on either side of him. All three looks a little uncomfortable.

Who was this mysterious stranger in black? What was his station, where he could sit with the leaders of nations? Many curious eyes followed him, the Terminator among them.

Lan Jue leaned in to speak with the brother. "The Astral Phantom?"

Chapter 649: Multiple Auctions

“She needs peace and quiet,” Lan Qing replied. “Why did you agree with dad to spare her life, yesterday? She could die a hundred times and it wouldn’t absolve her of her sins. Even she doesn’t know how many lives she’s taken.”

Lan Jue grinned. “For you.”

Lan Qing glanced at him. “Me?”

Lan Jue explained. “I did want her killed, but when I saw how she looked – and her status as a Paragon – I decided to spare her life.

Bewildered, Lan Qing pressed his brother. “What does this have to do with me?”

“How could it not?” Lan Jue retorted. “Dad’s told me countless times to help find you a woman.”

Lan Qing scowled. “Don’t worry about it.”

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes and peered at the Eastern general. “Bro, if it’s a... physical thing, then you know a Paragon has strong self-curative abilities. You don’t need to be ashamed...”

“I will literally kill you.” Lan Qing hissed.

Lan Jue chuckled. This was the first time he saw his brother act like this. Piercing that calm veneer was a humorous past time, certainly.

“Embarrassed to anger, eh?” Lan Jue chortled.

Lan Qing’s even expression quickly returned. “A-Jue, every day brings you closer to Paragon. You need to be focusing on the secrets of protogenia.”

“Quit it! Don’t even think about it, I won’t give you the chance to abuse me. What about your military meetings, huh? Don’t you need to be heading back to An Lun?” Of course Lan Jue would know immediately what his brother was up to. He wasted no time calling him on it.

Lan Qing sniffed. “So be honest.”

Lan Jue gave him a helpless look. "I'm not honest? When I have been dishonest? If you keep bullying me I'm going to go tell mom!"

Lan Qing's mouth curled into a scowl. He shook his head, but said nothing else.

The auction hall was nearly full, all the participants had arrived. It was tight, there were no unneeded seats to take up space. This was not an open auction, so there wouldn't be any media or walk-ins to swell the numbers.

It wasn't too loud in the auction hall yet. Everyone was here on behalf of some powerful person or organization, so they each quietly brooded over their goals. A few representatives put out feelers and tried to leverage the auction to network, but the vital crystals were everyone's top priority. Yesterday's showing had stoked everyone's interest.

A woman appeared on the stage pushing a cart before her. It was the enforcement team's leader, An Liu. Only Skyfire Avenue would hire a ninth rank Adept to serve as support crew for an auction.

As he pushed the cart to center stage, she couldn't help but allow her eyes to flicker toward the two Lan brothers. When her eyes met Lan Qing's, they darted away quick as they could. She even started to walk slower.

Lan Qing smiled at her for a moment, and Lan Jue saw it all. He leaned over. "You like her? An Liu's a good girl, I don't think she has a boyfriend. I can help introduce you."

Lan Qing didn't even look at him. "If you want to take a beating, keep talking. I don't need you poking your nose into my romantic life. I can manage on my own. Do you think I have time to run around chasing women?"

Lan Jue shrugged in resignation. "I'm worried about you! Anyway what chasing. All you have to do is open your arms and there'll be a flock of women swooping in."

Lan Qing's eyes peered into the middle-distance. "We have different

goals, different desires.”

Lan Jue gave him a thumbs-up. “Alright! Worthy of the being called the greatest Monarch. But when is His Majesty the Monarch going to publish his Paragon name?”

Lan Qing’s face froze. That particular task had given him no small measure of heartache. He felt loathe to turn down his father’s suggestion, how could he ignore it?

“Sooner or later you’re going to be in my boat. You can’t run from it. Your name’s going to be just as long.” Lan Qing said coldly.

But Lan Jue chuckled. “I’m in no rush, I still got time. Right now it’s you in the hot seat. I’m sure we’ll adapt as needed. Hurry and make up your mind, then you can use the auction as a platform. Pick something strong and domineering, something that makes people feel your power the moment they hear it. Hahaha!”

He couldn’t help but give a little, maniacal cackle. An Liu’s eyes shot back their way. In her heart was the image of a stoic man, who was looking utterly uncomfortable. Then, she saw the sharp, thoughtful light in Lan Jue’s eyes!

Just then, a deep voice interjected. “Our auction is about to begin. Please prepare to make your bids.”

There was a flash of light, and a silver portal appeared upon the stage. The Wine Master, his face expressionless, stepped through. He was clad in a very formal full suit. His Astrum was clutched in one hand. The moment he appeared, the heady aura of a Paragon swelled to fill the room. A pale silver light spread out over everyone, simultaneously isolated everything outside.

An Liu offered the Cosmagus a respectful bow. At his signal, she pulled away the sheet covering the cart’s contents.

A translucent crystal box was revealed. Within, pulsing with a gentle purple light, was a vital crystal. It was about the size of a fist, but bore the standard rhombus shape.

The Wine Master's deep voice issued through the hall. "Our first vital crystal, examined by all of you yesterday. Each of you should know well the power it contains, so I won't waste time with an introduction. Let's begin, with the opening bid set at one battleship. Each subsequent bid must match or exceed one scout ship. Ten scout ships equals a battleship, ten battleships an expedition and so forth. I won't waste time with unnecessary details. We are now taking bids on Vital Crystal Number One."

There was no long-winded introduction, it was pointless. Everyone here knew enough about the crystals for what they needed, anything else was a waste of time. With a hundred crystals to sell, things needed to move along at a good pace. As for how well those crystals would sell, it depended on the aspirations of the crowd.

"One battleship!" Someone in the back threw up their paddle.

"One battleship from the gentleman with paddle Forty-Three." The Wine Master fell into his role as leader of the auction effortlessly. He knew that was a very low offer. A crystal this big could be used ten times in the exuvium process. The participants knew it, too. They'd verified all the information themselves yesterday.

"One battleship and two scouts!"

"Three scouts."

The auction went back and forth between a few bidders, nothing too intense. Everyone was hesitating.

A deep voice suddenly arose from nearer to the front. "Five battleships."

Everyone stopped, and all eyes went to the bidder. It was the mysterious stranger clad in black robes. His bid was a large one, and surprised everybody.

"Bidder with paddle Three, five battleships. Any more bids?" The Wine Master calmly asked. He wasn't the least bit surprised by the development.

Five ships for one crystal – expensive, wasn't it? The other bidders wavered. The Wine Master also didn't see the need to drag it out. "Vital

Crystal Number One, the bid to beat it five battleships. Going once. Going twice. Three times. Sold!" He spat the words quickly, not waiting for responses. The small gavel in his right hand rapped against the desk.

Bang! The first vital crystal had been sold.

An Liu brought the second cart up onto the stage and removed the cloth. She took the first one away.

"Bidding will begin on our second crystal. Opening bid remains on battleship. Takers?" The Wine Master offered.

The auctioneers didn't respond right away.

"Five battleships." Mysterious Number Three called his bid without waiting for the others. Anyone else interested in buying felt their bid catch in their throat.

The Wine Master shot him a glance. "Paddle three, five battleships. Any other bids?"

No one spoke. The second crystal was smaller than the first. To them it wasn't worth so much. Who was behind paddle three? Why would he bid so high? It didn't make any sense – could he be a plant?

The Wine Master didn't leave a lot of room for thought. "Five battleships. Once... twice... thrice... sold!"

Bang! The gavel cracked again, another vital crystal was sold in as many minutes. There had been hardly any bidding at all.

An Liu brought the third cart on stage. Right away, low chatter filled the hall. Several bidders glared at the mysterious stranger in the first row.

Chapter 650: Mysterious Number Three

“Silence!” The Wine Master’s low voice growled. He lifted his Astrum, and that was enough shut everyone up.

Archangel Metatron shot to his feet. “Your Majesty Cosmagus, fairness and equality must be the foundation of any auction. No one here has taken to hiding their identity. I ask we make the bearer of paddle three reveal themselves to everyone.”

The Wine Master’s response was tepid. “Everyone had the choice to hide their identity and affiliations.”

An Liu had pushed the third cart to the center of the stage. In clear contrast to the two before it, this crystal was larger – about fifty centimeters in diameter. It contained about as much energy as the last two crystals put together.

“Vital Crystal Number Three. Starting bid, one battleship. Please make your offers.”

“Five battleships!” The black-clad buyer was not bothered by Metatron’s pleas.

Five more battleships? The others couldn’t handle it anymore. The prices were one thing, but they couldn’t even match this stranger’s bids! Undoubtedly it was a fine piece, large and full of pure vital energy. With a Tear of Neptune, those energies would be even more potent.

“Five battleships and one scout!” Metatron lifted his paddle, number fifty.

“Ten battleships!” Mysterious Number Three retorted with a firm voice, doubling the bid straight off. Again, silence. Metatron quietly stared daggers at the stranger’s back.

Three crystals in, the stranger had pledged twenty battleships – practically a small fleet! A pirate could easily turn those twenty ships into a formidable clan. No ordinary group had access to resources like that. If he was a normal buyer, fine – but what if he wasn’t? What if he was

placed there to drive up prices?

“Vital Crystal Number three, going for ten battleships. Any other takers?” The Wine Master was moving quickly. Clearly he was pushing for the countdown.

The auction floor fell into turmoil. What on earth was this stranger doing? There were a lot of crystals left, but if this kept up many participants would be priced out before they even began. War ships needed resources, manpower, and technology. The East had been clear about what ships would be considered useful for trade. There would be no way for buyers to cheat them, and crystals were delivered upon purchase.

“Ten battleships going once. Going twice. Going three times – sold!” The Wine Master paid no mind to the angry grumblings. He patiently and rapidly went through the procedure.

The fourth crystal was brought out. It looked very similar to the first one.

“Vital Crystal Number Four. One battleship, starting bid. Do I have one battleship?”

“Five battleships!” Mysterious Number Three started out the bidding once again.

“I’d be worried this auction might cost you more than you’re willing.” The angered voice growled from all around them, generated by some special means.

The Wine Master turned a blind eye to the interruption. He continued in attempts of maintaining the auction’s integrity. “Vital Crystal number four, five battleships. Anyone else?”

“Five battleships, one scout.” The Terminator spoke up.

“Six battleships!” The mysterious stranger countered.

“Six battleships, one scout!” Metatron joined the exchange.

The mysterious stranger paused as though thinking, but didn’t say anything further.

“Six battleships and one scouting vessel. Does anyone have another offer?” The Wine Master asked twice more before banging his gavel. At last there was a crystal that didn’t fall into the mysterious stranger’s grasp.

The fifth crystal was pushed onto the stage. When it was revealed several of the buyers sat up in their chairs. The crystal wasn’t any larger than the others, but it had a deeper color and vital energy so potent they could feel it like a soup. Clearly, this crystal was on an entirely different level from the others. When it was revealed, a lot of attention came its way.

“Vital Crystal Number Five. Starting bid is five battleships. Let the auction begin.” Skyfire Avenue’s chairman continued the same as before. The higher quality of the crystal didn’t change his demeanor.

“Five battleships!” A buyer in the back shouted out before the mysterious robed man could.

“Six battleships!” Another retorted.

A vital crystal like this had never been seen in human space, at least not as far as anyone knew. There was no way for them to measure the energy precisely. Further research was needed to discover specifics.

The exuvium process relied on vital crystals, so it was fair to assume the quality of the crystal would have an effect on how it worked. At least it was known that the more powerful the Adept, the more potent the crystal needed to extend their lives. There were several buyers in the crowd who were particularly interested in this piece.

A faint smile spread across Lan Jue’s lips. He knew what was to happen.

“One expedition ship.” Mysterious Number three raised their paddle. This was the first time an expedition ship was put forward. They’d paid out an equivalent sum already, but this time their posture was different. They wanted to win.

Yesterday’s showing revealed five such crystals on offer – vital crystal number five was one of them. It wasn’t the best one, but it certainly wasn’t something to sniff at.

“One expedition ship, one battleship!” No hesitation this time. The Terminator jumped right into the exchange.

When the Northern leader made his bid, everyone went quiet. Being second on the Paragon list made one a pretty effective deterrent force, even in an auction.

“One expedition ship and three scout ships.” Unfortunately for the Terminator, Mysterious Number Three didn’t seem to care who he was.

The Paragon’s eyes narrowed. “One expedition, five scouts!” He appeared interested in this crystal.

Mysterious Number Three would not be denied. “Two expedition ships!” Two! Equivalent to twenty battleships, all for one crystal.

Both Archangel Metatron and Fallen Angel Lucifer stared in disbelief. The East couldn’t have set this up. Who was allowed to sit up front? Government leaders from the three Alliances. Not just anyone could sit among them.

So far the West and North were stuck on the sidelines, watching.

The Terminator was silent, he made no more bids. This was too rich to make it worth it for him. The North had money, but not as much as the East had these days. Besides, they weren’t just talking money, during this auction. Ships were a different beast.

When Mysterious Number Three gave his bid, another representative from the first row in his sixties couldn’t help but speak out. “Two expedition ships and one battleship.” He lifted his paddle, bearing the number one.

“Two expeditions, two battleships,” countered Number Three.

“Two expeditions, three battleships!” Number one offered.

Mysterious Number Three wavered. After a moment he leaned back and offered nothing more.

“Vital Crystal Number Five, going for two expedition ships and three battleships. Do we have any other interested parties? Going once, twice,

three timer. Sold!”

The elderly Northerner nodded toward the Wine Master, a pleased expression on his face. He was also a senior Adept, peak of ninth rank. He’d been specifically asked to come by the North.

Finally, the auction began to liven up. Mysterious Number Three continued to throw his wealth around, and it earned him several more crystals. However, the remainder of his bids were more conservative. With so many thirsty auctioneers, the prices were getting too high to outbid everyone.

There were only a hundred crystals and eighty participants. At best, everyone would walk away with one. But Mysterious Number Three had ten to his name already. The others were getting anxious. Who knew when the next auction like this would take place? For every crystal passed, the chances of walking away empty handed grew.

Almost overnight, vital crystals had become one of the rarest and most sought-after items in human space. And what wealthy family wouldn’t want some? When word of the auction emerged, they clambered over one another for the chance to extend their lives.

Western government officials continued to look on in silence, while members from the North continuously raised the bids. They were already richer by several crystals. It made sense, considering the North had the most resources to throw around. They had the best ships modern technology could produce.

“Vital Crystal Forty-Eight. Starting bid, one expedition ship. A battleship is the minimum bid increase. Let the bidding begin!” At last, another high-grade vital crystal. Visually it wasn’t much different from the fifth crystal except it was fifty percent larger.

“Two expedition ships!” A representative from the West spoke up for the first time. The West had managed to acquire some normal crystals, but had yet to get their hands on one of the finer specimens. They lost the first one to the North, so the pressure was on to walk away with a win. They could see it plain as everyone else; the longer this went on, the most

expensive the bids would get. It was imperative they got a crystal or two of significance before the opportunity passed.

Chapter 651: Competitive Bidding

Lan Jue's face betrayed a small smile. They couldn't contain it any longer!

"Three expedition ships!" The mysterious stranger who'd stoked the chaos cried out again. He didn't bother with incremental bids, and instead immediately offered another big bid.

"Three expedition ships and one battleship." A Westerner challenged his bid. His paddle bore the number two.

"Three expeditions and five battleships!" The Northerner with paddle number one added his voice.

"Four expedition ships!" Mysterious Number Three was on a tear.

"Four and one battleship!" Number two shouted.

The Northerners were silent. Number three threw up his paddle. "Five expedition ships."

Stunned, everyone went quiet. These were expedition ships! Their systems could draw radiation from space to keep it going, almost indefinitely. They were considered the real force in an interstellar fleet, second only to dreadnaughts and capital ships. Typically, a fleet didn't have more than thirty expedition ships. Relinquishing five of them for a single vital crystal, it seemed crazy.

"Bidder number three has offered five expedition ships. Any other bids?" The Wine Master calmly asked.

One of the Western delegates was glaring bloody murder at the cloaked man. His face was a thunderhead. He'd been specifically told to get a crystal just like that – but this price was too high!

The Wine Master didn't let the prices or bidders affect his auction. "Five expedition ships. Going once. Going twice..."

"Wait! Five expedition ships and one battleship." The elderly Northern gentlemen threw his paddle up!

The auction hall broke into an uproar. The North apparently accepted this as a worthy price. The other representatives felt their hearts sink. These prices were madness!

There were high-level buyers hell-bent on winning, but not just from the West. The North was just as hungry!

“Five and two battleships.” Mysterious Number Three increased the bid, but much less aggressively than before.

“Six expedition ships!” The Northern representative lifted his paddle to confirm the bid. He knew that if this trend continued, the remaining crystals would be even harder to obtain. Bidding would only get more intense as supply dipped and demand grew. Chances only increased that desperation would drive the prices up.

“Six and one battleship!” The Westerner’s curt voice arose with his paddle. Everyone here was intelligent, and he had to have come to the same conclusion as his Northern contemporary. Things were only going to get worse. This crystal was also the third best one in the whole batch.

Bidder number one’s face was stern. “Six and two.”

Number two. “Six and three!”

“Seven expedition ships!” A new voice broke in from somewhere in the back.

The Northern and Western representatives craned their heads back to see. They first saw the paddle held high – number twenty three. It was borne by a stiff-faced man in his middle years who no one seemed to know. He was at least eighth level, however, judging by the waves of energy coming from him.

Seven ships was too much. The Western and Northern leaders glared with unbridled hatred. Both were uncertain whether they wanted to continue.

The Wine Master was ambivalent to their troubles. “Seven expedition ships. Any further takers? Seven expedition ships going once, going twice. Three times. Sold!” The hammer fell, another crystal was sold.

Number twenty three allowed himself to crack a small smile. All throughout the auction he'd been silent, until now. His sudden and expensive addition captured some attention.

His bid proved timely. A third high level crystal followed, vital crystal sixty four. The bidding was vicious, but the Northern representative came away the victory. His winning bid had been six expedition ships and six battleships. However, the crystal was a full twenty percent smaller than the last one.

The atmosphere felt white-hot, fervent. Those without the wealth to throw around were slowly being weeded out.

The North employed their riches to gather sixteen crystals, but they were not the biggest winner. Mysterious Number Three boasted that honor. Twenty crystals were his, including one high-grade piece, crystal number seventy nine. It was the second largest of the batch. He'd started the bid with a dreadnaught, and no one contested him.

Afterwards no one thought he was an Eastern agent any longer. There was no more need to fire up the crowd.

After three hours, the final vital crystal made its way on stage.

"This is our last piece on offer, and one of the best." A grin broke the Wine Master's professional façade. He didn't feel the need to introduce the crystal beyond that sentence. The East was already rich, boasting the equivalent of six hundred battleships. That was half what would be considered a fine interstellar navy. Half, only because dreadnaughts and Capital ships were tremendously expensive.

Everyone perked up when they realized it was time for the last crystal.

An Liu brought the cart up from backstage. The box atop it was hidden beneath a red cloth, but it was clear the box was bigger than all the others before it. The buyers' thoughts went back to yesterday, and a sparkle of interest lit up their eyes. Several representatives were especially zealous.

The red cloth was removed. Presented within the box was a vital crystal roughly the size of a man's skull. It glowed purplish-black, and from time

to time a strange mist seemed to surround it before quickly vanishing. Despite the box, everyone could feel the vital energies coming from the crystal.

The four high-grade crystals together couldn't compare to this specimen. Hearts sank to think of what it would cost.

Breaths came more rapid. Mysterious Number Three had taken two of the four best crystals so far. The other two belonged to number twenty three and number one respectively. The crystal one stage now was everyone's last chance. Even before the auction began they knew this was going to be a vicious bid. It was destined, there were too many people too desperate for a quality crystal.

The Western government was determined to have it, as were the two Citadels. The Great Conclave was less rabid. Because the Terminator had such close connection to the Northern government, they were sure to give him crystals to complete research of the exuvium process. In that way they shared the benefits.

But be that as it may, who didn't want a crystal for themselves? Who was to say the North didn't have some interest in this, the largest of the vital crystals? The rich families were especially determined. They had money, if they were still here.

"Starting price is five expedition ships. Minimum increase, one expedition ship. State your bids!" The price had catapulted, far above any previous item. Scout ships, battleships – they were no longer enough. The auction had not yet started, but the pain of the bidders was palpable already.

"One dreadnaught!" Mysterious Number Three threw his paddle up, immediately increasing the base price by half.

His deep pockets and determination caused several buyers to openly gasp. A dreadnaught!

"One dreadnaught and one expedition ship." Paddle number one rose. There was an underlining fear of the Wine Master among the buyers. He was fast, there was no time to think. A moment's hesitation could lose

them their prize.

This final crystal was everyone's last chance, why not try? What's more, if bidders couldn't have one themselves they would make sure their competition couldn't get it cheap. There was no more room for equivocation.

"One dreadnaught and three expedition ships!" The Western delegate raised the bid.

"One dreadnaught, five expedition ships." A bidder from one of the richer families threw their offer in.

"Two dreadnaughts!" This bid came from Lucifer. He'd been mostly quiet but for a few common crystals earlier in the auction.

The Great Conclave and both Citadels boasted a Paragon as their leader, Paragons who yearned terribly for a crystal as powerful as this one. Their representatives had no option but to throw everything they had at the opportunity. Therefore, Lucifer was not conservative with his bid, hoping to scare the others into silence. Judging by what they'd seen so far, two dreadnaughts was not too much for this item.

"Three dreadnaughts!" A voice beside Lucifer called out right on the Fallen Angel's heels. He angrily snapped his eyes to the side. His old rival, Metatron, had challenged his bid.

Chapter 652: His Majesty Poseidon

Metatron was calm. What was money? Those faithful to the Pontiff's Citadel demanded supremacy over their darker counterparts. Of course, lately the Pontiff and his men had been less than successful in their other endeavors. The loss of their assets in the Shattered Starfields was particularly damaging. But who could they blame? Skyfire Avenue? If they wanted vengeance, they would need to meet the Eastern organization's strength. Beyond that, alien fiends had moved into the territory. Archangel Gabriel had witnessed it all, and shared the information with his superiors. When the Pontiff heard the news, he nearly spit blood. Metatron could still remember the rage in his master's face and the tempest of protogenia that had surrounded him. Without Metatron's vociferous protests, Gabriel would likely be a corpse.

The auction was of particular interest to the Pontiff's Citadel, largely because their leader was getting on in years himself. Metatron had spent precious years of his life trying to break through, but as of yet had been unsuccessful. Constantine had a better shot, but since he'd used the fantascia genetica decoction in his youth, breaking through would be a herculean task. As a result, making sure their single Paragon lived for as long as possible was of paramount importance to their Citadel.

A cold air surrounded Lan Jue, his arms were folding before his chest. Whenever the light in his eyes flickered, reality seemed to shiver ever so slightly. He could sense the tension from Metatron and Lucifer behind him. He loved it. This was the way to make sure they stayed under the East's thumb.

"Three dreadnaughts and an expedition ship!" After a deep breath, Lucifer raised the bid. It was a stupendous price. Interstellar fleets typically boasted one Capital ship and four dreadnaughts. Especially doughty navies had more. By the looks of things, this one stone was on track to win the East at least that many.

"Four dreadnaughts!" Even before Lucifer could settle back in his chair, the bid was raised. Muffled gasps flitted through the crowd.

It was the mysterious stranger.

“If you keep raising the price, aren’t you worried humanity will make you pay for it?!” The Western delegate seethed.

Mysterious Stranger Number Three finally turned his head. A wave of terrifying power swept through the auction house – not strong, but suffocating. Like being steeped in an ocean of water. A pale blue light like a clear sky tinted everything around them, strange and beautiful.

Protogenia? Domain!

The buyers were learned and experienced people. They knew what this feeling meant. The Western government official gaped at Mysterious Number Three. Domain.... He... he’s a Paragon? He’d just threatened a Paragon? However, this Domain didn’t belong to any of the known superhumans.

Mysterious Number Three lifted his hands and slowly pulled down his cowl. Long, ocean-blue hair tumbled free and with it a strange aura. He turned around fully so everyone could see his face.

Delicate yet heroic features were so perfect they hardly seemed human. Sparkling blue eyes as deep and alluring as the ocean where pools of protogenic energy. His Domain collapsed, and the stifling sensation subsided. However, it was those eyes that left the most lasting impression.

“Poseidon...” A few shocked murmurs rippled through the museum.

Seated nearly in the first row, Lan Jue smiled. Yes! It was the perfect time to reveal who he really was. Who would dare oppose the leaders of the West and North other than the head of humanity’s richest family? The youngest of the Divine Monarchs, and Lan Jue’s brother – Hua Li!

Poseidon represented his family and business in this auction. Now everyone understood why he had so much wealth to throw around. The Poseidon group had more means than any other organization, including their very own planet. It wasn’t even worth trying to guess how much money Poseidon had.

But, when did Poseidon rise to Paragon? It wasn’t long ago he’d shown

the universe his power, and it wasn't even the peak of ninth level! His sudden breakthrough was even more of a shock to these representatives than Lan Qing's.

"Should I assume that's a declaration of war against the Poseidon group? Are you permitted to make these sorts of decisions on behalf of your Alliance?" Hua Li asked the question in a calm, even voice. Every syllable was a perfect note that rang in the ear. Even compared to his spectacular concert at the Great Adept Tournament, it bore a strange and irresistible charm.

The Western representatives swallowed so hard the whole museum could hear it. The anger fled from his face as he rose, and when he spoke he did so with a sheepish tone. "I apologize. I did not know we had been blessed with his Majesty's presence. Please forgive my offensive remarks." Anyone who was here knew when it was time to take your losses.

"Then let's continue with the auction." Hua Li didn't bother to debase him further. He settled back in his seat.

Poseidon Group was represented, sitting in the first row! A place deserving of their wealth and status!

When Hua Li sat back, for just a moment his eyes met Lan Jue's. The brothers shared a furtive smirk.

When Lan Jue had returned to Skyfire Avenue he'd tried to contact Hua Li, and learned he'd intended to participate in the auction. Today he was here as a Paragon, and it was his spend-thrift approach that had in part made this auction such a success. To those who suspected he was a plant, would the Poseidon Group stoop to that? Certainly not!

But he was! He and Lan Jue had agreed on a course of action long before the auction begun. The added cost didn't trouble Hua Li any, and he was as interested in these crystals as anyone. Privately, Lan Jue had also promised him more crystals for the trouble and expense.

"For dreadnaughts. Any further bids?" The Wine Master's interjection came at just the right moment.

“Four dreadnaughts and one expedition ships.” The Western delegate didn’t have any choice but to push the bid higher. He was going home with that crystal or he wasn’t going home at all!

“Four and two expedition ships.” The Northern representative wasn’t going to be left out. He, too, was hell-bent on obtaining this prize. Keeping it out of the hands of the West was also considered a victory. Spending resources could also be used to buy time. What’s more, the energies in this crystal were unlike anything they’d seen. Surely it could be used a multitude of times to help them with discovering the secrets of the exuvium process.

The Terminator had used protogenic trickery to speak with him. He promised the wealth of the Great Conclave to help the North in acquiring this vital crystal. Afterward they would share the crystal for their various needs. Thus the Northerner’s uncharacteristic persistence.

At this price, neither Lucifer nor Metatron could raise their voices. It was already questionable whether the Pontiff had the resources to continue when Lucifer made his bid, but now Metatron knew he could no longer participate. It was simply too much. At any rate, it was assured more of these aliens would be fought and killed. There would be more opportunity for vital crystals. This batch wasn’t the last of them.

“Five dreadnaughts.” Hua Li was nonplussed. He was determined to have this crystal for himself.

The Western delegate stared at him, then addressed the Paragon in respectful tones. “Your Majesty, this crystal is integral to my Alliance. We have a long history of mutual respect, I must ask that you consider this. Five dreadnaughts and one expedition cruiser.”

Hua Li’s brows furrowed, as though in thought. He fell silent and didn’t speak again.

Indeed these crystals were very important for the West and North. They were in dire need of them to learn what they could about the exuvium process. In this regard, Hua Li and the group he represented were less needy. He’d already gathered a number of normal crystals for that

purpose.

“Five dreadnaughts, two expedition ships!” The Northern delegate took the opportunity.

His Western counterpart had nothing to say to that. He could only swallow his curses and press on. “Five dreadnaughts, five expedition ships!”

The two of them continued to try and outbid each other. Soon it was six dreadnaughts. With the Poseidon Group no longer in the running, the increase in price came in smaller increments.

“Seven dreadnaughts!” When the Northerner called it out, the Western official’s face fell. At last, it was more than he could afford. It was a single damn vital crystal!

The North also knew the single crystal wasn’t worth such a price. However, he also knew that slowing the West’s progress was good for the future of the North. The East was already too far ahead to catch, and with the West’s genetic expertise they had an advantage the North did not. Any chance the West could make a breakthrough was not in the North’s best interest.

“Seven dreadnaughts. Going once, going twice. Sold!”

At last, the final vital crystal was purchased. Everyone breathed a little easier, especially the representative from the North. Seven dreadnaughts had stretched the limits of what he could offer. Any more and he wouldn’t have dared to increase. In cost of production, they could have built a capital ship for what it cost to build seven dreadnaughts. The price the North had paid throughout the auction was a truly staggering sum.

Chapter 653: The Final Item

“Ladies and gentlemen, please wait for a moment.” The Wine Master’s voice suddenly called out. The buyers all cast their eyes his way.

The Wine Master continued. “In recognition of your presence and support, the Eastern Alliance has decided to relinquish one final vital crystal for our auction, the best yet. It is on its way now, we simply ask you to wait a little longer. Jewelry Master, if you would fetch it for us?”

“Alright.” Lan Jue rose to his feet and stepped out.

More? A final item?

The dejected face of the Western delegate changed and an excited light glinted in his eye. The Northern representative gaped at the Wine Master. This wasn’t on the auction agenda! However, there were no rules against adding items.

What sort of crystal could be even more impressive than the last one? When Lan Jue left the museum, he took a brief stroll along the Avenue. What did he need to get? The crystal was stored safely in Thor’s Promise.

When he returned to the hall, his arrival was heralded by an intensely rich aura. Cradled in his hands was a vital crystal, not particularly large.

The crystal itself was surrounded by a hazy rose-tinted hue. It was about the size of his palm, flat, and octagonal in shape. The surface was oddly ridged. This was far more potent than any of the crystals that they’d seen before.

The Terminator, who had for a while been silent, suddenly popped his eyes wide. The fire within them was fierce. He sensed that the energy inside was in a liquid state. What’s more, it had protogenia! Vital protogenia!

This crystal was alive with vital protogenia! Logically this meant only a Paragon could create it. The Avenue was holding onto a crystal like this all along? He could hardly believe it, but as a Paragon this crystal had tremendous significance.

Of course the Pontiff wasn't the only one who desired to extend his life. The Terminator was no less urgent. Although he wasn't as old, the process of converting his body into a machine had riddled his body with problems. Upon breaking through, protogenia helped to mitigate most of them, but they did not disappear. Whether he wanted to take the next step as a Paragon or just live longer, these problems had to be addressed. Vital protogenia would help greatly.

Lan Jue's gait was deliberately slow, allowing everyone a chance to see the crystal, feel its energies. One could even use it to supplement their cultivation and catapult them to Paragon status!

Lucifer felt similarly. Although he was slightly weaker than Metatron, they were stuck at the same hurdle.

Dozens of fervent stares followed Lan Jue, but he paid them no mind. He hadn't the slightest fear that someone might try to take advantage. What had happened to the Astral Phantom was still fresh on everyone's mind. Skyfire Avenue had dealt with her handily. They sat within the Avenue after all, the museum – former home of the Clairvoyant.

Greedy eyes drank in the light of the crystal. Their minds raced. Everyone knew what this meant.

Lan Jue made his way to the Wine Master's side.

The Avenue's chairman did not immediately open bidding. "I imagine you're all tired after such a long and competitive affair. We've prepared food and drink for you to enjoy. After a half hour break we'll proceed with the bids for our final item." With that, both he and Lan Jue left the stage. There was a flash of silver, and they were gone.

When they vanished, order crumbled. The chatter became loud and unruly. Many were making calls to their backers with the news.

It wasn't the first time something like this had happened at auction, but this level of ardency was unprecedented. The crystal was one-of-a-kind.

"I'm a little reluctant!" The Wine Master handed Lan Jue a glass of brandy. He sounded upset, clearly the crystal was of interest him, too.

“The covetous child can’t trick the wolf,” Lan Jue said through an impatient frown. You know what our goal is, here. Don’t you already have one, anyway?”

This final crystal was indeed one of the best they’d obtained during their time in the Starfields, capture by Jue Di in that single-punch massacre. However, there had been a good seven or eight other crystals which had been better than this one, which the Wine Master had access to.

The auction had been for the benefit of Skyfire Avenue, but they also had an ulterior motive. It wasn’t the Wine Master’s brainchild, but a suggestion from Jue Di. It was simple; Lan Qing would get his pick of the earnings from the auction, up to fifty percent of the total.

The alien planets were powerful enough to present a real danger, even for Jue Di. Something in there was more powerful than anything they’d encountered, but even Jue Di couldn’t tell how strong. In a situation like this, safety was only assured through personal strength. An Lun had been struggling for resources, especially ships.

The East was not flush, either. They only had four interstellar fleets. One was stationed on An Lun, but it was hardly their strongest. It was unsatisfying. Indeed, their interest was making sure the other side didn’t outpace them.

However, right now the situation had changed. Lan Qing was a Paragon, inheriting great abilities. His influence in the East was vast. As far as the East was concerned, strengthening An Lun was in everyone’s best interest. They would worry about the scope of his power if humanity survived the alien menace.

The Eastern government agreed to Skyfire Avenue’s suggestion. It was part of the reason why Lan Qing was at the auction.

The Wine Master replied. “Ah, you. A real scoundrel. Collaborations between you and Hua Li are going well? Ah, who’d have thought he’d be a Paragon?” He hadn’t known, but once Hua Li revealed his face the secret was out. He and Lan Jue were so close, he couldn’t blame them.

Lan Jue answered. “I didn’t think it would be so fast, either. It must be an

inheritance. In fact, every generation of the Poseidon family has a Paragon. It's a power that's passed down. Hua Li's father must have sacrificed much to lift him into this Domain. Once it's stabilized, he'll be a true Paragon. Right now my brother and Hua Li have both ascended, A-Cheng is sequestered away in cultivation. I've fallen so behind. Skyfire Avenue isn't hiding any secret powers that'd make a Paragon, eh?"

"Enough crap," the Wine Master muttered in irritation. "If we did could anything compare to Jue Di? He's showed you the way step by step, there's no better situation."

Lan Jue changed the subject. "This auction has been a great success, but I'm not sure about the next one. They're likely already bitter at having to give up so many strategic resources. I've already set up the jewelry shop, you want to let them out for fresh air?"

The Wine Master nodded. "It's all prepared. When the auction is over the news will get out."

Some participants in the auction found it impossible to compete, and were going to go home empty-handed. Their longing for even one was almost too much to bear. The Avenue still had many, and could use this opportunity to sell another batch on the black market. Prices weren't limited to ships; mechas and power gems were also accepted as valuable resources. They planned to leverage the crystals' rarity to get whatever they needed.

There had been a plan for this auction from the beginning. First, was to put the West's doubts to rest. Then suck up as much power from their rivals as possible. This was how they would profit from the crystals. Also, it gave them an opportunity to puzzle out the state of these governments and wealthy families. Under all of that, though, the intent was to prepare the East as best they can for the alien invasion, and as a deterrent force against their neighbors.

The East's relative weakness wasn't something that would be changed overnight. However, the fact that their Alliance had a bevy of powerful Adepts. Their sheer number of Paragons was a deterrent against attacks,

and it was only going to grow. The East or North would have to destroy the Avenue to take it.

Chapter 654: The Final Auction

Whether the East would benefit from the alien menace would depend on where the three invading planets made their first strike. Certainly the first Alliance unlucky enough to face the aliens would be the hardest it. There was a three in one chance, and no one knew what to expect.

“It’s about that time. I believe they’re ready by now. I’m anxious to see how much this crystal will fetch.” Lan Jue smirked as he rose to his feet.

The Wine Master sighed and shook his head. “You get craftier by the day. I’m glad you’re on our side.” Lan Jue had handled the details of the auction. He’d collated all the information they had about the current state of things, and presented it to the Western leaders for discussion before they eventually agreed.

“And still you taunt me,” Lan Jue replied. “When this auction is over we have to plan our next excursion into the Starfields.” Scouting was integral and couldn’t be delayed any longer, they had to know where the planets were headed.

When they returned, ‘raucous’ was a mild term to describe the museum’s interior. The faces of several buyers were already flush with excitement and anger.

Lan Jue did not doubt that agreements would be reached and a good price obtained for the crystal. It was too precious to pass up for those in the audience. The Terminator and other Paragons were no exception. It seemed likely this crystal would break the snobbish attitudes of these opposing factions, which was part of Lan Jue’s plan. He wanted people as strong as possible when the aliens showed up.

Just imagine. What if the Pontiff used the crystal to extend his life? What if Metatron and Constantine used it to breakthrough and become Paragons themselves? How much would that improve the Citadel’s sorry state?

The same went for the Great Conclave and the Dark Citadel, too. At least three major organizations were very interested in getting this final

crystal for themselves. They wouldn't dare allow for the auction to be compromised. None of them even knew how many times this crystal could be used, or how many people the vital protogenia within could help.

The Wine Master spoke. "I presume you're all ready to continue. I will not take any more of your time than is necessary. Our final item on auction is about to be open for bidding."

"This vital crystal's starting bid will begin at three dreadnaughts. Every increase must be a minimum of five expedition ships. Begin." The lofty starting price was indicative of how valuable the crystal was. Lan Jue guessed in the end they would get a Capital ship for it.

Determining which was more valuable – a Paragon or a Capital ship – was hard to evaluate. In the battle was outside of a planet's atmosphere, a Capital ship's main guns would vaporize a Paragon. It didn't matter how many Paragons, either – so long as they were below the rank of Nirvana the ship would end them. Even Jue Di would be gravely injured by a direct blast. Paragons of who had achieved Nirvana or later still tried to avoid a situation like that as much as possible.

However, if a Paragon got close or managed to infiltrate a Capital ship, they could destroy it easily. If they were on the surface of a planet a Paragon's abilities were even more dominant. As a general rule, the smaller an item the more powerful its energy, and Paragons could do many things a Capital ship wouldn't.

The East's current lofty standing was due to their wealth of Paragons. For their Alliance they were strategic resources.

The two citadels had already contacted the West's government leaders to discuss the importance of this crystal. The reasoning was simple; the government had more ships, and the citadels needed this crystal.

The North was much the same. The Terminator and other Northern leaders would support each other.

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"Sir, please alert the Western congress that if His Majesty the Pontiff

receives this crystal it will extend his life by at least fifty years. It will also allow myself and Constantine to become Paragons ourselves.” Metatron urged the Western representative.

“Sir, with our specialty in energy absorption Satan can become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth with this crystal – the same as the Terminator. It will also help me to break through.” Lucifer countered.

“Gentlemen, I’m not in the position decide. I’ll run it up the ladder, and we’ll just have to wait and hear what they say.” The poor man was overwhelmed in the face of the two peak-ranked Adepts.

Metatron and Lucifer cast each other hateful glares. This was too important – both personally and for their masters – to let the other get the upper hand. Ascending to Paragon not only made them stronger, it also came with a longer life.

Both of them quickly alerted their respective leaders in the hopes they could apply pressure to congress as well.

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“Your Majesty, do you know exactly how this crystal could help you?” The Northern representative respectfully addressed the Terminator.

The Paragon’s deep, rumbling voice answered. “Judging by that aura, it can help me uncover the errors in my construction. Maybe even help me ascend to the next level. I wouldn’t have to worry over my health for at least another fifty years. It would work similarly for Titan 1. The Paragon manufacturing procedure caused a great deal of damage to his body, but it also pushed him into the Realm of Protogenia. Once the errors are corrected, he’ll be a true Paragon. So you can see how important this item is.”

Having said this, he needn’t go into any more detail to prove his point.

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“Three dreadnaughts and one expedition cruiser!” The first one to shout out their bid was the Terminator. The Northern leader was clearly chomping at the bit.

“Three dreadnaughts and two expeditions!”² Metatron raised his paddle next. Much to everyone’s surprise, Lucifer sat back, expressionless, with his paddle on the table before him.

Moments ago the Pontiff and Satan had come to an agreement. They would work together to get this crystal, for they knew there was a vast difference in wealth between the West and North. Right now, harping on their differences only made both sides weaker. Because of the Pontiff’s urgency he would use it first, but the Citadel had to cover sixty percent of the cost. The remaining thirty percent would be the Dark Citadel’s responsibility. ³ The ships themselves would be provided by the West, with the resources gathered by the two Citadels.

The agreement had been hammered out in just thirty minutes. It proved that in the universe there were no eternal enemies when it came to profit.

“Three dreadnaughts and three expedition ships!” The Terminator tried to slow the increase, feeling out his competition.

“One Capital ship!” Suddenly, a boisterous and harsh voice called out without warning. It sucked the breath out of everyone, even the Terminator.

A Capital ship? That was three times more than the current bid. This was crazy! Even the Wine Master looked astonished by the scene. Their highest guess was a Capital ship, but it’d taken only a few bids to reach that.

Of course, the only one able to offer such an exorbitant price was the president of Gobi Entertainment, Hua Li.

Hua Li looked perfectly calm, and graceful as ever. He sat with a small grin, like it was someone else who’d offered that nightmarish bid.

The atmosphere was smothering. By now the East had enough promised ships to make a more than impressive interstellar fleet of their own. Buyers looked at once another in speechless despair. They couldn’t help but wonder if they should send their own people out to hunt down the aliens for these crystals. These prices were astronomical!

However, if they knew that it'd taken Jue Di himself to acquire them, they might rethink the idea.

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. A Capital ship, what a price. To build one you needed three years' worth of resources from three rich planets. A single ship required over a hundred s-ranked gems to power.

The Wine Master didn't rush the auction, and stood on stage with a quiet smirk. He let the silence stretch. Meanwhile, Hua Li sat in his chair with a thoughtful expression.

Lan Jue cast a surprised glance toward his friend. He hadn't asked him to offer that bid. Appetites were already high enough as it is. For him to offer such a price, he must have been just as interested in it as everyone else.

"One Capital ship, one expedition cruiser!" After a moment of consideration, Metatron offered his price. He looked absolutely pained to say it, but the Pontiff's Citadel could not do without this crystal.

"One Capital ship, one dreadnaught." Poseidon's chilly voice brought another moment of silence.

"One Capital ship, one dreadnaught and an expedition ship." The Terminator's voice was higher than usual. His anger towards Hua Li could be heard in it. Gobi Entertainment and the Poseidon Group had gained more from this auction than anyone. Their sudden and ludicrous offers could not be countered. Hua Li had been silent for a long time, but now at the last moment he was making his final push.

Hua Li, as though intimidated by the Terminator, did not open his mouth. Metatron looked at Lucifer, who eyes him back. Each saw the hesitation in the other's eyes. Their threshold had been a Capital ship.

Chapter 655: The Auction Ends

By now the auction was downright stifling. Every new bid could be the last. Every second was the buyers grappling with whether they could justify the price. The North was rich and prosperous, while the West needed the combined wealth of Satan and the Pontiff to compete. The Western government could provide the ships, but they'd need the citadels' capital. However, their relationship with the Western government wasn't nearly so close as in the North.

"One Capital ship, one dreadnaught and two expedition ships!" Metatron grit his teeth and lifted his paddle.

"Take it then!" The Terminator hissed. He didn't press further.

Metatron, a ninth level Adept at his peak, nearly collapsed. He let out a long breath. Was it over? He'd won.

"One Capital ship and two dreadnaughts." Just as the buyers were thinking the Terminator's refusal meant the end of the auction, another took his place. Poseidon.

Metatron's hands were shaking. Where this anywhere else he might not have been able to hold himself back. But Poseidon was already a Paragon, and at his back was humanity's wealthiest organization. He didn't dare offend.

"His Majesty Poseidon still feels he hasn't purchased enough?" Metatron snidely spat.

Hua Li replied in an even voice. "Whether it's enough or not is my business. This crystal as just as important to me as it is to you. If our friend Metatron has the resources, he can feel free to raise the bid." Hua Li had never liked the Pontiff's Citadel. Especially after what they did to Lan Jue, which prompted him to cut off relations.

Metatron sighed, fury writ clear on his face. Of course he wanted to keep going, but the Western delegate had already turned and shook his head. This was already far beyond what they agreed was the limit. Pressing any

further would overwhelm his Alliance's government. After all, there were limits to what this crystal could provide them. In times of war these ships were priceless resources.

But this crystal was just as important! What could they do?

The Wine Master interrupted. "One Capital ship and two dreadnaughts. Going once."

Metatron grit his teeth, mad with determination. "Add an expedition cruiser!" His breathing was ragged, his face twisted. He absolutely could not pass up this chance. It might be his only opportunity to become a Paragon. Lucifer, perhaps for the first time, admired the man. He wanted it just as bad!

With luck this crystal could mold several Paragons from the ranks of the Western citadels while extending the lives of their leaders. They needed it.

Veins protruded from the Western representative's forehead, which was slick with sweat.

"All yours!" Finally, Hua Li spoke the words.

Metatron leaned against the back of his chair. His mind was blank. Lucifer was the same. The two of them were practically hand in hand – the first and likely last time such a phenomenon was to occur.

It was over! In the end the grandest prize had gone to the West. Paying what was owed, however, would be a long process. Once the ships were delivered they would receive the items purchased.

Lan Jue and his brother quietly slipped away. Lan Qing's calm exterior had been replaced with a grin he couldn't seem to shake. Skyfire Avenue had made out like bandits, and half of that was going to An Lun. Adding the fleet he already commanded, An Lun was now a frightening force to be reckon with.

He looked at Lan Jue and smirked. It had been a fine idea! Of course, the North and West might have felt differently.

"I have something I need to take care of, I'll catch up with you later," Lan

Jue said as they left the museum.

“Mh.” Lan Qing nodded, he had things to tend to as well. Namely, the Astral Phantom. There were still problems that needed to be solved. Her soul was marked, but there was still much to do.

Lan Jue left for Zeus’ Jewelry shop, its surface counterpart. Ke’er greeted him with a bubbly smile. “Boss! You’re back!”

“Are things prepared underground?” He asked immediately.

“All set,” she replied. “Mika, Xiuxiu and Guo-er ¹ are there. They’ve been very busy.”

Lan Jue smiled. “Prepared two glasses of cold water. We’ll have guests soon.”

“Ok,” she answered, then bounded off to fetch them.

Just then, a pillar of blue light arose from the ground like a mountain spring. It coalesced into a familiar form.

“His Majesty Poseidon certainly had a dominant bearing today!” When he saw him, Lan Jue couldn’t help but laugh. Hu Li materialized from the spectral light.

Hua Li replied with a smile. “All arranged by you, of course. Why didn’t you let me take that last crystal? It’s useful to my people as well. It could be used to supplement my father’s power, maybe even return him to Paragon. Bringing that back home would have been significant, especially in helping my family’s next generation of Paragon. It’d make it easier and more stable.”

He wouldn’t have offered such tremendous sums without reason. He meant it; that crystal would have been wonderful for the Poseidon family.

Lan Jue shook his head. “I didn’t want you to throw money away. Gobi Entertainment has money but that doesn’t mean you should waste it! I’ll give you one.” As he spoke there was a flash around his hand. A crystal about the size of his fist appeared. In terms of size it was similar to the one he’d given up, but the energies inside were even more potent.

Hua Li looked at him, shocked. You have more. This is too much, I can't accept."

Lan Jue tossed it at him. "What does any of that mean to friends? Stop the bullshit and take it. It belongs to you. Without you we wouldn't have walked away nearly so rich. It won't be long before the Pontiff and Satan head out to try and get their own, considering their poor showing today. This was likely the last auction we're going to hold as well."

Hua Li looked doubtful. "Is killing those aliens that easy? Aliens with cores like this won't be weak."

His friend nodded. "This did come from a strong alien. Energy to match a Paragon, but not on a protogenic level. One on one, we'd be able to take it alone though it'd be a tough fight. Our last trip to the Starfields we came away with our coffers full. When the aliens attack things will be different, but not impossible. We just need to make sure we have the upper hand."

Hua Li didn't voice any more opposition, taking the crystal. "I'm happy to have completed my task. I'll bring this back home and give it to my father. We have our own preparations to attend to before the fight. When the time comes we'll likely be here."

"Excellent," Lan Jue replied. "Skyfire Avenue is the safest place in the East. The West is unreliable. But it depends on where the planets show up first."

Hua Li laughed, making his face even more attractive and elegant. Even Lan Jue stopped to appreciate it. "No matter where they show up, though, I'll be by your side."

Lan Jue chortled. "Stop talking like a hopeless romantic, yeah? Alright, you have things to do. I need to take every opportunity to cultivate as well. You've broken through and I'm way behind. With A-Cheng sequestered for so long he's probably broken through as well. I'm the last one."

"You've split yourself up too much," Hua Li said. "Quiet your heart and focus on cultivation. Don't let the outside world intrude too much."

"Yeah," Lan Jue replied with a nod.

Hua Li bid him farewell and left. After a moment, Lan Jue left too to find the Driver. Their Disciplines hadn't been fully transformed yet. He was close, and the thunder essence had pushed him to a new level. His intentional suppression was what kept his Discipline from advancing faster. He was in no rush, breaking through would happen sooner or later. In fact the later he could push it, the better the end result.

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Lan Qing's living arrangements on the Avenue had been set up in the Gothic Winery. Typically it would be the jewelry shop, but Lan Jue was too busy.

Several rooms were in the back of the winery where people could rest. Streams of light filtered through the stained glass, giving the room a fairyland-type feel. On a stool by the window was the Astral Phantom in a plain yellow dress, peering out onto the street. She seemed entirely tranquil. Lan Qing admired her attractive face in portrait, and the delicate lines of her slender neck.

Chapter 656: Misfortune is No Excuse for Evil Deeds

“When I was young, my family was desperately poor. We lived in a slum, rats like all the rest. There was a trash dump outside of our front door. If we went outside the smell would make you gag. Eventually I began to think the smell was getting into my pores. I’d smell like garbage forever.” The Astral Phantom idly stared out of the window, her words soft and thoughtful.

“For years afterward I had this phobia of getting dirty, a vestige of those dark days. I have this memory... me, with a piece of bread in my hand. I asked my mother ‘how much bread do I need to eat to feel full?’ I remember the tears that streamed from her eyes and dripped onto my face. They were hot and slick. I asked her why she was crying, but she only shook her head and said nothing.”

“My father was disabled and couldn’t walk. He could only manage simple tasks. My mother was beautiful and hardworking. When they first got together my father was an excellent mecha pilot. But then he lost his legs. He was too young to have any savings. He was also an orphan with no family to lean on.”

“Mother shouldered the family’s burdens on her own, but she didn’t have any special skills or training. So we had no choice but to live in the slums, a hard and bitter life. But I wasn’t sad – in fact I was a pretty happy child. I got to be with my parents, that was enough. We tried not to let poverty ruin our lives. Until one day, mom didn’t come home. I searched all over for her until I heard crying. It was her. I dug through the trash until I found her, her clothes ripped and flesh bared. Someone had hit her so that her face was red and swollen with blood dripping from her mouth. Nothing covered her bottom half.”

“I didn’t know what to do when she grabbed me and started sobbing. I couldn’t understand what had happened. She cried like that for a long time... I said, ‘mom, I’m hungry. Can we go home and get some food?’ I

was five years old. Although I was scared, the pain in my belly was stronger. She stopped crying and took me home. She didn't talk to father. She just took a shower, changed her clothes, and made us food. When father asked why she'd gotten back so late she just said she was busy at work."

"That night I ate bread until I was full. I was still frightened but tired, so I went to bed. When I woke up the next day mother was gone.

When we found her she was in a river not far away. It wasn't deep, but she was floating face down... a rock had been tied to her upper body to keep her submerged. The police said there wasn't any sign of a struggle. They suspected suicide."

"When she died my father broke. He got sick and wouldn't get better and was confined to his bed until it took him, too. Later I learned that it had been a gang of vagrants from the slums that'd attacked my mom. In my mind this was all because of poverty. Because of poverty we couldn't defend ourselves. Because of poverty my father couldn't afford the bionic legs necessary to keep working. Around that time was when my powers awakened. I hunted down and killed those vagrants. I wasn't afraid, I just swore that I would become the world's strongest, richest person."

"In time I made money. I had power and influence. I could defend myself. But there was always an emptiness I couldn't fill. I would never get my parents back, no matter how rich or strong or pretty I was. I'd lost all my money in those pursuits. Then someone told me that if I became a Paragon there might be a chance to find their lost souls and call them back. I began to regain what I'd spent. My talents were clear. I knew that if I wanted to keep getting better I need hard work and luck, but also a great deal of money. Money bought resources. The world seemed so broken and unfair, so I turned to murder. The method to make money didn't matter to me. Once I earned enough, I used those resources to break through. I never cared who I killed or why, so long as they paid me well. Nothing was more important than money. I had grown into a greedy woman."

"When you marked my soul I was terrified. I felt like my spirit was marred by it. However these last few days that fear has passed. I realized I

could slow down, be at peace. Watching Skyfire Avenue from this window, I've realized there was so much I didn't consider. This would could be as beautiful as it can be ugly. I'm tired... but I'm grateful I didn't choose death. Thinking back on it I suppose I'm lucky it was you who got me. At least you aren't like me. You aren't a bad man."

At this point the assassin rose to her feet, and ran her fingers through her hair to straighten out the strands.

"It makes me happy to say all this out loud. They've been poisoning my heart for over fifty years. Tell me what you wish of me, super soldier. I serve at your leisure, even my body. I've never lain with a man." She turned to Lan Qing, her face sultry with a promising grin.

But in Lan Qing's eyes, there was only sadness and pity.

He'd listened to her heartbreaking tale in silence. He didn't interrupt and instead let her get it off her chest. His face expressionless, the soldier slowly made his way to the window and peered out over the street. He could see the striking blue façade of Zeus' Jewelry Store.

"You're lucky, actually." Lan Qing's voice was soft, low.

"Lucky?" She looked at him skeptically.

"My brother and I are orphans, we never knew our parents. Before we met our teacher we never knew what a full stomach felt like. We only knew life as pain and suffering. We were born on Earth, after it'd been ravaged and destroyed by greed. Only the most unfortunate remained. We begged anyone we could for food, convinced that just surviving made us lucky."

Flickers of emotion raced through the Astral Phantom's eyes. She looked at him, seeing for the first time his handsome but gaunt features. His voice was calm and his features still, like he was talking about someone else's life.

"I'd have never thought we've lead such similar lives," she sighed. Something else stirred in her pretty eyes.

Lan Qing turned his head to face her. His deep, dark eyes fixed hers. "No,

we're nothing alike. My misfortunes taught me to be strong, gave me perspective. It motivated me to chase the light. You... you became a demon."

The Astral Phantom's face slowly went stiff.

Lan Qing's soft voice proceeded. "You're beautiful, and your tale is moving. But none of this can hide the evil within you. In all the lives you've taken did you ever stop to consider the families left behind? Sparing your life doesn't mean I accept you – you're a tool to use against the creatures that want us all dead. The only way to clean the blood off your hands is to save as many lives as you can when the aliens come. This is your atonement. You can stop your games as well, because they won't work on me. Should I call you aunt? Or grandmother."

The Astral Phantom gaped at him. It was worse than a slap to the face. "A – Aunt?! You bastard!" She threw her arm back, ready to slap him.

Her movements were fast as lightning, but the stabbing pain that wracked her spirit was faster. She gurgled a pained cry and fell to the ground. The mark that was placed on her did not permit any defiance.

A dangerous chill had crept into Lan Qing's voice. "Now that you've decided to live, make sure you get as many years as you can. Do not try to take advantage of me or this opportunity I've given you." With nothing further to add, he left her there beside the window, alone in the room.

The Astral Phantom's childhood was a nightmare. Every word had been true and spoken from the heart. But one's pain didn't give them license to visit that pain on others. She had accepted money to slaughter countless of innocent victims in her role as a master assassin. Lan Qing was too smart for a sad story to make him forget all that.

A full five minutes later the Astral Phantom managed to pull herself up off the floor. Her teeth ground audibly as she glared daggers at the door. Never in her sorry life had she hated someone so intensely, but she was powerless to end him. She was sure her looks and sad story would move him – if not to let her go, then at least to get close. That would have given her time to search for a way out. But calling her aunt, grandmother, was a

punch to the gut. Her efforts were heartlessly denied. As a Paragon she had never known this level of humiliation. What woman didn't take pride in her appearance?

Lan Qing didn't impose any constraints on her, but regardless she couldn't leave this place. Through the mark Lan Qing instantly knew everything she thought, said and did. Even if she left the planet she couldn't be free from his control. Her life and death were in his hands and that was the end of it.

Chapter 657: The Proposal

“You came?”

“I did.”

The dry, somewhat aloof conversation was between two Reflections of Protogenia. The Epochrion regarded the Terminator warmly, while the Terminator’s face was less readable.

“Huan Xue... I feel regret. For the first time in my life.” The Terminator said softly.

The Epochrion paused. Was this the same strong, inflexible man she once knew? In all this time she never thought regret was part of his vocabulary.

The Terminator’s dark and creviced features broke into a small smile. “I’ve felt it ever since you left. I regret giving up so much of a normal life for power. But there’s one thing I couldn’t cut out – feeling. I realize now that you’ve always had a special place in my heart, but I never felt I was good enough for you.”

He spoke frankly, holding nothing back. At their age and station they didn’t need to be coy. He wasn’t telling her this because he wanted something.

Conflicting emotions trilled through the Epochrion’s eyes, and she sighed. “Davis, you’re a good man. Honest, determined. Pursuing your goals is nothing to regret. The situations life put before you left you few choices, but you did the best you could and became a national hero. You have always been a close friend, a brother. That will never change. As I told you when I left the Conclave, no matter what happens you will never be my enemy. These last years you’ve have to shoulder incredible burdens. You must allow yourself time to relax sometimes.”

The Terminator chuckled wryly. “I’m afraid I’ll have to rest when I’m dead.”

She helplessly shook her head. “You’ve weighed yourself down with so

many shackles. This is for you.” She produced a glimmering vital crystal and handed it to him.

He gathered it with a nod. “I’ll have my people send over a Capital ship.”

But the Epochrion shook her head. “No need. This is a gift from me. After all the years you looked after me, it’s the least I can do. I hope it can help heal you.”

“I can’t accept such a gift without payment,” he replied. “Besides, the politicians will find out and grow suspicious I’m sure. We should pay, and I will. You know, although you might not believe it I hope to see a prosperous East. We will need everyone to face the alien threat. The politicians don’t seem to understand that resisting destruction is the top priority. The aliens aren’t just bearers of vital crystals.”

Admiration was plain on her face. “As clear-headed as ever. I’m glad you understand.”

“Anyway, a transaction isn’t representative of our friendship,” he continued. “And who knows, maybe if this crystal heals me I will be worthy of you. Perhaps by then you’ll want me in the Avenue, and maybe I won’t turn the offer down.”

“This will never happen!” There was a flash of silver light. Suddenly, another figure appeared beside the Epochrion – the Wine Master. The Cosmagus’ face was a thunderhead.

“Huan Xue will be my wife, and no one will take her from me.” The Wine Master’s voice was fierce and aggressive.

A forced smile spread across the Terminator’s face. “Is that so? I see no husband – only a coward.”

“You!” The Wine Master’s anger flared. This man was a rival both politically and for Huan Xue’s affections. He found it difficult to contain his temper.

The Terminator continued, unperturbed. “Am I wrong? What has stopped you from plainly stating your love? You expect results without the work? If I were you I would have gone to the Conclave years ago to seek

out the one I loved, no matter the odds. There are no excuses in the face of true love. But what did you do? I have never believed emotions to be unchangeable. Time and age change all things, psychology included. In all this time you have refused to change, to try, because you fear failure. Is this not cowardice? Is this not selfishness?"

The Wine Master's breathing was quick with anger. He fixed the Northern Paragon with burning eyes and waves of protogenia pulsed from him.

The Terminator broke into laughter. "You may be a coward but you have a conscience. You're single-minded. Your heart's been unchanged all these years. My blessings to the both of you, then. But I warn you, if she ever comes back to me and the Conclave, I will never let her go again." He ended his reproaches there, and left the two of them alone.

The Wine Master blinked, stunned. The Terminator's sudden shift in mannerism threw him. He was hard and composed, but suddenly gave in. But he turned his focus to the Clockmaker. Her feelings were most important.

She looked back at him with a faint smile touching her lips. The Wine Master awkwardly spoke. "I'm sorry, just then..."

She gently shook her head. "I liked seeing the bad side of you. A pleasant break from the norm, don't you think?"

The Wine Master didn't know how to respond. "I..."

She stopped him with a chuckle. "He knew you were listening. He said those things on purpose, he knows how I feel."

The Wine Master's face became deep red as he realized he'd been fooled by the Terminator. He was so incensed that he couldn't see the truth. The perils of a heart in chaos!

The Clockmaker stepped forward, and the Wine Master instinctively stepped back.

"Did you mean what you said?" She asked.

“What part?” He stuttered.

She stared into his eyes. “It sounded like you wanted to propose! I’m an old woman, I can’t wait forever.”

Finally the Wine Master realized what was plain in front of his face. He smiled. “True. It was all true. Marry me, Huan Xue. I will be good to you, you’re the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

“Prove it,” she replied.

With a smile the Wine Master flicked his wrist, and a ring appeared cradled in his palm. It was lavender hue, and its faceted surface sparkled prettily. It was the picture of grace and dignity. It was a power gem, masterfully crafted.

“I remember you like purple. I made this myself, little by little, with my own hands. I did not use my Discipline. I finished it a long time ago and have fantasized about putting it on your finger ever since. Will you give me the chance to make this fantasy a reality? If you do, it will make me the happiest man in all the universe.”

As he spoke the Paragon held the ring aloft in both hands and dropped to one knee before her.

As she looked down on him she bit her lip. Her smile was gone, replaced with a mixture of joy and anticipation.

This was the day they’d been anticipating for so, so long.

“It took me so long to come to my senses, you’ve had to wait all this time. I’ve wasted the spring of our lives, but I hope it isn’t too late.” The Clockmaker presented her pale, delicate hand to the Wine Master. A comforting white light enveloped them. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. The two looked lovingly at each other as the Wine Master slowly slipped the power gem ring onto her finger. ¹

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The Auction was more successful and impactful than anyone would have dreamed. Now that it was over, Skyfire Avenue was abnormally

rowdy. Word had gotten out that the black market had a few crystals to sell. Since the crystals came from the Avenue itself, no one was going to corroborate these rumors. However when the first crystal appeared that was proof enough.

A pale blue light swirled around Lan Jue as he opened his eyes. He looked like an azure crystal statue. His skin was clear as glass and the blood pumping through him was plain to the eye. Although the energies radiating from him weren't strong, they bore a unique quality. His appearance wasn't frightening, what was frightening was the aura around him.

In the center of his chest, his diamond-shaped Core glittered with a faintly discernable light. Threads of silvery light embraced it. Though the immortal qi was fluctuating and unstable, it gave the sense of flowing through his whole body.

It was done. Finally, after so many days of training, the evolution of his Discipline was complete. The yin and yang lightning was joined, thick with the marvelous powers of the thunder essence and immortal qi. Lan Jue's powers had undergone a complete transformation.

A dual-natured lightning was a rare and marvelous thing in the world of Adepts, but Lan Jue's powers had risen to a whole new level. It went beyond his own comprehension, meaning only once he'd broken through to Paragon could he use it to its full potential.

Chapter 658: Aliens Reemerge!

The pulses of thunderbolt power that came from Lan Jue had undergone a clear, qualitative change.

The Driver, seated across from him, opened his eyes. He sounded upset. "I'm not there yet. I still need time."

"About half a month," Lan Jue replied. "You've been working hard, don't push yourself too much."

The Driver had worked harder than every over the last stretch of time. He'd been tirelessly cultivating in attempts to catch up with Lan Jue and transform his Discipline. However, there was an enormous difference in potency between him and the Jewelry Master. It would take time to close that gap. Grasping this opportunity would take time to fully realize.

That is not to say the Driver had not sensed progress, he had undergone his own significant transformation. He had reached the peak of ninth level, and suspected that he could breakthrough to Paragon once the evolution of his Discipline was complete. However, hoping and achieving were different beasts. There were at least ten times as many peak-ranked Adepts as there were Paragons in the universe. Breaking through was a rare happening.

Lan Jue enjoyed most of the thunder essence's benefits, but some small amount of the immortal qi contained inside was transferred to the Driver. It had a metamorphic effect, however the Driver adhered to Lan Jue's suggestions and restrained the growth of his powers. He intended to temper his abilities as much as possible, and shore up his foundation. It was a long and grueling path.

"Alright, I'll head back. I need to consolidate my Discipline." Lan Jue stretched and rose to his feet. The crystalline quality gradually disappeared from his flesh. The waves of energy from him also became gentler and more subtle.

By the time his feet touched the ground he was back to normal, and his powers were once again contained within. Now that the conversion of his

Discipline was complete, he was a conduit of yin-yang lightning. In other words, he was All-Heaven lightning. It was sure to substantially speed up absorption of the thunder essence. The power within the essence was concentrated, and very pure. In all this time he'd only managed to take in one-tenth of it. However, even that little bit was incredibly potent.

The immortal qi was another matter. It wasn't only useful to him, but to Qianlin as well – even more so. The Queen of Heaven abilities were inherently rich with congenital qi, so although her consciousness had yet to return, her powers felt like a fairy goddess.

Beep! Beep! His communicator called for his attention. He peeked at the screen and saw it was Lan Qing calling.

“Hey, brother!” ¹ He said by way of greeting.

Lan Qing's tepid voice replied. “Where are you?”

“I'm headed back to the surface shop,” he said.

“I'm going there now.”

When Lan Jue got back to the jewelry store, Lan Qing was already waiting for him.

“What's the rush?” Lan Jue asked in curiosity.

Lan Qing's face was downcast. “A planet in Eastern space has reported an alien sighting. I have to go.”

Lan Jue was shocked. “Which one?” If it was an Eastern planet, did this mean the aliens had chosen them to begin their invasion?

“Lyr,” he answered.

When he heard the name, Lan Jue's heart sank. Lyr, former home of the Bookworm. It was a planet covered in oceans that were teeming with life. Lyr University had a long history of rivalry with the NEU. More importantly, it was where the Tears of Neptune were mined – items integral to the extraction and purification of the vital crystals. If the aliens were there, it meant...

Lan Qing's troubled voice continued. “We can't underestimate them, the

aliens may very well be smarter than we are. Come with me, now isn't the time to mobilize An Lun. Is the Star Division ready for deployment?"

"Let me check with the Wine Master for instructions," he said. The communicator didn't even have a chance to ring before the Wine Master answered.

"Jewelry Master, aliens have been sighted on Lyr. The soldiers garrisoned there have already engaged the enemy, but they need reinforcements. We can respond quickest, so prepare Star Division for dispatch."

"I heard the news from General Lan," he said. "We'll leave as soon as we can. I'll tell the Division to get ready. You stay here and look after the Avenue, and make sure this information doesn't get out. We mustn't let the West or North know. We'll handle it."

The sudden tense situation shattered Lan Jue's calm. He was ready for action. He fired off a series of orders through his communicator, and half an hour later Zeus-1 was tearing through the atmosphere toward Lyr.

Skyfire wasn't far from Lyr. Majesty was further away at An Lun but at top speed it would arrive at roughly the same time. An expedition cruiser was with Zeus-1 as well – Lan Qing's transport. He was bringing an elite squad of mecha pilots.

Lan Jue connected with his brother's ship through the bridge's main controls.

"General Lan, please share the information you've received with us." The two brothers faced each other through the screen.

"I'm sending it now," he answered.

For this excursion only Su Xiaosu of Zeus' Amazons had come along, the others remained behind to look after the stores. They knew the market better than anyone.

Besides Xiaosu, the Driver had also come along. The Wine Master, Clockmaker, Keeper, and Bookworm had all remained on Skyfire. Lan Jue also didn't trouble his parents. Preliminary reports suggested the invaders were typical breeds, none of the stronger ones. There was no need to

bother the two strongest humans alive. Lan Jue and his brother had also sensed a problem the last time their father took to the field. They had an unspoken agreement not to trouble him unless necessary.

The Accountant wasn't on Zeus-1 because he had been left on An Lun to iron out their plans for electronic warfare. He'd taken well to the role, and in fact was an entirely different person than when Lan Jue had first met him. Now he was one of the most important people in the Division. Since Xiaosu had returned to Skyfire with Lan Jue, he had been left in charge of the Division together with the Bartender and Coffee Master.

Lan Jue had told them about the crisis on Lyr moments after he'd learned about it. Majesty was already on the way.

A data upload began. It wasn't much, just a few images. There were some surface photos and satellite images, and that was all. Su Xiaosu opened the files so Lan Jue and the Driver could examine them.

Judging by the satellite imagery things didn't look too bad. There were a few small splotches of purple here and there, but nothing dramatic. After so many encounters they knew the aliens tactics. The more their caustic power covered the planet, the more dire the situation. So far it wasn't an occupation.

The environment was different on Lyr than it was on Taihua, the last Eastern planet visited by these creatures. Taihua was a tourist planet, its population was few and far between to protect the planet's environment. Lyr, though, was a colonized planet. Although it had a relatively small landmass, there was a stationed military presence. The closest interstellar fleet had already responded.

Images from the planet's surface revealed that the aliens were coming from the sea. Once they made it on land they began to terrorize the population.

"What do you think? You have a plan?" Lan Qing asked.

Lan Jue studied the pictures with furrowed brow. "On the surface it doesn't look bad. Typical invasion procedures, from what we've experienced. It starts with a progenitor. It infiltrates the planet and starts

to gather vital energy to create its soldiers. They in turn spread out and gather more energy for the progenitor to continue the cycle and grow stronger. So long as the progenitor remains alive and life remains, it's soldiers never stop. If there are first responders left they should use their most sensitive sonar scanning systems to sweep the ocean beds."

Lan Qing responded. "They have sonar, but you know that Lyr's oceans are full of power gems. The magnetic fields they release will interfere with their systems. They won't be able to get any accurate readings. Right now the soldiers are busy trying to stem the tide of creatures coming from the ocean. They're holding, but the corruption is spreading fast. A fair amount of area has already died. Transport ships have already begun evacuating civilians and two small fleets are on their way. In six hours they will have a few mecha units to shore them up until we arrive."

"Alright. We proceed full speed ahead and try to get there as soon as possible." Speed was the best option. Thankfully the East was ready for war, so their response was quick. If they hadn't been waiting for it, it could have taken them three days to muster a defense.

Chapter 659: Fight to the End

Zeus-1 darted ahead at full speed with Lan Qing's expedition ship close on its heels. They kept pace with one another, steady at FTL travel.

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Lyr!

"The mecha department is ready to engage, weapons are being distributed. Those who didn't want to remain behind have left with the evacuation ships." The Dean of Lyr Han Ruchao sounded hoarse and tired, but his eyes showed a steely determination

Lyr University was one of the preeminent institutions of higher learning on the East, famed for producing quality soldiers and especially mecha pilots. But the aliens had arrived suddenly, without warning, giving them no time to prepare. The initial order was for a full retreat, these students were considered the future of the East. Those who chose to evacuate with the civilian elderly, women and children. Nearby military garrisons sent transport ships to facilitate the evacuation.

But the university was simply too big. The four ships were only able to evacuate six thousand people at a time, but the school's population was closer to fifteen thousand – they weren't getting everyone in a single trip. Yet, the military had no solution to this problem, all their other transport ships were tied up protecting the citizens of Lyr.

Their scramble could be understood. This was the first time since the East acquired Lyr that such a catastrophe has happened on the planet.

The sports field of the university was thick with people, some students and some teachers. The class leaders stood in front of their groups. ¹

In this critical time all students, good or bad, stood calm and collected in the face of danger. They did not run or lose their heads, something that could not be said for the routed masses outside the university walls. Those same walls bristled with defensive installations to protect from alien incursion.

As a military school they were stocked in the full gamut of traditional gear, except for weaponry. Those were provided on a temporary basis by the army. The teachers and students all had some level of combat experience, so in a time of crisis they became reinforcements. All of a sudden they found themselves on the front lines, but it also meant no one was coming to save them. Hold and retreat when able, that was their only option.

“Dean, all of our instructors are willing to stay behind. They want to live or die with their students.” The clear, strong voice came from a gallant-looking instructor. It was none other than the Bookworm’s disciple, Su He!

After Su He’s break he’d returned to the university as a teacher. His transformation from haughty adjunct to calm professor was clear to everyone. He had Lan Jue to thank for that, as well as the Bookworm’s teachings.

Han Ruchao’s burning eyes fixed upon Su He. He was the school’s best mecha pilot, and a ninth level Talent. His determination was like a shot of adrenaline.

“I’m staying, too!” From among the students, one of them shot their hand high up in the air.

The Dean had hid nothing from his charges, they all knew only six thousand people could leave at a time. The rest would have to hold on for the next round. When that was, though, no one knew. The closest planet was still a ways away.

The student who raised their hand was one of the few who’d attended the sparring competition at the NEU, Xiao Han. He was much more composed now than he had been. The loss he’d suffered didn’t break him, instead it served as motivation to get better. Over the last year his progress had been phenomenal, under the tutelage of Su He.

“And me!” Several more hands joined his, lifted high as desperate enthusiasm swept through the crowd. Lyr’s training field was abuzz with anticipation.

As he looked at their eager faces, the passion in their eyes, tears blurred Han Ruchao's vision. For many years he had been Dean of this school, giving his energy toward its progress. He knew he had his problems – he was arrogant, headstrong, prideful, and most importantly he wanted to win. But today, that pride was warranted. That pride made him stand tall.

Despite his shortcoming he had molded students who did not back down in the face of death. Dauntless they thrust their hands toward the sky, ready to defend their school to their final breath.

Nor was it just students from the mecha department putting their lives on the line. Airship trainees and support department students were just as fervent in their desire to fight. None of them wanted their companions to see them as cowards. Their blood boiled for the chance to prove their worth.

Han Ruchao's voice quavered with emotion as it passed through the microphone in front of him. "Thank you... thank you all. You should all be proud of how you were raised. Children. You bring glory to the school. I have spent my life in pursuit of making quality members of society, and today I see it was all worth it. No matter how strong or how fierce these creatures are, as your Dean I swear to be the last one to leave. Now, I want you all to listen closely to our plan. Students from the mecha department will suit up, find a weapon and get ready for battle. Class leaders will arrange you into squads and prepare you to face the enemy. Airship pilots, those from the mecha maintenance department, female students and female teachers will evacuate. That's an order. Teachers, make sure it gets done." 2

"In times of crisis we need order. Soldiers, toe the line! Execute!" The Dean's powerful voice thundered across the field. IT curtailed the dangerous levels of excitement agitating the students.

Su He stood nearby, silently nodding his head. When it was needed Han Ruchao kept level-headed, despite his own passions. His orders were simple and to the point. These children were the future of Lyr, of the university. Until the ship returned they had to get to safety.

Students from the mecha department raced for the mecha warehouse where the suits were stored. They were training suits but they were better than nothing. At least with the weapons provided by the army they could fight back.

As the largest university on Lyr they were stocked with over a thousand mecha suits. As training mechas their cockpits were also designed to fit two pilots – a teacher and student. That was enough for two thousand, while the remainder took up overwatch positions along the perimeter walls. This would at least give them a defensive position as they fought the aliens.

Han Ruchao's breath was quick, his heart raced. He had never been in a situation like this before, but as a learned man he was clear-headed enough to manage the crisis. He was the backbone of this effort, and could not break. If he did, they were lost.

They had lost communication with the outside world, and getting word from anywhere was almost impossible. The Dean couldn't know if or when the military would come to their aid. In the last correspondence, all he'd learned was the aliens were fierce, and weren't stopping.

Just then, an explosion shook the university walls. A plume of smoke arose in the distance.

Han Ruchao narrowed his eyes. It was coming from the front lines. Did the enemy already break through?

"Quickly! Get those transport ships off the ground, quick as you can! Professor Su He... where is Professor Su He?" He shouted into his communicator, using it as a walky-talky.

Su He's calm voice replied. "I'm on the field. I'll be there in a moment.

A few moments later a mecha descended from overhead with Su He at the controls.

"Professor, I need you to scout out the situation outside. If the aliens have broken through, I want you to coordinate our defense." Han Ruchao knew he wasn't a military commander. Having Su He assume control

would serve better.

Su He's voice was low and solemn. "I already went to look. They've broken through the perimeter line outside of the city. They're pouring through the streets. We need to prepare to hold them. The military has started to move evacuees toward us."

Han Ruchao felt his heart skip a beat. Suddenly his school was the most well-defended location on Lyr. It made sense to bring the vulnerable here. However that made keeping order worrying. With enemies at the gates, the situation was deteriorating rapidly.

"What are your suggestions, professor?" He asked.

"If the situation comes to it, we hold," he replied. "We can't break, no matter what. The moment they get through we're done for. Please give the order for everyone to follow my lead. I'll do everything in my power to protect the university."

"Very well. Everyone will listen for your commands, myself included." Han Ruchao answered without hesitation.

Su He burst into action. He knew more about military matters than the dean, and as a god-ranked pilot his reputation was second to none. The best scoring students in the school were his personal charges. Under his direction they quickly formed a defensive line; laser rifles to punish the creatures from afar, and mecha units as support. Other defenses were established along the walls as back-up.

They watched civilians swarm their way from the ravaged city. The university doors were left half-open so they could be closed again quickly. Six classes – over three hundred students, including fifty mechas – ushered the civilians inside. They were put in classrooms or out in the field, wherever they could fit. With the addition of city police, they managed to keep order.

Chapter 660: Fight, Lyr!

Flashes of purple flickered incessantly on the horizon. Booms and smoke rose as buildings fell. Roars, explosions, collapse... they all clashed together in a cacophony of terror.

Su He stood at the top of the clock tower, staring into the distance. High though he stood, his heart felt like it had sunk into the ground below. As temporary commander of the defenses he was meticulous in preparation, but he knew if the soldiers couldn't hold the aliens back the students didn't stand much of a chance.

They'd come too quick, too fierce. The world was swallowed by a toxic purple cloud that came on the heels of the alien warriors.

Su He heaved a sigh, squashing his own anxieties. Memories of a blue mecha darting through the jungle swam up to the front of his mind. Holographic recordings of scores of enemies being felled, and scores of lives being saved flashed behind his eyes.

Lan Jue, everything you did I can do, too. Or maybe I can't, and this will be my last stand. But if it is, I'll make sure the aliens pay dearly.

Every moment he watched the purple light crept closer.

"Everyone, prepare for battle." Su He calmly gave the order from his vantage.

"Classes one, two and three prepare. We have aliens coming in from one o'clock. Hit them with laser fire. Mechas, ready your weapons."

The inevitable clash with the aliens frightened the students. Behind stoic faces and metal breastplates their faces were pale.

Aoooooohh-! A lumbering beast heaved into view. It looks like a tortoise, with a body ten meters long and a thick shell on its back. In contrast to its likeness, though, it moved very fast on legs thick as verti-cars. Its whole body flickered purple as it bore down on them.

"Fire!" Su He shouted.

The students were nervous, but the bearers of the heavy weaponry were the best the school had to offer. They obeyed orders, and knew how to use the guns. A wall of shimmering laser light erupted from the university's walls and rained destruction on a large swath of land before them. The creature responded by reeling back and deflecting the shots with its shell. However the assault proved to be too much and the creature was blasted away.

They beat it back! A cheer rang out among the students. But it only lasted a moment when suddenly their cries caught in their throats.

Ten more purple figures appeared on the horizon, each one different from the last but all looking like corrupted marine animals. Looking upon them struck fear into the hearts of the human defenders, but most frightening of all was the creature soaring overhead. A great and terrible bird was headed right for the school interior.

"Ignore the sky, fire at will. Don't give them an inch of ground." He gave the order and launched himself into the air.

His mecha picked up speed, the wind whistling around its sleek frame. He blazed as brightly as a star as the distance closed between him and the alien bird. For half a second the sky was dazzlingly bright – in the aftermath tumbled two severed halves of the beast. Blood fell like rain onto the training ground below. Su He's mecha swung wide and returned to the clock tower.

The students and civilians looked on, witnessing for the first time the death of one of these nightmarish foes. Triumphant cries rose to meet their commander. Meanwhile the defenders along the walls managed to fend off the first wave of attackers.

But the aliens were strong, resilient. The turtle alien joined the others and pressed forward, acting as a shield so they could advance. Each lumbering step brought the hoard closer.

A line of mechas lines the balustrades, close-range fighters adept at tearing through whatever was in front of them. Another line of long-range mecha fighters and laser riflemen were at their backs.

Finally the beasts made their move. A frog-like creature leapt overhead and spat its tongue out. It blasted out with the force of a missile. The students responded with a hail of angry red laser fire.

Phomp! The frog screeched as its tongue was blown apart. The student who landed the shot was seated in a delicate-looking constructed mecha with a laser rifle twice its size. Its muzzle glowed red with heat.

Xiao Han! The Pride of Lyr University!

Xiao Han raced forward even before the chunks of tongue could hit the ground. Nine of his fellow students charged at his side to meet the aliens on the field. Besides Xiao Han, the other mechas were piloted by instructors. They were the only members of the staff with real combat experience. Serving as vanguard, they lead the students in routing the first batch of foes.

Moral soared as student and teacher alike watched the aliens fall before them. Their concerted fire didn't stop, though, only becoming more ferocious.

The line was holding, but Su He did not look happy. He knew from his scanners that the world around them was a sea of deadly purple. He couldn't tell what was waiting for them within that caustic mist.

A hard light glinted in his eyes. They would fight to the last man, until blood soaked the earth. It was the only way!

The four transport ships bearing civilians and non-combat faculty lifted into the air, shooting into the distance. They bore the future of Lyr to safety before the aliens could surround them and cut off their retreat. Su He let himself breathe a little easier as he watched them go. At least some would live to see another day.

Now they just had to hold for reinforcements. From the appearance of the aliens to now, over a day had passed. The closest military installation had to be close. Only, Lyr was big, who knew how long it would take the soldiers to get to them. Their focus was the main alien force!

More aliens appeared within sight of the walls. Mechas and defensive

gunners alike were immersed in frantic battle. Su He was forced to join the fray himself. Whenever a more powerful alien appeared, he was there to deal with it personally.

The initial fear and shock had begun to wear off, and Lyr's students fell back on their excellent training. Empowered by their mecha suits the students and teachers met the alien attackers in a dazzling display of color and sound. Instructors lead them valiantly to destroy wave after wave of foes. The normal alien soldiers no longer posed a serious threat.

The fighting continued. Su He commanded three hundred suits in battle, and the rest remained behind to defend the walls. Every now and again students would switch out to charge their suits and rest while others took their place. Only in this way could they keep up the fight, because the aliens weren't stopping. Luckily LU was well-stocked with power gems which they used to keep the mechas in the fight.

Su He did not expect the students to perform so well. Inwardly he praised them all for their grit and determination. If they lived through this they would come away with more knowledge than six months spent in a classroom. The best way to motivate potential was a real life-or-death struggle.

Lyr city had already been thoroughly destroyed. As Lyr's biggest city and its capital, it'd been the alien's first target. The soldiers that had been posted there were all dead. If one could look down from above, all they would see was an expanse of purple.

The first wave of reinforcements had already arrived in planetary orbit three hours ago, but were searching for the progenitor. However, Lyr was so large and finding it proved difficult. At the same time more aliens were arriving from outer space to cut off the approach. Aid was locked out.

Time crawled one, one minute – one second at a time. Scores of aliens continued to barrage the school. Strong though these aberrant creatures were, they couldn't hold a candle to real alien life forms. However, they were exceptionally sensitive to the presence of vital energy. The moment they sensed the living, they charged in for the kill. The LU was among the

last bastions of humanity, making it an enormous target.

These humans were not machines, and even machines needed to be recharged. As the battle stretched on to the two-hour mark, things began to get dangerous. Chief among them was they were running out of energy!

Although the school could boast some Adepts, they were few. Without the help of mechas, how could they stand against the unending alien assault?

“Professor Su He, we’re out of energy. We have an hour at most.” One of the teachers in charge of support gave Su He the news. His heart sank.

This was bad. Without energy what could they do? The fields outside of the school were teeming with aliens out for blood. If the mechas couldn’t hold them, they would be lost.

“Stop the laser cannons and save the energy for the mecha pilots,” he ordered. The aliens were better at defending against long-ranged attacks than close combat, but it left them open. He had to make the hard decision.

Chapter 661: Difficulties

It wasn't long before the energy deficiencies began to get painfully apparent. Without long-range support, the mechas starting to get overwhelmed. What's more, the students hadn't had much time to rest during the two-hour long battle. They were starting to tire out.

Su He darted from one area to the other, his yellow mecha a flash of light across the field. The crack of his heavy sniper rifle rang out again and again, each time bringing to an end another powerful alien. He filled in the gaps where needed.

Boom-! An alien was blasted away by oen of the students and slammed against the wall. It felt like the whole structure shook. Luckily, the university's defenses were made out of titanium alloy, but even so the impact had left a dent.

Overhead a host of flying aliens were approaching. They looked a little like seagulls, but none were less than ten meters tail to tip. Over a hundred of them were bearing down on the university from on high. It was the first homogeneous unit of creatures, and it made them look inexhaustible.

For just a moment, despair was plain on Su He's face. He knew the second their line broke the enemy would flood through and there would be no stopping them. These seagulls could be the straw that broke the camel's back.

He bit the tip of his tongue, focusing on the pain to push his hopelessness down. He raised his gun and took aim at the beast just in front of him. He waited until there was a lock, then pulled the trigger. A beam of angry red light carved a path through the air, leaving a scar where it passed.

Boom-! An intense blast of power ripped the foremost alien apart. But the others charged on, for they did not know fear. They spread out and swarmed toward Su He.

He swung the rifle over his shoulder and attached it to the mechas back.

With a flick of its metal hands, two glinting swords appeared in his grip. The rifle was powerful, but it used a lot of energy. Now it was time to show them what he was made of! If he could cut these creatures down before they got to the university, they could hold for a little while longer. If he didn't, their defenses would likely crumble.

Su He used his own Discipline to push his mecha to its limit. His suit flitted through the air, nimble as a sparrow. He charged straight, then changed directions suddenly and without warning to avoid the purple projectiles spat at him by the creatures.

He flew faster until at last he engaged, appearing behind one of the alien birds. He cut cross-wise like a pair of scissors and his foe's head tumbled from the sky to the ground below.

He didn't stop. In a flash he inserted himself in the midst of them and spun like a steel tempest. The aliens fell away amidst a cloud of blood and chunks of meat.

The yellow body of the mecha shivered, and suddenly one became two – doppelganger! As a God-ranked pilot Su He was finally able to move his hands at the necessary speed to use the technique. The identical images split, spread out, then merged together again in the blink of an eye. Two more aliens dropped dead.

Below, the students and teachers looked on as the beasts dropped like flies and it filled them with steely resolve. Their line – dangerously close to being routed – firmed up.

But they were stretched to their limit.

At last the final alien bird was cut apart by Su He's longswords, reduced to a thick purple paste. The acidic fluid covered the yellow mecha, and some portions of it were almost beginning to smoke. He was a mecha pilot, but his suit was not god-tier. It couldn't hold out for much longer.

He noticed only ten percent energy remained. Su He needed to return and charge up. But just as he was turning back, the skies darkened to an ominous violet.

More birds, but ten times as many were coming his way.

Done for!

He didn't have time to charge his suit. He stared at the control panel before him, closed his eyes, and pushed a button.

Thump! Su He was fired out of the back of the mecha like a bullet. He watched at the mecha that had served him honorably for years fell away and crashed into the ground below.

A dead mecha suit was just a ton of metal, and Su He still had some fight left in him. Without it he could push himself a little farther. He made a solemn promise that he would not stop until his last drop of blood was spilt.

He knew this next wave would probably bring him to that point.

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Crack! A red light fired from Xiao Han's rifle and killed another beast. His mecha staggered dangerously and nearly fell. The last one had clipped his left leg and nearly toppled him over.

He gulped great breaths of air within the cockpit even though his lungs felt like they were on fire. His heart beat so hard it threatened to burst out of his chest. He knew it meant his energy was depleted, and his body was close to collapse. Both he and his mecha were drained, but he didn't let up. Only one final regret nagged at him.

His life's greatest regret was losing to that fat-ass from National Eastern University. All his hard work since has been to strive for another chance – to get revenge. Now it looked as though he would never get the chance. Fat bastard, he snarled inwardly, if I die I'll be a hero! How about that?!

"Classmate, be careful!" His mecha's comms lit up as someone called out to him.

He snapped back to reality and urged his suit to duck, just in time to avoid an alien's swipe. But the move put too much weight on his suit's damaged left leg and it gave beneath him. He hit the ground.

A mecha suit out of control was no help to anyone. Aside from Su He's own, Xiao Han's Sovereign-class mecha had killed more aliens than anyone. It had also sustained a great deal of damage.

He slapped the eject button, just like Su He. Fearing death wasn't going to help anyone. So long as he fought to the end, he would be dying a man's death!

Bang! There was a screech, a shock, and Xiao Han spat out a mouthful of blood. The ejection mechanism failed! Just as he was prepared to fire out an attack from one of the aliens damaged the exit point.

It's over! His mind went blank, focused on that one thought. Once he hit the eject button he'd lost all control over the suit and the systems died. He was a sitting duck, an alien's meal wrapped up in a pretty metal coffin.

Boom—! He felt the ground shake as a thunderous blast tore through the area. He and the suit were thrown up into the air and hit the ground again with bone-jarring force. Then everything went dark as he lost consciousness. When he came to, he was surprised to find he was still alive. His vision cleared, and through the mecha's eyes he could see a large metal figure – one could almost say portly.

Vicious spikes bristled all along its body, and a spiked mace cradled in hand lashed out fierce as a tiger. Any alien daring to get too close was crushed beneath its weight.

Was this...? Xiao Han couldn't remember any classmates with powers like this. The metallic aura that surrounding him pulsed with powerful Discipline. He used his mace like a meat grinder, opening up a wide area carpeted by the remains of aliens.

The fat mecha leapt into the air and the spikes around it fired off in all directions. Tens of the creatures unfortunate enough to be in the blast radius were impaled and killed outright.

The aliens were corrupted versions of local wildlife, so their weak points were similar. Once the spikes found their target, they disappeared only to reemerge from the fat mecha's body.

Then, an even stranger scene was revealed. The brawny mecha squatted and all at once became a giant metal sphere covered in blades. It lunged forward, spinning on an axis. He'd gone from using a meat grinder to becoming one. The aliens caught in front of it were effortlessly swept away. The students in a hundred meters around the metal orb had some room to recover.

Then, one after another silhouettes descended from overhead. The earth shook as they made landfall. Scores of well-equipped mechas drew their weapons and shored up the students' defensive positions. The aliens who'd threatened to destroy these beleaguered students half a moment before were mowed down like paper tigers – like they had no means to defend themselves. The mechas moved like one entity, intuitively knowing where they were needed. The aliens couldn't advance an inch.

Reinforcements had arrived! Xiao Han fell back in his seat and sighed in relief. What incredible reinforcements they were! None of these pilots could have been anything less than Sovereign-class, he determined, and strong Adepts to boot. What were those insignias on their breastplates? A flame? What did that mean? They were damn fine pilots!

Another mecha with the flame insignia appeared in front of Xiao Han's mangled mecha. It used its two large blades to carve open the ejection chute. Xiao Han had by then recovered, and clambered out into the fresh air.

"Are you alright?" The pilot asked in an alluring voice.

A female pilot? Xiao Han couldn't entirely hide his surprise. "I'm fine. Who are you guys?"

"We're Star Division from Skyfire, here to save you. Relax, you're safe." The pilot ended their conversation by leaping back into the fight.

Chapter 662: Skyfire to the Rescue!

Xiao Han lifted his head and was surprised to discover a battleship sized ship hovering above the battlefield. A cadre of mecha suits tumbled from its cargo doors to join the fight. Their arrival stopped the alien menace dead in their tracks, like weeds before the scythe. Step by step they were pushed from the walls.

Su He was just as stunned. As he had been peering into the encroaching host of alien seagulls, there was a sudden roar that filled the air. A strange light swept by, and suddenly the purple was gone – nothing was left but clear blue sky.

More and more bulky silhouettes fell from the ship and into the alien force, coming to the university in its time of need.

Su He was a God-ranked pilot, and his eye was more discerning than Xiao Han's. When he saw how these newcomer fought he gasped. Where did these soldiers come from? They were so strong, well equipped, and every one of them flickered with the power of Discipline. He looked on as their heavy artillery mowed the enemy down, working together to bring out the strengths in one another. The aliens were asking for death in their persistent charge.

Since when did the East have such a mighty mecha division, and made of exclusively Adepts? Could they be from An Lun? Su He vaguely recalled news An Lun was creating an Adept army.

“Professor Su?” His thoughts were interrupted by a two-headed dragon, hovering before him.

“Who are you? Bahamut?” The mecha was distinctive and hard to forget.

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“The same. I’m the commander of Star Division’s Third Brigade from Skyfire. We’re here to help – don’t worry, the situation here is handled.” The Bartender smiled within the cockpit.

Majesty had almost overloaded its engines to get here as fast as it could.

Moments after they arrived, the danger to Lyr University caught their attention. They rushed to the rescue, handily managing the alien force. Once Second Brigade's long-distance mecha fighters hit the ground they cleared a safe zone around the school. The aliens couldn't contend against the overwhelming firepower, much less Majesty in all its terrible glory.

Su He's heart raced. "Star Division? From Skyfire? Are you all from the Avenue?"

"We are," the Bartender confirmed. "Our commander is an old acquaintance of yours, we call him the Jewelry Master. You probably know who I mean."

Su He gaped in utter shock. All of a sudden Lan Jue was the commander of a crack mecha division? There wasn't an enemy in all the universe that could face up to these soldiers!

Sounds of jubilation rang from within the university walls. The sudden arrival of these powerful saviors had pulled them from the brink of death.

A light shone from Bahamut's chest, projecting a holographic image in the air between them. A familiar face; Lan Jue.

"Hello classmate." Lan Jue nodded in greeting.

"Lan Jue. Thank you, you and your soldiers. We wouldn't have been able to hold on any longer." Su He was relieved and sincere.

Lan Jue went on. "The situation there has been stabilized. The rest of my team and I will be arriving soon to look for the mother, we call them progenitors. If you could, we ask you maintain command of the school and the people in it."

"Of course, leave it to me." Su He nodded.

Lan Jue smiled at him, and the hologram vanished.

Majesty's superior engines had brought it here faster, but Lan Jue wouldn't be left out of the fight. Zeus-1 was also tearing through space at top speed and closing in on Lyr.

Once Majesty arrived they were being fed a constant stream of logistic

information. So far the alien invaders had taken control of more than one fourth of the planet. Their appearance had been explosively fast, too fast for anyone to react. Oceans of vital energy nourished the beasts to maturity almost right away, and was the reason for their vast numbers.

The aliens also seem to have had this planned. A number of creatures had been out in space, responsible for dealing with reinforcements. Majesty's overwhelming firepower made short work of them. With the Accountant behind the fire controls the interstellar aliens didn't stand a chance. Once the blockade was destroyed Majesty and other Eastern military vessels poured through to come to Lyr's aid. Now that Star Division had arrived, the planet's dire situation was under control.

"Brother, in a minute I'll need your help finding the progenitor," Lan Jue said, speaking through his communicator to Lan Qing's battleship.

Lan Qing nodded. His eyes burned with anticipation of the fight to come. "It's been elusive, our scanners haven't been able to get a lock on a location. This is a problem, damage to the planet is significant. How many habitable planets are there for us? When it comes to outright war we won't have the resources to resist them. What's your plan, A-Jue?"

"I still believe it's best to evacuate the outlying planets, circle the wagons," he replied. "At least that way we can protect them better and defend resource planets. The remainder we can leave to automated mining for the time being. Citizens can be brought into the heart of the Alliance and resettled temporarily on planets more conducive to life. At the same time we need to strengthen our position and prepare for defense. Ramp up military production and train more soldiers. Fixed defensive positions aren't nearly as effective as mecha, so swelling our mecha numbers and dispatching them to every inhabited planet should also be a priority. This'll give us the chance to respond immediately to any threat."

Lan Qing nodded. "None of the interior planets have what An Lun can offer. I'll start dispatching units to administrative planets as soon as possible. Our military industry is working at its peak to produce weapons and outfit the defenders. We're also equipping the interior planets with as many railguns as we can fit on them. If Lyr had had railgun installations

the aliens wouldn't have been able to blockade reinforcements."

Lan Jue displeased. All of their plans were passive and after the fact. They needed time to learn about their foe and how they fought – time they didn't have.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. "Actually the best plan is to bring the fight to them. That's the only way to ensure we exhaust and destroy their energy supply, which in turn should cause them to be less aggressive. ¹ It's impossible to say how much life was stolen from Lyr, and it may even be the aliens came to try and destroy the Tears of Neptune. I've already ordered Majesty to keep its scanners wide and responsive. We won't let any alien escape."

"After we're finished here I'll run it up the chain, see if we can't take the initiative," Lan Qing said.

Lan Jue continued to think out loud. "If we do lead a preemptive strike it has to be small. The larger the force the harder it'd be to get out. Father said that there were aliens even stronger than me. I asked Jun Yongye about this, and he said the only creatures stronger than Jue Di were the immortals of old. Those immortal commanded power far beyond anything humans were capable of, so much so that the universe would outright reject something that devastating. Hence the immortals realms of the ancient days, because they couldn't exist in the same space as everything else. If they attempted to leave their special reality the universe's natural energies would obliterate them. You could say that immortals were forced to imprison themselves. Now the realm of immortals has ceased to exist the immortals have perished, too. There's no more place for them to hide – and the stronger the immortal, the stronger the universe hits back."

"Did you ask for more detail from father? Where does he stand, could be somehow become an immortal himself?"

A wry grin split Lan Jue's face. "I tried, but he didn't answer."

Lan Qing's voice was thoughtful. "There's something wrong with him. He doesn't want to tell us, so ask mother when you have an opportunity. She should know."

Lan Jue nodded in agreement.

Lyr came into view from the ship's bridge. A sick violet hue hung over vast swaths of formerly fertile ocean, shocking to behold. It looked like a nasty bruise. The ship punctured the planet's atmosphere and down toward the ocean surface.

The alien's poison had infected the land as well as the sea. Unquestionable, the progenitor was hiding somewhere the ocean of contaminated water.

"Let's get out there and find it. Keep Zeus-1 as support." Lan Jue said to Su Xiaosu.

"Aye aye!" She replied.

Lan Jue and the Driver exited the ship, entered their mechas and set out. Seated in Thor's cockpit, the Jewelry Master felt a comfortable bond, like the sleek sapphire mecha was an extension of his own body. It was a sensation he'd begun to recognize only after absorbing the thunder essence. His Discipline merged seamlessly with the suit's systems, and so his surprise Thor's AI and body seemed to be influenced by the All-Heaven lightning. Like Lan Jue, the suit was somehow transformed by it.

As Thor flew through the air its body was surrounded by an undulating pale blue light. The energies released by the suit were gentle, but nonetheless were reflected by the surface of the ocean. A strange ocean, where even the waves had been silenced.

Chapter 663: Thunderstruck

Lan Jue looked toward the Driver, hovering not far away. He'd reported a similar feeling of kinship to his mecha, Thunderclap. The similarity suggested it was the immortal qi that gave them this feeling, not their Disciplines. Thunderbolt energy wouldn't cause such changes in metal, but the old tales said immortal qi could impart life.

In more than one sense it was possible their mechas could become equivalent to Astrums. Of course, this was a great and pleasant surprise for the Driver. Lan Jue was also pleased, for although he had Captus Thor could bear the sword as well.

As they soared over the water a strange light flickered in Lan Jue's eyes. Probing waves of protogenia fluctuated around him and penetrated into the sea, searching for signs of life. It was the same method he'd used on Taihua to find the progenitor. He had been ninth level six rank at the time, and although by rank he was twice as strong, his true power was much greater.

"I think I feel something." The Driver's voice called to him through the main control board. They'd split up to cover more ground.

Lan Jue's eyes lit up. "Looks like we got lucky!" Lucky indeed to find it so soon. Lan Qing's battleship was descending through the atmosphere just in time.

Thor picked up speed, racing to join up with Thunderclap.

"How do we approach?" the Driver asked.

"It's time to give it a taste of our thunder magic!"

"Heh heh heh!" The Driver answered with a sinister chuckle. Thunderclap crackled with purple lightning as it shot into the sky. Lan Jue urged Thor to follow.

Thunderclap stopped three thousand meters above the water. Its mechanical arms spread out wide to either side. The purple threads of lightning surrounding it grew more intense. The air sizzled as the water

element within reacted to the gathering electric energy.

The sky darkened, and choppy waves appeared on ocean's surface. In the space of an instant roiling clouds appeared in the sky. Purple lightning streaked between the thunderheads like a scene from the apocalypse.

Lan Jue did not move, content to watch the Driver and serve as backup. He didn't need to fear the errant power of the lightning, it would not harm him. Although their Disciplines were different, they were derivatives from the same source.

Brrrruhmm-! Thunder roared so loud it rattled bone. The black clouds flashed brilliant shades of purple. A single bolt of lightning shot down, piercing the ocean to the sound of cacophonous thunder.

Boom-! A pillar of boiling water was launched a thousand meters into the air. Bolts of lightning spider-webbed all along the ocean's surface, wreaking havoc below.

The whole ocean seemed to vibrate and a sickly purple aura radiated out from within, as though it were trying to isolate itself from the lightning. Wherever they touched, the purple electricity was dispersed.

"Hmph!" The Driver grunted, another blast of lightning thick as an oil truck fired into the sea. It hit straight and true like a spear from the heavens.

A terrible roar answered, and the waters churned and became violet, like a great crystal whose ends stretched into the distance. An enormous figure slowly floated to the surface. When it finally breached the massive body jerked and shook. Its body sported several nasty looking wounds. It looked much like the progenitor from Taihua, only smaller.

After so many encounters with the beasts, Lan Jue was beginning to develop a knowledge of their capabilities. Compared to others on the planet, this was likely the most powerful of the invaders. But in the grand scheme, progenitors weren't very strong. It was clear by the strength of its vital crystal.

While it was not the strongest, it was one of the most important breeds

of alien. It had the greatest influence on humanity, and was capable of overtaking whole planets. Through the world's own energies it made itself stronger, making it the fastest maturing of all the creatures. Lan Jue was convinced that, left unchecked, a progenitor would absorb all the planet's life force and return it to a home planet to nourish them. What he did not know was what would happen if they let it get to that point.

They were weaker to begin with, and were rarer to encounter. In fact he hadn't come across a single one out in space. If there were enough of them they could invade planets as they pleased. It wouldn't take them long to overtake the habitable planets in all the alliances until humans had no means to fight back.

And yet in all this time Lan Jue had only ever seen them on Taihua, Moonfiend, and now here. Three only. It made him question just how many progenitors there actually were.

Already it appeared this one was in poor condition. The destructive power of the Driver's Primordial lightning was too much for the creature to contend with, and the damage was severe. The lightning's devastating effects were spreading all through the alien's body.

Thunderclap brought its mechanical hands together. Just as the Driver was preparing the final, fatal blow Lan Jue stopped him. "Wait!"

"Eh?" The Driver stopped, taken aback. "Why?" He was drunk on his power. Ever since transforming his Discipline his combat prowess had leapt to new heights. Outside of a Domain even a first-degree Paragon couldn't match him in direct attack power. The feeling was intoxicating.

But he also had total faith in Lan Jue. Without the Jewelry Master's help he may never have achieved this level of strength, much less a chance at becoming Paragon.

Lan Jue explained. "This kind of alien evolves quickly, and is specialized in devouring energy. Keeping it alive may help us learn more about it. The vital crystal isn't the only thing useful about it. A progenitor is much more dangerous than the ones we meet out in space. Let's take this one back alive."

“How do we bring back something this large?” The Driver asked incredulously.

Lan Jue smiled. “We can’t, but I know someone who can.” As he spoke, he looked into the distance.

A cyan light flickered in the sky, in in the space of a breath Lan Qing arrived to join the two of them.

Lan Jue explained his thinking to his brother. After a moment of thought, he answered. “It isn’t impossible. But you have to promise to keep this quiet. If people knew we were bringing it back we’d start a panic.”

“That goes without saying,” the Driver replied. “Come, our Majesty the Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven, let’s see what you can do.”

Lan Qing’s face jerked like he’d been struck. “Where’d you hear that title?”

The Driver shot a glance at Lan Jue, who helplessly said, “Dad was talking about it before we left Skyfire. He was trying to advertise the name. By the time we get back everyone will probably know it. Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven.”

The Eastern general’s face twitched. Suddenly his body was bathed in a golden glow, and a harmonious sensation flooded the area. The Driver allowed the storm clouds to disperse as Lan Qing’s golden aura swelled ever larger.

The image of Vairochana gradually came into being behind Lan Qing. His Buddha’s Revelation Domain spread out, turning the sea into a mirror of golden light. The violet hue was washed away and returned to normal. Vairochana’s image extended a hand, and slowly the progenitor rose from the waters. It continued to rise until it was lifted entirely into the air. Desperately it struggled, but under the weight of Buddha’s Revelation it was growing weaker by the moment.

Vairochana waved its hand, and a strange sight unfolded. The massive progenitor began to shrink – smaller and smaller – until it fit within the

Buddha's palm. Lan Qing made a motion with his hand and the reflection of his dharma disappeared, along with the progenitor.

"I have sealed it in my Domain," he said, "its powers are suppressed. It won't cause any problems for the time being. But for the safety of the planet I should bring it back to An Lun as soon as possible. We can study it there."

Despite its relative weakness, the potential strength of the creature and its energy-devouring abilities were still formidable. It was better to be cautious.

"Zeus-1, come in Zeus-1." Lan Jue called.

"Zeus-1 responding. What do you need boss?" Su Xiaosu replied.

"Perform a flyover and heck the area. Check to see if the purple territory is receding, and if the alien raiders have been reduced. Pay special attention to whether the reduction are uniform or just in one area."

"Aye aye. Give us a moment!" Lan Jue wanted to make sure there was only one progenitor on the planet. One had to be thorough in their eradication of evil.

Before long Su Xiaosu gave him her report. She told him that the aliens were gone, along with the purple haze they brought with them. The progenitor they'd captured was likely the only one.

Evidently progenitors were as rare as Lan Jue had thought. Although he did not know why, it was clear the beasts were in short supply.

Lan Qing left immediately for his battleship with the progenitor. They docked in the ruins of Lyr's capital to wait for more troops to arrive. Once things were more stable he would leave for An Lun.

The rescue mission had been a success. What's more, there was no evidence the progenitor had destroyed or consumed any Tears of Neptune.

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Dwarka 1, by the sea.

A figure rose from the sea, glistening with drops of water. Violet hair

and clothes clung to a perfectly formed body, but only until she was free of the ocean. Pearls of sea water rolled away leaving nothing behind, and soon she was entirely dry.

Pinched between her fingers was a glittering blue gemstone. She regarded it with a thoughtful expression.

Chapter 664: Gratitude

Had Lan Jue been there by the seaside, and had he seen the object in the woman's hands he would have recognized it immediately. He would have recognized her as well.

The Violet Princess was dressed as she had been when Lan Jue first saw her, just as breathtakingly beautiful. However, it was precisely her beauty that made her seem so strange – so unnatural. Although compared to their encounter on Moonfiend she seemed more 'human' now.

The gem in her hands was a Tear of Neptune, the s-ranked power gem only produced on Lyr.

After she stepped out of the ocean the Violet Princess lifted the power gem, pinched between her fingers. She peered at it with a curious look in her eye. Then, she popped it into her mouth. The beautiful alien disintegrated into a beam of light and vanished without a trace.

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Lyr University, it was the first time Lan Jue had actually visited it. He was greeted by Han Ruchao, Su He and other school leaders.

The university had survived thanks to their steadfast efforts. Han Ruchao's eyes were red as he struggled to contain his emotion. It was bittersweet, for although many lived a number of his teachers died in the fighting. Thankfully the loss of life was minimal, despite the high rate of injury.

The ordeal had been transformative for the students and faculty. Order was still maintained, those who were healthy made sure rules were followed and people remained calm. Once the aliens were gone people could begin to return to their homes.

"Thank you... thank you for coming so quickly. On behalf of this school and the whole city, thank you." Han Ruchao heartily shook Lan Jue's hand. Of course, he had no idea this was the same man who had embarrassed him so thoroughly during the student exchange so long ago.

Lan Jue's address was respectful. "It wasn't me, you should thank the soldiers who put their lives on the line. You're a real hero, Dean Han. Your direction saved many lives today. Thank you." Whatever grudge existed between Ruchao and Xu Renjian, in Lan Jue's eyes this man was as deserving of respect as any soldier.

He'd heard the Dean's determination to live or die with his school from Su He, and it had moved him. If everyone had his spirit and resolve, what would they have to fear from an enemy twice as strong as these beasts? His display of indomitable will was true Nobility!

While the leaders exchanged words, Star Division's soldiers were exiting their mechas. These aliens were typical fare for them, so they weren't overjoyed at the victory unlike their Lyrian counterparts.

Xiao Han had recovered some by now. He hobbled through the crowds of Division fighters in search of the fat one that had saved his life. He wanted to personally share his gratitude for saving his life.

The fat mecha wasn't hard to find, it was much larger than the others. He picked it out from far away. He hurried over, and on the way saw the mecha that had spoken to him during the fight. A beautiful woman stepped out.

His eyes lit up, she sure was pretty! She had long blonde hair, a slender body and legs that wouldn't quit; straight, thin and round. They ended in a nice rounded backside and a tiny waist. Any hot-blooded man would feel his heart race at the sight of her.

She floated to the ground and ran her hands through her tousled hair. She gathered the golden strands up into a ponytail.

All of a sudden the sky darkened. When Xiao Han lifted his head he saw an enormous mecha descending upon him. It was savage looking, like a rabid lion. The intensity that surrounded it left the surrounding Lyr students in awe. This was one impressive mecha.

A light beamed down to the ground below and a young man with short hair was deposited onto the field. He made his way toward the long-legged beauty with an easy smile on his face.

“Little Mi,” he called out to her.

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“Can’t you change your style? Barreling in here and there – what happens if you get surrounded? Then what?” Tang Mi showed her displeasure with Jin Tao through her scowl.

He chortled. “That’s who I am, I’ll never to learn to be as tricky as your brother!”

“Who are you calling tricky, dumb-mutt? You keep trying to hit on my sister and I’ll kick your ass!” Tang Xiao dropped from his mecha and stomped over toward Jin Tao.

Jin Tao’s response was thick with disdain. “Alright that’s enough. You think you can tell Little Mi how to live her life? You may be stronger than me now, but big brother here will make you think twice before throwing your weight around!”

“Bring it on, then!” Tang Xiao spat. “I’ve been waiting for the day for ages!”

The units Tang Xiao and Jin Tao commanded were the fastest improving of any. Their combat effectiveness soared. Tang Xiao had gained knowledge by the Descending Dragon Arhat’s rise, but Jin Tao had learned a lot from the ascension of Lan Qing. Both of them benefited greatly from their experiences, and their Disciplines reflected it. Tang Xiao had crossed the threshold into ninth level, while Tang Xiao was only half a step behind. But what he lacked in power he made up for in raw passion, a passion he inspired in others as well.

The two of them had infuriated the Bloodiron Khans during their time training in An Lun. One threw himself into any situation, consequences be damned. The other was as cunning and slippery as a fox. While outside of combat they were constantly trading barbs, in a fight their teams were practically unstoppable especially together.

Once during training Tang Xiao had come up with a plan, following Jin Tao as he ripped through the weak flank of the Khans. That day Jin Tao

became famous for his brutal fighting style. It was the highlight of the trip.

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Xiao Han stopped dead in his tracks a few steps away. When he saw the tubby pilot trot over he couldn't keep the rage from infecting his face. He couldn't believe it – never in a hundred thousand years could he imagine that hateful man would be the one to save his life. The same hateful man who'd disgraced him so intensely. But, how could he have become so strong in so short a time?

Tang Xiao must have felt Xiao Han's dagger-like glare, because he turned his way. When he saw him, he smiled wide enough to show all his teeth.

Xiao Han heaved a sigh and eventually urged his feet onward. Long trudging steps brought him before his savior. He grudgingly nodded his head. "Thank you."

Tang Xiao chuckled. "No need. I didn't like you before, but today I saw a true man. Forget what happened in the past, don't let me get too far ahead."

As he spoke, Tang Xiao extended his right hand.

Something flashes in Xiao Han's eyes. He hesitated, but finally took the offered hand. The obsessiveness with which he held onto that old hatred melted away as he took his comrade's hand. They were brothers in arms. The fatso wasn't quite so hateful as he used to be.

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Three days later.

Things had settled down on Lyr. Refugees returned to their homes to pick up the pieces. The East had sent a large number of soldiers to the planet and they had been busy searching for any vestige of the enemy.

Even if there was something hiding in the depths of the ocean they would find it. No matter where it came from, it was a living thing and that

meant their technology could detect it. Humanity's radar and sonar were exceptional.

Lan Qing had spread the news for all planets to keep their detection equipment on and at full power. Everyone had to be vigilant for the presence of progenitors. In addition to the radar, they were encouraged to begin regular patrols as well.

The military approved his plan immediately. What's more, they recommended the same to the other Alliances.

Lan Jue look through the window of his room, out over the azure sea. He couldn't shake the dark cloud over his heart. On the surface it looked like things were back to normal, but Lyr had suffered terribly at the hands of the aliens – and not just the cities and people, but the delicate oceans as well. It would take a decade or more for the wounds to heal.

What's more, they had responded quickly. If the progenitor had had more time the damage it caused might never have been reversed. It was important not to underestimate how frightening these creatures could be.

Lan Qing had left the day before and had put a lot of distance between him and Lyr already. He had to rush back, there was a lot for him to do.

The Star Division, meanwhile, remained on Lyr to rest for a time. They remained in part to help with the recovery efforts, but also as a reward. Lyr was a beautiful place, and anyone who liked the ocean would enjoy it here. Ever since Star Division's inception the soldiers had either trained intensively or fought intensively. They deserved a break.

At the university's insistence Star Division was housed in auxiliary dorms on campus. Han Ruchao knew he couldn't pass up this excellent opportunity for Star Division's lauded soldiers to teach his students. With Lan Jue's blessing several ninth-level Talents and God-ranked pilots were assembled to impart what they could to the university's population.

After the battle LU was flush with a unity of purpose. Those teachers and students who distinguished themselves were handsomely rewarded by the Eastern government. The military was also eager to extend invitations. It wouldn't be long before those students who grow to become notable

soldiers in their own right.

Sometimes bad circumstances could lead to good results. At least as far as Lan Jue could tell, humanity would fight together in the face of this foreign threat. They would need that if they had any hope to survive.

He turned away from the window and looked at the bed. Zhou Qianlin sat upon it cross-legged, quietly meditating.

Chapter 665: Violet Reunion

She was dressed in a soft egg-shell dress, her pretty face framed by long black hair. Long lashes rested against her fair skin, soft as an infant's. Floods of immortal qi pulsed from her and painted the room in rippling power and marvelous light. It drew a sharp contrast to her demure nature.

The moment his eyes fell upon her they filled with warmth. He walked over to the bed gently sat beside her. There he sat, quietly watching her and nothing else. His nostrils filled with her fresh sense, and his skin tingled from the waves of immortal qi issuing from her. For a minute Lan Jue felt like he could relax.

Bzz! Bzz! The communicator on his wrist hummed for his attention. When he looked down to see who it was, surprise crossed his face. He stepped outside and dialed in the number.

"You're done?" Lan Jue asked, his surprise evident in his voice.

"Yup." The voice on the other end was low and calm.

"When did you get out? Did you break through?" He asked.

"If only it were that easy... ninth level ninth rank." The answering voice grew somewhat more brisk.

Lan Jue smiled. "Good, then I've got some competition! Let's see who breaks through first." The recipient of his teasing was none other than one of the Four Divine Monarchs, Hades – Chu Cheng.

"I hear you've created some 'Star Division'? I'm gone for a bit and suddenly you're a big shot!" Chu Cheng bantered.

Lan Jue laughed. "What? You got an opinion?"

"Course not," his friend replied. "My uncle came back, did you know that?"

Lan Jue replied. "I know, he went back with your dad."

"He spoke a lot about you. Makes me feel like I've been wasting time. Sounds like I missed some good times, too. So, I decided to rejoin the

world! I'm going to join the military too and kill me some aliens!"

Lan Jue laughed. "It's rare to see you working so hard. No longer interested in a life of decadence?"

Chu Cheng sniffed. "Oh I'm never giving that up. I'm going to get all the depravity out in the next three days, then I'm joining up! His Majesty the Terminator has decided to create an Adept army of his own. You hear about this? He's got over ten thousand Converts signed up already, and sent me an invite personally. He wants to make me a Legion commander." That was what the North would call their divisions it seemed, and Chu Cheng would have personal command of a thousand soldiers.

The Terminator could boast those numbers since the North was capable of creating their own Adepts. The Conversion process could turn any normal person into a Talent, it was their specialty. The drawback was it became nearly impossible for Converts to breakthrough to Paragon.

Lan Jue shook his head. "Sounds like the Terminator's well-informed! He probably heard about our success against the aliens. This is a good thing, but you all have to be careful when you face off against them. There is at least one alien stronger than father out there."

Chu Cheng was silent for a moment. "Relax, joining was actually my grandfather's idea. As far as Paragon is concerned I've got one foot in the door, a good fight might be just the inspiration I need. Being ninth level at my age without any genetic alteration means I've got a solid chance. Uncle has also shared a lot of what he's learned with me. A-Jue, I'm telling you, you better work hard or I will breakthrough before you."

Lan Jue chuckled. "Excellent! I'm excited to see which one will be better, too; Star Division or Hades' Legion."

"Who's comparing?" Chu Cheng whined. "You guys over there are an aberration. I'm hearing A-Li started a 'Poseidon Corps.' They're supposed to be somethin' else! And get this, they started with the members of Gobi Entertainment. Afterwards they opened up recruitment to only the very best mecha pilots and Adepts. They're relatively small, but work together even better than your Star Division. They even have a damn Bastion ship,

you know that?”

“I do,” he replied. “There’s a reason they’re called the richest family in history. He helped me quite a lot during the auction.”

“Well I got shit to do. Namely sit around and relax,” Chu Cheng said.

“A-Cheng!” Lan Jue suddenly interrupted.

“Eh?”

“These aliens are dangerous. Be careful, and do not underestimate them.”

“Enh!”

He hung up. A strange smile spread across Lan Jue’s face. A year ago himself, Chu Cheng and Hua Li had little more to do than relax and enjoy life. Hua Li had been the busiest one, and even he half-assed most of it. Back then none of them would have imagined they’d be military leaders today. How the tides change!

Lan Jue was preparing to return to the bed and cultivate with Qianlin when something stopped him. He froze, and slowly turned to look.

There was a purple silhouette standing by the window.

Her back was to him, but he would never forget those long purple locks, or that perfectly sculpted figure.

The hairs on the back of his neck raised, his muscles tensed. A surge of energy flooded from his Core. A flash of blue light erupted from him and immediately Lan Jue’s skin became crystalline and translucent.

He utilized the connection between Qianlin and himself to call her to his side and took her hand.

“You’re so nervous!” The beguiling voice wafted through the air. She turned to face him.

“Violet Princess!” He growled.

She looked at him, her face wearing a bewitching smile. It came much smoother now, more natural than before – like an actual human. But only

'like' a human. She was still too beautiful, too manufactured to be real.

It was inconceivable to him that one of the strongest aliens would simply appear in this place. From what he could tell, she was here for him.

The Violet Princess took a step forward.

Violent bursts of electric energy flared around Lan Jue. Qianlin's body was surrounded by a pale white light. He didn't dare give the Princess any leeway – she had been a match for his mother, a Nirvana-level Paragon! Only his father would be able to contend with her.

"You don't need to be nervous. I only came to speak with you." She punctuated the thought with an enigmatic smile.

"What do you have to say?" Lan Jue's voice was low and guarded.

She stopped for a moment to think before continuing. "Your human bodies are very interesting. So much... potential. I like the structure. You seem to be a good specimen for your race, and I would like to mate with you. I am eager to learn about humanity's genetic construction. We wish to accept this peculiarity. I can feel the promise in you."

Lan Jue was dumb-founded. She was here to proposition him. An alien propositioning a human? How would one even describe the concept?!

The Princess then seemed to notice the woman beside him. "This one is your mate?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I love her."

She cantered her head to the side. "This is the same as a mate. In our royal family we do not mind sharing mates. We are only interested in prime genetic material. She can join with us as well."

"Why would we want to join with you?" He remained calm, poised.

"Evolution!" She said. "My species has an unparalleled ability to evolve. We consume, incorporate, adapt. We are the strongest race in the universe!"

Lan Jue smirked at her. "If that's true, why do you choose to take on human form?"

Her response was matter-of-fact. “Every species has its advantages and disadvantages. You humans have great potential, but very limited lifespans. After a short time, you die. We do not. As long as we have energy to consume we will continue to exist. From the birth of our mother planet to today’s royal family, you cannot imagine the power we possess. Join with us, and you will gain the ability to consume energy as well.”

“I need time to think about it,” Lan Jue replied.

She nodded. “Alright. I will find you again.” With that, the Princess vanished in a flash of purple light.

Lan Jue stood in the center of the room, still for a long time. When he was sure the Princess had truly left, he breathed a sigh of relief. He pulled Qianlin into his arms, though the look in his eyes was contemplative. Humanity needed to understand these aliens.

For the Princess to appear here like she did, it meant his guesses were right. They were here for the Tears of Neptune. Their brief exchange had also been very informative.

Progenitors seemed to be the natal form of their species. They weren’t the strongest, but they were the beginning. That made them vitally important to their species.

The fact that they assumed human forms must mean that their natural bodies had some disadvantage they were trying to overcome. It somehow curtailed their continuous evolution, probably restricted by universal protogenia. If that were not the case he couldn’t think of why they would want to be like humans. They would simply continue to evolve and dominate the universe. Seemingly that was impossible for them as they were.

As for her offer...

Beautiful as she was, the Violet Princess was not human. To Lan Jue these aliens were wild and vicious beasts.

Mate? Hah!

Chapter 666: Jue Di's Condition

The moment he was sure they were alone, Lan Jue dialed his father's number into his communicator. He told Jue Di everything that had transpired.

"These creatures are highly intelligent. She was probably testing you." Jue Di said once the story was finished.

"Dad, when you faced the alien in the Starfields we learned how strong they were. You are the most powerful human in history, is it possible universal protogenia will rebound on you, too?"

Jue Di was silent.

Lan Jue's heart skipped a beat. His father had always been good about replying to his questions. This time, though...

Jue Di took a deep breath. "I wasn't going to tell you and your brother, but now that you've asked it's time. Yes – once a human reaches a certain degree of power the universe attempts to restrict them. You will begin to sense it once you achieve Nirvana. What we call the Infinite is just the beginning, a bottleneck to immortality. However, with no Immortal Realm there is no way to protect ourselves from the universe. The immortal of ancient days had reached heights the universe could not sustain, they surpassed the limits of this reality and hid in a place that kept them safe.

"This place was the Immortal Realm. No one knows how this pocket reality came into being. They say it was created by a being of immense power. As more and more immortals rose to prominence, this realm was no longer able to hide them from the repercussions of defying natural law. In the end, it collapsed. The immortals perished, or perhaps found some other way to hide their power from the cosmos. The Immortal Realm went by many names; Olympia, Heaven, Western Paradise... they all described the same thing. A place of safety for beings that could no longer live in the same reality as everything else.

"None of the ancient books spoke of it, but after years of experience I know that those who came to achieve immortality – be they sages,

Buddhas or what have you – were unhappy. Every day the pressure of their stolen existence bore down on them, forcing them to live in cramped seclusion. I was blessed with talent and a potent lineage, and when I was your age my search for power was undeniable. I was determined to be the strongest human to have ever drawn breath. I achieved this, but when I did I began to sense something wasn't right.

“When I achieved Nirvana I began to sense a darker part of reality pressing me. Of course I did not care at the time. I pressed back and found my way into the Infinite. I began to feel the danger, but my potential would not be stopped. I could not simply stop cultivating and halt progress. I came upon the border of mortality, felt myself forced against the barrier.

“In the old world when a being reached my level of power they had to face tribulation lightning. Surviving meant entrance into the Immortal Realm. It was said that when the Immortal Realm was first created the danger from tribulation lightning was not so terrible. Only once the Immortal Realm could no longer bear the power within it did the lightning become truly terrifying. Only the truly strong could survive, for only the truly strong could help the Immortals maintain the reality they'd built for themselves.

“Now it's different. There is no immortal realm, and I must rely only on myself. Tribulation lightning has faded into legend, but the rejection I feel from reality is real. Every time I use my powers the universe can feel it and attempts to suppress what it senses as an aberration. It seeks to destroy me by consuming my life force. This is the reason why I hid away on Ziluo, cutting myself off from the rest of humanity. I had to take every precaution not to reveal my strength. But over the last couple of years I have felt I can no longer subdue my powers. It leaks, taking my life force with it. Under these conditions I have perhaps only three more years before my time in this reality is over, and only if I don't use my powers.”

Although Lan Jue had guessed at his father's danger, hearing it struck him like a ton of bricks. He hadn't known his condition had become so bad.

“Then, when you fought the aliens...” His voice trailed off.

Jue Di answered, his smile evident in the sound of his voice. “A true man has responsibilities he cannot shirk. You think I’ll let the universe tell me what to do?”

“What can we do? How do we stop it?” Lan Jue asked.

His father’s voice was solemn. “If the Immortal Realm is truly gone, then I don’t have the power to create one myself. My choices are limited; I can find a way to extend my life, or continue to this way until it claims me. I am close to what we call Immortality, but I need enough power to contend against universal protogenia and survive. I don’t have this power. However, if I were somehow able to break through and uncover the secrets of the Immortals, death would not take me so easily.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what I experienced in the Starfields, against the alien planet. Whatever it was possessed the power of an Immortal. Those beasts couldn’t be called Immortals, but it possessed the strength of one. It must have some way of defending itself from universal elimination. However, during the fight it didn’t give chase, likely for the same reason I can’t show my real power. It would be destroyed just like I would.”

As he listened, a thought crystallized in Lan Jue’s mind.

He perked up. “Dad... what if you could command more power than the greatest immortals? Could you resist the universe then?”

“The ancient texts seem to suggest it,” Jue Di answered. “For instance, one of the Three Pure Ones could do so. I’m sure that somewhere in existence there is this power, but it isn’t me. Perhaps you two, the younger generation could try. It’s likely that whatever method the alien is using to protect itself from obliteration takes a great deal of energy. They must continuously consume to keep from being destroyed. Approaching you as a mate was probably an attempt to perfect their own DNA. They’re a truly frightening race – strong and smart.”

Lan Jue’s voice was low, hard. “It seems an all-out war with these creatures is inevitable, and that means we’ll need to face their false

immortal. Do you have a strategy?"

Chapter 667: War Comes!

Jue Di went on. “Right now it’s hard to say. What we can say is the aliens fear our Discipline. We must also acknowledge the strength of our destructive technology. Bastion ships, for instance, can cause real havoc. More specifics will only be made clear when war breaks out. What we do know is that old shyster was right. This is the worst danger humanity has ever faced. Come back to Skyfire. Now that we know she can find you at any time, you’re safest with me. Focus on cultivation, then once you and your girl have broken through you can at least flee if an alien as strong as her comes for you.”

“Yeah.”

After speaking with his father Lan Jue felt crestfallen. Not for the dangers to his own life, but because of these aliens’ apparent ability to be everywhere. With the Princesses capabilities and ability to hide in plain sight, infiltrating humanity’s cities was as easy as a wink.

One could only imagine what a creature as strong as the Princess could do in the heart of a metropolitan area. Her kind were even more frightening than the alien planets themselves. At least you knew they were coming. Even humanity’s strongest couldn’t compare.

A cold light flit through Lan Jue’s eyes, mingling with stoic determination. Waiting around wasn’t going to save them from extinction. They had to bring the fight to the enemy, make the alien planets the battlefield at not human civilization. When he returned to the Avenue he would prepare for another scouting mission, maybe thin their numbers a little more.

Star Division left Lyr once recovery efforts were fully under way, and returned to Skyfire. All three alliances had redoubled their war preparations after news from Lyr broke. The West paused in their constant campaign to cause trouble. They joined the efforts of the North and East, carefully searching outlying planets for signs of a progenitor’s presence. Special attention was paid to especially fertile worlds.

Tragic news awaited Lan Jue and Star Division when they got back to the Avenue!

One of the North's planets – an administrative planet on the borders, full of life – had been attacked. Just as on Lyr the aliens had appeared without warning, attacking with even more ferocity than the ocean planet had suffered. Surveys of the destruction showed that at least three progenitors had fed on it.

By the time the nearest fleet arrived the planet was a rotten purple globe. The creatures had bled it dry, and the progenitors were nowhere to be seen. All that remained was a broken husk of a world where once life had flourished. The death toll was expected to be over fifty million. Nearly every living thing had been wiped out. The whole world was a necropolis.

It was only the third time aliens had appeared on human occupied land. Taihua had been the first, and thankfully few had died. This was thanks to its low population, as well as Lan Jue and the Wine Master's quick response. Lyr had suffered and many had died, but at least the planet survived.

But this time, in only two days a beautiful world had been laid to waste. Fifty million lives, snuffed out.

The news sent a shudder through the spine of every breathing human. The North held an emergency senate meeting and declared war against the three alien planets. Demonstrations were held all throughout Northern space while the call went out for soldiers to go on alert. A draft was implemented as well. In an impressive show of force the first, third, sixth, eleventh and thirteenth fleet were dispatched to escort the Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship to the Shattered Starfields.

Clearly the alien menace had provoked humanity's mightiest Alliance.

Meanwhile the North asked the East to send out the scouting party they'd used before as support in their sweep of the Starfields. Already they were moving the Arachnid-and Heron-class Bastions to the border in preparation. The remaining bastions were sent to the bigger planets most

vulnerable to alien attack, with their crew on full alert.

At last, after great suffering, war had come to the human worlds.

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“Ahhh!” A woman desperately clutched her child, trying to shield it. The purple blade-like edge that pierced her chest, running her and the child through, was unmoved. Two exsanguinated fell lifelessly to the ground.

The horrifying images flashed before them as a holograph. The Skyfire councilmembers clenched their fists as they looked on.

The North had shared the recordings with them, images from the planet they’d lost.

Tragedy couldn’t describe what had happened. It was a slaughter. Not just humans, but every animal and plant was gone, given no quarter. They were like a plague of locusts, devouring everything.

The image frozen in that terrifying moment.

The Wine Master’s drawn, angry face turned to the others.

“You see it, what happened to the North’s citizens. You’ve witnessed their savagery. Even before all-out war their monstrosity is clear. On a day they turned this beautiful planet into a graveyard. If not for the arrival of military vessels, there likely wouldn’t have been a planet to return to. Ten percent of human somehow lived, twenty percent of fauna. Fifty percent of all plants were destroyed. If not for the quick reaction of the Northern army, those progenitors would have devoured every life.

“Judging by the speed with which they took the world, if something isn’t done all human planets will be striped of life in a year’s time, and most of that time would just be traveling from one place to the other.”

Everyone surrounding the table knew how terrifying the creatures were. After the auction, Skyfire Avenue especially understood the worth of their vital crystals, but these bloody images reminded them of what they were up against.

“I’ll go and help the North scout out the enemy,” Lan Jue said to the

Wine Master. He was, after all, the chairman of the Avenue's council.

The Wine Master's brows furrowed. "Their sudden appearance, and the force with which they struck, suggests this was a premeditated effort to strike our scouting capabilities. I'll go with you, and we'll leave Star Division here to help the military prepare. I recommend we all brace ourselves, war will soon come to the East. These planets' teleportation capabilities are to be feared."

Chapter 668: Admiral Kang Hui

The Wine Master looked at Lan Jue. “Jewelry Master, bring the council up to speed on the North’s battle plans.”

He nodded. “All told the North has seven Bastion ships, and are in the process of constructing three more. Right now they’ve sent three of those and five interstellar fleets – a third of their combined military might – to the Shattered Starfields. Their aim is to sweep through the area and clear it of the enemy presence. Although the Starfields are dangerous and complicated, they plan to rely on the firepower from the Bastion and warships to clear a path. But what they really need is to find out where those planets are hiding. Our responsibility will be to deliver that information. I will be going with the Wine Master, Epochrion, Gourmet, Pauper, Pharmacist, and Driver. Our primary role will be scouting and support. Our goals are in line with the North; take the fight to the creatures instead of waiting for them to turn our worlds into battlefields.

“Star Division will remain behind under the command of Chief Officer Su Xiaosu. If any aliens should appear in Eastern territory, her orders are to dispatch Star Division immediately and repel the invaders. In preparation for this Majesty has had its engines upgraded so we can respond as quickly as possible. Our Eastern military also has measures in place for early warning. Their Bastions have been moved inward toward the center of our territory – specifically near Skyfire, and Taihua. They’re on standby, ready to react at a moment’s notice.

The Wine Master nodded. “We have no time to lose. The Keeper and Bookworm will remain here and handle the Avenue’s dealings.”

It was decided. Most of the Avenue’s strongest would go out as a guerilla scout force, but Star Division would remain behind.

As for the West, one of their two Bastions was under the auspices of Gobi Entertainment’s new Poseidon Corps. Two others were under construction and would be battle-ready soon.

War was on the horizon!

Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion.

Admiral Kang Hui stared at the starmap flickering on his screen. His face was stained with a dark glower.

The Bastion's commander had once been an Easterner. His parents had immigrated to Luo when he was very young. Even at five years old he'd shown great talent, so they enrolled him in a military school even before he could count. ¹ He continued to wow his instructors with his martial brilliance, and at the age of sixteen he graduated and joined the military.

Over the next twenty years he climbed the chain of command, beginning from the bottom as a private and eventually making his way to an admiralship. From there he continued to make his mark on military leadership. Now, at only forty-five, he was one of the ten top commanders of the Northern military, and was commander of the intimidating Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship.

He'd been entrusted with leading the North's military branches into battle against the alien foes. The other bastions guarding the Starfields' borders were also under his command. This was the same for the five interstellar fleets making up his entourage. He was the head of the beast.

Of course, the head always had a neck telling it where to point.

The North had no option but to mobilize in such force and respond to the alien attack. The destruction of the planet – Xitu – had terrified and enraged everyone. Politicians relied on and were beholden to their constituents, who were furious at their failure. Many planets were the backdrop for demonstrations chastising the government for their failure.

Fearing a revolution, the Northern government had to act. On the other hand, the aliens had shown them the scope of their terrible power. In the end the leadership designed this campaign. But it also had an underlying purpose, to capture more vital crystals.

Everything humanity knew about these aliens, every recorded encounter was locked in Kang Hui's memory, burned into his mind. Still he was

anxious at how little they knew. The enemy we don't know is the hardest to fight.

The videos he'd studied the most was the fall of the Seventh Fleet. He saw how the aliens fought without fear of death, resistant to the weapons man was so proud of. He watched as an alien drank up the blast from a Capital ship like a sip of water. Surely there was a limit to their defenses, but where was the line?

Bastion ships were the pinnacle of humanity's technology, an earth-shattering weapon of mass destruction. If they were found to be ineffective, mankind's troubles were beyond reckoning. If that were the case then they were truly facing an extinction-level event. No matter what they had to strike back as hard as they could, right now.

"Reporting, sir!" A captain loudly called from outside the door.

"Enter." He said.

The officer quickly walked to his side. "Admiral, First Fleet has reached its prescribed location. They're prepared to clear the way."

"Good." Kang Hui nodded. If they wanted to strike at the heart of the alien menace they would have to open a path. They would use the overwhelming firepower of their fleet to carve a route.

However, utilizing this method was costly. It would require a lot of firepower and hardy defense to make their way inside. Both drained significant amounts of energy. There weren't going to be any resupply depots where they were going, so they only had each other to rely on. It wasn't as simple as dredging a path, and their exit vanished as they asteroid fields moved through space. That meant they needed enough energy to get back home, too. One could imagine how demanding this was.

There was a reason the Shattered Starfields had been left to pirates, and they knew it. The cost of entering the Starfields to face the pirates outweighed the benefits. However, this time things were different. There was no greater threat to the safety of humankind than these alien invaders. What's more, the future of humanity lay in the vital crystals

borne by this foe. Both politically and from a resources standpoint, this campaign needed to occur.

Kang Hui had recommended the West and East join them for the strike, it just made sense to face the enemy with the combined might of humanity. However the Northern senate vetoed the request. Despite the official response that the North was capable of handling the problem itself, Kang Hui knew their decision was born from greed. They didn't want to share the spoils of war.

The Eastern auction had been a terrible blow to the pride of the other Alliances. After all, in one day they had acquired enough ships to build a whole fleet! But the crystals they'd acquired were promised to give rise to more Paragons, not to mention insights into the exuvium process.

The benefits of those crystals was a significant reason in the quick military response. The North had been ready for a fight for the last six months, with all their troops mustered and their ships ready. Now they were headed for the heart of the enemy.

“Admiral, shall we have them open a path?”

He responded by waving his hand. “Hold their ground and await further orders. Has the Eastern scouting party arrived?”

A staff officer broke in. “They should be here in three hours.”

Kang Hui responded. “When they do have their commander get in contact.”

“Aye aye!”

If not for Kang Hui's insistence they would have had no outside help. However Kang Hui's merits as a leader spoke volumes, and he knew the worth of combat intelligence. For such a small squad to learn so much, this mysterious Eastern scouting party had to be something special. If they really could do what they claimed, their addition to this campaign would be invaluable.

Entering the Starfields was a desperate and costly endeavor. If the information from the East was true and these planets could teleport, what

would they do if they went in and their target was already gone? Not only did they leave their homeland largely undefended, but the cost of a failed campaign would be staggering. They absolutely had to learn all they could.

On the other hand, Kang Hui was a military man. He was too smart to believe everything these Easterners told him. He had his own scouts to dispatch as well. Over the last day they had tirelessly worked to perfect their battle plan. However none of it could be put into effect until they had more concrete information.

Kang Hui stood up and walked forward. One wall of his office was composed of transparent metal alloy as clear as glass. He looked out over the beautiful expanse of space. He had spent over a third of his life out here, and it had left him with a deep affinity for the cosmos.

It had also blessed him with an intuition that bordered on supernatural. All of his responsibilities weighed on him, but also sharpened his mind and inspired his battle fervor. No matter what, he had been entrusted with the safety of the North – of all humanity – and he was going to do his job.

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Zeus-1 glided behind a guide ship, leading them to the imposing Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship ahead. Lan Jue had seen these monstrous war machines before, but had never gotten close.

As he watched the ship come closer, he was filled with a deep esteem. This was a symbol of humanity's greatness! From a distance it was hard to tell it apart from a planet.

In fact, a lot was similar to a planet during the construction of these ships. The hearts of them were very much like the cores of planets in many ways. They even had their own gravity, comparable to one-third what it had been on Earth.

They were all very well equipped to boot. The living quarters were virtually indistinguishable from a city on a planet's surface. Of course their greatest capabilities were in combat. Not typical combat, certainly, for their size made them the ultimate force for destruction. Their weapon systems numbered in the tens of thousands. Be it defense, main guns,

secondary weaponry or even its gravitation field, a Bastion ship was built to deliver death.

Chapter 669: Female Officer

Bastion ships were large enough that they could carry a great deal of resources. With a Bastion as part of a deployed fleet, its combat effectiveness doubled. They were the ultimate weapons of war, and where they went destruction followed.

Of course, commanding such power also required resources, a tremendous amount of resources. It was for this reason that the Eastern Alliance was only able to create two in its whole history. It was no coincidence that the North controlled the most resources, and the most Bastion ships.

The Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion did not look like an enormous metal orb. Its exterior was a deep, rich brown. Where it not for the fact it bristled with weapons, it would be very easy to mistake it for a planet. Although it couldn't transfer like the alien worlds, that did not mean it moved slowly. At top speed it was quite impressive. And like the aliens, the ship could destroy whole planets.

Bastions were beyond divisions. Their 'class' distinction was just for naming purposes. ¹ However there were differences, largely in size. It went without saying that the mass of the ships were directly correlated to how much damage they could dole out. The larger they were, the more energy they had at their disposal, and the more weapons they could fit into it.

An example of their dominating endowment were railguns, typically used as planetary installations. Bastions were able to haul these massive weapons into space and employ them in battle. This one, for example, had three thousand six hundred Alpha railguns on board. It was supplemented by five hundred and forty Beta guns and eighty more Gamma-level.

The classification system was best described by comparison. If one used war ships as an analogy then an Alpha railgun packed as much punch as a full volley from a battleship. Beta guns were as destructive as expedition ships. Gamma guns, therefore, matched the output of a Sovereign-class dreadnaught's main cannon.

In addition to all of that each ship had its ace in the hole; a unique main weapon.

Lan Jue had witnessed the preeminent power of a Bastion ship before. Zeus-1 had just barely escaped it during their trip to the Shattered Starfields so long ago. He remembered how it had cleared a huge area of debris with a single shot.

Tyrannosaurus was the second largest of the North's seven Bastions. The largest was named after their capital city, Luo. The next closest in size after Tyrannosaurus were Arachnid and Heron, and it was at least three times their mass. Lan Jue had no data on this machine's main weapon, but he could imagine what kind of devastation it was capable of.

The guide ship leading them in began to reduce speed as they approached Tyrannosaurus. Zeus-1 followed their lead. As they neared one section of the ship opened to reveal a hangar. That was their ultimate destination.

The Driver whistled in appreciation. "This sure as hell gets your attention! After all our cultivating I thought I was strong. Compared to this thing, though, all my strength means nothing."

He wasn't wrong. Assuming a straight fight even Jue Di wouldn't survive an encounter against one of these. A single person's abilities – no matter how profound – couldn't stand up against the culmination of science and technology.

As they pulled it they got a better look at it. The surface was bristling with weapons, enough to make a hedgehog jealous. Every one of them sat on a swivel, designed to move and adapt to any threat. From what Lan Jue remembered during his time in school, control of the railguns wasn't centralized. They were separated into sectors, each one independently controlled by a team of gunnery soldiers and a commanding officer. Only the Alpha guns were exposed. The locations of the Beta and Gamma guns were unknown until they were engaged for battle.

At least three hundred more hangars existed similar to this one, large enough to accommodate battleships. Fully engaged, ten thousand

warships could be launched in three minutes. Each of them were able fighters by themselves.

Zeus-1 followed the guide ship passed the thick hangar doors. Once inside the guts of the ship were a world of metal. The hangar was a huge silver-matte rectangle that didn't reflect any of the dozens of floodlights overhead. They slowly glided along until they were told where to land.

Before long a verticar arrived, followed by a cadre of mechas. They fell into position as the car pulled up to Zeus-1.

The Avenue's scouting party didn't include Jue Di this time, he'd chosen to remain behind in seclusion. After all, they weren't under the command of the Eastern government. Lan Jue told his father that their primary mission was scouting, and they could keep the adventures to a minimum. Even then Jue Di insisted Luo Xianni accompany them. So, although they didn't have the firepower they had last time, the scouting party was by no means weak.

Lan Jue was, of course, this crew's commanding officer. He was supported by Luo Xianni, the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Gourmet, and Pauper. Aside from the Paragons there was also the Driver, Pharmacist and Su Xiaosu who knew more about the Starfields than anyone. A few group, but composed of the strongest Skyfire Avenue could offer.

However theirs would be a quiet power. They discussed it en route to Tyrannosaurus, and agreed that the North would bear the brunt of the burden when it came to combat. The Paragons would only get involved if necessary. Gods only knew what the North was planning, but that was their prerogative. If the Paragons' help was desperately needed that was fine, but the Bastion's weapons array could cause more wholesale destruction than any of them could muster!

For these reasons Lan Jue decided not to show the Avenue's hand if they could avoid it. However, they would spare to efforts in scouting for the North and give them the best chances at success. After all, this effort was on behalf of humanity. All prejudices needed to be put aside.

The scouting party disembarked. Clanking metal and hissing gears arose

as the mechas snapped to attention. Besides Lan Jue, the others of his team were hidden beneath uniforms and Star Division helmets, concealing their identities.

“We welcome the Eastern representatives to the Tyrannosaurus.” A melodious voice greeted them. The door to the verticar hissed as it opened, and its passenger exited.

A female officer was revealed to them. She was tall and thin, with fair skin and ruddy cheeks that made her look healthy ² Her meticulously pressed military uniform outlined her beguiling figure ³. The epaulettes on her shoulder marked her as a colonel.

Lan Jue frowned. Although the North didn’t know he’d brought the Paragons, they were aware the team was an arm of Star Division. Yet they only sent a colonel and a small welcoming party. Lan Jue didn’t bother with such details usually, but it showed how little regard the North had for them.

The colonel stepped forward and snapped a salute. “I’m operations staff officer Ling Ya ⁴. On behalf of Admiral Kang Hui I’d like to welcome you to Tyrannosaurus. He’s asked that you see him immediately when you arrive.”

Lan Jue was displeased with the apparent snub, but recognized that the alien menace was a more serious matter. He nodded. “Fine. I am Lan Jue, commander of the scout team.” He began walking toward the verticar.

“Wait!” The colonel extended a hand, blocking his path. A small smile spread across her lips.

“Hm?” He looked at her.

“We have to confirm your identities before providing,” she announced. “A physical scan is also required. This is necessary to confirm who you are, and to ensure you don’t bring any dangerous bacteria or viruses on board.”

Lan Jue’s face darkened. “Do you understand what you’re asking, Colonel Ling Ya?”

These were routine practices for soldiers entering a Bastion, but they

weren't any ordinary scouting team. The East certainly would have told them the status of Star Division. Their presence had been requested, to say nothing of the many checks they underwent just to approach Tyrannosaurus. This wasn't just a slight against the East, it was a show of dominance.

The smile never slipped from her face. "I'm sorry commander Lan Jue. This is routine, don't make this harder than it has to be."

Lan Jue smiled as well. He wouldn't lose his temper with a woman. "It appears as though the North no longer requires our help. As you've made clear. We'll be going."

Ling Ya's brows furrowed. She didn't anticipate he'd make this difficult. "This is unacceptable, commander. We are not making unreasonable requests. We ask for your cooperation, otherwise this exchange will be unpleasant."

He laughed. Saying nothing further he turned around and headed back toward Zeus-1.

Clank-clank! Two mechas lumbered into view, blocking his path.

Surprised, Lan Jue turned back around and stared at Ling Ya. Her smile was gone, and in its place was a cold glare. "You are on the North's Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship. You may be Easterners but as long as you are here you will submit to our regulations. You are not permitted to come and go as you please!"

"Drama. I like it." He picked off his helmet as he walked to Lan Jue's side. "Tell me lady, you think these mechas are gunna stop us?"

Chapter 670: Dazzling Ice Lotus

When she saw the Driver's rugged, roguish appearance her scowl deepened. "Behave yourself."

He answered with a shrug. "How well I behave depends on the company. If I'm not getting any respect why should I sow you any?"

"You!"

A flash of light blinded Ling Ya's eyes. All she saw was the Driver shoot a hand out, and suddenly the two mechas blocking their path were blasted away. They flew a full ten minutes before striking the metal floor and grinding to a halt.

For half a moment the other mechas were stunned and unmoving. Then the sound of laser weapons revving up filled the hangar, and barrels were pointed their way waiting for the colonel's command.

"Hold your fire!" Ling Ya screeched. Part of her purpose here was to test the scouts' grit but she didn't want to start a real firefight. That would surely cause irrevocable consequences.

"Yeah, come to their rescue." The Driver had suddenly reappeared in front of Ling Ya. He fixed her with his hard eyes, bolts of purple lightning dancing in their depths.

She staggered back a step but quickly regained her composure. A pale white light surrounded her, and as she spoke her words were hard but the tone was cowardly. "How dare you cause trouble aboard this Bastion! We'll have you court martialed!"

His eyebrows shot up. "Court martial? For your Northern army? Grand! Give me the invitation and I'd be happy to play around with your stuffed suits for a little while. Now I'm tired of your poor reception. Let us in, or don't be surprised if I lose my temper. And if you can't do that then call someone who can."

Soldier temperaments were rarely on an even keel. Ling Ya especially, as a twenty-something officer who earned her place on Tyrannosaurus. She

lost her composure and in response the white aura around her flared. Instantly the temperature dropped. Her skin became as clear as ice, her black hair white as snow. Rising into the air she was surrounded by pulses of energy that were surprisingly strong.

But she wasn't looking at the Driver. Her eyes were fixed on Lan Jue. "Commander, I know you walked away as Champion of the Grand Adept tournament. It's a shame I couldn't participate, being a member of the arm. Now we have a chance to see if I could have beaten you. If you can best me, your scouting team can proceed without verification."

"Just you?" Another voice answered her, and another figure stepped up to stand by Lan Jue's side. When their helmet was revealed, Su Xiaosu's face was revealed.

"Beat me, then you might have what it takes to challenge the boss." She didn't mince words. Even before she was done talking the Morning Star rose into the air. A corona of golden light radiated out like the heavens were opening behind her. She flicked her wrist and a whip of crackling gold light lashed out at Ling Ya.

Her answer was to sniff dismissively. Her arms spread out, a spear having appeared in her hand. Ling Ya was born as genetic anomaly, her Discipline awakening at the moment of her birth. This was considered congenital Talent and meant her cultivation was far superior to a normal Adept's. As a result she was a ninth level seventh rank Talent at such a young age, and what's more was one of the few in Northern military service whose body was uncorrupted by technology.

Ling Ya had volunteered for this assignment. She was one of their crack fighters as well as a respected staff officer. Her rank was not indicative of her abilities nor her station here on Tyrannosaurus. She was a rising star in the North, to be certain.

When she'd heard that the scouting team was headed by commander Lan Jue – the same Lan Jue that had won the Great Adept Tournament – she was filled with a burning desire to test herself against him. She got her wish when the Admiral hinted for her to feel out their abilities. Ultimately

this was the inspiration behind her tough and somewhat demeaning greeting.

Ling Ya extended her spear and all the chill that had filled the air vanished, gathered into a single point. In the instant her spear and the whip met, all of that icy power raced through Su Xiaosu's weapon and toward her body.

Remember, Su Xiaosu was once the Moonfiend Empress – Morning Star to the Pontiff. Though she was meek in her dealings with Lan Jue, her persona was entirely different when confronting a foe. She flicked her wrist and the bullwhip separated into countless copies of itself. Meanwhile a sheath of blazing fire covered each leather crop. It burned away Ling Ya's icy power without effort. Ling Ya barely had time to react before the whip was on her again.

Holy Fire!

Ling Ya retreated, brandishing her spear. It lashed out too quick to follow, blocking each strand of Su Xiaosu's whip as they came. Their clash was loud and constant like the beat of a war drum.

The Driver stood beside Lan Jue, watching the exchange. "It's hard to say, but this little one's tough! Ninth level seventh rank, maybe."

Lan Jue concurred. "Seems about right. She was sent to test us. I didn't think it was the North's style, but if that's what they want we'll give them a show."

Ling Ya and Su Xiaosu were about even in Discipline, but when it came to combat experience the Moonfiend Empress had the upper hand. She was a product of the Pontiff's Citadel, and later carved out a realm of her own in the Shattered Starfields. A veteran of at least one hundred battles, what enemy would be new to her? Ling Ya's Ice Discipline was strong, but Xiaosu's Holy Light was no less potent.

As their contest continued Xiaosu slowly began to get the upper hand. The crack of her golden whip knocked away Ling Ya's spear again and again. No matter how the colonel struck, on which direction she attacked from, breaking the Morning's Star's defenses seemed fruitless.

Just then Ling Ya stopped. With a grunt she thrust the head of her spear into the ground in front of her. As the icy weapon buried itself in the ground her body became illusory. All of a sudden the hangar was filled with a vacuum force that pulled everything toward that spear, like it was the center of a black hole. Cold power coalesced around it, creating beautiful petals of glittering ice.

Dazzling Ice Lotus!

Once Ling Ya realized her victory would not come easy, she began to reveal her real power!

The temperature dropped by a hundred degrees in an instant. Hoarfrost grew along the metal frames of the mechas as they looked on in silent vigil. Su Xiaosu found herself unable to shake the traction, and each second brought her inexorably closer to the deadly sharp lotus petals.

Xiaosu reacted quickly. The hand holding the whip lifted and the motion brought her whole body up into the air. Her arm whipped around to make the whip coil in subsonic circles around her body. Her body continued to release a flood of brazen holy light that filled every corner of the hangar.

All of a sudden six resplendent wings extended from her spine. Hovering majesty above the crowd the whip she bore became a blade that glowed with divine power.

A column of light that seemed cast from heaven itself was cast down onto the Dazzling Ice Lotus. In response the cutting petals folded inward as though to meet the holy light.

Two powerful manifestations of energy met, and their collision caused the ground to shake. Even though the Bastion was constructed of the strongest alloys, it still could only just bear the load of two ninth-level Talents.

“Hold!” A booming voice rang through the area, bringing with it a flood of invisible power. Where it swept by reality warped. To witness it was marvelous, and the power it bore was impressive. As the waves of distortion swept by, both the Dazzling Ice Lotus and the column of divine light vanished – dissolved into nothing.

Surprise glimmered in Lan Jue's eye. This was surely a unique Discipline, and strong if it could overwhelm two ninth level Adepts. Attaining such potency even before reaching protogenic levels spoke volumes to its strength.

Su Xiaosu performed a backflip in midair, tumbling back to earth at Lan Jue's side. Ling Ya reappeared as well. A cloud of ice particles coiled around her.

He was a man in his forties, the one who'd interrupted them. Twinkling insignias on his shoulder board revealed him to be a Major General. Short-cut blond hair sharply contrasted with his ruddy, bronzed skin. A gleaming intelligence was clear in his eyes.

"Ling ya, apologize to commander Lan Jue. He and his party are guests on the Tyrannosaurus and you let your pride get out of hand. Later you'll be choosing your own punishment!" His voice was harsh, but a look at his face showed them to be insincere.

The hard look on her face melted away. She turned to Lan Jue. "I apologize, commander. I was too aggressive. Please forgive me."

The middle-aged newcomer gave him no chance to respond, stepping up to face him. He snapped a salute. "Welcome aboard, commander Lan Jue. I am under-secretary in charge of combat operations here on Tyrannosaurus, Wu Qiu. I'd like to apologize for the actions of my colleagues."

Lan Jue replied with a smile. He was well aware this was a test, and once their abilities were confirmed the charade was abandoned. Classic good-cop, bad-cop.

"It's no problem, a misunderstanding I'm sure. I assume you're happy with our qualifications?"

Wu Qiu was impressed. Lan Jue looked young – no more than thirty, perhaps – and yet was not only a champion Adept, but cool-headed as well. He was even-tempered in praise and humiliation. A rare quality in a person!

“Please, commander!” He stepped to the side and swept his hand out, opening the way.

Lan Jue nodded, signaled his companions, and headed for the verti-car.

Wu Qiu shot Ling Ya a hard, brief look then followed. Ling Ya had accomplished her mission, but she was not intended to use the full strength of her ninth level Talent. This was a Bastion ship! Who knew what damage they could cause?

Ling Ya was not the least bit frightened of the secretary. She stuck her tongue out at him and feigned a pitiful look. ¹

Wu Qiu scowled helplessly but didn’t stop her when she got into the car. Thankfully Northern verti-cars were spacious, with room enough to fit up to twenty passengers.

The doors closed and they gently lifted into the air. They maneuvered through a portal that granted them entry further into the ship, then picked up speed.

“Commander Lan.” Wu Qiu smiled as he turned slightly in his seat to face him. “I really would like to apologize for all that. On behalf of the Tyrannosaurus.”

“Now that the misunderstanding has been cleared up there’s no more reason to speak on it,” he assured. “Colonel Ling Ya displayed considerable skill.”

Chapter 671: Tyrannosaurus-Class Bastion Ship

Ling Ya smiled sweetly, completely absent the antagonism from before. “It’s a shame I wasn’t able to receive commander Lan Jue’s instruction.”

Lan Jue looked her way. “Our two forces are allies. We don’t want to hurt anyone, just maintain the peace. When we encounter the alien creatures I’d be happy to compare kill counts with the colonel.”

“It’s a deal,” she replied with a lopsided grin.

Although she was speaking to Lan Jue, her eyes inadvertently swept toward Su Xiaosu. The angel looked familiar, she thought. It had been uncomfortable to discover her battle prowess was even slightly inferior to the woman.

Wu Qiu went on. “I was told this is not your first excursion into the Shattered Starfields to hunt for aliens. Perhaps you could tell us more about what happened when you encountered the alien planets?”

Lan Jue smiled at the secretary. “I suspect the admiral will ask similar questions. Don’t you think it’d be prudent to discuss it then?”

Wu Qiu had come upon some resistance ¹. He just smiled and said nothing further. He’d already provoked his Eastern guests, he could expect the cold shoulder.

As the verti-car quietly soared through the ship’s interior they were treated to vista of spider-web like walkways crisscrossing one another across vast distances. The building below them were getting smaller, indicating that their car was heading upward.

They passed three separate security checks before ultimately arriving in an oval area. The verti-car touched down, and the two Northern officers lead Lan Jue and his team from the car. Wu Qiu guided them to a large building about the size of a football field. After another check they were permitted inside.

“Commander, if you would leave your team in the waiting area and follow me to the admiral?” Wu Qiu requested.

“Very well.” It wasn’t necessary for everyone to clutter up the admiral’s office.

Ling Ya motioned for him to follow. “Please come with me.”

Lan Jue gave his companions a nod. Ling Ya and the Driver took up the lead as they headed for the waiting room, followed by the Paragons. None of them removed their helmets or spoke. Wu Qiu directed Lan Jue toward another hallway.

Three more security checks later, they entered an elevator.

“You know I still think about your performance in the Adept Tournament!” Wu Qiu said conversationally.

Lan Jue replied with a demure smile. “I was just lucky, and the age restrictions helped. Your Discipline was impressive... peak of ninth level, I reckon. Dispersion.”

Wu Qiu sighed. “It wasn’t once I reached this level that I understood why Skyfire Avenue adheres so strongly to purely congenital Talent. Acquired power has its limits. After all, the technology far surpasses the capabilities of the human body.”

“It’s a problem with methods to overcome. His Majesty the Terminator found a way, didn’t he?” Lan Jue answered.

Wu Qiu chuckled politely. “How could I hope to compare to his Majesty.”

A gentle ‘ding’ announced their arrival. The elevator doors opened.

A spacious room was revealed to them with a snow-white floor constructed of some special sort of glass. Military men bustled here and there, none below field-grade officer ranks. Beeps and clicks issued from high-tech machines that filled the room.

Lan Jue’s eyes glittered as he looked around. Although it was his first visit to a Bastion ship, this was clearly the control room.

A Bastion's size and mass was comparable to a small planet. It took an army to build one, and it was far too large to be run by even a sizeable team. There was the main control station, but also several control sectors that worked in tandem. The main control station was like the brain of the ship, which passed orders to the various sectors. These sectors controlled ship movement, weapons systems, and life support to name a few examples. Each section was independently operated by a team of officers.

Because of this structure, the soldiers treated the ship no differently than being stationed on a planet. Some of them had been living here for dozens of years. The living areas were analogous to cities on Skyfire or Luo, and in theory were much safer.

A touch of pride was revealed in Wu Qiu's smile. "This is Tyrannosaurus' main control station. The Admiral's officer is on the other end, he's expecting you. He's very interesting in what you learned in your last trip. We appreciate your hard work."

Lan Jue was the definition of polite propriety. "Your praise is undeserved, Secretary. We are happy to help however we can, in the name of humanity."

The station's officers paid them no mind, too busy with their duties to dawdle. Ebbs and flows of energy buffeted Lan Jue from all sides, telling him nearly all of these soldiers were Adepts. All sorts of Disciplines were represented, filling the area with a vibrant atmosphere.

Lan Jue knew that Adepts were preferred for high-grade research and command positions. The reason was simple; they could do more than your average human. Their Talent gave them advantages and staying power in a fight. Tyrannosaurus seemed no different, however there weren't any high-level Adepts here.

Wu Qiu lead Lan Jue to a silvery-white elevator in the back. They stepped in and continued their ascent. During the ride Lan Jue felt no less than three passes of energy sweep across their bodies – more checks. Wu Qiu's credentials stopped any untoward reactions from being tripped.

They certainly took defense seriously!

The ride took only a few seconds. When the doors opened again, all sound from the station below was gone. There was only the quiet buzz of electricity to break the silence.

First to catch Lan Jue's eyes was nothing short of the boundless universe, spread out before him. The vaulted room was transparent from floor to ceiling. One wall was taken up by a series of monitors, thick with strings of complicated data. The other flickered with blinking, enigmatic lights. Even if Lan Jue knew what they were he wouldn't have known what they meant.

A Spartan desk of white was toward the back, and behind it sat a man.

Even seated Lan Jue could see the man was very tall. His features were the familiar type of his own Alliance 2, with lines belying his middle-age. Dark hair matched darker eyes, typical for Easterners. Four golden stars twinkled on his shoulder strap, indicating his high rank.

"Sir!" Wu Qiu snapped to attention.

The Admiral lifted his head from the holographic device on his desk. His eyes went to Lan Jue first. They were calm eyes, but somehow strange like they bore their own unique allure. It was like he could peer directly into your soul.

But, then, the commander of the Northern army's Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion wrinkled his eyebrows and shut his eyes.

Wu Qiu started and suddenly stopped forward, blocking Lan Jue's view. He could feel undulations of power coming off the secretary. Lan Jue, meanwhile, did not move.

"It's fine." Kang Hui's voice was low. He rose from behind the desk and approached, stopping beside Wu Qiu. His eyes were lit with appreciation. "Hello, Commander Lan. "I am Kang Hui." As he spoke the Admiral offered a salute.

Lan Jue was not a member of the military so did not return the salute. He nodded instead. "Hello, Admiral Kang Hui." His response was even.

Kang Hui turned toward Wu Qiu and nodded. The secretary took a few

steps back but remained in the office.

Surprise lingered in Lan Jue's mind. Kang Hui was the leader of one of humanity's most destructive weapons – and yet, his Discipline was hardly substantial. At best he boasted a seventh level Discipline, far inferior to the likes of Wu Qiu or Ling Ya. His Discipline, he suspected, had something to do with his eyes.

Kang Hui probably saw the uncertainty in his guest's look. He smiled. "Welcome to Tyrannosaurus, commander. Please sit." He indicated a metallic sea situated in front of the desk. Wu Qiu separated himself further, stepping off to the side of the room. However he remained, likely to ensure the Admiral's protection.

Lan Jue did not stand on ceremony and took the offered seat. Kang Hui returned to his own chair opposite.

"I'm a direct sort of person, commander. We have embarked on this journey on behalf of humanity, to meet the alien threat. I don't imagine its necessary we go over the guiding principles, so I'll get to the point. We are hoping you can help us learn more about our enemy."

Lan Jue answered with a slight nod. "We're here to help in your operation. We can be ready to leave right away and begin sending back information."

Kang Hui leaned back. "I was hoping we might first discuss what you learned during your last tour, get a clearer picture of the situation. According to our information you made two trips to the Shattered Starfields. The first time you uncovered their planets' ability to teleport. Your second visit served to learn more about the creatures themselves. I must express my admiration of your work, especially since our own scouting attempts have repeatedly ended in failure. Some of our scouts were even equipped with cloaking devices, to no avail."

Lan Jue nodded knowingly. "Their counterreconnaissance capabilities are very strong. They identify one another through powerful psionic bursts. They use this to identify and locate non-alien lifeforms. As a result Blinding Stones are effective, but only to within a certain range. Once

close enough, their psionic abilities render them useless. We learned this the hard way.”

Kang Hui regarded him with some surprise. “You were discovered? With all due respect, how did you accomplish your mission?”

Lan Jue smirked. “We killed the one that spotted us and kept going.”

He didn’t go into detail about Lin Guoguo or her methods, that was a state secret. She’s joined them for this trip as well, but remained back on the ship. He kept in contact with her through the Soulcaller gem. After all, the North had tried to kill him a number of times – it was important to be on guard.

Chapter 672: Communication

Kang Hui lapsed into a contemplative silence. He had tested Lan Jue's Discipline for himself. As the Jewelry Master had deduced, Kang Hui's Discipline was his eyes – through them he had precise analytical powers. Although he didn't have much in the way of attack, his eyes were able to pick out the specifics of whatever he gazed on. Even ninth level Adepts couldn't hide from him.

But when he looked at Lan Jue, he felt an incisiveness that went beyond the norm. So sharp he almost felt cut just by recognizing it, forcing him to retract his Discipline. It also made him look at Lan Jue in a new light. If he said he killed those aliens, he believed him.

"Would like you to describe what you saw when you witnessed the alien planets for the first time. As well as the situation when you encountered them next."

Lan Jue obliged with a nod. He went over what they'd discovered, telling him about Star Division and their encounters with the West and Gabriel. The West and North already had some news of Star Division's existence, but it remained a mysterious arm of Skyfire Avenue's might.

"... We could hardly believe it when we saw what happened to Moonfiend. This Violet Princess and aliens like her are strong – similar to a Nirvana-level Paragon. If not for the concerted efforts of our Paragons and their teleportation specialty, we likely wouldn't have gotten away as clean as we did."

Kang Hui listened attentively the whole time, absorbing every detail. From time to time he would ask a question which Lan Jue dutifully answered. Just as Kang Hui had said, this was a problem facing all of mankind, a battle of survival against two opposing species. No matter the disagreements between East and North, they would need to band together to face it.

Lan Jue had some information of his own about Admiral Kang Hui. He had originally been an Eastern man, but walked a neutral path once

joining the Northern Army. However, because of his lauded military exploits his position was never in danger. He enjoyed widespread support. So whether it was hawks or doves calling for his removal, none of them had any power to get it done.

He had a stellar record. Lan Jue thought if it had been the Arachnid's commander, Admiral Holmen, their participation would have been more deeply debated.

After Lan Jue's report was finished, Kang Hui fell silent once more. Then, "How confident are you the mission will be a success if you head out to scout again?"

"If we keep our distance and we're there just to determine whether the planet has moved, about eighty percent. If we want to get closer it's hard to say. Our earlier discoveries showed that the planet is a frightening living entity, stronger than any Paragon humanity has produced. There's no way to hide from its psionic pulse. Because of this we have no way to guarantee success of a close pass."

Kang Hui responded. "We don't need you to get close, just make sure they're there. The bulk of the action will be our responsibility this time, but I need to know where they are as soon as possible. Find out and bring back the information as quick as you can."

"Absolutely." Lan Jue replied without hesitation.

After a moment of consideration the admiral continued. "I have a somewhat unreasonable request. Because of the importance of this mission, I would like my people to accompany you. One as a trainee and one to help you complete your mission without incident."

Kang Hui framed it as a request, but his mannerism made it clear he expected Lan Jue to acquiesce.

Much to the Admiral's surprise, Lan Jue smiled and nodded his head. "An extra set of capable hands is always welcome." This 'help' he was sending was certainly there to supervise and report back. Lan Jue was expecting it.

The Tyrannosaurus' commander was well aware of how important scouting was. Even for Lan Qing and Lan Jue, they knew the value of confirming intelligence independently. If Kang Hui hadn't insisted on sending someone with him, Lan Jue would have been suspicious.

"So long as you understand," Kang Hui replied. "You've come a long way, we invite you to rest onboard. It will take us about a day to reach the border of the Starfields, then I will leave this important mission in your hands."

Lan Jue recognized their meeting was over. He stood. "So long as you keep faith, we'll make sure your army gets the information as soon as possible."

Kang Hui didn't rise as Wu Qiu led Lan Jue from the office. When they were gone he leaned back in his chair and lapsed into thought. His eyes flit back and forth, though what was going on in his mind remained a mystery.

After a little while Wu Qiu returned. "Admiral!" He called, announcing his arrival.

Kang Hui looked up at him. "What do you think of him?"

The secretary was thoughtful for a moment. "Inscrutable."

"Oh? Explain." Kang Hui urged. He had a lot that concerned him, but Lan Jue seemed of particular importance.

Wu Qiu obliged. "At first he seemed gentle, dignified. However quickly he proved to be quite intelligent. From what we could gather he's in his thirties. Not a Paragon, but there's certainly something unique about him. Little Ya wasn't able to goad him into a fight, which was my hope, but after meeting with him it dispelled any thoughts of weakness."

"Young men who are strong and in positions of power are often arrogant. However he didn't appear prideful – maybe world-wise, someone who knows the pain of reality. Economical and careful with his words, but I found myself convinced with his pledge of support."

Kang Hui nodded. "I also thought he was a different sort. Level-headed. I

wasn't able to get a strong read of him, but I could tell he was a righteous man. I think he's trustworthy. Ask Ling Ya to go with them, watch how they do things and confirm the information. She'll keep an eye on them."

"Yes, sir." Wu Qiu gave a salute.

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Lan Jue and the others were given a lavish area to lay their heads. If this were in a hotel it would be a presidential suite, with all the fixtures of opulence. It was also, without question, riddled with recording equipment, but the Paragons' Domain made sure to render them ineffectual. When they got there Lan Jue let Lin Guoguo know everything was fine.

Luo Xianni munched happily on some fruit. "Son," she said, "What do you think? What are your thoughts on the admiral?"

Lan Jue looked her way. "He's even-tempered, but beyond that I'm not sure. I didn't sense a lot of strength from him – his Discipline is Sight, but what exactly I don't know. He tried to scan me but I think Occisus bit back. In a day the Bastion will reach the Starfields and our mission will begin. They'll be sending... representatives to come with us."

The Gourmet nodded. "That's expected. So what's the plan? Are you going to let them see our strength?"

Lan Jue turned his attention to him. "There's nothing for it, they'll find out eventually. If we do encounter aliens we should fight as hard as if they weren't there. If we get exposed then it was meant to be, let nature take its course."

The Clockmaker cast him a glance. "The North fears Skyfire Avenue. If they know we Paragons are here it's how to know how they'll react."

Five Paragons, Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, Driver, Su Xiaosu, Lin Guoguo and of course Zhou Qianlin were all here representing the Avenue. Altogether about half of Skyfire Avenue's strength was in the belly of one of the North's greatest assets. If the North threw caution to the wind and turned their guns on them, they wouldn't be able to run.

Lan Jue nodded, aware of her meaning. "Be cautious. Right now they still

aren't sure of who we are. If they do make a move it'll be when our mission is over. For the moment we're safe. I've already talked it over with the Wine Master and we have a plan to ensure everyone's safety."

The Wine Master nodded. His right hand motioned in the air and his scepter appeared in a flash of silver light.

"Tyrannosaurus is the North's second largest Bastion. Since we're here, I figured a souvenir was appropriate. We're protected against the small-minded."

The members of the scout team gave each other looks. They understood his meaning, and couldn't help the smiles that crept into their faces.

Typically Bastions were stationary; not because they were slow or ineffectual, but because moving them cost a great deal of energy. As it slowly lumbered through space it looks like a slowly moving planet, surrounded by ships that – from a distance – looks like a cloud of twinkling asteroids.

Chapter 673: The Investigation Begins

A typical interstellar fleet typical consisted of a capital ship, four to eight dreadnaughts, three to six expedition ships, a couple hundred battleships and countless patrol boats. Five fleets spread out across space in an impressive array like a deadly spearhead.

Three of them – the Sixth, Eleventh and Thirteenth fleets – hugged close to Tyrannosaurus. They were the Bastion’s protection escort.

The border of the Shattered Starfields loomed in the distance. It was marked by a veritable wall of asteroids so thick you couldn’t see between them. Tyrannosaurus’ main thrusters were cut, and a series of stabilizers hummed gently as it brought the massive ship to a halt.

“Admiral. We’ve reached the target location. The First and Third fleets are coming into formation.” One of the ship’s staff made the report to Kang Hui.

The admiral’s voice was steady. “Tell the Skyfire team it’s time to start the mission.”

A few moments later a wall separated on the ship’s exterior. A humble blue ship separated itself from the lumbering behemoth and quietly slipped into space.

Zeus-1 was roughly the size of a patrol ship. Next to Tyrannosaurus it was almost invisible, but it gave the countersign and lithely slipped through the forest of warships into the Starfields.

Seated on the bridge, Ling Ya tried to look at everything at once. The interior was smaller than a typical patrol ship. There were installations that were clearly added in afterward to accommodate an unusually large crew.

As she continued to examine the bridge she noted that the equipment was also entirely different than she might expect. Initially Ling Ya had looked down on the little blue boat, and in fact all of the East. She felt they were inferior in technology and capability. However upon entering Zeus-1

her preconceptions changed. Everything was state-of-the-art – in fact, there were a few pieces of equipment even Tyrannosaurus didn't have.

She was also surprised to discover there was someone aboard she hadn't noticed before. How, when they'd scanned the ship so thoroughly before! Despite her prejudices, Zeus-1 had impressed her greatly.

Lan Jue stood beside Su Xiaosu, who was guiding the ship. He was quietly watching the asteroids slip by. The Paragons were in the resting area. Currently the only ones on the bridge were Lan Jue, Xiaosu, Guoguo, Wu Qiu and Ling Ya herself. The Driver was cultivating in the resting area with the others. Part of his reason for coming was to continue training with Lan Jue, with the ultimate aim of completing his Discipline's transformation. Once the process was complete he was on good footing to breakthrough to the Realm of Protogenia and could attempt it at his leisure.

But the Driver heeded Lan Jue's advice. He worked to suppress his abilities and delay his breakthrough. Now that his ascension was almost assured his goal had changed – simply becoming a Paragon wasn't enough. He wanted to become even stronger, be a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Maybe even achieve Nirvana.

Ling Ya's attention returned to Lan Jue. In his meticulously kept uniform, the young commander looked particularly elegant and dignified. He left quite the impression. There was a teasing light in his eyes when he smiled.

Hmph! I'll definitely show him when the fighting starts. We just need to find some aliens. We'll see just how capable this guy really is, if he can even complete this mission.

Zeus-1 sped up as it vanished into the tumbling rocks.

Ling Ya continued to study Star Division's commander. Wu Qiu's attention, meanwhile, was on Su Xiaosu, primarily because he noticed she was the only one responsible for flying the ship. Obviously this was in part because of the ship's advanced systems, however it spoke volumes to her skills as a pilot. She had to keep an eye on the overall situation, know the

ship intimately, and possess a great deal of experience – a lack in one and she wouldn't be able to do what she was doing. But she was so young, with a Discipline more suitable for fighting than flying.

This made him very curious to know more about Su Xiaosu.

The further they got into the dangerous Starfields, the more his respect for her increased. They swung between the asteroids like a swallow, never slowing down. It was a masterful dance from one potential disaster to another.

As far as Wu Qiu was concerned, not a single pilot in Tyrannosaurus' entourage could match her. Her reaction speed was too fast! Like the master butcher who never strikes bone. What skill! If she had joined the Northern army she would certainly have been one of their most preeminent pilots. And a ninth level Adept – what a woman!

Wu Qiu also found himself stealing furtive glances of the woman seated in the captain's chair, Lin Guoguo. She held herself with a regal bearing. She was beautiful, mysterious, and there was a deep intelligence in her eyes.

She was snuggled into the chair with a novel in her hands – exceedingly laissez-faire.

What an odd collection of people! One pilot, a hands-off commander, and a girl more interested in her story than the mission. Everyone else was just hanging around. However, Wu Qiu didn't look down on them. He knew how to look at the big picture. Although they'd only witnessed Xiaosu's strength, the enigmatic nature of the rest of them was telling and intriguing. They were certainly there for a reason, otherwise they wouldn't have come along. Yet, he still didn't even know who everyone was.

Lan Jue wandered over toward Wu Qiu and took a seat behind him. A small smirk tugged at his lips. "We've entered into the outskirts of the Shattered Starfields, Secretary. We'll reach the inner solar system in a couple of days. We may encounter aliens in transit, so it would be prudent for you to keep in contact with Tyrannosaurus."

Wu Qiu nodded. "You don't need to worry, commander. Leave it to us."

They had joined the scouting crew with the North's most advanced communications equipment. Although the Starfields' magnetic field was strong, the devices and Tyrannosaurus' own magnetic field would ensure information could be shared reliably.

Ling Ya's pretty eyes never left Lan Jue. "Commander, your team doesn't appear to be treating this any differently from a normal scouting trip. If we do encounter aliens how do you expect to handle them?"

"We're just here to gather intelligence," Lan Jue replied. "We'll avoid them to the best of our ability, otherwise combat could draw more to us. Once we accomplish our task, we'll return home immediately."

She continued her questioning. "You told Admiral Hui in your report that they search through psionic pulses, rendering Blinding Stones useless when you get too close. What guarantees do we have that we'll be able to avoid them?"

Lan Jue's smile widened. "I've got to leave you with a little suspense. Watch closely, you'll find out soon enough."

Ling Ya pursed her lips, but didn't pursue it any further. But the look in her eyes made her displeasure clear.

Their flight continued, fast but stable. The ship's internal gravity dampeners made their trek comfortable despite the pitching and rolling. Lan Jue didn't engage them in any further conversation and was content to sit quietly, eyes closed, lost in his own thoughts.

Six hours later he opened his eyes. A thoughtful look crossed his face as he rose and walked over to Su Xiaosu.

"Something feels off." He muttered.

Xiaosu nodded. "I sense it, too. We haven't come across a single alien signature. Do you think they've left the Starfields?"

"That was be the worst case scenario," he replied darkly.

Su Xiaosu also couldn't help but frown. She knew what Lan Jue meant. The North had amassed enough firepower to destroy – or at least

grievously wound – the alien forces. If the aliens were no longer here than the expedition was a monumental waste of time and resources.

Uncertainty was the worst part of it, because if they weren't here then where would they appear next?

Ling Ya appeared at Lan Jue's shoulder. "What is it? What's happened?"

Lan Jue's voice was low. "Something strange. We should have encounter aliens by now."

"Could they have already left?" She asked.

"That's what we're afraid of," he answered.

Ling Ya scowled. "So you're saying they've teleported?"

Lan Jue glanced at her. "I'm saying that's a possibility. We suspect teleporting consumed a lot of energy but it's been some time since we witnessed it. We can't rule out the fact they might have already left. What's more, we have been studying the aliens but I can assure you they've been studying us as well. It's short-sighted to expect they didn't notice all the commotion from the North. It can't be dismissed that the fact you put this expedition together could be the reason they aren't here."

Ling Ya seemed unconvinced. "This entire operation was kept secret. According to your last trip weren't they were raiding for energy? They couldn't have vanished so quickly. It takes time for their scouts to gather information, too!"

"The fact is we still know frighteningly little about them," Lan Jue countered. "We have no way of knowing how they share information, maybe even telepathically."

Chapter 674: He Actually Enslaves You?

Ling Ya stuffed her hands into her pockets. “So what do we do now? If there’s nothing to find do we just turn back?”

Lan Jue nodded. “Let Tyrannosaurus know we haven’t found any aliens yet, and include the possibility they may have teleported away. Alert human-occupied planets as well, tell them to be vigilant.”

Ling Ya nodded. She had her reservations about Lan Jue, but she was a professional soldier. This was not the time to act mutinous. She wasted no time relaying the information back to Tyrannosaurus with Wu Qiu.

“Boss, aliens incoming!” Suddenly Su Xiaosu’s urgent voice rang through the bridge. Everyone’s eyes immediately shot toward the radar screen. Sure enough, three angry red dots were closing on their position, and fast.

“Keep out of sight!” Lan Jue ordered.

“Wait.” Ling Ya hurried back to Lan Jue’s side. “Can we get a look at them first? We need to confirm they actually are aliens. We need our information to be precise.”

Lan Jue stared at her for a moment. This woman was smart. What she was saying was only part of the story. What she really wanted to know was how Zeus-1 fought or evaded foes.

“Fine.” His hesitation was brief. It was time to get down to business.

Zeus-1 continued on with no deviations in course. Lan Jue was silent, with no need to give his crew commands. Behind him, the helmet had already descended onto Lin Guoguo’s head and she was ready for her role.

Through the bridge’s windows they could see three purple spots rapidly growing larger on the horizon. Once the telescopes picked them up Lan Jue recognized them as the most common sort, shuttle aliens. They specialized in speed.

“Shuttlers. They’re fast and prefer to ram their prey. The trick is to keep your distance and deal with them as quickly as possible. Don’t give them a chance to hit you.”

She listened carefully and nodded her head. All the information humanity had gathered on these creatures was locked in her memory. She produced her recording equipment and started to record them.

Her attention was also fixed on Lan Jue. Part of her mission was to discover how this small scout team dealt with the threat of alien discovery.

There were three of them, together about as strong as four ninth level Adepts. They weren't much of a threat.

Ling Ya continued to record the aliens as they drew nearer, while at the same time inconspicuously keeping an eye on Lan Jue. She was curious how he would handle the situation.

Yet, much to her shock the aliens flew right by. They never stopped or slowed down, and even when they got close they didn't seem to notice Zeus-1 was there at all.

"Huh?" Ling Ya couldn't help but vocalize her confusion. "They didn't see us? Didn't you say they could locate telepathically?"

"Pay attention!" That was his answer.

Ling Ya nearly groaned. Pay attention, he said! This man needed a spanking!

Lan Jue relaxed now that they'd encountered some sign of alien life. There were many reasons the aliens might not have been immediately encountered – for example, they might have moved to a more energy-rich sector of the Starfields. Now that they were sure the aliens were around, the North's expedition could proceed.

Zeus-1 continued to penetrate deeper into the Shattered Starfields in search of the alien planets. Their encounter had already been reported to Tyrannosaurus, along with the video.

Zeus-1 wasn't the only scout ship that had been sent out. There were seven or eight more on patrol, looking for information. All of them were specially equipped patrol boats.

The further in they went, the more aliens they came across. However, no

matter what sort of alien they encountered Zeus-1 kept out of sight or flew right by. The aliens were none the wiser.

Ling Ya watched as closely as she could. It wasn't until their third encounter with the creatures did she noticed something off about Lin Guoguo.

Skyfire Avenue had an Adept that was able to hide them from the aliens! No wonder... no wonder their missions succeeded. Finally she'd uncovered their secret.

Lan Jue didn't take advantage of the Wine Master's transference power to take them inside. For one, they didn't know the condition of the transfer location. Secondly, using it was very costly. Finally there were things they could learn on the trip in.

"Hello, I'm Ling Ya. May I know your name?" With no aliens in their immediate vicinity, Ling Ya made her way over to Lin Guoguo and greeted her with a smile.

"Hello, I'm Lin Guoguo." She answered with a pretty smile, appearing very friendly.

"Hello, Guoguo. You're an Adept from Skyfire Avenue?" She asked. "Your Discipline helps you avoid the aliens?"

"If you look closely you'll understand," she answered. "It's pretty bold to directly ask an Adept what their Discipline is, don't you think?"

Ling Ya was not deterred. "It's nice to meet you. If you have an opportunity you should come to the North for some vacation time. We have a lot of things to keep you entertained, as well as help with cultivation. When we're done perhaps you'd like to stay on Tyrannosaurus for a little while? I can show you around."

Lin Guoguo shook her head. "No thanks, I'd prefer to stay with the boss."

"Boss? Him?" Ling Ya cast her eyes toward Lan Jue.

Lin Guoguo nodded innocently. "Yes! He's my boss, and master. I do

what he tells me and follow his orders.”

Ling Ya gaped at her. “My God! What century are we living in where he can enslave you like this! You must be suffering terribly, but can’t say anything. I’ll help you and make sure you get justice.”

Lin Guoguo sighed, her innocent expression lost and replaced with a teasing smirk. “Girl, you think you’re smart. I’m not one to start trouble. If he was like that why would I stick around? You think too much. To put it simply if the boss wasn’t around, the universe would be absent one Lin Guoguo. I owe him my life and I’m going to spend it at his side. No one’s going to change that fact. When I die, I’m going to do it in his arms, you understand?”

Ling Ya was stunned. “Are you his girlfriend?” Lin Guoguo was pretty, strong, and clearly cared deeply for her commander. It was a natural assumption.

Lin Guoguo’s answered betrayed the lump in her throat. “No! He isn’t interested in Guoguo. Sister... perhaps you can try to convince him to accept me? I’d even be his concubine!”

Lan Jue, not far away, almost fell over.

Ling Ya scowled. “Hopeless. You’re brainwashed.”

Lin Guoguo vigorously nodded her head. “I am! And not just me; Xiaosu, Mika, Ke’er, and Xiuxiu are all victims of the boss’ nefarious brainwashing technique! Even as a concubine I wouldn’t be his first.”

“Guoguo!” Lan Jue’s irritation was no secret.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Swordfish!” Su Xiaosu’s voice cut through the banter.

Swordfish were among the fastest aliens they knew of. The moment they heard one was in range Lin Guoguo returned her head to the helmet – but it was already too late.

A flash of purple flickered outside the window, then stopped. An alien’s lumbering body came into view.

Aside from the radiant purple color of its flesh, Swordfish aliens looked remarkably like their namesake. Its main weapon was the sword-like mouth protruding from its head, but that was not to say its whole body was a danger.

It was a troublesome beast. It didn't have any long-range attack capabilities, but was fast enough to close distances in a hurry. It could hit hard enough to tear through a battleship's hull like paper. At full speed one of these things could put a dreadnaught out of commission.

For this reason Lan Jue and his team had a vested interest in dealing with them. Best was to kill it as quickly as possible.

Lin Guoguo had been distracted by her chat with Lingya and wasn't wearing the helmet. The Swordfish had arrived too suddenly. They were discovered by its psychic pulse.

"Boss, what do we do?" Su Xiaosu asked. The pulse also meant the alien had a lock on them. The alien was already turning around. Its body was enveloped by a vibrant purple light, and all of a sudden it became a beam of energy headed straight for them.

Despite Zeus-1's impressive defenses, they didn't dare let this creature get a solid hit. Xiaosu's experience kicked in and she quickly swerved Zeus-1 out of the alien's path.

Lan Jue looked out the window. "I've got this one." The others were resting and it would take too long to get them up to speed.

Lan Jue rushed to where Lin Guoguo was seated. She stuck her tongue out again for good measure and got out of his way. Lan Jue took the vacated seat.

The helmet descended and fit itself snugly on his head.

Zeus-1 continued to pitch and roll, but the alien was too fast for Xiaosu to keep up.

Ling Ya stuck her tongue out, fixated on Lan Jue and his reaction. She was desperate to know how he dealt with these things, and finally the time had come to tip his hand.

Lan Jue leaned back, helmet on his head, and hands resting lightly on the chair's armrests.

Suddenly the bridge seemed different, like the entire ship had been injected with a life of its own. Zeus-1 banked hard to the side, just fast enough to avoid another attack. A pale blue light sprang up to surround them.

Then, a beam of blue light erupted from the front of the ship.

Chapter 675: Pride?

At first the shot looked like it was directed at empty space, but just as it fired the Swordfish threw itself into the path of the attack.

Boom-! Space was lit up by an explosion of electric blue light. In the center of the blazing orb of power was a single dark spot. For a few moments the explosion lingered, but eventually dispersed. When it did the alien was gone, and only its vital crystal remained, floating quietly in the void.

How did he do that? Again Ling Ya was more confused than enlightened. Could this little ship really pack this big a punch? And what incredible accuracy! Frankly, a patrol boat shouldn't have been able to kill a Swordfish in one shot.

The North wasn't absent their own battlefield experience. Once they'd started the engines of war Northern soldiers had encountered several of this aliens. Although the Seventh Fleet had been destroyed, crews had managed to send back priceless information before succumbing to the aliens. Ling Ya had it memorized. Swordfish boasted impressive defenses, to where shots from a dreadnaught may not put one down – to say nothing of a patrol boat.

Lan Jue picked the helmet off his head and turned to Lin Guoguo. "Don't get distracted."

Lin Guoguo's response was serious. "I know, boss. I'm sorry." She replaced him on the chair and affixed the helmet to her own head.

Lan Jue's next target was Ling Ya. "Your role here is support, not to cause trouble. Colonel you will do the job you were sent here to do, stop getting the way of our mission."

The look of displeasure on his face riled her. The nerve! But there was nothing she could say. It had been her meddling that lead Lin Guoguo to become distracted.

"Mnh." That was the extent of her response. She returned to her chair.

“Little Ya, dial it back a little. We’ll come across more aliens as we proceed, we don’t need to go digging for information. I’m sure they’ll reveal more as time goes on.” Wu Qiu’s voice whispered in Ling Ya’s ear.

Ling Ya snapped her head around, unwilling to capitulate. “What’s there to learn from this guy? A few tricks and secrets? Not that he shares any of those with us. Uncle Wu, how was their gun that strong? It killed a Swordfish in one shot. Now they have another vital crystal, which means more resources.”

“That couldn’t have been purely the ship’s weaponry,” Wu Qiu replied. “It was enhanced by Discipline. I can’t tell just how strong Commander Jue is, but he it must be impressive. I imagine he has more surprises in store for us.”

Ling Ya answered by rolling her eyes. “Do you think there’s a way we could convince him to join the North, uncle? That girl is a zealot, and I fear she won’t be going anywhere unless it’s with him!”

This earned a wry chuckle from him. “So you do see his worth. He is the vice Chairman of Skyfire Avenue’s leadership council. You know how well the Avenue is doing lately, especially with regards to Paragons. His status there is even higher than some of them, so what does this mean? It means the Avenue would stop at nothing to make sure he stays right where he is. This commander is probably the future of Skyfire Avenue, how could we entice him away?”

Ling Ya scowled. “He may act like a gentleman but he’s got an ego the size of Tyrannosaurus. And he’s a sexual deviant. These pretty women around him are head over heels – I can’t see anything good in that situation.”

Ah-choo! Lan Jue suddenly let out a loud sneeze 1

Ling Ya’s face froze.

Wu Qiu smirked. “Alright, stop talking and pay attention. He’s conceited but perhaps it’s warranted. How many people do you know with his influence and power at his age?”

Zeus-1 continued on. More aliens came and went, but overall they were fewer than the last time Lan Jue had visited. As they neared where the planet had been, Lan Jue ordered Su Xiaosu to pull into an orbit instead of flying in directly. They would try to approach aliens from the side.

If the aliens knew humans were on their way, they would also likely know where their ships were. In addition, they would be ready for scouts, and a direct incursion would meet with heavy defenses. With some planning they could swing around the side or back and lower their chances of being discovered.

Ling Ya didn't cause any further problems and contended herself with observing quietly. She recorded everything they encountered along the way and sent everything back to Tyrannosaurus. The longer they scouted the enemy the more she felt Lin Guoguo was important. Whenever they got close to the aliens she would immediately put that strange helmet back on.

She had to be a psychic of some kind! Each new hint pointed at that possibility.

"Boss, we've arrived." Su Xiaosu turned her head and looked at Lan Jue.

"Alright!" Lan Jue left for the resting cabin. They were near the last known location of the alien planet – on the other side of that familiar asteroid belt. Now they had to take things more seriously and be more careful. The Paragons needed to be made aware.

Wu Qiu, meanwhile, was still inwardly praising Su Xiaosu. What a prize she was! Not only was she a masterful pilot, but she seemed to know the Starfields like the back of her hand. It would take the North's own scout teams at least another day to find this place, and that was with guidance equipment.

Skyfire Avenue really was rife with talent! If he knew that Xiaosu was the once-feared Moonfiend Empress, the shock might have killed him.

Before Lan Jue and his party left the Avenue, a final decision had been reached concerning the prisoners that had been locked in the Pontiff's dungeons. Two-thirds of them remained to join Star Division and were

already training with the soldiers. This served to boost their numbers by close to fifty percent, for a total of over one thousand three hundred men and women. The newcomers were disseminated through the four divisions based on abilities. After body checks they were cleared to begin a strict training regimen.

The Paragons arrived on the bridge from the other room and took their seats. Their arrival caught the eyes of Wu Qiu and Ling Ya, since they had been entirely out of sight until now. In fact the two Northerners had almost forgotten they were on board. What was their purpose, anyway?

Lan Jue returned to Xiaosu's side. "Let's go!"

"Aye aye!" She barked her reply, then plunged Zeus-1 into the asteroid belt.

The Driver took his helmet off and joined Lan Jue at the controls. "I'm more or less done assimilating what I learned. One more round and the transformation will be complete. I'm still suppressing my Discipline but it feels like I can't hold it much longer. What should I do?"

Lan Jue smiled. "If you can't hold it back then let nature do what it does. But as it is now completing the transformation will probably force your breakthrough. Let's wait until we get back and you can complete the process there. Otherwise it'd be a waste."

The Driver chortled. "I never thought the day would come – but here I am worried I'm too early. When we get back, then."

What were they talking about? Ling Ya watched the men with sharp and curious eyes. They might as well have been speaking in riddles. Breakthrough? To what, the next level? That man was likely a ninth level Talent, too, but what would he be nervous about 'breaking through' into? Wu Qiu didn't understand either, but they were here as a friendly attaché, so he couldn't use his Discipline to find out more about the soldier.

Once they entered the belt's magnetic field 2 Zeus-1 began to shake. Lin Guoguo was in a meditative state, ready for a surprise attack. An asteroid field would be the best place for the creatures to ambush them so she had to be ready. To avoid detection she had to be react at a moment's notice.

However, for all their anxiety things seemed safe. It looked as though they would make it through the asteroid field without incident.

“We’re nearly at the mission area. Mother, you and the others get ready.” Lan Jue turned his Luo Xianni and the Wine Master, sitting nearby.

The two of them rose, helmets still concealing their identities. However Lan Jue’s sentence had taken Ling Ya by surprise.

This commander actually brought his mother on a dangerous scouting mission? Nothing in their intelligence briefing about Star Division said anything about the commander’s mother being a part! He was supposed to be an orphan. His brother, they knew, was the Eastern super soldier who recently broke through to Reflection of Heaven and Earth – Admiral Lan Qing. But, he was supposed to be an orphan as well.

Luo Xianni and her nephew stood shoulder to shoulder. They quietly felt the ebb and flow of energy outside the ship. Jue Di wasn’t here to protect them this time, so they had to be ready to flee if things turned bad. Otherwise, they risked destruction at the hands of a powerful alien.

The Gourmet, Pauper, and Clockmaker stood as well. They occupied different corners of the bridge. They were ready to lend themselves to the fight. Each of them had their hands resting on a metallic orb that was affixed to the ship by a rod. From the outside they looked like they were meant to keep them steady, but Wu Qiu knew better. They were used to infuse the ship with Discipline.

All of them were strong Adepts? Was this whole squad...

Chapter 676: Magnified

The shaking came to an abrupt stop and Zeus-1 burst from the asteroid field like a swallow from the clouds. The vast expanse of space stretched out before them.

Ling Ya and Wu Qiu looked out onto the scene. Where the Shattered Starfields primary planets had been, there remained only a single purple world.

“An alien planet...?” Ling Ya gapes at what she saw.

Lan Jue nodded his head, staring at it with serious countenance. He looked toward Su Xiaosu. “Measure it. I feel like it’s larger than last time.”

After a moment Xiaosu’s stringent voice replied. “It is. Forty-six percent bigger than when we saw it first. That’s a serious increase. Unless this is another planet, it’s evolved.”

Lan Jue sighed, trying to suppress the anxiety welling up in his chest. He continued in a sour voice. “Pull into a distant orbit, keep taking video. Secretary Wu, suspend communications with Tyrannosaurus – we aren’t safe here. We can deliver the information when we’ve finished, and are safely back in the asteroid field.

“Alright!” Wu Qiu’s reply was quick and compliant. He was witnessing the alien planet with his own eyes, and this meant several things. At the very least everything Lan Jue had told them before was true. He wasn’t going to start causing trouble now.

Ling Ya was also filled with a disquiet she couldn’t shake. This thing was five times bigger than the mighty ship she’d come from. Ferocious looking creatures came and went from it in a constant stream. This was the power her army had come to face!

The Driver muttered darkly. “The other two are still nowhere to be seen, but I’m not gunna complain there’s only one of ‘em. Divide and conquer. If we can put this thing down you can call the expedition a success.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Indeed.”

Maintaining distance and taking pictures did not put them in any immediate danger. Between the Blinding Stone and Lin Guoguo's constant masking they avoided detection. After an hour of silent observation, Lan Jue gave the order for them to retreat. Lin Guoguo couldn't keep the ruse up forever and needed to rest soon. Once they were safely hidden in the asteroid field, with Lan Jue's permission, Wu Qiu sent Tyrannosaurus all that they'd learned.

Their target was confirmed. It was time to commence the operation.

"Commander Lan. Admiral Kang would like a word with you," Wu Qiu said.

Lan Jue walked to his side and took the communication device from the secretary. "Hello, Admiral."

Kang Hui's glum voice answered. "Hello commander. The intelligence you gathered was tremendously important. We're preparing to move out as we speak, headed your way. We need you to continue to watch and report back what you see. We need to be kept abreast of the planet's condition and location to facilitate our operation."

"Leave to us," Lan Jue affirmed.

Reconnaissance was of course more involved than taking a peak. They were the North's eyes out here, and only through constant observation could they set the stage for a successful attack.

He could hear the Admiral's appreciation for their work in his voice. Not only had they been quiet, but they had installed themselves as an invaluable source of information. It made what they had to do much easier.

"If possible, commander, we'd like you and your time to extend the scope of your reconnaissance. Specifically, we're looking for the presence of the other two planets. These creatures obviously possess higher intelligence – we need to be sure they haven't set a trap."

Kang Hui's suggestion struck Lan Jue. The old fox was a clever one, he silently praised.

“Breathe easy, Admiral. We’ll take a more careful look around and let you know what we find,” Lan Jue confirmed.

“Very well.”

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On the outskirts of the Shattered Starfields, a white light had risen up around Tyrannosaurus. Its main propulsion systems were coming online, and its large array of boosters were pulsing with pale light. The five fleets that had gathered around it parted to make way.

Kang Hui, seated in the captain’s charge, gave the order. “Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship, on the move – into the Starfields. Fleet commanders, order your ships to follow. No one stays behind. Alpha formation.”

Tyrannosaurus began to pick up speed, and from the bridge they could see the rocky expanse that marked the Starfields’ border creeping toward them. Large as the ship was, they certainly weren’t going to find any gaps to slip through.

They barreled ahead at top speed, brazenly headed for the asteroid belt.

The white light around the ship buzzed. As they met the asteroids, the larger ones were harmlessly vast to the side. Smaller space rocks were smashed to dust. The North’s Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship drove through the belt like it was no more than a nuisance.

It was dramatic proof that the three alliances could have dealt with the pirate menace. They just didn’t want to.

The fleets fell in behind Tyrannosaurus in a line as the massive ship cleared a path. All they had to do was follow, like hiding beneath the shade of a great tree. However the going was slow, and it cost Tyrannosaurus dearly in energy. Although it was equipped with devices that could replenish energy through space radiation, it was spending far more than it could recover in a short period.

In distant parts of space the North’s Arachnid-and Heron-class Bastions were also on the move. They pushed through the cosmic debris just like

Tyrannosaurus. The operation was now fully under way.

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Moments after Lan Jue got news of Tyrannosaurus' entry, he was struck by a surge of pressure. Now, more than ever, their role was crucial to the success of the mission. Spread out, observe, report. No rest for the wicked.

Lan Jue had replaced Su Xiaosu at the controls. They found a relatively space spot for Lin Guoguo to recover. The five Paragons were on the bridge, leaving only the Pharmacist alone in the resting area. She would be called if combat broke out.

"At full speed it'll take Tyrannosaurus about five days to reach our location. The interim is important," Wu Qiu reminded Lan Jue.

He nodded.

The alien planet was as enigmatic as it ever was. It hung in the darkness of space, and besides the aliens coming and going in droves they could learn nothing else from it.

The days passed. The atmosphere about Zeus-1 grew more tense by the hour. All they had to do was persist until fighting broke out. They were anxious for the Bastion ship to arrive and engage the enemy, a single alien planet against three bastion ships and five fleets. The North had mobilized a third of its total military power – equally a fifth of humanity's strength.

If they could bring punishment upon one of the alien homeworlds, it would prove that humanity has what it takes to fight back. Victory would mean tremendous gain for the North as well, but Lan Jue was unconcerned. So long as humanity's future was assured, that was all that mattered to him.

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"Tyrannosaurus will be here in four hours. They're resting and prepping for the last leg. When they get here they'll move right in for the attack. Combat will be initiated right away, before the aliens have a chance to react." Wu Qiu gave the latest information to Lan Jue. His voice betrayed his excitement.

It had been a long time since these terrifying weapons had seen full combat. The secretary had total faith in the Bastion ship. He knew what it was capable of.

Lan Jue also permitted himself some measure of relief. With Tyrannosaurus' arrival their work would be done.

"Let's perform final checks – make sure the planet is still there and the situation hasn't changed," Lan Jue ordered. He didn't assume anything. The closer it came to all-out combat, the more careful he'd been.

Zeus-1 slipped out from the asteroid fields and continued to watch the planet, invisible as a ghost. Nothing was different, the planet was just the same as before. It seemed to have no idea what was coming.

"No good." Lan Jue scowled, suspicious.

"Hm? What is it?" Ling Ya swiftly hurried to his side.

"The aliens have scouts and gathers out constantly, tracking down and bringing back energy all across the galaxy. Your military made quite an impressive entrance, but they seem totally unaware. It's too quiet."

Wu Qiu joined them, curious. "I thought the same, but it's too late to go back now. Our only option is to go ahead with the mission. We have a lot of firepower on the way, not to mention we've been watching for days. If this is an ambush it's too late for them, too. But I'll share your concerns with Admiral Kang."

"Good," Lan Jue replied. No matter what, they had to continue watching, continue with their reconnaissance.

Three more hours... two more.

One more hour!

Chapter 677: Infiltration

Humanity's strongest army had arrived. Lan Jue could feel the formless pressure approaching from behind. They continued to patrol along the border of the asteroid field, orbiting the alien planet once every twenty minutes. If the planet was preparing to move they would know right away.

All quiet! Even if the planet tried to flee it was already too late. After all, teleporting an entire star takes a lot of energy. It needed time to complete the process.

Could they have underestimated the humans? Hope sprang up in Lan Jue's heart

"Boss, something's happening!" Su Xiaosu pointed to their target and shouted in excitement. "Nothing's leaving, just coming back. They know we're coming."

Lan Jue looked at the screens and confirmed Su Xiaosu's report. All they saw were scores of beasts moving toward the planet from all directions and disappearing into the atmosphere. It was less a planet and more like a beehive.

Anxiety gripped Lan Jue's heart. What were these monsters preparing to do?

All of star division's members had gathered on the bridge, preparing for the operation to begin. The Wine Maker and Photographer were prepared to transfer them out at a moment's notice. They were about to witness a full-fledged intergalactic war. Even the shockwaves from their class were going to be earthshaking. It was best to keep their difference at not get involved.

They sent everything – their observations and concerns – back to Tyrannosaurus with the latest scout report. Kang Hui told them to await further orders. It was expected that an operation this large was going to be discovered by the enemy before the attack began.

Tyrannosaurus barreled ahead. Its five-fleet entourage spread out behind and began clearing asteroids in their path with weapon fire. Battle was soon to ensue, so preparation was more important than conserving energy.

“Huh?” Lan Jue’s eyes popped open, wide with surprise. He could see things changing outside. The alien planet, large already, began to expand like a balloon.

As it grew a part in the center began to collapse inward. The bigger it got the deeper the cavern became, and along with it came an imposing vacuum force.

“What is it doing?” Wu Qiu gasped.

Lan Jue’s face fell as the possibilities dawned on him. “It’s the same thing that happened before the Seventh Fleet was destroyed. But this planet is much bigger... you should tell Tyrannosaurus.”

“We can’t! Communications have been cut!” Ling Ya cried.

Lan Jue felt his heart jump into his throat. Their communication equipment was strong – for it to fail now, this was no accident.

“Boss, the traction is too strong. We’re being sucked in!” Su Xiaosu’s voice was urgent.

Just as she warned, Zeus-1 and the asteroids around it began to tumble faster and faster to the rapidly expanding planet. The collapsed center was like a large black hole.

It had known all along. It had known they were coming.

The Wine Master and the Photographer looked at Lan Jue, awaiting his orders. They could leave at a moment’s notice, teleporting to safety.

Zeus-1 was picking up speed out of their control along with the kilotons of rock around them. Right now those asteroids were the main threat to their lives.

A golden hue hung over the ship, a manifestation of the Pauper’s power as he channeled it through Zeus-1. It protected them to some degree

against the asteroids but they were insignificantly small by comparison. Against that enormous alien planet even a Paragon seemed impotently weak.

Lan Jue snapped his head toward Wu Qiu. “Secretary, we can’t alert your superiors from here. Our only option is to flee and try to bring them what we learned. What are your thoughts?”

Wu Qiu gaped at him. “Flee? How?!” Zeus-1 was careening toward the planet and crashing asteroids were exploding all around them. Wu Qiu and Ling Ya both were pale as sheets.

Lan Jue didn’t wait. He called out the order. “Do it!” Only prompt decisions would free them from this situation.

The Wine Master and Photographer released their respective powers, which flared dramatically around them. A strange, low chanting filled the bridge.

Ling Ya and the Secretary felt everything change. Reality became surreal. An intense pain nearly sent them into convulsions.

Thankfully the sensation lasted only a moment.

Buzz– Zeus-1 shuddered. The universe settled, and the familiar sights of their succor planet came into view. It had cost them, but the Paragons readily made the sacrifice to save their lives.

Wu Qiu and Ling Ya still hadn’t recovered.

“Secretary!” Lan Jue unceremoniously smacked him in the forehead. A tremble wracked through him as he regained his composure.

“See if you can get ahold of Tyrannosaurus and let them know what we saw.” He ordered.

Wu Qiu glanced out the bridge’s windows. Everything seemed normal but for the fact that they were in an entirely different part of space. What... what’s going on, he pondered. How did they get away?

His head was swimming with questions, but Wu Qiu was a professional soldier and secretary of combat. He snapped back to the present and

immediately tried to get in contact with the Bastion ship.

“Tyrannosaurus, Tyrannosaurus! This is Zeus-1. Respond!”

“This is Tyrannosaurus.” Someone on the other end answered.

Wu Qiu’s face lit up in relief. “The situation has changed. I need to speak with Admiral Kang immediately!”

“This is Kang Hui!” The Admiral’s voice came on a few moments later. “What’s going on, why did you contact me?”

Wu Qiu wasted no time explaining. “Admiral, something’s changed with the aliens. We experienced a strong disturbance that cut our communications. The planet had begun to expand and is drawing all the asteroids towards it. There’s some sort of black hole in the center of the planet, similar to what the Seventh Fleet encountered. You have to be careful.”

“Where are you? Tell us everything.”

Wu Qiu paused. Where? How should he know? He looked at Lan Jue for help.

Lan Jue came to his rescue. “Admiral Kang, this is Lan Jue. The situation became dire and we were forced to teleport to safety. We currently cannot get close enough to continue surveillance. Please be cautious – the aliens have likely known for a long time that you were coming. I don’t know what they prepared but they’ve had ample time to do it.”

Teleportation? Back on Tyrannosaurus Kang Hui was silent. What was happening? That tiny patrol boat could teleport?

An ear-splitting alarm began to screech.

“Attention all hands. Attention all hands! Enemies have invaded the ship, man defenses!” The digitized voice rang through the alert system. Kang Hui’s face fell, but he wasn’t alone. Lan Jue was just as disturbed.

Aliens boarded the Bastion ship? How was this possible? Then it dawned on him. Lan Jue spoke urgently. “Admiral... admiral are you there?”

Kang Hui responded with a strangely calm voice. “I’m here, what is it?”

Lan Jue wasted no time. "Please confirm infiltration and let me know. I might know who it is."

It took only a moment for the admiral to return with more news. "It's a violet figure. Too fast to see more clearly, but it's strong. We've already lost one of our mecha pilots and it's heading my way. Is it an alien?" Despite the danger, he maintained an eerie level of calm.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh. One figure. It could be the Violet Princess... or the Violet Prince? The aliens had been ready for this. This was bad.

He quickly gave his suggestion. "We'll be there soon, admiral. Employ your strongest defenses to slow the invader down. He's a humanoid alien as strong as the legendary Jue Di. You need to flee to safety and stop your advance immediately."

Lan Jue's voice was more a command than a request. Tyrannosaurus was the heart of that attack group and the center of the operation. If something were to happen to Kang Hui they would be flying into an unmitigated catastrophe.

"When will you arrive?" He asked.

"Soon!" Lan Jue replied without hesitation. "Sir you need to make a decision!"

Chapter 678: Making Their Move

“I know!” Kang Hui opened up a second line but kept Lan Jue on the communicator.

“Hand down my order. Bring the ship and the fleets to a stop. Engage all of the ship’s internal defenses to their highest readiness and do whatever possible to stop the invader. Put the fleet in a defensive position as well and tell them to be ready for a fight. Defcon 1!” His orders were simple and to the point. He said they needed to hear in a few short sentences.

On the other line, Lan Jue sighed in relief. He turned around. “Mother, Wine Master. We need to get to him as soon as possible. We can’t let the enemy succeed.”

Out there in space was the North’s best fighters. If they fell before the operation even began, if one of their mighty Bastions fells, the future of humanity would be bleak indeed! Nothing else was more important than making sure Admiral Kang was safe.

On one end of the bridge Wu Qiu and Ling Ya stared in muddled confusion. On the other, the Wine Master was already lifting his scepter. The ship was flooded with a stabbing silver light. At the same time it mingled with a gentle pink glow. They mingled together and filled every corner of the ship.

The first teleport had been so sudden, the situation so dire, that the Northern soldiers hadn’t even known what happened. However, now they saw it coming – could feel the pulses of protogenia coming from the two helmeted scouts. Whoever they were, they commanded power on a whole other level!

Protogenia... Paragons? The Wine Master? Incredible! This man bathed in silver, scepter in hand, was Skyfire Avenue’s chairman and foremost Paragon – the Cosmagus!

But the other one? A pink, enigmatic energy that was hard to fathom wafted from her. Another powerhouse? How was it she felt even stronger than the Cosmagus?

Time didn't wait for them to puzzle out the answers. Reality rippled like waves in a pond. After the very unpleasant first experience both Wu Qiu and Ling Ya reacted by calling on their Discipline for defense. Neither were eager to feel the effects of teleportation again.

Flash! When matter reconstituted itself around them the first they heard was a deafening alarm. Outside the windows was a world of white while the sounds of destruction crashed all around.

This is...

As Ling Ya and Wu Qiu looked out over the familiar scene and twisted metal, they gaped in shock.

"Secretary, get out there and find the Admiral. We need to confirm his location!" Lan Jue wasted no time in explaining things to them. With a flick of his wrist a long white dress appeared in his grip. Immediately following, he was consumed by an orb of crackling electric light that hid him from view.

When the light dissipated a moment later there was someone else beside the Star Division commander.

Lin gYa gaped when she saw her. She was gorgeous! In her flowing white dress her beauty could topple mountains. A surreal atmosphere surrounded her as though she were a fairy come from the land of fantasy.

Her Discipline wasn't lightning. Who was this woman?

Wu Qiu had recovered faster than the colonel. It'd taken him only a few moments to recognize this place as the resting area in Tyrannosaurus' living quarters. He needn't ask how they got here; teleportation. But how they teleported here, only the mysterious scouts would know.

His ears rang as the alarms screeched all around them, sharpening his mind. Now wasn't the time for thought, but for quick and decisive action.

"Admiral? Admiral where are you? We've teleported into Tyrannosaurus with reinforcements." Wu Qiu shouted into his communicator.

"Teleportation? Get over here, the emergency code is 5431..." Kang Hui

quickly rattled off a series of numbers.

“No need for all that trouble,” the Wine Master interrupted. The Wine Master lifted his scepter for a third time. In a flash, they were gone.

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Kang Hui’s office.

“Who’s that!” A pulse of powerful energy swept through the area, crashing from all directions. A shell of white light hid everything.

Admiral Kang Hui was seated calmly behind his desk. Four Adepts of different specialties stood at his side. Each one of them were bathed in auras that betrayed their peak-level status. The office interior’s defenses reacted quickly. The walls bristled with guns that pointed at the center of the white light, ready to fire at the first sign of danger.

“Admiral, it’s us!” Wu Qiu’s urgent voice called to him.

When Kang Hui saw it was indeed Skyfire Avenue’s scout team, he was dumbfounded. In all his years he’d never witnessed anything like this! Only a few minutes earlier these mysterious Adepts were close enough to the aliens to feed him information. Now here they were – it was inconceivable!

The Wine Master removed his helmet, revealing his craggy features. “No time for talk, Admiral. I am the Wine Master of Skyfire Avenue, I came with the scout team. We believe your Bastion ship has been infiltrated by one of the aliens’ strongest leaders. We need control over your ship’s defenses to help us beat it back. If we don’t succeed than Tyrannosaurus will be destroyed. We need to know precisely where it is this moment.”

Kang Hui’s surprise was short-lived. Of course he knew who the Wine Master was – also known as His Majesty Cosmagus! No wonder... no wonder this team succeeded where so many others had failed. They had a Paragon! A Paragon acting as a scout!

Star Division’s remaining members removed their helmets, one by one. Kang Hui – normally steady and reserved – began to shake.

He didn't know the Gourmet or the Pauper, nor did he have any idea who Luo Xianni was. However, there was no way he wouldn't recognize one of the North's former Paragon leaders – the Epochrion!

“Your Majesty Epochrion?” He shot up onto his feet.

She nodded. “At ease, Admiral. We rushed back here to ensure your safety and keep this ship from being destroyed. We need you to turn over the ship's defenses to us. Prepare to meet the enemy. They're coming.”

“Yes!” Kang Hui was not part of an indecisive generation. Although things were far outside of what was planned, he reacted with purpose. He turned to a man with a general's star on his shoulder, one of the peak-level Adepts. “Give their Majesties whatever is needed to combat the enemy. Start with the alien's coordinates.”

Lan Jue paid them no mind, his attention was on one of the large screens nearby. A flash of purple streaked by. All you could see was a humanoid shape before the defenses barring its path exploded into shrapnel. Destruction was left in the monster's wake.

Doughty mecha suits were left in ruin and any personnel unlucky enough to cross its path were instantly slain. Their essence was gobbled up faster than the soldiers could react.

But Lan Jue's perception was sharp. All he caught was a pair of eyes. That was enough.

“That's the Violet Prince. Let's get after him!”

The Wine Master shot his eyes toward Lan Jue and nodded.

The Photographer growled. “A-Jue, Gourmet, Pauper, Wine Master, Clockmaker, Pharmacist and Driver – do whatever you can to slow him down. I'll find a way to take this fight out of the ship.”

“Got it.” They said in unison.

The Wine Master waved his scepter. An orb of silver extending from the head until it swallowed them all up. It contracted against into a single point and vanished, along with Star Division's fighters. Once they'd found

the Prince's location on the screens it wasn't difficult to track him down.

Kang Hui stared blankly at the empty spot they had occupied. Who was that woman who was issuing orders? Even the Cosmagus and Epochrion had regarded her with respect and deference. What did this mean? The Epochrion was a Reflection of Heaven and Earth! He didn't even know who the other woman was!

"Admiral, the Gourmet is likely Skyfire Avenue's Infernal Vanguard. As far as we can tell, the one they called the Pauper is the Arhat of the Descending Dragon. The Pharmacist was the woman who came in second place during the Great Adept Tournament." One of the Admiral's attendants had leaned in to share the information.

Kang Hui's surprise was clear. "You mean to tell me this scouting team has five Paragons..."

The soldier stood there, just as shocked, but nodded after a few seconds of quiet. "Yes, sir..."

Kang Hui's face began to change. He became darkly obsessed with a single thought: How strong were these things where a scout force needed five Paragons?

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Flickering silver light deposited Lan Jue and the others in an empty area of the ship. The wine Master was the first to move, stepping ahead and indicating with scepter. What issued forth was a ray of anti-space that carved a channel through the ship. It extended forward until crashing into the far wall. Reality around the borders of the pitch-black aisle crackled in protest and everything around them adopt a surreal quality. The universe seemed stacked on top of itself, layer upon layer, warping and changing even as they looked on.

It was the Wine Master's Domain, Interspatial Flux!

The space between dimensions possessed tremendous amounts of energy. Be it folding, tearing or blending, this energy had many ways to wreak havoc.

Chapter 679: The Monstrous Prince

Suddenly a torrent of purple light crashed into the Wine Master's domain. It was a brazen flood that tried to fight its way through. Eventually the interspatial flux fractured and gave way. The Wine Master's Domain was nearly defeated.

Just as it broke through the line a loud 'ding!' sounded through the area. The flood of purple stopped in its tracks. A clock had sprung up in the beleaguered folds of reality that sparkled with a myriad of colors. Where it's light radiated time appeared to slow, and the purple light's spread was halted.

The clock was difficult to perceive clearly as it existed in the flux. However, a figure appeared in its center – the image of the Clockmaker.

The Epochrion! Reflection of Heaven and Earth!

A grey light sprang up from nearby to join the fray. It seemed unhindered by the Epochrion's power. It roiled like a pestilence, corrupting space around it as it headed for the purple light. Although it did not stop the violet power's advance, it did slow it. Where they clashed spouts of grey fire lapped at the edges.

The Gourmet, Infernal Vanguard!

Three mighty Paragons battled to contain the purple light. They struggled to ensure it could not extend its terrible reach.

And yet it was not enough!

The Violet Prince was a contemporary of Jue Di, even against three Paragons he was not at a disadvantage. His fully manifested power stretched into the Infinite.

The purple light suddenly receded, contracting. It untangled itself from the burning power of the Gourmet's Domain. In the next instant it swelled to form a nightmarish beast before lunging ahead once more. The interspatial flux continued to give way, and the Epochrion's time dilation was losing its grip on the monster. Nothing seemed capable of standing in

its way.

“Aaagggghhh...” Raging cries made the whole structure shudder, and a golden dragon threaded its way through the corridor of interspatial flux. Its snake-like body writhed, its horned head thrashed, and five-clawed hands swiped ferociously. The golden figure twinkled majestically in the blackness of the Wine Master’s Domain. It met the lizard-like purple beast with hesitation.

The purple monster seemed to grow more distinct, more real – like a hideous crocodile corrupted by evil. Its enormous head occupied nearly half its body, and as the creature opened its maw the combined powers of the Paragons collapsed into it.

Fear and surprise swept through the human defenders.

Strong though the Violet Prince was, he still was beneath Jue Di’s capabilities. If he threw caution to the wind and employed his full powers the Violet Prince would not be alive. Though Jue Di was not here, the Prince was facing humanity’s first-class Paragons, who themselves were capable fighters. They would not be able to defeat the Prince, but there was a chance they could repel him.

“Crack!” The first to lash out was their strongest, the Epochrion. The clock paused, its pendulum froze. For a moment everything was calm, and even the monstrous Prince was still. An orb of silver light floated through frozen time and into the Prince’s mouth. Next came the golden dragon, racing forth at incredible speed. The ghastly grey fires congealed to form a spectral blade, which then tumbled from the sky toward their enemy.

As the Gourmet’s weapon fell three clear ringing cries issued forth, and three dazzling lights appeared. Red, white and blue respectively ¹. They flickered in an uncomfortable and illusory fashion, but upon closer inspection seemed more real than the Domains they passed through.

Boom–! The first explosion came from the silver orb. It detonated with a flash of silver light, while black tears in reality spider-webbed out in every direction. Dimensional Tempest!

It was the Wine Master’s most daunting attack, a dimensional

phenomenon turned attack. It caused wide-spread devastation, obliterating everything within its scope, tearing apart the dimension itself. At full power it could erase pockets of the universe. Of course the Wine Master could not command such power, but it mimicked universal protogenia in much the same way.

He was on the cusp of becoming a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, though he wasn't yet there. Still, the destructive power at his fingertips was extraordinary.

The purple monster was wracked with pain. It reacted by clamping its enormous jaws shut to suppress the imploding dimensional tear within. The monster was strong – strong enough to simply devour the Wine Master's strongest attack.

But it was given no respite. With a threatening roar the golden dragon descended upon it, backed by the power of several Paragons' Domains. Reality shuddered in its passing. Tendrils of golden light suddenly appeared around the creature's head, wrapping around it as though to tie its mouth shut.

Four pillars of light crashed onto in the same moment. The first to make contact was the largest, the enormous grey blade. When it struck ribbons of grey power joined the gold to constrain the beast. The three other lights quickly followed.

A strange and fantastical scene emerged. While the Paragons struggled vainly against the Violet Prince, the impact of those three lights made the whole ship quake.

Three jets of purple light issued from the monster's back, spat from three identical gashes. The Prince writhed and howled.

They wounded it! Those jets of light was its blood!

The monster trashed desperately against the Domains that restrained it. Cracks appeared in the Paragons' power as they struggled to keep hold.

In this moment of truth a flood of pink light surged through the area, covering everything like a film. It sealed the cracking Domains together,

shoring them up. Then, they all became that shining pink hue. It grew brighter and brighter until – all of a sudden – everything vanished.

Another flash lit up the endless darkness of space.

The crocodile-beast was thrust out into the freezing vacuum. The pink light then deposited several other figures a short distance away. At the fore was none other than the Photographer. Spread out behind her were the Wine Master, Gourmet, Pauper, Lan Jue, Zhou Qianlin, the Pharmacist and the Driver.

Skyfire Avenue's eight mighty warriors stared down the Violet Prince, who had re-assumed human form.

Short as their first exchange was, Lan Jue and the others had spared nothing in their assault. The only one who hadn't gotten involved was the Driver, but not for lack of desire. He simply had no opportunity.

Tyrannosaurus was quick to take advantage of the opportunity. Its massive white shields sprang up like a milky atmosphere. Humanity's greatest technological achievement was called such for a reason. Even the Violet Prince wasn't going to get passed those shields.

Rage flashed in the Prince's eyes, but he wasn't looking at the Paragons. His glare was reserved for Lan Jue, Qianlin and the Pharmacist. They stared back, and in their hands were the legendary weapons of ages past; Captus, Demortus, Occisus. Those three cursed weapons were the ones that had injured him. Although the humans could not see it, three small cuts ran across his back. Small though they were, they would not heal and continuously leaked purple fluid.

The Prince stood there, staring. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Meanwhile Luo Xianni's face was dark and dour. She had waited for the perfect moment to get involved, and in the Prince's moment of weakness transferred it and them away from the Bastion ship. If the Prince had succeeded in destroying Tyrannosaurus, all of their effort up to this point would have been for naught. At the very least it would have thrown the Northern army into chaos. Without Admiral Kang Hui, the whole strike

force would be sitting ducks.

Finally the Prince settled his sights on Lan Jue's face. Something flashed behind his eyes, and then he dissolved into a beam of purple light and vanished. The human defenders were silently relieved. Making him flee was difficult enough, keeping him there would be impossible.

They allowed themselves a moment to relax. But just then, a choking sense of danger swept over them. They each unconsciously drew their eyes up.

Asteroids from the belt of space rocks collapsed inward, and the vacuum force they'd fled from before reemerged. Lan Jue gaped at what he saw. The planet was so far! What sort of power was necessary to extend the traction this far?! He didn't know how many asteroids there were, put big or small, whatever the number, the planet's was drawing them in.

What was its plan?

Lan Jue felt the power tug at him even as he stood in thought. While Tyrannosaurus remained stable, the myriad ships in its fleet had been cast into disarray. Dreadnaughts and larger ships fared better because of their mass and engines, but battleships, patrol boats and even expedition ships were being dragged out of position.

Chapter 680: The Cusp

A stillness came over everything, but instead of easing the fear in Lan Jue's heart it only increased it. As he watched the asteroids crash into one another, he and his friends were bathed in a beam of light from Tyrannosaurus.

A tractor beam. Lan Jue's sullen expression lessened. The Admiral had come to their aid instead of kicking them while they were down. The beam drew them in, and in a flash they appeared within the belly of the Bastion ship.

A familiar face was waiting for them when the scouting party settled. It was Ling Ya, though her face was absent the prideful glower from before. Now it was drawn and pale. She bowed respectfully before them. "Please, everyone, come with me. The Admiral has requested I bring you to meet with him." She turned and headed away.

"I've got it." Lui Xianni scowled, and with a wave of her hand the pink manifestation of her power sprang up and covered them all. In a blink they were again within Kang Hui's office.

For a Paragon of Luo Xianni's standing the internal security of Tyrannosaurus was in name only. She only needed to know a location to transfer herself and anywhere she pleased right to it.

When they appeared in the office, Kang Hui rose to his feet in solemn silence. He saluted.

The gesture represented his respect and appreciation for their work in those crucial moments. Words couldn't express his sentiments well enough. Besides, there was still an eminent danger to address.

"Admiral, is there anything on the radar?" Lan Jue wasted no time, immediately engaging the Northern commander in questioning.

Undoubtedly, the ship's radar systems were state-of-the-art. Only through it would they be able to pick out encroaching alien forces as early as possible.

Kang Hui's eyebrows drew together. "Everything is strangely quiet. But several of our smaller ships were dragged away by that strange force. I've already ordered the ships to pull into defensive formations as quickly as possible."

As he spoke, he indicated one of the large screens near him. It switched to a large radar display. It crackled and flickered, for although it was constructed of the best technology it was still affected by the Starfields' interference.

There were a few blips indicating alien forces. But as they watched the number of bogies grew.

"They're gathering!" Lan Jue hissed.

Kang Hui muttered. "They aren't moving quickly... slow. At this rate they'll be on us in an hour."

"Admiral, prepare all ships for battle. These are aliens, we can't face them the normal way. The one who infiltrated your ship is known as the Violet Prince – one of their strongest. He's good at looking like us, copying our genetics. They need it because they believe our DNA will unlock their potential as a species."

Kang Hui sighed. "How many of his kind are there?"

He knew that without the intervention of these people before him, Tyrannosaurus would have been lost. The devastation a fourth-degree Paragon could do was unthinkable. He didn't even want to imagine what would have happened without their help.

"We aren't sure. At least two that we know of, and we believe the planets themselves are alien lifeforms. Those three worlds are probably the strongest of all the alien creatures." Lan Jue voice was gloomy.

The Admiral sighed once more. It seemed things were worse than he thought.

He reached out and pressed a button on his desk. "Combat division, spread the word: All ships, prepare for battle. Get back into formation as quickly as possible and engage shields. Wait for the attack." The aliens were

amassing for an offensive, now wasn't the time to charge ahead. They would wait for their foes to come to them.

The five fleets were some of the North's best. Their formation had been broken by the surprise traction, but they were already forming back up. They would only have one shot at this, so the ships formed an arc formation centered around the Bastion. It allowed them to unleash the full might of their weapons on the aliens as they came.

The full might of the aliens were on full display. All of humanity's combined military might couldn't copy what was amassing just outside of the fleet's strike range.

The living planet continued ahead unabated, maintaining stable speed. The large black hole that was its maw remained open, and the mass of the planet itself seemed a hundred times larger. The length and breadth of space as far as the eye could see was thick with alien creatures.

'Terrifying' didn't do the scene justice. However, they faced five of the best trained fleets in space with a planet-sized ship at their head.

With every kilometer they drew nearer, the anxiety in the air thickened.

Kang Hui closely monitored the data as it flit across his screens, ticking down the distance between the two armies. He'd called to prepare them early because different ships needed different prep time. The larger the vessel, the more time was required to charge their weapons.

Lan Jue watched the screens as well, but his mind was on other things. When he struck with Captus he felt it slip into the Prince's body. The beast's mighty defenses seemed significantly less mighty in the face of the Banishing Blade. In other words, the god weapons were particularly well suited against them. The Violet Prince would likely be able to survive a direct blast from Jue Di. This meant what aliens feared the most was the combination of a Paragon's abilities and weapons such as Captus. They devoured vital energy, but it was also their undoing.

The only way to prove the hypothesis was to face the creatures again. When the Prince's eyes had found his own, Lan Jue didn't see hatred. He saw respect. He respects me? He must know the Princess sought me out

and made her proposition. These monsters are no less intelligent than mankind. But what was their end game?

As he thought Qianlin stood silently by his side. Ling Ya was nearby as well, lifelessly staring at them.

She's so beautiful! She thought. So beautiful... but where did she come from?

The two of them together seemed like towering pillars. Ling Ya's feelings were strange; before seeing Qianlin she was anxious to test herself against Lan Jue. However, once the beautiful woman in white appeared that eagerness abated.

She couldn't figure out why, but it was true nonetheless. It made her uncomfortable.

The communicator on Kang Hui's desk was never silent. Reports flooded in to Tyrannosaurus from the various fleet leaders. His office doubled as the center of military action, where all of his staff officers sent information and waited for the admiral's orders.

Eventually Lan Jue looked at the man responsible for the Northern fleets. Being admiral was no easy job, he thought.

"Sir! The alien forces will be in range of our main cannon in five minutes. We've charged and ready to fire on your orders!" One of the gunnery officers shouted into the office.

"Give the order," Kang Hui began. "Capital ships and dreadnaughts have their weapons at the ready. Once they're in range, let them have it. Let's test their defenses!"

It was the first time in his life Kang Hui gave that order.

How terrifying was the strength of a Bastion's main gun! He had no choice but to see. There were two reasons; First, the enemy was clustered, it was a good opportunity to see how strong their defenses were. Second, it took twenty minutes to fully charge the weapon. Using it at the battle's onset gave them a chance to fire it a second time.

It was a weapon of mass destruction, and two blasts increased their chances of victory.

The Skyfire scout team watched with baited breath. By now they were recovered from their fight with the Prince, but his escape was clearly planned. How was the alien planet going to face these human defenders?

What was about to transpire was one of the most important moments in human history. Who lived and who died hung in the balance.

The decision would soon be made!

“Enemy will be within range in one minute! Fifty-nine... fifty-eight... fifty-seven...”

The countdown began. Tyrannosaurus turned end over end toward the beasts, revealing its base. To save on energy the ship’s main thrusters and main canon were constructed together.

A canon the size of a small moon extended from the base. An angry red light roiled within the barrel. Even the soldiers of the Northern fleet peered out of the windows with nervous excitement. Witnessing a Bastion’s main weapons fire was a rare event.

The center of Kang Hui’s desk separated, and from the opening arose a single, blood-red button. As he placed his hand upon it, a light scanned its retinae.

“Retina and fingerprint scan complete. DNA conformation complete. Emotional state; normal. Heart rate; normal. Identification process complete.”

Not even the ship’s Captain could be trusted implicitly with a weapon as powerful as this. Checks were required to make sure they were in the right state of mind. Only then could the hell that was Tyrannosaurus’ primary cannon be unleashed.

Chapter 681: Failure

“Ten, nine, eight, seven...”

“... three, two, one. Fire!”

Kang Hui’s right hand slammed down onto the red button.

Vrrrrrummmmm—

Tyrannosaurus shook violently when suddenly a searing red beam fired from it. It coalesced into an orb at the head of the canon, then shot out as an angry red column – like a spear piercing the blackness of space.

Even before the beam was close, asteroids in its path sizzled and fractured. In only a few seconds the space rocks were disintegrated and cleared a path while the shot was kilometers in the distance.

In Kang Hui’s office, everyone’s eyes were glued to the screens. They held their breath and waited to see what would happen. However much damage this shot caused would spell out the future of this fight. If it hurt the aliens enough they could breathe a little easier.

The shot moved at nearly the speed of light. The alien planet didn’t react in any way to Tyrannosaurus’ change or the blast from its main gun. It simply continued its slow, inexorable advance.

What happened next stunned everyone into a dumbfounded silence.

Direct hit. The red beam struck right in the center of the planet’s black hole. However, they watched in disbelief as the shot reappeared behind the hostile world, and off into the empty expanse of space.

“Redirection!” Kang Hui reacted fastest. He immediately recognized the planet had changed. It wasn’t an orb, it was a ring. It wasn’t exactly like what the Seventh Fleet had faced, but nonetheless they’d caused no damage!

Tyrannosaurus went about recalibrating as the beam continued.

Tyrannosaurus could only maintain continuous fire for a short time. What they discovered shook them to the core. It was as though the planet

knew everything they were doing. It had positioned itself just right to allow the Bastion's attack to pass straight through.

The red beam was a javelin, and the planet had been a ring for it to harmlessly pass through.

How could this happen? No one – not the Paragons, not the intelligence officers, not the Admiral – no one could have imagined this would happen. And yet the evidence was right in front of their terrified faces.

It was almost inconceivable, but the planet's hole was large and Tyrannosaurus' blast was finite. Even as Tyrannosaurus moved to try and reposition the beam, the alien planet moved with it in perfect harmony.

A few seconds later the main gun's energy was exhausted. The red beam petered away into nothing, having never struck its target.

“Admiral, the planet's in range of the Capital ships!” One of the flight officers shouted the news.

Kang Hui didn't let his surprise impede on his role as commander. “First and Third fleets prepare their Capital ships to fire. Tell them to aim for the edge of the planet and avoid that hole. Lock on before firing cannons. Fleets Six, Eleven and Thirteen hold on my orders.”

In an intergalactic battle you mustn't show your whole hand all at once. Kang Hui was wise enough to save a few tricks up his sleeve until the right moments.

However, just as the planet was pulling within range of the ships it stopped. The Capital ships preparing to fire scrambled to react. Meanwhile the black hole at the planet's center began to change. It adopted a deep purple hue and started to rotate like an enormous whirlpool.

A thin curtain of asteroids still whipped about in space between the planet and the human fleets. Unlike Tyrannosaurus' attack, the rest of the ships couldn't get passed the asteroids to hit the target behind.

“What is it doing?” Kang Hui glowered at the scene, as curious as he was frightened.

Lan Jue's mind raced. There was something, a bolt of inspiration just out of reach.

What could the planet do? It was large, strong, and oppressive; it could swallow energy, devour life, teleport...

It could expand and create a vortex...

Suddenly a light clicked on in Lan Jue's mind. He sputtered. "I got it. The thing is strong enough to draw the asteroids around and through it. I think it's going to use these asteroids as weapons. Admiral, tell your ships to watch for the asteroids and prepare to deal with them."

Kang Hui paused and stared at the Eastern commander. Was he serious? A planet that sucked up asteroids to use as weapons?

Lan Jue spoke urgently to him. "We saw them devour three whole planets and absorb what life they had. We know it can expand, much like what we see now. It's sucked up all those asteroids because it's going to spit them out – they don't have any life it needs. Admiral!" He was nearly shouting by the end.

Kang Hui sucked in a breath. Whether he believed it or not, the dangers of being wrong were too great. He fired off a string of orders.

"Everyone listen up! All ships draw in close to me and hold your fire. Assume tortoise formation, same as when we moved into the Starfields, a solid line. Capital ships and Tyrannosaurus form up as a spearhead. Everyone else get behind. Tyrannosaurus crew engage secondary weapons systems and put full energy into our shields!"

Lan Jue gave the admiral an appreciative thumbs-up! He hadn't studied airship command but he knew that this was the best choice if a hail of asteroids did come their way. However, if he was wrong and the planet had something else planned, they'd just broken their defensive formation.

"Admiral, why are we changing formation? What are you hiding?" A deep voice called to them through the communicator, indicated by a blinking yellow light. Only a handful of people had a direct line to Kang Hui, namely fleet commanders. This was the leader of the First Fleet,

Admiral Ying Tianlong.

First Fleet was the North's wild card. They had some of the best training and equipment the North could offer. It was the only fleet with ten Sovereign-class dreadnaughts. They boasted a laundry list of military exploits in the victory column, and more experience on the field than anyone.

Admiral Ying Tianlong was himself a secret weapon. With his experience and capabilities he should have been Fleet Admiral like Kang Hui, but he was obstinate and prideful. He'd offended powerful men, and that meant he'd remain Admiral until he retired. He would be promoted only then, in a show of respect for his exploits.

"Commander Ying, we are in the middle of a war, follow your orders." Kang Hui was referring to an elder, but in this dire time he wasn't afraid to pull rank. ¹

Ying Tianlong was silent. He was a soldier, and a soldier followed orders. Still the ships seemed hesitant to move into formation as Kang Hui commanded. They were much slower than before. Fleets Eleven and Thirteen were fasted, since they were under the Fleet Admiral's direct command. They'd begun to move immediately after receiving the word. Their Capital ships took up the foremost position and drew in close to Tyrannosaurus' flanks. They were followed by fleets Three and Six, while the celebrated First Fleet was last in the formation.

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"That moron, does he know how to command troops? The enemy is closing in on us and he called tortoise formation? Is he planning to ram us right into them?"

"See, these are the Admiral's orders. Look..." The Captain of First Fleet's flagship tried to reign in his commander. Refusing a superior officer's orders in times of war was a capital offense. They would all be court-marshalled.

Ying Tianlong looked to be in his forties, but the streaks of white at his temples said differently. He still stood tall and straight, however, with the

bearing of a much younger man.

He took a couple ragged breaths, then waved his hand dismissively. Rules were rules.

An urgent shout from his radar officer caught the admiral's attention.

"Something's up. The alien planet seems to be getting smaller and there are a bunch of small bogies coming out from the center vortex. They're fast, and they're headed our way. They'll collide with the asteroid belt in twenty seconds.

"What?" Ying Tianlong swung around in surprise and strode to the radar screen in several long steps. After a moment's glance his face changed. The radar screen was thick with more red dots than he could count, headed right for them.

His pupils contracted and a cold sweat broke out over his body. "Then enemy's attacking! Fleet, fall in behind. Capital ships up from, shields up, weapons hot. Protect me!"

First Fleet was too slow – there wasn't time to shield themselves behind Tyrannosaurus. But Ying Tianlon was an experienced commander. It wasn't ideal, but he chose the next best option. Now wasn't the time for regrets, he could worry over that if they survived.

Chapter 682: Asteroid Storm

On Tyrannosaurus, Kang Hui's face had also gone pale. The ship's radar was even clearer on the Bastion, revealing in high-definition quality the torrent of asteroids spat from the alien planet. Thousands of tons of rock were hurdling toward them, too fast and too widespread for them to avoid.

"Fleets Three, Six, Eleven, and Thirteen are in formation. First Fleet hasn't gotten into position yet." An officer called.

Kang Hui's face darkened. "All Capital ships engage full shields. Commander Ying will lead his own fleet's defenses. Prepare weapons for fire, wait on my command. Secondary weapons systems live, and make sure these asteroids don't get close. Tell me the moment Tyrannosaurs' main gun is ready to fire. Find out where Heron and Arachnid are and get that information to me right away."

Lan Jue's eyes were fixed to the screen. His breathing came fast, stunned by the suddenness of this asteroid attack. They were everywhere, far as the eye could see. The thin layer of the asteroid belt that remained between them and the alien planet wasn't going to help. On the contrary, they would likely join in the oncoming attack.

A burst of energy swept toward them, an oppressive force that seemed poised to swallow up everything in its path. The asteroids from the planet crashed into the belt, resulting in dramatic explosions and detritus moving at thousands of kilometers a second. The Asteroid belt gave away and joined the tide of stone as it headed toward the human ships.

Without question, the aliens knew the humans were coming, and from where. They had prepared all of this, even down to the limited alien patrols to limit casualties. The Violet Prince, the asteroids, avoiding Tyrannosaurus...

All of it planned perfectly. The aliens knew much more about humans and their reactions than anyone would have guessed. They even know particulars about Capital ship weaponry, not to mention a Bastion's main guns!

The nightmare they faced now was a result of underestimation. Even after repelling the Violet Prince and preparing for the asteroid attack, humanity was in a dangerously inferior position.

What could they do in a situation as desperate as this?

It didn't matter how strong Skyfire Avenue's people were, this was a full-fledged space battle. A single person, even a Paragon, couldn't sway the tide. Even something as frightening as the Violet Prince wouldn't dare reveal itself to Bastion and Capital ship fire for any stretch of time.

Victory or defeat was in the hands of Kang Hui and his army, now.

The Asteroid Storm was here! They barely had time to prepare. The smallest were the size of mountains, and the bigger ones could be mistaken for moons. Simple as they were, they made brutally efficient weapons.

Tyrannosaurus had taken the first shot, but the alien planet aimed to finish the fight before it really got under way.

"Fire!" Kang Hui gave the order.

Tyrannosaurus lit up with thousands of flashes as its secondary weapons systems let loose. Sizzling beams of energy crashed into the asteroids. There was no way the ship would survive relying on shields alone, not to mention the amount of energy it would take to protect a ship of its size. Guns were turned on the space rocks to reduce their numbers as much as possible before they struck.

For the moment it seemed to work. The overpowering munitions from the ship obliterated the asteroids, turning one after the other into space dust.

From the bridge windows they could hardly see passed the flashes of muzzle fire. The asteroids were many, but once within the kill zone of Tyrannosaurus' weapons they were destroyed. The ship slowly spun around as the guns – jutting from the surface like so many bamboo shoots – continued to fire.

The weapons issuing from Tyrannosaurus' surface were its Beta-and

Gamma-class railguns. They were strong enough to mar planets! The ship rotated to give the weapons times to vent heat and recharge for another volley while another sector took charge. This way it kept up continuous fire.

Like a well-oiled machine, the North's Tyrannosaurus-class Bastion ship spun and fired, and not a single asteroid was able to penetrate the crossfire. The four Capital ships from the four fleets were only responsible for the furthest outliers. It meant they could conserve energy and focus fire on where it was needed most. Now it was clear why Kang Hui ordered them to move in. The smaller their surface area, the less energy was needed in defense and the harder they were to hit.

Kang Hui's skillful command played an important role in their continued survival.

The only problem was First Fleet. They'd dragged their feet and missed their opportunity. It's Capital ship and dreadnaughts desperately fired into the encroaching wall of stone to protect themselves.

Smaller ships could play no role here. If they were unfortunate enough to get caught by even the smallest asteroid, they would be reduced to slag.

Countless beams of light lit up space. From a distance it looked like the most incredible light show in the galaxy.

Lan Jue was secretly impressed. Despite all he knew about Bastion ships, this was the first time he'd seen one in full combat. Now he understood just how incredible they were. It was the first time he'd seen this tactic of continuous railgun fire as well. It was especially effective against asteroids since they had no shields or armor.

The stream of asteroids from the alien planet seemed endless. The ships fired back with just as much tenacity.

"Admiral, we're losing energy quickly. We're down thirty percent already."

"Pay no mind," Kang Hui muttered. "Continue at full power. Don't you want to go home to your families? We cannot lose this battle. Give the

order to Third and Sixth fleet to prepare their cannons. Tell them to target the enemy planet.”

“Admiral, the asteroids are still too thick. We can’t get a lock.”

“Then hold the attack,” he replied. “Focus on the asteroids. All Capital ships and dreadnaughts go weapons hot. Get ready to switch targets on my command.”

The Skyfire delegation stood to one side of the office, silently nodding. This Kang Hui was a credit to his Chinese ancestry, with a big heart and a sharp eye for making the right decision. His direction might just get them through this definitive battle.

Judging by the planet’s reaction, it was afraid of the Bastion’s lethal main cannon. It was trying to destroy them before they could get another shot off. If this was not the case, a counter-attack like the one they used to destroy the Seventh Fleet would have been more suitable.

Their first priority had to be defending themselves from the flood of deadly rock. Once that threat was dealt with they would engage. If they succeeded, not only would the damage to the enemy be great, but it would show humanity they stood a chance.

Explosions ripped through space as the railguns detonated asteroids, causing the ships to rattle continuously. A shiver went down the spines of all who witnessed the pure destructive capabilities of the Bastion ship. This was the apex of humanity’s capacity for annihilation.

“Where are Arachnid and Heron,” Kang Hui calmly asked.

“Sir, they’re headed our way at full speed. They’ll be here in three hours!”

“Stream our engagement to them in real-time so they know what to expect. Tell them to expect an ambush.”

“Aye, aye!”

There were three of these evil planets out there, but only one had shown its ugly surface. As for the other two? No one knew where they might be lurking. If the aliens knew about Tyrannosaurus, then it was more than

likely they also knew about Heron and Arachnid. Judging by how strong just this one planet was, they would need two Bastions to stand on equal footing.

A strange light flit across Kang Hui's eyes perpetually as he watched the battle. His attention flashed from one screen to another, informing his constant stream of commands. While it looked like micro-managing, each order was precise and correct.

Under his direction Tyrannosaurus and four of its fleets had drifted sideways toward First Fleet. Meanwhile the two reserve fleets had turned them weapons to the flank to aid the errant fleet, saving it from destruction and sharing its defensive burden.

Ying Tianlong stood on the bridge of his Capital ship, his face red with rage!

"Get me Admiral Hui on the line!" He roared, then took several deep breaths to try and bring himself under control.

"This is Kang Hui." After a moment the commander's face flickered into view on a screen.

Chapter 683: Moonfiend?

Ying Tianlong snapped to attention and saluted his superior. “Admiral Kang, I am willing to accept whatever disciplinary action you deem necessary. But the First Fleet is the backbone of our nation’s security, I beg you to come to our aid.”

“Commander Ying,” Kang Hui began coolly, “you will follow all orders to the letter, do you understand? If we survive this fight, then we can discuss punishment.”

“Aye, aye!” Ying Tianlong stood straight, chest out. Pride had clouded his judgement, but the man was still an outstanding soldier. He understood what was required of him in this moment, and although he was loathe to admit his failing to the admiral he wasn’t willing to gamble with the one hundred thousand lives under his command.

After accepting Ying Tianlong’s apologies, Kan Hui’s face bore no change. In a fighting force this large there were more important things for him to attend to besides a commander’s wounded pride. He was already being pulled in too many directions.

Lan Jue took Qianlin’s hand and they walked over to the admiral.

“What it is, commander Lan?” Wu Qiu was also standing by Kang Hui, one of many officer in what had become the war room. He waited patiently for orders, along with Ling Ya. When he saw Lan Jue approaching the admiral he stepped in to block his path. Kang Hui could not be disturbed.

Lan Jue’s voice was low. “We can help the admiral keep up his energy.”

Wu Qiu paused, then turned his head to look at Kang Hui stooped over his desk. When he turned back he looked unconvinced. “The admiral has to pay close attention, he’s directing our defenses. He mustn’t be disturbed.”

Little by little the flood of asteroids had started to decrease. The alien planet could spit them out, but had no control over where they went once

it did.

First Fleet managed to pull themselves into formation. Ying Tianlong's Capital ship and the fleet's ten dreadnaughts had pulled in front as a shield for the smaller ships. The battleships and patrol boats huddled behind their bigger brethren while they shot apart any asteroids that came their way.

Then, the alien planet began to move.

It picked up speed, approaching the human defenders once more. All the while asteroids were belched from within that rotating vortex.

Kang Hui's pupils contracted. "All dreadnaught-class ships or higher, prepare main cannons."

Only a short period of time had passed since the fight began. However, it was so frantic and ferocious no one could tell just how long it'd been. They had waiting for this moment with singular focus, and now that it was here they were almost too stunned to react.

It was getting closer! Meanwhile the asteroid assault was diminishing by the moment. Northern ships repositioned their heavy weapons toward the encroaching enemy powerhouse.

But then, without warning the planet stopped dead in its tracks once again. The asteroids vomited from within stopped as well.

Was it spent?

No sooner did the thought cross the soldiers' minds than it was dramatically disproved. They gaped at the madness they witnessed.

The planet began to expand again, even bigger than it had been before. A colossal form emerged from the vortex. It was round, an orb with an entirely purple surface that emerged slowly but picked up speed. As it fired from the planet it began to spin with such speed that its gravity well wracked surrounding space. For good reason – it was ten times the size of Tyrannosaurus!

"Moonfiend!" The shocked gasp came from the woman standing with

Lin Guoguo at the back of the room, Su Xiaosu.

No one knew the planet better than she did. She knew it the second she saw its topography. And she was right, this enormous purple planet spat at them from the aliens was the husk of Moonfiend! Nothing lived on its poison surface now, making it nothing but a cosmic corpse turned weapon.

They thought we knew about them, but no one could have imagined the aliens would use a whole planet to attack them. Whether gravity, atmosphere, or sheer mass, a collision with Moonfiend would exterminate anything it came in contact with.

“All ships open fire, give everything you’ve got!” Kang Hui’s cool exterior was broken, he shouted the order. The moment Xiaosu recognized the planet, he understood the danger they were in.

There was only one result if they planet hit them, complete annihilation. The alien planet had come close enough that – at Moonfiend’s speed – they would have no way to escape if they tried to run. What’s more, even if they tried the space around them was still thick with asteroids. Their only option was a single bold gambit, destroy the planet with overwhelming firepower.

If Tyrannosaurus’ main cannon had been charged, even a rogue planet wouldn’t have frightened them. It was strong enough to blast it apart. However it wasn’t ready, wasted on a failed shot against the alien world. Their railguns would have to be enough, or they were doomed.

Boom-boom—boom boom-boom! A ceaseless series of blasts shook the Bastion ship as its guns fired. They held nothing back.

Third, Sixth, Eleventh and Thirteenth fleets unleashed their Capital ships and dreadnaughts. Cannons that had been trained on the enemy were turned on its weapon instead. Blinding streaks of light swept passed Tyrannosaurus’ flanks.

Luo Xianni, watching from the war room, darted out her hand to grab the Wine Master’s arm. When he turned to look at her, she fixed him with a look and nodded. Jue Di’s partner was strong enough to deal with the

planet, but it came at a dangerous cost. There was also the Violet Prince to consider.

It was speeding up! For a terrible moment the humans watched as their cannon fire and Moonfiend closed in on one another. The question was front and center in everyone's mind. Would it stop the planet? Was this the beginning of a great victory, or their last moments breathing?

Kang Huis' hands gripped the edges of his desk with enough force to turn his knuckles white. He glared at the screens with hard eyes and a clenched jaw. This was the most important battle of his life, and possibly his last.

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Arachnid sailed through space so quickly it left a wake of displaced meteorites in its path. Since there was no entourage to protect it paid no mind to the detritus swirling around it. Eight enormous mechanical legs hung limp behind the Bastion ship as it charged ahead, enveloped in a faint white light.

If judged by mass, the Arachnid-class Bastion was among the smaller of the North's mighty ships. However that didn't speak to its awesome power. Although they looked like a spider's legs, that was as far as the similarities went. Not only did they make the ship more agile than its larger brothers, they were also invaluable in a fight.

Holmen sat behind his desk with a steaming cup of coffee in his hands. The screen in front of him flashed with scenes of a desperate battle. A life feed from Tyrannosaurus.

"Sir!" A voice spat from the intercom on his desk.

"Speak." The admiral took a sip from his cup.

"Admiral. We just got word from Tyrannosaurus to engage as soon as we can. They warned us to look out for an ambush."

"Got it," he replied tepidly.

Holmen was a leading voice among the more hawkish members of the

military, and a senior commander. He'd been promoted to Fleet Admiral for this excursion. He was the same commander who had attempted to blow Lan Jue out of the sky on his trip to the Starfields. Zeus-1 was very nearly destroyed at his order.

Of all the Northern officers he was the most familiar with the Shattered Starfields. It was for this reason he was chosen to join the expedition.

"Ambush? He's frightened." Holmen muttered to himself over the rim of his coffee mug. He and Kang Hui had never been friends. In his mind Kang Hui's lineage was inferior, it made him weak. How was it he'd been promoted faster, he wondered? If he'd been given the same cherry-picked missions Kang Hui had received, he would have been Fleet Admiral years ago.

Competition was in his nature, especially when it came to Kang Hui. As for the alien threat he had also been vigilant and itching to get his hands dirty. Before being given command of a Bastion, the Seventh Fleet had been under his command. He knew how capable it had been as a fighting force, and thus could see how strong the alien creatures must be.

He'd volunteered for this mission, in part as revenge but also to earn himself a vital crystal. Many high-level military leaders were backed by powerful families. It was how they got their status in the first place.

"Ahead at flank speed, bring us to the battlefield. Make sure the main cannon is charged and prepared to engage." He wasn't convinced of any imminent danger, but he knew better than to underestimate an enemy. Although he had no love for Kang Hui, he had to admit the man was competent in some areas. Among them was a comprehensive tactical knowledge on the battlefield.

Engines flared beneath the mechanical spider's abdomen, thrusting it even faster toward the fight. Holmen's Bastion was crewed by excellent officers who guided Arachnid through the Starfields deftly, dodging asteroids and small moons as they were encountered. The ship's mechanical legs would occasionally stretched out to knock obstacles out of the way. It looked more like an octopus than a spider.

Chapter 684: Ares' Cleaver

Holmen never took his eyes from the screen in front of him. He watched every detail as Tyrannosaurus lead its entourage in battle against the alien planet.

The monsters were crafty, using the galaxy itself as a weapon. Were it him in Kang Hui's place, Holmen wasn't sure he would have fared much better. You better hold out Kang Hui, you miscreant, you better hold the line! Wait for me to come pull your ass out of the fire.

No matter his personal feelings, protecting the North and its army was their shared goal.

"Admiral! Sensors have picked up a strong pulse of vital energy." The voice of one of his officers interrupted Holmen's thoughts.

He and Kang Hui had different styles of command. Tyrannosaurus' Captain relied on his own superhuman vision to guide his men. Holmen, meanwhile, preferred to delegate when possible. He firmly believed that a single person had limits, no matter how strong. A fighting force was strongest when they worked in unison.

As a result his people were some of the best. Although Holmen was prone to angry outbursts, and was as cold as a man could be, his soldiers loved him dearly. Unless the situation warranted, his staff handled their own business and troubled him only when necessary.

"Continue battle preparations. Where are we with the main cannon?" A glint flashed in Holmen's eye and his right hand slapped the surface of his desk. As though in response, two large metallic hoops rose from either side of him. His desk separated to reveal several control panels, transforming into a complicated operations control center.

"Sir, main cannon is charged to forty-one percent. It will be ready to fire in eleven minutes and thirty-two seconds."

"Redirect energy to the guns to hasten the charge. Thirty degrees to port. Reduce speed to standard ahead, forty percent." He calmly delivered his

orders.

Arachnid's spindly body suddenly lurched to the left. One of its enormous legs crashed down on a larger moon and used it to redirect its forward motion. At the same moment its secondary weapons systems came online. Glimmering railguns with glowing barrels appeared all along the Bastion's surface.

Suddenly, a large purple sphere appeared not far to one side. They saw it just in time to witness a hail of purple beams launch from its surface. They were headed right for Arachnid.

A small, hard smile broke Holmen's stony features.

That bastard was right after all. Here you are then? Excellent! Let's see what you've got. Brothers and sisters of the Seventh Fleet, today I make them pay!

The light surrounding Arachnid suddenly swelled. As its railguns took aim at the planet the ship feigned to one side.

A stream of data tumbled across Holmen's screens. Quick calculations told him the alien planet was thirty-two times larger than his ship – quite a bit larger. There were no readings on power levels yet.

Holmen's reactions were calm and precise. He'd been waiting for this. Come on then, you bastards!

The purple rays were fast and rapidly approaching. Scanners revealed them to large aliens, with umbrella-shaped monstrosities in the lead. They raced ahead with a clear target, and large as they were they still moved with uncanny agility. They juked and dodged, changing direction so quickly they were hard to lock onto. Strange pulses blasted from the umbrella-aliens as well, confounding Arachnid's scanning systems.

"First Combat Division, engage!" Holmen called out the order through his intercom.

Panels on the side of the ship split open, and from them gushed a horde of combat ships like angry wasps. They were all silvery-white, no larger than fifty meters from bow to stern, and sleek as missiles. They scattered

into the surrounding vacuum of space, darting in all directions.

Stationed forces of a Bastion were different from general army units. A single division boasted a thousand ships. Typically a Bastion had between five thousand and ten thousand fighters ready to be deployed. They were their standard front-line troops.

Tyrannosaurus couldn't engage the enemy with its troops in the midst of an asteroid storm, but Arachnid's situation was different. He didn't have to hold back vital combat resources and deployed them right away. Often in a space battle these small combat ships were more effective than mechas. Fighter ships worked better together out in space, while mechas were more suitable to ground combat operations. They were more adaptable and had more power and options available to them. Out here among the stars, a full contingent of fighters could erase a whole fleet.

Arachnid's First Combat Division fighters spread out around the Bastion, but not too far. They gathered into a hundred units of ten ships, unifying agility with firepower. The aliens came at them like bullets fired from the purple planet. By the time First Combat Division was in place, the creatures were on them.

However the aliens weren't met by the fighters. The first thing in their way was more than five hundred blasts of energy. They burst from between the fighter units, perfectly accurate.

Railgun fire! Arachnid started the fight with a wall of destructive energy from one of humanity's most potent weapons. Each gun was individually manned, ensuring there was no friendly fire. Meanwhile the fighters hovered in position so as not to get in the way. The battle had begun!

The saucer-shaped aliens reacted quickly. They spun around at incredible speed, flinging out orbs of purple energy. The orbs spread out and stuck together like a film to warm the aliens from the encroaching attack.

Seconds later a deafening explosion arose. Blinding white and toxic purple met in a cloud of tumultuous energy.

Holmen grinned at his screens, confident that the salvo caused his foes

pain. Those looked like normal alien fighters, nothing special, and that blast had come from his Alpha-and Beta-railgun arrays.

But he would be disappointed. As the tempest of energy subsided the aliens reappeared. Enormous, shield-like bodies protected the smaller aliens from the railguns, rendering them useless. Their cumbersome form looked thick and craggy like tortoise shells.

Arachnid's long-range scanners peered into their midst, revealing the shell-bearing aliens. They were huge, easily two hundred meters in diameter for the big ones, no less than one hundred for their smaller brethren. Their shells were the same sickly purple as the planet and flickered with violet light. They were thick, just as effective as ships' armor.

All the railguns had managed to do was push them back and cause their shields to ripple. Nothing got through.

Even Lan Jue, with all his experience, would be dumbfounded by the scene. They had been brought along with the saucer-aliens as natural shields. Saucer-aliens remained behind and pushed the shields ahead of them to protect against the railguns. The remaining alien forces followed. Meanwhile the giant alien planet was approaching from the distance!

A dark and seething anger tainted Holmen's face. He wasn't upset that they'd survived his first salvo. What troubled him was their intelligence. It was all planned, all deliberate.

"Ares' Cleaver!" Holmen growled the words into the intercom. He firmly pressed a distinct, angry red button on his panel.

Arachnid's First Combat Division burst into the fray while even more were dispatched from the Bastion. The bristling railguns swung back into the closed position, leaving Arachnid's surface an unbroken field of alloy armor.

The atmosphere-like shield around the Bastion receded. While it seemed to be getting smaller, that was simply because it was condensing. Concurrently the ship's eight mechanical legs splayed out around it, flipping in the process. Their back ends were thick and sturdy, while the

front was sharp as a blade.

Arachnid's body was thirty-thousand meters around. Its legs were eight thousand meters long and separated into two section. The bottom sections were five thousand four hundred meters long, and were tipped by the second section, each three thousand six hundred meters long. Thus in just a few moment the spider became a deadly sphere with eight razor-sharp blades splayed around it. They called it; Ares' Cleaver!

Tyrannosaurus relied on its enormous size and impressive weapons suite – a very traditional Bastion. With its large energy stores it was best suited for fighting with other interstellar fleets.

Chapter 685: Heron-Class Bastion

Arachnid was a newer design, incorporating new advances in bionic integration. The North was not called the trailblazers of technological advancement for nothing.

Arachnid didn't need any backup from an intergalactic fleet, an unstoppable force of war in and of itself. Thus, it traveled without an escort for fear it would impeded on its own ability to wage war.

By the time Arachnid's legs were fully extended, all seven thousand of its fighter ships were deployed. They quickly dispersed like a cloud, but didn't rush in to attack. They were like spectators, a net of eyes.

Eight rectangular engines spat tangerine-colored light from behind the Bastion. It looked like a terrible beast birthed from the abyss of space, and it raced ahead hungry for alien blood.

The sudden transformation was an unexpected surprise for the alien attackers, especially when the bladed arms began to swipe through the air.

The simple motion was actually phenomenally precise. Within Arachnid, a host of supercomputers controlled every aspect of the arms. Each swipe was calibrated to avoid collision with the other arms and make every strike as effective as possible. High-frequency ionization, as evidence by the pale blue light that surrounded them, made them incredibly sharp. They were deadly mechanical talons.

Scrrrrgzt! A brief but piercing sound like nails on a chalkboard shuddered through the ship. Outside, the tortoise-shell line of defense that had protected the aliens from Arachnid's railguns were parted like butter before a hot knife. The three thousand six hundred meter forearm even sliced through the saucer-alien pushing them from behind. Many of the alien forces hiding behind it dispersed, and many others were instantly slain.

In no time, Arachnid's eight arms carved away the aliens defensive shield.

Panels flipped all along the Bastions surface as the railguns reengaged. Columns of light fires into the alien forces, and from afar Arachnid looked like a bristling hedgehog. Purple mists of caustic fluid hung in the air, remnants of the alien massacre.

For the fighter ships watching from afar, they looked like pleasant clouds.

This was the power of a Bastion ship, the greatest war machine humans have produced!

The long-planned trap lain by the aliens had been foiled, and now they were exposed to the punishing rain of fire from Arachnid's railguns.

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Like a bird of prey swooping through the darkness, the Heron-class Bastion ship made its way through the Shattered Starfields. Compared to its brethren, it moved the fastest among the rocks and moons,

Heron was markedly different from all other Bastions. Its constructed look like a fighter ship, only blown up to staggering proportions with a wingspan of thirty five thousand meters. Its hull was thirty seven thousand meters fore to aft and stretched a sleek seven thousand one hundred meters tall.

Heron carried ten thousand smaller copies of itself onboard but lacked a single main cannon like Arachnid or Tyrannosaurus. Instead it had three slightly smaller ones with power equivalent to ten Capital ships each. It was also the fastest Bastion ship ever built.

Northern technology adhered to the idea of 'build everything and see what works,' and newer style ships like this were created to push the boundaries of what they were capable of. They were even constructed with elements that gave them the ability to completely change shape. As difficult as it was for a ship like Arachnid to change even part of itself, one could imagine the trouble in finding ways for a whole ship to transform. ¹

Heron was a prototype of this new generation of Bastion ships. Its manufacturing principle was 'make it faster than any Bastion before it.'

They were successful, and Heron became the preferred Bastion for the North's long-range missions. While it couldn't boast the sheer destructive power or defensibility as its predecessors, its speed gave it an advantage the others lacked. Furthermore, it was supplemented by several divisions of fighter groups that could engage swiftly. A ship like this sweeping into a battle could dramatically change the tide!

Yan Yuan stood proudly before the bridge window, watching the asteroids bounce off Heron's shields. He was enjoying the view. It made him feel powerful, unstoppable.

He was one of the new generation of Northern military leaders, two years younger than Kang Hui but already an admiral. Where he differed from Tyrannosaurus' commander was his lineage. Yan Yuan came from a storied Northern family, and was his family's pride and joy. He leaned on the considerable resources at his disposal to temper himself into the successful soldier he was today. While unconfirmed, he was also considered the future patriarch of his family – a true rising star in the North.

Originally the North hadn't required Yan Yuan's participation in this fight, but he'd insisted. He felt humiliated by the fact Kang Hui had risen through the ranks faster and enjoy more prestige. The only way to prove his superiority, he felt, was on the battlefield.

Combat had already broken out, he knew. They'd received the call for aid from Tyrannosaurus and were already advancing as fast as they dared. He had to get there! Yan Yuan would not allow his stellar military record to be stained by inaction – he was a perfectionist.

“Sir!”

“Report.”

“We will reach Tyrannosaurus in one hour, Admiral.”

“Flank speed, and tell the gunnery officers to prepare for immediate combat once we arrive.” Yan Yuan ordered.

“Aye, aye!”

Heron's construction was such that it didn't need fear the Starfield's many obstructions. In fact its wings were made to be weapons, sharp and sturdy. Northern leaders had proposed sending Heron into the Starfields a long time ago to clear out pirate forces, but the cost was deemed untenable. So, when Yan Yuan brought this up to his superiors they approached his request to join the expedition.

It was time to prove his merit! Yan Yuan gripped his hands into tight fists. His career could be described as flawless, all he needed was a fight big enough to get people's attention. This was it, and he cherished the opportunity. Yan Yuan was confident in his capabilities, and the capabilities of the ship he commanded.

"Admiral, we've just received reports from Arachnid that they've been ambushed." The urgent news brought Yan Yuan back to the present.

"Go to defcon 1!" He barked the order while returning to the commander's chair.

Heron's radar swept into through the rocky expanse of space around them. Bow-mounted railguns extended and started target-tracing while the main cannons began to charge.

Although Yan Yuan had never participated in a full-on military campaign, he had a wealth of theoretical knowledge and plentiful experience with small engagements. Tyrannosaurus was locked in a firefight with one of the planets. Arachnid had been waylaid by another. It could only mean the enemy had known they were coming, and assuming Heron would slip by unmolested was foolish. Enemy forces would do whatever they could to prevent them from giving aid to Tyrannosaurus.

Just as Heron was preparing for a fight, a sudden and unexpected pull come from the side. It originated deep in the asteroid belt, strong enough to pull the Bastion off course.

"Cut engines! Prepare to engage!" A beam of dazzling white light shot into the distance from the top of the ship. It was a type of long-range radar that released a pulse after a few moments, revealing a large area to their scanners. Heron used it to uncover enemy positions or confound

interference attempts.

However something unexpected happen. As the white light spread farther and grew wider, a flash of imperial purple erased it from being. IT was as though the universe simply swallowed it up.

That was...

Heron didn't stop to fight an unseen enemy. Its engines blazed in attempts to shed the traction dragging it backward. Speed being the Bastion's greatest asset, it was a wise choice to escape from their foes attack range and reengage on their terms. Yan Yuan was an admiral, he knew tactics.

Once the ship got some distance, it turned back around toward where the sneak attack had come from.

What they saw was a nebula of purple – a swarm of aliens too many to count headed their way. The creatures were pouring in from the surrounding asteroid field, some of them larger than Capital ships.

In the center of the throng was a massive violet planet slowly emerging from the darkness. A swirling whirlpool roiled at its center. Though smaller than the one attacking Tyrannosaurus, it was the same in all other respects.

Chapter 686: Crossing Swords

The aliens spread out like a dragnet, trying to swallow Heron up. An equally large force of them appeared behind the Bastion as well. All of a sudden the ship was caught between two forces; it was a vice and they were caught right in the middle.

Ambush! Yan Yuan's face fell. For forces to appear behind them, it meant they knew Heron was specialized in speed and planned for it. Fighting while outflanked was asking for disaster. They had to get to Tyrannosaurus.

Yan Yuan was desperate for glory, but he didn't let it cloud his judgement. He knew little about these creatures and was in an unfavorable position. Tactical retreat was the wisest course.

The enemy was no less cunning or intelligent than mankind, the same determination Kang Hui and Holmen had come to. Retreat had been cut off by the time Yan Yuan had made to flee. If he'd have been faster, he might have been able to break the encirclement. Now Heron faced the full strength of the alien planet, and even though Heron was fast it was too large to make a quick escape. Turning took time, time the aliens weren't likely to give.

A number of strange umbra-like monstrosity came at them, firing smaller aliens that looked like tortoises and pushing them ahead in their charge. Rays of purple light also shot by on their way toward Heron.

However the most frightening was of course the alien planet itself. It wasn't attacking them yet, but its massive presence was like an ominous star, stifling the breath of soldier and officer alike.

They had to retreat!

Yan Yuan screwed up his courage and gave the order. Heron didn't release its forces into the fight, instead blasting forward at full speed. Its milky-white shield now blazed bright gold, and in the darkness of space Heron looked like a fiery phoenix come to wreak havoc.

Was he planning to charge through the enemy line?

The aliens continued to close in.

BANG! Heron crashed into the enemy forces with a shuddering crash. No matter how large the aliens were, compared to the Bastion ship they were hardly worth noting. Herons razor-like wings were supplemented by its shields, which were formed to a blade's edge. Even tortoise-aliens were unceremoniously cleaved in half as it roared passed.

Nor did Heron keep a direct path. No sooner did it reach top speed then the ship pulled to one side, arcing perilously to one side. They were making a break for it, but it wasn't going to be easy. Their new trajectory was bleeding their speed and leaving them open to attacks from the side.

Railguns hummed mechanically as they extended. Beams of light flashes at odd intervals, blasting through the throng of foes. Heron was baring its talons.

But there were too many. They couldn't stop the Bastion, but they could at least slow it down. Meanwhile the evil planet was drawing ever closer, the horde of monstrous creatures tightened the net.

"Cannon, clear us a path!"

Heron's three main guns, affixed to its back, were fully charged and ready. Although they weren't as powerful as those on Arachnid or Tyrannosaurus, the trade-off was they primed faster.

Three identical beams of energy tore through the darkness. Anything caught in its path was immediately disintegrated.

Two of the three guns were aimed straight ahead, opening the way forward. The third one took shots at the alien planet, slowly but surely bearing down on them. In the same instant, Heron's main engines exploded with columns of angry red light that rocketing the ship forward – signs the engines were overcharged. Its railguns were already firing as quickly as they could. Heron darted forward like a sparrow, desperate to escape its captor.

It broke through! Yan Yuan's face relaxed ever so slightly. He knew his

ship, yes there were aliens that could catch them but none that could do the Bastion any significant damage. There was no way that lumbering planet would be able to stay on their tail.

His eyes were fixed to the radar, watching for any movement from the planet.

Surprisingly, the swarm of aliens stopped their pursuit and turned around. So did the planet, but much to his shock it began to swell with frightening speed. Its change in size also caused Heron's cannon fire to shoot directly into the central vortex. He shots vanished, leaving no visible damage to the planet itself.

It was less a planet and more a possessed balloon from some nightmare.

What was it planning?

"Redirect all power to shields!" Yan Yuan shouted. Now wasn't the time to fret over energy reserves.

In their short exchange Yan Yuan realized how strong his foe really was. The planet was like a Bastion ship with a seemingly limitless number of aliens as support. Without a fleet to help, he didn't like their chances of survival.

As Yan Yuan pondered his dire situation he kept an eye on the planet. It grew and swelled grotesquely into a massive, fleshy red orb. Even from vast distances, one could almost pick out its throbbing arteries.

Heron's overcharged engines had created some distance between it and the horror behind. For a moment it looked like their escape was a success.

Only just then, without warning, a blood-curdling scream tore through Yan Yuan's brain. The hellish screech felt like it was tearing through his very soul.

He was stunned by it, and next he knew the planet was practically on top of them.

It was so fast it seemed to violate the laws of physics. Heron was faster than anything humans had built, but this living planet was moving three

times as fast!

With some curiosity he noted that the planet appeared to shrink as it got closer. He couldn't shake an almost comical image; a popped balloon shooting forward.

"Fire at will, keep it off us!" Railguns all along the Bastion swung around to find their target. They let loose in a frenzied salvo, hoping against hope it'd somehow keep them from destruction.

Chapter 687: Defeat and Autotomy

The alien planet was too fast. It came tearing at them like a comet, and strong as Heron's railguns were they didn't appear to cause much damage. Most of the shots were deflected by the violet vortex.

The planet made impact, slamming into Heron's wing.

Boom—!

The wing was torn to pieces, and the impact sent the Bastion ship into an uncontrolled spin. Yan Yuan felt everything spinning around him. Their shields had been practically useless.

They didn't spin far. Before the Bastion could be blown into the recesses of space, that same terrifying traction returned. It stopped them in place. They were sitting ducks – the planet had hit them right where it knew it'd hurt the most. Their engines were destroyed.

If it'd been Tyrannosaurus it might have avoided damage due to its stronger shields. However Heron was constructed for speed and maneuverability, it was never supposed to get hit like that. Just think – a Bastion ship appearing quickly out of nowhere to deposit scores of fighter ships. It was enough to end any typical intergalactic battle.

“Bastard!” Yan Yuan grit his teeth. The ship's gravity-control devices kept him more or less stable as he shouted commands. It was time for quick and hard decision. Hesitation could spell their doom.

A teal light shimmered over Heron's damaged surface, belts from the engines. Within the ship machinery whirred and shifted. The whole crew cabin lurched toward the front of the ship. In fact, everything part of Heron but its damaged wing started to transform. Large metal segments separated from the main body, glimmering with the same teal hue. The alien planet's traction immediately pulled them quickly toward the vortex.

A series of staggering blasts ensued. Those metallic canister were bombs, and when they reached the vortex they erupted in dazzling explosions. The back half of the assailed Bastion continued to pummel the

enemy with railgun fire, while the front still blazed with teal light. Then there was a burst of color as the front one-third of the ship separated and shot forward. It moved as fast as the planet had during its 'balloon maneuver,' and in a blink the surviving part of Heron disappeared into deep space.

Sacrificing the tail to save the body, a tactic learned from lizards. Northern scientists wanted to have a contingency plan in the event Heron was overwhelmed by enemy Bastions. Even Heron had its limitations in speed, and in the event a battle became too rough its own tail became an explosive weapon. Meanwhile the ship's personnel were transferred to the front and blasted away like an escape pod. It was a risk that cost Heron dearly, but so long as it had soldiers there was a chance. So long as they had soldiers they had everything.

What was left of the North's fastest Bastion was crippled. It didn't have the fighting capabilities of a Capital ship in this condition, and no longer had the benefit of its fighter ships. Still, the alien planet could only watch it vanish into the distance. It didn't have the energy for a quick pursuit as before, and the explosions forced it to retract its vortex. Heron had escaped.

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"Charge!" Holmen's eyes blazed with a bloodthirsty light. Witnessing the damage Arachnid's arms had caused gave him a glimmer of hope. He remembered once using the ship to rip apart a small moon. The alien planet was much larger, but destroying it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

Perhaps hundreds of vital crystals glittered in space among the mangled remains of the alien force. Their purple light was reflect in Holmen's greedy eyes. He nearly salivated to think of what all of those would buy him! The East's crystal auction had made it clear how much these were worth.

Arachnid raced ahead with its cannon's fully charged, and its eight arms ready to carve into the planet. Its shields flared in preparation. Surviving

aliens from the first assault had scattered, like they knew the battle was already over. However, the net of fighter ships that followed Arachnid didn't let them flee. They closed the net tighter and put down whatever grotesque foe crossed their barrels while gathering up vital crystals.

It was starting to look like a ringing victory!

Tyrannosaurus' dilemma was the farthest thing from Holmen's mind now. All he could think, was that his time of recognition. All he had to do was destroy the evil planet in his sights – maybe even capture it – then no one in the Northern army would be able to deny his superiority.

Arachnid was certainly smaller than its target, but it was fierce. Maybe even fierce enough.

Holmen always had a talent for command, and years of service tempered it with experience. He was mad with ambition but it didn't affect his ability to direct the attack. The smaller ships had finished mopping up, and were swinging in behind Arachnid to join its charge toward the planet.

Their victory was nearly complete!

All this time the alien planet was quiet, like it was not aware the fight was still on – a lamb to the slaughter. It seemed incapable of defending itself. It simply hung in space waiting for Arachnid to come put it out of its misery.

The Bastion came closer, closer! Arachnid extended its eight arms, their bladed edges glinting ominously.

“Kill–“ Holmen roared as Arachnid brazenly threw itself against the enemy. Its shields were bright and thick with bolstered power.

The two collided like star-crossed stellar bodies.

Chapter 688: The Splendor of Life!

The first thing Holmen noticed were the odd data readings. No gravity? None whatsoever... what did it mean? Without gravity a planet would break apart like sand. It was smaller than a main sequence star, a white dwarf or a neutral star, but that didn't excuse it from the laws of the universe!

However the Bastion had already crossed the point of no return, and uncertainly only bred fear at this point. The time was now, and Arachnid reacted by swiping with its massive arms.

The plan wasn't to smash into the planet directly. With their size discrepancy the Bastion would certainly lose that dogfight. Instead Holmen's plan was a simple one; tear at it with Arachnid's arms. The East claimed it was alive, didn't they? Very well, then! Then we'll stab the damn thing to death. Swing by, chop it up, blast it with the main guns, repeat.

It was Arachnid's best method against an enemy planet. Holmen knew this, and in fact some had come to call him the World Butcher for his dark skillset. He'd destroyed more than one living planet for the benefit of the North.

Boom-! Impact! Arachnid's eight bladed arms tore into the planet in no particular order.

However, the gore or grit Arachnid's Captain hope to see did not appear.

Where Ares' Cleavers struck the surface of the planet flashes with purple light. The flashes deflected the strikes, leaving not so much as a scratch behind. In response the earth surged, spitting enormous purple tentacles that wrapped around Arachnid like boa constrictors.

No! We were drawn in!

"Main cannon, fire!" Though surprise, Holmen wasn't beaten yet. He shouted the order to his subordinates.

Firing the gun so close put Arachnid in the red zone – it was more than likely it would be damaged by the subsequent blast. Holmen took this into

consideration but made the decision anyway. These creatures were dangerous, they needed to be stopped.

The guns were primed, and at his command they were fired. But just then, at precisely the wrong moment, the planet-born tentacles pulled. Arachnid was wrenched to the side just as the cannon released its payload. The beam shot off into space, missing its target entirely.

It was like their foe had planned this from the beginning. Their desperate gambit had failed. But how? How did it know the exact moment they were firing their guns? A haze overcame him, a cold sweat springing up on his forehead.

The fighter ships, seeing Arachnid waylaid, rushed in to its rescue. They opened fire on the planet with everything they had.

Ripples of purple light spread from where their shots met its shield. Arachnid's railguns continued to fire at whatever target they could reach. Meanwhile its legs fought to free themselves. Nothing was effective.

How could this be? How could its shields be so strong? Those thoughts screamed through Holmen's head.

But no matter how many times he asked the question, no answers were forthcoming. More tentacles surged from the planet, groping for Arachnid. Still others lashed through space at the darting fighters.

The tentacles – the smallest three thousand meters, and the largest nearly ten thousand – were covered in countless suction discs. With every swipe the discs caught some unfortunate pilot and either crushed their plane to ruin or threw them into their comrades.

Railguns along Arachnid's surface fired wildly at the tentacles, blowing many of them apart. But when one fell, ten more appeared. They wrapped around the Bastion to keep it from fleeing, or bashed against its shields with bone-jarring force.

How?! Holmen continued to shout orders while watching the rapidly deteriorating situation pass before his eyes as data on a screen. Their energy stores were being quickly exhausted.

To think, he'd turned his nose up at the East's intelligence? A living planet? Nonsense.

He would have called tentacles rising from a planet's surface nonsense as well, but they were right outside his window trying to rip his ship apart. Shields that made a Bastion envious protected the impossible planet from harm, even from Are's Cleavers.

"Deploy the mechas!" Holmen's voice was hoarse, his voice lilting even as he shouted the order. Mechas would make no difference here.

Not only had Arachnid had its victory snatched away, it seemed to be heaving its last gasp.

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"Send me!" Luo Xianni calmly stared at her nephew.

The Wine Master looked back. "I'm going with you."

"And me." The Clockmaker let her voice be heard.

Moonfiend's desiccated corpse was barreling toward them, leaving no time for deliberation. Resolve burned in the Paragons' eyes.

It wasn't hard to imagine how difficult it would be to alter a planet's trajectory – impossible, under normal circumstances. Luo Xianni possessed this power, but it would cost her, maybe even her life. After all, there was an even more terrible planet waiting for its chance to strike.

Just as the Paragons were preparing to leave, Kang Hui's voice stopped them in their tracks. "Wait."

Everyone looked toward the Admiral. They saw his bloodshot eyes looking back.

"First Fleet. First Fleet's Admiral Ying Tianlong respond. Ying Tianlong, what are you doing?!" He shouted at the monitors.

It was then the Skyfire delegation saw the monitors. A single ship was headed full speed at the planet on a collision course. They could tell by the light from its engines that it was going too fast to change course.

It wasn't alone. A host of ships followed, duty-bound to follow their commander even to certain death.

"Admiral Hui! I am determined to fix my mistake. Please make sure Tyrannosaurus survives. For the North!" Ying Tianlong's voice crackled on the intercom. His voice wasn't loud or passionate or prideful. He sounded calm. Resolute.

Kang Hui stood behind his desk with his hands clenched in impotent fists. He'd always known of Ying Tianlong's contempt for him. He knew it was why he'd dragged his feet to follow orders. But in these final moments they stopped being rivals. They were soldiers, and Kang Hui understood Ying Tianlong's decision.

First Fleet blazed a path through space on a suicide mission into Moonfiend's surface. A sacrifice to give Tyrannosaurus a chance at survival.

To face death with an unflinching gaze... the words were simple, but only heroes lived it.

"Ying Tianlong--!" Kang Hui shouted at the monitors.

"Let the world know I was no less than you, Kang Hui! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

A chorus of laughter answered Kang Hui's pained shout. When they heard the brave reply, Lan Jue, the Pharmacist and the Driver stood tall in silent respect. The North and East may not always have been allies, but in humanity's darkest hour they were brothers-in-arms.

Boom--

First Fleet's flagship disappeared into a brilliant ball of flame as it and all the energy it contained detonated against Moonfiend's surface. It was followed by another, then another as every single ship from the First Fleet followed their admiral into oblivion.

They were the North's mightiest fleet, a band of brothers! Heroes, to the North and all mankind!

Tears had appeared on Kang Hui's craggy face. He snatched the cap off

of his head as he snapped around to face Lan Jue and his team. “Please, head to the energy core and infuse the main cannon with as much power as you can.”

First Fleet’s sacrifice had significantly slowed Moonfiend’s approach. One hundred thousand souls spilt their blood to give the rest of them a chance.

The Wine Master glanced at the map where Kang Hui was pointing. With a wave of his scepter, he and the rest of Star Division vanished in a flash of light.

Kang Hui didn’t stop to brush the tears from his face and returned to giving orders. Tyrannosaurus began to turn, leading the remaining four fleets in a course to avoid Moonfiend.

But as they started to turn the distant alien planet began to pick up speed, racing toward Moonfiend. It began to swell once again and the whirling vortex at its center sucked at the dead planet it’d spat forth.

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Tyrannosaurus’ Energy Core Room.

They stood in an open circular room with two hundred chambers. Each one housed a metal bar, and someone standing beside it.

All of them were Adepts, none less than fifth rank. When the battle had turned against them they raced down here to lend their Disciplines to the ship for guns and shields. Even two hundred Adepts didn’t have the power Tyrannosaurus needed, but if they focused their gifts on just one area the benefits were sizeable. Empowering turrets, for instance, or a sector’s shields. Or a cannon.

Chapter 689: The Destruction of Moonfiend

Skyfire Avenue's representatives appeared in a flash of silver light, deposited into the energy core chamber. Lan Jue, Qianlin, the Pharmacist, Driver, Morning Star, Psychic Tide, and the five Paragons; eleven of them. Their arrival was expected. Eleven positions had been left open for them to occupy.

Lan Jue was distracted. His heart was heavy after witnessing the scene on the bridge. The North's sacrifice had affected him deeply. In truth he'd never liked Northerners or Westerners. But after what he'd seen, he had developed a respect for them.

Warriors... true warriors! They'd lain down their lives for their country without hesitation. This was what the soul of a soldier really was! His prejudice subsided, his mission the same as every human here: Protect Tyrannosaurus from alien destruction.

Eleven pairs of hands were lain upon metal rods. No words were exchanged – none were needed. The tell-tale pulse of Discipline flooded the room and drew the eyes of the other Adepts. Their eyes were stabbed by the brilliance of their auras.

Lan Jue was only faintly visible in the orb of blue light that surrounded him. His power coursed through the rod before him, causing it to shiver and flooding the ship with excess energy. Nor was he alone as Qianlin, the Pharmacist, the Driver and all the others followed his lead. Needles practically jumped off the charts once the Paragons joined.

Literally. Ship officers stared in shock as monitoring computers failed to record the sudden leap in output. Forced to guess, they suspected a full three hundred percent increase. Incredible! Was there a limit to the power these eleven newcomers possessed? The Adepts failed to understand how their addition was so potent, so outside the norm. It was like witnessing a miracle.

One of them waved a scepter which contained the flood of their power. It was so potent there was legitimate concern for the safety of the spectators.

When they regained their senses the Adepts returned to their duties, coursing their Disciplines through the rods as well. Although it went unspoken, their victory – or at least survival – hinged on how fast the main cannon charged.

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Kang Hui stared at his screen, watching the charge rate spike dramatically. He also watched as the alien planet quickly caught up with Moonfiend. A purple light issued from the planet's vortex and hung over the former pirate enclave, which was riddled with craters from where First Fleet made impact. Once it had, the planet turned back toward Tyrannosaurus which was pummeling them both with railgun fire. Its main cannon's second shot was inevitable.

"All fleet break off, attack the planet from the flanks." Kang Hui ordered. Keeping the fleet close wasn't just useless now that the asteroids had passed, it influenced Tyrannosaurs' ability to engage.

"Dino-plate!" The Admiral roared.

At his command the entire ship began to change. Smaller railguns disappeared as the surface became a sea of spiky protrusions. All of a sudden Tyrannosaurus looked like the head of a terrible mace. What's more, the head of each spike was a Gamma-class railgun.

It was Tyrannosaurus' supreme transformation. Kang Hui's bastion wasn't constructed with the same bionic principles of Arachnid or Heron, its armor and energy stores were its advantages. As one of the North's most traditional Bastions, its energy consumption was considerable but its construction was also among the safest.

Moonfiend's sudden appearance and frightening speed had originally denied this transformation – it took too long. However Ying Tianlong and his soldiers had bought them the time they needed.

Third, Sixth, Eleventh and Thirteenth Fleets spread out to either side of Tyrannosaurus. A buzzing cloud of fighter ships were dispatched from the Bastion to support them. Kang Hui looked on with red eyes. In the course of this short battle one fleet had already met its demise. What would become of the rest, burning toward their overwhelming foe?

The fleets always competing with one another for glory, but First Fleet had always been head and shoulder above the others. It was a fact no one could contest. Especially in its final moments the First Fleet set the bar high, which lit a fire of patriotism and duty in the hearts of the Northern navy. Their hats were off in a sign of respect.

Ying Tianlong had waited to obey orders. He corrected that with his life.

“Where are we on the main cannon?” Kang Hui muttered.

“Admiral, at the current rate we’ll need three minutes to get a full charge.”

“Good!” A fervent light blazed in the admiral’s eyes. He was determined to fight hard, for as long as they could. Ying Tianlong’s sacrifice would not be in vain. Besides the window for retreat was gone. If they wanted to flee they would first have to free themselves from the enemy’s clutches.

Come on then, you bastard!

Moonfiend lurched backward from the alien planet’s vacuum force, but only for a moment. In a blink it was spat forward again on a collision course toward Tyrannosaurus. However, in contrast to its last charge Moonfiend was moving significantly slower.

Tyrannosaurus sped up as though to meet it head-on.

An interstellar fleet lead by Capital ships had enough combined might to destroy a small planet. However, Moonfiend was anything but small. On the contrary, it had once been the largest stellar body in the galaxy. But under Tyrannosaurus constant assault, blasts from the four fleets and First Fleet’s valiant plunge, parts of its surface had begun to fragment. Great craters and cavernous crevices marred its surface.

Tyrannosaurus blasted forward as its entourage swung around in a

pincer maneuver. They blasted away at Moonfiend, slowing it down, while Tyrannosaurus bore down on it like a golden spiked mace!

“Brother Tianlong, may your journey to Valhalla be a smooth one.” Kang Hui stood tall before the window, watching Moonfiend grow larger by the moment. He marked himself with the sign of the cross.

BOOM–!! An explosion to shake the pillars of heaven roared through the Shattered Starfields. Tyrannosaurus, relying on its size and armor, and the aid of its entourage, brazenly rammed into the remains of Moonfiend.

Things appeared to move in slow motion. Moonfiend first stopped, then began to crumble apart. An angry red light cast everything in a stark light as the planet’s core cracked open.

Tyrannosaurus shook from the impact, so violently that for a moment it seemed the whole ship would rattle apart. However, a few moments later it grew stable. Moonfiend’s explosion tore passed the Bastion’s windows, swallowing everything up in an incandescent red glare. The only sound was the persistent roar of a planet’s ruin.

The angry fires of Moonfiend’s core roared around Tyrannosaurus. The Bastion stood its ground, unmoving even in the face of apocalyptic destruction. Its scale-like protrusions burned in the fires but did not give.

This was in part due to Tyrannosaurus’ energy restoration systems. Through this system the Bastion could supplement its energy reserves and shields at a moment’s notice. However, this required that there was enough energy outside for the system to draw from.

As tremors shivered through the ship Lan Jue held tight to the metal bar in front of him. He never stopped filling the ship with his Discipline. In his mind’s eyes the image of First Fleet crashing into Moonfiend’s surface played over and over.

War was cruel, but it was where heroes were born.

If there came a day I had to make a decision like that, could I make it? Lan Jue quietly mulled over the question.

The alien planet didn’t press the attack. Perhaps it was just as shocked

by the scene as the humans were. Tyrannosaurus had bared its fearsome teeth. Meanwhile the four remaining fleets were in position.

Eventually the blazing light of Moonfiend's demise receded. Fresh slabs of space rock were all that remained of the pirate planet. The alien planet that spat it out wasn't advancing – it was headed back toward the asteroid field.

It was trying to run!

Kang Hui's eyes flashed. He was about to give the order when an urgent voice caught his attention.

“Admiral! Heron has had to shed its tail. They're headed our way. Admiral Yan Yuan wishes to speak with you.”

His heart skipped a beat, cooling the bloodlust that had bubbled up within him. Shed its tail... as one of the highest ranking military officers in the North he knew what that meant. They'd been ambushed.

Chapter 690: Retreat

“Connect him.”

“Admiral Kang Hui!” Yan Yuan’s stern face appeared on the screen.

“Admiral Yan Yuan, what’s happened?” Kang Hui asked calmly.

Yan Yuan explained. “We were ambushed by one of the planets. It was much stronger than we anticipated. It struck us and we were forced to eject the tail of our ship in order to escape. We recorded the encounter, I’ll send it to you in a moment and we should be arriving at your location in fifteen minutes. What is your current situation?”

Kang Hui’s hands were clenched into fists. “We were in a stalemate until First Fleet sacrificed their lives to buy us a chance. We’re preparing to counter-attack, I’ll speak with you in a moment. Come as fast as you can.”

“Alright.” Yan Yuan nodded. After hearing things were going better for Tyrannosaurus, he was visibly less worried.

Another call was coming through.

“Arachnid-Class Bastion has come under enemy fire and was destroyed. There were no survivors.”

For a moment Kang Hui was stunned. Holmen’s craggy face swam up at him from the depths of his memory.

Holmen’s fallen in battle? Down with his Bastion? How could this happen... He...

Kang Hui felt cold all over his body.

The enemy had separated, waiting for the humans to stumble into their traps. Only Tyrannosaurus managed to stand their ground, but only just barely. Their operation was a failure! Heron was on its way, but so were the two other alien planets.

A harsh and bitter expression darkened the admiral’s face. Ominous as the situation was, however, he still gave his commands.

“Sound the retreat, all hands. Tell Third and Sixth Fleets to bring up the

rear. Give Admiral Yan Yuan our fallback position, and have Heron meet us there. We're getting out of here as fast as we can, and let the Alliance know what's transpired."

Retreat was their only option. Live to fight another day. If they let themselves get surrounded by all three alien planets they would be doomed. It didn't matter how sour the taste of defeat was, withdrawal was the right decision. They'd already lost many to the expedition, further risks were irresponsible.

Tyrannosaurus, guarded by its entourage, slowly began to head back the way it'd come. Even in retreat they kept their guns trained on the distant alien world, while keeping an eye out for the other two.

The enemy planet had stopped once it reached the relative safety of the asteroid belt. It floated in silence, as though it were watching them go with cold, hard eyes.

The main cannon was charged!

Lan Jue let his arms drop, releases the charging rod. He'd also heard the retreat order.

"Let's head back," the Wine Master said.

The familiar flash of silver light deposited Lan Jue and the others back into Kang Hui's office.

The Admiral sat behind his table. He looked like he'd aged sixty years since they last saw him. His hands rested limply on the desk top, pale and weak from overuse. A deep and bitter pain was behind his eyes.

"Admiral, what's happened? Why are we pulling back?" Lan Jue asked.

Kang Hui's response was curt. "Heron was defeated and barely managed to escape, but not before jettisoning half the ship. It's got about as much punch as a Capital ship now. Arachnid was destroyed by one of the planets, leaving no survivors. Admiral Holmen chose to self-destruct, but not before sending us all the information they'd gathered. We learned that the planets are headed back here – if we don't retreat we'll be surrounded."

They'd guessed it would happen, but hearing it from Kang Hui made Skyfire Avenue's scout team shudder. Their hearts sank.

The North had been defeated. Three Bastions and five fleets, and still the alien planets emerged victorious. From this battle they witnessed firsthand the terrible power of these invaders, the sheer power they were capable of. It wasn't even a direct engagement.

At first it'd seemed the Bastions were a match for these evil worlds, but was that true? The aliens were wise and cunning, more than humans could ever have thought. For all their boisterous praise, human intelligence was thwarted.

The aliens appeared to know human tactics even before they did, setting up an ambush in the difficult topography of the Starfields. If there was anything this ruinous ordeal revealed, it was that the planets were more than a match for a Bastion ship.

More was being understood about the aliens every day, but humanity still seemed to just be scratching the surface. Only through more encounters could they uncover more secrets about these beasts. Until those secrets were uncovered, though, humanity was at the mercy of these beasts. A planet could transfer wherever it pleased and mankind would have no means to protect itself.

A depressed silence hung over the office, but Kang Hui was not lost to self-pity. They were still within the dangerous confines of the Shattered Starfields. They'd cleared a path in, but another would be carved to let them out. Asteroids and planetoids were constantly moving here and they'd long ago closed the door Tyrannosaurus had opened.

It slowed them down. That meant the three hungry planet could catch up.

"Make sure our radar is widespread, eyes on every direction. Get me the footage from Arachnid's final moments as soon as possible." Kang Hui's cold and calculating persona had returned. He had to get the remaining forces back safe, no matter what. At the very least these soldiers had some experience fighting the creatures now. It was experience that would

undoubtedly serve humanity well in the coming months.

Lan Jue looked out into space, First Fleet's noble sacrifice still at the forefront of his mind. The aliens power was revealed to them today, but more than that their intellect and guile. From the very beginning they'd been led by the nose into a trap. It'd cost them many lives.

But in Lan Jue's mind the North had not lost. War with the alien menace was as inevitable as the sunrise. Northern soldiers had thrown themselves into the fires relying on nothing but their own prowess, in spite of the difficulties. That took strength and courage. Defeat was a bitter pill, but Northern blood had bought invaluable knowledge of the enemy. They'd learned more in one battle than they could have from ten scouting missions.

"Admiral, I want to go back out there. I need to know more about those planets!" Lan Jue turned and fixed Kang Hui with a resolute stare.

Kang Hui paused. "Now?"

Lan Jue nodded a determined response. "Yes, right now!" Now that the fight was over, there was more they could learn about how the planets would react, whether they would disperse or stay in humanity's backyard. One could never have enough intelligence on the enemy.

Lan Jue had watched Northern soldiers give their lives, helpless to aid them. There was only so much he could do as an individual when combat broke out. But whatever he could accomplish for the future of humanity he had to do, to the best of his ability.

"Very well, take care of yourselves." After a brief moment of contemplation, Kang Hui gave his blessing.

Lan Jue shook his head. "We won't all be going. You are an important leader in the fight against these monsters. We'll be leaving some behind to make sure you get out alive."

Such a suggestion would have earned him hard looks and bitter words from the Adepts around Kang Hui before, but after the battle the strength of Skyfire's representatives had been proved. Five Paragons! Together they

could turn the tide of battle.

Lan Jue looked toward Luo Xianni. “Mother, you stay with the Gourmet and Pauper to protect the admiral. Wine Master, Clockmaker, if you would come with me.”

Paragons though they were, Lan Jue was Star Division’s commander. Operational decisions rested solely on his shoulders.

Luo Xianni was their strongest, leaving her behind ensured Kang Hui would survive the trip home. The Wine Master could transfer them the same way she could to make sure Zeus-1 stayed safe, he had to come along. As for the Clockmaker, she and the Wine Master were an item so separating them would have been troublesome.

“Very well, you be careful out there.” Luo Xianni was not pleased with the decisions, but she didn’t stop her son from going. He embarked on a righteous cause.

“Then we’re off!”

The non-Paragons would of course join Lan Jue on the tour. Xiaosu was their pilot, Zhou Qianlin couldn’t leave Lan Jue’s side, Lin Guoguo was responsible for obfuscation, and the Driver and Pharmacist were muscle. Although not strong enough to save Tyrannosaurus in battle, this small group was enough to make sure Zeus-1 didn’t bite off more than it could chew.

Ten minutes later, Zeus-1 pulled away from Tyrannosaurus and into the depths of the Shattered Starfields.

Su Xiaosu was at the helm, quietly mulling over her conflicted emotions. She had named Moonfiend herself, those many years ago. It’d been the home of her mighty pirate clan, the seat of her former power. Now, though, her former home had passed into memory. Gone. The pain she felt was to be expected.

Lin Guoguo was in the captain’s chair, flooding her consciousness through the ship’s systems. She sensed their surroundings and monitored the radar.

Lan Jue ordered a new route this time, swinging wide from where they'd come from. They were still in danger of attack from the alien planets.

This time Star Division didn't have a clear mission, but Lan Jue had a plan. First he had to know if the planets would rejoin. If they did, what was their next move?"

"Connect me with the admiral," Lan Jue told Su Xiaosu.

"Aye, aye!" She replied.

After everything they'd gone through it was important to maintain communication with the Northern leader. Kang Hui had opened up a special channel to make sure they stayed in touch.

Chapter 691: Death of a Spider

“Commander, what have you found?” Kang Hui said.

“We haven’t seen any aliens yet,” Lan Jue replied. “But we’ve steered clear of your exfiltration route. We’ll be proceeding with the reconnaissance from a different path. Admiral, we ask that you share the data from Arachnid and Heron when they get clear of combat.”

Under normal conditions Kang Hui would never even consider sharing combat information with a foreign national. All of it was confidential and classified as a state secret. Everything that was learned was paid for by the blood of Northern soldiers. However, after everything that had transpired Kang Hui didn’t refuse their appeal. He told Lan Jue the data was already available.

The data transfer was quick. On Zeus-1’s screens appeared the Bastion that had once tried to destroy Lan Jue. Star Division’s commander – along with the Wine Master and Clockmaker – absorbed everything they saw.

Arachnid’s mechanical arms were a stunning revelation to them, and they watched in awe as the Bastion cut through the alien forces as though it were invincible. Tortoise-aliens were slashed down like they were made of bean curd.

A ship worthy of the North’s reputation! Only humanity’s most technologically advanced Alliance could create such an awesome monstrosity.

But their admiration quickly turned to dread.

They watched Arachnid charge the planet and crash into its surface with baited breath. Arachnid’s deadly arms and mass had to make that alien world reel. But it didn’t, instead they watched in stunned silence as the mighty ship was ignored like a gnat. Their faces fell.

Kang Hui didn’t edit anything from the video, all that had transpired was given to them. Even Arachnid’s internal systems data was provided like the size and attack power of the mechanical arms.

Each one of Arachnid's arms was equivalent in power to Heron's main cannons. They were considered inferior only because the ship needed to get in close to use them. Still, it succeeded where all other cannon fire had failed and actually struck the alien! The result? No more than ripples on a pond. Arachnid's great slashing arms left no damage, much to everyone's disbelief. From the outside no shields were evident around the planet, but Arachnid's failed attack raised the question; how strong was this planet's defense?

Could a cannon blast from Tyrannosaurus even break its shields?

Lan Jue's mind raced as he watched the recording. Arachnid's attempt reminded him of something. "The planet never risked taking a shot from the main guns. It either evaded them or used deception to protect itself. But even if it did how much damage would it do?"

The Wine Master spoke, his voice low. "If Arachnid's inability to crack its shield is any indication, even a cannon blast seems like it would have little effect. The planet it encountered looks smaller than the one we fought as well. We can assume their close-combat abilities – their natural abilities – are very formidable."

Lan Jue nodded. "Father said he sensed a power even stronger than his coming from a planet. What does that say when he's the strongest human alive? The limit of human capabilities, in fact. He's also told me that it's impossible to grow power beyond the Infinite because universal law prohibits it. But if that's true for us, it should also be true for the aliens... it must have found some way to hide itself from the universe's restrictions. The Violet Prince referred to the King and Queen, the strongest of the aliens. We know the planets are alive, so it's safe to assume the planets are what he was talking about? The Prince himself is equivalent to a Paragon who's reached the Infinite. He was holding back in our fight so the universe wouldn't recognize his power."

"So you're saying these planets are somehow tricking the universe into ignoring them?" The Wine Master asked.

"Or something like that, at least that's my guess," Lan Jue replied. "It's

the only explanation that makes sense and it answers many questions. These planets are large as Bastions but change readily when needed. If they were simply weapons they couldn't react so fast. But if they were akin to a physical body then you could say it's like instinct."

"If this is a possibility we should try to confirm it during this mission," the Wine Master offered.

"Look." The Clockmaker cut them off and pointed to the screen.

Arachnid was struggling against the tentacles that had emerged from the planet's surface. Thick as mountains they wrapped tight around the ship and rendered its weapons useless. There was no escape, and every tentacle it cut down was replaced by several more.

The fighter ships were trying to flee once it was clear Arachnid was doomed, but the planet's central vortex denied them the chance. None of the smaller ships had enough power to resist the vacuum, and they were all swallowed up. Twinkling purple lights followed, those being the vital crystals left behind by slain aliens.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes. Apparently these crystals were just as cherished by the planets as they were to humans.

The screen briefly went white as a mammoth explosion burst from Arachnid's location. The screen went dark, then all that was left was white noise.

Self-destruction! Once it was clear escape was impossible, Holmen made the valiant choice and chose to detonate the ship against the planet's surface.

There was no data to confirm it, but a Bastion's self-destruction had to be apocalyptic in its devastation. It had to have done some damage to that planet. What's more, it denied the life force of the hundred-thousand plus soldiers aboard the ship.

First Fleet's Ying Tianlong led his troops to a fiery death. Arachnid's Holmen chose self-destruction over a pointless death. Together they were a potent demonstration of the North's strength of character. They'd died

defending the honor of their homeland, the first victims in the war against alien invasion.

Lan Jue took a deep, shuddering breath. His eyes were red. Arachnid had once tried to kill him, but none of that mattered in the face of their sacrifice.

The screens flickered and the snowy picture was replaced by summary data. It was everything learned by Tyrannosaurus from the recording. It included a preliminary analysis of the planet's defenses, but since Arachnid couldn't overcome them it was simply a projection. Things were not optimistic. Even Arachnid's main cannon wouldn't have done much of anything, they posited, though without more data it was hard to be sure.

This was the strength of their enemy... even those tentacles were well protected.

Lan Jue guessed the planet already knew Arachnid was more than a match for its alien forces. It waited for the Bastion to get close enough to deal with the ship itself. But perhaps it didn't anticipate self-destruction – part of their mission would have to be uncovering the aftermath.

Next was the recording of Heron's tribulations. More surprises were forthcoming, like the planet's ability to launch itself forward like the much smaller shuttle aliens. It was so fast even the North's swiftest Bastion couldn't escape! A terrifying revelation!

All of this told them one thing: The alien planets had no weakness. Close-combat, long-ranged attacks, defense, intelligence, speed... each one stronger than the last. Humanity had more than ten Bastions, but from what they saw even if they gathered them all together it may not get them the advantage. None of them were as agile, nor could they teleport like the planets could. Putting all of humanity's proverbial eggs in one basket was reckless. Moreover, the limit of these aliens' powers was still a mystery – whether or not human could even fight back with any effectiveness. Not to mention there were planets to protect and gathering their Bastions left those planets exposed.

They still needed to know more.

The atmosphere aboard Zeus-1 was melancholy, its crew was dispirited by the result of their expedition. For all their efforts humanity seemed doomed to extinction!

“It’s evident to everyone these creatures are especially well defended against human technology.” It was the Pharmacist, who’d rarely opened her mouth, who made the observation.

Lan Jue turned his head to look at her. “What you mean to say is non-biological attacks can’t break its defenses?”

Chapter 692: The Verdict

The Pharmacist answered with a small nod. “We’ve had several dealings with aliens ourselves, and they haven’t been so impossible to overcome. However, now they seem particularly impervious. This is true for their awareness and combat prowess.”

Lan Jue nodded, thinking back to the many aliens he’d personally cut down.

The Pharmacist went on. “There’s no such thing as a flawless creature. We are governed by the same rules they are – we just haven’t found their flaw yet. I believe that discovering this should be the focus of our reconnaissance mission, and even test it.”

“That makes sense. For example, we can use the same level natural strength and technological strength and see which has the better results.” They were all intelligent people. The Wine Master puzzled out her meaning quickly.

Zeus-1 made the journey quickly. Not long after leaving Tyrannosaurus they were back at the heart of the Starfields. Empty space greeted them where the system’s three primary planets had been.

Lin Guoguo, seated beneath the helmet as usual, stared into the distance with eyes that glittered gold. She continuously cloaked them in psychic obfuscation, while the Blinding Stone kept Zeus-1 out of sight. They stood out as much as space dust.

In the distance they spotted a group of aliens, all headed in one direction. All the various breeds were represented, but most notable were the saucer-aliens – the kind that carried other smaller creatures with it as it traveled. The host of alien creatures thickly dotted that far region of space as they moved together toward some unseen target.

Star Division looked on in surprise.

Lan Jue shook his head. “Last time we came looking there were so few. I thought they were back within the planet, but that doesn’t appear to have

been the case. It looks like they'd been sent out... somehow outside of the Starfields."

That would mean they had been dispatched with some sort of goal. They did not, after all, use these smaller monstrosities in the battle against the Bastions. So what was going on?

Many in the alien horde were strong, strong enough to go toe-to-toe with human Capital ships and with about the same numbers. Why had they been sent out? And to where?

A break in the throng revealed an alien planet. It was the same one that had attacked Tyrannosaurus.

Its central vortex had vanished and a thick purple atmosphere hung over the whole planet. Somehow it seemed smaller than it had not long before – probably from the loss of Moonfiend. The alien creatures converged on it from all sides and vanished into the hazy light, like bees returning to the hive.

Lan Jue and the others watched from a distance. With Lin Guoguo's help they could remain for about an hour without fear of being discovered. Immediately evident was the fact nothing seemed eager to chase after Tyrannosaurus. However Lan Jue didn't dare send this information to Kang Hui, for fear the energy use would attract attention.

Star Division continued to watch, but as they did the sense something wasn't right began to nag at them.

As the aliens continued to flow into the planet, the atmosphere around it darkened and it grew in size. The more aliens that came, the larger it got, and the darker its hue became until it was a deep violet. A suffocating sense of oppression could clearly be felt.

"Could it have been pretending to be weak?" When the words left Su Xiaosu's lips, a cold chill ran up everyone's spine. Strong as they were, could the aliens really have been concealing their real strength? How powerful were they really? It had to be a trick, to lull the humans into believing they knew the truth when clearly they didn't. It would play to their benefit in the next fight, revealing strength the humans didn't think

they had.

“No... it can't be that simple.” The Pharmacist watched with furrowed brow. “It's not just about deception. It could just as easily have held back instead of wasting energy to make aliens. There's another reason. Jue Di said that there are limits to how much power any living thing can possess – surpass that and the universe tries to... redistribute that power. If this planet is alive, like we suspect, it must be at or near that limit. It would mean that it had to limit itself by diffusing its energy into those aliens or it risked passing the threshold. This is a tool, an important means of controlling its own growth. What's more, the North's three Bastions could destroy these smaller ones easily. The planets probably sent them out because they cherish the energy these smaller ones contain. They rely on it.”

Lan Jue nodded as the Pharmacist gave her hypothesis. “All of that is a possibility. Let's keep watching.”

The aliens continued to return in an unending flow of purple bodies. Suddenly, their conversation was cut short by a heady burst of power. They looked back at the scene, and in the distance they saw another enormous silhouette come into view.

Another planet!

Everyone unconsciously held their breath. Where they going to gather here? It would prove everything they'd guessed. The aliens weren't planning on leaving the Starfields just yet, they would continue to sup on the vital energies of the system while enjoying its protection.

The second planet was visibly smaller than the first. Its massive purple body slowly came to a stop not far from its twin.

“Let's go,” Lan Jue said. “We have to see if this is the one that destroyed Arachnid.”

Zeus-1 began its approach, slowly closing the distance.

No scar! The planet showed no signs whatsoever of being in a fight. Either this wasn't the planet Holmen faced or the admiral's sacrifice had

been in vain.

Before they could tell for sure, another tyrannical aura made their hearts skip a beat. The third planet had arrived.

It radiated an angry violet light, and a deep crater revealed discolored terrain beneath. It looked like a round piece of chocolate some enormous cosmic beast had taken a bite out of. Slowly it approached the other two while a strange and sick fluid flowed in the wound.

Zeus-1 didn't need to do any more searching for the planet that'd destroyed Arachnid. At least they could confirm that Holmen's final order had caused some damage.

Here they were, all together. As the humans quietly watched, they witnessed aliens leave from the largest of the planets and head toward the other two, changing them.

"Boss, I can't hold for much longer." They'd been here for a while, and Lin Guoguo was starting to become exhausted.

"Let's go," Lan Jue answered. Su Xiaosu swung Zeus-1 around and calmly brought them to a safe distance.

The last few minutes had been very telling. For the North, it would be a relief to discover they weren't being chased. They were also able to confirm damage to one of them, though at the same time it was clear they could aid one another.

Zeus-1 made its way to a larger asteroid and settled on its surface. Lin Guoguo immediately sank into meditation to recover her strength.

"What do we do now?" The Wine Master asked Lan Jue.

He pondered for a moment. "I want to grab one, bring it back. Like the Pharmacist says, we need to learn more about them if we're going to craft an effective strategy. If things keep going as they are now, we're just waiting for death – far too passive."

The Wine Master looked at him. "Are you going yourself?"

Lan Jue nodded. "We've got no Bastion as support and only ourselves to

rely on. Without mother here you are the only one that can get us out of harm's way in a hurry, and you'll need time to prepare in that event. It would be too risky to put Zeus-1 in that position. I go out alone, secure a target, and come back – simple. Then we get out of here.”

The Wine Master frowned at the prospect. “You know the Violet Princess has you in her sights. Don't you think this is too dangerous? You don't have Guoguo's psionic pulse to shield you, making you easier to spot to the enemy.”

“It's the same for everyone,” Lan Jue countered. “Anybody who goes out there runs the risk of being discovered. That's why you're staying here to prepare for a quick exit. We teleport out of here the moment I get back, no matter what's after me. That's how we stay safe and get out with mission accomplished.”

At last the Wine Master acquiesced. “Very well, just be careful.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Relax, I'll make sure I've got my head on a swivel. You don't think I can take care of myself?”

“I'm going.” The Pharmacist spoke up.

Lan Jue looked her way, ready to deny her request. But he saw that there was no room for argument in the look she gave him. And there was something else.

“Alright!”

Lan Jue took Zhou Qianlin's hand and brought her to the back of the ship. She followed meekly, with no light of consciousness in her expression.

When he looked at her beautiful face, Lan Jue couldn't help but sigh. He hesitated for just a moment, then spoke softly to her in a warm voice. “You need to stay here on the ship. You can't come with me this time.” He gave her a gentle hug and a light kiss on the forehead.

He helped her stand to one side. “Wait for me right here, I'll be back soon.” He ran a hand along her silken hair, then left.

Chapter 693: Life and Death

Just then Lan Jue felt his shirt tightened. When he turned around, he saw a pair of lilly-white hands gripping his clothes.

“Qianlin!” Lan Jue gasped in surprise.

Ever since falling into this state Qianlin could perform basic functions, but this was the first time she’d taken the initiative. However, her eyes still bore that dull look.

Lan Jue tried to loosen her grip but she just held on tighter. He tried to convince her to let him go but she would not be swayed.

Tears had begun to well up in Lan Jue’s eyes. He pursed his lips, and after a moment sighed. “Alright, we stay together. Life or death, no matter what happens, we don’t separate.” He dropped his head and kissed her lips. The tell-tale light surrounded them and when it was gone, so was Zhou Qianlin. Lan Jue felt his Discipline surge to its peak.

A few minutes later Zeus-1’s cargo hold opened and two figures emerged; Lan Jue and the Pharmacist. They didn’t wear their mechas, they would be too conspicuous. Instead they relied on their protogenic understanding to protect them from the vacuum of space.

“Sis, why did you want to come? Did you sense something?” Lan Jue asked her.

The Pharmacist’s calm expression fractured, revealing uncertainty beneath. Her body shook ever so slightly.

“What is it?” Lan Jue asked, concerned.

She was silent for a time, fighting with herself to maintain calm. She bit her lower lip. “I felt... I felt it.”

He didn’t understand. “It? What do you mean?”

She sighed. “Ultus!”

“Ultus?” Lan Jue gaped at her. “First of the Banishing Blades... the one your husband bore?”

She nodded.

Lan Jue stared at her in shock. “One of the planets?”

Again, she nodded. “The largest one. I’m sure of it, Ultus is somewhere inside. If you don’t believe me, channel your consciousness through Captus. You’ll feel it, too.”

Lan Jue nodded and shut his eyes, searching his feelings.

His mind sunk into the mystical blade. Therein was a world of marvels, thick with the sword’s power. Reality existed in tiers, constantly emerging and collapsing before his eyes. Among it all was a faint sense, immortal essence so broad and profound that it seemed to permeate everything, its end and beginning.

This was the root of the Banishing Blades’ power. Therein he found Captus, shivering. He sensed it, felt it calling to something far away in the ethereal reality they inhabited. He could also sense Occisus and Demortus close by.

Lan Jue gasped. She was right, the sword was there. But that meant her husband...

His eyes opened and he turned his attention toward the Pharmacist. Her eyes were wet, and tears were suspended in space between them.

She had spent so many years, desperately searching for any news of her lost love. Now she had it, but it was news of his death. If Ultus was somewhere inside the alien planet then the chances her husband still lived were minuscule.

“Sis, it’s alright. Maybe –“ Lan Jue tried to find the words to comfort her.

She waved her hand. “It’s fine, I’ve prepared for this day. I knew I was just lying to myself by hoping he’d come home. How could he still live? I just never thought it would be these cursed aliens that killed him! No matter the cost, I am going to get that sword back. It’s the only thing he left behind.”

“I’ll help you!” Lan Jue replied without hesitation.

She paused, staring at him with glistening eyes. Three simple words, but they were a solemn promise. Both of them had seen the strength of these monsters with their own eyes and still Lan Jue was eager to help. It was moving beyond words.

Lan Jue went on. "Do you have a plan? Maybe some way to awaken the sword?"

"No one would know better than Yongye or Xuanyuan, you should ask them," she replied.

"Alright!" Lan Jue wasted no time in seeking out the White Blademaster and asking for his help.

Jun Yongye appeared at his side in a flash of light. His first action was to stare at the distant planets. He had been awakened when Lan Jue entered the sword's dimension and had also felt Ultus' presence.

"Yongye, we believe Ultus is inside the alien planet. Is there any way we could call it out?" Lan Jue's voice was low and serious.

Jun Yongye furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "Ultus... yes. That is Ultus' aura I sense. But it is sealed by some great power. I can also feel that the whole of its power has been stimulated. Strong... Ultus is the first of us. Individually it is just as powerful as any of the other blades, but it is the only one with knowledge of the Banishing Stance. If you could recapture it, the Stance may be achievable."

"I've only ever heard of the Banishing Stance in tales and legends," Lan Jue said. "Is it really that strong?"

Yongye chuckled politely. "The realms of gods have gone from this universe, but I can tell you that even the Three Pure Ones would be turned to dust if faced with the Banishing Stance. With the Blades at its center this Stance could create an entirely new universe. Is that 'strong'?"

Lan Jur gaped at him. He could see the fervent light glint in Jun Yongye's eyes.

"So how do we get it back?" He asked.

Yongye replied in low, even tones. “It’s difficult. We can locate its specific location by tracking its aura, but only a sword’s master can control it. We can find it, but we can’t take it away, to do so you would need to kill its master. The one spot of good news is that the swords cannot harm each other. You’re protected from Ultus’ power.”

Lan Jue was going to continue his line of questioning when suddenly he stopped. The Pharmacist had grabbed his arm, and he turned to look at her.

She had recovered from her momentary sadness. “There’s no rush. Now we know Ultus has fallen into the hands of the enemy. Once we break through to Paragon and can command the swords’ power more fully it won’t be difficult to track this planet down. If we reach the level of Jue Di, with our three Banishing Blades the planets would not seem so insurmountable.”

Inwardly, Lan Jue was moved by her words. After discovering her husband’s weapon, no one would be more eager to recover it than her. She knew it was a terrible risk to try it now! To attempt it at their level of power would be like a moth leaping into the flames.

“Sister, no matter what and no matter when, when you’re ready to get that sword I’ll be right by your side.” Lan Jue’s promise was full of determination and passion.

She smiled at him and gently nodded her head. “Alright, we have a mission to complete. Let’s get back as soon as we can, we have a lot of information to share with the East. Everything we experienced out here will be important.”

“Yeah,” he said with a nod.

The two of them raced ahead, approaching the planet while being careful to keep their approach hidden. But their target wasn’t one of the planets, but a straggling alien. If they could grab one and bring it back alive their mission would be a success. At their strength it shouldn’t be very difficult. The key was not to attract the attention of the planets.

In the vast expanse of the universe, humans were infinitesimally small

and hard to pick out. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist found a suitable place to lay in wait for their prey. Their protogenic mastery was more than enough to hide from an alien, even a wave or two.

Their chance came a little more than an hour later.

A saucer-type alien came floating by, majestically flitting through space like a jellyfish in the ocean. In its wake was another, smaller creature. It looked like a beetle with a dark purple shell, and stretched ten meters long.

Lan Jue had seen this kind before. Compared to its other interplanetary cousins it was very small and easy to overlook. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate it because of its size. Its armor was strong, and moved quick as lightning. In battle three spines jutted from its mouth that it used as weapons. Lan Jue had seen one bite through an asteroid three hundred meters across.

That seemed to be their specialty, cutting through asteroids. They were like mites that hid themselves on the bodies of larger aliens.

It was formidable in both attack and defense, certainly not bottom of the barrel when it came to the alien hierarchy. But it was small, and that made it easier to capture.

“That’s the one,” Lan Jue gestured toward it.

“Alright, I’ll follow your lead.” The Pharmacist replied.

The Pharmacist and Occisus were potent killers – not best suited for taking prisoners. Lan Jue would have to do most of the work.

He wasted no time. In a blink he was racing forward toward their target.

Chapter 694: The Pharmacist Advances!

Ten meters was miniscule when compared with stars and planets. Lan Jue, standing at roughly two meters, was even less deserving of attention. Even so Lan Jue didn't give the beetle-alien a chance to discover him. As he raced ahead an angry red light lashed out.

From the beetle's perspective, reality collapsed in front of it, creating a powerful vacuum. It immediately reacted by retracting its wings and trying to get free, but the pull was too strong. Its body was surrounded by a crimson light.

The red aura flickered and flared. The alien had no control over itself, and the strange power caused it to pitch wildly from side to side. Lan Jue appeared suddenly on top of it, and as he pressed his hands to its back a dim blue light joined the red. Flecks of silver light hung in an orb around the beast.

There wasn't a single sound. The beetle writhed and raged until, suddenly, it stopped. It hung limply in the darkness. From start to finish, the exchange had lasted no more than a few seconds. Captus locked it down, Lan Jue's All-Heaven lightning suppressed it. Together it was enough to overwhelm the beast and knock it out. Perfectly executed.

The alien's agility was counteracted by Captus' power, as well as its psychic projection. It couldn't even call for help.

Wavering blue light brightened the area for a moment as Lan Jue deposited the creature into Thor's Promise. He waved to the Pharmacist to let her know it was done. He began to head back where they'd come from as a beam of light.

As he headed back to the ship, the Pharmacist was silently impressed with her companion. Lan Jue was no less capable than she was now. It'd take her ten years to reach a level of understanding with Occisus. How long had Lan Jue had his Blade? Yet it seemed there was nothing preventing him from a deeper comprehension of the sword's power. Part of it was his innate talent, but a fair bit was also hard work and

determination.

She opened her mouth and spat forth the seven-star blade. She stood atop it and let the weapon bring her back to Zeus-1.

Their mission had ended, it was time to return and share the story of what had happened. Who knew how much news of this clash would affect the human worlds.

The Pharmacist and Lan Jue raced back side by side. Both of them knew how dangerous it was to stay any longer than they had to.

Suddenly, Lan Jue sensed something and quickly turned toward the Pharmacist by his side. Her reactions were quick, and she turned the blade beneath her feet like a surfboard to change course.

Ting! A pretty crystalline sound arose while simultaneously the universe contracted in upon them. To the humans it felt like an enormous hand caught them in its grip and was trying to squish them into paste.

The Pharmacist's eyes flashed, and the sword beneath her feet erupted into a hundred thousand cutting lights. They blasted out from her in all directions. Lan Jue proceeded to swing his arms around in a circle, and the black-white power of Taiji appeared before him. Crackling sky-blue manifestations of All-Heaven lightning roiled within.

A strange and disconcerting dizziness swept passed, like the universe was rotating on an invisible axis. It cut Lan Jue and the Pharmacist off from the crushing pressure.

A violet figure appeared in space before them.

When they saw her, the expression on Lan Jue and the Pharmacist's faces fell. They knew who she was, a familiar face they'd encountered several times before. The Violet Princess.

Jue Di had told Lan Jue that the Princess was a part of the Infinite, just as he was. She was new to the level of power, but nonetheless was even more powerful than Luo Xianni. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist weren't even Paragons yet. One could imagine their trepidation.

The universe had been painted violet. Although Lan Jue had managed to separate them from the Princess' power, they were still trapped.

Two swords descended from the darkness of space, one red and one white. Their light was cast upon the two humans; Captus and Occisus, respectfully.

IT was clear the Violet Princess had been ready to attack, but when the swords appeared and she felt their aura it gave her pause. Fear painted her eyes.

Lan Jue's greatest worry had been realized. He thought he was quick, but clearly the Princess was quicker.

"I felt you long ago but I couldn't tell precisely where. I didn't think you would deliver yourself to me. Come, let's return." The Violet Princess spoke calmly, and her eyes never left Lan Jue.

Lan Jue looked defeated. "Violet Princess!" This was clearly not his day. The Wine Master couldn't sense them here, but even if he could it was hopeless. Even together they were no match for this creature! What's more they were far too close to the planets, and even if they didn't get involved the Violet Prince was not far away.

"Let her go. I'll go back with you." Lan Jue spoke softly, like he was narrating someone else's misfortune.

A light flashed in the monster's eyes. "Why should I? You both can come with me. She is also suitable for mating and giving birth to the next generation!"

The Pharmacist's pupils contracted to two angry black dots. She looked back at the Princess with a terribly cold glare.

"Answer my question. Many years ago there was a man who bore a sword like ours. You captured him. Does he still live?" The Pharmacist's words were chilly and firm. They had no way of learning what went on inside those planets, but there was a chance they could learn something from the Princess herself.

The alien leader paused, and she looked at the human woman with a

deep curiosity. Then her attention turned to the weapon suspended by her side, and for a moment she looked like she recognized it. “That human? He refused to couple with our Queen and took his own life. Our Queen felt it was a terrible waste. He would have given her very powerful offspring.”

Took his own life!

When she heard the words, the Pharmacist felt like she was frozen solid. Tears welled up in her eyes. Scenes of the past raced through her mind, days when they were young and growing up together. He’d been older than she was and carried her on his back to go play. They studied together, trained together, pushing one another to be better. They’d been together when the trove of Celestial Master Qian’s teachings had been uncovered. They were together when they obtained the Banishing Blades.

As time went on they had a child together. Shortly after he left on that fateful mission and never returned. At the time he was a rising star in the Eastern army, a future Paragon! He was supposed to get a promotion to general when he got back.

At the time he had been praised as a contemporary to the An Lun super soldier – no less talented and capable. Together they were the bright future of the Eastern military. He had even more potential than Lan Qing.

He had been a man of integrity, and gentle as water to her. A perfect man, a perfect husband. Just when she thought he’d make a perfect father, he vanished. All of that was gone now, as she finally learned of her partner’s fate.

Her body began to sway, as did the sword beside her. A stifling, murderous aura bloomed from Occisus. It poured with a blinding light that made the violet realm around them begin to crack. Even the Princess’ powers didn’t seem capable of restricting this unparalleled bloodlust.

The Pharmacist’s eyes had turned crimson and waves of power from her flooded the area – more than ever before. A wave of sword light cut right through the Violet Princess’ Domain.

The creature stood in shock, frightened of the power Occisus and Captus bore. When the savage force of Occisus was released that fear grew,

freezing her in place.

Mystical lotuses appeared in tiered layers around the Pharmacist, each one white as polished jade. Set against her beautiful figure she looked like an immortal returned to the universe.

Occisus – the deadliest of the Banishing Blades – blazed as though it were on fire. Beams of white light issued from it and poured into the Pharmacist, pushing her daunting aura to even greater heights. Meanwhile the surreal lotus flowers spread out around her, and though they were beautiful to behold their deadly sharp power was palpable.

Domain... this was her Domain.

Lan Jue knew what was happening, but how? Breaking through and immediately summoning one's Domain? This was true talent!

Like him, the Pharmacist had been constraining her powers, delaying her breakthrough for the chance to advance farther with time. But facing the Princess and hearing of her lover's fate caused her brutality to explode beyond her control. It awakened the blade, and the two together joined as one terrible presence, thrusting her into the realm of the Paragons and calling forth her Domain.

It had been Occisus' hidden dangers that made her most reticent to breaking through. She and her husband had been hasty, and joined with the Banishing blades before they were ready. They were scoured by the limitless power of the weapons. She feared these dangers would impede her progress when becoming a Paragon.

This was not a problem for Lan Jue. This was due to the fact that Captus' sword spirit was strong, as was Lan Jue at the time of joining. With a good foundation and the help of the thunder essence's immortal qi, he had been able to assimilate the gentler Captus without issue.

Chapter 695: Gates of Slaughter

In this instant, Occisus finally accepted its master and propelled her into the realm of the Paragons. The power of her Domain was inferior to that of the Violet Princess, but even the terrible alien's strength couldn't hold thirst for carnage back. Even the universe seemed to shrink away from the fearful sense.

The Violet Princess, for all her power, hesitated to engage.

Captus also seemed galvanized by Occisus' display and began to quiver. Ripples of angry red light pulsed from it, weaving among its companion's violent display. A strange, uncomfortable sensation swept across the area.

The Violet Princess screamed. Her howl still hung in the air as she dissolves into a violet stream of light and vanished into space.

As she did the blinding red and white lights mingled to create a towering gate. Three words were etched into reality at its apex:

Gates of Slaughter!

All around them the universe was a tapestry of red and white, separate but woven together. Time and space collapsed at their borders and any asteroid within 5 kilometers splintered into dust. Nothing was capable of denying the pure destructive force that threatened to devour this pocket of the universe.

Captus swelled to enormous size. It writhed and cut through the air, wildly casting squalls of power every which way. Occisus continued to burn with a pure white fire, and its light embraced the newly ascended Pharmacist.

"What are you waiting for, flee!" Jun Yongye's voice rang in Lan Jue's mind. It brought him back to his senses. He reached out his right hand and Captus shrunk as it fell into his palm. Blade and man as one, Lan Jue became a ray of red light that streaked into the distance. The Pharmacist followed close behind.

Eventually the trail of light they left behind faded into nothing. They

were gone.

The Gates of Slaughter remained behind, but began to fade after ten seconds. Even so the calamitous sensation remained. Waves of its power continued to wreak havoc through the area and fluctuated frantically as though universal protogenia itself was forced to submit.

After another ten seconds a different power swept through, strong and constraining. Two flashes of purple cut through the pale white light, depositing the Violet Prince and Princess.

The Princess still looked anxious and apprehensive. Her pretty face pouted in disbelief. “It was so frightening,” she said. “It was like my mind and power were in danger of being shattered. How could such boundless power exist? It is in defiance of universal rules, beyond what should be allowed! But I felt it clearly, well beyond that limit – beyond what Monarch can safely use.”

The Violet Prince furrowed his brow, perceiving some invisible thing. After a moment he spoke again. “Monarch says it is not real... it is a simulation of a real force, like the one in the blade left behind by the human. Monarch has managed to control some measure of the human weapon’s power, perhaps He will learn more about this. Princess, you are too cowardly.”

The Violet Princess stood tall and regarded him with prideful incredulity. “I am to be Queen, I must protect myself from danger. That human is also of great interest to me. I wish to take him as my mate, our offspring would be very strong.”

The Prince narrowed his eyes. “What of the female? Maybe she is a suitable breeder.”

A flash of purple lit up the Princess’ eyes. Before her, an image of the Pharmacist appeared complete with a near-perfect representation of her aura.

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Twinkling motes of silver filled an empty tract of space. Silken threads of

silver grew from them, connecting them. All of a sudden they cracked like a fractures mirror, and from the fissure in space-time there emerged a sapphire blue battleship.

Any energy signature was constrained. In fact all was quiet, like nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all. Within Zeus-1 the Wine Master sat down on the floor, exhausted. Transferring them over such a long distance by himself was a stretch of his abilities, not to mention the size of the ship. The Starfields were also rife with disrupting energies that made it all the more difficult.

Lan Jue's face still showed his shock. Captus had disappeared back into its place between dimensions, but Occisus remained suspended in air. It flickered in and out of existence, surrounded by white light. Thankfully, with Captus' help, its unbridled murderous power was contained. Were that not the case he feared for the safety of those onboard the ship.

No trace was seen of the Pharmacist, who had joined with her blade. However Lan Jue could feel waves of power coming from Occisus that felt familiar.

At last she had broken through. He couldn't know whether she would rise to be a Reflection of Heaven and Earth like his brother, but it wasn't out of the question. After all, she had the benefit of a Banishing Blade. She would inevitable be integral in the fight against the aliens.

Lan Jue couldn't say he wasn't a little envious of the Pharmacist's breakthrough. It seemed like everyone around him had been advancing while he remained behind. His brother was especially impressive, leaping to second degree and commanding Varochana as his dharmic reflection. In the course of a single day he had become one of humanity's most promising Paragons.

Hua Li had also received the rights of his ancestors and ascended to Paragon status. He was now truly His Majesty Poseidon. Chu Cheng had yet to take that step, but was separated by only the thinnest margin. Now, the Pharmacist had joined the ranks of Eastern powerhouses.

But himself?

Lan Jue's individual Discipline had risen to ninth level eighth rank. If he wanted he could reach peak rank in very little time, even break through to Paragon. His body was imbued with immortal qi from the thunder essence, and he had command of the mighty All-Heaven lightning. Although he could not be called a Paragon, the truth was he wasn't a typical Adept, either.

The restriction that had been imposed upon him – by Bize, by the arrow of compassion, by his connection to Qianlin – they held him back. The only way he would rise to Paragon was with Qianlin by his side. Her Discipline was only slightly less than his own, yet Lan Jue was still uneasy. If she didn't come to before it was time for her breakthrough, it may result in problems. If she couldn't sense the flows of protogenia as she crossed the barrier, how could she advance? It wasn't even certain the process wouldn't come with unseen dangers.

After all, a Paragon's growth depended on their comprehension of the universe.

Lan Jue glowered helplessly, but he knew he couldn't rush. He had to find a way to rouse Qianlin from the hell the Astral Phantom had put her in.

He thought back to Qianlin's small hands gripping his shirt. He took it as a sign that maybe the day she came back to him wasn't far off.

Each time they cultivated Lan Jue channeled the immortal qi he absorbed from the thunder essence into her body. He hoped it would nourish her. It was the reason she appeared more and more ethereal, like a fairy from the old tales. Whatever awful toxin the Astral Phantom had used, it could not be more powerful than the essence of the immortals. It had to be strong enough to bring her mind back.

"What did you find out?" The Clockmaker asked, alarmed at Lan Jue's panicked bearing.

He snapped back to the present and faced her with a bitter smirk. "The aliens' reactions are better than we thought. We captured an alien as fast as we could, but the Violet Princess still tracked us down. Faced with her

Domain, the Pharmacist broke through. Then our weapons somehow created this power, on their own. It was powerful enough to scare the Princess away and give us an opportunity to run. I think she's still in the process of her breakthrough now."

"The Pharmacist broke through, that's incredible! Meditate, learn from the power she releases. I'll protect the ship." Zeus-1 was distant by this point. Unless the three alien planets were headed right for them, there was nothing to worry about.

In fact the Clockmaker's permission wasn't needed. Su Xiaosu, Lin Guoguo and the Driver were already immersed in meditation. Xiaosu and Guoguo still had a ways to go before it was their time to break through, but the Driver tread nearer every day. His moment would be when the evolution of his Discipline. The primordial lightning he commanded was strengthening fast, though it still couldn't compare to Lan Jue's. At any rate, his ascension was all but assured.

Lan Jue sat and crossed his legs, slipping into introspective silence as he felt the flows of the Pharmacist's protogenia. It was easy for him to understand its secrets because they were issued from Occisus – a pair to Captus which he bore. When the bearers of the Banishing Blades ascended these weapons would channel their powers, more potent than any astrum. It was something they all had in common.

Of course, Lan Jue had his own unique potential. His All-Heaven lightning and the thunder essence continued to amalgamate, boosting his cultivation. Most importantly, it gave him a sense of the immortal realm that had passed into legend.

Chapter 696: Simulated Strategy

Although the meaning of Occisus was ‘immortal executor’ ¹, it was actually created by the greatest of the immortals, Celestial Master Hongjun. However, the swords came under the control of the fiend Tongtian ². It was he who created the Banishing Strategy, and thus gave the blades their ominous names.

The immortal qi Lan Jue had absorbed helped him greatly in commanding the power of Captus. What he needed now to solidify that power, was to break through and keep improving his own strength. Jun Yongye had told him long ago that becoming a Paragon would vastly enhance his control of the blade. This would be especially true for the Pharmacist since her Discipline was laden with immortal qi.

However, helpful as the Pharmacist’s breakthrough was Lan Jue could not ease his heart enough to meditate on it. The gate that was created was there every time he closed his eyes, at the forefront of his mind. Those three words were burned into memory

Gates of Slaughter!

At first he didn’t know why the Violet Princess had fled so readily, but then he felt what came out of that gate. The power it bore was even more catastrophic than his father’s Up-ender attack.

Strangely it hadn’t affected him or the Pharmacist in the least. Could it be this was a taste of the power Occisus bore now that its master was a Paragon? If this were true, to what heights was the Pharmacist capable? Could she unveil the secrets of the Infinite?

“Ease your heart and meditate. It is not so simple as you think.” Jun Yongye’s voice was serious and impatient.

“Yongye, guide me. That whole experience was beyond my understanding. The confusing is stopping me from focusing.” Lan Jue pleaded.

Yongye replied. “The Gates of Slaughter is one of the principles of the

Banishing Strategy. It is so powerful the greatest immortals shiver at its mention.”

“The Banishing Strategy?” Lan Jue gasped. “But we don’t have the formation. How could any part of the Strategy manifest?”

The sword-spirit went on. “The Pharmacist’s breakthrough invigorated the base elements of her sword. In that moment, Occisus and Captus resonated with one another – part of that is the Gates of Slaughter. Altogether, the Banishing Strategy has eight Gates. Because we don’t have the formation all I could produce was a counterfeit of the Gates, but its aura was enough to frighten the Princess. Even a copy of the real thing is incredibly difficult to produce, and if the Pharmacist hadn’t broken through in just that moment I wouldn’t have been able to complete it. If we were in possession of the formation, and could employ the Strategy, do you think the Princess would be able to flee? Even with only three swords the Strategy would be enough to reduce her to ash.”

An arrogance had crept into Jun Yongye’s voice as he described the power the swords possessed.

So that’s what it was! Lan Jue’s heart raced.

Though his time with Captus was brief, he knew the power this god-blade held. Or, he thought he knew. Upon feeling even the mimicry of power from the Gates of Slaughter, he began to understand.

He burned for the knowledge of the Banishing Strategy!

“We must recapture Ultus! Spare no effort, for once the formation is obtained even those terrible planets will be cut down before these swords.” Excitement was evident in Jun Yongye’s appeal.

“When the Gates appeared I could feel Ultus more clearly. It may be under alien control, but they can’t suppress the blade’s will. If you can find it, awaken it, then there is a chance you can take Ultus from their clutches. With the four Banishing Blades together again, you’ll have a mighty force in hand that these monsters will struggle to oppose, even without the Strategy.”

Lan Jue gave a bitter smirk. “Easier said than done! If we want that sword back we’ll need to walk into the lion’s den. That planet is the one the Princess calls Monarch, and it’s even stronger than father. You saw the fate of Arachnid just as we did, there’s no way we can get close enough. How can we get the sword back if we can’t even get close enough to find it?”

Jun Yongye replied with a small, mysterious smile. “The Princess did mention she was interested in coupling with you...”

“You... I’m not prostituting myself!” Lan Jue balked.

Gradually his doubt and confusion subsided, enough to focus on Occisus’ power. It was pure and strong, and although it was unerringly brutal there was a righteousness to it. It was a sword of reckoning, here to pass judgement on all things foul and eliminate evil.

Lan Jue’s powers were also just, fair and good. His rapport with the essence of the sword deepened his comprehension of its secrets. Soon a profound focus consumed him. Qianlin, joined with him, enjoyed the same abiding level of wisdom.

The Clockmaker looked on, and she witnessed the changes coming over Lan Jue’s aura; first blue, then red. They flickered back and forth while behind him the Banishing Blades’ lights roiled like dancing auroras.

Three of the god-blades had been gathered. Their splendor dominated the laws of nature.

A divine light shone from within Lan Jue, and every change that came over him caused reality to ripple.

The first one to arise from meditation was Lin Guoguo. Psychics like her were rare, and although the Pharmacist’s breakthrough tempered her abilities they didn’t offer any insights. She would only be gifted insight from a Paragon with powers like hers – a very unlikely scenario.

Of the four Adepts it was Lan Jue and the Driver who sank deepest into meditation. He was near to Paragon already, and his evolved Primordial Lightning was another righteous display of the immortal realm. There was

some faint parallels with the Pharmacist's legendary weapon. He learned much.

Lan Jue had even more of a connection with the Banishing Blade. He, too, felt the flows of protogenia deeply.

The Wine Master was the third one to awaken, recovered from teleporting them to safety.

"How are you? Better?" The Clockmaker asked.

The Wine Master glanced at the sword and nodded. "I'm fine. The hardest hit was my pocket-book, teleportation is expensive! But, I feel as though I may make a breakthrough soon."

The Clockmaker's face lit up. "You have a sense?"

He chuckled. "Skyfire Avenue has Paragons popping up like weeds after a spring shower. As its chairman, how could I show my face if I don't work to keep up! With my aunt's help and my years of experience it is nearly time. When we return I'll cloister myself in preparation."

She seemed a little disappointed. "In our time the rise of a Paragon was a rare and wonderful thing. How many does Skyfire Avenue have now?"

The Wine Master sighed. "In fact, I would rather it was like it had been in the old days. It is a sign of looming tragedy that we should have so many now. These aliens have come to end our species, and they are so strong as to make it a real possibility. They come on a foul wind, and I shudder to think of the destruction they'll cause when they invade the human galaxies."

The Clockmaker tried to reassure him. "There is no point in worrying over it now. All we can do is continue to give our best. We will fight, and cast the beasts from our homes. Humanity has survived since ancient times, and I believe it was all in preparation for a time like this."

"I hope so," he replied. "The Clairvoyant's prophecies are coming true, but the one I wish for most desperately is the Jewelry Master. They say destiny is a strange and marvelous thing. Ever since that young man shed his troubled past, Skyfire Avenue has been swept up in his every act. Like

the Clairvoyant said – he is the hinge. A bridge, and because of him Skyfire Avenue will play an important role in humanity's future.”

The Clockmaker looked at Lan Jue. “Then we must be even more vigilant in protecting him. I didn't agree with this trip to help the North, I know how they operate. They are fierce on the battlefield, with valiant soldiers and wise commanders. However, they will sell the deepest core of themselves for their Alliance. Were the outcome different and their campaign a success, I would not be surprised to find them turning their guns on us.”

The Wine Master nodded. “That's why we set the teleportation array on Tyrannosaurus. In the end we didn't need it to save ourselves, but to save them.”

The Clockmaker turned to him, looking him deep in the eyes. “The only person you can ever really trust in this universe is yourself. Do not believe that saving Kang Hui's life has made him an ally. When it comes to the benefit of the nation, one man's feelings mean nothing. Kang Hui is their highest ranking military officer, he lives that fact. Give the North a wide margin as we go back, it's safest to return straight to Skyfire.”

The Wine Master nodded again in agreement. He'd originally planned to catch up with the Bastion and share their intelligence before returning home. But the Clockmaker was right, it may very well be a path toward danger.

Chapter 697: End of the Expedition

“Xiaosu, send our data to Tyrannosaurus. Ask if they need anything more from us.” The Wine Master, after thinking for a moment, spoke to the ship’s driver.

She confirmed, then turned on the ship’s communications and did as instructed. The North’s equipment was top of the line, and they were connected immediately.

“We’re sending the data,” Xiaosu said.

“Did you get any feedback?” The Wine Master asked.

Xiaosu stared at the screens. “Hold on, waiting for a response now. We’re pretty far away so the signal isn’t very clear.”

She spoke again after a moment. “They want us to meet up with them as soon as possible.”

“Got it.” The Wine Master’s mouth turned into a slight frown. He looked toward the Clockmaker. “So you think that if we go back, there’s a chance...”

She smiled. “I’m not sure, but there is always a chance. The safest choice is not to go back. We’ve already completed our mission.”

“Alright.” He understood her sentiment. Out in the Starfields, Zeus-1 didn’t have a way to communicate directly with Skyfire Avenue, and the loss of a single patrol boat during a massive alien battle was completely feasible. The North only needed to claim that was the case if their aims were less than wholesome. While the Wine Master thought well of Admiral Kang Hui, he wasn’t prepared to stake the lives of his companions on a feeling. Returning to Tyrannosaurus was risking more than he was comfortable with.

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Tyrannosaurus-Class Bastion Ship

“We’ve obtained the data. According to the starmaps we’ve received, the

three planets have gathered at the former location of Moonfiend. They don't appear to be giving chase." Ling Ya read out the report.

Kang Hui heaved a sigh of relief and leaned back against his chair. His frayed nerves could rest, at least a little. But there was also sadness; Holmen was dead, his ship destroyed and the one hundred thousand souls on board committed to the stars. First Fleet had also sacrificed itself for Tyrannosaurus' safety. Heron did not escape unscathed, either. It was the greatest loss the North had suffered since humanity's stellar migration. As the highest ranking military officer, everything that had happened was his responsibility.

"Get in touch with headquarters and share the information with them." Kang Hui sounded tired as he gave the order to Ling Ya, and shut his eyes.

"Aye, aye!" She replied.

"Admiral, you need to make up your mind." Wu Qiu stood beside Kang Hui, speaking softly to him.

Kang Hui's eyes popped back open, and his response was thick with anger. "They are allies, not to mention I'd be dead without their help – this whole mission would have ended in worse disaster than it already is. You honestly want me to turn on them?"

Wu Qiu sighed. "Yes, Skyfire Avenue has helped us greatly but their council chairman is on that ship, along with four other Paragons. There's also commander Lan Jue, and if we can get them to defect or take them out of the equation the results would be catastrophic to the Avenue. According to our information, Lan Jue has been chosen as the Clairvoyant's successor to lead and we have an opportunity that may never come again. Headquarters also didn't make it clear..."

Kang Hui's breathing had quickened and his hands were clenched into fists. After a moment, though, they relaxed. "No! They may not be a group we like, but they are brothers in arms against the alien threat! Without them Tyrannosaurus would have ended up like Arachnid. I will not betray their aid with treachery, and you will never make another suggestion like it again. Do you understand!"

Another sighed heaved Wu Qiu's shoulders. "Admiral, we do as you order, but you put too much faith in friendship." As he spoke the officer opened his hand and pressed down.

Kang Hui, already exhausted and with his guard down, grunted. He collapsed on top of his desk.

The admiral's guards stared in shock, but were about to lunge at Wu Qiu when the secretary grunted. A powerful aura burst from him. Against an Avenue Paragon he didn't amount to much, but aboard this ship he was the strongest Adept.

"I am working in the Admiral's best interest. After this expedition's failure he will be court martialed. He will need something to show for it if he wants to evade charges. Little Ya, tell the Avenue scouts that we want them to return as quickly as possible, but we won't wait long."

When Ling Ya looked at the secretary she saw the murderous light in his eyes. Her heart skipped a beat, and for a moment a handsome face flitted through her mind. She was conflicted, but her hands typed out what Wu Qiu demanded...

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Zeus-1 quietly slipped through the darkness of space. While Lan Jue and the Driver cultivated, the Wine Master concealed the waves of protogenia from the ship with his own abilities. He was pleased with the Pharmacist's breakthrough. The Avenue would have another Paragon, and one with robust combat ability. As an Adept she bore extraordinary strength, which would only increase as she deepened her understanding.

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The explosive news spread across the human words like wildfire. The North had thrown themselves at the aliens in a full offensive, with three bastion ships and five fleets – yet still they'd lost. Arachnid was destroyed, Heron mangled, and although Tyrannosaurus had suffered no damage it'd returning with four fleets instead of five.

Overnight, the alien planets became humanity's new boogeymen.

The Northern army gave Ying Tianlin the posthumous title of general. Holmen received no honors, but his family was generously compensated for their loss. Due to Kang Hui's failed leadership which resulted in a devastating loss for the North, Kang Hui was awaiting removal from command. Meanwhile, humanity worried over its future. It was a constant point of discussion. When would the aliens arrive?

On An Lun, Lan Qing quietly sat behind a screen. He silently reviewed all the data from the North's expedition, though the most comprehensive intelligence had come from Star Division's scouting team.

His face was dark. Leathery hands clenched tight and released, again and again in a sign of his agitated state.

The North was defeated! Humanity's most powerful Alliance had failed. What's more, the power they'd brought to bear against the aliens was equivalent to the East's total military power.

What's more, according to Star Division the aliens hadn't even used their full power. If this was the result at reduced power, what would happen when their foe no longer felt the need to hold back?

Lan Qing had the same concerns as the civilian public. When were these aliens going to appear in their backyard? Where? They could teleport wherever they liked without any notice. They wouldn't be able to muster forces fast enough if they didn't know where their enemy would be. Wherever the planets appeared, humanity would lose at least one planet.

"Sir, Skyfire Avenue on the line." An officer quickly trotted over and delivered the news.

"Connect them," he answered calmly.

A familiar face soon appeared on his screen.

"Admiral Lan Qing." The address was formal and polite.

Lan Qing nodded. "What is it?"

It was, of course, Lan Jue. "The Eastern lawmakers have passed a bill ordering people to evacuate to the largest planets. I wanted to ask what

the plans were for An Lun. I'm not asking for any sensitive information, just trying to plan what's next for Star Division."

Lan Qing's face was a stone. "We'll go where we're needed."

This caused his brother to roll his eyes. "Perhaps something a little less vague? Humanity's only got about ten Bastions ready for battle, and although they were defeated the expedition did prove one thing. Bastions are how you fight those things."

Lan Qing replied in cool tones. "What we need to know is how often the alien planet can transfer. Perhaps you don't understand that the only way to use the advantage of our Bastions is to surround the enemy. Right now we've been forced into a passive position while we wait for more information."

"I know," Lan Jue replied. "That's why I'm asking. I heard through the grapevine that you've already reorganized the troops after receiving the ships we won at auction. As I understand it you've got two fleets now. But the East is still weak, I think you need to let the army know we need to gather our forces."

Lan Qing frowned. "I don't need you to tell me how to do my job. If there's nothing else I have matters to attend to."

Lan Jue paused, struck by his brother's foul mood. It was the first time he'd seen Lan Qing like this. "Brother..." he said.

Lan Qing sat in silence for a moment, then visibly relaxed a little. "What?"

"If I don't come back from one of these trips, I need you to look after dad."

A hardness overcame Lan Qing's face. "What are you thinking?"

Lan Jue responded with a grin. "Nothing, I'm just saying. Don't get emotional."

Lan Qing's eyes were piercing as he stared at his younger brother on the screen. He knew Lan Jue better than anyone. He wouldn't have said

something like that unless there was a reason.

“What are you planning?” He calmly asked.

But Lan Jue just shook his head. “Nothing – alright, that’s all I needed. I’m off to cultivate.”

The connection was cut, and for some reason Lan Qing felt even more unsettled than he had a moment ago. The look in his brother’s eyes seemed carefree, but he knew Lan Jue. When he got that look, it meant he was plotting.

Chapter 698: Ninth Level, Ninth Rank

Skyfire Avenue,

A month had passed since the failed attempt to destroy the alien planets. Humanity had fallen into a bleak despair, a fear that their foe could appear at any moment. The North's defeat was too large to go unnoticed, so they didn't even attempt to hide it from the public.

Each alliance – be in the North, West or East – all adhered to the suggestion Lan Jue had made at the Eastern parliament. The resource-oriented and smaller planets were abandoned, and their populations were gathered closer together for protection.

It was a large operation, but a necessary one. It was clear the aliens could appear anywhere, at any moment. The outlying planets were most vulnerable and thus had to be given up.

Representatives from all three alliances met several times for high-level meetings, with aims to coordinate their military power. At least they had come to some agreements over mutual defense.

When the scout team got back to Skyfire Avenue, Lan Jue continued to cultivate religiously with Zhou Qianlin. The Driver had completed the transformation of his Discipline and sheltered himself away. The Wine Master did as well, in preparation for ascension to Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

As for the alien Lan Jue had recovered, it was in the capable hands of the Bookworm and Keeper.

Preliminary analysis revealed what Lan Jue and the others had expected. The aliens' defenses were weaker against biological attacks, and more potent against engineered power. According to the Keeper their weakness lay in their complicated DNA. Somehow, the power of an Adept's Discipline broke apart the bonds that held their DNA together and subjected them to terrible consequences.

"Boss, you seem pretty lethargic today." Ke'er saw her employer resting

idly behind the counter of the Jewelry Shop and couldn't contain her curiosity.

Everything seemed business as usual on the Avenue. Few normal humans were permitted to enter, so it was like the troubles of outside didn't exist here, at least on the surface.

Lan Jue smirked at her. "Constant preparation is going to get the work done faster. I need time to rest like anyone else!"

Ke'er giggled and trotted over to him. She hopped up onto the counter. "So what's your plan today, boss?"

"No plan," he answered. "Rest, cultivate. How are things underground?"

She beamed at him. "Couldn't be better! Who isn't interested in making themselves stronger? We're low on inventory, though. Most has been given to Star Division."

Star Division's numbers had grown to over one thousand five hundred soldiers, including the unfortunate experiments Lan Jue had rescued from the Pontiffs clutches at Moonfiend. Their abilities had all been boosted by *fantascia genetica*, though, which made their progress slow and fraught with hidden dangers.

Meanwhile Skyfire Avenue boasted more Paragons than anyone else, and only continued to add to their dominant position. It had always been their trump card, and they were finally reaping the benefits.

In terms of military strength, the North was still the strongest even after their defeat at the hands of the aliens. The West had thrown all their resources into the creation of more Bastions to keep up, and their total martial capabilities had improved markedly.

War had come to all corners of human space. They felt it like a dark cloud on the horizon.

The communicator on Lan Jue's wrist began to buzz. He looked down and was surprised by what he saw.

"Wine Master, you've finished?" He'd been locked away in meditation

ever since they returned. It'd been forty days.

"Yes." The Wine Master's voice replied from the other end.

"Did you break through?"

"Luckily," he replied. "Come, there's something I wish to speak with you about."

"Alright." Lan Jue rose, waved goodbye to Ke'er, then left the jewelry shop.

Lan Jue took a minute to appreciate Skyfire Avenue. He loved standing on its stone pathways and looking at the buildings lining the street. It felt like stepping back in time.

"Hurry up!" The Wine Master's voice shouted in his ear. Lan Jue grinned then crossed the distance to the Gothic Winery in long strides.

When he pushed the door open, the Wine Master was waiting for him inside.

"I assume we're here to raise a glass or two for your good fortune? In congratulations for ascending to the next degree?" Lan Jue said with a grin.

The Wine Master just looked at him. "It seems you're awfully relaxed."

He shrugged. "If we don't take time for ourselves how can we get anything done? If I don't relax the alien planets will disappear on their own?"

The Wine Master's eyes flashed. "Have you improved? Ninth level ninth rank?"

Lan Jue nodded. "As expected. I've continued to absorb the thunder essence. With the Driver and Qianlin's help in cultivating, it's getting hard to hold back."

Just yesterday he had reached peak rank. Now he bore the same power as he did when joined with Qianlin. She had risen to eighth rank, not far behind him. However, due to their connection Lan Jue had to stop cultivating. Now that he was at his peak he couldn't press himself any

further. The next step was Paragon, and he had to cross that threshold with Qianlin.

Until Qianlin reached her peak, he couldn't progress. What he hated before was now helping him to keep his Discipline constrained, purifying it.

The Wine Master went on. "The Pharmacist still hasn't come out from meditation?"

The process of the Pharmacist's breakthrough continued all the way back to Skyfire. Once they got back she announced that she would sequester herself in her shop to solidify her new powers. However, Lan Jue knew it was in part because of what she'd learned about her husband.

She had waited for years, desperate for any news of him only to learn the news was sad. Ultus' energies could not be faked – the final shred of hope in her heart had died.

It was hard to imagine the pain she was feeling. Lan Jue didn't know what he should do or say. All he knew was that she had changed somehow.

"She isn't doing well. I'm worried she'll make a rash decision." Lan Jue sighed.

He'd told the Wine Master everything that had transpired. The Wine Master nodded. "Who could have anticipated we'd learn of this connection. Whatever her decision, Skyfire Avenue will support her as much as it is able."

For a moment he was silent, then quietly spoke again. "I called you here for something else. The Clairvoyant once called you a bridge, a hero to humanity who would defeat the aliens. He said you would help gather the strong."

"Star Division is working toward that purpose, so I have decided to ask the Paragons to join as well. This would include the Keeper and Bookworm, though of course their focus will be research. Anyway, this decision will certainly strengthen the Division tremendously."

Lan Jue furrowed his brows in thought. “You’re planning to have Star Division join the war directly? Individually our men are strong, but are of little use in a battle in outer space. What if they get hit by a Bastion cannon?”

The Wine Master waved a hand contemptuously. “I’ve already been in contact with the military. Of course it won’t be that simple. We aren’t going to be the brunt of the force, but we can be the tip of the spear. Simply put, we’d act like Arachnid – at the right moment, we strike fast and hard.”

Lan Jue’s face darkened. “I think you need to find a better example. Arachnid was destroyed.”

The Wine Master sighed. “Anyway, you know what I mean. The military has already given us a lot of resources. Zeus-1, 2, 3 and Majesty have all been upgraded and refitted to give us everything we need. More importantly are the mecha suits, which will supplement our Disciplines and harm the aliens. Once we get in close, we can do some real damage.”

“The reason I called you here was to see if we can’t convince more Paragons to join our cause.”

“More Paragons?” Lan Jue repeated. “Who do you mean? A-Li?” It was the first name he thought of. Other than him and those on the Avenue there was just the Pontiff, Satan, and the Terminator.

But Hua Li was already commanding his own unit, the Poseidon Corps. On the surface they belonged to the West, but according to what Hua Li had told him they were largely free of outside control. They even had their own bastion – called Poseidon. It was patrolling space around their planet, now. As the commander of his own army there was no way he would join another, no matter how good their relationship was.

As for the Pontiff, Satan and the Terminator, they were all leaders of their own organizations. Kang Hui’s sneak attack was front-page news all across human space, and who wouldn’t want to play warlord? Right now Adepts were a hot commodity everywhere.

“Have you forgotten? We have a couple old friends in the West.” The

Wine Master replied with a smirk.

Chapter 699: The Eight Great Paragons

Lan Jue's heart jumped. "You mean the two gods of wine?" Lan Jue's mind conjured up images of Lalou Bize and Aubert de Villaine.

Those two gods of wine had been the source of a great deal of trouble for the Avenue.

The Wine Master nodded. "Their planet is verdant, and will likely be abandoned by the west since it's primarily a tourist destination. It has a small population so evacuations will be quick and easy. If the aliens show up, they won't let a planet so full of life pass them by. I plan to offer my help in transporting their underground world to someplace safer. Perhaps that will be enough to convince them to help us. If humanity is destroyed what good would their vineyard serve?"

Lan Jue gave him a piercing look. "Why do I get the feeling there are selfish ulterior motives involved?"

"What do you mean, ulterior motives?" The Wine Master snapped. "All I do, I do for the good of humanity."

Lan Jue pointed out the obvious. "But they're Westerners. What makes you think they'll agree to defect?"

The elderly sommelier waved a hand dismissively. "The West doesn't even know they exist. At any rate, do you think they care about national loyalty at their age? I suspect their grapes are their biggest concern."

"No harm in trying," Lan Jue acquiesced. "They're Paragons, after all. So you want me to make the trip?"

But the Wine Master shook his head. "No, I'll go. I need you to stay here and look after the Avenue while I'm gone. Star Division, and all the Paragons that are part of it now, are yours to command."

All of a sudden Lan Jue felt like he'd been caught in a trap. "No way. At the very least you're going to be the worst kind of back-seat driver!"

This earned a chuckle. "I've been chairman of the council for too long already. The Clairvoyant had always intended for the position to go to you."

It's also a spot well-deserved. Everything's been decided – you have a lot to do, so you better get started.”

“You...” This old fox is too damn cunning! Lan Jue's face drained of color. Getting a moment of rest in the last few months had been a herculean task he'd only accomplished by leaving Star Division's day to day with Su Xiaosu. Thankfully she was good at it.

Now that the Wine Master was leaving, the pressures of leadership fell squarely on his own shoulders. Telling a bunch of Paragons what to do was easier said than done – how was he to expect any commands to be followed?

The Wine Master chuckled at Lan Jue's crestfallen look. “Oh don't pull that face, I know you'll be great. In fact I think you'll do a better job than I did. You have a fine relationship with all of our Paragons, and Star Division will become a part of the Eastern army. We've been in contact with the military already and they've pledged them to An Lun's forces. Can you think of anyone more qualified for the position?”

The Wine Master's insistence only made him feel more helpless. But was he wrong? He did have a decent standing among the Avenue's Paragons.

Altogether, Skyfire Avenue had eight powerful Paragons as its mighty protectors; Luo Xianni, the Photographer; the Wine Master, Cosmagus; the Clockmaker, Epochrion; the Gourmet, Infernal Vanguard; the Keeper, Arcane Magnate; the Bookworm, Karmic Scholar; the Pauper, Arhat of the Descending Dragon; and finally the newly ascending Pharmacist, the Siren of Slaughter.

Luo Xianni he didn't need to worry about. He didn't know her Paragon title but it didn't matter – he called her mother. The Wine Master was an insufferable busybody, but also an old drinking buddy. Lan Jue's relationship with the Clockmaker wasn't especially close, but the Wine Master and she were intimate. She was also a confidante of the Clairvoyant, and Lan Jue didn't have to worry about her support.

The Gourmet was an old friend and their roots ran deep, not to mention

their connection through Chu Cheng. The Keeper and Bookworm looked at him like a nephew, and a protector to the Accountant. The Pauper and he had many ties that tangled them together. As for the Pharmacist, Lan Jue called her sister.

After thinking it over he could say that it was true, he had good connections with each of the Paragons despite not being one himself. It would continue to be true for the Driver when he eventually broke through.

“Your main job will be to coordinate everyone’s efforts. Don’t worry, I’ll be back before you know it. I’ve also spoken with the Keeper and he’ll help you where he can. With that psychopath in your corner what else do you need? The Eastern government has also pledged its full support to the Avenue, so you don’t have to fret over them. Once you feel good about Star Division, we’ll link them up with An Lun’s army, and one of their main tasks will be the protection of this planet.”

Lan Jue frowned at nothing in particular. “An Lun’s army will be protecting Skyfire? What about An Lun itself? That’s one of our most important planets guarding the border. Besides, what are two fleets going to accomplish if an alien planet appears in local space?”

Grinning, the Wine Master responded. “Now you’re getting into national secrets. Once Star Division is ready and on its way to An Lun, you’ll see. Ah, right – I’ve managed to convince the army to give you an official rank. What do you think, Rear Admiral?”

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Lan Qing outranks me by a mile. Star Division has eight Paragons, being led by a Rear Admiral makes it sound weak. Why not make me a fleet admiral!”

The Wine Master gave him a flat stare. “It’s that easy, is it? Nevermind, hang the title then. You should be focusing on breaking through anyway, the earlier the better. That will shore up confidence and respect.”

“So I’m supposed to lead Star Division, the Avenue, and become a Paragon? What do you think I am, a god?” Lan Jue whined.

“That’s your problem,” the Wine Master retorted. “I’m just responsible

for assigning tasks. I think you can handle it.”

Lan Jue outright scowled. “My heart can’t take this. I need a drink. If you’re going to be handing down directives and running off to drink with the wine gods I don’t think my request is unreasonable. Open up that vault you keep your wine in and let me pick a bottle, then I’ll accept.”

The Wine Master’s face twitched. “Don’t even think about it, you shameless punk. The moment I let you in you’ll ferret out my best bottle and drink it before I have a sip. We’re done here, you can go. We’ll convene the council tonight and make the announcement. I’ll be leaving in the morning – oh, and the Clockmaker will be coming with me. The combined strength of the Avenue is now in your hands, we’ll come back when we’re done.”

Lan Jue just stared at him. “So you just kick me out, eh? Aren’t you afraid I’ll find your stash while you’re gone, walk away with a sack of ill-gotten loot?”

“You wouldn’t dare!” The Wine Master gasped. Before the claim wouldn’t have worried him – he was confident in his power. But with Captus in Lan Jue’s hand and power comparable to many Paragons even without breaking through, the threat was real. His treasures might really be in danger if Lan Jue lost his mind!

Lan Jue grunted. “I guess we’ll drink once you get back. I’m leaving!” He shot to his feet and headed for the exit.”

“Alright, alright! You scare me!” The Wine Master complained.

Lan Jue hadn’t really planned to leave, but he’d made a good show of it. He stopped and turned his head back to look at the stingy old man.

The Wine Master stooped and pulled something from beneath the table. It was a bottle. “Take it, call me when you plan to open it up.”

The bottle was pitch black and smooth, simple but for its label which bore intricate orange scrollwork.

“This is...” Lan Jue actually didn’t know, he wasn’t familiar with the bottle. But he knew quality the moment he saw it.

The bottle was porcelain. Not wine, then. Spirits?

He took it from the Wine Master, and immediately his eyes lit up.

“Whisky... King of the isle of Islay, Bowmore 30 limited-edition? You actually have a bottle of this? Wine Master, if I were a woman I’d marry you right away – you’re a damn treasure! Thank you, thank you.” Lan Jue nearly cackled as he committed the bottle to Thor’s Promise. He turned and left, absent the animosity he’d started with.

As he watched him go, the Wine Master couldn’t help but shake his head. The Clockmaker entered from a nearby doorway. “Since when did you become so generous?”

The Wine Master bleakly responded. “What makes you think I wanted to give him that bottle? This kid’s mood affects his decisions deeply. Leaving on this trip puts a lot of stress on him, he needed a little encouragement. At any rate the wine in my cellar is more than a single man can drink in a lifetime, and he’ll get it when it’s time for me to pass it on. In fact I’m rather helpless.”

“Helpless?” The Clockmaker asked.

The old man sighed. “The kid has a natural affinity for wine, and is the Clairvoyant’s chosen one. I’d actually had plans to adopt him, but who could have known about my aunt. She’s an elder, who am I to contest?”

The Clockmaker couldn’t help but laugh. “He’s an interesting boy, the Jewelry Master. If he breaks through and ends up like his brother, you wouldn’t have been a suitable adopted father anyway. He’s Jue Di’s son.”

“So I guess I’m more an older brother,” the Wine Master replied. “It’s uncomfortable. Giving him a hard time helps my mood. Alright, we have things to prepare, you and I. We’ll make this trip to the Barrows a honeymoon, what do you think? It’s a beautiful place.”

Chapter 700: Skyfire Council

The Clockmaker's face reddened. "Who'd want to go with you on a honeymoon?" 1

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When Lan Jue returned to Zeus' Jewelry Store, his smirk was gone. In the space between his shop and the Gothic Winery, a depression had set in.

He understood what the Wine Master meant. He wanted to gather all of Skyfire Avenue's strength for when it was needed. Really, Star Division was already just that. Skyfire's greatest Adepts made up the heart of the organization. But Paragons were difficult to manage. What duties could he assign to them befitting of their station?

They weren't suited to being Division leaders necessarily, since personal strength wasn't what made a good leader. None of them were particularly good mecha pilots, either. These were problems.

Lan Jue mulled over the problems until Ke'er greeted him.

He had to break through soon, Lan Jue told himself. Things would be easier to manage once he could count himself among the Paragons. It was rather silly for him to assume people would listen, even as vice-chairman, when they bore so much power. And yet, becoming a Paragon wasn't something you could just choose to do and make it happen. Ascending to such lofty heights didn't happen in the course of a day.

He also wondered how his father was doing.

Jue Di had remained on Skyfire Avenue, locked away within the Photographer's shop to cultivate. Since coming back Lan Jue still hadn't seen hide nor hair of him. He only knew his father was cultivating thanks to Luo Xianni.

When his father came out of his hermitage he would ask him for more instruction. Lan Jue already had his feet firmly planted on the road of the inheritance his father promised, but only Jue Di knew the specifics.

ζ

Night fell upon the Avenue.

Skyfire Avenue's councilors gathered for their meeting in the depths of Skyfire Museum. Nowadays the Clairvoyant was Jun'er. She had inherited the Eye of Tomorrow's legacy and powers, and she was growing stronger every day. All of this had been told to him by the Wine Master.

Meanwhile, the higher-ups in Skyfire Avenue had already determined Jun'er would ultimately be successor to the Avenue's leadership. Once the Wine Master formally stepped down the title of chairman would pass to Lan Jue. Then, when she was ready, Jun'er would assume the mantle.

The Wine Master had told Lan Jue something the Clairvoyant had told him before his death. He'd said that Jun'er talents were even stronger than his own when he was her age. She would one day become a truly incredible Seer.

Skyfire Avenue's future looked very good indeed. Part of this was due to luck, otherwise Star Division's growth wouldn't have been so quick. It was staggering to think that in only a short time, the Avenue had gone from three Paragons to eight.

Stepping into the museum – with its refined atmosphere and the scent of books – makes visitors feel as though they were awash in a sea of knowledge. This place was filled with treasures, including tomes passed down from the ages. It was this extensive library that had attracted the likes of the Bookworm and Keeper. Most of them were eventually relocated to Skyfire Library, but some still remained here.

Lan Jue had come early, yet already all the councilors but those in seclusion had arrived. The Wine Master sat at the head of the long table with the Keeper to his right. The space on his left was empty, then came the procession of Paragons and finally the Avenue's councilors.

As Lan Jue approach, they each greeted him in turn. He walked over to the Wine Master and sat in the unoccupied seat to his left. He returned the hails as he walked across the room.

The council chambers were thick with a sense of solemn duty. It was no wonder, the alien threat was a burden on everyone's mind. Skyfire Avenue

was in as much risk of destruction as anywhere else.

Lan Jue spotted Jun'er quickly. She was seated in the back, away from the others. Although she could not see, her little face broke into a warm smile when Lan Jue looked her way.

He smiled back. Lan Jue fought the urge to walk over and give her a hug – now wasn't the time.

"Daddy will speak with you when the meeting's over, clever Jun'er." Lan Jue called out to her.

"Alright! I haven't seen you in a long time." Much to Lan Jue's surprise Jun'er didn't call out, but relayed her response directly to his ears alone. Transferring sound like that required the Adept to compress the sound waves and release them within the desired scope. It was impressive enough that she could do this without the gift of sight, but remember how old she was!

An inexplicable feeling surged within Lan Jue's heart as he looked on Jun'er beaming face. No matter what, he had to protect the Avenue – protect mankind. He had to leave something good for future generations to build upon.

Everyone who would be participating had arrived and taken their seats.

The Wine Master cleared his throat, drawing all eyes his way. "Hello everyone. I am happy that you were all able to make it. It has been quite a while since we've had a gathering like this. Besides the Pharmacist and the Driver, who have locked themselves away, everyone else has managed to come."

Everyone was silent, listening carefully as their chairman spoke.

"I would like to begin with the Keeper. If you would please tell us the results of your research?" The Wine Master turned to address the scientist.

The Keeper nodded his head. "We have undergone a series of experiments using the alien specimen our Jewelry Master has acquired. Preliminary results have already been aggregated."

“We have determined that these creatures – like us – are composed of vital energy. However, where they differ is in an ability I have called genetic assimilation. Through our research we have noted that alien breeds can differ wildly, but their cores retain the same traits. Namely, their ability to absorb and assimilate genetic code from whatever they devour.”

“To oversimplify, by consuming a living creature the aliens are able to take specific traits from their DNA and apply it to themselves. In this way their genetic make-up becomes very complicated. However, there is no doubt that this is the process by which their species evolves and strengthens. It is their most terrifying ability, taking what they wish from their victims and transferring it into their genetic material through their cores. Thus it affects every aspect of their life; combat, feeding, breeding and so forth.”

“An alien’s strength is directly correlated to the genetic assimilation process. Through constant modification they perfect themselves and their offspring. They are living representations of ‘Survival of the Fittest.’ Frankly speaking, I continue to be amazed by the perfection of their genetic strands. Through it you can clearly map the evolution of each alien and what they consumed. Each one is unique, risen from the ranks of their weaker kin to become the apex of their species.”

“The Jewelry Master and others have encountered some of the most potent examples of this process. They have chosen to assume human form because – according to them – the potential of the human body surpasses their assimilating capabilities. We suspect this is their ultimate motivation in coming in such large numbers to consume us. It is the enemy’s hope that in devouring us they can reach new heights of genetic perfection. Their appearance was not a fluke – it was premeditated. Put another way, the conflict between our two species is inevitable.”

For a moment, the Keeper paused as though to collect his thoughts. “All of these are the advantages we’ve managed to uncover. This does not mean they are without flaw. Their genetic composition is complicated, and the speed with which they can adjust their DNA structure makes them

strong and adaptable. However, by the same vein the complexity of their DNA is a weakness. It is susceptible to mutations and other problems. Because of the immediacy of their evolution, damage to their DNA is immediately reflected through their bodies as a whole.”

“An Adept’s Discipline is itself a type of vital energy, inexorably joined with our own ancestral make-up. When it comes in contact with alien genetic structure, the bonds become uncertain – sort of confused. In a sense, our Disciplines are a genetic weapon. Conventional weapons are well-defended against, even mechas. However, if they are infused with Discipline they can bypass the creature’s’ natural guard and throw their bodies into chaos on a genetic level, causing catastrophic damage.”

At last some good news. The gathered Adepts breathed a little easier knowing their powers’ efficacy was backed up by science.

The Gourmet interrupted. “So you’re saying that our Disciplines are these monsters’ bane?”

The Keeper nodded. “In more ways than one. However, this is not an absolute truth. Penetrating an alien deep enough to affect genetic change isn’t as easy as it sounds. They have perfected their defenses through constant evolution. They have acquired the ability to isolate their inner environment from all manner of external forces. So, in order to make the most of our inherent advantages, we must discover their vulnerabilities. Once we discover how to bypass their natural defenses, we can better attack them on a genetic level. As is typical with all creatures their brains and eyes are vulnerable.”

The Gourmet nodded thoughtfully.

The Pauper interjected. “Are we able to create some sort of genetic weapon to fight these things? Do we have the technology?”

“In theory, yes,” the Keeper said. “But it needs to be affixed to some sort of delivery system that gets it passed their defenses, or can affect them mentally. The first option is difficult because getting around their guard is a problem, as we discussed. The weapon needs to be effective already to deliver the anti-gene payload. So far Adepts are more effective than

weapons, which is why they must be at the forefront of future weapons design. Ultimately the Jewelry Master's suggestion is best – we use mecha suits to supplement and enhance our Disciplines, making combat against the aliens easier.”

The Wine Master spoke up next. “What about combat ships? Can't they be empowered by Discipline as well?”

Chapter 701: Restructuring

The Bookworm was the one to answer. “Ships won’t work. It can be put into their weapons, but ship guns spread vital energy too thin. We can’t concentrate Discipline enough to pierce their defenses. As far as our tests have shown, mechas are the most suitable weapons. They deal the most damage while providing the highest rate of survivability for the Adept. Outfits like our Star Division are particularly effective against them for this reason.”

The leaders around the table nodded their heads in understanding. Star Division’s success, they knew, would also translate into a higher standing for Skyfire Avenue.

The Keeper continued. “We’ve given the results of our experimentation to the military already. They will share it with the West and North soon. I believe they will create Adept armies of their own once they learn of their efficacy.”

The Wine Master turned to Lan Jue. “Jewelry Master, as commander of Star Division why don’t you tell us about how it’s doing?”

He responded with a nod. “At present Star Division is one thousand five hundred fighters strong, all Adepts of varying degrees. It is split into four brigades: First Brigade specializes in close-and fixed-combat; Second Brigade is composed of area-and long-range fighters; Third Brigade is recon and support; and Fourth Brigade is specialists.”

“As I said, Third Brigade is our reconnaissance and infiltration team. Fourth Brigade deals with logistics, rear support and coordination. First and Second brigades are mainly combat. They are subdivided into units of ten soldiers each, led by an eighth-level Adept or higher. We encourage our fighters by rewarding them with loot and vital crystals, based on merit.”

“Currently all of our people have been outfitted with customized mechas that play to their Disciplines. Results have been exceptional. I dare say that Star Division is stronger than any group of comparable size. Calling

us a 'Division' may not be true in terms of numbers, but our accomplishments earn us the name."

"We cut our teeth clearing out pirate strongholds in the Shattered Starfields. We were victorious in every mission. Star Division encountered the alien planets on Moonfiend and fled with one casualty, we've been building up arms and personnel since then. While we can't compare to the destructive capabilities of a Bastion ship or interstellar fleet off-planet, we can do just as much damage on the ground. With Paragons counted among our numbers, I believe we could compare to a Bastion ship in regards to sheer cataclysmic potential. After all, a human can go where a planet-sized ship can't. If we can infiltrate a Bastion, we can take it."

The Keeper chortled. "That might be a little ambitious. After the Violet Prince's attack on Tyrannosaurus, the Alliances are taking a closer look at internal security."

Lan Jue paused, then chuckled in spite of himself. "This is a good thing, a little pain to learn their lesson. Alright, that's all I have to report."

The Wine Master glanced at him. "In order to better protect Skyfire and by extension Skyfire Avenue, we've agreed to make Star Division part of the conventional Eastern army. We will fight the alien threat together, and toward this end I suggest all Paragons lend their strength to the cause. Star Division and the Eastern army would benefit greatly from your participation. Jewelry Master, as commander you can assign us as you please."

Inwardly Lan Jue glowered at his old friend. The old bastard was leaving him all the responsibility. But he wasn't wrong, it was Lan Jue's job, and one he couldn't avoid.

"After some thought I've decided it makes little sense for the Paragons to be disseminated among the Brigades. The way we're set up it wouldn't be fair or useful to other members of a Paragon's ten-man unit. Further, Paragons aren't best in mecha suits. They're more than strong enough without them. In conclusion, I feel the Paragons should work as independent actors – essentially their own Brigade. They can be

dispatched on strategic missions as is most suitable to their abilities and the situation.”

The Wine Master regarded him with a faint smile. “An interesting thought. I have no opinion on the matter, it’s up to you. So who should lead this Paragon Brigade?”

Lan Jue had already accepted his friend’s fine gift of alcohol. There was no recourse but to do his duty. “It has been very difficult to find a suitable candidate, and I’ve thought long on the problem. I don’t know enough about your individual leadership skills, so for the moment we’ll keep the post open. I’m open to suggestions, and would like to hear what our illustrious Paragons think.”

The Keeper was first. “I don’t care, so long as I’m not called out on too many missions. The Bookworm and I have a great deal of experiments that must be attended to.”

I know, Lan Jue muttered internally.

“I agree,” the Wine Master said.

None of the other Paragons had opinions to share.

While the Paragons seemed numerous on paper, the truth was somewhat different. The Keeper and Bookworm were scientists and wouldn’t participate much in field work. The Wine Master and the Clockmaker, meanwhile, would be leaving for who knew how long. The Pharmacist was dealing with personal issues, so really the only Paragons Lan Jue had under his command at any one time were the Gourmet and the Pauper. As for Luo Xianni, she wasn’t even here! He never really counted her among them, anyway. How could he presume to order around his mother and father?

The Wine Master pretended not to notice his sour expression. “The Clockmaker and I will be leaving tomorrow on a task of our own. We hope to convince two more Paragons to join us. During my absence all matters of leadership for Star Division and the Avenue will be handled by the Jewelry Master. He will temporarily replace me as chairman of the Skyfire Council. If anyone has any thoughts or objections they may share them

now.”

No one spoke. They all felt Lan Jue was a fine choice.

A thin voice broke Lan Jue’s appreciative mood. “Look at you, Lei Feng. Congratulations, I knew the Wine Master was shopping around for a patsy.” The Coffee Master’s voice spoke directly into his ear, thick with mirth.

Lan Jue quietly replied. “You want the damn job?”

The Coffee Master chuckled. “That’s no good, everyone sees your skill – you’re our first choice. There’s no escaping duty, Chairman! Work hard.”

“Jewelry Master,” the Wine Master broke in, “things have been arranged with the army leaders. They would like you to contact Fleet Admiral Lan Qing as soon as possible and dispatch Star Division to link up with his forces.”

“Alright,” Lan Jue answered with a nod.

Star Division had been to An Lun before, but that had been for training. Now they were going to become part of the illustrious An Lun forces. It felt strange to the Jewelry Master.

“Will we remain an independent force or must we comply with their commands?” Lan Jue asked the Wine Master. He trusted his brother, but Lan Jue’s loyalties were to Star Division and Skyfire Avenue, whereas Lan Qing served at the pleasure of the East. It was better to understand their role clearly from the start.

He explained. “We’re a relatively independent adjunct force. If you’re given an unreasonable directive you are free to refuse, but our standing orders are to support and protect the An Lun army and Skyfire. In general you will adhere to their requests – I’m sure the so-called super soldier of An Lun will be cooperative.”

Lan Jue nodded, he of course had faith in his brother. It just felt strange, especially since An Lun was so distant from Skyfire. How could they protect something so far away?

The council went on for a while longer, discussing details bringing Star Division's resources with them to An Lun. It seemed like the best decision, for if by some tragedy Skyfire was destroyed at least some of the Avenue's assets would remain intact. An Lun was a military base, and so was far safer than Skyfire.

After the session conclusion Lan Jue made his way over to Jun'er, still seated quietly in the back. He lifted her up into his arms.

"Have you been good?" He asked, running a hand through her hair. She'd only grown bigger and more beautiful in the time since he'd seen her last. Jun'er was definitely blessed with her mother's fine genes.

"I've been very good. I get to play with the stars every day, it's so much fun! Do you want to come with me to see the stars?" She asked.

"Alright!"

Following her lead, Lan Jue went with Jun'er to the former Clairvoyant's room. When he opened the door they were bathed in gentle starlight.

Jun'er wriggled to get free of his embrace. When she did, a beam of starlight fell over her, and she floated into the air. Surrounded by that cosmic light she looked like a young goddess.

Lan Jue's eyes narrowed unconsciously as he felt the waves of power coming from her. However, he was surprised to find that something was hidden from him – he couldn't feel how strong she had become.

"I'm already eighth rank." She said, like she'd read his mind.

Lan Jue gaped at her. Eighth rank?

Chapter 702: Human Survival Conference

“It’s because of what my teacher taught me, it helped me grow fast. He told me that when he leaves I must continue to improve myself in the starlight. Then I will understand everything. He left a lot behind for me, so I come in here to play every day.”

As Lan Jue looked upon her a seething pang arose in his chest. She said she was here playing, but how lonely she must be!

“Daddy, I’m going to be strong soon. I can already feel that you and mommy aren’t happy – there’s so much for you to do. Don’t feel bad, things will work out. But you have to be careful, be careful with yourself and the people near you. I feel there’s a shadow following you, sometimes close and sometimes far. But it had a close connection to you. Not one... two. One is good and one is very bad.”

Lan Jue didn’t know how to react. People near him? For some reason a chill overcame him and he was filled with memories of Hera’s death. The same dark despair from all those years ago welled up in his heart.

“Can you tell me if you see anything else?”

But Jun’er shook her head. “No, I’m not strong enough. And you’re my daddy... it’s harder when you’re close to the subject. But I can feel you are more threatened than in danger. It will be fine. The danger is for the person who wishes you well.”

Prophets were famously ambiguous. They had the gift of sight, but rarely was that sight clear. Lan Jue believed Jun’er without a shadow of a doubt anyway, though he wasn’t sure precisely what she meant. They played for a little while until Jun’er said it was time to cultivate, then he left.

When he returned to his room he called his brother.

“What is it?” Lan Qing’s voice bore that typical distant chill.

“Hey brother, I assume you know our deal with An Lun?” He asked.

Lan Qing coolly responded. “I just got the news. When will you arrive? How many men can we expect?”

“We’ve got one thousand five hundred,” Lan Jue replied. “From what I’m hearing we’ll be sending most or all of them. Aside from the soldiers we’re also sending a team responsible for overlooking Avenue resources. We’ll probably need a sector for ourselves, seeing as altogether we’ll be sending about three thousand people.”

“Alright.” Lan Qing replied without hesitation.

Were it anyone else Lan Qing likely wouldn’t have agree to accommodating non-combat personnel, but Skyfire Avenue was a special case. It was Skyfire Avenue’ vital crystals that had bought An Lun a second interstellar fleet! What’s more, the addition of Star Division would double the strength of An Lun’s forces.

“When is it convenient for you for us to arrive?” Lan Jue asked.

“You don’t. We’ve been ordered to move our people there.”

“Here? You mean the fleet?” Lan Jue inquired.

“Everything,” Lan Qing replied.

“What does ‘everything’ mean?”

“That’s a military secret. You’ll know soon enough.” It was clear he wasn’t getting anything out of his brother.

Lan Jue sighed helplessly. “Fine, then we’ll wait for you to show. I’ll get Star Division ready.”

“There’s no rush,” Lan Qing said. “As Star Division’s commander you’re coming with me to a meeting. Military conference. You’ll represent your interests there.”

Lan Jue blinked. “What conference?”

Lan Qing told him what he knew. “It’s been organized by the North, a conference to decide the best way to deal with the aliens. They’re calling it the Human Survival Conference and each alliance is sending high-level military leaders to discuss strategy. You’ve personal experience on top of being a commander, so you’ll come with me.”

Grudgingly, Lan Jue agreed. “Alright, I guess I’m going.”

“That’s all,” Lan Qing said. “We’ll be leaving for Skyfire tomorrow, and when I arrive we’ll go together. The meeting’s on Luo.”

“Got it!” He replied.

After hanging up with his brother, Lan Jue dialed in the Wine Master’s number. “Wine Master.”

“What is it?” The older man’s voice returned.

Lan Jue told him what he’d learned from Lan Qing.

“You are most suited to go to the meeting” the Paragon agreed. “Go ahead, but be careful. You’re going with a Paragon, yes? Who will you chose?”

Lan Jue shook his head. “No need to rush into a decision, either the Gourmet or the Pauper. Probably the Gourmet since we have a better relationship. Someone needs to stay back and look after the Division, too – probably Su Xiaosu would be best for that. But I’ll need to find someone to look after the Avenue’s affairs.”

“Who do you think?” The Wine Master pressed.

“Su Xiaosu’s busy, the Driver’s cultivating... the Coffee Master makes sense. He might be a little lazy, but he’s got good attention to detail. There shouldn’t be a problem,” Lan Jue answered.

“Alright, let them know.”

He cut the line. Lan Jue chuckled.

Lan Qing arrived quickly on an FTL transport, the trip only taking him a couple of days. Lan Jue had prepared everything for Skyfire Avenue’s eventual move to An Lun, employing the help of his four Amazons. Zeus’ Jewelry Store was a simple matter, just a whole lot of power gems. Most of them had already gone to Star Division, but the remainder would be arranged for transport.

When the time came for Lan Jue to leave he did indeed bring a Paragon, but it wasn’t who he’d thought. It was the Pharmacist, not the Gourmet. She eventually left her seclusion, and offered to come after she’d heard

that Lan Jue was headed for Luo.

After her breakthrough the Pharmacist had grown quiet. Her illustrious persona was restrained, as was the sharp aura that so frightened the people she encountered. But what was present was a deep and abiding sensation, like peering into an abyss.

From what Lan Jue could gather, she was likely the third most powerful Paragon on the Avenue currently. Now that she had broken through she was able to truly command the deadly power of Occisus. How far that command extended, though, they would only learn through experience.

Zeus-1 lifted off from the airfield and toward their destination.

In contrast to his brother, Lan Qing didn't bring any guards or entourage. As was typical, he chose to travel alone.

Zeus' Amazons set about their separate duties, managing Zeus-1. The Pharmacist waited patiently in the waiting room, while the two brothers watched space fly by from a table by a window.

"You've improved. You haven't been wasting time." Lan Qing nodded his head at Lan Jue in approval.

Lan Jue nodded back. "I've been working hard. It won't be long before I catch up to you." His words were flippant, but determined.

"I'm not waiting for you," Lan Qing retorted. "You better hurry."

Lan Jue changed the subject. "You aren't the only one there representing the East, I take it? Our relationship with the North is less than stellar, so why did they pick you?"

"Because I command the bulk of our army," he said. "They wouldn't dare provoke us now, and they're too busy with their own business even if they wanted to. Anyway I needed to come, it's the only way for me to understand the thought process of the other Alliances. It's important to understand your allies. I'll need you to tell me what you thought of the North's fighting tactics as well."

Lan Jue shot him a glance. "Aren't you afraid for your safety? A single

person's strength only goes so far."

Lan Jue's response was tepid. "I'm not not afraid. I'm just confident in my intelligence."

Lan Jue was at a loss for words. Had he always been so...

He wanted to laugh... but...

Lan Jue went on to tell his brother about everything that had transpired in the shattered Starfields, and his opinions on them. He didn't leave out any detail. Lan Qing listened attentively, nodding from time to time as though in thought.

"The whole thing makes me look at the North with new eyes. Luck didn't make them the strongest Alliance, they strive hard for that distinction. Their soldiers are hard and determined. I still don't like them, but I admire them."

Lan Qing nodded. "Indeed, they're good soldiers. They just see things differently than we do."

Helplessly, Lan Jue added. "If it was you facing those planets, what would you have done?"

Lan Qing looked at him for a moment before speaking. "You want to know?"

Lan Jue nodded.

Lan Qing was praised as the ultimate soldier, and the youngest admiral in the Eastern army's history. He was the next generation of military leadership. So what would he have done differently?

"If it were me," he began, "I would have chosen a better battleground. Fighting within the Starfields was a poor decision. You had no ready support and retreating was slow and difficult. The enemy is largely a mystery, so even if they were evenly matched victory would have been difficult. With so little known about our foe I would have dispatched more scouts for better intelligence. Instead of a direct confrontation I would have continued to harass their outlying forces and captured more

resources. Then I'd wait for the right time to strike, but even if I was in danger of missing that opportunity I wouldn't rush in. Strike when the attack would spell their demise!"

Lan Jue silently mulled over his brother's words, eventually leading to a quiet admiration. Yeah! Rushing into a fight without knowing what you were getting into was a recipe for disaster. But the North had been under pressure to act.

Chapter 703: Arriving

Lan Qing paused for a moment, then continued. “But that doesn’t mean their fight was without purpose. It was worth at least fifty recon sorties. They learned a lot about how the enemy fights and reacts, and that will make the war easier. The North must also have done their research, which is part of the reason I have to go to this meeting – to better understand. It can only help us in the long run.”

Lan Jue rejoined. “The North is still will make their attempts. As we were retreating we continued to field requests from Tyrannosaurus to meet – obviously a ploy to get us in firing range. You hold an important position in the East, don’t you think this is dangerous walking into the enemy’s clutches? What if...”

Lan Qing waved his hand. “No time for ‘what if.’ I’ve told you, I trust in my intelligence. Right, it’s time for you to cultivate. We can discuss more of this once you’ve become a Paragon.”

Shit, some brother! This is discrimination! Lan Jue speechlessly arose and left for his room. His Amazons snickered behind his back. The only person who would dare treat Lan Jue that way was his brother.

Lan Qing stared out of the window with a thoughtful expression. Whatever he was thinking, though, remained a secret.

Lan Jue couldn’t remember how many times he’d visited Luo by now. Last time it was to participate in the Great Adept Tournament. To hide his identity he wore a hat and sunglasses, but declining the mask Poseidon preferred. Lan Qing also wore sunglasses, and a black outfit complete with a dark windbreaker. He looked like a fashionable tourist.

At least it’s not a military uniform, Lan Jue inwardly commented.

The Pharmacist walked beside Lan Jue. Today she was dressed in a tailor-fit white dress. Half of her face was hidden behind a pair of large sunglasses, the rest expressionless. Her aura was constrained and the only person who would be able to sense her presence were the ones she allowed.

Although they concealed their identities, the three of them were still the focus of some attention. The reason was simple – they were tailed by four beautiful women.

Mika, the Stygian Succubus, was dressed in her typical work uniform; a deep blue fancy outfit, but with her glasses and fiery red hair she looked more the temptress.

The other women were similarly dressed – perhaps intentionally, perhaps not. White blouses and skirts cut to the knees, only the colors varied. Xiuxiu's clothes were a pale maize, Ke'er wore aqua, and Lin Guoguo stood out especially in a hot pink outfit.

They were the definition of eye candy. One alone would have drawn eyes, four together couldn't avoid them.

Lan Jue couldn't help but ask if they were ready to walk some runway he wasn't aware of. They looked back at him with big eyes threatening tears, and he couldn't say no. At any rate it didn't matter what they wore, they still would have been a sight on Luo's drab streets. If they'd worn combat gear it would have been just as bad, if not worse.

Lan Jue's sole point of gratitude was the fact Qianlin wasn't walking with them. They were safely melded together. Though Lan Jue's cultivations were curtailed, Xuanyuan Shishi was able to lead Qianlin in her own meditations to help her advance.

As the Eastern representatives left the airfield, Lan Jue's first thought was how many people were out on the street. Luo was one of the largest planets to house humans, but it seemed almost jam-packed. Crowds jostled like ants packed in their tunnels, shoulder to shoulder. Peering into the distance, one could only see a sea of bobbing heads.

Of course, large groups of people gathered the interest of those with less than savory intent. Gentlemen with impure intentions tried to saddle up to the Amazons, but they were on high alert and had little patience. An invisible, inexplicable shield surrounded them that kept the rabble at a safe distance. The bolder among them were quickly silenced by Mika's sour temper and hellfire.

“No one’s coming to meet us?” Lan Jue questioned his brother. Lan Qing was supposed to have arranged everything.

Lan Qing glared at him, a look like he was staring down an idiot. “You told me you were worried about safety, and now you’re asking why our presence isn’t being advertised. Do you want to paint a target on our backs? Are you not thinking?”

“I...” Lan Jue felt defeated. After his brother’s breakthrough to Paragon he couldn’t even win a verbal argument.

“So where are we going?” He asked instead.

“I’ve arranged everything. Come with me.” Lan Qing walked on without waiting for his answer. The seven of them walked for a short distance before stopping in front of a very average looking verti-car. It looked like a large taxi with more than a few hard years of service under its belt.

Lan Qing opened the door and politely motioned the women inside. Then he and Lan Jue entered.

Their driver was a large man in a baseball cap. He also wore sunglasses, and a cigar hung from the corner of his mouth. “Let’s go,” Lan Qing ordered.

The driver didn’t speak. Apparently already in the know, he urged the verti-car into the air and toward Luo City. Despite the run-down appearance of the car, the driver was skilled. The journey was quick and smooth. Verti-cars like these flew about ten meters above ground. That was about their limit, and was the main separating factor between them and high-altitude transport.

The crush of people was even more apparent once they reached the city interior. Undoubtedly this had to do with the evacuation order. Luo was the North’s largest planet, and one of its safest. It made sense, then, that people would choose to evacuate here. However, it looked like the planet was already at max capacity.

“Status,” Lan Qing softly asked.

Finally the driver opened his mouth. His voice was low, but clear.

“The city is close to capacity. Inflation is rampant, food and essential goods are three times more expensive than they were before the aliens showed up – even with the Northern government trying to stabilize markets. If they didn’t things would be ten times what they are now. Resources have been brought in from other planets to manage demand. Things are fine for now, but population growth has been unchecked for years. Word is they can sustain this for twelve months before it collapses.”

“What about the North’s resource planets?” Lan Qing asked.

The driver replied. “No good. They’re sticking to pre-war plans, meaning mining, refining and manufacturing haven’t stopped. Products must continue to flow to protected planets. At least that’s the plan, but stories of the aliens’ savagery are rampant. No one wants to work on an exposed planet. Everyone knows if the aliens show up and there’s no fleet or Bastion to protect them, they’re as good as dead. Even soldiers don’t want to be stationed on resource planets. All of this means production is stalling, and we humans consume a lot.”

“Right now it looks like we’ve got our heads above water, but that won’t last. If the aliens don’t show up within the planned timeframe there will start to be restrictions imposed. No entertainment, luxury items, less food... it’ll lead to chaos.”

Lan Jue quietly listened to the driver, and his heart sank with every word. Skyfire wasn’t even close to being in such dire straights even though it’d already opened its door to refugees.

The North was strong, and had always encouraged childbirth. Because of this they had been in the midst of a baby-boom. They had planets that needed populating, after all. Now that population explosion was proving to be a problem. It was going to be difficult for leaders to find a solution.

Lan Qing was nodding thoughtfully. “So the North must be anxious. Has there been any news of a second assault against the alien planets?”

“Yes,” the driver replied. “Congress has been mulling over a plan in the last few days, so has the army. Practically all available resources are being pumped into military production. The only way to fix their problems is to

destroy the source, so no effort is being spared to find ways to destroy the aliens. It's the reason they called for the Human Survival Conference, so a solution can be found before the problem gets worse."

Lan Jue was surprised, but he kept it to himself. Obviously the driver was a plant, arranged by his brother. How he learned so much about the inner working of the Northern government he didn't know, but this simple-looking driver was definitely more than he let on!

In the space of their conversation, they'd arrived. The taxi stopped before a small building in the Western style, simple and innocuous.

"Finding rooms is very difficult," the driver explained. "I could only find rooms for two, small apartments. Best I could do." He pulled to the side of the road and his passengers disembarked. Then, he relinquished his car to the valet and led them into the hotel himself.

Now that he was out of the car his height was clear, only a little shorter than Lan Jue and his brother. Lan Jue didn't know why, but suddenly he thought the man looked familiar.

Chapter 704: No Way

“Do I know him?” Lan Jue asked his brother.

“Figure it out yourself!” Lan Jue curtly replied.

Lan Jue’s face stiffened. “I really don’t mind flipping off a fleet admiral.”

“See if you keep your finger.” Lan Qing taunted.

“Whatever.”

The hotel’s lobby was small and simple. From the chipped floorboards to the stained counter and creaky stairs, the place looked like it’d seen better days. In truth Luo City was already a hundred years old, but this place seemed older.

An elderly receptionist stood behind the counter. While the others waited, their taxi driver walked over to handle check-in. Lan Jue took the opportunity to look around.

“This stuff looks like it’s half a century old,” Mika quipped. “Very Western. I can’t even tell when some of this stuff was made.”

The taxi driver was back quickly, and heard Mika’s comment. “The owners are descended from Western royalty. Something in their past forced them to immigrate to the North. It’s always difficult to leave your homeland, so they brought their furnishings with them. Everything in this place are antiques and family heirlooms.

Perhaps for the first time in history, Lan Qing had words of praise. “Very interesting place. It has heart.”

The driver sniffed. “Up to your specifications, is it?”

Everyone – Lan Jue included, gaped at the driver. Who was he that he could talk to Lan Qing that way?

The Fleet Admiral scowled but didn’t say anything. He took the key he offered and disappeared upstairs to his room. Lan Jue and the ladies were six remaining – seven including Qianlin. That meant four rooms were needed. The Pharmacist had her own. Lan Qing, it would be assumed, also

had his own quarters. However they watched the taxi driver walk up the stairs and follow.

No way. Could this... was his brother coming out of the closet? No wonder he'd never had a girlfriend. If father knew, Lan Jue thought, he'd beat Lan Qing bloody. ¹

Lan Jue told the others to get settled. He headed for Lan Qing's room. When he arrived the door was closed, but he simply opened it and walked inside. Lan Qing was standing by the window and the taxi driver was at his side. Both men were staring out onto the street.

The room was as classically designed as the rest of the building, to the point where it felt like Lan Jue had stepped into the former era. It was strangely pleasant, a place where one could easily forget their worries.

However, Lan Jue was too distracted to appreciate it. Lan Qing accosted him. "What are you doing here instead of resting in your room?"

Of course Lan Jue couldn't tell him what he was really doing – supervising. He tried to look nonchalant as he strolled over. "I just wanted to talk about the convention," he lied.

"The meeting is the day after tomorrow," Lan Qing replied. "I have the invitation letters prepared, you just need to show up. There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh," he stalled. "So... you're spending the night here alone eh? It's a nice room!"

Lan Qing finally turned around and looked at him. "Are you trying to say something?"

Lan Jue flashed a quick glance toward the mysterious taxi driver at his brother's side. "Nothing, nothing. I'm, ehm, a little hungry. How about we grab a bite?"

The Eastern admiral scowled. "I'm not hungry, you go ahead. Why are you acting so strange..."

He was struggling to find reasons to stick around, and with his options

dwindling just blurt it out. “Brother, th-there’s just some things that aren’t appropriate. Think of father!”

Lan Qing stared at him. “What inappropriate thing am I doing? Will you stop talking nonsense?”

Lan Jue looked at him, then pointedly at the driver. He tried to make it clear what he was referring to.

Lan Qing was indeed very smart. When he saw Lan Jue’s worried and accusatory expression a smile broke his cold façade. He turned his head away

The taxi driver was less amused. He caught Lan Jue’s look at glowered at him. “What are you trying to say?”

It was then Lan Jue heard it. Something wasn’t right – he sounded like a she!

A woman?

“I’m sorry – sorry! I didn’t mean anything.” Lan Jue stumbled over his own tongue. Good, he thought, at least she’s a woman. It didn’t matter his brother was chasing cougars.

“I’m sorry to bother you two. Go on, don’t mind me, I’m leaving.” He left the room fast as he could.

“Is there something wrong with your little brother’s head?” The taxi driver said in irritation. She picked off her hat and glasses to reveal a plain-looking man’s face. Her hands briefly covered the visage, and when they dropped the Astral Phantom’s bitter expression was revealed.

He smirked at her. “He’s just being nosey, don’t take it seriously. We need to focus on this meeting, it’s important. Everything’s been arranged?”

“Yes,” she answered flatly. There was absolutely no love lost between these two. Were it not for the mark on her soul, the Astral Phantom would have found a way to kill this irritating man a hundred thousand times. The bastard called her old! Women held grudges, especially against those who insulted their age. She wouldn’t soon forget his transgressions!

“Then go rest. I won’t need you until it’s time to convene. Find us the day after tomorrow,” Lan Qing ordered.

“Mnh.” She grunted her response, then left.

Lan Qing allowed her disrespect. He didn’t need to dominate her, they had an agreement. Once the alien menace was dealt with she could go free, and that would be the end of it.

Aliens... planets.

Lan Qing’s heart sank. He’d gone over the North’s fight against the beasts a hundred times in his mind. He thought over and over about what he would have done differently.

What he’d told Lan Jue was only one part. Fighting in the Starfields wouldn’t impeded a Bastion’s combat abilities too much, though it would make retreat and reinforcements difficult.

The East’s Bastions were clearly inferior to the North’s. The East’s strongest ship was about equal to the fallen Arachnid. Tyrannosaurus was stronger than two of the East’s Bastions combined. If it came to war between the Alliances, he wasn’t sure who would win.

Only through more information and deeper understanding would their chances improve. Lan Qing needed to push his people to be like Star Division, that would serve them well.

Star Division would be integral in the coming fight.

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When Lan Jue got back to his room, he couldn’t help but chuckle to himself. He really was a doomsayer! He retrieved a towel from Thor’s promise, then separated from Qianlin and wrapped her in it. He helped her put on some clothes.

It was torture for him every time.

The room was small, with only two single beds, a desk, and a single chair. Still Lan Jue liked it just fine. He was a fan of antiques. It wasn’t the Pharmacist’s Hall of Supreme Harmony, but it served.

Lan Jue coaxed Qianlin to the center of the room and had her cultivate. Meanwhile he arose and headed to the room next door to visit with the newest addition to the Avenue's Paragon roster.

Knock-knock! He rapped his knuckles on her door.

"Come." The Pharmacist's crystal-clear voice called from within. Lan Jue pushed his way in.

The Pharmacist sat on the bed, looking out the window. It was one of the rare moments he didn't catch her cultivating. It was dusk on Luo, and the sun's golden light bathed her room in a soft glow. It was beautiful.

He walked over to her. "Hey sis. Have you stabilized your powers?"

She quietly nodded in response. "Not a problem."

"Sis... you know, you shouldn't take it so hard. We can't bring back what is lost, but no matter what happens I'm going to help you get that sword back." His words were soft and sincere.

She answered with a pained laugh. "Who'd have thought my husband's death would inspire my pure murderous rage. It's what allowed me to merge with Occisus. For years I waited, only to learn the worst. I just can't hold myself back any more."

Anxiety crept into Lan Jue's face. "Sister, don't do anything hasty!"

She shook her head, stood, and faced him. "If I go out one day and don't come back, promise me you'll look after Jun'er."

Lan Jue froze. "I-Listen to me, don't be rash. Your husband's gone but you knew that all along, didn't you? You knew you were fooling yourself to think he'd magically come back after so long. He's gone, but you are still here, and you have Jun'er to care for. That little one already has to suffer the loss of her father, you'd deny her a mother as well? I'm sure she knows I'm not her real father, and if something were to happen to you I'm not sure her little heart could take it. If you want to go hunting aliens, fine – but you've only got two choices. Go alone but kill me first, or take me with you. You won't die alone."

Lan Jue's face was hard and resolute. He never looked away.

Water began to collect in the Pharmacist's eyes, and she glared back with lips tight. "Why. Why do I have to suffer these disasters? Why was he chosen for that mission? All I ever wanted was to live happily with him and make a family! You know, I never went to see Jun'er after we went back to Skyfire. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to control myself. She looks so much like her father..."

She stopped, her voice choked with emotion.

Chapter 705: Senior Colonel or Admiral?

She wrapped her in a hug and placed her head on his shoulder. “Cry. You’ll feel better once it’s out.”

The Pharmacist’s tears fell like glittering pearls down her cheeks and moistened Lan Jue’s shirt. Already he could feel the knot of pain and anger loosen within her.

“I’m sorry.” The Pharmacist pushed herself away and turned from him.

“Do we need to say sorry to one another?” Lan Jue said softly. “I mean what I said. When the time is right, I’m going with you to get that sword back and kill those monsters. We’ll avenge your husband’s spirit – and think, if his spirit is watching he wouldn’t want you to throw yourself into danger. He would want you to look after Jun’er, look after yourself, and live a good life.”

She gently nodded her head. “Don’t worry, I’m not going. I feel much better after crying. You’re tired, go rest. Call me when you’re going out for food.”

After she promised not to run off Lan Jue was relieved. It looked as though she were returning to normal. Pain was still clear in her glistening eyes, but who wouldn’t feel torment after what she’d been through?

Lan Jue thought about his own tragedies, about Hera, and a stab of pain arose in his chest. Hera’s death and Qianlin’s stupor, were they not his fault?

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Northern Ministry of Defense.

The building was a six-sided structure on the outskirts of Luo city, ten kilometers in circumference. All matters concerning Northern military and defense were handled here. It was called the Hexagon by journalists and laymen.

Today, security was exceedingly tight. Soldiers patrolled the grounds armed to the teeth, with meha suits in full view and fighter drones

hovering overhead. It was in preparation for the Human Survival Conference, as protection and an honor reception for leaders of the East and West. This was the largest collection of Alliance representatives in over ten years.

The purpose of the conference was to outline humanity's plan for survival, and pledge cooperation in the battle against the alien menace. The North's grievous loss had shaken the citizens of all nations, and brought the threat to the forefront of international discussion.

Economies were on the brink of collapse and society was struggling to cope with the ever-present threat of destruction. If there wasn't some good news soon, it could put all three alliances in jeopardy before the enemy even arrived.

The military was important in this time of crisis. News of their exploits and preparations filled the news feeds of every station. Only a strong and unified people would be able to weather this terrible storm.

Lan Qing had changed into formal military attire, and Lan Jue was in a finely tailored blue suit. The North's invitation had only been for the two of them. The Astral Phantom drove them to the Hexagon, and it wasn't long before they were intercepted by drones and asked to provide credentials. Once their identities were confirmed they were permitted to continue.

They proceeded to a parking area where they were asked to disembark, and had to go through another round of checks. Finally, they boarded the Hexagon's internal transportation system and entered into the heart of the structure. The Astral Phantom had to remain behind.

With them in the transport was a Northern staff officer. He regarded the two brothers for a moment as they entered. They were familiar, he thought, but he could only verify their invitation, not their identities. All he noted was Lan Jue's face, and the fact that the stars on Lan Qing's shoulder didn't match his age.

"Gentlemen, when you enter the Hexagon you will need to submit to an identity verification process," he instructed.

Lan Qing nodded, but Lan Jue smirked at the man. “Is there a reason for all these checks? If only the normal folk got the protection military leaders enjoy.”

The officer’s face changed, and he looked at Lan Jue a little harder. Lan Qing’s expression never changed.

Before long, the shuttle arrived at its final destination and deposited the two brothers in a room where a military escort waited. When they saw Lan Qing’s shoulder bars, they struggled to hide their surprise.

The transport officer was clearly ignorant and didn’t represent the rest of the Northern armed forces. His age, rank and appearance were striking, and even if you didn’t know him on sight it was easy enough to guess.

The first person to greet them was a man whose epaulettes designated him as a Lieutenant Commander. He snapped to salute. “Hello, Admiral.”

Lan Qing returned the salute. “Hello.”

The Lieutenant Commander motioned for them to follow. “Please come with me.” With no further adieu, he led them toward the door. This was much better treatment than Lan Jue had enjoyed aboard Tyrannosaurus. The Jewelry Master mused over this as he followed the other two deeper into the Hexagon.

Their guide walked half a step ahead, speaking as he led them through the halls. “Admiral Lan Qing, I presume?”

Lan Qing nodded.

All of a sudden, the lieutenant was the very picture of respect. Lan Qing reputation was known far and wide, not to mention he was lauded as one of the most talented military leaders in all of humanity – and the youngest Paragon!

“I’m honored to meet you, Admiral.” He gave another salute before walking on. He dropped the honorary title of ‘Your Majesty’, since Lan Qing was a representative of the military.

From behind Lan Jue smirked. Good, he thought, I don’t know how Lan

Qing would've reacted if he used his colloquial title.

As they made their way, a second group came from another hallway. He was an elderly man in a smart dark green uniform. A female soldier – likely his secretary – followed in tow.

Three golden stars glittered on his shoulder, the mark of a general. The woman's insignias said she was a Colonel. Lan Jue was somewhat familiar with military dress and noted that they were Westerners.

They met in the hall, headed in the same direction. Lan Qing, Lan Jue and the Lieutenant Commander greeted them with a nod before walking ahead. While each Alliance was independent there was a set of unspoken rules, such as allowing higher-ranked military officers to walk ahead of you.

"You don't have eyes?" A cold voice called out.

There was a blur as someone cut off their path. It was the young woman, the general's secretary. She made no effort to hide the potent energy roiling within her. Her sharp and threatening aura gave their guide pause.

"Xiao Chen, stop causing problems." The Western general scowled and chastised her in his deep voice.

"Sir," she pressed, "you should be walking ahead. These men clearly don't understand their lack of respect." Her words were cold and sharp, and she glared daggers at Lan Qing.

The Lieutenant Commander who led them was apologetic. "I'm sorry Colonel. Please go ahead."

Her eyebrows pricked up. "Is this how you Northerners receive your VIPs? Where did you learn military etiquette? When is it alright to allow a senior colonel ahead of a general?"

Senior colonel? The Lieutenant Commander was stunned, but turned to look at Lan Qing. Suddenly he understood what was happening. Typically Eastern uniforms were easily identifiable, but Lan Qing's dress was peculiar. Because of his exploits on An Lun, his shoulders were adorned with a pair of aiguillettes. They were marks of distinction, but if one didn't

look closely they could be confused for the dress cords of senior colonels. Lan Qing's age added to the misunderstanding.

He was going to explain, when suddenly another voice cut him off. "Get out of the way!"

There was a blur of blue as someone else stepped forward and waved their hand. A soft energy filled the hall, but strong enough to make the Western colonel stumble to the side.

Lan Jue had no patience or respect for Westerns. He didn't know the source of the woman's misunderstanding, only that she'd made his brother a target. They weren't always on the best of terms, but in public Lan Jue was certainly going to stand up for his brother!

To him, this was a stand-off between the East and West. He was going to win it.

In truth he didn't have much affection for the North either, after hearing they were in danger of being killed after all they'd done in the Starfields. He wasn't in the mood to suffer any more insults. His brother wouldn't raise a hand? Well he wasn't going to allow such disrespect.

Still, he was as courteous as he could be with the colonel. He only used his powers to move her out of the way.

All the while Lan Qing said nothing. Once the way was clear he walked on with Lan Jue by his side, shoulder to shoulder. In a rare display the two looked and acted like brothers. Cold and lethal. At least to the Colonel!

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be enough.

"You want to die?!" The Colonel roared at them and launched herself forward. Her arms splayed out to the side and a pair of sharp blue lights appeared in her hands. She chopped at Lan Jue's shoulders. It was a conference in a foreign land, otherwise her attack would have been aimed at his head.

The lights in her hand were a pair of foot-long knives that glowed with blue light. They weren't typical weapons, obviously, but instead condensed Discipline. Her swipes were unnatural sharp, so much that it sounded like

they ripped the air in passing.

Chapter 706: It's Him...

Lan Qing continued to stride forward as though nothing was happening. Lan Jue never looked back. Just as it seemed her strike would land he thrust his hand back her way.

All of a sudden the women felt a tugging vortex open up in front of her. The Disciplines-forged daggers she prided herself in fell into chaos and its energies scattered. She reacted by urging her Discipline forth, but no matter how hard she called for her powers it was like some deep dark sea drank it all up. Then, an unseen concussive force blasted her off her feet. She tumbled head over heels down the hallway and, just before hitting the ground at her general's feet, some invisible force eased the impact. No harm came to her.

She scrambled back to her feet, ready to charge in again when the harsh words of her superior stopped her dead. "Enough. You're no match for them, they're being easy on you."

For a moment she seemed to consider refusing the order. Spinning around, she fixed him with petulant eyes. "General, they--"

Lan Qing and his brother had already walked a good distance down the hall toward the conference room. Meanwhile the general watched them go with a thoughtful expression.

"Those are special young men. We aren't in the West, get your temper under control."

Colonel Xiaochen forced herself to take a deep breath, struggling to quench the rage that flared within her. Inwardly, though, she promised to make those upstarts see the error of their ways!

Meanwhile the Lan brothers had already put the episode out of their minds. The tantrum of a Western colonel was no concern of theirs.

"I apologize Admiral Lan, I think the Colonel misread your uniform. Your age likely confused her." The Northern lieutenant spoke placatingly.

Lan Qing glanced at his shoulder board and nodded. "It's fine."

“I’m sorry, Admiral...” Again the lieutenant apologized, standing awkwardly in front of them.

“What?” He looked at the young officer.

“I was a little distracted. I forget that we are required to verify your identities. If you could follow me to the verification instruments?” He had been flustered, it was true. When he’d seen who he was escorting he forgot the process and lead them down the hallway.

Lan Qing was readily identifiable, certainly, but although Lan Jue looked familiar he couldn’t place who he was. But even if he did the identity verification process was required for the safety of the conference goers.

“Alright!”

The brothers followed the officer to an area off to the side of the conference room.

As they walked in Lan Jue scanned the area. The conference chamber was large, roughly the same size as the parliament hall on Skyfire. Altogether there were about five hundred seats arranged around the circular room with a raised platform at the front. Twenty seats had been arrayed behind tables on the platform.

Lan Qing would likely occupy one of those seats. The thought made Lan Jue proud.

The lieutenant brought them to a set of instruments nearby. They arrived the same time as the Westerners they’d just encountered.

“What happened Ross?” The officer leading the Western delegation was also a lieutenant commander, and addressed Lan Jue’s guide with some confusion.

Ross regarded him with a sheepish smile. “I forgot to check their identities outside. I had to ask them to do it here. Go ahead and lead our distinguished visitors from the West to their seats.”

“Alright.”

The two lieutenants caught the attention of Xiaochen. She looked at the

general, but he shook his head at her. As he stepped forward to find his seat she followed a step behind, fixing Lan Qing and Lan Jue with a glare. What was the story behind these two, she wondered.

Lan Qing handed their invitation to Ross, then the lieutenant motioned for him to approach. The verification process required fingerprint, DNA, and iris scans. The iris and fingerprint scanning was typical, and the DNA scan required a strand of hair.

Lan Qing stepped forward and began the process. A few moments later Lan Qing's information appeared on screen.

From Xiaochen's angle she could just make out the screen. All of a sudden she froze. On the screen she saw;

Lan Qing

Eastern Navy Admiral, commander of the An Lun forces. Note: Youngest Eastern general on record, and a member of the Eastern military council. Rank: Paragon. Title: Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven. Further Aliases: Prometheus, God of Wisdom, An Lun Super Soldier.

What followed was a laundry list of Lan Qing's accomplishments and commendations.

He... he's the An Lun super soldier? Poseidon, God of Wisdom... a general. A general? How is this possible? He's so young. He - he...

Qiu Xiaochen stood nailed in place, her body refusing to move. Ever since she was small she had worked hard, and been told to apply herself like the legendary An Lun super soldier. She had strived to be meet his example.

A Paragon... and he's a Paragon! My God! How could one person be so talented?

In this moment, if by some cruel twist of fate he were to come her way, she wouldn't be able to control her emotions. She looked at his resolute features, his cold expression - and then she thought of how she'd made herself look like a complete clown!

“Thank you for your patience, Admiral.” The lieutenant was more polite than ever as he handed Lan Qing’s invitation card back.

Lan Qing simply nodded and stepped to the side. Now it was Lan Jue’s turn, but Qiu Xiaochen kept her eyes glued to his brother.

He seemed to have felt something and looked her way.

Qiu Xiaochen was a beautiful woman, a product of mixed blood¹ Her fiery red hair was cut short in military fashion, and she looked back at him with big black eyes. She boasted one-fourth Eastern blood, which made her figure tall and slender, well proportioned. She was as intimidating as she was lethal, and it showed in her bearing. Her legs could rival Tang Mi’s for length and appeal.

Lan Qing gave her a passing glance.

“Ah! You’re...”

The shocked sound pulled Qiu Xiaochen out of her haze. She looked to where the sound had come from and saw that it’d been the lieutenant, Ross. He looked at his screen in disbelief.

What could that man – the one who’d lifted his hand against her, who looked a little like Lan Qing – what could his records show that was so surprising?

When she glanced at the monitor she saw another long list of titles.

Lan Jue

Skyfire Avenue designation: Jewelry Master. Chairman of the Skyfire Council, commander of Star Division. Champion of the Great Adept Tournament. Further Aliases: God of Lightning Zeus, Mercenary King (former). God-ranked mecha pilot and one of the Divine Monarchs.

Rank: Very near Paragon

Chapter 707: Acquaintances

It's him? It is really him?

Qiu Xiaochen gaped at him open-mouthed. Of course she knew the name, even seen him on T.V. during the Great Adept Tournament. Dressed in a suit, she hadn't immediately recognized him.

Now, beyond all expectations, he was here next to Admiral Lan Qing. Lan Jue had disappeared from the wider world after becoming champion, but here he was.

His victory over Titan had deeply affected her. Before she watched him put the convert down, she had had plans of entering the transformation process herself. However, she changed her mind after seeing what happened to the North's second greatest convert.

She also remembered his heroic deeds, how he had been willing to sacrifice his life for the innocent. He was a real hero!

Lan Qing, Lan Jue... they were brothers?

"All set?" Lan Jue asked Ross.

"Ye... yes of course. Chairman Lan, right this way." He respectfully referred to him by his highest title, chairman of Skyfire Avenue. Any other organization and his title wouldn't have mattered, no matter how flowery. But Skyfire Avenue was different! He was one of the leaders of a group that boasted eight Paragons! Besides, he was a peak-ranked Adept himself, poised to join their ranks.

Twin rising stars! It was the best phrase Ross could think of to describe these two.

Qiu Xiaochen followed them with her eyes as Ross led the pair to the front of the room. She looked back at her own superior, unconsciously swallowing her anxiety.

Lan Qing was delivered to the table atop the dais, as expected, and offered a seat near the middle. Though he was young his merits, military status, and Paragon rank demanded a seat at the high table.

What came as a surprise to Lan Jue was when Ross offered him a seat atop the dais, closer to the center than his brother. That was to say, in the center.

Seats of the dais were arranged into two rows. The first row had eight seats, and the second fourteen. Lan Qing was near the center of the second line and Lan Jue near the center of the first!

At first Lan Jue was shocked and a little confused. However, after a moment he understood.

It was simple; he represented Skyfire Avenue! Namely, Skyfire's Star Division and its eight Paragons.

He recovered from his surprise quickly. The North set them up this way for a reason. These guys are competition? Well let's show them we can play nice, they must have thought.

But far from being grateful, Lan Jue felt disdain.

Lan Qing sat quietly in the second row. His eyes were closed, as though he were meditating.

A short while later Lan Jue spied a series familiar face entering the conference hall.

The first person Lan Jue recognized was the man who had nearly died with him in the Shattered Starfields. Tyrannosaurus' commander, Kang Hui! Though he'd suffered a terrible loss, discerning eyes could tell he had not lost much of his influence. Despite the rumors he'd retained both his command and rank, resulting in a stern rebuke but little more.

In truth the Northern leadership had no choice. The only person with experience in fighting these creatures was Kang Hui. His knowledge was indispensable to the Northern war effort, and it was that knowledge that saved so many lives. Relegating him to the sidelines now would be unwise.

So, after a series of intense discussions as to his punishment, it was decided he would work off his offenses on the battlefield.

Kang Hui spied Lan Jue almost immediately. He approached Star

Division's commander with determined steps and, disregarding the stares he received, he extended his hand to shake.

"Commander Lan, we meet again. Without the help of you and your people I'm afraid..." He trailed off. Circumstances were different now and it was best to say less than more.

He felt conflicted. He deeply respected this young man – he was capable and smart. But Wu Qiu's mutinous actions had tainted their relationship. Lan Jue hadn't been fooled, but that didn't mean he knew the whole truth either. How could Kang Hui not be embarrassed by what had happened? Lan Jue had saved his life, and in return...

Shame caught Kang Hui's tongue.

But Lan Jue answered with a smile. "Hello, Admiral. I hope we have an opportunity to fight side by side again."

Kang Hui sighed. "It may not be so simple. We'll speak again later, the conference is about to start." He took his seat on the second row.

While taking his seat the Northern Admiral was surprised to find another soldier, who looked very much like the young man he so admired. He sat in an honored position like himself.

"That's my brother. Lan Qing, Admiral of the An Lun forces." Lan Jue's voice whispered in his ear.

He was surprised for a moment, but recovered quickly. He took his seat beside the Admiral and struck up a conversation. Lan Qing was famously economical with words, but he was happy to speak with Kang Hui. He didn't want to pass up the opportunity to speak with a commander who had first-hand experience fighting the alien hordes.

Another familiar face came in shortly afterward. Their arrival caused many in the room to rise to their feet in a sign of respect. Military personnel snapped to attention as the Terminator, the North's sole Paragon, entered.

His enormous stature was like a magnet, everyone's eyes were immediately drawn to him. Lan Jue rose to his feet with all the others. As a

Northern leader he also was sat in the first row of the dais.

“Small waves of the past become tides that propel us forward! The new generation is really something to behold.” Of course the Terminator would be able to sense the changes in Lan Jue’s strength.

Lan Jue’s response was respectful. “I am undeserving of the praise. His Majesty is just as vigorous as ever.”

This earned a chortle from the Paragon. “Is Jun’er well?”

“She’s doing wonderfully,” he replied. “She says she would like to come and visit ‘big uncle’ sometime when she has the chance.”

For a moment, disappointment flashed in the large Paragon’s eyes. “Tell her I’ll try and visit when the aliens have been dealt with.”

Chapter 708: The Terminator's Good Faith

Lan Jue was somewhat surprised by his words. Skyfire Avenue would of course never allow Jun'er to come to the North for obvious reasons. But for him, with his status and history, to come to see her? Didn't he fear reciprocation for what he'd done? It was the sort of masculine confidence his father had become famous for.

The Terminator's eyes looked passed Lan Jue, to the row behind. Lan Qing had stood as well and regarded the Terminator with an easy smile.

The Terminator returned his friendly expression. "And the waves crest higher. It seems you've already stabilized your new powers – another young hero."

"It seems his Majesty is also nearly ready to attain the next degree. Congratulations."

The Terminator's eyes lit up. The Terminator was stronger than Lan Qing, and had been a Reflection of Heaven and Earth for many years. Of course it would surprise him for Lan Qing to so readily sense the state of his powers.

"There is an opportunity for me to break through. You and I should compare notes." The Terminator was back to his easy, smiling façade.

"I hope we have the opportunity," Lan Qing replied.

The Western delegate and his Colonel secretary also took their seats on the second row of the dais. Qiu Xiaochen quietly told her superior everything she'd discovered.

The Western general's face was strange, especially when he saw the Terminator speaking with the two young men. Secretly it annoyed him. How the world has changed, he lamented! The young were truly something.

The older one was a legend among soldiers, and the younger one – the one who'd turned his hand against Qiu Xiaochen – represented the greatest Adept organization on the planet.

Without question, the Eastern Alliance was enjoying an unprecedented era of growth. From the moment the aliens made their presence known to now – and even into the future – it appeared every decision the East has made was correct.

Their merits spoke for themselves. They were the first to acquire vital crystals; the first to learn the benefits of the exuvium process; first to learn anything about the alien threat; became rich through their auction; and finally, saved the lives of many Northerners through their efforts in the failed expedition. Most importantly, Skyfire Avenue continued to grow in strength.

The East was in an advantageous position when it came to Adepts, more than any other Alliance. Word had gotten out that the legendary Jue Di had also returned to the worlds of man. That man alone was as destructive as a Bastion ship – likely more so.

And the West? They were woefully deficient in good Adepts. Evil rumors of the Pontiff had begun to circulate, which were forcibly silenced. But as a high-level government official, the general knew all about it.

The West's two Citadels used to think they were rivals of Skyfire Avenue. Though there was a discrepancy in strength, it wasn't insurmountable. Now, however, the only people holding on to that assertion were the delusional and ignorant. Even if one considered the frankly impossible possibility of the two Citadels merging, they still couldn't hold a candle to the Avenue. They had more Paragons than the West had peak-ranked Adepts! Catching up was out of the question.

Where that became pertinent to the war against the aliens was in recent research. Although the findings were still uncorroborated, it appeared as though Adepts were particularly well suited to killing the monsters. If this was true, the East's status among humanity would only benefit. They would become even more powerful and important.

Lan Jue was a top leader in the Avenue, and not even a Paragon yet. Skyfire Avenue's seat on this dais proved all his conjectures true.

"Sir." Qiu Xiaochen's voice brought him back to the present.

“Ngh.” He grunted by way of response.

Curiosity glimmered in her eyes. “How do you think they did it? They’re so young but have so much power. Is that purely due to talent?”

The general smirked. “There’s no such thing as a casually successful person in this universe. It’s true now, and will remain true in the future. You see them how they want you to see them, out here in the crowd. You don’t see the hard work they put in to get themselves here.”

Qiu Xiaochen seemed unconvinced. “But I work hard! How am I still so weak compared to them?” She was a ninth level Talent, a rare thing in the military, but only first rank. Compared to the two brothers from the East, it was hardly worth noting.

“I can’t answer that,” he replied. “If you’re able, do what you can to get close and ask them yourself. Only they know the truth.”

The conference hall was quickly filling up. Seats on the floor below and on the dais were quickly becoming occupied. In the first row, aside from Lan Jue, were three representatives each from the Great Conclave and Northern Army. The last came as a surprise to Lan Jue.

“You continue to get stronger. When did you break through?” A near perfect smile filled his vision. As familiar as the two were, Lan Jue was still taken aback each time they met. His first thought was always, if this guy was a woman he’d bring down nations.

The final person to sit at the head table was none other than Poseidon – Hua Li. Though he sat near the end of the line, it was nonetheless a show of respect.

To Lan Jue’s left was the President of the North. To his right was the Army Chief of Staff. It was an extremely flattering position for him. Meanwhile the Eastern Chairman and Army Chief were seated on the far end. It was all arranged according to power and prestige, as all these types of meeting were.

The Terminator himself sat in the second row, at a distance from Lan Qing. He represented the Eastern army, whereas here the Terminator only

represented the interests of the Great Conclave.

Beneath the blazing lights illuminating the hall, seats quickly filled up. All the dignitaries were military leaders from the three Alliances. Most were from the North.

The atmosphere became more suffocating and boisterous as more people filed in. No one held on to foolish facades of ease, not when the dangers of alien invasion were evident. It felt like the weight of a giant boulder bearing down on everyone.

Bang! Bang! The Northern President was an elderly man who oozed with charisma. Today he was wearing a dark suit that complimented the somber atmosphere of the meeting. The sound of his gavel rang across the hall, and everyone fell silent.

All eyes turned toward the dais.

To the people below it was a spectacle. Mostly just for the presence of Hua Li and Lan Jue. They both were so young, and exceedingly handsome. Although Lan Jue didn't look as striking as his friend, absorbing the thunder essence had imbued his presence with an inexplicable power. He seemed more elegant, almost ethereal like he was a visiting spirit from another plane. Even looking directly at him, it was difficult to penetrate that power and see him clearly.

Lan Jue did not concern himself with the spectacle of it all. He sat calmly in his chair, his mind on Hua Li.

Specifically, Hua LI's presence here proved something. It proved that the Poseidon Group had more clout than he gave them credit for.

He'd heard that the group had recalled their Bastion – named Poseidon – to protect their home planet. All of the family's workers, servants and soldiers had been brought back to planet Poseidon. It was as though they didn't fear standing alone against the alien planets, as though they were confident in their self-defense.

By all accounts Poseidon Group had consolidated a great deal of power. Hence Hua LI's position of authority here. After the meeting he would

have to spend some time and talk, Lan Jue thought. It seemed like this guy had a lot he was hiding!

“First, I would like to welcome all of our distinguished guests on behalf of the Northern Alliance.” The President’s voice was low, but abnormally powerful. Everyone could hear him as though he were standing at their side.

“You all know why we’re here. Human survival! It’s the name of this conference, and to my memory never in the history of our species has a conference like this occurred. It is unfortunate, but these are the times we live in – a time when the fate of our species will be decided.”

“I hope I’m not wrong in assuming all of you have seen the results of recent expedition. What those evil planets did to our three Bastions and five fleets. We shared all of the frightening details with you. And frightening is the right word – these monsters are far more terrifying than we thought. We lost the first battle, but it was not a total loss. Frankly speaking, with as little as we knew about them the results were not surprising.”

“Through this process the North has suffered greatly at the hands of the enemy, bearing a tremendous amount of pressure. This pressure has come from many sides. From within the armed forces, from the government, and from our beleaguered people. However I stand here among now, as a representative of our government, to say that you – all of you – have done well. Although we have been beaten, we have not been defeated.”

Chapter 709: The Conference

His words rang with power and passion. Much to everyone's surprise, he began with justification of the North's failed actions while admitted its failure.

Kang Hui sat stony faced on the second row. Lan Jue was also expressionless.

Among politicians every sentences had a meaning. However, the President wasn't playing politics. His words were encouraging, to the people and to the arms forces. That's what they needed now.

"Our government has chosen to reinstate Admiral Kang Hui. He shall continue to lead Tyrannosaurus against our foes. In a moment the Admiral will share with us the details of the operation so we can understand what in the world happened. But more importantly, what we learned."

Kang Hui stood, and as he did the overhead lights caught the four golden stars on his shoulder. With determined steps he took the podium, and the lights dimmed as a holographic image appeared in the air.

The images flickered. Frozen frames from the Tyrannosaurus' recordings.

"Yes, we lost. The reason for it was primarily a failure of understanding the enemy. I stand before all of you today to tell you – unequivocally – that however strong you may think these monsters are, they're stronger. We have had time to analyze the data we've recovered and have since shared it with all of you. We did this because when the time comes for us to defend ourselves, we hope it will help us all against the alien enemy."

Kang Hui's words were sincere and passionate. He went on to explain the planning and execution of the mission, the Bastions plans, and ultimately their fate after meeting the alien planets.

Whether it was Tyrannosaurus' botched fight, Heron desperate escape or Arachnid's destruction, no detail was spared. Kang Hui shared all he

knew easily and without reservation. Everything was locked in his head, and never once did he have to refer to a sheet to provide the data.

Lan Jue listened intently. What he shared with his people was from a spectator's perspective. Kang Hui's knowledge came from a position of leadership.

It took the Admiral about an hour to relate the battle from start to finish. His eyes were red when he told them about Ying Tianlong's final charge, and Arachnid's decimation. Never once did he speak ill about the two fallen commanders. The only words he had for them were tales of heroism and strength.

"At this point I would like to offer my sincerest thanks..." He turned back, and looked at the rows of chairs behind him.

"We invited Star Division's scout team to participate, due to their previous experience with the aliens. Despite their credentials, I will admit I had my doubts before we set out on our expedition. However, the more I worked with them the more their abilities were proven. What you ladies and gentlemen may not be aware of, was that Star Division's scouting party consisted of five Paragons. Due to this deep well of ability they were able to time and again escape from the jaws of death and return with information crucial to our understanding of the enemy. Thank you, commander Lan Jue. Without your help Tyrannosaurus would have succumbed to the enemy's traps. If you hadn't come to save us from the Violet Prince the operation wouldn't have even gotten off the ground. On behalf of everyone who served on Tyrannosaurus, thank you for everything you've done."

As he spoke, Kang Hui saluted Lan Jue.

Lan Jue respectfully stood and smiled at his brother in arms, but said nothing.

Once Kang Hui finished relating all the information about the failed battle he returned to his seat.

The Northern President's deep voice broke the silence. "After our ships returned, we set about trying to see what we could learn. We examined

everything that was obtained from the Starfields and set about analyzing every bit of data we had on the beasts. Now, this includes the results of Eastern Alliance's own research, which we've used to help make our findings more complete. His Majesty the Terminator will now take the podium to tell us all we know of the aliens."

Surprised mutters rippled through the hall. They didn't expect the Terminator to give the report himself.

The North's ultimate convert rose to his feet, like a mountain ripping itself up from the roots. When he took the podium he offered no flower address. His booming voice rattled the walls.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what Kang Hui said is absolutely true. These monsters are worse than our most terrible nightmare. Like the Admiral I, too, would like to first thank Skyfire Avenue. Their preeminent researchers, known as the Keeper and Bookworm, were the first to learn the secrets of our enemy. From them, we've learned a great deal."

"According to research, the first thing we were able to discover was that these creatures are like us; biological. Where they differ – and what makes them frightening – is their need to consume. Their zeal for growth and evolution is all-consuming. They do this by devouring their prey, and using their genetic material to perfect themselves. It is this process that makes them strong, it is this process that makes them a threat."

"We have evolved as well. In the former era the average lifespan sat around fifty years. Now it is not uncommon to live one hundred and fifty years. In some special cases we can live to be three hundred. This is thanks to evolution. However where we are changed over long periods of time, the aliens can evolve almost immediately."

"We now believe that these aliens began small – a single-celled organism. As they consumed other living things they grew and changed. We suspect the three alien planets arose from that humble place. From the higher cast of these creatures we've learned their names. The largest is called Monarch, the one that fought against Tyrannosaurus. Empress is the second, the one that destroyed Arachnid. Heron narrowly escaped the

third, Consort.”

“Nothing can match the ever-changing nature of these monsters. While they may look like planets, they are as alive as you or me. Think on that for a moment. They react in a fight by instinct, faster than any machine we can create.”

“In the East they say the universe is ruled by an invisible force. When a single creature becomes too strong, that invisible force descends upon it. I know that many in the North and West’s science community believe that to be hogwash, but as a Paragon I can tell you it’s absolutely true. How do I know? Because I can already feel it. It isn’t clear, but it’s there.”

“Undoubtedly, the power these planets possess is far beyond any human alive – possibly stronger than thing that has ever lived. They have evaded the rules of the universe by concealing themselves as celestial bodies. We suspect their increased surface area diffuses the pressure from the universe and makes it more bearable. While the hypothesis remains to be proven, it does fit in with what we know.”

“What this means is that while it may look like a planet, we are facing a living thing – a strange, enigmatic living thing. I suspect that not only do they gather live energy for their own evolution, but also to keep their leaders alive. If that’s the case, then the data we have begins to make sense.”

“Nothing is perfect, everything has a flaw. I do, as I’m sure every Paragon does. Nothing is undefeatable, and these aliens are no exception. According to what the Keeper and Bookworm have learned, the weakness of these beasts lies in their very DNA.”

The Terminator went on. From his words Lan Jue could tell the Northern Paragon believed in the data from Skyfire Avenue. That meant he believed Paragons were the best weapon humanity had against this powerful foe.

“During this last attempt, we were denied the precious vital crystals. For all we sacrificed, we didn’t even come close to what the East offered in their auction. But we can count the lives we spent trying to get them. What we learned was that other aliens would gather up the crystals left

behind. We saw it clearest when Arachnid came under attack. You all saw the tentacles that came from Empress. Most were involved in containing Arachnid, but several others can clearly be seen gathering vital crystals.”

Chapter 710: Lan Jue's Suggestions

“Vital crystals are energy – condensed vital energy. When faced with the question ‘what can the aliens not afford to lose,’ these crystallized shards of power are one of them. We can safely assume that the only real aliens are the three planets themselves. The others we’ve faced are extensions of them – like appendages. Every crystal we take is like taking a piece of one of the planets. As far as we can tell, this is why Monarch didn’t send monsters into combat against Tyrannosaurus. Were it not for Commander Lan Jue’s reconnaissance, the losses suffered by Tyrannosaurus and its fleet would have been much worse.”

“We know that these aliens are beings of higher intelligence, and so we must assume everything they do has a purpose. It likely knew that sending in the monsters would have been useless against a Bastion. All it would accomplish is delivering vital crystals into our hands. To keep them safe, the alien homunculi were dispatched from the battlefield, and ordered to return once the danger had passed.”

“Their ploy was very successful. We recovered no vital crystals in the course of the expedition. With all we know now, I suggest that any further clashes with the aliens should focus on gathering vital crystals. In this way we strengthen ourselves while weakening our enemy. Kill the homunculi and take their crystals by any means necessary. So much power is stored in those crystals – power that can create whole living beings – that they must be the most important resource our enemy possesses.”

As he listened Lan Jue slowly nodded his head. The Terminator’s analysis made sense. Why would so many reinforcements be instantly called whenever even one insignificant beast was harmed? Because the planets feared a vital crystal would fall into the hands of their prey.

Star Division had returned from their first tour in the Starfields with so many crystals because Jue Di was able to kill so many, so fast. At the time their aggregate strength was enough to handle a host of reinforcements.

If contemporary knowledge held true, then a direct assault against the

planets themselves was ill-advised. Instead, ambushing the creatures – what the Terminator now called homunculi – and taking their crystals was the best plan of action.

After giving his report, the Terminator turned to military deployment and defensive strategy. It was also an important point of discussion. Plans needed to be laid for how the three alliances would work together for human survival.

The Shattered Starfields sat in the center between the three opposing territories. While some areas were thinner than others, the alliances were still separated by vast distances. For this reason accumulating troops in the appropriate areas was impossible. Nor did they have any clue as to where the aliens would appear. Their ability to teleport made determining at-risk areas impossible. Everywhere was at risk.

Lan Jue figured that the aliens would simply avoid any large gathering of soldiers. Their agility was a serious problem. Neither could humanity flee. Despite having nowhere to go, there were simply too many humans spread over dozens of star systems. Meanwhile the alien planets numbered only three, and could go where they pleased.

As the conversation continued on military strategy, Lan Jue listened but didn't have any opinions. It was not his area of expertise. Instead, he set his mind to finding the most effective way for Star Division to help.

Star Division was beginning to take shape as a powerhouse of planetary combat. But out in space, that power was greatly diminished. Lan Jue suspected that even he couldn't stand against a dreadnaught in outer space. Perhaps if he got close, but after a certain distance he would likely succumb to the ship's cannons.

He was unsure how Star Division's role would manifest itself in these conditions. How would he employ his soldiers to their full potential?

In the face of destruction the alliance representatives swore to put aside their own interests for the good of humanity. Sincere and cooperative discussion ensued about how best to protect the lives of their citizens.

Defeated their enemies wasn't a simple feat that could be achieved in a

single action. Nor was the defense of human worlds. The first step had to be to avoid unnecessary loss while impairing the enemy. The more they learned, the better they could craft a plan of attack.

Although the North had failed in their attack, it wasn't without value. Alien defenses were discovered to have limits. Bastions may not have been as effective as the military hoped, but they nonetheless could contend with the aliens. Converging six Bastions on one of those planets would end in a different result, they were sure.

Determining further action would mean more reconnaissance, and so the importance of scouting missions were also declared. Everyone agreed that Star Division's help and intel was what brought Tyrannosaurus and its entourage back alive. For this reason, more than anything else, he had been given a spot on the first row of the dais. Granted he wasn't military, but his actions had made Lan Jue an unwitting standard-bearer for soldiers throughout all the alliances.

Lastly, the delegates agreed on a master plan for resisting the alien menace; Scout, harass, research, and destroy.

Reconnaissance was determined to be a pillar of the strategy. In order to protect their scouts and assist in their mission, the alliances pledged to work on new technologies and provide them for use in the field. These would include better ships and anti-interference communication devices.

"Now we would like to invite the commander of Star Division, Commander Lan Jue, to help us ascertain best practices in scouting out the enemy forces." The Northern President invited Lan Jue to the podium with a smile.

Lan Jue paused. No one had told him he was expected to speak.

He rose to his feet and looked at the President, who nodded in encouragement. All of a sudden Lan Jue understood. They wanted him unprepared on purpose, in the hopes he would reveal something he might have hidden before. He'd told them everything before, what more did they want?

He approached the podium and, after greeting the delegation, spoke his

piece. “I have had the unfortunate experience of encountering these monsters over a long period of time. The first time was on planet Taihua, where their sudden invasion had stunned everyone. The sheer aggressiveness of these beasts, their insatiable hunger, was burned into our collective nightmares.”

“The Clairvoyant once said that this would be one of humanity’s greatest challenges. If we faced it, and overcome this adversity than humanity would rise to master the cosmos. If we did not, it would spell our destruction as a species.”

The hall was silent. All of a sudden the atmosphere was dismal and heavy. Who did not know and respect the Clairvoyant’s reputation? He was one of history’s greatest prophets, who established Skyfire Avenue with his own hands. His vision helped lift humanity to the interstellar society it was today.

After a moment Lan Jue continued. “His Majesty the Terminator has given an excellent account of what we know about the aliens, I won’t address that further. However, I will emphasize that the aliens are an exceptionally intelligent adversary. They don’t just consume – they study, and learn. They knew all the North’s tactics and had counteracted their plans to assure the least cost to themselves and the greatest damage to our people.”

“I have met one of them that was at least as strong as a third-degree Paragon. It told me that our inherent potency is what they were after. They wish to emulate us in order to further their evolution.”

“So far I agree with everything this body has put forward. Reconnaissance must continue in order for us to learn more about what we fight, and why. I support His Majesty the Terminator’s determination that we need to send out our best troops to continually harass their supply lines for vital crystals. Little by little we can steal strength from our enemy and turn it to our benefit. However we must understanding that this is exceedingly dangers. We know that among the aliens at least one has achieved the Infinite.”

“My team’s success in scouting the enemy forces is simple; we had enough power, speed and defenses to evade them. But what you may not have known is that evading death came at the cost of an s-ranked power gem each time we needed to teleport away. That was what separated us from success and failure, living and dying. In addition we were strong, strong enough to strike fast and hard before they could muster a response.”

“In my view there are several things that must be done to assure the future success of our scouting missions. First, we need better and faster ships. Second, we must develop psionic shielding techniques. These creatures are capable of carpeting an area in a psionic pulse that locks on targets even if they’re invisible.”

“Third, find way to protect ourselves. We found teleportation to be best, but there are other methods. You also need sufficient support.”

“Fourth, ensure that every scouting unit is strong enough to do the job. Even against common homunculi they need to be able to kill it and flee before reinforcements arrive. The higher caste of these creatures are frightening, but few. The alien planets are among this higher cast but they are restricted by their size. So long as you don’t get close they won’t be a problem. As long as our people have the ability to get away, our scouting and guerilla missions will be a success.”

“So, it is my suggestion and hope that all of the alliances put their focus on finding soldiers that can do these jobs and protecting them. For Star Division, this is how we’ve managed to survive. If we can maintain constant surveillance of the enemy we will know when they transfer, giving us time to prepare and react. That is all I have to say, thank you.”

Chapter 711: Don't Be Naïve

After candidly explaining their problems and suggesting solutions, Lan Jue returned to his seat.

Suddenly encountering the Violet Princess during their last mission had shaken Lan Jue deeply. At his level of power, and with the Pharmacist's help, they only managed to survive by luck. In reality perhaps the only person who was sure to survive a scouting mission was his father. However, his father had long been under threat by universal protogenia and couldn't use his powers over long periods. Every time he used his abilities it was like taking years off his life.

So Lan Jue's greatest hope was that humanity find some way to use technology to solve this problem. If they could, it would be a huge weight off mankind's collective shoulders.

After Lan Jue's short speech, military leaders and researchers alike sat in contemplative silence.

The morning portion of the conference was done. For the afternoon the delegates would be separated into their respective specialties. Military leaders would gather to discuss how to direct their armed forces while scientists would ponder how to bring technology up to the task.

Lan Jue and his brother left the hall, when suddenly they were stopped.

"Commander Lan Jue, Admiral Lan Qing. Can I invite you out to dinner?" Kang Hui's earnest voice called.

Lan Jue shot his brother a glance. "Of course."

A pleasant smile split the Northern admiral's face, "Excellent. Please come with me, gentlemen."

The cafeteria was a plain place, as was the fare. A fourth person had joined them for the meal along the way – Yan Yuan, Admiral of Heron.

Yan Yuan, unlike Kang Hui, had had his command stripped and not returned. Although Heron had managed to escape without loss of life, returning it to full functionality would be painfully expensive for the

North. But at least he'd lived.

"Commander Lan, Yan Yuan and I would like to propose a toast to you. Since we still have meetings in the afternoon tea will have to take the place of wine." Kang Hui lifted his glass, followed soon after by Yan Yuan.

Lan Jue, a smile on his face, lifted his glass in salute and took a sip.

Kang Hui went on. "It feels like the old world has passed, things are different now. When First Fleet sacrificed itself I will confess, I thought it was in vain. I didn't think we would come back from that doomed mission. We did, thanks to you and your Star Division. I am ashamed for what happened after. Although I can't go into details, I can tell you that none of it was at my command."

Lan Jue waved a hand. "What is done is done. We all answer to someone, it's nothing to fret over. But if we want to have any chance against the aliens, the only way we can do it is together. Otherwise it's a slow march toward destruction."

Kang Hui nodded sagely. "Indeed! Our internal leadership finally realized the truth of that sentiment, that's why we're holding this conference. Only when we stand together and fight hard against our foreign enemy will we succeed. Commander Lan, do you plan to lead your army on another scouting mission?"

Lan Jue's heart jumped. Kang Hui had called it an army, not a scout team. The meaning was clear.

After thinking for a moment, he responded. "In scouting the enemy, especially if you plan to harass them, you must first consider safety. Of course we won't stop trying to learn more about what we face, but we must choose the best people for the job. As I told the conference what we need is technology that can meet our needs, anything that can assure our safety. If all we're doing is courting death, then even if our people can handle it psychologically the losses we've suffered are pointless.

Kang Hui nodded his head. "I understand. Take heart, Commander Lan. We will do everything within our power."

Lan Qing never spoke a word. He sat by his brother's side and quietly ate his food.

Finally, Yan Yuan tried to engage him in conversation. "I've heard so much about you, Admiral Lan. What do you think about our situation? Do you have any suggestions for what we should do?"

Lan Qing raised his head and regarded the two Northerners. "I have nothing to say. Show your strongest hand and hide your weaknesses."

It was a sweeping phrase with no specific meaning, but when it came from the super soldier of An Lun it filled them with confidence. Even though they were commanders as well, Kang Hui and Yan Yuan looked at the young admiral in surprise. No wonder he was the East's youngest, most lauded leader. Beneath that calm was a steely determination to show what he was made of.

"You seem confident," Yan Yuan couldn't help but say.

"Confidence isn't in the things you say," Lan Qing replied. "It's in the things you do. I am confident that I will meet these aliens one day, and when I do I will fight with the full extent of my abilities."

Lunch ended, and the four men returned to the conference hall where delegates had broken into their groups. Lan Jue and Lan Qing separated as well, Lan Qing sitting with military leaders and Lan Jue meeting with researchers. He did so for two reasons. First, he was a powerful Adept in his own right, and second was his scouts would lean heavily on technology to do their jobs in the future.

Talk continued until dusk. By the time it ended tired representatives dragged themselves from the conference hall.

"Come with me." A deep voice stopped Lan Qing and Lan Jue as they were preparing to leave.

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled, and surprise alit on Lan Qing's features. Both of them turned their heads in one fluid motion, searching for the origin of the voice.

Large and imposing, the Terminator stood nearby. Everyone who passed

bowed and scraped in their passage.

7

Qiu Xiaochen was leaving the hall when she spied Lan Jue and Lan Qing out of the corner of her eye. Her steps quickened and she tried to catch up, but not because of some mission given to her by the West. In fact, it was because she was honestly interested in these two young stars of the East.

Young, handsome, similar in appearance but very different in nature, they were outstanding members of their generation. Who wouldn't be interested in getting closer to people such as them?

However, as she neared she was surprised to see them stride off in another direction. They were headed toward a man who always made her feel like it was harder to breathe.

The Terminator! The strongest man in the North, and the second most powerful Paragon on the Paragon List.

They wanted to speak with the Paragon?

Ah, but of course, Lan Qing was also a Paragon. Lan Qing's recent ascension was no secret. Nor was his title; Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven. But subconsciously it was easy to forget and simply see him as Admiral of An Lun, or super soldier, or Prometheus. She had to remind herself that he was now a Paragon, and a Reflection of Heaven and Earth at that.

Why are they speaking to the Terminator? Something about Adepts?

Qiu Xiaochen stopped in her tracks. She couldn't just walk over, she was in no position to trouble people of their stature.

The Western general's voice interrupted her thoughts from behind. "Never mind."

She looked back. "Oh, general."

"I don't know what's going to happen," he sighed.

This seemed to surprise the Colonel. "You mean you don't know how the war with the aliens will go?"

He answered with a small smile. “No, I mean I don’t know what will happen to the West. The North is on the cutting edge of technology, and has a powerful army. The East has the most powerful Adept organization in history. Both of them will fare well against the alien threat, and the East seems poised to become the next super power. But us? Although the West is the leader in genetic research we’re nonetheless a step behind in understanding the exuvium process. Our military is not much stronger than the East’s. We have two Adept organizations at odds with one another, whose leaders have deigned not to show their faces for some time. The future of our alliance troubles me.”

Qiu Xiaochen was unsettled by his words. “But we have the Poseidon Group!”

When she thought about Hua Li’s beautiful face her face adopted a tinge of red. Like many young women Poseidon was a secret crush.

“Do you really think Gobi Entertainment or the Poseidon group are part of the West?” He asked. “Xiaochen, you’re old enough to know better.”

ζ

Not far away a man smiled – an easy, simple smile that drew near every eye his way. As a Paragon he could hear every conversation that was happening in the room. He had planned to speak with Lan Jue, but like Xiaochen was stopped when he saw him and his brother move toward the Terminator. In truth there was no need for Hua Li to come to this conference in person. He’d come because he knew Lan Jue would be here.

It was as the Western general said, Gobi Entertainment and Poseidon Group were not officially part of the West. They didn’t accept nor exert any direct influence on Western affairs. Poseidon Group belonged to Poseidon Group.

Hua Li was the sole leader and representative of Poseidon Corps. With the aliens on their doorstep, how the Corps and Group reacted was important, where they pointed their power was significant. He wanted to discuss this with Lan Qing and Lan Jue, and see where he could offer his help. The foundation of such a cooperative was trust, and they trusted Hua

Li more than they did the West.

Outside of the conference hall a large bus was waiting. It had been arranged for the military leadership, chief among whom was the Terminator. To the North he was more than just a man, he was a symbol. To the North he was like a god among men.

Lan Jue followed the Terminator onto the bus. Much to his surprise, while the bus looked luxurious on the outside the interior was anything but. Rows of plain but wide seats stretched to the back and that was all.

The Terminator sat, and although the bus was wide he made it seem cramped. His dark features were calm and solemn.

“I’m bringing you to a place where you and I can spar, Lan Qing. You should begin to prepare.”

Chapter 712: The Trial

“Alright.” Lan Qing’s reply was simple. He shut his eyes and proceeded to meditate.

A faint smile painted the Terminator’s face, then he turned his eyes toward Lan Jue. “Do you have an interest in participating?”

The Jewelry Master smiled back. “Absolutely, the more the merrier right? But it wouldn’t be just me, I have a partner.”

“Fine, both of you together are fine,” the Terminator assured him.

But Lan Jue chuckled. “No, you misunderstand. Lan Qing is Lan Qing, I am me. My partner is not him. You can have your spar with Lan Qing first, then we can test our skills.”

Lan Jue wouldn’t dare pass up an opportunity to test himself against the strongest Adept in the North. He knew it would be an interesting match, and beneficial to feel how the flows of protogenia changed around such a powerful adversary.

He and Lan Qing were brothers, and thus were prone to pulling punches. What’s more, Lan Jue knew his brother’s abilities almost as well as his own. The pressure of not knowing didn’t exist. However, it was different with the Terminator. The pressure from a famed Paragon would be great, which in turn would deepen his protogenic understanding even further. He was also reasonably sure the Terminator wouldn’t do anything untoward after approaching them in public.

In the end Lan Jue trusted Jun’er’s assessment of the man – he was a good person. He believed it without a shadow of a doubt. Maybe she wasn’t as adept in her prognostications as the Clairvoyant, but she had a natural acuity which he trusted. In fact the Wine Master had told him that the natural visions that came to Jun’er before she began cultivating would be clearer than a focused try, and truer. What she gained from the Clairvoyant was the ability to see farther.

Lan Jue shut his eyes and began to meditate as well, modulating his

Discipline for the fight ahead. In a spar against the Terminator he wouldn't dare to overestimate his chances.

The Terminator looked at these two brothers who looked so similar. A small smile spread across his face, then he shut his eyes as well. These two men were more important to the Terminator than they would imagine.

After half an hour the bus began to slow and descend to the ground. The roof of a building below slowly separated, just wide enough for the bus to pass through.

Lan Jue and Lan Qing opened their eyes. In Lan Qing's there was a crystal clear light, and a strange sense of kindness. Lan Jue's eyes were sharp, and a crackling blue power flickered intermittently.

The Terminator opened his eyes only once the bus touched down.

"Come." He disembarked and began to walk.

He led them through a set of large doors and into a long metallic hallway. For reasons unknown, Lan Jue felt somehow repressed in here. Although he couldn't pinpoint where it came from, for this sense to pervade it had to be from something strong.

Lan Qing also seemed to sense something, judging by the slight surprise in his eyes. His sights darted to the walls slipping past them.

The Terminator's deep voice reverberated of those walls. "This place is part of the Great Conclave. In a way it is an extension of myself. About twenty years ago I came across a strange metal that was derived from the collision of two comets. In the vastness of the universe it's common for asteroids to collide, but an event like two comets crashing into each other is exceptionally rare. Complicated influences from gravitational fields must line up perfectly for this to occur."

"We can't know what the original composition of those comets were, but after their collision this metal was left behind. It was strangely complex and incomplete. When the Northern patrols found it they brought it to me because of the strange power it emitted. I was shocked to discover pulses of protogenic energy coming from it."

Protogenia? Lan Jue looked at the Terminator in shock.

He went on. “I was startled, there had never been a case of inanimate metal possessing protogenia. Certainly the power couldn’t have come from the metal itself, but was somehow injected into it after their impact. No one knew how, precisely, but I could feel it. I began to study it in depth.”

“As time went on I discovered that the protogenia was in a constant state of flux, becoming stronger by the day. I was a Paragon by then, ascended through the transformation of my body. I always knew that life and protogenia were inexorably tied together, but I never expected a lump of metal to change my future. The more I understood the material, the faster my cultivation became. As it changed, so too did I. After ten years I became a Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

“I thought it might continue to assist my perfection. However, I discovered its pulses weakening shortly after breaking through. Its protogenia was coalescing, stratifying, strengthening. As it began to settle the changes in it stabilized and its benefit to me diminished. I have had people scouring the sky for another chunk of metal like this, but to this day I’ve had no luck.”

“I took the heart of this metal and turned it into my Astrum. The remaining impurities were mixed with other metals and used to create this building. It was constructed as a place for Paragons to cultivate, as well as a place for Paragons to spar.”

Every Paragon had their own origin story, Lan Jue and Lan Qing knew. Such power never came easily to anyone. In all the history of mankind no one had been born a Paragon. However, they didn’t expect the Terminator to be so forthcoming with his story. It was frankly unbelievable considering the strained relationship between their two Alliances, not to mention the Conclave’s contention with Skyfire Avenue.

Over the course of his story the three of them had traversed the hall and passed through a set of thick metal doors. They entered into a spacious empty room.

Here the pressure was even clearer. After the Terminator's explanation and careful concentration, Lan Jue could feel the flows of protogenia flooding this place. All of this using only the impure shell of metal, while the core had lifted the Terminator from the Realm of Protogenia. Its strength was undisputable.

"Welcome, guests." An electronic voice greeted them, followed by the appearance of a flickering image.

Lan Jue's keen perception had noted that the Terminator seemed much more relaxed after they'd entered. Like returning home. Clearly this was an important room for the Terminator, like his secret place.

"Ah, Noah. Raise the shields to full strength." The Terminator said.

The projected image was a large man, who after careful examination looked remarkably like the Terminator only younger.

"I have no children, nor am I capable of producing any. So, I had Noah created. I had models created using how I looked in my youth with the image of the woman I liked the most. I sort of tribute, I suppose." The Terminator grinningly described Noah's history.

"We're going to fight here, Your Majesty?" Lan Jue asked.

"Indeed," he replied. "Then we'll talk after. Are you sure you won't be fighting together?"

Lan Jue nodded his head without hesitation. "So long as you don't mind fighting a war of attrition."

A booming chuckle issued from the Paragon. "You know good opponents are hard to find. When Huan Xue was here we sparred often. Though if I'm being honest, I didn't like her fighting style. Changing the flow of time was very uncomfortable for me. Really, my greatest honor would be to one day face off against Jue Di."

Lan Jue shrugged. "That shouldn't be too hard. Beat Lan Qing bad enough and I'm fairly sure Jue Di will make an appearance."

The Terminator's eyes lit up. "Really?"

“You’d have to beat us both pretty bad, more like.” Lan Qing chimed in.

The Terminator grinned. “Let’s give it a try. Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven... that’s quite a long name, but I won’t hold it against you. Shall we begin?”

When he heard his Paragon title Lan Qing’s face twitched. It was only a passing moment, though.

Lan Jue swayed for a moment, then disappeared in a bolt of lightning. He was conveyed to a far corner where his body was surrounded by a shell of blue energy that his everything within. A figure joined him within the orb.

After cultivating for so long with Zhou Qianlin, both of their Disciplines had grown exponentially. He’d been long eager to find someone to really test his skills against, and see just how much he’d improved. Things had been so busy he hadn’t found the opportunity, so the Terminator’s offer and this special ring of his couldn’t have come at a better time.

With a smile on his dusky features, the Terminator looked at Lan Qing. “After you!”

Without standing on any further ceremony, the battle begun!

Chapter 713: Destructive Protogenia

Lan Qing's air underwent a sudden and dramatic change. A flood of light shot from his every pore, even filling his aura. Looking upon him, the Terminator was filled with an unconscious sense of peace. That harmonious light painted everything around them.

Lan Qing's palm slowly extended outward. As the younger generation, he would be given the chance to strike first.

As Lan Qing thrust out his hand the action seemed plain, as though there was nothing to expect. But when his arm reached out the furthest it could go his harmonious aura suddenly flared and filled the whole arena with light.

It was in that moment the Terminator struck. Compared to Lan Qing's slow movements, the Terminator's fist was fast as a rocket. For Lan Qing it felt like he was slammed face first with a planet. There was nothing beyond pure force.

No wonder he was called the God of Might!

Bang! The whole arena shook.

The Terminator's punch looked wild, but it was actually cleverly employed to counteract Lan Qing's peaceful aura and interrupt his rhythm.

However, the moment before the Terminator's fist and Lan Qing's palm met the Northern Paragon felt the harmonious light begin to burn. It was like the Peerless Light Emperor had become a small sun.

A flower corona of flame surrounded his fist like it was trying to push through an atmosphere. Its force was shed by the effort until, by the time it eventually did reach Lan Qing's palm, only about a third of the strike's power remained. The Terminator's hand glowed like it'd punched through magma.

A blast ripped through the air. Although both men were holding back, the result of their clash was strong enough to shudder the foundations of

the arena. A pale yellow light sprang up that stabilized the area, melding with the protogenic energy of the metallic walls to keep them safe.

Lan Qing was knocked back seven steps before he could regain his footing. The Terminator's fist continued to seethe an angry red for a few moments before returning to normal.

"Very good!" The Terminator roared. He launched forward, suddenly seeming less a man and more a raging beast. Appearing to swell even larger, the man's meaty fist came tumbling down upon Lan Qing once more.

Everything around them seemed drawn toward the Terminator, sucked inexorably toward that destructive fist. Even Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin on the far side of the arena struggled not to be dragged off balance.

Lan Qing stretched out his arms, one hand up and the other down. At the same time his body began to spin like a top. Behind him, the ethereal image of a Buddha emerged with a blazing sun behind its head.

The light of Buddha illuminates all, piercing the heavens and painting the earth!

Boom-!

The Terminator's fist was knocked aside with the blast, and the man himself was thrust backward a couple paces. The vortex that Lan Jue had become constricted as the image behind it shimmered in response to the strike.

If someone familiar with the Terminator were here to witness the fight, they would have been shocked the scene. Lan Qing blocking his attack – was a feat!

Lan Qing was no match for the Terminator in terms of sheer attack power. Still he was able to withstand the Paragon's overwhelming forte and not fall behind.

Lan Qing reacted. He flung himself at the Terminator like a cyan tempest. The Buddha behind him solidified and countless hands spread out around it. As Lan Qing closed in on his target the Buddha thrust

those palms forward to coincide with the attack, and they came crashing toward the Terminator in unison.

The Terminator faced the dramatic assault with an imposing air that thickened reality around him. With a grunt he planted his feet, and an angry red light sprang up around him like a cocoon.

Lan Qing's palm strikes hit that cocoon, and each one made it flash brighter.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang! The pummeling blows rang like the chimes of an enormous bell, reverberating over and over again through the arena. Lan Qing fell into a harmonious rhythm of palm strikes, each one hitting with the weight of the Buddhist faith.

Suddenly the myriad shadows converged into a single point, and Lan Qing lashed out with a punch. The ten thousand become one, focused in a single punch.

The Great Spiritual Mantra!

Boom— –!

The shell of red light around the Terminator trembled, then began to crack under the terrible force of the mantra. They spread quickly like cracks through thin ice, threatening to shatter at any moment.

Surprise was clear in the Terminator's eyes. He pushed his two hands out and as he did, a host of glowing orbs appeared behind him.

The arena grew dark, and a strange scene revealed itself. What appeared behind the Terminator was an enormous black orb, so massive as to blot out everything else. A radiant light burned around the orb, outlining its contours.

A palpable fury filled the Terminator. Lan Qing felt it as a dark tempest on the horizon, ready to swallow him up.

Until today neither Lan Qing nor Lan Jue knew what sort of protogenia the Great Conclave's leader possessed. Now they finally understood. Originally Lan Jue thought the Terminator's powers were related to metal

in some fashion, but what he saw proved him wrong.

The Terminator's progenia was pure destruction!

The pitch-black orb behind him was a comet, and within it burned the promise of obliteration. Everything within its path was destined to be atomized. Now, a deep rage replaced his typical composure, so thick and fierce as to bring a lesser man to his knees. Lan Qing's pressing attack had forced him to reveal his inner nature.

The Admiral seemed unconcerned. He pressed his right hand skyward, a motion mimicked by the golden Buddha at his back.

A glorious golden light erupted from Lan Qing – Buddha's Revelation! Lan Qing's Domain!

When the Terminator's Domain appeared everything around him – the air, molecules, atoms – all of it was ripped apart and cast into disorder. All of that destruction seemed to feed that terrifying black orb.

In the same moment that golden light, so soothing and comforting, returned life to that which the Terminator's Domain tried to destroy.

For a tense and breathtaking moment everything was destroyed and remade. The light of Buddha and the darkness of extermination warred, colliding and intertwining. For a time neither gained the upper hand.

The manifestation of their Domains were constrained to an area ten meters around both men, in order to protect the weaves of space-time within the arena. If they truly let loose, the resulting force would undoubtedly tear the building down to its foundation.

Lan Qing threw both hands toward the heavens. Great Mantra of Clarity!

The golden light brightened as the image of a Buddha hung in the air overhead. Its eyes were full of compassion, and it seemed to take over everything. There was no self, no other – no fear. It seemed like it was the center of the universe, all-encompassing and timeless.

The Terminator heaved a great, bestial roar. His body swelled another

ten meters and the comet at his back gained in ominous power. His arm swung forward to deliver another punch while the radiant light around the comet became a shimmering red – like boiling blood, like the pain of a thousand angry souls.

Boom–! Reality shuddered, and the force shield that protected the outside world from their ferocious contest flickered dangerously.

Lan Jue looked on with fervent eyes. He pressed his hands together before his chest to maintain the shell of electric energy that protected him and Zhou Qianlin. He was relying on the power of his All-Heaven lightning to protect them from the aftermath of their clash.

Lan Jue watched every moment with sharp focus, drinking in the ebb and flow of protogenia as the two Paragons manipulated it. An opportunity like this – two Reflections of Heaven and Earth locked in battle – was a rare and wonderful thing to witness. What's more their powers were diametrically opposed. The constant change between death and rebirth caused the surrounding protogenic energies to flurry erratically – revealing its truest nature.

The dark comet was pushed back, but grew in size. Everything behind the Terminator seemed separate.

Lan Qing was pushed back, but the image of Vairochana became clearer. With his hands pressed together before him as though in prayer, the aura of Buddhist tranquility poured from him. His whole body was painted in golden light, as though he were a statue composed of flowing gold.

The Terminator grunted. “Alright. See how you fare against my Termination. The first Apocalypse descends, ending the world!”

He punched again, only this time he vanished. Lan Qing watched as the comet came tearing his way like a global extinction event.

He felt besieged by an incomparable sense of finality, like a planet was about to descended upon his head. He felt the ruin of ten thousand souls bearing down on him.

Lan Qing's response was to press forward with both hands. His body

disappeared into the image of Vairochana. What followed was a chorus of deep chanting, and blossoming flowers of golden light sprang to life in the air. As they appeared the sense of destruction melted away.

“Prajna-paramita!” Three low words, spoken in Sanskrit, galvanized the vitality of all living things.

Countless beams of golden light burst forth, lancing through the darkness and into that dark comet. A great golden hand pressed down upon it, stopping its disastrous charge. A golden seal blazed against its surface.

“Ban ruo bo ruo mi duo!” ¹ The guttural chants became louder and louder, as a host of silhouettes appeared in the sky. Waves of energy continued to pour forth, eventually overcoming the blood-red light of the comet.

“The second Apocalypse descends, bringing quiet to the universe!” The burning red light was extinguished, but immediately in its place a vacuous power sucked everything toward the dark comet.

The nearest equivalent sensation was the creation of a white dwarf. Its gravitational pull was so great it couldn’t even protect itself, and so began to collapse bringing everything around it closer in its destruction.

This was even more terrifying than its previous form, for now the comet was speeding up its own demise to bring about the obliteration of everything around them. Everything was sucked into its collapsing center, toward an inevitable demise – until nothing remained.

Chapter 714: Pressure Battle

This was the Terminator's power – his true, terrifying power.

Lan Jue felt that this man, the one they said was second on the Paragon List, earned his fame. The Epochrion was also a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, but she could not compare to his sheer destructive power. More notable was his protogenic understanding. The Terminator was intimately aware of the secrets of his ruinous abilities and the mighty source it came from.

Even Luo Xianni, having arisen to Nirvana, would struggle. Her space-time abilities were undermined by the Terminator's protogenia, and if the two fought tooth and nail it wasn't impossible to imagine Luo Xianni being defeated.

What incredible power! Lan Jue inwardly praised the Northern leader.

"Buddha's Wisdom!" ¹ The soft voice was not a chant, but Lan Qing's own voice. It was full of tranquility, benevolence, and a quiet self-confidence.

The light of Buddha's Revelation dimmed, and the image of Vairochana dissipated into the darkness. Only Lan Qing remained.

He stood alone against the ravenous vacuum of the dark comet. He spread his arms, and a pure white lotus bloomed from the center of his chest. It lazily drifted forward, vanishing into the infinite destruction of the Terminator's Domain.

But with each petal destroyed, that fearful power diminished. It was like each white petal it devoured pulled the comet from the brink of annihilation. Somehow it was healing its collapse, stunting its destruction.

It wasn't a collision, it was a rescue. Lan Qing was saving the dark comet from itself like a doctor curing a patient of their ailments.

"I did not imagine you could use such a method to counteract my Domain." Surprise was thick in the Terminator's words. His dark comet dispersed. The world around them returned to normal, and the two men

stood in the center of the arena as though nothing had happened. The Terminator looked at Lan Qing in shock, and the Eastern Admiral looked back with compassion and joy.

“His Majesty has a third phase, I’m sure.” Lan Qing’s eyes twinkled as he stared at the Terminator.

He sighed. “The third phase is different from the first two. I can’t use it unless as a last resort. Even though we didn’t release the full scope of our powers, facing my second phase means you’ve attained power equal to my own. I would never have imagined your rise would be so quick. I’ll admit I’m a little jealous.”

But Lan Qing shook his head. “I could sense that you were holding back. It was my honor to spar with you. And unless I’m mistaken you should be near your next breakthrough.”

The Terminator nodded. “I won’t lie, I’m close – I can feel the pull of Nirvana on my spirit. But it feels more like a curse. I need outside stimulation to propel me forward, to catalyze the potential I haven’t yet tapped into. The strength you’ve shown isn’t enough, but I can try and see if your younger brother has the capability. Who knows, with his assistance perhaps the two of you can help.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t have any untoward intentions. In fact there was a little of that metal I told you about left over after I constructed my Astrum. Whether I break through or not, I’d like to give it to the two of you. It’s only enough to make one Astrum, but I’m certain you’ll find it useful. Especially your brother who has yet to break through. Perhaps he can gain some insight from it.”

Lan Qing’s eyes sparkled. Of course the Terminator didn’t know that Lan Jue possessed one of the Banishing Blades, or the thunder essence that allowed for their merger. His younger brother already had his Astrum. It was, in fact, Lan Qing who needed a weapon through which he could focus his power.

“So is it our turn?” Lan Jue piped up with a smirk. He arrived floating through the air with Zhou Qianlin’s hand in his own.

“I imagine you heard what we were discussing,” the Terminator said. “I promise nothing bad will come upon you while you’re here. At any time you can tell me, and I’ll bring you safely to the exit.”

Lan Jue smiled pleasantly. “I have no problems with this. Improving humanity’s strength is good for the species. Allow me to congratulate you on your success beforehand.”

The Terminator’s eyes were bright. “Despite your kind words don’t expect me to go easy on you. I intend to meet Jue Di, and if causing you a little hurt is how to accomplish that then you can expect it. That old man is my idol.”

Lan Jue’s face twitched for just a moment. If there was anything his father despised, it was being called old.

Of course, the Terminator couldn’t know what he was thinking. By this time Lan Qing had moved to the side and was kneeling comfortably away from the other two. He was meditating, in part to recover but also to contemplate the flows of protogenia he’d experienced during their fight. Although he was already a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, there was no time when a Paragon finished increasing their knowledge or comprehension of the universe.

The Terminator grinned at the young couple that faced him now. “Whenever you’re ready, you can start.”

Lan Jue glanced at Qianlin then released her hand. She still had recovered consciousness, but that didn’t impeded the connected they had heart to heart.

They were connected through the Arrow of Compassion and their joined blood. One silver lining surrounding Qianlin’s unfortunate mental state was it helped her easily slip into a position of spiritual receptiveness.

The longer he looked, the more surprised the Terminator became. Although he couldn’t quite place it, the two of them didn’t seem to fit in the reality they occupied. They were somehow separate from the world, like everything around them was making way.

No matter how close he looked, he couldn't figure out why that was.

Strange!

The Terminator couldn't shake it, and all he could guess was that they must have discovered some special way of cultivating. That must be why they seemed so odd.

Meanwhile Lan Jue smirked at him with a quiet arrogance.

What was up this guy's sleeve, the Terminator wondered?

Lan Jue's expression became serious, almost solemn. He'd clashed with the Terminator before, as well as the Violet Prince and Princess, but they had always had back-up. A one-on-one fight was rare, and it was his first time facing someone so close to Nirvana.

He didn't rush to action. Instead Lan Jue shut his eyes, and Qianlin seeming to sense the change, did so as well. The surprises continued to assail the Terminator as he sensed an enigmatic link grow between his two young challengers.

It started with their breath; even, long, and coordinated. It quickly extended to their hearts, which beat in unison. They ceased to be two separate people, and more like a single fractured entity.

Clang! The sound snapped him from his thoughts. The fine hairs on his body stood on end, galvanizing his focus. It was a heavy and uncomfortable sensation, like the judgement of the universe was leveled on his shoulders.

Only once since becoming a Paragon had he felt that way. Although it only lasted a moment, it was enough to make his heart skip a beat.

Lan Jue and Qianlin lifted their hands, and as if in response haloes of red and blue appeared around their heads. Two swords descended from on high, playing off one another and enhancing their brilliance as though they were alive. They supplemented one another, depended on one another, and entangled one another. The Terminator was left flabbergasted.

What swords were these? How could their power be so incredible? As a second-degree Paragon he sense Captus and Demortus differently than others. The waves of influence within them were frightening to him, so frightening in fact that he didn't dare look into them too deeply. The closest he could describe them was like active volcanoes that could rain fiery destruction on everything around them at a moment's notice.

"I am looking forward to His Majesty's instruction." Lan Jue's soft-spoken words were delivered, and then he made his move. The Jewelry Master stepped forward, and almost laughably slowly pressed his sword forward.

The mysterious blade was imposing as a mountain, mighty as a tidal wave. It was both turbulent and magnificent!

It was as though the Terminator could hear the roar of the sea. In that roar he felt as though he would be swallowed up.

In the same instant Lan Jue stepped forward, Qianlin made her first move. With a sweep of her sword countless slashes of the sword's energy were spat out in all directions. They felt full, sometimes with vitality and strength, sometimes with the consistency of rain on a tin roof. All the while they blotted out the sky as they raced for the Terminator.

"Excellent, a fine sword style!" The Terminator barked his praise with drawing a circle in the air in front of him. A pitch-black orb appeared in that spot that was surrounded by a blazing yellow disk.

It was a pocket dimension of his Domain. He didn't need to begin with the full gamut of his abilities against two Adepts yet to achieve Paragon. However, the Terminator soon discovered that he may have underestimated them.

The first strikes to reach him were from Captus. They defied nature by tearing through the sky in erratic fashion. Light as feathers, they were nonetheless impossibly sharp.

The Terminator sensed the manifestation of his Domain become punctured and stabbed. Somehow his protogenia was unable to deflect Lan Jue's weapon, and on the contrary was actively severed by it.

Chapter 715: Majesty, Beware!

It wasn't power – it was the weapon. Inconceivably sharp! Even an Astrum couldn't cut apart Domain like that!

Once the surprise was passed the Terminator responded by pressing both hands downward. The corona of golden light around the dark orb turned blood red. His Domain expanded. The injection of growth and energy fought back against the flood of sword energy Qianlin had cast his way.

Then Lan Jue's sword strikes arrived.

He first saw a red light, then felt it as a tug that threatened to pitch him forward. Like his own powers, Lan Jue's sword had the power of traction. What was different was where the strike landed it left behind a gaping tear that acted like a rip in spacetime. That tear sat in the midst of the Terminator's Domain, at its weakest point.

It was quickly plugged by the Terminator's overwhelming strength. However, before he knew it swipes from Qianlin's sword burst through the former breach and wreaked chaos in his Domain like a tempest.

Incredible! How are these young fighters so formidable?

He was forced back a step, compelled to retreat as his Domain shrank. It was as though his Domain was trying to flee from those terrible swords.

But Lan Jue wouldn't be denied. He thrust a second time with Captus, but strangely the vortex it created was made where the sword waved. As Lan Jue moved so too did his weapon, expanding the scope of the vortex as he launched his attack on the Terminator.

The myriad slices of Qianlin's sword coalesced into a single flood. It swung wildly through the air until it centered toward the Terminator's head.

The unspoken cooperation between his two opponents was one thing, but what was truly frightening were those weapons. More specifically the power these mystical swords bore, for all protogenia seemed not to exist

where they passed. It gave the Terminator pause, fearing real injury.

He also held back for fear of hurting them.

Staggering back another step, he had no recourse but to lash out with a punch.

Qianlin nimbly leapt away like a fairy. Meanwhile, Lan Jue lashed out with Captus in a horizontal swipe to his side.

The vortex created in its wake leached the Terminator's force. But the Terminator was a Paragon, and the attack served only to slow the punch not stop it.

Lan Jue traced out a circle. Where Captus flowed a shadow of its passage remained behind. When the Terminator's fist passed through all of its strength was speed was bled away.

With the Terminator caught, Qianlin chopped with her sword again, producing another flood of feral sword swipes that attack his body's key areas.

These two are hard to deal with! He thought. It seems I have no choice but to use some real power.

He looked at the two with new eyes, realizing they were more of a threat than he originally anticipated. As far as he could sense, the two of them together were as strong as a first-degree Paragon.

All at once the aura around the Terminator changed. The small pocket of his Domain swelled in response. For Lan Jue, he felt like the universe in front of his was collapsing into discord, and a terrible promise of obliteration washed over him. Pressure descending from where, threatening to crush the life out of him. Suddenly, he and Qianlin where in a black and empty void.

Here they were specks of dust in an infinite expanse of nothing – except for a single, monumental comet that burned blood red. It was roaring through the darkness right for them, intent on destroying them outright.

This was the real Domain of the Terminator, the Apocalyptic Comet.

Suffocating pressure continued to pile on them from all directions. The Terminator had vanished, leaving Lan Jue and Qianlin's swords to hit nothing but empty space.

Domain was the greatest difference between an Adept and a Paragon.

Lan Jue was not alarmed. Crystal blue light filled his eyes as he lifted Captus. It seemed as though his body swelled as his right hand lead Captus to cut through the blackness.

Red light flickered as Captus carved out a swirling vortex. It dispersed through the black, clearly not enough to cut away the Paragon's Domain. However, in the center of that disseminating vortex appeared a spark of purple light. The moment it appeared, the whole of the Apocalyptic Comet Domain seemed to shudder.

Br-r-r-uuummm— Thunder rolled, issued from Lan Jue's own body. As it radiated outward it cast the Domain into turmoil.

"Ah?!" 1 The Terminator's voice rippled through the area, but it was the blood comet that reacted. It swelled even larger, closing the distance between itself and its targets.

A bolt of crystal blue lightning shot out and struck the comet's surface. The world-ending orb slowed ever so slightly, but the lightning bolt was rapidly devoured by its destructive intent.

However, a moment later the Terminator discovered that his two opponents were no longer within the scope of his Domain. Instead from the roiling borders of this Apocalypse two sword slashes 2sword screamed his way.

A golden force field appeared around him, but the swords were simply too sharp. They carved through his defenses and forced him to dodge. Lan Jue and Qianlin reappeared as the Terminator's shield was cut away.

"You're able to escape my Domain?" The Terminator gasped in shock, but didn't let up. He wailed at them with another full-armed punch. He held nothing back.

Lan Jue never uttered a word. He moved with Captus in the Taiji sword

style to deflect the Terminator's blows. Although he was forced to retreat Lan Jue was able to avoid injury under his own power. Qianlin took advantage of the moment, employing the greatest utility of her ten-thousand swords as one technique. A hundred thousand diffused strikes covered the Terminator from all directions.

The Terminator's shock only grew with each passing moment. He couldn't use his full power for fear he'd injure Lan Jue or Qianlin, but the two of them were a chore with their different but harmonious sword techniques.

Lan Jue's style was focused and forceful. Sometimes it surged like an unstoppable river headed for the ocean, sometimes so integrated he couldn't find a gap. All the punches the Terminator threw at Lan Jue were dispersed and deflected. Incredible, considering the protogenia that filled every strike.

By contrast, Qianlin's style was elegant and almost gentle, but deceptively lethal. Infinitely variable and maddeningly pervasive, making the impossible possible. It was that variability that made her a threat. The two styles together made a marvelous – and dangerous – unified front. Without the use of his full power he wouldn't be able to face up to the two of them.

No wonder the Clairvoyant chose him to inherit the Avenue!

The Terminator inwardly praised this young couple's limitless potential. With these weapons in hand, they would become truly spectacular Paragons. Who knew how far that potential would bring them. No Northerner had the prospects they did.

"Majesty, beware." Lan Jue's voice brought him back to the present.

He froze and watched as Lan Jue and Qianlin reeled back, shoulder to shoulder. Lan Jue's face hardened in concentration as the two of them thrust forward with their swords.

The styles were the same, still focused flow and thousand swords as one. Only this time, it was completely different.

Lan Jue's eyes fell upon Qianlin, filled with love and affection. She looked back, and though hidden behind a fog there was the faintest light of infatuation in her gaze. Her face bore the faintest ghost of a smile.

An incredible scene revealed itself. The light around Captus and Demortus flared, and the full force of the blades' deadly intent pulsed out like a wave.

The first thought that crossed the Terminator's mind was that it was some kind of protogenia, a kind he'd never experienced before. What's more, within it he felt a strange and inexplicable power.

In this moment focused flow and ten-thousand swords became one. At some point even they couldn't pinpoint, Lan Jue and Qianlin had joined together but their two weapons were still lashing out.

Red and blue disappeared replaced with a pure aurora of light. It simultaneously flickered with all the colors of the rainbow, but strangely somehow was also formless and colorless. All of a sudden the Terminator felt like he stood on the cusp of disaster.

What is this...

Again he was shocked, and again he pressed down with his hands. The power around the dark comet expanded still further as he called upon his second phase, Bringing Quiet to the Universe. Still the vacuous power didn't affect the sword's power at all.

The might they bore was created in the first moments of the universe, from the stuff that underpinned reality. Time, space, everything warped around the will of the godblades. Shields protecting the arena were shattered and the Terminator was flooded with the crushing sense of immanent destruction.

The earth began to shake, rattling the secret arena and in fact the whole building. The roof exploded as the crystalline power soared toward the heavens. The earthshaking, dazzling power surged; red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue and purple flashed like a technicolored lightning storm. Among them and containing them were infinitely plain streaks of black and white.

Chapter 716: Harmonious Swords

A multitude of colors, a dazzling rainbow that connected the heavens to the earth.

Where it met the clouds they parted. Where it encountered rain the droplets broke – a stairway to heaven built on a shimmering rainbow lane.

The darkness was destroyed as the primordial essence borne by the swords swept through. The rainbow aurora hung in the air for what felt like a long time before finally dissipating.

Lan Qing had awoken from his meditations long before and gaped at the scene with unabashed surprise. Almost incapable of believing what he saw, he watched as the boundless destruction of the Terminator'' Domain fractured into dust. The ultimate convert employed nearly all of his power to keep himself from being swallowed up by the prismatic aurora, and that was when it curved up – piercing the comet-casted ceiling and into the sky.

The Terminator kneeled on the ground, covered in a hundred tiny wounds. Droplets of blood coated him like a sheen of sweat. His wide eyes stared in disbelief at the two figures appearing in the distance.

He hadn't used his full strength, and in fact the Terminator had held back. But he could feel it clearly, even the totality of his abilities wouldn't have been capable of saving him from that power.

Harrowing... the memory of that power was seared into his mind. The sense of uncaring finality he'd felt lingered in his heart. What in the world was that sword technique that resulted in such staggering power? How could two Adepts produce an attack like that?

Qianlin's sword had vanished. She leaned into Lan Jue's protective embrace. Lan Jue's face was pale as he fell to his knees, still managing to support his beloved. Both were soaked with sweat.

The Terminator had questions, but Lan Jue didn't have answers. He didn't know such awesome intensity could be summoned from their

efforts. All he knew was that in that moment, it felt as though he and Qianlin were one inexorably tied entity.

It went beyond the body. The connection through blood and the Arrow of Compassion fused their very souls. Sharing every bit of each other also caused their swords to combine, and in their fusion the marvelous supernova had been produced. To Lan Jue it felt like a dam had burst, a great door had opened somewhere inside Captus. Although it had closed once the strike was delivered he could feel that it had fundamentally changed the godblade.

Was that... the Harmonious Swords technique?

He recalled the tales of Jun Yongye, telling him of the ancient days when the Harmonious Swords were an invincible reality. Through his and Qianlin's efforts it was a reality once again. Jun Yongye had called it the strongest force besides the Banishing Strategy.

At the time Lan Jue thought the sword-spirit was exaggerating. But just then, that wild animus channeled all of their energy, even their psyche into the strike. Like the Terminator, that sensation had left a profound impression.

At last they'd succeeded. At last they had achieved the Harmonious Swords. It had just been a moment, but a truly marvelous moment. If he had not used all his strength to divert the flow at the last minute Lan Jue feared it would have swallowed the Terminator. The only thing Lan Jue could compare it to was the attack Jue Di delivered to the aliens out in the Starfields, Upender. That was the only other attack he'd seen that could overturn reality, blot out the sun and moon.

But could Lan Jue really use such a potent ability already?

In that moment his comprehension of protogenia had also changed. This would have a significant impact on his future breakthrough. More and more he sensed the time approaching. More and more he found it hard to hold the power back. He prevailed only through the blood-connection with Qianlin and the Arrow of Compassion.

When the two of them joined he could also sense Qianlin's spirit. Her

soul pulsed with intensity, and in that brief moment of total fusion he felt his own power pull Qianlin along. Like he had dragged her Discipline to a higher level.

He needed to experience it again to learn more, but Lan Jue already knew that this enigmatic power would play an important role in the growth of their Disciplines.

Lan Jue hadn't anticipated something like this would happen. Lan Jue's focused flow and Qianlin's ten thousand swords as one were techniques they'd employed for a while already. Through the help of their respective sword-spirits they had grown well versed in the styles.

The strength of their cultivation, their understanding of the Banishing Blades, deeper protogenic comprehension, and the flood of immortal qi between them all coalesced to their benefit. Jun Yongye had told them it was time to attempt the Harmonious Swords technique, and he'd been right.

Although technically not a Paragon, the immortal qi and All-Heaven lightning empowered Lan Jue's attacks. He fought with no less force than a first-degree Paragon, maybe stronger. Qianlin was not quite as strong, but also benefited greatly from the immortal qi they shared. That is what allowed them to attempt this legendary sword technique.

Lan Jue's interest in this fight had been to give the style a try. The foundation of the Harmonious Swords was the binding of a man and woman soul to soul, shared devotion and unequivocal love. Beyond that they needed a deep familiarity with their respective styles. Both prerequisites they'd met.

Still, it shocked Lan Jue how smoothly it'd happened. More shocking was just how indomitable the attack had been.

Only once he'd used it himself did he understand the power of the Harmonious Swords. Everything within him had focused to a single burning thought. His love for Qianlin.

Through that love their souls combined, closer than ever before. Captus and Demortus follows suit, being as much a part of them as their spirits

were. Together they rose to a sublime place of perfect union.

In that union Captus and Demortus had awakened. He remembered a similar feeling from Occisus when the Pharmacist had ascended to Paragon. He and Qianlin's swords pulsed with it as they joined, it the source of their staggering power.

Lan Jue's uncertainty lay in whether he could call upon that state again. He felt so weak that even moving his fingers was a herculean task. It felt like the sword had drained him to his core.

The Terminator's muscles chest heaved. The shock in his eyes refused to abate.

"What... what the hell was that?" He could help but ask.

Lan Qing had come to Lan Jue's side. Although he didn't expect the Terminator to take advantage of their weakness he nonetheless was there to protect them. However, the look in his eyes was no less dumbfounded than the Terminator's. The only thing he could deduce from what he'd witnessed was it was not something taught by their father. Jue Di hadn't taught his younger brother whatever that had been.

Lan Jue fought to steady his breathing and racing heart. He dropped his head and placed a tender kiss on Qianlin's lips. She vanished.

He felt strange, for it was the first time they'd joined and he felt no increase in Discipline. It wasn't a blockage, rather there was no higher place for them to reach.

Lan Jue coughed weakly. "Your Majesty, do you happen.... To have something here to eat? I think... I need sustenance. Something to give me strength." He struggled mightily to get to his feet. He could only manage by leaning heavily on his brother.

The Terminator's face twitched. "Yes, wait a moment." The host of cuts along his body had, over time, healed and left no trace. Harming a Paragon was no easy feat, and through his constant upgrades the man had tougher skin than a Bastion ship.

The Terminator left with long strides. Once he was gone Lan Qing

helped his brother back to the ground. He looked at him with a curious expression.

“That technique...”

Lan Jue responded with a wry smirk. “I couldn’t tell you. It’s something we were taught from Demortus and Captus. Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi told us this was an elite style handed down from ancient times. Weaker than your Prajna style and my Taiji, but joined together it creates an incredible force. What you witnessed was called the Harmonious Swords technique.”

“But at our level of cultivation, calling on the technique was only just manageable. The swords we use are too potent. We’ll only be able to command the full breadth of the swords’ abilities when we break through to Paragon. Although, if this accident revealed anything it’s that we may not be able to command it even when that happens. It’s strong, but incredibly draining.”

He calmly described what had happened, but he did not let the potency get to his head. There was always a great cost for the use of great power. Without a doubt, however, the Harmonious Swords would make a wonderful ace in the hole.

A flood of energy flowed from his chest to enervate the rest of his body. It supplemented what he lost and made him stronger. The immortal qi that filled him, that made his Discipline more than a common power, pulled him from the cusp of collapse. Its subtle influence strengthened him, transforming him into something greater.

By the time the Terminator returned with some food, Lan Jue was back to normal. At least, he looked completely recovered.

Chapter 717: The Monarchs Gather

Suppressing the surprise he felt the Terminator handed Lan Jue some food. Steak, bread, water. Simple but nutritious fare.

He looked on with a conflicted gaze as Lan Jue ate ravenously. Though he clearly didn't possess the strength of his older brother, his marvelous display of skill had left a deep impression. What's more, experiencing this sword style had cleaved a fissure in the barrier between him and Nirvana. It was clear with each chop of the sword, as though cut into his own heart.

It felt boundless! As boundless as the potential of this young couple.

The Terminator couldn't help but feel jealous of the East's good fortune. If only his own alliance had this kind of talent. But hopes and wishes was all he had.

After eating, Lan Jue tenderly wiped his mouth. "Your majesty, I think it's time we got going."

"Forgive me if I don't send you off," the terminator said. "I learned a lot from this exchange and must meditate on what I learned. Someone else will see you out. On behalf of the Northern Alliance I hope we can continue to work closely."

Lan Jue and Lan Qing exchanged a happy glance. These words coming from the Terminator meant more than from any politician.

The two brothers returned to their hotel.

"How likely do you think it is that everyone will cooperate after this conference?" Lan Jue asked as they arrive back at their room.

Lan Qing thought for a moment. "30%."

30%?" Lan Jue said in astonishment.

Lan Qing smiled softly. "How much do you think? They are all looking out for their own benefit. Believing politicians is like believing Hua Li has gotten more reliable."

As though to punctuate his brother's remarks, Lan Jue communicator

started to buzz. “Speak of the devil. A-Li.”

“A-Li.” Lan Jue connected the call.

“Hey are you guys back? Is it alright if I come over?” Friends didn’t need to rely on small talk.

“Come on over.” Lan Jue sent him the address.

Ten minutes later, Hua Li appeared at their door. Another person they hadn’t seen in a long while arrived with him, Chu Cheng.

After ascending to Paragon, the air around Hua Li was completely different. His stunning appearance never changed, but the vibrant aura was gone, replaced with something deeper and more mysterious. In a word, he seemed more manly.

Chu Cheng, on the other hand, was just as coquettish and free-spirited as he’d always been. However, closer inspection revealed a constant eruption of fire behind his eyes while he himself was surrounded by a sense of deathly stillness.

The four Divine Monarchs were together for the first time since the Clairvoyant’s departure.

They sat, and Chu Cheng flicked his wrist. A bottle of whisky appeared in his hand. “This calls for a good drink, don’t you think?”

Hua Li lifted a finger and four crystal blue glasses materialized. They weren’t real glasses, of course, but constructed by Hua Li from elemental manipulation. They were thin and chilled, perfect for a good scotch.

Chu Cheng poured them each a glass. For a time they simply sat, smiling and enjoying each others’ company. No words were necessary.

No matter what transpires in the world, the bonds of friendship never changed.

Lan Jue swung his eyes toward Chu Cheng. “You’re close to a breakthrough, right?” He was sensitive to the flows of protogenia now, and could clearly sense the aura from his friend. It felt like a volcano on the cusp of eruption, like he could take the plunge at any moment.

Chu Cheng nodded. "I'm under constant guard lately, do you know how hard it was to leave? If you Easterners assassinated me the North would be deprived a great Paragon!"

Lan Jue couldn't help but laugh at Chu Cheng's exaggerated expression. The guy was cracking jokes, so it seemed his future breakthrough wasn't going to encounter any problems.

But then the Hades heir put away his smile and sighed. "Now that I'm here I finally understand what you told me. It's hard to hold back, I was too eager and the pressure is becoming more than I can withstand. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out, although I know the longer I can withstand the further I'll ultimately get. I can see my road, but this revelation came too late."

"Before I used to think simply breaking through was enough, but now I've come to my senses. If I'm sure to break through, what's to stop me from getting stronger? Do you have any methods that can help, A-Jue? Some sort of seal or block maybe?"

Lan Jue rolled his eyes. "If only it were that easy. Short of taking your life you're just going to have to let nature take its course. Now that you're here you shouldn't get in your own way. What's most important is capturing your path and walking it without hesitation. Wandering will only delay growth."

Hua Li chuckled. "You sound like an old wise man. When did you become a spokesmen for the sages, eh?"

Lan Jue shot his brother a glance. Lan Qing sat stony faced and didn't utter a word.

Hua Li was the next to heave a sigh. "I thought I would have been the first. I'd clear the way for the rest of you to follow, but the Big Brother blazed the trail. That's some real talent! You shouldn't be depressed, A-Cheng – you're in a better spot than I am. I've known my path since birth, and the potency of the Poseidon bloodline is inexhaustible. Still it seems there are barriers I can't pass. There hasn't been a Reflection of Heaven and Earth in my family for over a century. If it weren't for these aliens I

would have taken more time, but I wasn't left with a choice."

His three companions knew what he meant. A Paragon was a treasure to a family, and this was especially true for Hua Li. He not only represented the next generation of leadership, he was the new leader of the Poseidon Group.

"Ah, by the way, I'm getting married." Hua Li casually dropped the bombshell.

The other three gaped at him

"Married?" Lan Jue and Chu Cheng cried in one voice.

Hua Li's face was calm, bearing only a small smile. "Yeah! What, you think I shouldn't?"

Lan Jue gave him a strange look. "Is it that girl you told me about? If it is you sure screwed up never bringing her by for us to meet."

Hua Li shook his head. "No, not her. Mo Xiao."

"So you finally came around," Lan Jue teased. "She's an excellent choice. That girl would die for you. Seems becoming a Paragon made you grow up."

Hua Li's face changed, bearing something that seemed very unnatural for him. Disappointment. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"So when's the wedding?" Lan Jue asked.

Hua Li took a sip of his drink. "A month."

"Mnh. If I can't make it I'll send my gift with A-Jue. Congratulations." A rare smile touched Lan Qing's lips.

Hua Li nodded. "Thank you."

Chu Cheng looked at him with skepticism. "You say you're getting married but I don't see any of that newlywed joy! Mo Xiao's one hell of a woman! Ach, what a shame. Who knows when I'll find the love of my life."

Contempt was thick in Lan Jue's voice. "Are you capable? I'd be careful, with as many women as you've scorned hell will come calling one day."

Chu Cheng snorted. "I am chasing the realm of the stars! No woman can stop me."

Lan Jue looked at his brother and scowled.

Lan Qing replied. "A-Cheng, you're about to break through. Restraining yourself won't be as effective as letting us help you. It'll galvanize your potential and improve your end result."

Chu Cheng's face fell. He knew what he meant. "Look man I didn't offend you. Why are you threatening to beat me up?" He knew Lan Qing well enough to be very wary of his calm façade.

Lan Jue chortled darkly. "Because that's the exact same sentiment he has."

Suddenly Chu Cheng was all flattery prose. "Honored brother, forgive me. I'm just looking for a special woman. When I find her what's ambition by comparison? Right?"

Lan Qing cast him a withering glance. "I'm not kidding. Prepare yourself – tomorrow I help you break through."

"Damn... are you for real?" Chu Cheng looked back warily.

Hua Li shamelessly gloated at Chu Cheng's fate. "When have you ever known Big Brother to kid? Congratulations in advance, Hades."

Chu Cheng seemed unwilling. "Big Brother.. I mean, look... your own brother hasn't broken through yet you know? You shouldn't bother with me – you should be helping him! Playing favorites isn't in your nature!"

"He doesn't need my help," Lan Qing calmly replied. "You do. If you keep whining we'll start right now."

"I –" Chu Cheng looked to Lan Jue to save him.

Lan Jue, meanwhile, fluttered his lashes innocently at his beleaguered friend. "A-Cheng, are you familiar with the phrase 'you reap what you sow?' I think you should go and get ready. This is a great opportunity! I trust my brother, and if he says he can help you then I'm sure he will."

"I knew I shouldn't have come," he griped indignantly.

Hua Li chimed in. “Let’s focus on the positive. Big Brother, the Poseidon Group is thinking about joining the East.”

“How do you intend to help?” Lan Qing inquired.

Hua Li explained. “We’ve recovered the Poseidon-class Bastion from the West and are in the process of refitting it. We’ve also got two interstellar fleets and enough resources to keep ourselves going for a hundred years.”

“We’ve transferring everything we can from our home planet to the Bastion – including Poseidon’s Palace.”

Lan Jue’s heart skipped a beat. “It sounds like you’re getting ready to evacuate.”

Chapter 718: Poseidon's Plans for Cooperation

Hua Li was unperturbed. "We've considered the possibility. The alien threat is real, and if humanity is destroyed than there's no reason for us to stay. The universe is a vast place, and no matter how strong those creatures become they can't rule the whole thing – no species could. From everything we've learned, universal protogenia will descend upon the aliens when they've passed a certain threshold of strength. We know they're facing this problem now – that's why they're after us. Constant evolution is their eternal goal, but even evolution has its end. We'll go out and search for a suitable planet away from danger. I suspect it'll take about a hundred years."

Lan Qing pressed. "So in what way do you plan to 'join' the East?"

Hua Li leaned back in his chair. "When the fighting starts we'll leave the West and fight with Eastern forces. So long as there is a species to fight for we'll stay. We don't want to see the destruction of humanity as much as anyone else. After all, Poseidon Group has enjoyed a great deal from the love and respect of the people. We have a responsibility, and we'll contribute as much as we're able. We won't be leaving until the last moment."

"Why not stay with the West? Poseidon Group is powerful and respected there – are they not giving enough?" Chu Cheng inquired.

Hua Li shook his head before responding. "No, it's not about 'enough.' I simply don't like how the Alliance is run. My own organization's intelligence and the analyses presented at the conference came to similar determinations; the best weapon in the war against these creatures is the Adept. The West has a host of inherent issues that look impossible to overcome. The Pontiff's Citadel and the Dark Citadel will never work together, their mutual enmity runs too deep. Their hierarchical system is also a problem, their military is too fractured. The West has its good parts but the bad have begun to outweigh them. Our evacuation plan was

actually suggested by the Western military.”

Once they heard that Lan Jue, Lan Qing, and Chu Cheng understood. Was the West planning to flee?

Hua Li sighed. “Such is the nature of our disappointment with the West. Part of their scheme was the assertion that we don’t go to war and instead cover their retreat. If they decided the situation was too dire, they want us to flee with them. How are we supposed to feel about that? If you plan to run at least make the enemy howl in pain before you do. I suspect if the aliens show up in Western territory first, they won’t hold out long. Their first inclination will be to scatter.”

Lan Jue glowered at the prognosis. He knew his alliance, and the East was ready to face this crisis as one people. Perhaps it had been foolish optimism to think the other alliances felt the same. Hua Li awakened him to the possibility that things weren’t as unified as he’d like, and at least out there problems were mounting.

“So, after many discussions, we decided that once we’ve gathered all the resources we can that we’ll leave the West. We will fight the aliens, but we don’t want our future generations to be saddled with an unreliable partner. We’ll fight with the East.”

Lan Qing didn’t rush to elation. His burning eyes fixed Hua Li. “What are your demands?”

There were no free meals in this universe. Hua Li was their close friend, but he also represented a powerful family. This wasn’t a question of friendship, he had his own people to consider.

Hua Li nodded. “We’re hoping for deeper ties to the East. Specifically, we want to be a part of the alliance. Assuming victory over the aliens we have one request; that you let us purchase Taihua or Lyr for our own use.”

Chu Cheng whistled. “You guys sure have a healthy appetite! Out to buy another planet!”

Hua Li sighed. “We really have no other option. We can’t see any future in the West, and although the North is mighty it doesn’t measure up to

the East in the ways that matter. We chose the East because of its potential and Paragon presence. And, of course, because of you!” Hua Li looked between Lan Qing and Lan Jue.

Lan Qing’s brows furrowed and he muttered inaudibly to himself. This was no trivial matter to consider. Poseidon Group was phenomenally rich, with more money and resources than the East would know what to do with. An extra Bastion and a couple fleets would be very useful in the coming war and may even turn the tide. Accepting would mean making the East safer.

But it would cost them a whole planet...

Both Taihua and Lyr were important strategic resources! 1

“I’ll need to bring this up with the leadership and wait for an official reply. Speaking personally I hope you do join us, but selling a planet is bigger than me.” Lan Qing made his position clear.

Hua Li smiled. “So long as I have your support, Big Brother, I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. At any rate buying Taihua may not be necessary. If the West really does leave then all those planets will be up for grabs. Perhaps the East can capture Poseidon for us. We’d of course prefer our native homeland to someplace new.”

Lan Qing nodded. He understood Hua Li’s position and recognized it as an important possibility for the East.

“How capable is the Poseidon-class Bastion?” He asked.

Hua Li responded. “I can’t tell you exactly, but in many ways it’s not inferior to the Terminator-class Bastion.”

Lan Jue’s eyes nearly popped out of his skull.

Terminator-class Bastion was the North’s flagship. It had roughly two times the destructive capability of Tyrannosaurus. It had been given its name to commemorate the ascension of the Terminator to Paragon. It was lauded as humanity’s single greatest weapon.

Tyrannosaurus, Heron and Arachnid together were no match for

Terminator. The Terminator himself was its commanding officer. If Terminator was dispatched in the war ahead, Lan Jue was certain its namesake Paragon would be at the helm.

The West had always been loathe to talk about the Poseidon-class Bastion as a matter of national security, so there was no information about its capabilities. However, Hua Li had no reason to deceive them. More than anyone he grasped the truth of his family's holdings.

Lan Qing nodded. "Alright, I understand."

"Alright, that's all I got. I have to trouble you to act as a go-between," Hua Li said. "But I will reiterate that if the East can't hold we'll have no choice but to flee. My family must survive."

Lan Qing's face never changed. "I understand. But I hope that if this cooperation is approved you don't leave my An Lun soldiers to fend for themselves on the battlefield. An Lun is the tip of the spear. If the East falls they will be the first to give their lives. After that if you need to go then so be it."

Hua Li paused. He stared in silence for a moment at Lan Qing, then at Lan Jue. "This is for your ears alone, but Poseidon's doors will always be open to you. If the time comes know you have safe harbor. I'll come for you, no matter the cost."

But Lan Qing shook his head. "No need for that. As Admiral, if I'm not willing to die with my soldiers then our cause is doomed from the start. If the East's final moments do come, take A-Jue and go."

"Brother!" Lan Jue's eyes hardened. "If you stay how can you expect me to go anywhere? You represent the East, but I represent Skyfire Avenue. It's as true for me as it is for you; a leader dies with his people or there's no point in fighting."

Chu Cheng chuckled. "Alright, alright. Drink, gentlemen. We get together so rarely, let's not spoil it with such depressing talk. Hell, after what happened to those three Bastions we probably don't have a chance anyway! Far as I see it they've got the upper hand. But anyway – tomorrow, big brother! I'll face the difficulties head on!"

As he spoke Chu Cheng lifted his glass, and the other three followed suit. They threw their glasses back and drained their contents.

Lan Qing was the first to leave. He had to deliver Hua Li's proposal to the leadership for consideration. The East's Chairman and chiefs of the armed forces were all on Luo and it was a matter best discussed face to face.

Chu Cheng left a short time later to begin preparations. Lan Qing hadn't been kidding, so Chu Cheng had to be ready to go all out.

Only Hua Li and Lan Jue remained, seated across from one another. Lan Jue sighed. "This crisis happened too fast. In a blink it swallowed up everyone."

Hua Li nodded but changed the subject. "Are you going to participate in my wedding?"

"I can't make any promises," Lan Jue replied. "Star Division is gathering its strength in preparation to face the enemy. I need to stay on Skyfire."

"If we move to the East this won't be a problem. Our Poseidon-class Bastion will be stationed near Skyfire." Hua Li announced.

Lan Jue answered with a smile. "In that case I'd be happy to."

Hua Li went on. "I don't really want to get married but I can't deny Mo Xiao a life of affluence. I feel I've wronged her."

"Eh?" Lan Jue looked at him in surprise. "If you don't want to marry her then why go ahead with it? This is a life-altering decision. You still don't like her?"

A bitter grin touched Hua Li's lips. "She was groomed for this from a young age. She was raised to be my wife. Ever since she could grasp the concept she knew she would be my partner for the rest of her life. You know, my family had more than a hundred prospects, but she distinguished herself. To her I'm more of a goal. If your future wife saw you as a mission to accomplish, would you like her?"

Chapter 719: Forced Marriage

Lan Jue furrowed his brows. “As far as I can tell Mo Xiao likes you a lot.”

Hua Li shook his head. “It’s different... it feels different. She’s a good friend, a great partner. But not a wife. I never liked her like that.”

“So why marry? I figure an unhappy marriage isn’t any good for the family. Besides you told me you have someone you love, and it looked like you meant it. What will happen to your love then?”

A laugh bubbled from Hua Li’s lips. The bitterness in it paired with the young man’s good looks tugged at Lan Jue’s heart. Even he couldn’t help but be smitten by him.

“Marriage is not a choice for me. Mo Xiao is destined to be the mother of Poseidon’s next generation. It’s our duty to the family, and one I must adhere to. We’ll employ technological methods to conceive an heir to carry on the family legacy. Our wedding is just a formality.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “The one I love doesn’t know I love her. I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept of unrequited love.”

Lan Jue was stunned. “You? Unrequited love? Hell all you have to do is profess your feelings and I’m sure you could have any girl you want right?” As far as Lan Jue was concerned there was no better candidate for a husband than Hua Li.

But the entertainer and Paragon shook his head with a bitter grin. “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand,” Lan Jue said. “What is going on? I can help you figure it out.”

Hua Li was still reticent. “I’m afraid of hurting her, and if it doesn’t work out we can’t keep a friendship. She has someone she loves so it isn’t my place to say anything. This love will have to remain buried in my heart and go with me to the grave. But, you know, holding love for someone is a nice feeling. All I can do is make sure I don’t betray her.”

Lan Jue openly gaped at him. “I never would have pegged you for a hopeless romantic.”

Hua Li chuckled. “There’s a lot you don’t know. Alright, it’s time for me to head back. But before I do how are you doing? When are you going to break through?”

“Soon I suspect,” he answered. “You keep working, don’t wait for me. You aren’t my competition.”

Hua Li shrugged. “Maybe we should spar tomorrow, my last shot at kicking you around before you become a Paragon.”

Lan Jue chortled. “Alright, I’m not afraid of you. Don’t think you’re going to wail on me just because you’re a Paragon now. Tomorrow we’ll see who beats on who.”

“No doubt, better than sitting idle though. We’ll be the pre-show for A-Qing and A-Cheng,” he said.

Lan Jue wasn’t being cocky. After seeing what the Harmonious Swords did against the Terminator, how would Hua Li be any different? He also sensed that Qianlin had slipped into a quietude, the sort of quietude an Adept enters when they were ready to break through. What that meant was she had also reached the peak of ninth rank. Now that they had reached the threshold together, it was only a matter of time before they were Paragons.

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As rays of early morning light filtered into his hotel room, Lan Jue stirred from his meditations.

His eyes were warm and soft, without a hint of sharpness. Anyone who did not know him would say he looked like any normal person.

The deeper Lan Jue’s comprehension of Taiji became, the calmer and more potent his All-Heaven Lightning became. But in that calm was a mystifying aura.

The sensation wasn’t merely protogenia, but essence – the essence of

All-Heaven Lightning. Or to put it another way, more like universal protogenia.

The thunder essence he'd consumed was almost gone, only a third remained to be absorbed. At this point the rate of absorption had quickened considerably. Part of that was the immortal qi, and his Discipline had been entirely evolved through the pure lightning element.

Lan Jue was at his peak, stronger than he'd ever been. It could be said he had one foot in the Realm of Protogenia. With the addition of Captus, his arrogance with Hua Li last night was especially warranted.

Ding-dong. His doorbell rang.

Lan Jue sensed the presence outside. He knew who it was. When he pulled open the door he saw the stoic face of the Pharmacist looking back at him.

"You're up? I'm sorry to bother you so early." Her stony visage cracked into a gentle smile as she walked into Lan Jue's room. She looked like she was back to her old self.

"How do you feel after your rest?" Lan Jue inquired with a smile of his own.

"Very well, thank you," she said. "There's something I wish to speak with you about. Currently, the three alliances are urging their people to gather on the largest planets. The result has been a severe lack of resources. I'd like to use this opportunity to purchase some herbs to ensure the Hall of Supreme Harmony can survive the war. I also plan to concoct a batch of medicine for Star Division troops to carry with them. This should keep casualties to a minimum."

Lan Jue beamed at her. "Excellent idea! Where will you go gather the materials?"

She replied calmly. "Several Northern planets possess excellent herbs, but Luo seems to have run out. I plan to make a trip to see if I can't discover some on my own."

"I have to be here for another couple of days. If you want to wait I can go

with you when I'm finished," Lan Jue offered.

She shook her head. "We don't have the luxury of time. Handle your business, and I'll deal with the shopping myself. I've already arranged transportation. When I find what I need I'll head back to Skyfire directly."

The Avenue's chairman nodded. "Alright, just be careful."

She smirked as she ruffled his hair with her hand. She cooed teasingly at him. "Brat, I'm a Paragon now, with a legendary godblade at my command. What danger will I encounter that I can't overcome? Relax. I'll see you."

She patted his shoulder to punctuate her words, then turned to go. However, after only a few steps she stopped and turned her head to look back at Lan Jue. It seemed as though she wanted to say something but in the end reconsidered. She offered a small, friendly smile then swept away down the hall.

A sense of disappointment filled Lan Jue's chest as he watched her leave. He understood the pain she carried with her. Scars like those only got better with time.

He left to find his brother and the two went for breakfast. Chu Cheng and Hua Li met up with them then.

"A-Li, I've spoken with the Eastern leaders. The Chairman has gone back to convene a secret session of the national congress and discuss your offer. Seeing how important it is, you should send some of your people over right away to take part in the discussions. We must also consider how this will affect the East's relationship with the West."

Hua Li nodded in understanding. "It's not a problem, we've already come up with a plan that involves a few ways for us to deal with the West. I'll have Mo Xiao go and participate in the deliberations herself. As my fiancé she fully represents the wishes of Poseidon Group."

"Very well," he replied. "When you go back she can fill you in on the details."

Hua Li, smiling, nodded his head. Then his attention turned to Lan Jue. "Today is a good day! Not only will our dear friend break through, but I

have an ass to kick! I've never won in all the time I've known him but I think today that'll change."

Lan Jue's dark laughter was ominous and pride filled his voice. "Don't assume victory yet. We'll see how things end up!"

Hua Li regarded him with surprise. "Well aren't you full of self-confidence! Even with such a big gap."

On paper the difference between an Adept and a Paragon was a few letters, but it was a gap about as wide as earth was to heaven. Hua Li was assured in his superiority.

Chu Cheng, meanwhile, no longer seemed dejected by his encroaching public humiliation. On the contrary he was calm and did not speak. However, a flickering gray light shimmered in his eyes. Clearly he had worked hard to prepare for today.

"A-Cheng, I have a problem. Is there anywhere here with an arena that can handle our power?" Hua Li asked.

Chu Cheng's answer betrayed a note of pride. "Of course there is, I've already found the place. It belongs to the boss, Terminator. We're in luck because he'd disappeared somewhere and gave me special approval to use it."

Suddenly his voice dropped and he leaned in conspiratorially. "You guys didn't see it, but yesterday there was this strange light over Luo. It pierced the clouds and shot out into the atmosphere. I think it was the Terminator, he's going to break through."

Lan Qing and Lan Jue shared a quick look. He wasn't wrong about the Terminator's impending breakthrough, but that light hadn't come from him.

They took a high-altitude verticar to a familiar location.

As expected, it was the arena where the Terminator had taken the Lan brothers just the day before. The ceiling had since been repaired, like nothing had happened.

“We’re up first!” Itching to get started, Hua Li threw his arm around Lan Jue’s shoulder while a nasty light smoldered in his eyes. He spoke eagerly as he tugged him forward. “I have waited so long for this day. But I’ll be gentle, don’t worry.”

Lan Jue gave him a flat stare while Chu Cheng laughed behind them. “I tell you I’d be down, too! You should take a load off big brother, you can judge the ass-whoopin’ I’ll give your little brother.”

Lan Jue swung his eyes between the two of them. “It looks like you two are invested in being bullies.”

Hua Li grinned at him, and Chu Cheng stood his shoulders back and chest puffed out. They didn’t respond, but their body language said all they needed to say.

“Bring it, A-Li. A-Cheng, watch and learn.” He gave the order without irritation and walked to the center of the ring.

Hua Li watched him go with some small measure of curiosity. He glanced at Chu Cheng. “I’m suddenly filled with a sense of foreboding. He didn’t become a Paragon and not tell anyone, right? Something doesn’t feel right.”

“He hasn’t. Go on.” Lan Qing quietly replied.

Chapter 720: Lan Jue vs. Poseidon

“Ah, then it’s fine.” Hua Li trotted after Lan Jue.

Chu Cheng moseyed over to Lan Qing’s side. “So how long you think Lan Jue will last?”

Lan Qing fixed him with a long, uncomfortable look. “What makes you think it won’t be the other way around?”

“Ah? Hey big guy, since when did you become such a favoritist? It’s not like you.” Chu Cheng was honestly surprised.

Lan Qing placidly responded. “If it were you instead of Lan Jue it would absolutely be a loss. Not a chance. Lan Jue isn’t a Paragon, he’s better.”

Lan Qing had come to understand Lan Jue’s strength, little by little, over the last few days. He had displayed an incredible talent, and even without the Banishing Blades he would be an exceptional fighter – no normal peak-ranked Adept.

Lan Jue stood in the center of the arena, watching Hua Li approach with calm expression.

Hua Li stopped a few yards away. Where he stepped the floor seemed to ripple like the surface of a lake. As he looked at his opponent, surprise twinkled in the Paragon’s eyes.

His surprise came from how Lan Jue interacted with the environment. Somehow he was both a part and separate, like an immortal surveying the lands of humans – and just as arrogant.

That arrogance wasn’t in his look or posture. Instead, it poured from him like an invisible wind. He was separate from everything because he was superior to it. It surrounded him with a palpable sense of danger.

“Begin.” Lan Jue nodded at Hua Li.

His opponent smirked and waggled a finger at him. Hua Li made no attempt to hide the contempt in his gaze.

Further discussion was pointless, so Lan Jue made his move. In a blink

he appeared in front of Hua Li driving his palm toward his chest.

Hua Li watched him come, standing with his hands clasped at the small of his back like a haughty lord. Just as it seemed Lan Jue's palm strike would land, the area before Poseidon ripples with a pale blue light.

Everything took on an aqua hue, and the fighters found themselves in something like an underwater world. It filled everyone with a strange and fantastical sensation.

Lan Jue felt like he'd been caught in a quagmire. His arm – in fact his whole body felt sluggish. The pull of dark undercurrents tugged at him.

A strange scene followed. Lan Jue slowly curled his outstretched hand into a fist and hammered it forward.

His entire body was enveloped in a hazy black and white aureole. Tides of yin-yang energy dispersed the dark currents and caused the world of blue before his fist to ripple.

Hua Li's eyes widened as he watched. Lan Jue's fist became a shimmering resplendent cobalt as it smashed into the Paragon's protective shield.

Surprises continued, for the rippled of protogenic power that surrounded them were dispersed like water cast from a basin. All of a sudden it was like gravity returned and everything around Poseidon came splashing down. Lan Jue pressed ahead in his attack.

For a moment Hua Li was stunned. What he felt in that punch filled him with fear. However he was a Paragon, with a Paragon's speed. The moment Lan Jue broke his defenses Hua Li became a beam of blue light and vanished. Lan Jue's fist tore through thin air.

Hua Li reappeared ten meters away, far enough – he thought – to avoid Lan Jue's attack. But just as he was getting comfortable the world of water around him rippled and bolts of crackling lightning appeared all around. As they struck him he felt the power penetrate down into his bones. Numbness crept into his limbs and through his trunk. The vast cache of energy at his command evaporated like snow in a bonfire.

What was this power? He was a Paragon but somehow his energy had been dispersed. It was inconceivable.

Lan Jue never stopped. When his punching arm extended as far as it would go his index finger shot out. A burst of sapphire power surged out, flat at the front like a set hammer.

Nine Taiji Hammers!

Hua Li was numb from head to toe. Dodging was impossible.

All at once Hua Li unleashed his true strength. Swells of elemental power undulated around them, and a grand figure appeared from nowhere before him. A beam of metallic blue light erupted force and crashed into the sapphire hammer.

Poof! Lan Jue's Taiji hammer was gone, but so was the metallic beam.

Hua Li grunted in momentary effort. He'd bought himself enough time to shed the numb sensation stifling him.

On the sidelines Chu Cheng was watching in open shock. What was happening? Hua Li was on the defensive? His Majesty Poseidon was making a fool of himself! ¹

Lan Jue didn't waste his advantage. He launched himself forward surrounded by lightning, his body disappearing into the crackling power. Although the arena was filled with the manifestation of Hua Li's power, the rippling power was dispersed wherever it came into contact with Lan Jue's electric shell. Lan Jue passed through like there was no resistance at all, without an ounce of speed lost.

Neither Chu Cheng nor the unfortunate Hua Li had anticipated Lan Jue commanded such dominance.

With a low growl Hua Li's eyes took on a metallic blue light. His body vanished into the warped and quivering sea of power. If before it'd been a sea of calm, now it was the ocean in a tempest.

Thick waters solidified and pressed in on Lan Jue to try and crush the life out of him.

The lightning froze and Lan Jue was revealed again. Only now, his body was enclosed in an orb of glittering translucent sapphire energy. No matter how much of the electric blue energy collapsed upon it, the shield around him broke it apart.

Even protogenia seemed to have no effect on his defense. Hua Li's power had no way through. A Paragon's greatest advantage over Adepts was their control of protogenia. Against Lan Jue, however, that did not appear to be the case.

Hua Li reappeared, his face dark with doubt and anxiety. "What is this power, A-Jue? How are you able to unravel protogenia?"

Lan Jue answered with a grin. "It's been too long since we've sparred. You still think you can beat me?"

Hua Li grunted at him. "I haven't showed you my real strength yet. Don't gloat just yet."

As he spoke he reached out and beckoned with his right hand. A halo of blue light radiated from him replete with divine supremacy. A golden rune in the shape of a trident shimmered into existence upon his forehead and his aura swelled.

Pressure like the crushing depths of the ocean strengthened around Lan Jue. The metallic blue light which was so easily dispersed before still could not penetrate Lan Jue defensive shield, but was less quickly defeated.

Lan Jue's eyes lit up in excitement. "Divine rite – the power given to you by your family. You've only achieved the Realm of Protogenia but this inheritance lets you command the power of a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Am I right?"

Hua Li gave an imperatorial laugh. A flash of light deposited a metallic blue trident in his hand. "Don't worry, I won't give you a chance to surrender." He drew the trident through the air as he spoke, each stroke releasing a wave of golden light. They rippled through the water-like environment, reflecting and refracting off of one another but relentlessly toward a single target.

When the first wave of golden light struck Lan Jue's shield, it shimmered queerly. Poseidon's new power was also dispersed, but the power protecting Lan Jue was noticeably weaker.

Such power! As the pressure continued to increase Lan Jue knew he had to act.

A flash of red light briefly lit the arena, and Captus appeared in his grip. When it did the space around him seemed to be on the verge of collapsing in on itself. Poseidon's Domain was drawn to it, into the gloomy red light like water through a drain. The pressure began to ease.

A corona of red light sprang up around Lan Jue, wide enough to allow half a step in each direction. In that small space he swung the sword around and carved out circles in the air that left behind crimson orbs.

The golden light issued from Hua Li's trident fell into the red orbs and vanished like clay statues in a stream.

He can do that, too?

Through his Divine Rite Hua Li was pressing his opponent with the full range of his strength. Lan Jue had protected himself with tricks and techniques, but the difference had to be more than his non-Paragon companion could bear!

But the truth was laid bare, and he could hardly believe it.

Lan Jue was also in a unique position. Although the pressure put upon him by Hua Li didn't match the Terminator's, he also didn't have Qianlin by his side. The skill of his Taiji sword melded with Captus' power and his All-Heaven lightning. Through their perfect accord he continued to diffuse Hua Li's assault.

Poseidon's Trident was a mighty Astrum, but even it could not contend against a legendary Banishing Blade. Ever since fusing with the sword yesterday, he sensed his ties to Captus had reached new heights. It felt like a natural extension of himself. He flowed through the Taiji sword stances like a fish in water, and Captus' powers of space-time manipulation had infused Lan Jue's heart.

With each swipe Lan Jue's grasp of Captus' nature deepened. He poured his Discipline into the blade and felt it amplify. The immortal qi within his All-Heaven lightning resonated with the Banishing Blade, though only a true immortal would be capable of summoning its full strength.

Control was Captus' eminency. It was complemented perfectly by the Taiji style. As he swung around tracing circles through the air, they did more than disperse Hua Li's onslaught. They expanded, joined, and swelled until they formed a net of inexplicable force that covered everything.

Chapter 721: Better Than a Paragon

Where Poseidon's protogenia came in contact with Captus' crimson power, it was either dispersed or devoured. Nothing could stop the spread of the terrifying red power.

How!

Disbelief was writ plain in Hua Li's eyes. When did Lan Jue get so strong? Poseidon was a Paragon, and he a mere Adept! His powers had changed so drastically it was hard to fathom. It was restrained, profound, but also explosive.

Lan Jue's pace suddenly increased. He swung Captus in seven consecutive slashes that were absent the precision and delicacy of before. The red blade lashed with the speed and ferocity of lightning, leaving in its wake seven jagged streamers of light. They were red and blue, and inside twinkled a mysterious power that made them look like patches of a starry night sky.

For Hua Li, it suddenly seemed like everything had gone dim. He felt surrounded and a moment later noticed those slashes had inexplicably appeared around him. They were on him before he could react, assailing him with tremendous pressure.

Seven-Star Hammer! Another of the Nine Hammers of Taiji!

Lan Jue's sword, as an extension of himself, issued the doughty attack. Hua Li sensed reality around him threatening to collapse, swallowing his energy even before he had a chance to use it. The seven azure blue orbs of starry light closed in on him. Every one of them birthed a frightening surge of energy that he could feel in his very soul!

This guy!

Divine light sparkled in Hua Li's eyes. His arm shot out abruptly, waving his trident through the air. Golden light gathered all around until it reached a critical mass, then surged out like a tsunami in all directions. An enormous figure appeared once more behind Hua Li – all the Poseidons of

the past merged into one. With its appearance a sense of awe and fear pervaded.

Boom—! The ensuing blast was a chaos of red, blue and gold. Their collision covered the arena in a sea of tumultuous power.

Lan Qing, perhaps anticipating this, had appeared in the air overhead. His hands were pressing down and the image of Vairochana shimmered behind him. A waterfall of myriad colors suppressed the wild energies below from surging out of control. The arena had its own protections, but they'd seen how they could be overcome. Who knew what sort of tragedy this eruption would wreak on the planet if it were let loose.

The seething torrent of power continued for a full minute before finally abating. When the dust settled Chu Cheng peered into the aftermath. He saw Lan Jue standing firm with the shimmering red sword in hand. Hua Li was a short distance away, with tousled hair and sporting tattered clothes.

Both men were pale and drained, but it was clear Hua Li had come out the loser in their exchange.

Chu Cheng rubbed his eyes in disbelief, then blinked and looked harder. The scene remained the same. It'd been real, all of it – the truth was irrefutable.

Hua Li wasn't any better. He swayed slightly on his feet, glaring at Lan Jue.

"Round two?" Lan Jue smirked. Once again he lifted the Banishing Blade, and in response a brilliant blue light appeared from his chest. It grew and spread as the sound of crashing waves filled the air. But they were not waves, it was a world of electricity.

Pure lightning element. The tide of power didn't undulate or sizzle like lightning, instead calmly filling the space around him. Captus' angry red light continued to paint the arena in its glow. Meanwhile, Lan Jue's aura continued to rise.

All of Lan Jue's power coalesced into his focused flow sword technique. Once galvanized it would be fierce as a thunderbolt, steady as a landslide,

and potent as supernova.

Hua Li's scowled and shouted. "Enough, no more! This is unfair!"

Lan Jue chuckled. Captus dissolved into red light and vanished. "It's one on one, how is this unfair?"

Hua Li made no effort to hide his agitation. "There's something you're using that counteracts my protogenia. I could use none of the advantages of Paragon. My energy far outstrips yours but dissipated the moment it reaches you. Even if I was truly a Reflection of Heaven and Earth I couldn't pierce your defense. How is this not cheating? His Majesty Jue Di must have given you something for you to be able to do this."

"You guess wrong," Lan Jue explained. "It's nothing Jue Di gave me – it's my own Discipline." As he spoke he lifted his hand, revealing an orb of purple lightning rotating in his palm. All-Heaven Lightning.

After intense cultivation the inherently wild nature of All-Heaven lightning had been stripped. It was now calm and restrained. All the more frightening when it was unleashed.

The final clash of their exchange – Lan Jue's Seven Star Hammer and All-Heaven Lightning – had nearly routed Hua Li's Divine Rite-empowered protogenia. It frightened him, and forced him to employ the full breadth of his power and protogenia to defend himself. Even then he had only just managed. If Lan Jue had been a true Paragon, even that likely would have failed.

Hua Li stared at Lan Jue with a conflicted look. "It seems clear I won't surpass you in my lifetime. If you've reached this level already, why delay your breakthrough?"

Lan Jue smiled. "I'm waiting for her."

Hua Li paused. After a moment, though, he nodded. "I understand."

Lan Qing had returned to Chu Cheng's side. His low, calm voice arose. "Our turn."

Chu Cheng answered with a nervous chuckle. "After watching that

exchange I'm pretty lacking in confidence."

"Then I'll beat some faith into you," he answered.

Chu Cheng then turned to Lan Jue and offered a sheepish and apologetic smile. "A-Jue, forget what I said earlier yeah? I'm on your side, always will be. Hua Li, the backstabber, he just wanted to bully you because you hadn't broken through yet. But me? Thought never crossed my mind. In fact just the idea is despicable!"

"I struggle to believe you have any moral integrity," Hua Li snapped. "You think because I can't beat him I can't kick your ass?"

Chu Cheng puffed out his chest. "Wait till I break through in a minute, then we'll see if you're as good as you think."

"Enough nonsense. Hurry up!" Lan Qing fixed him with an intolerant and irritated look. Then in a flash he was within the center of the arena.

Lan Jue and Hua Li removed themselves to the outside borders of the arena. Hua Li poked him. "So what's that Discipline called?"

"All-Heaven Lightning," he replied. "I borrowed the name from old legends. My thunderbolt powers were yang based. I evolved it with the help of yin-based lightning and a chunk of thunder essence I was lucky enough to come across. The result was what you experienced today. You shouldn't feel discouraged, it's no loss of face to lose to me."

"I didn't lose! I was afraid to hurt you. If I'd have used my full strength I'd have taken you." Hua Li muttered.

Lan Jue chuckled but didn't refute his claim.

"You don't believe me?" Hua Li shot him a glare.

"Oh yeah. I believe you, I believe you." His words assured Hua Li, but the look on his face betrayed how he really felt.

Hua Li shot back indignantly. "My bloodline has the power to absorb the full force of the oceans. I become one with the inherent protogenia of the sea. It comes at a cost, but it also pushes me into a whole new level of power. You're strong, but all your abilities are still just based in Discipline.

Dispersing my protogenia was draining for you, too, and if I were stronger you wouldn't be able to keep up."

Lan Jue was bemused by his friend's competitive spirit. "Alright, enough. You win, alright?"

Hua Li wanted to continue his gripe, but Lan Qing and Chu Cheng had already begun their contest.

Lan Qing stood, still and silent. No echo of power radiated from him but none was needed. He bore himself like an indomitable force and his presence alone was subduing. Even Hua Li and Lan Jue on the far side of the arena could clearly sense it.

One could imagine what Chu Cheng was feeling.

His narrowed eyes overflowed with licking gray flames, and everything around him seemed drained of life and color. A pervading sense of death hung around him like a cloud. He was much stronger now than he had been during the Great Adept Tournament, that much was clear. The fires of hades danced around him like silken threads, thick with nuanced power. His control was absolute.

Chu Cheng didn't wait for his aura to reach full strength. In a flash his body disappeared into the void while Lan Qing was surrounded by macabre gray light. It was as though in a moment they'd been transported to the underworld.

Just then, a translucent grey streak descended from above. It raced toward Lan Qing, nothing held back. The An Lun admiral was a Paragon, a Reflection of Heaven and Earth in fact, so Chu Cheng had to respond with unmitigated force. His first strike came from the ancestral weapon of his bloodline, Hades' Falchion!

When the Gourmet ascended to Paragon he forsook the name Hades, and instead took the title Infernal Vanguard. In part that was outside of his ability to choose since he didn't bear Hades' Falchion. He didn't feel qualified to take the name and lead his family.

Instead the weapon was bequeathed to Chu Cheng. It purified the

deathly fires he commanded, increasing its strength and penetration. Just being in the falchion's presence felt like it was devouring one's soul.

Chapter 722: Chu Cheng Advances

When he saw the strike Lan Jue quietly nodded his head. He wasn't the only one to advance, his companions were all getting stronger. For the Four Divine Monarchs, strength had always been a priority for each of them.

Ting! The ringing sound brought Lan Jue's attention back to the fight.

Lan Qing had lifted his right hand and, with only his middle finger, flicked away Hades' Falchion.

The Astrum responded with a low rumble and the whole body of the blade vibrated. Chu Cheng's world of solemn gray grew dimmer and more obscure. In front of Lan Qing a single gray door appeared.

Another sword slash burst out from the door as it opened. From overhead Hades' Falchion descended to join it. The two attacks supplemented each other as they raced for the center of Lan Qing's chest.

Ting-! Lan Qing never flinched and fell back a step as his middle finger knocked the danger away. His body began to glow with a faint golden aura. The emanation of enlightenment and compassion swelled his oppressive aura at the same time.

Even from their vantage Hua Li and Lan Qing were finding it hard to breathe.

Such pressure! Hua Li even gasped audibly. What this big brother's true strength?

Hades' Falchion flitted through the air, coming at Lan Qing with blinding speed from every direction to try and flip passed his defenses. Lan Qing never counter-attacked, and simply flicked or slapped away the blade whenever it got close.

Still his aura strengthened. It swelled with every passing moment, rose with every breath to pulverize them in an indescribable power.

In the midst of that pressure the whole arena started to quake. Chu Cheng's attacks had slowed as they tried to fight through the influence of

Lan Qing's emulsions.

Golden light shone brighter around Lan Qing until he was a blazing silhouette. Any time Hades' Falchion got close it to the deathly aura it bore was dispersed. Its desperate efforts were only getting weaker.

This was clearly a one-sided contest.

"Just this and already you can't keep up? Do you want to be a Paragon?" Lan Qing's disdainful taunt rolled like thunder through the room.

A flash of light revealed Chu Cheng suspended in air. Lan Qing's call had forced him to appear. His grey eyes had become a seething blood red, and he burned with pride and a thirst for victory that made his aura flare.

They all knew Lan Qing was their better, but deep in their hearts who didn't want to put the soldier in his place?

The suffocating pressure collapsed. Chu Cheng threw his head back and released a wild scream into the air that summoned a majestic ashen aura. The influence of his power continued to spread through the area, and he slashes Hades' Falchion held tight in his white-knuckle grip. Each vicious cut birthed a blinding flash and the shadow of strange archaic runes.

Chu Cheng himself was ripped apart. Splintering parts of himself were swallowed into the nine runes that hung in the air. As he vanished the runes overlapped one another, causing Hades' Falchion to blaze with a staggering light before shooting ahead. A streak of burning power was left in its wake.

Lan Qing's lips turned up in a smirk. He stamped a foot forward and punched his right hand. The surreal image of Vairochana appeared behind him. The Buddha's resplendent light mingled with the glow of compassion from Lan Qing, and together they enveloped Hades' Falchion.

The nine runes along the Astrum's surface burned as it struggled against the light. Then, Lan Qing's punch landed. First the falchion shook then thrown back. Its nine runes were shed and hung in the air.

Suddenly, everything stopped. The crushing pressure, Vairochana, Lan Qing... everything vanished without a trace. In the ensuing stillness the

gray light from Hades' Falchion bloomed. As though they were reawakened, the runes surged with pulsing waves of energy.

Chu Cheng appeared in the midst of those runes, seated cross-legged in mid-air with his eyes closed. All around him the world roiled in a state of flux. Sometimes the nightmarish image of the river Styx and its fetid, poison water prevailed. Sometimes it was a blazing sun ready to swallow the world. All throughout the gray fires of the underworld rose in staggering columns.

His powers were raging out of his control. Wild tempests of protogenia appeared and vanished in the same moment. But the period of calamity was short lived. Suddenly and with tremendous force, a pulse of pure protogenic effusion exploded through the arena. For a moment they were immersed in the underworld. Everything was drained of color, and a deathly stillness hung over everything.

Success! Lan Jue's eyes lit up as he watched. He and Hua Li were protected beneath a shell of golden power – Lan Qing had joined them by their side.

Lan Qing had slowly built pressure since the fight's outset. He urged on Chu Cheng's fighting will and then – when the pressure was at its greatest – he removed it. With nothing to contend against Chu Cheng's power gushed out to fill the vacuum and transformed him from an Adept into a Paragon.

Lan Jue smirked as he watched the dramatic display. "I'm the last one. I never thought that'd be the case."

Hua Li's response was less than sympathetic. "So what? You're not a Paragon but I still struggled against you."

Lan Jue's chortling laughter responded. "Stop fussing. When I break through I'll protect you!"

Hua Li stared at him. "So you say, but you better keep your word. You aren't going to meditate on the changes in his protogenia?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "No need. My protogenia is solid and I know my

path. I need no more guidance.”

He wasn't exaggerating, for with the addition of the immortal qi and all his experience with other Paragons, he knew precisely what he needed to do.

Humanity now had a new Paragon among them. This time it was the North who would celebrate their good fortune.

Chu Cheng's ascension also marked the return of the Hades' bloodline. First the Infernal Vanguard, now him. Unless things changed they had the power necessary to wrest the Dark Citadel from the hands of Satan.

The three Monarchs remained to look after Chu Cheng. The process of breaking through was sometimes long and sometimes short, it depended on the individual's comprehension and protogenic control.

For Chu Cheng, he had many benefits in his favor contributing to his rise. The Clairvoyant's gift of the Emberblossom pendant guided him. Recultivating at his peak had tempered his abilities further, culminating in the military training he'd undergone to lead his people. All of that helped push him to this point.

Lan Jue quietly informed the Gourmet, who then alerted his family. Before long the old patriarch of the Hades Bloodline, Chu Yun, appeared with the current head of the family, Chu Dong. Several other notable members of the clan had also come.

Chu Yun wept openly as he saw his grandson in the midst of his breakthrough. He had waited for more years than he could remember for this moment.

After two days and two nights Chu Cheng completed his transformation. Once it was done the North rang with trumpets and cheering cries. No good news had come to their Alliance since the defeat in the Shattered Starfields. But now they had a new Paragon to protect them in this dark hour; Hades!

He was placed at the bottom of the Paragon List.

Once the Chu Family took over their friend's vigil, Lan Qing and Lan Jue

left Luo and returned to Skyfire. There was much that required their attention.

Once they returned Lan Qing left almost immediately. Lan Jue didn't know what business he had to attend to. As for Lan Jue, he didn't need to ask the Avenue what was needed before receiving some bad news.

"Daddy, mommy wanted me to give this to you." Lan Jue looked at the small girl in his arms and felt his heart inexplicably seize.

Jun'er had come to see him shortly after he'd returned to Zeus' Jewelry Shop. She'd come by herself. With the help of her psionic projection helmet Jun'er walked the streets like anyone else. A holodisk player was gripped in her tiny hands.

Lan Jue thought back to when the Pharmacist left them on Luo. He knew what it was even before looking at it.

"I'll check it later. How about you and me go get some food. What do you think?" He spoke tenderly. He didn't want to watch it with her, it would be too frightening and painful.

But the little soothsayer shook her head and smiled. "No! Mama said she wants me to watch it with you. She said there's something for me, too, but that I had to wait for you daddy. I waited, am I a good girl?"

He pinched her pudgy white cheeks. "Yes you are. Alright, let's see."

Lan Jue set up the projector and hit play. It spat forth a beam of light that painted an image in the air before them.

It was the Pharmacist.

As always she was garbed in traditional Chinese clothing; a silken qipao with intricately woven flowers scattered across a white backdrop. Her long hair was meticulously kept in a bun on top of her head without a single hair out of place.

"Lan Jue... I hope you don't mind me using your name instead of your title. I'm sorry I deceived you. All the years of suffering came crashing back in that moment. Breaking through also released the barriers I'd built

in my heart, and I was flooded with all the pain I'd hidden away. I thought for a long time... thought about everything he and I went through. We grew up together, learned together, fell in love. In the end we were the most important people in each other's lives."

"Ever since I have fought my hardest to suppress these feelings. Jun'er gave me faith to keep going on. I fooled myself into thinking he'd just encountered some accident. But he was strong enough to make it. I can't hold onto that lie anymore."

The image of the Pharmacist paused as she fought the sadness welling up within her.

"He'd dead. There's no escaping that fact. There probably isn't even anything left of him but my heart can't take it. I can't fight it anymore, I must find him. No matter the consequence... even if it means my death, I have to go. I know it's a foolish choice and will end in failure, but I believe you understand what I'm feeling. I need to find anything that remains of the man I love."

Chapter 723: Duty-Bound to Rescue

Tears streaked down the Pharmacist's face, twinkling like small crystals. Of course she knew her decision was foolish and emotional. But years of pain bubbling up to the surface was impossible to ignore.

Lan Jue wanted to hit something. He'd known she wasn't in her right mind but he'd believed her and let her go. However, he also knew he wouldn't have been able to stop her. He remembered that she'd been about to say something but held back. Suddenly the sentimental and reluctant look in her eyes that day made sense.

"I suspect my chances of coming back are slim. Jun'er has grown and has all of the Avenue to look after her. That brings me peace. Don't tell her what I'm doing, just tell her that I've gone far away and I won't be back for a long time. I've locked this with your fingerprint to ensure she can't see it. I'm sorry, Jun'er... but I can't wait any more. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

The hologram stopped here and the Pharmacist's image vanished.

"Mama. Mama!" Jun'er squirmed uncomfortably.

Lan Jue understood right away that the little one had lied to him. But how could he criticize her now after what they'd seen?

There was no question as to her destination, she was after the alien planets. Her goal was also plain as the nose on his face. She was on a suicide mission to make them pay for what they'd done to her late husband.

"Jun'er, don't rush. I'm going to go get your mother back, alright?" He hugged her tightly to his chest, using his warm embrace to try and soothe her.

But Jun'er was calm. She spoke plainly. "Mama will come back. Definitely. Go and get her daddy – you're the only one who can."

Lan Jue's heart sank for he knew the dangers, and the likely outcome. Could he bring her back? It didn't matter what the answer to that question

was, he had to try. He had to for Jun'er, for himself.

"Let me take you back, Jun'er. Then I'm going to go find your mom." He carried her from Zeus' Jewelry Store with hurried steps and told no one of what they'd seen. After dropping her off at the Skyfire Museum he left immediately for the airship hangars.

Lan Jue knew it clear, he had to go on this journey alone. The chances they would have the alien planets was high, and the chance of coming back very low. Yet despite that he had to go, because if he didn't the Pharmacist's death was assured. Perhaps if he were lucky the Pharmacist would get lost in the Starfields and he'd have a chance to convince her to come back.

Lan Jue quickly took a verti-car to the hangar, boarded Zeus-1 and departed Skyfire. He'd had no time to rest before his next mission. Once he was free of the planet's atmosphere he urged Zeus-1 to top speed and raced for the Shattered Starfields.

He dialed a number into the ship's systems.

"Shouldn't you be on Skyfire?" Lan Qing's face appeared on the screen.

Lan Jue wasted no time. "Something came up that needed handling right away. The Pharmacist has gone after the alien planets by herself to seek revenge. I need to find a way to stop her. I'm by myself and it will be dangerous. If I don't come back..." He trailed off.

He hadn't brought Lin Guoguo and thus had no way to hide his presence from alien patrols. He didn't want to force anyone to share the dangerous situation he was putting himself in.

Lan Qing's brows furrowed. "Do you understand how irresponsible this is? Star Division needs you, all of Skyfire Avenue needs you. How can you act on impulse like this and rush off alone?"

Lan Jue sighed. "Look, I understand everything you're saying and I understand the responsibilities that have been put on me. But you know me, you know the kind of person that I am. If I didn't help when my friends were in need than I wouldn't be me. I'm sorry, I need you to tell

Skyfire Avenue. If I don't make it back then Xiaosu will be in command of Star Division. She's the best choice. I'll do whatever I can to stay safe and come home."

Lan Qing stared at him through the screen for a long time. Eventually he replied. "Be careful."

"Yeah, ok." He hung up then blocked all further communications. Once the word got back to the Avenue he knew people would be trying to get him to come back. However, it was already too late to change his mind. He was going to save the Pharmacist for the benefit of Jun'er and the woman herself, even if she didn't want it.

Zeus-1 shot through space like a comet. He set the ship on cruise control and shut his eyes. He needed to gather his thoughts. He didn't want to die, but the only way to bring he and the Pharmacist back in one piece was to have a plan.

Her goal was to find her husband, or exact vengeance for his murder. That meant that she was searching for the alien planets, specifically Monarch. If the Violet Prince was to be believed that was the one that had kill him all those years ago. Ultus was there.

If Lan Jue wanted to stop her, his best shot was somewhere around Monarch. That meant that evading aliens along the way was paramount. Zeus-1 could cloak and Lan Jue had some psionic skill, though nothing like Lin Guoguo.

His ship was small and he didn't have the Photographer of Wine Master here to make a quick getaway. If he was discovered he only recourse was to kill or run. That was a real problem.

Strong as he was, there were limits to the number of creatures he could handle himself.

Oh, but wait. He wasn't alone. He'd hesitated to bring her but in the end Qianlin had remained safely tucked away in his spirit. He'd made her a promise that no matter what they would stay together.

Zeus-1 had undergone many upgrades over the last couple of years, and

that showed itself in its speed. There likely was no other ship in its class that could catch it. Lan Jue hoped that would be enough to stop the Pharmacist. It wasn't easy to make it to the Starfields from Luo. Getting a ship was one thing, but then she had to navigate the infamously difficult Starfields by herself. Even if she found a safe route it wasn't certain she'd find the planets.

It was actually farther to the planets' last known location from Luo than it was from Skyfire. Once she was in the Starfields her progress would also be considerably slowed. Only Xiaosu could navigate the broken currents of asteroids with speed and dexterity.

Space travel was a lengthy process, and therein lay his chances to catch up with the Pharmacist.

Xiaosu wasn't piloting Zeus-1 this time. However, several trips and a state-of-the-art onboard computer was enough for Lan Jue to manage, he was confident. A couple days of travel later, he'd arrived.

As he plunged into the Starfields Lan Jue engaged the ship's cloak. He wasn't reckless, he tried to remain under the enemy's radar. No one knew what the planets were like now, or what they were up to. But just the fact they were there meant the Starfields was a place fraught with dangers.

Things seemed unsettlingly still, even more than his last visit. It was probably because all life had been stolen from this sector. The swath he traveled was vast, who knew how much the enemy had gained from their systematic sweep.

Hua Li was probably right in his analysis, even the aliens were limited in how far they could evolve. They strove to break free of the restraints imposed by universal protogenia, but it was not so easy.

Once more Lan Jue was faced with just how little humanity understood about their foe.

He was on yet another scouting mission, Lan Jue mused helplessly, though this one was not his choice. This visit was far more dangerous since his target was the strongest known enemy they faced.

Keep it slow, sis. You need to give me a chance to catch up.

Lan Jue didn't drive Zeus-1 directly to Monarch's location – he wasn't that foolish. If he did he was far more likely to run into patrols first. Then he'd be forced to face them, possibly a lot of them.

After discovering the aliens' ability to psionically locate their targets, Skyfire Avenue dedicated a lot of energy toward learning more. The Keeper had designed something called a Psionic Generator which, after some testing, was able to perform at roughly one-third the capabilities of Lin Guoguo. Of course it didn't have anywhere near the flexibility of the Psychic Tide, meaning it could only emulate a few kinds of enemy pulses. Hardly stellar, but at least it held some use. At least it extended Zeus-1's safety net. Still Zeus-1 was small and the technology was new. It was hard to say how effective it would be in practice. Yet, Lan Jue had no choice but to rely on it.

Lan Jue's first destination was the small base they'd built for Zeus-1. It was the best place for him to launch his search. Lan Jue knew from the beginning that approaching the planets in Zeus-1 was impossible. The only way he could get close was by himself.

But going solo with limited equipment also had its advantages. He was a small target.

Star Division's former basecamp was still there, the same as it had always been. Lan Jue coaxed his ship into the hidden valleys on the small planet's surface, then gathered some supplies and set out on his own.

Chapter 724: Teleportation, Ultus!

Thor's Promise shimmered with an internal light. Then, in a flash, an enormous sapphire figure appeared suspended in space. Lan Jue placed the psionic generator and Blinding Stone within Thor's central gem lattice then boarded the mecha to calibrate.

Thor had been upgraded along with Zeus-1 when Lan Jue had gone to visit his father. Jue Di had fitted the mecha with an important assembly unit called a focal pool. It could accommodate all sorts of power gems in such a way as to have them work seamlessly together.

With the Blinding Stone equipped Thor could cloak itself from view as Zeus-1 had. The psionic generator was more complicated, but after some modifications to the operating procedures Lan Jue made it compatible with Thor. Concealing the mecha would be easier than a whole ship, and safer.

Seated within the mecha's cockpit, Lan Jue felt at home. It was like a piece of him was returned. He carefully flooded the suit with All-Heaven Lightning.

Thor was constructed with a slew of rare materials that either resisted or amplified electric conduction. It'd cost Lan Jue dearly in both effort and funds to construct. His Discipline was different now, stronger, so he wasn't sure the suit could support it. He stole a moment in his rescue mission to make sure it could.

All-Heaven Lightning wasn't just destruction, for within pure destruction was the seeds of life. Thunder essence was an example, where the tremendous power of Tribulation Lightning struck the most powerful lifeforms down or lifted them up.

Thor started to shimmer with a strange dark blue light. In the dim expanse of space it looked black, but when a star's light bathed it the machine sparkled like a sapphire.

He shot off into space. Lan Jue's hands immediately fell into a familiar rhythm as they danced over Thor's controls. Under the cover of Zeus-1's

equipment he was as invisible as space dust, and slipped through the Starfields silent as a specter.

His target was the alien planets. A mecha suit could not compare to a spaceship in regards to speed, but Lan Jue was an important factor. Thor's current pilot was a different man than he had been, time had moulded him into something better. He was nearly a Paragon, and with the benefit of Qianlin's help he could fill the suit with enough energy to maintain light-speed travel for long periods.

So far everything was going his way. He only hoped the Pharmacist hadn't reached those evil worlds yet. He'd gotten a late start, but he was fast and taking a direct route.

As he neared the planets, alien patrols began to appear. Thor's radar was extended as far as it would go to give its pilot time to react. When a creature appeared Lan Jue kept his distance. At range the psionic generator might fool his enemies, but its efficacy was greatly reduced the closer he came. In the end it came down to how well Lan Jue could fly.

Thankfully space was a big place, and the aliens were few and far between. He maintained lengthy separation but pressed ever inward toward his target.

He leaned upon his knowledge and experience fighting the beasts to know which ones were the most dangerous. As he came upon one kind of alien or another he knew what measures to take in order to remain hidden. After some time the alien worlds appeared in the distance.

He'd lost count how many times he'd seen these planets, but each time he was filled with a pervading sense of dread.

He spotted Queen first, fully recovered from the damage Arachnid had wrought. She and the other two seemed smaller than they had been. All of them were surrounded in a hazy purple atmosphere, and a sense of stillness prevailed. They seemed dormant.

Lan Jue found a sizeable asteroid and settled Thor atop it. He didn't dare get close to the planets now. Instead he would use his mecha's remote monitoring equipment to learn what he could.

Where they hibernating? He couldn't tell, now did he know if the Pharmacist had arrived or not. Lan Jue watched his screens with a frown.

He wanted to save the Pharmacist, but he wouldn't foolishly throw himself into the enemy's net if she were already captured or killed. He'd stop her only if he had the chance, otherwise it would be a pointless sacrifice.

You're not here yet, sis... I know you haven't gotten here yet!

Communicators were useless out here because of the interference and weak signal, even for Zeus-1. For Thor, radio silence was the only option. He'd tried to reach the Pharmacist several times before entering the Starfields, but she must have had her communications system disabled.

Thor stood on the surface of the asteroid, still like it was just another feature of its topography. Lan Jue continued to watch his equipment and hope. As he looked on aliens continued to come and go from the planets and everything seemed normal.

He spotted a few breeds he'd never seen before, which he carefully recorded in the event he made it back. If he wasn't able to stop the Pharmacist he didn't want the trip to be a total waste.

Twenty four hours passed quickly, with Lan Jue vigilantly scanning for any trace of his friend. He was beginning to feel restless. If the Pharmacist had already arrived and the planets were this quiet, it meant he'd missed his chance. Each of these worlds were stronger than his father – stronger than the greatest human alive. What chance did he have if the Pharmacist was in their grasp? The minute he got in close he would be captured and slain.

But it would likely be worse. Lan Jue thought about the Violet Princess' desire to couple with him and steal his DNA. The thought made him shudder, it was too frightening to ponder what would happen if he were caught.

His mind turned to Zhou Qianlin. Her spirit had stirred from its meditations, she was now at the peak of ninth rank just like him. Perhaps when they returned to Skyfire they would isolate and prepare for the next

step. Once they broke through and mastered their Banishing Blades, perhaps they could find some means to come to grip with the alien menace.

Seventy-two hours. Lan Jue decided that was the cut-off, if no trace of the Pharmacist was found by then it meant she was likely already dead. He would have to leave.

Time marched on, and Lan Jue's heart sank with each passing minute.

Sis, have you already...

Thirty-seven hours passed. She should have arrived by now, if his guesses of her speed and trajectory had been correct. But there was no sign of her.

Wait. Lan Jue's heart was heavy.

Suddenly his pupils dilated as he stared into the distance. His mind snapped to laser focus – something was happening with the planets.

They stirred from their slumber and began to swell. The stagnant purple atmosphere roiled and became an ominous violet like the planet was coming back to life.

It's awake? What's it doing?

Lan Jue poured Thor's processing power into the psionic generator. At the same time he focused inward to slow his breathing and heartrate. Thor's secondary systems quieted, leaving only the generator and Blinding Stone running. Lan Jue did all he could to make himself part of the rock that surrounded him.

In the black cockpit of the mecha Lan Jue watched as the alien raiders poured toward the expanding planets. A dark premonition filled his mind.

At first the number of aliens returning to the planets were relatively small. An hour later they'd become a flood of writhing purple bodies, more than he could count.

As the beasts returned the worlds they disappeared into continued to grow. That familiar vortex arose at their center, rotating like a perpetual

tempest. However, there was no traction as he expected. Instead light around the planets started to warp and shift.

They were going to teleport!

Lan Jue knew where his premonition had come from. These alien worlds were getting ready to move! Damn! Were they ready for their invasion?

He stared at them, wide-eyed and in shock. He couldn't warn anyone, not even if he got back to his ship. If the alien worlds were headed for the human territories, then where? Even if he could warn the others, who would he warn? It was already too late.

Lan Jue didn't anticipate this, the trip was supposed to be a rescue mission. He didn't know he would be here to witness the start of an invasion.

Suddenly his dark thoughts were interrupted by a streak of white in the distance.

It began as a single point of light which gradually became brighter until it blazed like a star. Where its light fell, a murderous sensation followed.

Sis! Lan Jue almost shouted.

That unbridled thirst for slaughter had to come from the Pharmacist's sword, Occisus – the deadliest of the Banishing Blades!

She must have seen the planets preparing to leave and chose this moment to strike. It was the first time Lan Jue saw a Banishing Blade wielded by a Paragon, as a conduit to one's power. When he looked closer he saw what the light was coming from; a sword over ten thousand meters long that forced reality around it to crack. Black streaks energy crackled like dark lightning through the canvas of white light. They were undiluted blasts of murderous intent. The terrifying flood of power was difficult to describe.

Aliens continued to return at the planet's call, but those unfortunate enough to bear near the white light were instantly eliminated. He shuddered as he watched, for their destruction was as cruel as the bloodlust that white light contained. All-Heaven Lightning swept his foes

away beneath a flood of overwhelming power. But Occisus did not kill that way.

Chapter 725: To the Rescue

Anything that came close to the light Occisus released was cut apart by a hundred thousand minute slices. The aliens were diced again and again until there was nothing left of them but lacerated atoms. Occisus was a ship-sized meat grinder.

He could sense immediately that the Pharmacist had prepared for this moment for a long time. Her will permeated the aura and galvanized it.

Lan Jue's instinct was to rush forward and get to her, but it would be impossible. Even if he and Qianlin had prepared and met her with their Harmonious Swords style, it still might not be enough to withstand Occisus.

His choices were limited. What could he do if he couldn't stop her? Flee? Fight!

Lan Jue grit his teeth as Thor's systems came back online. Thor was a conflagration of blue light that overwhelmed its Blinding Stone as the mecha launched toward Occisus.

Even a Paragon didn't have the energy necessary to bear this sword without effort. When her strength failed, that would be his chance to end her foolhardy crusade. But if the planets abandoned their teleportation and joined the fight their chances of survival were slim to none.

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The Pharmacist target was simple – Monarch.

Humanity's war with the aliens was not new by this point. There was some level of familiarity with the enemy, knowledge which served the Pharmacist. She knew that attacking the central vortex was useless. The only way to do damage to these terrible alien worlds was to hit them directly.

She had been watching and waiting. By coincidence she had arrived only about four hours after Lan Jue. Though her heart was filled with enmity she was no fool. She knew her mission was not easy – in fact it was likely

impossible. A single person meant nothing against a foe the size of a planet. But none of that mattered in the face of her all-consuming purpose: To get her husband's sword back!

From time immemorial the Banishing Blades were the greatest weapons ever created. She knew that somewhere within the legendary sword was some residual spark of her husband's spirit. She needed it back to feel some part of him again.

When she'd arrived the planets were still hibernating. If she wanted any chance at succeeding she had to bide her time. Of course, she had no concept of what that chance would be. Still she had come alone, and that gave her patience to find the right moment.

She'd slipped into a stillness not unlike her unwitting foes and waited. She saved her energy for the final fight. As a Paragon and with the help of Occisus she could hide herself better than Ln Jue and Thor. She'd been practically invisible until this moment.

When it seemed the planets were preparing to teleport, the Pharmacist knew her time had come.

As her will flooded Occisus and the sword awakened, she could sense Ultus' presence. She knew where it was being held and that was where she focused her assault.

She pressed forward, holding nothing back. Her own protogenia was consumed as the blade drank everything up to fuel its bloodlust. It empowered her, making her attacks more potent than they ever had been. Maybe Occisus would carve her up too, she thought. But she didn't mind, she just wanted to see that piece of her husband one last time.

Close and closer she came. Her body and mind were as one, focused on her singular purpose. Her heart beat against her chest.

My love, I'm here. If your soul is out there make Ultus heed my call. Come back!

The command echoed through her mind, through her sword. Beneath the hunger for destruction lingered pain and loneliness.

The white light ripped through space!

Just when Occisus seemed poised to clash with Monarch's roiling violet atmosphere, reality warbled uncomfortably. Occisus vanished. Then, a moment later, its white light brazenly reappeared on the planet's surface. The ten-thousand meter long sword buried itself in the alien world.

A golden beam shot from Monarch's surface. Its appearance bore a sharpness that seemed to defy reality. Though it was not as brilliant in hue as snow-white Occisus, its power was more tightly compacted. White and gold collided.

Ting! A sound that seemed to shudder the pillars of the universe rang out. Rippled ran through the vortices in all three alien worlds.

The white light dimmed and the Pharmacist reemerged in the space near Monarch. Her face was pale as a ghost like there was no blood left within her. She had put every ounce of herself in that attack. In this moment, besides what was needed to keep her alive in space, she was as weak and frail as a normal human.

In her hand Occisus shivered.

But more frightening than her feeble condition was the look in her eyes as she stared at the sword – and the one holding it.

The sword was gold from top to pommel. It was simple, much like Occisus in appearance. It was gripped in the hands of a man in his mid-thirties. His body was hidden beneath long violet robes, but his handsome face was left uncovered. Long black hair splayed out behind his angular and handsome features and the whole of him shimmered with a faint golden glow. He was like a perfect representation of an ancient emperor. ¹

And his deep violet eyes were staring right back at the Pharmacist.

For a moment the two stared at one another. Then, slowly, the man lifted the golden sword to strike.

Only just then his whole body shook. The aura of power around his weapon fluctuated frantically and he pressed his other hand against his head. He winced, as though in terrible pain.

Not a moment later a flash of blue light swept by and swallowed up the Pharmacist. A streak of brilliant color was left in its wake and streaked into the distance.

Two beams of violet light erupted from the surface of Monarch and into the heavens, giving chase. They moved with unparalleled speed and seemed poised to quickly overtake the blue streak.

Just then, a deep and commanding voice boomed through space.

“Return!” the golden figure left in a flash, leaving behind a trail of fading golden silhouettes. The two beams of violet returned just as quickly as they left, as though they were two baseballs knocked back toward Monarch.

A sweeping light of yellow-gold appeared in the blue light’s path and intersected with it. There was a brilliant eruption of color – and then nothing.

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On the surface of Monarch.

The man with the golden sword slowly recovered. The look on his face was icy cold, and when he spoke his words were like frozen daggers. “You dare hinder me. Still your will lingers – good, very good! Then they shall be allowed to flee this time.”

The two beams of purple light descended from heaven in a flash and terminated before the man in purple. The figures of the Violet Prince and Princess emerged.

Both of them prostrated themselves before the man. “Monarch!”

“Hmph!” With the grunt the central whirlpools of power within each planet swelled. They grew until the whole world was swallowed up. When the light reached its brightest point there was a sudden flash, followed by darkness. The three planets were gone.

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The pale yellow light eventually stopped, settling on the small planetoid

Lan Jue had parked Zeus-1 upon.

Thor's sparkling sleek figure emerged. But there was also someone else, glaring at the mecha with eyes hard enough to crumble mountains.

Thor's chestplate hissed open and Lan Jue stepped out, carrying the pale and stupefied Pharmacist. He didn't dare lift his head to face the other man.

"Father, I'm sorry!" He muttered to the ground.

Indeed the one who saved them in their moment of need had been none other than Jue Di, the only one who could. No other living creature could have delivered them from the clutches of the Prince and Princess.

Jue Di floated to the ground and stood before his son. His voice was cold and cruel. "Get on the ship. We'll discuss this on the way back."

"Yes, father." Lan Jue replied obediently.

He didn't need to ask to know that Lan Qing had told Jue Di about Lan Jue's plan. His father had come a long way to save him. Lan Jue stole a furtive glance and while Jue Di seemed fine, pangs of regret stabbed at Lan Jue's chest. He knew every time Jue Di used his powers universal protogenia burned away some of his life force.

Zeus-1 lifted off and began the journey back home. With no alien planets or patrols to worry about, their path was quick and direct.

Lan Jue inwardly prayed the planets hadn't transferred to the East. Humans were selfish creatures and he was no exception. At times like this who didn't hope tragedy fell upon others rather than their own friends and family.

"Sister, are you alright?" He looked toward the Pharmacist, seated beside him with that same dull expression. Ever since using the sword she seemed lost, or somehow sealed away. Even her eyes didn't move.

Lan Jue was suddenly reminded of Jun'er's words. She had told him her mother would be fine, that only he could bring her back. It seemed she'd been right once again. Her prophetic skills were getting stronger.

Jue Di stood by Lan Jue's side staring out of a window. His face was dark and solemn.

Lan Jue dropped his head again, his face heavy with concern. "Are you alright, father?"

Jue Di stared at him with hard eyes. "If you would stop making trouble for me I'd be fine. They definitely teleported into human territory. I'm going to rest. It looks like staying out of it isn't an option for me anymore. Get us back to Skyfire, your brother's waiting."

Lan Jue paused. "Shouldn't he be on An Lun?"

Jue Di answered. "This doesn't conflict. You'll understand once we return." He didn't give Lan Jue any chance to bother him further. Walking off to one corner he settled on the floor and began to meditate.

The aliens were undoubtedly about to visit destruction upon the worlds of man, yet Lan Jue's heart was accomplished what he'd set out to do, the Pharmacist was back safely. He'd deal with the aliens when they got back.

Chapter 726: He's Not Dead...

Lan Jue's mind wandered back to the man he'd saved the Pharmacist from, and the golden sword he'd borne. That had to have been Ultus.

Did that mean the one who used Ultus against Occisus was the true master, Monarch? Just in human form. Somehow he wasn't as... perfect as the Violet Prince and Princess.

"He's not dead!" The Pharmacist soft voice startled Lan Jue.

He snapped his head her way. "Who?" He asked instinctively.

But a moment later his pupils contracted as the thought crossed his mind. "You... you mean that was your husband?"

The Pharmacist's stunned eyes had regained some spirit, and leaked bitter tears as she nodded her head. "It was him... it was him! I would know him no matter what they've done. He'd not dead, that was him! Only he wielded Ultus like that."

The Pharmacist lifted her hand, and it was then Lan Jue spotted the wound. A rivulet of fresh blood dripped from her pale skin onto Zeus-1's floor.

"Sis, are you alright? Why isn't the wound healing?" Small injuries like the one on her hand should have healed quickly as a Paragon.

She shook her head. "No, don't let it. This is my chance."

She stretched out her hand and revealed her palm to Lan Jue. What he saw was the cut, but it was strange. It looked like a rune, or a picture. A picture that was carved by a dozen precise slices.

Lan Jue fumbled for his nearby instruments and snapped a photo to record it. The Pharmacist was in a trance as he did. "He was your husband? Then why..."

She bitterly shook her head. "It was him, and it wasn't. I had waited for my moment to strike. When I did, when all of me was pushed through the sword, that's when it felt it clearest. I thought if I could just find Ultus it

might have a piece of him left in it. I never thought I'd see him."

"Unless I'm mistaken the aliens must have sensed Ultus' power when they captured him. But they can't use it, they don't have a human's blood to call on the spirit of the weapon. So they kept your husband, and are using him to control the sword. I don't know what it means exactly, but I'm right – my husband is still alive and under the monster's control. But when I arrived there was a moment, when the two of us clashed, that he fought back. For just a second he was himself. A wisp of his consciousness shot out at me and I blocked the blow with my hand. I heard him. He said... 'search.'"

"Search?" Lan Jue was a smart man, it didn't take him long to puzzle out the meaning. "The picture on your hand has something to do with the Banishing Strategy?"

The Pharmacist nodded. "I only just digested what I felt. Thank you, A-Jue. Without you I likely wouldn't have survived. He stopped the alien from killing me but I was too weak to escape."

Lan Jue smiled sheepishly. "You know that was way too risky. You can't just think of yourself, you have Jun'er to consider! That little girl can't be denied her mother."

The Pharmacist's head dropped. "I'm sorry. I was consumed with my loss, losing him was like losing my heart. At Least Jun'er still had you, and I believed you would take care of her. How could you be so foolish as to bring Jue Di along to save me? What if you..."

Lan Jue didn't explain. He didn't tell her he'd come by himself and Jue Di had chased after.

"It's fine, it's all in the past. We know your husband is safe and his mind is whole. We still have a chance. We can defeat these monsters to get him back. You don't need to go rushing into danger anymore, right?"

"Yes." She answered with a resolute nod. She was drained, but her spirit was strong. Her eyes sparkled with fervent light to know her love still lived. She couldn't have asked for better news. She had a reason to keep living.

“We’ll learn what we can from this rune when we return. It has to have something with our inheritance from Celestial Master Qian. When I find a lead, you me and Qianlin will go search for the Banishing Strategy. With the Strategy and by virtue of the Banishing Blades, we’ll get him back and destroy those damned aliens!”

If there was anything that could accomplish such a feat it was these swords. Lan Jue thought they were legends until he and Qianlin joined with them. Only once he felt the outstanding power they bore then he understood.

The Pharmacist turned her head and lightly kissed his face. “Thank you, brother.” She rose to her feet and separated herself to another part of the ship, where she began to meditate.

Lan Jue felt a warmth pass through him. If he hadn’t had come the Pharmacist would be gone. He’d never have seen the smile of joy that touched her lips. The danger they’d faced was worth it.

He gathered his focus and steered Zeus-1 from the Shattered Starfields. Only once he left the Starfields and got in contact with Lan Qing and the Avenue would he know more about where the alien planets disappeared to.

All-out war had finally come. His only hope was that humanity didn’t suffer too greatly.

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Distant starlight danced on the surface of the Bastion ship. Terminator – flagship of the Northern military – hovered in the vast emptiness.

Terminator’s Admiral was a man named Brown. Admiral Brown wasn’t only the captain of this mighty ship, but also the right hand of the Northern armed forces. He was a truly powerful man in the world of fighters, second only to the Commander-in-Chief. That was the President.

Admiral Brown cast a longing glance at the circular side table next to his desk. Atop it sat a dozen of his most favorite spirits, some of the best ever made. Among them were prime examples of Chinese rice wine 1, old

Scottish whisky, and others.

Chapter 727: Terminator-Class, Surrounded

Admiral Brown had sworn off all alcohol until the alien threat was dealt with. He needed a sober mind, it was the only way to fight an overwhelming foe.

He was also responsible for the ship until its commander arrived. He'd received news a few days ago that the His Majesty the Terminator was locked away in seclusion. Once he exited his hermitage stronger, he would come to take personal command of the Bastion.

He'd careful gone over all the data recovered from the battle of the Starfields, where Tyrannosaurus, Heron and Arachnid were defeated at the hands of the alien worlds. He understood his foe well. Not only were they strong, they were legion, and some were frighteningly powerful by their own right. Tyrannosaurus' Admiral had almost been cut down by just one of them.

Luckily Paragons from Skyfire Avenue had been on board. If they hadn't, Tyrannosaurus likely would have fallen.

War was on the horizon, it could break out at any moment. The Northern economy was struggling under the weight of that promise. Society was in turmoil. If this problem wasn't solved soon citizens would start to react negatively.

Admiral Brown sighed and shook his head. He was stuck out here patrolling the borders of the North, looking after two important planets. Luo was under guard by Tyrannosaurus and two other Bastions.

Terminator was a powerful weapon of war. Eventually the threat of its presence would be brought to bear against the alien planets. Whether or not they could handle its strength remained to be seen.

The screech of an alarm suddenly filled the air. An urgent blinking light called the captain's eyes to the emergency communications line.

"Admiral, we're getting strange fluctuations of universal energy."

He felt his heart tense up. Returning to his desk with long strides, he answered back. "Give your report. Where are the fluctuations localized?"

"Around us, sir. We're surrounded. The fluctuations are strong and are already interfering with our instruments. Requesting permission to engage shields."

"Get them up," he replied quickly. "Fifty percent. Prepare to increase speed."

Terminator-Class Bastion was the largest ship in all of human space. Shielding something that massive required tremendous energy, but these were special circumstances. It was no time to be stingy.

He fired off a series of orders. Terminator's various ports and landing zones were closed while a white shell sprang up around the ship. Brown's eyes were fixed on the port window as he gave his commands. His pupils contracted when he saw the enormous purple vortex.

It reminded him of something – an image the Skyfire scout team had recovered months ago. It was when...

"Shields at one hundred percent. Charge the main cannon – all hands to battlestations. Full speed straight up, spare nothing!" The orders came spilling from his mouth in a rapid stream.

He knew the danger they were faced with.

The white shell thickened until Terminator looked like a towering egg. Like Tyrannosaurus, this Bastion was large and circular, constructed to look like a small planet. Its main gun was situated on the bottom, hence why he ordered them to bring the ship over the vortices.

Terminator's cannon needed time to charge. Even disregarding energy saving procedures it needed at least fifteen minutes. There was always a drawback to power.

As the Bastion rumbled, its pale surface was lit by three orbs of light that appeared around it. Three bloated, purple planets appeared in collapsed pockets of space-time. In the center of each world was a whirlpool that pulled at its surroundings.

Lauded as humanity's greatest technological accomplishment, Terminator still had its limits. It didn't have the energy or thrust necessary to free itself from the tug of three planets larger than itself.

"The alien planets!" Admiral Brown felt an icy hand grip his heart. He hadn't expected the war to start like this, with the enemy appearing en masse before his very eyes.

"All guns, open fire!" He roared.

Terminator struggled mightily against the pull of the planets, but couldn't get high enough to position its cannon. But that didn't leave the mighty ship helpless. Countless beams of light erupted from the Bastion's surface as its rail guns let loose. Its smooth surface became a spiked world of flaring weaponry.

The planets responded, reaching out for Terminator with tentacles the size of mountains. Several were shot away by the railgun, but still others landed staggering blows on Terminator's shields. It blazed with rebounding white light.

It seems, in contrast to their trickery and planning with Tyrannosaurus, the planets were opting for a full assault against Terminator.

"Admiral, shields at sixty percent."

"... forty-five percent..."

"... thirty-five percent..."

The tentacles were mighty, and each suction disk stripped a portion of the Bastion's shields. Terminator was caught in a terrible web and the more it struggled the more tangled it became.

It's over...

Admiral Brown delivered his orders mechanically, but he knew Terminator had already fallen. They had no reinforcements, and no way to flee. They couldn't use their main cannon to blast a path. Stern resignation hardened the Admiral's eyes.

Chapter 728: Disaster for Humanity

Admiral Brown's hand, risen high over his head, shook ever so slightly. As Terminator rattled and pitched around him, he knew their end had come. He'd always known this was a real possibility, but now that he was faced with it the anguish that filled him was almost petrifying.

Bang! He slapped his hand down on the red button in the center of his desk.

The alarms changed pitch. Its ear-piercing siren resounded through every corner. Outside, the swarm of fighter drones fought to find any gap through which to escape. The Bastions mighty shields collapsed, allowing the alien tentacles to land their blows on the ship's exterior. The terrible screech of fractured metal, the rumbling blast of explosions, all of it mingled into a calamitous crescendo of destruction that shook the universe.

A red light began to arise from the depths of Terminator.

Outside the Alien planets paused in their assault. The purple-violet atmospheres around them thickened visibly. Their tentacles no longer struck the Bastion and instead stuck to its mangled surface.

The fighter drones were left to their own devices. Seeing their opportunity, pilots broke from open space.

The alien worlds began to expand and drew closer. The whirlpools of strange power they bore closed. Hugging tight to Terminator, all four spherical bodies shot upward like cannonballs.

Red light painted Terminator's surface, growing darker by the moment. A frightening sensation radiated from deep within. But just then the enemy stopped, released their tentacles and left Terminator at the mercy of inertia to hurdle up and away.

The whirlpools reemerged, only this time they spat energy instead of consuming it. This caused them to rocket away from one another in opposite directions.

Terminator soared into the distance, until eventually it seemed to freeze in time. Everything seemed to stop as humanity's mightiest weapon became so dark as to be almost invisible. Then the red intensified, becoming an angry orange that burned from the center of the Bastion, followed by an explosion that threatened to consume the solar system in its ferocity.

Nearly all of the fighter jets that had tried to flee were swallowed up in the blast. There was no roar of fire or burst of air. No sounds – only a sea of burning light.

The alien planets gathered together well outside of the blast radius and sped into the distance.

A Bastions' self-destruction was inconceivably powerful. Especially Terminator, with its compressed stores of energy, exploded with the force of a dying star – several tens of times stronger than the death of Arachnid.

Four notable Northern planets were in the sector Terminator had been assigned to protect. The North had the most planets and the highest population, and Terminator had been dispatched to keep some part of it safe. Northern officials had been sure that even if an alien planet showed up, Terminator was strong enough to at least keep it tied up long enough for reinforcements to arrive. Besides, Terminator's main cannon was strong enough to completely destroy an average-sized planet.

Now, from the surface of those four planets, the sky was covered in a burning white glare. Aftershock's from the blast caused their atmospheres to warp uncomfortably. It continued this way for more than ten minutes, but eventually the burning remains of Terminator darkened. The roar of the explosions followed and shook the worlds of man for a long time after.

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Skyfire, Skyfire Avenue.

"What?!" The Wine Master shot to his feet so fast the table shook. He face was livid. After becoming a Reflection of Heaven and Earth he had been in a fine mood. Then Lan Jue vanished and that put a damper on his honeymoon. However Luo Xianni had reassured him by saying Jue Di had

gone to bring him back.

Now, as he stared in shock and alarm at the scarlet message scrolling across the screens, no one knew how to react.

The alien planets had teleported and laid siege to Terminator. After destroying the Bastion they'd taken the four planets in the sector and cut off any means of surveillance.

If the planets were in human space it likely meant Lan Jue and the others were ok. But it also meant the real war for human survival was underway.

Before they had been content to bare their teeth, but now they had struck a crippling blow in allied territory. All told, a billion Northern citizens were lost – the hold-outs and those too ill to leave for Luo and other internal planets.

With how fast the planets could consume a planet, these people...

The Wine Master shut his eyes in the face of the terrible truth. His forlorn voice echoed across the whole of Skyfire Avenue.

“All councilors, we are convening an emergency meeting. Come to the Gothic Winery immediately.”

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Panic swept through human space as the news of the tragedy got out. By the end of a single day everyone knew war had come. Special sessions of government were called in all the alliances, and every available warship was called to service. The loss of four planets and a billion citizens was the single worst disaster mankind had ever faced. Although they couldn't know their fate for certain, the history of aggression shown by the aliens assured tragedy.

Humanity's reckoning had come.

Meanwhile, Lan Jue was steering Zeus-1 back toward home.

The Shattered Starfields were vast. Even though Lan Jue was anxious to get home and learn of the planets' destination, he couldn't simply will

himself out of the hodge-podge of asteroids and shattered planets. He steered his ship as fast as he dared while pulling up maps of human occupied territory on his secondary screens.

It was the latest maps with updated data after evacuations. It clearly showed where humanity was pulling back, to keep their people close in the event of alien attack.

He poured over the data, searching for the most likely place for the aliens to appear. He knew it was pointless, but perhaps he would have some insight to offer when he got back to Skyfire.

Mankind knew shockingly little about the aliens compared to their foes. They even knew about Bastion positions and capabilities. They had displayed expert control and strategy against Heron and Arachnid. Although Lan Jue had not seen the planets' fighting abilities with his own eyes, he did not believe humanity could match up. After all, the alien worlds handily defeated three Bastions and humanity only had ten – ten ships that required staggering resources and were spread out to protect billions of people.

In a straight-up fight mankind had a chance. But the aliens were determined not to make it a straight-up fight. They'd proven that time and again.

They'd displayed great cunning and intellect, doling out bitter losses to humanity while protecting themselves from typical human war strategy. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that up to now, humanity was on the losing side.

If he had to guess, they relied on the Violet Prince and Princess to infiltrate human lands and learn about their prey. Considering the powerful psychic abilities of these creatures, and their Nirvana-equivalent strength, learning the secrets of humanity would not be difficult.

Meanwhile humans had no means of learning about their enemy. Lan Jue and Star Division had been the only ones successful in learning anything at all.

The key was in discovering precisely what the enemy's goal was. Did

they pillage the worlds of man simply for their DNA and vital energy, or for some other reason? Perhaps a combination? It was integral that they found out.

“What are you thinking about? Rushing isn’t going to help anything. Safety first, fly carefully.”

The familiar voice rose from behind him. Lan Jue turned his head to see the Pharmacist at his back, she’d sneaked up at some point while he’d been lost in thought. As a Paragon her powers surpassed his sensitive perception.

He could tell her from her expression that the Pharmacist had calmed. The sadness that had clouded her mind had passed. Behind her eyes now was a burning resolve, something Lan Jue recognized as the will to fight. She’d come out from the depths of her pain strong and ready.

“How are you feeling?” Lan Jue asked with a smile. “Relax, the ship’s fine. We’ve been here so often the ship’s AI can handle navigation. We won’t run into any problems.”

The Pharmacist nodded. “Good. I’ve come upon something I think will help you.”

Lan Jue turned his full focus to her. “Something from your husband?”

There was the faintest hint of sadness, which she concealed with a nod of her head.

Lan Jue didn’t press her further and chose only to listen. He knew whatever she had to say would be difficult for her. The fear her love might not return still persisted.

“He told me much through the sword and rune,” she began. “I settled my heart and focused on it while I meditated. Things aren’t exactly as we’d expected, but through my husband’s efforts I might have learned something important.”

Chapter 729: Enemy Objectives

Lan Jue was overjoyed. “That’s excellent! Figuring out their motive has been the biggest headache.”

“Mh.” The Pharmacist nodded. “He was dispatched with earlier scout teams, lured in by the fact that they looked like normal planets. They approached with their guard down, and made curious by the strange energy readings. None of them expected it would be their last journey.”

“When they got close they found the lesser aliens. His squad was elite, and after a bitter fight they put the enemy down. That’s when they found the vital crystals. But, just as they were preparing to leave with the information another beast appeared. It was the one we now call Monarch. The leader of these evil creatures.”

“My husband didn’t tell me what he looked like. Only that he was strong... so strong. They had no way to fight back. He and his compatriots were captured. They weren’t killed, but rather imprisoned. My husband is a smart man, so he didn’t use Ultus in the fight against the Monarch. He couldn’t fully control the blade, and he wanted to give himself a chance to escape.”

“Once they were captured the aliens used some alien method to drain their life force. Then they used psychic force to probe their minds. My husband realized that hiding Ultus held no more purpose. Once his life force was entirely drained they would kill him, so he chose to risk his life for his fellows. But, even with the Banishing Blade Monarch was too strong, and they were recaptured.”

Here the Pharmacist paused. Her face was pained, as though she were drawing on her own memories. She deeply understood the helplessness he’d felt, the pointlessness of his fight. No one would come to save them. He was facing death.

“After their failed escape the aliens began to dissect them to learn what they could from their bodies.” She growled the words, a flash of anger in her eyes. “My husband had to watch as they were killed one by one. He

knew eventually his turn would come. But before it came to him the Monarch called its Queen. She devoured his team leader, absorbed her DNA, and took on her likeness. She wanted to use my husband to..."

Her face reddened and she paused.

Lan Jue nodded. "I understand. Go on."

"That was the situation he faced," she continued. "He loved me, and how could he even consider being defiled by such a loathsome creature? He summoned all of his energy from his Core. When he and I joined with our weapons we were inexorably tied to them. However, as my husband's mind and body burned from the effort, a portion of his will was seared into Ultus. It became something like a sword spirit. He tried to call all of that power to take him and Ultus away from Monarch, but somehow the alien master was able to seal him away. So in a way he is dead, but he is also alive. If we can get Ultus then I can see him again, the same way we see Jun Yongye."

The pain in her features gave way to burning hope. The chance of seeing her long-lost husband again was the only thing keeping her going.

Lan Jue sighed and took the Pharmacist's hand into his own. "We will do everything we can to get that sword back."

"I know." She said, nodding her head gently. She continued. "The Violet Monarch is very interested in Ultus. He must have felt its power. But he is not human and can't use it. So my husband decided to use that to his advantage. He pretended to capitulate so the sword would remain whole and unsealed. If the Monarch locked the sword away he would have no chance to flee. So, he controlled the sword so that the Monarch might use it and bided his time. We were accidentally the chance he's been waiting for."

As he listened Lan Jue couldn't help but be filled with admiration for this man he'd never met. He endured the unendurable for years, waiting for his chance. It wasn't for himself – his body was gone – he suffered unimaginably for the future of humanity! So that mankind could survive the alien threat!

No wonder he could impart his knowledge to the Pharmacist in such detail. He was never fully under the Monarch's control. After all, the Banishing Blades were legendary weapons created by humans, how could an alien creature master it? Even the mightiest immortals feared facing them. No matter how strong the alien planets became, they could never surpass the power of the immortals of old.

The Pharmacist went on. "He told me that the planets are living things, the source of the alien horde. In many ways the other aliens are like cells from a host. Already they have evolved to their apex, any further would call the wrath of universal protogenia. They rely on tricks and other methods to hide themselves from notice."

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled as he listened. No one understood the aliens better than the Pharmacist lost love. Anything he shared with them was priceless.

"They've come up with many ways to protect themselves," she continued. "Hiding as planets is one. The resonating power of a planet veils them from universal retribution and slows down the cost in loss of lifespan. Constantly stealing vital energy also restores that which universal protogenia consumes. We've guessed all of this, and my husband confirms it. He also told me that teleportation comes at a great cost in life force, so it isn't something they can perform often. They must first accumulate enough power before they can attempt it, and to do this they shed 'cells' to gather what they can. Those are the lesser aliens we see."

Lan Jue blinked. "So those aliens are actually part of the bigger ones? Actual cells?"

She nodded. "Yes. They all look differently, but they all have something in common and that is their vital crystals. They are the cells of the alien worlds. What accounts for their outward appearance is the DNA they absorb from the creatures they kill. Put another way, the smaller aliens are cells wrapped in the best traits of their victims. Even creatures like the Violet Prince and Princess are inexorable parts of the planets they come from."

It was the first time the thought occurred to him. Obviously it was an important piece of information for their struggle. The Pharmacist kept going.

“Their evolutionary process has been long and full of struggle. When they discovered humanity and the potential our DNA possesses, they found a way to evade universal protogenia. The Prince and Princess are their first trials, as well as the Monarch himself.”

“While experimenting on their human captives, the aliens also may have discovered a way to create a new realm of their own, like the Heavens of the ancient days where immortals resided. But to do so they need more ancient genes from our people. If they get enough it can help them research the methods needed to build their paradise. What this means for us is that their search will never stop until we’re all dead. They’ll slaughter every one of us to find what they need.”

Lan Jue was stunned. “That’s their ultimate goal? To create their own immortal realm?”

“No!” The Pharmacist shook her head. “Ultimately their goal is evolution – forever adapting and growing. A realm of their own is a manifestation of that singular purpose, so that they have a place to continuing getting stronger. They believe that eventually they can develop the ability to face and overcome universal protogenia. When that happens they can make their own. In essence, rule the laws of the universe, and thus the universe itself. That is their goal, in fact the goal of any intelligent race, humans included. The only thing that makes us different is we aren’t willing to commit genocide to achieve it.”

Chapter 730: To Create an Alien Realm?

Lan Jue swallowed. The Pharmacist's insights were more than important, they redefined how Lan Jue understood his enemy. With brows furrowed, he spoke. "So they must evolve to a certain point before they can create this Alien Realm, right? And if they succeed, it would mean the end of our species?"

The Pharmacist smiled bitterly at the prospect. "That seems to be the case. So we need to stymie their evolution by any means possible. According to the knowledge in the rune my husband imparted, the aliens have been studying us for at least the last ten years. He and his compatriots weren't the first group of humans to be captured and experimented on. They were just a continuation of their efforts."

"Of course creating a realm outside of the universe is not easy. Getting enough ancient DNA is their chief obstacle. At least they still have a long way to go before they succeed."

Lan Jue pressed further. "Assuming they did accomplish this, how powerful could they become? Is there any precedent for this?"

"It's hard to say," she answered. "It's never been made clear, even in the ancient days. However, according to what we do know of the beasts from my husband, and the knowledge that remains of the ancient days, we can guess. If they built this realm and complete their evolution, they likely still wouldn't be able to surpass the highest order of immortal realms."

Lan Jue sucked in a gasp of surprise. "How are you so calm? We're talking about celestial immortals, the most powerful in all the history of the universe! Even Paragons who've achieved the Infinite are inferior to even the weakest Immortals. Celestial immortals... that's inconceivable levels of power. At that point we couldn't contend against them even in our wildest dreams!"

The Pharmacist answered with a small, cryptic smile. "You shouldn't underestimate yourself. I'm calm for good reason. You know the frightening power of the celestial immortals, but even they trembled

against the combined might of the Banishing Blades and Banishing Strategy. No matter how many of the immortal realm's most powerful descended to try and destroy them, none returned. That is why in the end my husband urged me to recover Ultus no matter the cost. Once he fully joined with the sword, he discovered that the Banishing Strategy had been locked within it all along. We don't need to search for it any longer, it's found. What we need to do is get that sword back and find someone to wield it. Once we do, it wouldn't matter if those planets were harbingers to the end of the universe, the Banishing Blades would destroy them."

The Banishing Stance was contained within Ultus? Lan Jue didn't know if this was good news or bad news. He decided on good – at least they knew where it was instead of having an entire universe to comb through. Of course there were arguments to the contrary. The key to humanity's salvation was quite literally in the clutches of their strongest foe. Capturing it from him would be no easy feat.

It was true that the Pharmacist's husband controlled the sword, sealing it away from the Monarch. Yet, the alien leader was as strong as an immortal already. Stronger even than Lan Jue's own father. Besides their enemy was a planet. They had to face an entire world to get the weapon back.

Lan Jue glowered at the dark news as the Pharmacist continued. "We have no other choice, the Banishing Stance is our only play. It will be difficult, but not impossible. My husband has said that entering into human territory means they're ready. They've kept their distance until now not because they didn't think they could destroy us. They were preparing to make their alien paradise. Now, like us, they no longer have a choice. The Monarch, Queen and Consort have entered into a meditative state to prepare themselves. This means the strongest we'll have to face are the Prince, Princess, and the Monarch. The highest level we contend against is the Infinite. 1"

"So in a way, while their evolution is the precursor to mankind's destruction, it's also our greatest opportunity. We wait for our chance, and take the initiative to recapture Ultus."

“Did you husband say how many others like the Violet Prince there are?” Lan Jue asked.

“Around ten,” she replied. “The Prince and Princess are two, the others are also extensions of the planets. Those would not have the same level of intelligence as the other two.”

Lan Jue couldn’t contain his bitter laughter. “Ten creatures that command the power of the Infinite. We’re not any better off!”

“Not now, but perhaps one you make your breakthrough,” the Pharmacist pointed out. “The Harmonious Sword technique you and Qianlin have learned can summon great power from Captus and Demortus. With it we can take them on one by one and carve a path to victory. What’s more, you must have been paying attention during the fights against these monsters. They may be as strong as a Paragon who’s achieved the Infinite, but against a real Paragon like Jue Di the differences are vast. We humans are the product of an unbroken line of ancestral knowledge and ability. We do have a chance, if we fight our hardest.”

Lan Jue’s mind raced as he explored the odds of success. Eventually he conceded that there was some truth in the Pharmacist’s words. There was a chance, slim though it was – less than thirty percent. But if what her husband said was true there was an opportunity.

“What if we got all the Bastions together for an assault while the Monarch and other prepared to evolve?” Lan Jue asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not familiar enough with strategy to tell you. If so, then that’s wonderful. At any rate we can attack from two fronts; a headlong assault and finding a way to get Ultus back. Either way we destroy our enemy.”

“Yeah.” The Pharmacist’s husband had revealed the truth of their enemies to them. More importantly, they knew what they were going to do next. Now, for the first time, they had a tactical advantage.

The Pharmacist folded her hands in front of her. “Everything can wait until we return home. We have to learn where the planets have transferred to. Furthermore, you and Qianlin’s advancement must come

quickly. I can sense you're at the border, one foot past the threshold – but you mustn't be impatient. More than break through, you must succeed the way your brother succeeded. If you can rise to a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, you'll have all the more control over Captus. It's the same for Zhou Qianlin."

"Yeah." Lan Jue nodded.

After Qianlin's rise to her peak, Lan Jue felt his Discipline react. It felt galvanized, ready to act and beyond his control. Already pulses of protogenic energy radiated around his body. It was a sign that his breakthrough was near.

Yet the Pharmacist was right, he couldn't rush. The more insight he accumulated the stronger his grasp would be when the time came. His protogenia now was vastly different than it had been years ago as the God of Lightning. He needed more time, he needed to keep his cultivation in check.

Zhou Qianlin's progress was like a river carving a path through a mountain, powerful and irrepressible. Still, Lan Jue's heart was heavy. Up to now her senses had still not recovered. It seemed she would only fully return to him once they became Paragons.

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At last Zeu-1 left the Shattered Starfields behind and returned to human-controlled territory. The first thing Lan Jue did was dial in his brother's number.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Lan Qing's harsh voice answered on the other end.

Lan Jue sheepishly answered. "I'm sorry, big brother, but I really had no choice. I couldn't just sit by and watch the Pharmacist throw her life away! Relax, I'm fine and so is she. We got back safely. Where did the planets teleport to? Not the East, right?"

Lan Qing paused for a moment. "You saw them teleport?"

Lan Jue nodded. "Yes. We got there just as they were leaving. And stupid

as this trip was, we came back with some very important intel. First you have to tell me where the planets went... judging by how calm you are, not the East.”

Lan Qing’s tone remained even. “Two days ago the planets appeared in the Northern Alliance. They immediately surrounded their Terminator-Class Bastion. It self-destructed, but did no damage to the enemy. We believe the planets have taken the area Terminator was sent to protect. This included the planets Dakkar, Saqi, Monteux and Bollen. There were a billion citizens still on the planets when they went dark.”

When he heard his brother say the North, Lan Jue felt a pressure lift from his chest. The North was farthest from the East. But his elation was short lived, and quickly replaced with sadness.

A billion... a billion innocent people!

Lan Jue’s voice was strained. “Is there any chance they can be saved?”

“It would be difficult, if at all possible,” Lan Qing responded. “The North has fully engaged their military. They’ve asked us and the West to send support, to save the survivors and destroy the enemy. I’m on my way to the Northern Alliance now. You should come as well, you’re more familiar with the planets. We’re gathering in orbit around Luo.”

Chapter 731: Preparing for War

“Alright!” Lan Jue answered without hesitation. He felt guilty for abandoning his home and responsibilities as Skyfire’s Chairman, but it had been for the benefit of humanity.

Lan Jue face now bore a steely look of determination. He folded his hands in front of his chest, and as his eyes flickered with power the air around him warped in return.

“Brother, I have intelligence to share with you. Something we’ve just learned. In it is a detailed analysis report on the planets – at last we got some good information. If it’s true, if they’re in the process of evolving, we can use this opportunity to assemble all of humanity’s strength and finish this is a single blow.”

Lan Jue’s voice was thick with solemnity and resolve. Humanity had already suffered worse at the hands of this enemy than from all former tragedies put together. What was borne from this was not a passing rage, but a deep and abiding hatred. No cost was considered too great in the destruction of these beasts, to bring order and peace back to the worlds of man.

Lan Qing downloaded the information then disconnected to go over it. Lan Jue stared out of a nearby window for a moment before dialing in another number. The Wine Master’s face appeared on screen.

“I’m sorry.” It was the first thing Lan Jue said to his old friend.

“Let’s not discuss that now. Are you safe?” He asked.

The Jewelry Master nodded. “The Pharmacist and I are fine. I’ve just gotten off the line with Admiral Lan Qing. I’m headed to Luo to join with humanity’s forces there, we’re to support the North in fighting the aliens. Star Division...”

The Wine Master cut in. “We’re also preparing an answer to the alien invasion. The East is sending a Bastion and five fleets, about half of our total military power. It’s headed to Luo as well. When you arrive I’ll pass

over command to you. That's all except to remind you that you represent more than just yourself now. Your sense of righteousness is important, but you mean more than that now. You have to consider what is more important."

"Yes, I understand." Lan Jue obediently replied. In hindsight it was clear his actions were rash and irresponsible, especially given the circumstances.

The Clairvoyant had once described Lan Jue as a link, a person who connected people. This destiny was even more important than his fighting ability. Between him, Lan Qing, Poseidon Group and the Chu family, humanity had a mighty core with which to battle against the alien forces. When they showed their hand the universe reacted. But among all of them, it was Lan Jue that the Clairvoyant's prophecies concerned. In them he claimed that Lan Jue was the key to success in humanity's darkest hour. He was the light of the future.

The Wine Master was one of the Clairvoyant's closest friends and staunchest believers. One can guess how highly he regarded the late seer's divinations.

"Did you get your slap on the wrist?" The Pharmacist had listened in as Lan Jue spoke with his brother and the Avenue's Chairman.

Lan Jue shook his head. "It's nothing. If I could go back I'd make the same choice. I couldn't have sat back and watched you charge off to your death!"

The Pharmacist answered with a smile. Her eyes sparkled with mirth. "You! I don't know if it's a ploy to make people like you, but it works. If I didn't already have a husband you'd be next in line. You better not act this way with all women, though. You'll give people the wrong idea. Don't you already have enough poor girls owing 'love debts'? I see how those young girls look at you, that's no way to live. You and Qianlin are a good match, how can those girls hope to match up? Have you thought about that?"

A sheepish grin spread across his face. "It's a problem I've been dodging for a while. I know how they feel, but they're my friends – I see them as

little sisters. I know I'm stringing them along but they needed help, what was I supposed to do?"

She regarded him helplessly. "Fine, fine. You've always been a good man, alright? Anyway, none of this matters if we don't live through the alien invasion. Talking about it won't solve anything at this point."

"Yeah."

Once Lan Qing had the data from his brother, the admiral shared what he'd learned about Terminator's destruction, as well as all the long-ranged surveillance they had of the four planets that were in danger.

As expected, the planets were covered in a haze of purple after less than a day. Nothing of their former beauty was left. From experience they knew how aggressive alien progenitors were, to say nothing of the planets they were spawned from. Their enemy had prepared to take these planets quickly, and had done so unopposed.

From what they could gather from telescopes, the human planets had been forced into a new orbit around a central center of gravity – namely the three alien planets. That is to say, the unfortunate victims of the alien invasion had been turned into silent sentinels for the enemy, satellite stellar bodies arranged as protectors. Between them all was a host of smaller creatures that outnumbered ten human fleets. Undoubtedly, this was the enemy's main force.

Their aim was clear; turn these four planets into their home base from which to expand. They had already had their life force devoured. How, it was impossible to know. But without question it did not bode well for the billion souls that had called them home.

Lan Jue's heart was heavy as he gazed at those purple-hued planets. It was a scene from his darkest nightmares! Wherever that purple color emerged, humanity had failed. Once that color covered all of the human territories it would mean his species was lost.

They had to destroy the aliens now, while they prepared to evolve, no matter the cost.

Beep-beep! The ship's communicator called for Lan Jue's attention. Lan Qing's face appeared on the screen.

His brother's straight posture and military attire emphasized his heroic appearance. His mood was calmer. "How possible is it that the information you acquired is real?" He asked with careful and even tones.

"Eighty-percent," Lan Jue replied. "You know as well as I do that it matches perfectly with everything we've learned about them so far. Up to this point we've been lacking a cohesive understanding of our enemy, but now we've learned the gift of what they want. I don't have to tell you how much that helps us fight back. They can't teleport, we know, because it will cost them too much in life force, and they spent so much this time in order to gather human genetic material for their evolutionary process. Right now is our best opportunity to fight back, and we can't pass it up. We have to go at them with everything we've got."

Lan Jue spoke with passion and decisiveness. The alien planets were at their most vulnerable now, after teleporting into humanity's reach. Although he couldn't be sure the planets planned to evolve, their battle formation suggested that was the case. It would be foolish for them to wait for their enemy to evolve into a stronger form. Instead, they had to follow any path to victory. On the one hand humanity's soldiers would engage head-on, while at the same time Lan Jue would find a way to recover Ultus with Star Division's help. It didn't matter which method succeeded, so long as the aliens were destroyed.

Lan Jue shared his scheme along with all the data he'd given to Lan Qing. Hence his brother's query.

Lan Qing's low voice returned. "I'll share this information with the other Alliances. We're going in, but we have to make sure the planets won't leave before we arrive. Are you sure about this? The North is going ahead full force, plus two-thirds of the West's army and a large share of our own – not to mention your Star Division. If we fail..."

He didn't finish his thought. He didn't have to, Lan Jue knew what was in store if this operation failed. He was silent for a time, how could he say

he had one hundred percent faith in a situation like this? The cost was too high.

“No one ever knows for sure, all we can do is offer our best hypothesis. As far as I know it’s true that teleportation is costly for them. If they teleported again so soon it would probably cause them immeasurable harm. To put a number on it, I’d say there’s no more than a thirty-percent chance they’ll be gone by the time we get there.”

The deep voice had come from beside Lan Jue. Jue Di had awoken from his meditations and had joined him by the screen.

“Father!” Lan Jue said in surprise.

Jue Di looked at his older son on the screen. “Tell them exactly what I said, the planets are probably in the process of evolving. Every minute that passes brings us closer to our destruction. Besides, the North doesn’t have a choice. If they don’t take this opportunity, they may not get another one. They have a dagger in their ribs, you think they won’t try to remove it? 2 The worst that can happen is the planets disappear again, but if they do it’ll make them weaker. Either they are there or they aren’t, but our only option is to attack now. Make sure you’re ready and with enough provisions to spare. We should be ready not only to attack, but to hunt them down if they run.”

Lan Jue’s heart surged with emotion. They had to consider where the plan was coming from. Once Lan Qing let the other leaders know, he would be responsible for the result. That was why he needed as much assurance as he could get from Lan Jue. An Lun’s admiral would assume all responsibility. Except, by affixing his name to the plan Jue Di was taking all that weight on his own shoulders.

“Dad...” Lan Jue trailed off.

Jue Di waved a hand, silencing him. He continued to speak to Lan Qing. “Do you understand?”

Chapter 732: You're All Still Young

Lan Qing heaved a sigh, staring at his father on the screen for a long while. He offered a firm nod. "I understand."

"Then do what you need to do." Jue Di waved his hand in dismissal. Lan Qing cut the connection.

"Father." Lan Jue called to him for a third time.

At last, Jue Di looked his way and smiled. "I'm old, you're all still young." He patted his sons' shoulder with a calloused hand, then left his side.

Lan Jue felt he saw a slight stoop in his father's back¹. Jue Di's persona was as iron-hard as ever, but Lan Jue knew his father was getting old.

His lips tightened in a hard line, and his fists clenched. If he had another chance, he'd have worked harder in his younger years, focused more on cultivation. If only he had, he'd be able to support his father better!

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The Northern Alliance had fallen into disarray in a matter of days.

Chu Cheng was perched on a seat, watching the towering man before him. Today the Chu family representative was dressed in a smart military uniform with three golden stars on his shoulder.

His record of military service certainly didn't warrant general status, but Chu Cheng had risen to become the North's second Paragon. He had become one of the most important people in his Alliance almost overnight.

In normal times Chu Cheng would have perhaps been a one-star general. After all, military ranks were not so easy to achieve typically. Anything beyond that would have been difficult with his qualifications. However, these were special circumstances and the North needed heroes to raise up their populace. Their propaganda campaigns were successful, they were good at advocating for heroism.

However the dark news of disaster had stolen Chu Cheng's thunder. An

unprecedented panic had swept the worlds of man, and only the North's prominent military presence had kept things from dissolve into outright chaos.

Things as they were, the Northern leadership found themselves with their backs against the wall. They had rapidly begun to lose the trust of the people, and their soldiers were facing a threat they weren't sure they could overcome. Despite being humanity's mightiest Alliance, with a military that made the universe tremble and seven Bastions to their name, there were on the cusp of collapse.

In a matter of a few short months things had changed dramatically. Arachnid was gone, Heron was no stronger than a Capital ship. Terminator – praised as humanity's greatest technological achievement – was brought low by those hellish living planets. Indeed the North had suffered more than anyone.

All throughout these awful days, the North had had no time to catch a breath. Their Bastions had been reduced from seven to four, and their flagship had succumbed to the enemy. Two more were in the making but would not be ready in time. In a blink, the North had fallen into a dark pit they could not claw out of.

"The army has made up its mind," Chu Cheng said in a low voice.

"Mnh. They don't have a choice. If we didn't lead the charge our government would be dissolved. The people are scared, they need something to believe in. War has to be where their hope lies." Depression darkened the Terminator's face.

He had completed his breakthrough, achieving the strength he'd dreamt of for so long. It also meant his life would be extended another few dozen years. After all, he wasn't like the Clairvoyant who continually suffered the scourge of constant protogenia use. Now that he had achieved Nirvana, he could lead the North for at least another half century.

But that was under normal circumstances. These were not normal circumstances.

"I will be taking command of Tyrannosaurus. You will command Heron

2.” The Terminator said.

“Alright!” Chu Cheng responded right away. He couldn’t be said to take military matters as seriously as many other commanders, but he was a general now and had to follow his commander’s orders. Besides, victory would be won through cooperation and unity against the aggressors.

The Terminator smiled and nodded. “A miracle will come when it’s needed. You might think I’m kidding, but the Clairvoyant was a man I had total faith in. If he said your man will lead us through this darkness, then he will.”

Of course Chu Cheng knew who the mountainous man was referring to. A smile emerged on his face. “Yeah! He’s annoyingly good at miracles, that guy. But he still hasn’t become a Paragon, and I’m not sure when he will.”

A cold light flashed through the Terminator’s eyes. “Believe me, the longer he delays the better. When he does break through the results will shake the heavens. The darker the night, the brighter the dawn. Come, our forces are already gathered. Our presence is an important symbol to our people.”

Chu Cheng chuckles. “Suddenly I feel like a mascot.”

“That’s exactly what we are,” the Terminator replied. “Do you think you and I can face those monsters ourselves? No – in this battle, victory or defeat rests on Star Division.”

“Yeah.”

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Zeus-1 closed in on Luo, and approached its appointed position. Lan Jue stared out of the window, hardly believing the scene unfolding before his eyes. He’d seen Bastions larger than planets, and fleets that stretched farther than the eye could see. But what he witnessed just outside the hull of his tiny ship was hard to describe.

A planet. A whole other planet silently hovering in space near Luo. Its surface was pock-marked with craggy rocks and deep crevices, no different from the times he’d seen it before. But out here? In Northern space?

Impossible!

It was planet An Lun – the whole thing. How in the heavens had it made the trip all the way from the East? Lan Jue was at a total loss.

“Are you here?” Lan Qing’s face appeared on Zeus-1’s screens once again.

“Yeah.” Lan Jue muttered. “That’s An Lun...”

When he saw the surprise on his little brother’s face, Lan Qing smirked. “Now we call it Middle Heaven.” ³

“Middle Heaven?” Suddenly it made sense. Middle Heaven... Peerless Light emperor of Middle Heaven. A bastion ship named after Lan Qing. An Lun had been completely remodeled under the East’s unique vision. Now it was a weapon of war.

No wonder... No wonder there had been no new bastions for ten years. It wasn’t because the East couldn’t, it was because they were building this.

Ever since their establishment the Eastern Alliance had been an inferior position. It’d had only two Bastions to its name. Without Jue Di as a deterrent, the North likely would have swallowed the small Alliance up years ago. Even despite the threat of retaliation by the Paragon the North had continued to harass its neighbor.

Things were better for the West, they were somewhat shielded from Northern aggression so they paid them little mind. But the East was different – it was established from the foundations of the mysterious and powerful country of China. It had been a place of boundless secrets and mystical knowledge the North feared. So, though they did not dare attempt the East’s destruction they worked to keep the Alliance from gaining strength. ⁴ This was compounded by an unceasing march of sanctions against them economically, militarily and technologically. ⁵

If the East wanted to get out from under the North’s thumb, they would need a show of force. Bastions were an important tool for just that purpose.

The East was the first Alliance to suffer from the alien incursion, but it

had thankfully suffered the least. Vital crystals pilfered from the enemy had purchased a whole new fleet for the East, while the North was forced to abandon their shadowy war of attrition. They needed Eastern support now, in the face of a foreign enemy.

Because of this the East did not need to hide its hand any longer. Their newest, strongest bastion was revealed to all.

Middle Heaven's name was a testament to Lan Qing's status among Eastern stratocrats. He was also the newest bastion's admiral. Surrounding were was a massive host of five interstellar fleets! Although the East had only dispatched one of its bastions, its support ships constituted the bulk of the East's smaller vessels. Only one fleet remained behind near Skyfire.

A ship appeared before Zeus-1 to guide it toward Middle Heaven. As he was led closer to the re-forged planet he could see it clearer. Things certainly had changed.

Its surface was still a landscape of craggy rock, but interposed among the peaks and valleys were the dark barrels of cannons. Middle Heaven was hardly a beautiful thing to look upon – especially compared to the likes of Tyrannosaurus – but it used to be a planet! It was larger than Tyrannosaurus, as far as Lan Jue could remember, and likely of higher quality.

The sheer cost it must have taken to build this thing was staggering.

Under the direction of the guide ship, Lan Jue urged Zeus-1 through the defensive line Middle Heaven's fleets had arranged and on to the bastion itself. As he came upon the familiar surface Lan Jue couldn't help but inwardly sing the planet-ship's praises. He didn't know the East's technology could achieve such a thing. To arrive in the North so quickly, it meant the ship was also fast. Its energy source and engines had to be something special.

Chapter 733: Confluence

Once Zeus-1's wheels were safely on the tarmac Lan Jue, Jue Di and the Pharmacist disembarked. Lan Qing, the Wine Master and the Clockmaker were waiting for them. The welcoming party was not big, but not small. Of course they weren't there to welcome Lan Jue, he knew. They were there for Jue Di.

Lan Jue walked forward quickly and with a pleasant smile. "Wine Master! It's been a while!"

The Wine Master stared back at him with a flat, cold stare. He breezed right past Lan Jue and bowed before Jue Di. "Your Majesty, we're sorry for troubling you."

Jue Di waved him off. "It's no trouble running after my own boy. Find me someplace quiet, and call me when the fighting starts."

"Indeed, we already have something prepared for you. Aunt is there waiting for you, I'll take you there." The Wine Master rose and lead the way personally.

The Pharmacist walked over to Lan Jue's side and nodded respectfully to the Clockmaker. "I'm sorry. All of this was my fault. I've caused a lot of trouble."

The Clockmaker smiled back at her. "Misfortunes may sometimes be a blessing in disguise. What is done is done. Come, everyone is waiting for you."

Lan Qing walked over to Lan Jue, then. He patted his brother's shoulder and offered a nod of acknowledgement for the Pharmacist. He said nothing, just turned and left, as cool as ever.

The Clockmaker led the two of them to a verticar. After clambering in Lan Jue spoke. "How's the situation?"

"Unclear," she answered with a low voice. "But we think the people on those four planets..."

Lan Jue's face darkened. After so long, the chance of finding any

survivors was close to zero. Five percent of the total human population, gone in a blink of the eye.

The Clockmaker went on. "The enemy is cunning. They've turned the four planets into defensive fortresses with a huge number of aliens standing watch. They've managed to completely cut us off from any information. The North has attempted several scouting sorties but all have failed. Some of their Bastions have also tried to get close enough to harass them, but have been repelled by the defenses. The commands are also hesitant to bring their ships in too deep for fear they'll be trapped. So, we find ourselves in a stalemate. Full-on assault is our only option."

Lan Jue frowned as he thought. He hadn't anticipated their foes might lay a trap like this. If they relied on the normal aliens alone they would be no match for bastions and their fleets. But, by virtue of the four planets as advance guard, no one knew the condition or actions of the alien planets themselves. If the planets were not yet distracted by their evolution an attack would be dangerously premature. No one could tell how much power their enemy would bring to bear.

"What's the North's plan?" Lan Jue asked.

She obliged. "After hearing you were on your way His Majesty the Terminator has chosen all-out assault on the enemy position. Whether or not the planets have begun their evolution, now is the time. Our hands are tied, but the North has faith our bastions can effectively fight back. This isn't the Starfields, its home territory and they don't have the benefit of cover. Representative forces from every Alliance has gathered here for the final charge. Even if the planets aren't distracted, so long as they don't teleport away we have a chance to rout them."

Lan Jue nodded in understanding. "So it is, but for some reason something doesn't feel right."

"Oh? How so? Is there a problem with the information you've provided?" The Clockmaker asked, surprised.

Lan Jue shook his head. "No, the data we recovered should be rock-solid. It seems like they're waiting for us to come in for the attack. From

everything we've seen we know the monsters are intelligent. So far they've had the upper hand in every encounter. They must know the sort of power the Alliances plan to throw at them, but they're just waiting? To say nothing of the fact it seems outside of their character."

The Clockmaker's brows scrunched tight. "But the arrow's already knocked. It wouldn't make any sense to call it all off now, unless we can get some reliable information on the planets themselves."

Lan Jue's voice was resolute. "I want to try. Can we tell the North to let us try a scouting mission? We'll slip passed the enemy's lines and find the planets. Once we confirm their status we can begin the attack."

"Alright," she answered. "I'll alert Admiral Lan. He'll have the Eastern forces let the North know."

Lan Jue nodded, determined to succeed. While other missions may have met with failure, he knew the monsters well. All of Star Division and his five Amazons would be called on. Between Lin Guoguo's abilities, Zeus-1's technology and their familiarity with the aliens, slipping through the aliens' defensive encirclement shouldn't be impossible. After all, Skyfire Avenue was lousy with Paragons these days. On top of it all they had the full might of humanity behind them. If they ran into trouble they could call for the assault to begin and use that to their advantage.

The verticar found its destination and settled to the ground. When Lan Jue stepped out, he was met with a sight that stirred him deeply.

Row upon row of smartly dressed Star Division soldiers stood in perfect formation. They snapped to attention the moment he appeared.

"Commander!"

Lan Jue stepped forward, standing before the fighting force he'd forged. His heart was filled with the mighty vigour that poured from them.

Standing at the fore were Skyfire Avenue's Paragon, and another familiar face. A stooped figure, a head of white hair and a pair of sharp eyes drew his attention. It was none other than the one who forced the blood connection between he and Qianlin, the one who'd gifted him the Arrow

of Compassion. One of the great Gods of Wine – Bize Lilou!

The Wine Master must have been successful in convincing her to help. However, absent was the other god of wine they'd met, Aubert de Villaine.

The Infernal Vanguard, Arcane Magnate, Karmic Scholar, Arhat of the Descending Dragon, and the Wine Master were all present. Of course, there was the Pharmacist and Clockmaker by his side. A host of Paragons.

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The East's representation in the world of Adepts could only be described as overwhelming. Do not forget that the Astral Phantom, Lan Qing, Luo Xianni and Jue Di also counted among their number. Ten Paragons arrayed for battle! That kind of power was able to shake the pillars of heaven.

Among them Lan Jue also felt another presence and a close friend. The Driver. He grinned at Lan Jue from the crowd. His gruff exterior had undergone a change, and the whole of him seemed more refined. Physically he was larger, and spiritually he was more restrained.

He broke through! He had become a Paragon, a fact that sent Lan Jue's heart soaring. It meant an even stronger position for the East, and humanity. It was important to remember that he commanded yin-yang lightning, which made him stronger than your average Paragon. The Arcane Magnate and Karmic Scholarly likely wouldn't beat him in a spar.

"I apologize for worrying everyone." The Pharmacist spoke, not waiting for Lan Jue to address his soldiers. She took a step forward and bowed low at the waist.

"Mama!" The clear voice rang through the air like a ray of sunshine, and a little body pushed her way through the crowd and into the Pharmacist's arms.

The Pharmacist, a woman wrought from iron, crumbled before the tiny girl. Tears streamed from eyes as she hugged Jun'er tightly to her.

Regret surged through her. "I'm so sorry, Jun'er. I'm sorry. Mama shouldn't have left you, I won't go running off like that again. I'm sorry,

my baby.”

Jun'er's eyes were dry, her tiny face beamed a smile at her mother as she patted her back with a small hand. “It's ok, mama, everything will be fine. I knew daddy would bring you back. We'll be together forever. I missed you mama.”

The Pharmacist kissed Jun'er's cheek and didn't speak further.

Lan Jue came over to the two of them and gently ruffled the girl's hair.

The Wine Master interrupted. “No time for discussion. We need to prepare for the attack. How are you?”

Lan Jue paused. “I'm fine... what is it? Has the fight already started?”

The Wine Master nodded. “The North has alerted us that they will be starting soon. Star Division is to offer its support. We're off to war.”

Chapter 734: Before the Fight

Lan Jue scowled. “Right now we don’t know what the enemy is up to. This feels too rushed. I was just telling the Clockmaker that I think we need another scouting mission, see if we can discover any new information. At the very least we confirm their status before beginning the attack. This doesn’t seem right, why would they just wait for us to attack?”

The Wine Master responded with a sigh. “There’s nothing for it now, the North is under too much pressure to wait. A billion people! Already their society has begun to come apart. If this attack doesn’t begin right away the government is going to lose control. Even though the chances of bringing anyone back is slim to none, it has to be attempted. It’s the will of the people, the North will do everything it can to bring them hope. Tyrannosaurus hasn’t been fully repaired from its last fight but they’ve already put it out on the field, along with their four other bastions. That’s five from the North, and the West has brought another two. With Middle Heaven that brings the total number to eight – an unprecedented gathering of military power. That doesn’t take into account the twelve interstellar fleets that accompany them. There are five hundred million soldiers waiting on orders to deploy, two thirds of all soldiers on active duty in every Alliance. It’s time to finish this!”

After listening to the Wine Master Lan Jue understood the plight the North found itself in. Losing four planets had put them in a precarious position with their own people, and already the bulk of humanity’s soldiers had gathered for a retaliatory strike. If this didn’t succeed, they were as good as doomed. To them, even if the aliens had some trick up their sleeve, this power they were bringing down on them would have to be enough.

Eight bastion ships! And scores of warship as support. This time the fight was in home territory, with enough space for them to maneuver. No one doubted the strength of the planets, but they were facing an army the likes of which this side of the universe had never seen.

For the North, their greatest worry was that the planets would teleport

before they got close enough to deal a fatal blow. This was the reason behind their rush, the quicker they mobilized the less likely it was their enemy was already gone.

But still Lan Jue felt they were going too fast.

“We’re setting out in an hour. The Northern bastions have already begun the approach.” The Wine Master said.

Lan Jue nodded. “So when do we join the fray?”

“You arrived just in time,” the Wine Master explained. “We’re about to convene a Tri-Alliance meeting which we’ll be attending. The East’s forces will be represented by Admiral Lan Qing, who is acting as commander in chief for Eastern forces. He’s already at the meeting hall. We should head over as well.”

“Alright.” Never before had an operation of this scale been attempted. Be it manpower, resources or cooperation this war was unparalleled. It also meant it was incredibly involved, and even if Lan Jue spoke up it was already too late to stop the war machine from rolling. As leader of the charge, the North had already made up its mind. Things were unlikely to change this late in the game, especially based on the discomfort of one person.

After bidding the various Paragons farewell, Lan Jue followed the Wine Master to a verticar. They quickly left for the meeting hall.

“You convinced Bize? What about Aubert?” Lan Jue asked.

The Wine Master addressed him calmly. “Master Aubert has come to his senses. However he is too attached to his wines and refuses to leave the Barrows. The West has already abandoned the planet, and its wealth of vital energy makes it a prime target for alien aggression. Aubert decided he needed to remain behind and protect his vineyard. Bize was also reticent to leave him behind, but I convinced her to come. Her reasons are simple; if they want to pass on what they’ve learned, there need to be humans to pass it on to.”

Lan Jue hadn’t thought it possible. Not only were Bize and Aubert

masters of their craft, they were artists. They had put their hearts blood into their work, he'd have thought they would prize it above all else.

The Wine Master grew serious. "Aubert had me come back with a large bottle of wine. He asked me to protect it, and make sure this particular vintage survived."

Lan Jue swallowed. It'd been some time since he'd had a good drink, he'd had no time. Hearing the Wine Master talk about it made him itch for a taste.

A smile touched the Wine Master's lips. "When all of this is over you and I will celebrate over a bottle. I'm sure the gods of wine won't mind a few bottles to mark the occasion."

"Alright! If that's the case I'm anxious to get this over with."

The Wine Master returned to more serious matters. "It looks like a significant part of this fight will take place on land. The North wants us to direct Star Division there."

"What are they planning?" Lan Jue asked.

The Wine Master glanced at him. "It seems the four former planets have become support for the enemy. We're not sure how, but the aliens seem restored after a visit to the planets' surface. According to the Keeper they're replenishing themselves on the captured planets' vital energy. So it seems that if we want to win we need to take the four planets back first."

"For the first time we humans have the upper hand in sheer force. The North's strategy, therefore, is a slow but steady march straight in. First they want to recapture the planets, then move in for the alien home worlds themselves. We'll approach from four sides to make sure the enemy can't evade or escape."

Lan Jue nodded his head thoughtfully. Though the North was being hasty, at least their strategy was sound. Recapturing the lost planets had to be first, otherwise they'd act as a protective screen.

They were sure to face progenitors when they invaded. Perhaps they would be lucky and managed to save the planets from absolute death.

After all, it took time for all the vital energy of a planet to be consumed.

“It sounds good to me,” Lan Jue said with a nod.

When the verticar landed, Lan Jue and the Wine Master stepped off, then made their way for Middle Heaven’s control center. After a series of checks, they were permitted to enter.

Lan Qing was already absorbed in a video conference. The two new arrivals took seats nearby.

Six large screens filled the meeting room, flickering between whoever had the floor. Representatives from all three alliances were heard. Lan Qing’s face was among them.

Lan Jue manipulated the acoustic currents to speak only to Lan Qing. “What’s the situation? Is the plan all set?”

Lan Qing gave his answer. “The chief commander of the operation is Admiral Kang Hui. He has experience facing the aliens in battle. For now everything seems rational. We lead with the fleets, which will spread out and engage the enemy on several fronts. They’ll kill as many of the creatures as possible and soften things up for a ground incursion. The bastions will stay back as support and deterrence. Their cannons will be charged and ready to fire the moment the alien planets are in range. The second the enemy is in their sights, they’ll let loose with all their strength.”

“When the landing operation commences the North will be responsible for two of their former planets. The remaining two have been left to us and the West. The North has asked us to dispatch Star Division to take the planet.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Not a problem. The Wine Master has already let me know, it’s what we’re good at. We’ll need air support.”

“That’s one of the problems we’re faced with,” Lan Qing explained. “Part of the North’s requirements are that we don’t lay down fire on the planet’s surface.”

Lan Jue blinked. “Why? If that’s the case our job just got a hell of a lot harder!”

Lan Qing remained stoic. “There’s no other option. Our long-range telescopes have found people still alive. There are survivors down there. This changes things for the North, saving them is a priority. The Northern public is on the verge of rioting, and if they find out survivors were shot down by friendly fire the results will be catastrophic. Warships will have to handle things out in space. The planets’ surfaces are going to have to be left to ground troops alone, with the hope we can bring some citizens back alive.”

Lan Jue’s brows were wrinkled as he thought. “That definitely makes things harder. We’re likely to suffer casualties. We also have no idea what’s in store for us when we get down there. You know what will happen if we run into something like the Violet Prince.”

Lan Qing nodded. “That’s why the North has called for Star Division specifically. They’re hoping we can clear out a planet quickly then move in to support other incursion teams.”

Lan Jue frowned. “I guess we just have to make the best of it.”

The Wine Master chimed in. “That’s the way it is. All of our Paragons are ready to fight. We should take a planet quickly, assuming there isn’t a particularly powerful foe to face. With his Majesty Jue Di in the lead, finding a Prince or Princess may be a good thing.”

Lan Jue’s heart skipped a beat. The Wine Master was right, aliens had vital crystals. The stronger the alien, the more potent the crystal. Lan Jue’s father was suffering, but if they could get a crystal from a beast as powerful as him, that could turn Jue Di’s condition around.

Chapter 735: Battle Plans

“I’ve got no problems here.” Lan Jue said.

A steady procession of speakers flit across the screen. Each one described how they would deploy their forces to support the operation.

The plan was separated into three stages. First stage; control surrounding space by overwhelming enemy forces with superior firepower, and prepare for planetary invasion. At the same time, attempt to get any intel possible on the alien planets and their condition.

Stage two; deploy the ground troops and try to retake control of the human planets as quickly as possible. Save anyone left alive.

Stage three; order all ships to converge on the alien planets and begin their all-out assault. Continue until the enemy is annihilated.

That was the main idea. Discussions continued over details and planning. Through the process smaller command teams were established, with their own objectives. Lan Jue and his crew were put in charge of taking the planets.

Primarily they were to eliminate any aliens they encountered, then Eastern forces would sweep in to clean up. Afterwards they would establish a planetary defense system. The North was bringing a host of railguns meant for installation on the planets, which would then be used as forward bases and reserve firepower. Once the planets were recaptured, the aliens would be surrounded.

The first step was the easiest. Although the aliens were strong, without the aid of their home worlds humanity overpowered them. Retaking the human planets would be harder, especially without air support. It made Lan Jue’s task dangerous and challenging.

Discussion turned to scenarios and how to respond to them. For instance, what to do if the alien planets joined the first during the first stage. In that case, how many bastions would fight against which planet? These questions were carefully examined.

It would still be several days before everyone was ready for the final assault. In the meantime, soldiers were a flurry of activity, preparing for war. Everyday Lan Jue joined his brother for meetings and listened dutifully as plans were discussed. Over many hours the plan were hammered out, to the point where even Lan Jue didn't hold any concerns.

Scouting missions would proceed once the human planets were retaken. For now that didn't seem too late, and easier once the enemy forces were cleared out. The North had a detailed plan in regards to how they would proceed.

As the days progressed, Lan Jue also came to learn more about how Middle Heaven came to be. In truth, calling it a Bastion ship wasn't entirely correct. It was, after all, still a planet. It was also one of the East's best-kept secrets.

Once the East had taken An Lun they started with a detailed survey of the planet, as they did with any new acquisition. They discovered it was not suitable for widespread human habitation, but it did have a wealth of resources including rare metals. Because of its riches and it's located in contested space, the East fortified An Lun with soldiers and defensive capabilities.

As the operations on An Lun continued, An Lun's army was born.

Much of An Lun's refined materials were used to develop An Lun itself. Military leadership recognized the importance of an installation on the border with the North, even if An Lun's wealth was depleted. Thus the plan was never to abandon the planet when its mines were dry. They would continue to develop it for military use.

Time passed, and one day a geological surveying team made a new discovery. Deep in the An Lun mines was a unique sort of substance. It was similar to the materials used to create nuclear weaponry from the old world, and thus very dangerous for humans to be around. However, the unstable element produced a tremendous amount of energy, and composed the planet's core.

The scientist who uncovered the element was initialized frightened by what he'd found. The recommendation was made to immediate halt all mining activities on An Lun, and to pull the miners out of danger. Among the dangers was the possibility that one mining accident could cause a chain reaction, resulting in the obliteration of the whole planet. The blast would be so intense it would put neighboring star systems in jeopardy. In short, An Lun was a ticking time-bomb – the moment its core became unstable it could blow.

This came as a great shock to Eastern leadership. However, they had already poured a tremendous amount of time, energy and manpower into the planet. Simply abandoning it would be unpalatable. What's more, without An Lun acting as a vigil it left their borders open. The decision was made to dispatch a science team to see what they could learn.

Research continued for two years. In the end it was determined the unstable element could be safely utilized. That meant they could stay on An Lun. As a result the government poured funds into learning everything they could about the element and its uses. It was named after the geologist who first discovered it; Molinite. It was defined by its instability, but under the right conditions it produced vast amounts of energy. The scientists' first problem was finding a way to stabilize molinite and prevent it from harming An Lun's population.

As research continued scientists discovered that stabilizing the element wasn't too difficult. However, simply stabilizing it wasted its potential. So they set about finding ways to guide and utilize its potential.

It took five years for them to find the best use for molinite. Since the planet's core was entirely composed of the material, the potential energy it stored was virtually limitless. Through ceaseless experimentation the rudimentary concept for Middle Heaven was born. The East's military deficiency made them determined to follow through with the plan. If successful, it would mean the East was in possession of the largest Bastion ship in human history.

Initially they'd called it An Lun Warplanet, and kept it secret from anyone not directly involved. All throughout the building process only the

highest echelons of government and military were privy to the information. This was, in part, why An Lun was so stringent in its defense.

The first obstacle was stabilizing molinite on a large scale, and converting it into a power source that could move an entire planet. Research revealed that using too much of the molinite at once caused it to become dangerously unsteady. However, they could transfer energy to reserves. Then, once the energy was refined, it could be converted into stable energy.

To achieve this scientists developed a plan wherein the planet's core would be hollowed out. Surrounding it would be a series of reactors and energy refineries to convert and store the energy. They used this energy to continue An Lun's transformation, and ultimately as Middle Heaven's source of power.

Over time the bastion took shape. When Lan Jue went to visit An Lun, the planet was in the final stages of conversion. It was for this reason Lan Qing required that he and Star Division be restricted to a small area of the planet.

Middle Heaven's greatest advantage was its maneuverability. Through the tremendous energy molinite provided, Middle Heaven could maintain high speeds and fight, all while remaining relatively stable. The planet's rocky exterior became its armor.

Precious ores were still present in large quantities on An Lun's rocky surface, still available to mine. There was enough molinite in its core to keep the planet running for a thousand years, and that was if it was in constant flight.

Middle Heaven was the greatest technological achievement the East had ever produced. It was worth it just to see the shock on the faces of Northern officials. Unfortunately for them they couldn't know about the molinite, or how the warplanet came to be.

Middle Heaven was the crowning achievement of eastern science. It had as much firepower as Terminator had before its fall, but for a slight reduction in fighter drones. That was to be expected, of course, since the

cost in creating this bastion was astronomical. Rumors of another bastion in production had been a lie to deceive anyone trying to look too closely.

Eastern hopes were laid squarely on the bulky shoulders of Middle Heaven. They hoped it would lift their Alliance from military inferiority.

Lan Jue also learned from his brother that Middle Heaven stored a lot of human, plant and animal DNA, as well as other important things from the East. If humanity lost and the aliens took over their section of space, Middle Heaven would act as their ark. The seeds of humanity would be conveyed to a distant star far from danger to start again. It was the same idea they shared with the Poseidon group.

As for Hua Li's people, they weren't going to directly participate in the battle. However, in secret they had their agreements with the East.

Chapter 736: Hmph!

If this operation was a success, then no more needed to be said about Middle Heaven's stockpile – things will continue as usual. Poseidon Group would continue to live happily on planet Poseidon just as before. But if humanity's gambit failed the Poseidon Group would announce their defection from the West, and leave for Skyfire where they would join with Eastern forces.

If that happened the West's power would immediately suffer. They would be no match for the East at that point, and Poseidon Group wouldn't need to fear retribution.

In addition, Poseidon Group had its own plans to flee if things went sour.

Humanity's future hinged on the result of this war, a war they had to win. If they did not, no one wanted to think of the horror that would follow. Their only chance would be a desperate escape.

Warships covered the heavens, as numerous as the stars, surrounding the lumbering form of Middle Heaven as it flew through space. Lan Qing assured his brother that their current speed was only half of what the bastion was capable of. Although the East had offered their Northern counterparts full support, they still had some reservations. If the North used this opportunity to assault its allies, the East would have to be ready. As a result, the Alliances were separated into their own areas, isolated and responsible for their own part of the plan.

It took three days for Middle Heaven to reach the launching area and get in formation. Then they waited, silent but vigilant, anticipating the order to begin.

Eight bastions and twelve fleets could cover an impressive area. Everywhere the eye looked it was meat with a sea of metal. Middle Heaven's radar was filled with blinking red lights. In the distance their instruments could pick out the violet giants that were the four former human planets. Even the space around them seemed to have adopted a purple haze – aliens, countless scores of them suspended in space.

Never had Lan Jue seen so many gathered in one place. They were thickly packed but their numbers spread far and wide. Their psionic pulses were too intense to penetrate, effectively making everything behind them invisible. Long-range telescopes were the best way to get a read on the situation at this point. Their electronic surveillance had been rendered useless.

Inwardly Lan Jue sighed as he stared at the screens. The aliens were adept at controlling information. So far they had kept humans from getting any of the intelligence they needed to mount an effective defense. Alien strategy continued to outplay humanity's.

Lan Jue hadn't gotten any rest as they approached the staging area. He was too busy directing Star Division and preparing for the incursion. He hadn't even had time to cultivate. Although at his level, even failing to cultivate didn't stop his power from increasing on its own. Every day he felt his power struggling to expand beyond his control, bringing him closer to that final step.

He could sense the time of his breakthrough was near. It was the same for Zhou Qianlin. Once she had reached ninth rank, Lan Jue was surprised to discover Qianlin's Discipline strengthening even faster than his own. Of course, their powers were different. Qianlin's abilities were the purest Lan Jue had ever seen. Especially once combined with immortal qi, her Discipline was entirely free from impurities. It appeared to continue refining itself as time went on.

No one was more impatient to break through than Lan Jue. He was confident that once they did, Qianlin would awaken from her vegetative state. They could be together again. He had looked after her for so long, and through the process the agitation that consumed him eased. To him, nothing was more important than being able to be with her. Without her, what use was anything else?

She wasn't Hera, he knew that. But she had come to mean just as much to him.

She had to wake up!

“Boss?” A gentle voice interrupted his thoughts.

Lan Jue turned his head. Xiuxiu stood by his shoulder, offering a glass of water.

“Thank you.” He took it from her and sipped from the glass. “How has your cultivation been going?” He asked with a smile.

She smiled back, a sweet and gentle smile. “Very well. We’ve all been working very hard lately.”

Lan Jue regarded her apologetically. “I’ve been so busy lately, I’ve had no time to look after you ladies.”

Xiuxiu smiled. “It’s fine! We don’t mind so long as you’re alright. We just hope you could bring us along more. We’re happy when we’re near you.”

Lan Jue’s brows furrowed. “Xiuxiu, you’ve been with me the longest. Ever since we were small father took you in and raised you with us. I’ve always seen you as a younger sister, equal in all things. That Zeus’ Amazons business was just something other people called you, you girls have always been my closest friends. But you know that a person can’t share their heart. There’ve been no shortage of people reminding me that I shouldn’t string you and the others along or there will be problems. Xiuxiu, my hope for you and the others is that you find places of your own when this fight is over. I want all of you to be happy.”

Xiuxiu’s face changed and turned pale. “Boss, you don’t want us? Because you have sister Qianlin?”

Lan Jue paused. “How could you think that? It’s not that I don’t want you, I don’t want to hold you back!”

Xiuxiu hung her head and muttered. “Happiness is different for everyone. Having a family, a husband and children doesn’t always mean happiness. For me, happiness is being with you. Seeing you every day is enough. This is my only requirement, my small wish – and you want to deprive me of it?”

She lifted her head and fixed Lan Jue’s eyes with her own. “You say you can’t share your heart. But what about Hera? You loved her, now you have

Zhou Qianlin. All this time I've been right by your side. Waiting, waiting... waiting for a day that never comes. Now you won't even let me wait?"

Her voice rose with every word, thick with emotion. Her body was shaking. Lan Jue stared at her without knowing what to do. He thought back to the Pharmacist's warning and realized she was right. He hadn't realized Xiuxiu's obsession had consumed her so.

"I'm sorry Xiuxiu. That's not what I meant, It's just..."

"You don't need to say anything." She shouted, tears streaming down her face. "I'm not going anywhere until the day I die. If you want me to go then you'll have to kill me." She swung around and sobbed as she ran out, giving Lan Jue no chance to respond.

As he watched her flee Lan Jue was struck with a pang in his chest. He felt like a coward. Ever since they were small Lan Jue knew she liked him, but he figured it would fade with time. Instead it was the opposite, and things had only gotten worse.

If Xiuxiu was like this, then what about Ke'er, Mika and Lin Guoguo? Could he expect the same reaction? It was unfair to them! But they didn't want to go.

Lan Jue rubbed his forehead. He was at a total loss as to what he should do. Once the fight was over he would have to sit down with them and have a frank conversation.

Perplexing though the situation was, Lan Jue had no regrets. Xiuxiu had been with him always. Ke'er, Lin Guoguo and Mika had each been saved. If he had to do it all again he would, without question,

Setting the glass of water down, Lan Jue decided to spend some time cultivating. They had come to the calm before the storm, the perfect time to reflect on what he'd learned.

Just then, he heard determined footsteps approaching. The aggressive aura surrounding her was choking. Her body was clearly outlined in the tight flight-suit she wore and her head of fiery red hair bounced wildly behind her.

Of all of the Amazons, Mika's potential was the greatest. Even Su Xiaosu couldn't compare. Her Discipline had improved the most recently, and she was now ninth level fifth rank. Lan Jue knew she had the greatest chance of all the Amazons to become a Paragon one day. But her potential was also her curse, the demon blood that was her lineage could easily spiral out of her control.

"Boss!" Her voice was high. Lan Jue didn't have to ask to know why she was here.

"Mika, sit." He pointed to a nearby chair.

"I will not sit." Her hands were planted firmly on her hips and she glared daggers at him. "Why are you tormenting Xiuxiu? Do you know how much she likes you? How could you treat her this way?"

"I –" Lan Jue opened his mouth, but found he didn't know how to explain himself.

Mika was in a rage. "We don't demand anything from you, why the hell are you forcing us to leave? We don't need to go find some man. We don't need another family. We have all the family we need at Zeus' Jewelry Shop. Do you know I catch Xiuxiu staring at your picture on her communicator sometimes? She smiled like an idiot whenever you come up in conversation. But even she isn't trying to get anything from you. Still you want us gone. Boss, I'm telling you now, if you tell us to go we're taking our own lives. We'll make you regret it the rest of your life. Hmph!"

Mika spun around and stomped off, her head held high like a queen. Lan Jue watched her go with his mouth hanging open. Was this... were they declaring war on him?

Chapter 737: It Begins

Mika swept through the door and down the hall as fast as her feet could take her. She began to wheeze once she was out of the boss' earshot, gasping through a face twisted in anger. She muttered to herself. "He'd just keep doing it unless we show him we're serious. Sooner or later it had to be done. Heh, see how he likes being bullied. He won't be making us leave any time soon."

Zeus-1 pulled out of Middle Heaven, with Majesty close on its heels. They took up position at the back of the fleet, and waited. The fight was about to begin, and Star Division needed to prepare for their part of it.

Star Division was more than prepared. Besides Jun'er, all of Skyfire Avenue's elite were in attendance. All four brigades were ready for war, but the charge would be led by the First and Second, with support from Vanguard.

Vanguard squad was a team composed entirely of Paragons or Adepts with equivalent power. This included Jue Di of the Infinite, and Luo Xianni of Nirvana. Of course, the various other Paragons from Skyfire Avenue and the God of Wine, Bize. The power behind the small squad was, frankly, ludicrous.

They constituted the best humanity had produced – ninety percent of the strongest people in the universe. Jue Di was their leader. However, Lan Jue was the one who called the shots.

Vanguard and Zeus' five Amazons were aboard Zeus-1. Star Division occupied Majesty. Everyone was waiting with baited breath for the order to move in.

Lan Jue stood by the window and looked out. The Paragons were all quietly meditating in their seats, maintaining their calm. Not only did they have to take the planet, they had to do it as fast as possible. When that happened they would leave Star Division behind to clean up, and Vanguard would go where they were needed the most. With the help of a squad of Paragons, retaking the planets was expected to happen swiftly.

They were also to keep a look out for creatures like the Violet Prince and Princess.

Lan Jue stared into the blackness of space with his arms crossed in front of his chest, eyes sparkling. This was likely to be the most important fight of his life.

Jun'er had attempted to forecast what would happen, but said the future was unclear. She was, after all, still young, new to her powers, and there were so many involved. The alien planets were also nearly immortals. Difficulties seeing the future were to be expected.

The Driver stood at Lan Jue's shoulder. His voice was low when he spoke. "How are you doing? When do you think you'll break through?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "I don't know, but it should be soon. I'm fighting it off as strong as I can. The more you accumulate the easier the process is."

The Driver sighed. "Indeed! Even I was surprised at how easy it was. With the help of my Primordial Lightning, I didn't encounter any real resistance. It seemed completely natural to join with my protogenia and become one with it. But it's different for you. I can't see where you're at – it's like looking into a deep pool."

Lan Jue chuckled. "That's because I'm more handsome than you are."

The Driver sniffed disdainfully. "Stop talking nonsense. You think you can hold a candle to me?"

He smirked at Lan Jue, but saw his commander's pupil's contract and stare straight ahead.

"It's starting!" He said.

Yes, the war was about to begin!

Engines flared to life from the tail ends of the massive warships. It lit up space like the birth of a hundred thousand new stars. They maintained formation as the fleet began to close in on the four human planets.

Twelve fleets, specifically, and they moved as a single body. Like

Armageddon descending on the alien horde.

Behind them eight massive bastion ships began to press forward. The largest of them was of course Middle Heaven, though it must be said it was also the ugliest. It was also slower than its smaller counterparts.

Tyrannosaurus was nestled in the middle of them all. Admiral Kang Hui stood behind his control desk with solemn expression. He was determined to cast off the shame of his previous defeat with this second encounter! The fate of humanity hung in the balance, and the pressure laid on his shoulder made it hard to breathe.

“Begin!” Kang Hui’s face was dark, and his voice was curt. The light in his eyes was fierce – it was time to do or die! He was ready for the ultimate sacrifice if it came down to it.

Fallen comrades, by the end of today I’ll have either won you vengeance, or I’ll meet you in the hereafter.

Ships began to move. At first they moved slowly, but soon they were closing in on the enemy from all directions.

From a distance one couldn’t see the end of the human fighting force. Patrol boats charged at the fore, surrounded and protected by battleships, expedition ships and dreadnaughts. Capital ships came up from behind as an imposing rear guard.

Cannons began to charge. Firepower mighty enough to level planets pointed at humanity’s foes.

As though sensing the change, the alien forces began to react. They swarmed, but not toward the humans. Instead they pressed tighter and withdrew, leaving empty space behind. At the same time they closed in tighter around the human planets they’d taken, as though ready to die in defense of their newest acquisitions.

Kang Hui scowled. This wasn’t what he wanted to see. He had hoped the aliens would charge ahead to meet them, so they could be spread out and their power diffused. However, with the fleets of three Alliances and the support of the bastions, he was confident in their success.

On the other hand he was well aware of his enemy's cunning. Rushing in would not have been like them.

"Hold formations." Kang Hui continued to call out orders. He had learned from their earlier failure that charging in was a sure path to defeat. Stay prepared, stay vigilant. The alien planets were still nowhere to be seen, and until they showed up anything was possible.

The fleets split up into predetermined formations and blazed toward the four planets as instructed. To avoid harming the planets, Capital ships were instructed not to have their main cannons charged. This was also to save energy for the more difficult fight ahead.

As the human ships closed in, the aliens gathered even tighter together. The large aliens even hid behind the planets.

"Avoid hitting the planets. Open fire!"

With his order, ships spread around all four planets simultaneously began their attack.

Flashes of laser fire lit streaked through space. They sped passed and around the planets, aiming for the aliens trying to use them for cover.

Their enemy also pulled into formation. Turtle aliens brazenly appeared on the front lines, defending the others with their shells. The other creatures didn't attack, but instead hid well behind the makeshift shield wall.

Human forces were arrayed well, keeping formations that allowed for maximum coverage. However their strongest weapons were checked by their proximity to the planets. They had to rely on secondary weapons systems only.

Suddenly a purple light began to emerge from behind the turtle aliens. Streaks of purple energy blasted forth, not unlike cannon fire from the human ships. They didn't have the impact of human weapons, but where the caustic energy struck it began to dissolve the ships' shields, causing them to fluctuate erratically.

Ship captains reacted quickly. Dreadnaughts and Capital ships pulled to

the front. With their stronger shields and heavy guns they could shield the smaller ships from destruction.

Both sides viciously exchanged fire. However, the humans were at a disadvantage since they couldn't use their strongest weapons. The alien horde had no such restrictions.

Close inspection revealed that it was a particular kind of alien firing at them from a distance. They looked like hedgehogs, capable of throwing spikes of energy from their backs.

The human ships kept their distance. Just as the aliens had studied them, the humans had learned about their enemy. They knew the monsters were especially strong at close range, but lacked strong long-range fighting capabilities. Of course, this didn't include the planets themselves.

Humanity had prepared well for the battle. With the backing of all the alliances they didn't worry about running out of resources or energy, and so maintained the long-distance attacks. Their goal was to destroy the hedgehog aliens quickly, and keep the other creatures from getting too close. Any alien who dared try to get close was instantly put down by the overwhelming hail of laser fire.

Though mankind had suffered numerous defeats, each time they had learned. Kang Hui's plan was a simple one – make less mistakes! Use the strength advantage to beat back the enemy, don't be too aggressive, but don't give them any opportunities either. Grind them down, that was how you killed aliens.

Chapter 738: Landing

His execution proved effective. They were exchanging fire, but the humans were clearly in a superior position. The aliens' tightly knit formations worked against them. While their proximity to the human planets prevented Capital ship fire, it also prevented them from using their own advantages.

Crack! A turtle-aliens shielding could no longer hold up to the sustained fire and fractured. The squishy creature below was swiftly reduced to mangled flesh. Its twinkling vital crystal appeared, but was quickly swallowed up by another monster nearby.

Where there was one others soon followed. Before long the defensive line began to collapse. The alien forces were being slowly pushed back as they realized they couldn't stand up to the human fleets.

For each meter they retreated the human fighters inwardly cheered. Under Kang Hui's orders they pressed forward, maintaining optimal distance and never letting up.

The universe was on fire, a sea of angry light. Streamers of lethal energy were exchanged back and forth across a dark backdrop. For the first time in the history of their conflict, mankind was overpowering their enemies. So far things were going according to plan.

However, the aliens wouldn't be so easily defeated. Under the cover of defensive-type creatures they continued to retreat behind the planet they knew their prey wouldn't harm. Clearly they understood the mindset of the humans, they wouldn't attack their own.

Kang Hui smirked coolly. Trying to draw them in deep? Not likely.

As the planet came within firing distance Kang Hui gave the order to hold. Ground teams were to prepare for landing.

He was more careful now after the bitter lessons he'd learned before. He wouldn't easily give the enemy an opportunity to make a fool of him again. Kang Hui knew that the creatures wouldn't retreat so easily unless

they were clearly being beaten. It had to be a diversion, that was the only explanation. Since they didn't know where the three home worlds were, there was always a chance they could show up when the humans were most vulnerable – like chasing the aliens deeper into their territory. He wasn't going to allow that to happen.

They had to stick to the plan. Recapturing the human planets was their first priority, then they could go about exterminating the enemy.

“Admiral, ground teams are ready to move at your order.”

“Give them cover fire, clear out whatever's in their path.” Kang Hui coldly commanded.

Lan Jue had received the order back on Zeus-1. Prepare for incursion!

“What do you think?” The Wine Master asked. They were provided the most up-to-date information. They knew that so far humans have suffered no casualties, while more than a thousand aliens had met their end. However, no vital crystals were left behind. They were all swept up and kept from the hands of their killers.

Lan Jue shook his head. “We've only just started, it's hard to say. We'll have to wait and see what develops. So far it looks like our strategy is paying off. Get ready, soon it'll be our turn.”

“Mh.” The Wine Master nodded. One by one the other Paragons rose from their meditations. Their eyes burned, they were fighting on behalf of their species.

“Zeus-1. Zeus-1, this is Middle Heaven.”

“This is Zeus-1, go on.” Su Xiaosu was manning the controls and quickly responded to the hails.

“The incursion has begun, engage!” Majesty was also hearing the same command.

“Received, operation is a go!” She confirmed.

She rose to her feet and faced Lan Jue. Star Division's commander nodded.

Zeus-1 was on the move, closing in on its target planet. With Majesty, they were responsible for the largest of the four worlds, Monteux. Obviously Paragons would be more effective on the largest planet, the North believed. The hardest task was delegated to the team with the highest chance of success.

Zeus-1 and Majesty closed ranks, and flew wing to wing toward Monteux. Behind them were ten more large transport ships bearing the markings of the Bloodiron Khans. Indeed, An Lun's mighty adept army would provide aid for the mission. Monteux's recovery had the lowest chance of failure, especially since Lan Qing was sending in his best people.

His faith wasn't just in his own people, but in Star Division as well. He believed in Lan Jue's command. His little brother would make sure their losses were kept as low as possible.

Zeus-1 pulled to the fore. A hail of cover fire kept them from being harassed by enemies on the way in. However, that air support would end once they hit the planet's atmosphere. They had to be ready for a fierce battle once they reached the surface. The only backup they would be able to rely on was low-flying patrol ships or the odd battleship. Anything larger than that wasn't going to risk friendly fire.

This presented a problem, but with the North in such a precarious position at home everyone agreed to manage best they could. Nothing was more important than saving their beleaguered compatriots.

As they closed in Lan Jue's eyes blazed. This would be a true test of Star Division's capabilities. Behind him the Paragons had risen to their feet and gathered. They stood in silent support of the young commander.

"Let me go!" The Pharmacist called. There was a brutality smoldering in her typically calm face.

Lan Jue shot her a glance. He answered her with a nod. They needed to throw everything they had at this fight, and take advantage of every opportunity.

Lan Jue knew this was her way of apologizing for her actions. No one had spoken ill of her or chastised her actions, but her heart was filled with

shame. Lan Jue was an important member of Skyfire Avenue, yet her actions had put him in mortal danger. If something had happened to him it would have been disastrous for everyone.

Lan Jue understood, and wouldn't dare discourage her. He wanted to help clear her conscience.

She left, then the Wine Master spoke. "Do you want any of us to help her?"

Lan Jue smiled, and shook his head. "No need. She's the Harbinger Fairy!"

The only Paragon still meditating was Jue Di. All the rest stood behind Lan Jue, watching Monteux grow larger outside the window.

It had used to be a beautiful and vibrant world, a treasure for the North. Although not as important as Luo, it had served as a center of economy and commerce. It was for this reasons Terminator had been stationed nearby. But the planet was different now. Its surface glimmered with a strangely beautiful purple hue. Sadly, it was a beauty rife with death and decay.

From high above they could see something on the surface, moving in surging waves. A host of aliens were waiting for them.

These weren't manifestations of an infection, like what the progenitors created. These were true aliens. Evidently their strategy had always been to bring the fight to the surface and take advantage of their close-combat strengths.

Lan Jue knew from the briefings that the West and North were sending over thirty mecha divisions and scores of small warships to the other planets. They were manned by their finest converts and acquired Talents. Here, however, the fight would be hardest and backed by the fewest infantry. That was because they had Star Division.

Closer. Their cover fire started to taper off. Five hundred patrol ships and sixty battleships continued to keep the aliens at bay with secondary cannons. Many aliens were hiding in the hazy purple atmosphere of

Monteux, waiting for their chance.

Blasts of caustic purple energy were cast into the incursion force, but Zeus-1 deftly avoided them all. Two patrol boats that had pulled ahead to clear the way were not so lucky. They knew the horror they were signing up for, but they volunteered to fight anyway.

When the human ships entered the atmosphere and began to shake, the aliens made their move. Wave after wave of purple blasts streaked past them. Ten patrol boats were instantly dissolved, until the corrosion reached their engine and caused them to explode.

Lan Jue scowled. The enemy was perversely clever, they didn't engage the humans in open space instead attack them from the ground when they came in range. Without a doubt, what their telescopes had thought were humans were actually these monsters lying in wait. These evil bastards were smart.

Lan Jue saw the truth, but it was too late to change anything. His only option was to soldier on.

Just then a white light overtook their screens. At first it wasn't intense, but it moved with incredible speed. It cut through the atmosphere like a hot knife through butter, and toward Monteux's poisoned surface. Whatever purple energy came close was dissolved and dispersed.

"Admiral Lan Qing, call the patrol boats and battleships back from Monteux's atmosphere. They're dying in vain. Leave the incursion to us." Lan Jue called out.

Chapter 739: Bladestorm

The East had arranged for direct communication between Lan Jue and his brother.

“Alright!” Lan Qing’s answer was short and to the point.

Zeus-1’s warship entourage began to pull back. They continued to give Lan Jue cover fire but no longer pressed into the planet’s atmosphere. That blast of white light continued its headlong charge.

The light was, of course, the Pharmacist. She was dressed in white, in the style of ancient china. Her long hair was done up braids that made her seem all the more pixiesque. However, her tender beauty was paired with eyes that burned with murderous intent. Not wild bloodlust, but righteous determination to eradicate evil. She tore through the air on her seven-star sword, Occisus clutched in hand. She looked for all the world like the immortal faeries of old.

Streaks of violet-purple light shot at her, but never came close. She juked and dodged, and before long she was approaching the planet’s surface

As she swept her eyes to the horizon she was met with an unending sea of creatures. All kinds of monstrous faces sneered and howled at her. Some were as large as mountains. They focused attacks in her direction.

The situation was worse than they’d anticipated. The aliens had guessed recapturing the planets would be a main objective and had set a trap. But what did this mean to the Harbinger Fairy?

There was a flash of purple, and a shuttle-shaped alien launched itself toward the Pharmacist. She regarded it with as much concern as she would an insect.

A streak of white, the shuttle alien raced passed her and away. It erupted in a fountain of purple blood and savaged flesh as though it had suffered a thousand cuts. Chunks of it tumbled to the ground below.

A shimmering purple crystal was captured in the Pharmacist’s light. Their first vital crystal!

The shuttle alien's demise brought more attention on the Pharmacist. She stopped in midair and glared down at them. Her eyes were cast far toward the horizon, then back to the milling beasts below her feet. Her pretty lips moved, though her words were lost to the host of angry growls.

Aaaaouuu-! One of the beast, standing three hundred meters tall, threw its head back and roared. Dozens more aliens threw themselves at the Pharmacist.

She faced them calmly, the hard light of murder glinting in her eyes. She lifted Occisus high, and pointed toward her enemies with her other hand. Her legendary sword reacted by dissolving into a column of white light that shot into the sky. All of a sudden, whether Zeus-1 overhead or the aliens below, everything was lost in a blinding white light.

It was like the whole universe was lost in Occisus' glow.

Even the keen and powerful Paragons shuddered as the power washed over them. They could feel the lethal energy it contained. Even Luo Xianni stared with wide eyes. "This girl's aura... packs quite the punch!" She muttered.

"Blaaadestooorm!" The clear and emotionless call rang from the Pharmacist.

The first blast of light emerged. It shot forth, obliterating anything in its path. It struck the closest alien and tore right through it, heading for the beast coming up from behind.

A second blast followed. Then a third, a fourth, a fifth...

The sword-shaped white lights were mirror images of Occisus, as though the sword had fractured into countless copies of itself and tumbled from heaven. They descended wildly to the unfortunate creatures below, brutally ending their lives. Even shelled beasts couldn't protect themselves from the Pharmacist's fury.

As far as the eye could see Occisus' power descended in a deadly rain of white. Those aliens that weren't immediately killed clambered over one another to try and flee.

Bladestorm was a technique of ages past, imparted to her through Occisus. Upon breaking through to Paragon the Pharmacist was infused with this secret knowledge. The murderous intent she bore galvanized her weapon's power, and the result was widespread death.

Purple bodies continued to fall beneath flashes of white. The air was thick with screams of rage and pain, but they did nothing to curb the slaughter. The Bladestorm of the Harbinger Fairy was sure to be spoken of in the annals of humanity for all time.

This patch of Monteux was painted dark purple, but now it was from the blood of their fallen enemies.

No less than five hundred aliens had fallen to the Pharmacist's attack, including the massive one that had challenged her. Parts of it were strewn across a large swath of ground. Scores more approached from the distance but didn't dare get too close. They, too, feared death. They may just have been cells shed from their home worlds, but they had intelligence and knew the pain this lone human promised.

Zeus-1 also kept its distance behind her. They didn't want to be caught in the hail of death!

The Pharmacist vanished, appearing a moment later standing atop the sapphire ship. The manifestation of Occisus power shifted and raced for the distant alien observers. They fled for their lives as Zeus-1 searched for a clear patch to land on.

The Wine Master reminded everyone of the plan. "Everyone pick a direction. First order of business is securing the landing zone."

Several figured separated from the ship as it continued its descent.

The smell of rot and decay filled the air, belched from the poisoned purple ground. If one looked closely they could spy what looked like veins snaking across the surface. The corpses of the monsters were quickly being eaten away and absorbed by the earth. Even vital crystal were being sucked up to feed whatever those veins were connected to.

Lan Jue knew that so long as the aliens could retain those crystals, they

weren't really losing anything. The Wine Master knew this as well, thus his first action was to brandish his scepter. The scores of mangled bodies beneath him shook and flashed silver. In the next moment their vital crystals were floating beside the Wine Master. Then they vanished into a vortex of glimmering light.

Every crystal they pilfered from the enemy made them weaker. Gathering them was a priority. Each alliance had agreed to allow all crystals to remain with the ones who'd taken them. The North had two planets to farm for crystals, while the East and West had one each. Of course, Monteux was the largest, and part of the East's promise to help with other operations was the potential to acquire more vital crystals.

The Paragons raced off, each in separate directions.

The Pharmacist remained kneeling atop Zeus-1. Her face was sallow and her appearance frail. Being only a part of the Realm of Protogenia, she had only just managed to summon Bladestorm. Occisus' demands were high. She needed time to recover.

Lan Jue did not follow the Paragons but remained behind to survey the area. Jue Di and Luo Xianni were with him. Because they were susceptible to the ire of protogenic energy, they did not hurry to use their powers.

The Wine Master, Driver, Gourmet, Keeper, Bookworm, Pauper, Clockmaker, and Bize spread out in eight different directions.

The Wine Master arrived at his prescribed location in the blink of an eye. He held his astrum aloft, and the area before him shuddered in protest. As aliens flew toward him and encountered the flux they were instantly ripped apart. Only a few particularly strong beasts survived passage.

A dragon-like colossus slithered through the air surrounded by a violet aura. It opened its maw, and spat from it a dazzling orb of purple toward the Wine Master. The fractured reality around it seemed unable to stop its advance. Clearly, this was one of the beasts that could survive in space.

The Wine Master grunted and waved his scepter. A piercing beam of silver issues forth, splitting reality in its passage and leaving a black void

in its wake. First it consumed the orb of energy the beast had belched. Then, having not slowed at all, it crashed into the monster itself. The screech it released was loud enough to deafen, but lasted only a moment. The Wine Master callously looked on as the dragon separated into two equal halves. Its large vital crystal vanished in a flash of silver.

Like the Wine Master, the Driver rose sharply into the air when he reached his target area. Overhead a dark cloud of purple had gathered of similar hue to the planet's plagued surface. But the bolts of purple lightning that issued from it were not of alien making. Where they landed, nothing survived. Without exception, any alien caught in the scope of the lightning storm was incinerated.

Chapter 740: Dominating Power

It was his first time releasing his powers in battle since ascending to Paragon. The feeling of protogenia flowing through him was intoxicating, and even his enemies were in awe of the primordial lightning flashing in the sky. Aliens witnessing their brood's destruction from a distance didn't dare approach the Driver.

The Gourmet walked idly along the ground. In his passage the world withered away and the sky blanched. A gray-hued stillness and death spread from him like a pestilence. Aliens that came to close were also painted in the monochromatic color then burned away in a painful and silent demise. Their bodies turned to ash and floated in the breezeless air. The Gourmet brought to them a universe of ruination and despair.

The Keeper and Bookworm made the most dramatic display. Above the Keeper's crown was an array of small stars arranged in a matter. All of a sudden they shot out, spreading in all directions. They swelled into beams of energy ten meters in diameter. He looked like a human battleship.

Meanwhile, the Bookworm was not much different. The blasts issued from him were five meters wide and looked like beams of sunlight. The earth shook in their passage, belching fire and thunderclaps. The two scientists were showing restraint, for if they used powers like the ion cannon it could clear away huge swaths of enemies, but the North may misunderstand and accuse the East of using Capital ships on the planet.

Where the Keeper and Bookworm were commencing their shock and awe campaign, the Pauper tore through the enemy with a ferocity to match a wild beast. He didn't use any long-ranged abilities, deigning instead to throw himself in the thick of the alien horde. The loud and clear roar of a dragon hung in the air as he ripped a bloody swath through his foes. The image of a golden dragon slithered through the air around him.

An enormous but slow-moving monstrosity that looked like a turtle came trundling his way. The Pauper leapt into the air, arc high over the aliens' heads, then brazenly smashed into the creature's armored back.

The impact forced the turtle monster to the ground.

It screamed in protest while the Arhat of the Descending Dragon lifted his fists high. When he brought them down, armor that deflected warship fire shattered like glass. A tempest of golden light swept through the area.

He sprung at the next alien, never pausing to catch his breath. He was a protogenic warhead, and where he went the cries of dragons marked the death of his enemies. As he moved through them the golden dragon pulled aliens within reach of his fists and were summarily exterminated.

In sharp contrast, the Clockmaker's strategy was much calmer, though no less monstrous.

Gentle multichromatic colors danced across the field in waves. Some areas moved sluggishly while others were swift and abrupt. When the aliens tried to strike at the Clockmaker, they suddenly found themselves moving in slow motion to tear apart an ally that'd had inadvertently rushed in front.

It was absolute chaos. The monsters tore each other to shreds, and all the while the Clockmaker calmly walked among them unscathed.

Bize's sector was the bloodiest. 'Granny Bize' swiped the air with claw-like hands, leaving crimson streaks where her long red-lacquered nails passed. The streaks lengthened and spread like bloody knives through the crowd. Moments later groups of aliens would tumble to the ground in several pieces and fountains of blood.

Twinkling vital crystals flew over to her as her enemies were felled. According to the agreement, she got to keep whatever she got. They were an important factor in how the Wine Master had convinced her to come. Both she and Aubert had been around for a staggeringly long time. Both of them could benefit from the restorative properties of the crystals.

Eight directions, eight Paragons! They spread out like a fishing net, and not a single creature evaded them. This was the benefit of individual strength. Without cost or crisis, the initial stages of their mission were complete.

Majesty found a landing sight, relinquishing scores of figures the moment it touched down. Mechas, twinkling in the purple light. They quickly arranged into teams then spread out to secure the landing zone.

Compared to the last time Star Division took to the field, they had matured quite a lot as soldiers. Lan Jue, suspended overhead, nodded in approval. Retaking the planet would not be a problem.

Following on the heels of Majesty were the Bloodiron Khans' transport vessels, and finally normal An Lun ground troops. Altogether there were five companies responsible for taking back Monteux – the smallest operation force by comparison.

Scores of engineers had come with the soldiers. They deployed with machinery that had come with them on the transports and immediately got to work. However they quickly discovered a problem. As they tried to work the ground would wriggle and sway to throw them off, as though it had a life of its own.

Lan Jue spread out his hands and pressed them downward. A curtain of blue light descended and spread over the forces below. When it reached the ground it began to pitch and shake. The cancerous vessels buried deep underground atrophied under Lan Jue's power, collapsing and cutting off its poisonous flow. Gradually the poison hue drained from the earth and its natural color returned.

All-Heaven Lightning – the evolution of Lan Jue's Discipline and the thunder essence – was a bane to all things evil. By virtue of its power he was able to overcome the toxic influence of his enemies. Clearing the vestiges of their sickness was an easy task.

Without the tendrils of the beasts to trouble them further, the engineers got back to work – installing railguns. Recapturing the planet was a priority not just in principle, but because they could be turned against their aggressors.

The guns themselves were provided by the North. The plan was to install them once an area was secured then press on to the next sector. Once they were ready to go they would be used to assist other teams until the planet

was entirely under human control.

Lan Jue stepped forward. Thor appeared as though summoned from the ether, and its pilot was swallowed in a beam of sapphire light. Once Lan Jue was settled in its cockpit the storied mecha's eyes lit up.

At Lan Jue's levels of power a mecha suit was unnecessary. However, as commander he needed its communications equipment to keep in contact with his teams. It afforded him immediate command and control.

Star Division was on the move with Thor directing activities overhead. By now the Pharmacist had recovered. She was seated on Thor's shoulder, but no matter how fast the mecha moved she did not struggle to keep her balance.

Flashes and explosions lit up the skies from one horizon to the other, signs of humanity's spreading dominance. Star Division followed their leader as he raced forward in search of a specific target. If they wanted to retake the planet they had to find the progenitor. Once it was slain, the tendrils of its influence would wither and die. If they were lucky they might find survivors as well. They would be alive only as bait, but saving them was a priority.

Lan Jue headed first for the Driver. The two of them were Brigade commanders, so he was the natural choice for a first direction.

"Feels good! My Primordial Lightning is pretty damned impressive, isn't it!" The Driver called out to Lan Jue when he saw him approach. He needed no mecha, the sector he was sent to manage was already clear and the aliens routed.

"Save your energy. Let our people handle things, we'll fill in the gaps." He ordered. Performance was an important part of the Division's structure. It was how rewards were decided, not the least of which being access to the exuvium process for them and their families. The promise of an extended life was at the core of their motivational strategy. If the Driver killed them all, how could their people prove themselves?

Battle was the best way to prove and improve themselves. If Star Division wanted to continue to better themselves, they would have to do it

in the fires of war.

“Got it!” The Driver knew what Lan Jue was getting at and answered right away. Below them, Star Division spread out to take control of the situation.

First Brigade was in the lead, followed by Second Brigade as support. They nimbly set off to do their jobs. Lan Jue, the Driver and the Pharmacist followed. Now their task was to penetrate the enemy lines and hunt down their target.

“Guoguo, come here.” Lan Jue ordered.

A figured separated itself from the crowd below and rose to meet them. It was a beautiful golden mecha, Lin Guoguo’s newly refurbished war machine. She rushed to her boss’ side. “Your command?”

“Use your psionic abilities to scan the enemy,” he said. “See if you can find any human mental energy. We’re going to see if there’s anyone left to save.”

Chapter 741: Shut the Hell Up

Retaking a planet took time. In the meantime, there might be lives to save.

This fight was different from the ones they'd engaged in before. The aliens they fought before were infected mutations controlled by progenitors. They were weaker, mindless creatures. This time they were battling real aliens, doughtier foes who wouldn't go down so quickly. It was important not to forget that there were some creatures among them strong enough for interstellar flight. When the railguns were up and running, their goal would be to deal with those.

"Aye, aye!" Lin Guoguo replied. Immediately a pale golden aura sprang up around her suit.

As she had grown stronger, so too had her psionic capabilities. With the help of her mecha she was able to scan a vast area without much effort. Lan Jue had some psychic abilities of his own, but they weren't near as discerning as Lin Guoguo's. To him human signatures would easily be lost among the sea of angry alien minds, so the task fell to his Amazon.

Star Division swiftly and effectively fight through their enemies, making safety a priority. Lan Jue had commanded that teams were to proceed in twos to watch each others' backs. They were to maintain close defensive formations as they searched.

Specifically, they maintained a flying wedge formation. This allowed them to change directions quickly and attack in any direction. It was also stable and defensible.

As had been the case from the beginning, teams were led by stronger Adepts. At the heads of the triangle were ninth level or Higher Adepts who, with their mechas, were more than a match for any normal alien they came across.

Tang Xiao led his team at the head of the brigade. His tactics had evolved from the rolling ball of destruction from before. Although it was effective, it was also slow. Him and his team kept close and followed the

structure outlined by his superiors.

One of the creatures came charging their war, a beast that looked like a lion. However, the similarities to a typical lion were scarce. The alien corruption was a hundred meters long with a fierce and frightening air. Its front legs were thick as oak trees. At a glance the human fighters knew it would be a tougher one to kill.

“Ey? This one kind of looks like Jin Tao! More handsome, though.” Tang Xiao’s voice was teasing and condescending, but he didn’t waste time. His mecha was the first one to race forward.

“What noise is this piggie making now?!” Jin Tao’s angry voice crackled through the communicator.

Although their constant bickering would lend one to believe otherwise, the two young men worked marvelously together. Both their squads had only improved over time and performed excellently.

“I’m going in first!” Tang Xiao cackled. His mecha was already blasting forward at top speed toward the lion-like monstrosity.

The beast responded with a guttural roar. It lifted one of its front paws to swipe at the squad leader.

Within his cockpit Tang Xiao chuckled darkly. His pudgy mecha didn’t juke or dodge and simply let the attack come. What followed was a strange scene. All of a sudden, Tang Xiao fell from the sky. It tumbled out of control like it’d been knocked out of commission, though there were no signs of damage. When the lion struck it, the suit stuck to its paw like a piece of melted candy. Then, it dissolves into a liquid and slithered up its leg.

The lion, surprised and confused, roared at its arm. Like a cat with tape stuck to its foot the beast kicked and swiped the offended limb to try and flee itself, to no avail!

Another roar thundered through the area, though this one was not from the creature. Another lion joined the fray, smaller than the first and made of metal. It launched itself at the alien like a pale yellow thunderbolt and

landed on its head.

“Don’t steal my kill!” Tang Xiao shouted.

“Does it have your name on its forehead?” Jin Tao fired teasing barbs back at his rival as they fought together.

Although Jin Tao’s mecha was much smaller than its opponent, the energy it put out was staggering. A blinding yellow aura hung over its metallic body. Glinting alloy claws dug into the monster’s head.

Just then, a host of metallic spikes shot through the monster’s mandible from below.

“Mine!” Jin Tao and Tang Xiao shouted in unison.

Jin Tao pulled his claws apart, tearing open the alien’s forehead. But he didn’t find what he was looking for.

Tang Xiao laughed victoriously. In a flash his fat mecha suit was on the ground again and in formation. He waved his hand at Jin Tao, a glittering vital crystal clutched within.

“Goddamn, gloating are we?”

“So? I made the first move, it was your greedy ass that tried to take it from me! I’m just making sure you know you failed.” Tang Xiao, as usual, knew how to push the right buttons.

“Shit, I loathe you!” Jin Tao howled.

“Move aside and stay out of my way.” Tang Xiao cackled as he and his team shot forward.

“Fat-ass!”

“Dumb-mutt!”

They continued to rag on one another as they fought.

“Will the two of you give it a rest? Shut the hell up!” The harsh voice immediately silenced the two young men. The only one who had that kind of pull over them was Tang Mi!

Tang Mi understood the dynamic between Jin Tao and her older brother.

They were natural rivals, but although they loved to trade barbs they fought well together. All this talk of kill-stealing was nonsense. Both of them had agreed to share the credit for their teams' exploits before the battle. What purpose did their bickering serve? None, but they couldn't get enough of it. They were quiet for now, but their bickering was endless.

A bolt of lightning tumbled from the sky, killing a beast that was lurking underground near the squad. That kill belonged to the Driver, to ensure his people didn't fall into its trap.

Skyfire Avenue surged ahead, overcoming all obstacles. But Lan Jue's face grew darker with every inch forward. They were strong, and their progress was fast. In part, this was due to the help of Lan Jue and the two other captains. Yet Lin Guoguo could find no trace of human consciousness.

This made Lan Jue's heart sink. It meant it was likely all humans have been wiped out before they'd arrived. Swallowed up and used as fuel for the aliens' evil plans. It also made him uneasy, since their long-range telescopes had certainly picked out humans on Monteux. So why were they pulling humans onto the planet's surface to fight? If there was some plot, the enemy was going to move on it soon.

Boom-! An explosion rang out, and an alien fell from the sky.

Railgun fire! Installations were going ahead as planned. It was good news – the first success opened the door for the second.

Right now, Lan Jue's job was to make sure Star Division didn't get in too deep. Some aliens were too much even for mechas. They were the sort that were capable of fighting out in space, and were too dangerous for Division soldiers to take on by themselves.

This was also why Lan Jue wasn't in the thick of it. He had to save his energy for that eventuality. He wasn't there to fight, just to make sure things went smoothly. Star Division had to be protected.

Monteux's recapturing continued without a problem. Losses were kept low. However, the other two planets were less fortunate.

A huge number of aliens had waited for them to land. Once they did, the

humans were immediately thrown into a frenzied and intense battle for their lives.

For the North, Terminator and Chu Cheng were responsible for a planet each. However their numbers were limited, and they were losing men to overwhelming enemy forces. Close to one fourth of their soldiers were shot down on the approach, and only about half of those survived the crash. The waiting alien forces set upon them the second they got out of their ships.

Thankfully things were looking good out in space. Humanity's forces had taken control of most of the area. Those aliens which hid behind the planets didn't dare stick their heads over the horizon. The moment they did human cannon fire blew them apart.

Admiral Kang Hui stood in his office, sternly giving orders. "Turn on the scanners. Find those planets."

The eight bastions closed in, but kept their distance from the front lines.

Kang Hui had anticipated the ground forces finding resistance. By Kang Hui's estimations most if not all of the humans on these planets were gone. Callous as it was, it meant they should have been using their ships to pummel the surface with orbital fire. Even the weaker ships were capable enough to clear out large numbers of aliens at a time.

But the pressure was too great. The people wouldn't have it! And he understood their thought process; if they were willing to sacrifice their people now, who's to say they wouldn't be the next one Northern guns were turned on? So, it was decided for them that survivors had to be rescued at all costs. However this tied the military's hands, and cost them the lives of their soldiers.

Thankfully, though, things still seemed under control.

The eight bastions came ever nearer while the fleets cleared the way ahead. Kang Hui couldn't think of any tricks the enemy could use to turn the situation around.

Chapter 742: I'll Decide What's Permitted!

"Increase artillery support to the ground teams, except for Monteux. Allow nearby ships to provide cover fire for our troops." Kang Hui ordered.

"Admiral, that won't be permitted. There are..." His first officer timidly interjected.

Kang Hui's response was cool and unyielding. "I'll decide what's permitted. ¹ Are you saying our soldiers aren't people, too? If we keep this up, how many will die before we take the planets? Follow orders, soldier!"

"Sir!" The officer had no choice, in battle the Admiral's orders were to be obeyed above all else unless directly contradicted by superiors. But in a battle this crucial, what was the likelihood of that? Nothing was more important than remove this threat to humanity. The military leaders would all stand behind Kang Hui's decision.

They could see the cover fire increase from space. Things started going smoother on the three planets almost immediately.

"Sir, railguns have been installed on Monteux. Four of them so far. So far the East has handled their mission well." Finally, some good news.

"Have admiral Lan send over his data."

"Aye, aye!"

A few minutes later satellite images from the Eastern fleet started coming in. He looked upon the ground team's progress in silence.

What power! What overwhelming power! With no more than ten people they were protecting the whole ground assault team. Of course, those ten people were Paragons!

Inwardly Kang Hui sighed. He had been told in no uncertain terms that if this gambit was a success, to turn their weapons on the other Alliances. But Kang Hui was a smart man, and he had seen the power of these Paragons with his own eyes. Everyone one of them was capable of bringing Armageddon on their heads. That was even before they considered Jue Di. Provoking him would be begging for death.

The leadership simply didn't understand. The East's rise wasn't something they could prevent. What they should be doing is working to maintain a good relationship with them.

Strength has always been the way of the universe and the path to dominance. For the sake of humanity, Eastern prosperity wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Besides, Kang Hui had Eastern blood, and after this fight he would undoubtedly be one of the strongest voices in the military. He would work for cooperation rather than aggression.

Kang Hui was honestly a little nervous ever since Admiral Lan brought his An Lun army. Middle Heaven was a staggering sight to behold, even larger than Terminator had been. As for how much carnage it could produce, they could only imagine.

Whatever capabilities it had, the East's latest bastion was undoubtedly stronger than it looked. He didn't trust its cumbersome speed, either. Why keep the stony exterior that slowed it down so much? It wasn't like remodeling the planet's surface would have been difficult for modern technology.

It was impressive enough as a feat of engineering – the first planet to be turned into a Bastion!

He hoped there would be an opportunity for them to see what Middle Heaven could do. Militarily, the implications of a super-bastion frightened and excited him.

"Tell the Admiral to take control of the planet as quickly as he can."
Kang Hui said.

ζ

Lan Qing was, of course, aboard the massive bastion that used to be his base planet. He was watching after the ground crew, but what Kang Hui didn't know was that Lan Qing had already ordered his fleet to prepare for attacks from 'friendly' forces. When Monteux was under their control, the ships would move in to defend their people.

This was, however, only a defensive maneuver. He didn't anticipate

much trouble, not least because of his father's presence. If Jue Di didn't have to watch his power consumption, he could destroy a planet by himself.

He watched the screens as data continued to stream it. It looked like everything was still going well on the ground.

"Have we found anyone alive?" He asked his brother.

"So far, nothing," Lan Jue replied. "I think it was a ploy by the aliens. But why would they want to lure us to a fight on the planet's surface?"

Lan Qing answered confidently. "Don't think too much about it. You need to focus on taking over your sector. Leave the rest to me."

"Bro. Come on, do you need to be so harsh all the time?" Lan Jue joked.

Lan Qing paused for a moment. "This is war. You should call me Admiral."

Lan Jue chuckled. "You need to relax. When we finish this fight I'm gonna tell dad to find you a girlfriend. It's about time you started a family."

Lan Qing's face turned hard and hostile. "Get back to the fight!"

Lan Jue cut the connection, suddenly in a better mood. He'd been nervous before, so nervous he forgot something important. Who was his brother? Prometheus the Wise! If Lan Jue had foreseen a problem, of course his brother had!

The situation still wasn't clear to him, but further consideration would have to wait until they finished taking the planet. The alien home worlds still had the opportunity to surprise them.

So far, while the aliens were many they hadn't come across the stronger breeds. The truly powerful ones he feared to see were as strong as the Paragons. Lan Jue was sure the aliens weren't lacking in that class of powerhouse. But where were the Violet Prince and Princess, or others like them? What about Monarch?

The fact they weren't on the field meant things were only getting started.

"Boss, I sense something." Lin Guoguo announced.

Lan Jue's eyes lit up. "Where?"

"I'll take you," she said. Without wasting any more time she urged her mecha toward the horizon.

Lan Jue followed close behind. The Driver and Pharmacist remained behind to look after Star Division.

As Lin Guoguo led the way she ignored the aliens that charged for them, attempting to block their path. Bolt after bolt of All-Haven lightning turned them to ash before they got close. The vital crystals left behind were swept up as they flew passed.

In the distance, the shell of a city came into view. Even from this distance, though, they could see signs of corrosion on its towering buildings. It looked like the whole thing had been devoured and digested. It'd been stained purple by the ordeal.

Lin Guoguo gasped. "These absolute bastards!" How many people used to live in this city? How many of their compatriots had become fuel for these monsters?

Guoguo's senses led them to a building that looked like it may once have been a church. "In there," she said. "I can sense about ten life forms... humans."

Lan Jue was suddenly serious. "Wait here. I'll take a look."

"Boss, be careful," she urged.

Lan Jue, though, changed tack. "Never mind, come with me. Pack up your mecha." He didn't feel comfortable leaving her outside by herself. They were deep in enemy territory, and a powerful creature could appear from any corner. She was safest by his side. He left Thor's cockpit.

"Alright!" She answered before appearing before her mecha in a flash of light. Both of them stored their suits.

Lan Jue went down to ground level, but didn't place his feet on the poisoned earth. He remained hovering about a meter above it. Lin Guoguo was a step behind him.

Lan Jue surveyed the building with a scowl. He spread his hands, and a gentle power emanated from him to push open the corroded doors. A rotten scent exuded from within the building. A pale blue light sprung up from within him to protect both he and Guoguo from the toxic cloud.

“In there,” she confirmed.

Lan Jue entered.

The interior of the building had fared better than its façade, but a carpet of poison purple blanketed the floor. The aliens’ sickness would not be denied by walls.

The interior was spacious and stretched far back. There, at the end of the room, was huddled a group of people. They looked at Lan Jue and Lin Guoguo.

Could there really still be people alive in here? When the thought crossed his mind, suddenly Lan Jue felt an abiding unease. They did feel like humans, but their reactions were strange. That was to say, they were completely emotionless. Something definitely wasn’t right.

The destitute people scrambled to their feet and raced toward Lan Jue.

“Save us. Save us!” They shouted the words as they raced forward. They moved quickly across the carpet of purple, seemingly unfazed by its corrosive properties.

Lan Jue felt stricken. He didn’t move.

The light within the church dimmed. When they got close, Lan Jue could see that their eyes had turned deep violet. They felt like humans, but they were not themselves.

Controlled? Could they be saved?

He was still lost in thought when the closest one leapt up at him.

“Boss, be careful!”

BOOM! The victim erupted in a grotesque explosion of purple blood and flesh.

Chapter 743: Progenitor

Lan Jue felt his shield shiver. The explosion was much more intense than he imagined. The other people detonated as well, one after the other. Lin Guoguo and Lan Jue were caught in the middle.

The intensity was enough to reduce a mecha suit to ruin. However, at Lan Jue's level of cultivation it posed no danger to him. He sensed the corrosive nature of the explosion immediately, but more important was the surge of psychic energy that followed. These people weren't alive, they were just mimicking a particular psychic pulse. In fact there was a sense of relief when their tortured existence passed.

The aliens were truly evil creatures! Lan Jue's hands curled into fists.

"We're going!"

They left the church and returned to their mecha's cockpits.

"Attention Star Division. All soldiers listen up, this is commander Lan Jue. If you discover any signatures of human life, do not approach. Keep your distance. We've discovered..." He shared the awful experience with his teams then did the same with Lan Qing.

It seemed their original feelings had been correct and the chances of human life remaining here were slim. The aliens had taken the whole planet, so there would be no place for humans to hide. Any humans the long-range telescopes discovered were likely these booby-trapped puppets.

"Be careful and continue your mission." Lan Qing urged his brother. When they hung up he immediately opened a connection to Tyrannosaurus.

"Admiral Kang Hui, this is Lan Qing."

"Admiral, what is it?" Kang Hui looked upon the screen, surprised by the young heroic face that greeted him. He was continually impressed with the man, whether it was his mannerisms, command or abilities. Kang Hui felt that An Lun's commander was one of the best military minds alive today.

Lan Qing shared his brother's information.

As he listened, Kang Hui's face turned dark and angry.

"Admiral, it's clear there are no more humans on the planet's surface that aren't soldiers. We should begin pummeling the planet with orbital fire to reduce casualties and take the planets faster. Have you discovered anything about the alien planets?"

Kang Hui replied. "Nothing yet. There's too much interference to see anything behind the human worlds. I agree with your assessment but I can't order a full bombardment. The military leadership and parliament would not allow it. If I gave the order it would immediately be rescinded by my superiors. I hope you understand my predicament."

Lan Qing fell silent. Then he nodded. "I won't trouble you, Admiral." He knew it was risky even for Kang Hui to tell him as much as he had. The North was in a precarious position. Although it would make their jobs easier, laying down fire on one of their own planets would do irreparable damage to the psyche of the Northern people. In a sensitive time like this with humanity on the path to success, he couldn't force that order to be given.

The operation must continue! Everyone would just have to give their best.

Lan Jue returned to the front lines. Star Division had continued to press ahead without meeting any serious resistance. The enemy's numbers had begun to thin. They weren't as tightly pressed as they had been at the landing zone. Meanwhile Lan Jue's people had acquired quite a number of vital crystals, but the aliens had also begun to change up tactics.

The ground beneath them started to churn. Whenever an alien fell its crystal was folded into the poisoned earth and swallowed up. Already this simple change helped the aliens recover a hundred crystals. Clearly the enemy knew they were in danger of losing their power source.

They had to find the progenitor. Killing it would revert the land back to normal and give them the advantage.

Just then, a sound caught Lan Jue's ear.

"Left flank, forty-five degrees. Straight ahead six thousand seven hundred kilometers."

It was a familiar voice. Jue Di.

Six thousand seven hundred kilometers? That was the other side of the planet. Lan Jue was starting to understand. His enemy really was clever. The progenitor was hiding on the back side of the planet away from the human ships, beneath a crowd of space-faring aliens! With so many powerful aliens protecting it, would killing the progenitor be as easy as he thought?

If things weren't looking good for them, it was far less favorable on the other battlefields. They also had the planet's rotation to consider. Each of the planets moved slowly, but they did move. Eventually they would be brought right to where their enemy was waiting out in space, putting them in a dangerous position. ¹

"Admiral Lan, I request air support. The progenitor has been located on the far side of the planet. Soon the planet's rotation will bring us within striking distance of the enemy's strongest. We need to kill that progenitor as soon as possible." Lan Jue firmly made his request.

"Alright!" Lan Qing answered immediately.

Kang Hui had said he would decide what was needed in the heat of battle. The same went for the East, and they didn't need to follow Northern orders when their own people were at risk. So long as the situation warranted, Lan Qing would command his own troops directly.

Five of the fleets attached to Eastern command began to move. Three surged ahead while the remaining two swept around to approach from the flank.

Back on the planet, Lan Jue called out his orders. "Fall back!"

Star Division could continue to press forward. If they wanted to kill the progenitor, the three commanders weren't going to be enough.

Star Division's flying-v formations changed direction and began an orderly retreat. Lan Jue, the Driver, and the Pharmacist covered their retreat to make sure none of their people were left behind or harassed. They fought their way back to the landing zone quickly.

By the time they got back Lan Jue was feeling more relaxed. Twenty railguns had been installed on the high ground. The arteries of the progenitor hadn't snuck back in from below.

Twenty railguns was enough to ward off a dreadnaught. Aside from the railguns, their engineers had also constructed a makeshift base with secondary defensive weapons in case the enemy chose to attack them there.

Paragons from the Vanguard squad had also started to return after Lan Jue's order to retreat. They returned with the most vital crystals. A progenitor's tricks and bucking earth wasn't enough to keep the crystals from their grip. You couldn't snatch food from the jaws of a tiger.

"We found the general location of the progenitor, but it's on the other side of the planet. If we go at it directly we'll have to fight our way through their strongest alien defenders. We need to bring enough power to match them. Once we take the progenitor out we can take the planet." Lan Jue told them his thought process.

The Wine Master nodded. "Sounds good. What's your plan?"

Lan Jue explained. "The lives of our people are important. We've established ourselves here, so we'll leave Star Division to cooperate with An Lun's people and make sure this place stays safe and to extend the green zone. We'll go, kill the target, then come back."

"Alright," the Wine Master replied. "Who's coming with you?"

Lan Jue thought for a moment. "This is a sneak attack, so we don't want a lot of people but we need enough power to get the job done. It'll be me, you, the Clockmaker, Driver and Pharmacist. The five of us should be enough. You and the Clockmaker will keep us safe, and the three of us will lead the way."

The Wine Master nodded. “So be it. The others will stick to the plan.”

Star Division’s standing orders had been to save any survivors, but they didn’t seem to be likely any more. They would better serve here, helping to spread their base and clear out the enemy. The first wave of ships had brought a hundred railguns that needed to be installed. Once they were, humanity would have a mighty staging area to work from. More guns were also on the way, and installing them had to be a priority. Under their protection the ground forces would be fine even once the planets rotated into the line of fire 2.

“I’m going with you!” Luo Xianni appeared before Lan Jue.

“Mom, your condition...”

She chuckle at his concern. “Relax, I’m fine. I’m not your father, I’m not affected as much by the restrictions. Besides, if you don’t need my help then I won’t do anything, just make sure you’re safe. If we run into a strong enemy then you have back-up. It’s fine, your father is also keeping an eye out.”

“Alright, then we have no time to lose. Let’s go!” Lin Guoguo was waiting nearby with a small verti-car she’d brought from Zeus-1.

Everyone climbed in. Of course, the Driver was given the controls. As his name implied, he was adept behind the wheel.

Although a verti-car wasn’t as fast as a Paragon, this one was equipped with a Blinding Stone. Perfecto for the covert nature of their mission. Lin Guoguo also went with them, pairing her psionic obfuscation with their Blinding Stone to make them practically invisible. Once the verti-car was up in the air, it was like it never existed.

Under the Driver’s expert control the verti-car tore through the air, agile as a swallow and faster than any normal driver could manage. He was pushing the vehicle to its limit.

Lin Guoguo flooded the area with her psychic powers, she didn’t need an amplifier in this case. The car was small enough for her to hide without much effort.

The car was only big enough for eight people. Lan Jue and the Driver were up front. Even at Lan Jue's level of strength he felt dizzy as the car sped along. The Driver was pulling out all the stops. Aliens filled the sky but the Driver dodged among them like he was doing it for fun.

Chapter 744: Space-Time Solidification

Monteux's landscape flit by below them as they raced for the other side of the planet. It would be about three hours at this speed before they reached the progenitor.

"There aren't as many aliens as I thought there'd be," Lan Jue noted through a scowl.

"Mh. I noticed that, too." The Wine Master replied.

When they made their landing the aliens had stretched as far as the eye could see. However, now as they flew into the far side of the planet where they were anticipating denser numbers, they found the opposite. That wasn't to say their foes were few, but they weren't overwhelming either.

"Could they have fled to get away from the railguns?" The Pharmacist pondered out loud.

The Clockmaker nodded her head. "That's a possibility. Maybe they're relying on the planet's rotation to keep them out of firing range while they wait to take the offensive. After all, it will take time for any ships of ours to make it here. The faster ones will have to wait for the others to catch up to perform their sneak attack."

Lan Jue added to her determination. "That's why the war council was so adamant about retaking the planets. They make a strong launch point and rear guard to protect us from alien trickery."

"Yes. We'll think more on this when we've dealt with the Progenitor!" The Wine Master said.

Star Division's strike team penetrated further into enemy territory. Alien numbers increased, but only marginally. After an hour they had begun to come around to the other hemisphere of the planet. Here the atmosphere thickened to the point where vision was impaired, but not enough for them to fail to note that their enemies were increasing. A few stretched over five hundred meters long.

"It looks like we were right." The Driver watched as the monsters

zoomed passed their windows.

“Drive carefully. We mustn’t be discovered.” Lan Jue warned.

This earned a chuckle from his friend. Relax, I’d lose face if we were discovered. Won’t happen.”

Indeed the Driver’s technique was flawless. Even as the air became more heavily dotted with lumbering alien bodies, he effortlessly flew among and around them.

“I’ll lead the strike.” The Pharmacist growled.

Lan Jue nodded. Aside from Luo Xianni and Jue Di, the Pharmacist was the one to turn to if they needed to cut down a host of enemies quickly. It was the same for Lan Jue and Qianlin’s Harmonious Swords. The Pharmacist was the natural choice for leading the attack.

Alien numbers held steady, though they couldn’t be sure since it was impossible to see the situation above the atmosphere. An inexplicable tenseness filled the humans. Some of the beasts were over a thousand meters long, and had the fighting capabilities of a dreadnaught. Occasionally they spotted some three thousand meters or more, and they could square up against Paragons. The largest one Lan Jue spotted was five thousand meters long.

It still troubled him that the Violet Prince and Princess’ whereabouts were unknown. They were the most terrifying foes they would face. They were in the lion’s den, and if they showed up fleeing would be difficult.

The further they went, the more tense the atmosphere became.

Below the ground had gone from pale lavender to deep purple. Thick veins the size of felled tree trunks slithered across the surface in a singular direction. They undulated rhythmically like they were swallowing something. The progenitor’s presence made Monteux look like a giant organism. Rather, like a parasite had taken over, and was draining the planet of its essence.

The predatory nature of these monsters was terrifying to behold.

Lan Jue's eyes blazed with determination. If the Prince or Princess showed, he would face them with the Harmonious Swords.

"That should be it!" He swung the car around suddenly and the screens fixated on a single image. All eyes went to the picture; a mountainous feature at the center of the pulsing veins. It rose over a hundred meters tall and its body was such a deep purple as to almost be black. The veins slithered around it like the arms of an enormous octopus. They rose to the mountain's apex and pointed high into the air.

"Are they siphoning power to their homeworlds?" Lan Jue said in surprise.

Luo Xianni watched the screen with a frown. "They don't look thick enough. They would have to be larger if they were to span space. There has to be a middle-man somewhere transferring energy to the planets."

A cold light flit through the Pharmacist's eyes. "Is this it?"

She didn't need to ask, it was the progenitor, the strongest one Lan Jue had ever seen. The aura around it was no less fierce than a Paragon. Overhead no less than five three-thousand meter long aliens hovered, with a host of smaller ones between. They formed a formidable wall of defense. That's why the Driver had swung the car so dramatically. There was no gap to get closer!

Lan Jue turned around and looked at his companions. "We don't have many opportunities to get this done. Things look alright down here, but we don't know the situation above the cloud cover. We need to kill this thing as fast as possible and flee before the enemy can react."

Luo Xianni smirked. "Luckily momma came with you. I can handle all of this. The rest of you focus on killing that ugly thing. The Wine Master will get us back when the job is done, and I'll handle battlefield control."

Such a dominant temperament! A host of terrifying beasts milled outside their window, but all Luo Xianni had to say was she would take care of 'battlefield control.'

Lan Jue nodded toward the Pharmacist. "I'll act as your support, sis."

“Alright!” She replied quickly. Then, she produced a small china bottle which she promptly opened and imbibed. Her aura became volatile.

After everyone made their plans, the Driver’s somewhat disgruntled voice piped up. “What am I, the getaway driver?”

Lan Jue smiled. “Getting us in and out safely is an honor. You’re doing an important job. Alright everyone, get ready.”

The verti-car’s doors hissed open. They needn’t fear discovery right away. The Blinding Stone’s powers extended to a small circumference around their vehicle. Lin Guoguo and the Driver were left behind as the others exited.

Luo Xianni flicked her wrist and a flash of pink replied. Her camera had appeared in her palm. She looked at the writhing mass of enemies with the same cunning smile she always wore, like they didn’t trouble her at all. She pointed her camera, then nodded to let Lan Jue know she was ready.

Then, she vanished.

The Pharmacist looked at Lan Jue and the color drained from her eyes, leaving them pearl white. Lan Jue’s, a dazzling azure blue. A shell of All-Heaven lightning sprang up around them.

She took in a deep breath and with it the Pharmacist’s aura swelled, surging passed what Lin Guoguo could conceal. She stepped forward into the air and a shimmering image appeared at her back. It looked like her, perhaps seventy percent, with a white sword in its grip.

The Pharmacist had used some decoction to increase her powers nearly to a Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

Hummmm—The ethereal buzz swept through the area with an intense and murderous aura. Overhead the five largest aliens turned simultaneously in her direction. Their fear was palpable.

The progenitor also sensed the disturbance. It cried in alarm and a host of tentacles sprang out from the ground around it. They lashed and swiped frantically all around the monstrous creature before reaching for the Pharmacist. Above them a giant head descended through the clouds.

Just the monster's head was five hundred meters tall and a thousand meters across. The section of its body they could see was another five thousand. Its rage and power filled the air with a choking pressure that even a typical Paragon could not produce. It had to be stronger than the Realm of Protogenia, or a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. It was more comparable to someone who'd achieved Nirvana.

It opened its enormous maw, ready to swallow the Pharmacist whole.

But just then, a voice like chiming silver bells rang out. "Take advice from Luo Xianni, a camera is all you need!"

Her voice seemed to carry a strange power with it as it swirled through the air. The sky became pink, but not from light. A pink camera ten thousand meters across filled the sky. The thunderous ch-k of its shutter boomed, and space-time solidified.

Whether it was the progenitor or the monster on the other end of its poison umbilicus, neither could move. Everything froze. Everything except for the Pharmacist and Lan Jue. They exchanged a look then launched ahead.

The Pharmacist released a warcry and a white light surrounded her alluring frame as she became one with her sword. Occisus stretched large and wider as it tore through the sky until it was a blinding beam of white light.

Chapter 745: Hit-and-Run

A glimmer of sapphire light clung to Occisus' point, but quickly spread to hang over its entire length. If one looked closely they would see the faintest hint of red that seemed to delineate between the blue and white.

The farther it traveled the larger Occisus became, beginning at only a dozen meters or so to hundreds now. Anything unfortunate enough to be caught in its path was cut in half without thought. Tentacles that tried to block its path were severed, unable to stop the white sword from its single-minded purpose.

Shhtk! The enormous Banishing Blade and all the murderous power it bore were buried in the progenitor's body, then through to the other side. When it emerged a block crystal was impaled on the tip. It was only a meter or so in diameter, but the vital energy that surged from it was startling.

Occisus swung through the air, back to where it had come from. Meanwhile the giant creature overhead had begun to move. It struggled against Luo Xianni's control and was gaining ground.

In a flash of light Occisus disappeared. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist were deposited back in the air. Both of them looked drawn from putting so much energy behind a single strike.

Silver light emerged around the two of them and in a blink they were gone. The pink hue that hung over the area also dispersed, while a streak of pink light swept through the air. Back and forth it went three times across the sky until it vanished entirely.

Aaaaagghhghrrr! The roar from the herculean monster above rattled the earth. Its massive girth descended from the clouds as the beast vomited purple energy over the area. But there were no humans for it to accost. Still it was an impressive display, empowered through the veins connecting it to the progenitor.

Time returned to normal. With a loud crash the progenitor collapsed to the ground with sprays of white energy leaping from its wounds. It sunk in

on itself, caving under its own weight.

The white light turned to blue, and though not as intense as its predecessor the surrounding aliens were choked with fear. It consumed the progenitor's corpse by degrees.

The verti-car dashed through the air back in the direction of the human base. Everyone was on board.

Lan Jue was in high spirits. "Using teleportation to run away is probably my most favorite thing."

Perfection, that was how he would describe their mission. Luo Xianni's battlefield control had been seamless, leaving just enough time for Lan Jue and the Pharmacist to perform their task. Strong as the progenitor was, the Pharmacist was stronger. Frozen in place, all it could attempt was to try and resist their charge. It'd failed.

If they'd attacked with technological weapons, it was unclear whether they'd have been able to pierce its defenses. But Occisus was no typical human weapon. With Captus' help and the All-Heaven Lightning the power was nearly god-like. In a blink they'd pierced to the monster's heart and stole away with its vital crystal.

Although Lan Jue and the Pharmacist could not employ the Harmonious Swords, their combined might was still terrible to behold. It'd taken them practically no time to put down the progenitor, despite its strength.

The silver light that had whisked them away in the moments following had, of course, been the Wine Master granting them succor. The second pink light was Luo Xianni. Against a Nirvana-level time-space master the behemoth's attacks had been pointless.

The Clockmaker hadn't even had time to join the fight. She had been swept away to safety with Luo Xianni.

Lan Jue's mother's voice reached his ears. "Run away my ass! This was a strategic retreat, don't open your mouth if you don't know what you're saying, you stinky brat!"

"Right, I'm sorry..." Lan Jue hurriedly replied.

Everyone was thrilled with the death of the progenitor. Its death was a great boon to the incursion team. At the very least they would no longer need to fear the corrosion seeping from the earth. The possibility existed that another progenitor was hiding somewhere, but it was unlikely to be as powerful as the last. Killing it had been a true victory.

“Mom,” he queried. “Do you think the crystal we got from the progenitor could help you and father?”

“From what I was able to sense it may have some use,” she confirmed. “But at best it would heal the branch and not the root. ¹ When we get back give it to your father. Let’s see what he thinks.”

“Alright.” It was the first time they’d encountered a vital crystal this potent. It was a priceless treasure, to be sure. They might have been able to get a few more from the monsters in the sky, but conditions were too unclear for them to try. They had to retreat for safety.

“Admiral Lan, are you able to see any difference in Monteux’s color from orbit?” Lan Jue opened a connection to his brother.

“Were you successful?” He asked.

Lan Jue replied. “The mission was victorious. There are a lot of aliens on the far side of the planet, and it was difficult to get a clear read on the whole situation. We won’t be needing the air support.”

“We know.”

“Oh? You know?” Lan Jue said.

“Two of our fleets went to the far hemisphere but were unable to find a concentration of aliens. I had them await further orders, but as far as we could tell the main force had moved on.”

Lan Jue’s heart skipped a beat. “They aren’t there? So what now?”

Lan Qing went on. “I’ve already explained the situation to Admiral Kang Hui, we’re waiting for his response. If my guess is correct this doesn’t bode well for us. The alien home worlds may have already left. We’re in the wrong place. We don’t think they can transfer, but that doesn’t mean they

can't fly of their own accord, and fast. They could have fled while we were unable to get scout teams to put eyes on them."

Lan Jue sucked in a breath of surprise. If his brother's determination turned out to be true, it would mean a great deal of trouble for them.

From the time the planets had transferred into the North to the beginning of their assault, a good deal of time had passed. It'd taken half a month for the Alliances to gather forces and create a plan of attack. If the alien planets had completed their invasion and left, how far could they have gotten in half a month moving as fast as they could? And if they did but no one saw anything, what did that mean? It meant they had the ability to cloak themselves!

"We need to confirm this immediately." Lan Jue said.

Lan Qing agreed. "Yes. But right now we're still concerned with alien traps. We haven't been able to find the alien horde out here. We have to wait for more guidance from the Admiral. He's already told us to move in, move around the planets and take a look. We should know more soon."

The elation they'd felt after killing the progenitor quickly faded. Lan Jue's voice was low. "Have you seen any change in Monteux's color?"

"We're seeing it recede from up here," his brother responded. "Your team was successful."

"Admiral, I request permission to put together a scout team, and move into enemy territory. The enemy blockade seems much lighter and we need to know if the alien planets are still in there."

Lan Qing was quiet for a moment. "Be careful."

"Yeah."

The Paragons had listened in on the conversation and their moods had soured just as much as his had. If it was as expected, things had gone south. What was the enemy up to? So many aliens had been left aside, but the planets themselves? If they weren't here to evolve, then why? And where?

Wherever they went, widespread devastation was sure to follow. If word got out it would undoubtedly lead to panic. All the planets would need to do is move through the North depositing progenitors, and the results would be catastrophic.

The Driver didn't need prodding. He urged the verti-car to the fastest it would go and brought them back toward the base. Meanwhile Lan Jue was giving orders. He told the remaining Amazons to bring Zeus-1 over to pick them up. Jue Di was with them, so there was no need to fear for their safety. The other Paragons were left behind to assist the ground troops with retaking the planet.

Zeus-1 arrived quickly and the verti-car slipped into its cargo bay. Once everyone was aboard the sapphire ship pointed its nose toward space and fired its engines.

The Blinding Stone was activated and Zeus-1 vanished into the darkness of space. Lin Guoguo kept them hidden beneath a veil of psionic energy to protect them from prying alien forces.

Now that they were over it, they could see the purple color draining from Monteux' surface. The progenitor's death had vastly weakened the aliens' control. Yet Lan Jue and the others were not pleased with the situation. They knew how cunning and lethal the alien planets were. What were they planning? If all of this was just to buy time, then the aliens sacrificed a great deal for an unclear objective.

Lan Jue was burdened with these questions as Zeus-1 rocketed off into space.

"Make your way into the interior and start the scanners." Lan Jue told Su Xiaosu.

"Aye, aye!" She replied immediately and before long their equipment was sweeping the heavens for any sign of the alien home worlds.

"Don't get flustered. You have to maintain calm no matter the situation." Jue Di had walked over to Lan Jue's side and spoke quietly with him.

Lan Jue handed over the black vital crystal they acquired. "Father, do you

think this might be able to help you?”

It was a meter across and shaped like a hexagon. It flooded the cockpit with rich vital energy the moment he pulled it out, nearly staggering everyone nearby. However, interspersed within that energy was a twisted energy, something evil that thirsted for murder and destruction.

Chapter 746: I Know a Way

Jue Di grunted and waved his hand. In response a golden light hung over the vital crystal, isolating the toxic energy from its surroundings.

The Wine Master walked over to them. He produced a dazzling blue stone and handed it to Jue Di. "Take this, your Majesty."

Tear of Neptune, the s-ranked power gem from the depths of Lyr's oceans. By now these formerly disregarded gems had grown scarce. The East had used most of them for their research.

Jue Di smiled. "With this I'll be able to use the full scope of my power, at least a couple of times."

He took the power gem, and as he spoke a pale blue light sprang up around the Tear. The light grew and spread until it swallowed up the black vital crystal. The Wine Master looked on, impressed. Although he could galvanize the energy of the Tear himself if he wished, he wouldn't be able to do so in such a balanced manner.

The vital crystal began to shake once the Tear's power washed over it. Visible strands of black slithered out into the air around it, only to be neutralized by the Tear's aura. It was the Tear of Neptune's primary use, filtering impurities. Only once the Tear cleansed the vital crystal would it be fit for use by humans.

Zeus-1 soared through space behind Monteux. It was as Lan Qing had said, although their radars still picked out a fair number of aliens nearby, there were nowhere near as many as they'd seen during their approach. There were especially few stronger breeds. In fact as far as they could see, they were greeted by nothing but empty space.

Where the hell did these things go! Lan Jue clenched his fists and scowled. His disquiet was growing by the moment.

Humanity's struggles against the alien offenders had been long and bitter. Could they really have left, now at this climactic moment? Or was this some trick?

Suddenly, he sensed a great surge of energy coming from beside him. He swung his head toward Jue Di and was surprised to see his father's eyes had gone pure gold. He felt his perception sweep out in all directions, disregarding the ship and any other obstructions.

Jue Di's whole body was covered in a dim golden shell of light, and the vital crystal he held was like a star captured in the palm of his hand. The vital energies from within it were swallowed up into the Paragon's body, having been filtered by the Tear of Neptune.

Far Sight? ¹

Lan Jue didn't know the power, he just came up with a name. His father really was on the cusp of the immortal realm!

After a minute Jue Di's face changed. "Nothing. I'm sure of it, there aren't any aliens the further in you go. Even if the alien planets could hide themselves, they wouldn't deceive my Sight. There's nothing out there – they likely evacuated long ago."

Lan Jue sighed. He immediately got in contact with his brother and told him the news.

Lan Qing's face fell in much the same way his father's had. They hadn't even thought this was a possibility until it was too late. "Admiral Kang Hui has ordered ships to move in to sweep and scout. It doesn't seem like they've found anything, either."

Lan Jue was at a loss. "What now?"

Lan Qing seemed to consider for a moment. It was Jue Di who answered. "Let's go back to Middle Heaven. I know a way."

Lan Jue paused. Jue Di seemed to reconsider. "Never mind, there isn't time. I'll go myself." He stepped forward, and suddenly he was gone.

Although he wasn't a space-time Adept, when a Paragon reached the level he had their understanding of the fabric of the universe was vast. He was back on Middle Heaven in a blink.

Lan Qing was waiting for him when Jue Di appeared.

“Father, what’s your plan?” The enemy was so inscrutable even the God of Knowledge was unsure of how to proceed.

Jue Di stood proudly before his son. “Before in situations like these we had that old snake-oil salesman to show us the way. He’s gone, but his apprentice is with us. Bring me Jun’er. I’ll help her and we’ll see if we can’t find some trace of these things.”

“Alright,” Lan Qing replied.

A short while later, Lan Qing led Jun’er to meet his father. When he saw her his stern face broke into a fatherly smile. He dropped to his haunches. “Jun’er. I’m Grandpa Bupang.”

“Hello Grandpa Bupang.” She said. Jun’er was smiling, but there was some anxiety in her reply.

Jue Di seemed to sense it. “Do you feel something, Jun’er?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, just a really bad feeling. Like something bad is going to happen.”

When she said it, even Lan Qing felt his stoic heart tremble. And for good reason, little Jun’er was the successor to the Eye of Tomorrow.

Jue Di’s smile never faltered. “It’s alright Jun’er, don’t rush. Let grandpa help you see a little clearer. Why don’t you call your master.”

“Ok!” Jun’er muttered a few sentences under her breath. Suddenly, a bright light appeared before her that coalesced into the image of the Eye of Tomorrow. She held the tiny image in her equally tiny hands. Her pretty face was lit by the undulating eminence of her master.

Jue Di placed his calloused hand on the little girl’s shoulder. “Take it easy. Take your time, search your feelings. Tell us everything you see.”

“Ok!”

Jun’er felt a flood of warmth pour through her body from the middle of her back. The gentle heat was very comforting as it flowed through her to her eyes. In response, the image of the Eye of Tomorrow sharpened. She shut her eyes. Immediately it was as though a dense fog had lifted.

“Purple planet. They feels scary.” She muttered.

“Where are they?” Jue Di urged.

“So many... so many tentacles. Wrapped around a planet.”

“Many people are dead. It’s... it’s so scary. So many people are dead
Grandpa Bupang.”

“Don’t be scared,” he said soothingly. “Bupang is here to protect you.
You’re going to be fine.”

Chapter 747: Alien Plot

Jun'er's mood eased at Jue Di's comforting words. "The purple planets are flying away. The one is purple now, too. They put something inside of it."

"Ah! The inside of the planet is burning, so hot! Ah!" Jun'er's eyes popped open, her face was covered with sweat.

Lan Qing and Jue Di exchanged a look. Each could see the shock in the other's eyes.

The Eastern admiral rushed to a control panel and opened all communication channels. "This is Middle Heaven. Repeat, this is Middle Heaven. All Eastern troops evacuate the planets immediately.. Evacuate."

Zeus-1 had been waiting for news from Jue Di. When they heard the order come through their computers they were struck with fear.

"Brother, what is it? What did you find?"

Lan Qing's voice was harsh. "Get back now, close in on Middle Heaven. The Aliens have destabilized the planets' cores, they could explode at any moment. They were waiting for us to close in and get caught in the blast. It's why they didn't have much of a presence."

Lan Jue gasped. Suddenly everything was clear, and that feeling of dread sprang up stronger than ever. Star Division was still on Monteux, along with many of their Paragons. All five Eastern fleets were in its orbit.

"Wait, don't rush. We can't act rashly in our retreat." Lan Jue said. He'd become strangely calm.

"Huh?" Lan Qing looked at his younger brother on the screen, confused.

Lan Jue patiently explained. "They set this up according to how they expect we'd react. Somehow they're controlling how and when this explosion will happen. If they see us order a full withdraw, the aliens will trigger the explosion. The North and West won't have any chance to get their people out. We have to be smart – get in touch with Admiral Kang, and let's do this slowly, together."

Lan Qing was known for his intelligence. His reactions had been quick and thoughtless because of the shocking news. But his brother's quick thinking helped him understand.

"Alright, I got it. Never mind the rest, you get back here and we'll talk about it." Lan Qing replied.

Lan Jue smiled. "Brother, you know I have to be with my people through this. I can't leave until we've safely gotten them out. Keep this quiet, don't tell anyone but Kang Hui. Let's take this slow."

Lan Qin narrowed his eyes as he looked at his younger brother. They shared a look for a long time, before eventually Lan Qing nodded. It wasn't the time to argue, it was time to act.

"This is Admiral Lan Qing. I'm rescinding the previous order. The problem's been resolved, stick to your jobs. Fleet commanders..."

Lan Qing gave his amended orders, then told Kang Hui the situation. Everything continued according to their battle plan. With the exception of Monteux, the other planets gained territory and started building defensive structures. The alien forces were slowly pushed back – everything seemed to be going well.

The eight bastions began to move in. Their fleets parted, as though to give them passage. Powerful cannons hummed as they charged and pointed toward the four planets. Humanity looked ready to storm their former worlds.

On Monteux, on the skull of the beast Lan Jue and the others had encountered by the progenitor, the Violet Prince and Princess stood. The Prince eyes were shut, and a small smile spread across his lips.

"It seems they've finally realized Monarch and the others aren't here. They're moving in, Monarch's plan was well-considered. Our mission is nearly complete." He spoke with a dulled, detached voice.

The Princess answered. "We should prepare to leave. Shall we trigger the reaction now?"

Her counterpart shook his head. "Wait for a moment. Humans have

learned, they are more cautious and are approaching slowly. The explosion will take ten minutes to trigger, we'll begin once they've gotten closer. Everything is already prepared. Those ships that threaten Monarch... those Bastions, they are also gathered. Our victory today will leave them with nothing to defend against our plans. Their lesser vessels mean nothing."

The Violet Princess nodded. "Then we wait."

"Hm?" Uncertainty suddenly crept into the Prince's eyes.

In space, the bastions cannons released their blazing payload. Dozens of energy beams tore through space toward the planets.

The Violet Prince's brows furrowed as he considered. "Their bastions have moved in for the attack? Their people are still on the surface! What is it they are trying to achieve?"

Suddenly, all of the aliens felt a tremble rush through their bodies, the Prince and Princess being no exception. They shook their heads, pain evident on their perfect features. Blasts of white light erupted all along the surface of the worlds and spread until they covered the planets entirely.

Energy interference waves, used to counteract electronic equipment. It also had a distinct effect on psionic pulses. Psychic energy was how the aliens maintained information about their surroundings. As the interference waves spread far and wide, their ability to gather information was reduced to zero.

The Violet Prince and Princess were essentially blind. They couldn't see the transport ships lifting off and blasting away. The ships couldn't use their radar or communication equipment, either. But previous orders had told them what to expect and how to react. Kang Hui had concocted the strategy.

However, not everyone followed orders with the precision they should have. Because not all the information was given, the West's withdrawal was slow. They weren't given all the information, and therefore were unable to react efficiently. It made no sense to pull back when their victory seemed assured.

The allure of the vital crystal was strong. Although the military accomplishments of the West were not grand, they had acquired many vital crystals for the Citadels to use, in order to grow their strength and influence.

Chapter 748: Middle Heaven's Protection

Most military leaders were obedient enough to head the retreat order. But the commanders of the Citadels were thirsty for riches and chose to ignore them.

"We have our own ships. We'll stay and take out some more of these creatures, it'll be fine." The Pontiff coolly gave the command.

Satan, on the other side of the planet, cursed under his breath. "Bastard. He dares to disobey my orders. Are vital crystals worth more than your lives? You have five minutes to get your asses back here."

In contrast to the Pontiff's Citadel, Satan's people had not continuously suffered at the hands of Lan Jue. Though he was greedy, he was less desperate and more sensitive to commands. Despite his covetous nature, he understood that life was more important.

"That was an order to retreat, do you hear me!" Satan's angry shout crackled through the Dark Citadel's communications channels.

"But, your Majesty, the vital crystals..."

"Idiot! Do you think the army strategists are stupid? Do you think they'd order a general retreat for no reason? I'm leaving, if you want to wait here for death then so be it."

Satan screamed, his heart filled with a disquiet he couldn't put his finger on. It had only gotten worse when he got a message from the daughter he'd been estranged from for years. The note was simple.

'Run.'

Seeing her name on his communicator stirred a host of complicated emotions, but chief among them was unease. Without it he likely would have reacted much the same way as the Pontiff.

Satan relayed the order to Lucifer, telling them to retreat as quickly as possible. The Paragon didn't bother with a ship and instead shot through the air by virtue of his own power, and into space.

ζ

“What are they up to?” The Violet Prince shut his eyes and tried to penetrate the disturbance with his psychic energy. But he was thwarted by the scale of power of it, only succeeding in causing himself more pain.

The Princess was grasping at straws. “Perhaps it is a precursor to their invasion? These are what the humans call ‘interference waves.’ We mustn’t wait, it’s time to act.”

An ominous lint glinted in her companion’s eye. “You’re right. Whether they’re attacking or fleeing we must react.”

They exchanged a look, then suddenly vanished in a tornado of purple energy.

ζ

Zeus-1 and Majesty blasted through Monteux’s atmosphere at intense speeds, fleeing the battlefield. Moments after speaking with his brother, Lan Jue had alerted his troops. They were the first to gather by the transport ships in preparation to withdraw. Construction of the base and railguns had continued, though robot engineers were left the task. This perplexed the enemies and gave the humans cover for their retreat.

When the EMP missiles struck, the ships were guided into orbit by pilot experience alone. They fled the area with exceptional discipline.

Detonating a planet took time. No matter how strong the aliens were, a world that was the result of several millennia of compression wouldn’t explode with a word. It needed to undergo a process. However, no one knew how long that process would actually take. If it was on the shorter side, retreat might already be too late for those on the ground.

What’s more, only heaven knew the scope of a planetary explosion. How far would its destruction reach? They’d never bothered to calculate how much energy these worlds contained in their cores, or how resilient they were. Every planet was complicated and unique.

However, beyond all question the explosion would be catastrophic.

Lan Jue stood in the bridge on Zeus-1, his hand wrapped around a metal rod. He continuously flooded the ship with his Discipline to give it the energy needed. The light spat from its engines were a brilliant gold. Paragons on Majesty were doing the same.

Star Division's commander scowled, his face dark with rage. Lan Jue's fury was not simply because of the loss of these planets. It reminded him of the half-healed wounds deep within himself, of the darkest period of his life.

Hera had perished under similar circumstances, had she not? When that planet exploded Lan Jue felt like his soul had been in the center of it. For years he was inconsolable, and the path to recovery had been long and difficult.

These beasts – they were unthinkable cruel!

If they had not discovered the alien plot, the humans' plans would have proceeded. Their ships and bastions would have retaken the planets and begun reconstruction. None of them would have been able to flee when the planets exploded. Perhaps the bastions would have survived, their defenses were strong, but the fleets and all their soldiers? How could they have survived the raging destruction of a planet at close range? Countless lives would have been lost in an instant.

It would have been an unprecedented loss for humanity's military. Without a means to fight back, it would have spelled the end of their species at the hands of the alien menace.

Although Lan Jue and the men and women of the Alliances had learned a great deal about their enemy, their boundless cruelty and cunning continued to surprise. It was not easy to devour several planets' worth of energy so fast, yet they did. What's more, the energy required to detonate a planet was enormous. In order to prepare so quickly, it meant this had been their plan from the beginning.

Lan Jue's first terrified thought was that they couldn't think like humans if they wanted to fight against these monsters. The alien planets were no longer here, and whether they teleported away or left by some other

means their target was somewhere else.

They were exactly as intelligent as Lan Jue suspected, which was why it seemed so strange for them to choose such an indefensible position as a place to evolve. Humanity's armies were a threat, so they did whatever was necessary to stop them. Callously obliterating billions of lives and four planets was a passing thought, tools to use to their advantage.

It was frightening how accurately these beasts were able to judge human reactions. They knew how the North would be forced to react if their planets fell into enemy hands. They would have no choice but to come with their full might. They even anticipated mankind would fret over their ability to teleport, and painstakingly kept that possibility alive in the minds of their prey.

Were it not for Jun'er and Jue Di's efforts, they might have succeeded. Even if only half of their ships were lost, a third of their bastions, humanity would never had joined together again in mutual defense. Leaders and politicians would have chosen to look after their own, to flee in the face of overwhelming adversity. But by then the alien teleportation abilities would make them invincible. They would hunt down and kill the humans with impunity until they got the DNA material they needed. With mankind's armies in disarray, nothing would stand in the way of their domination.

How many humans would remain if that were to occur? Would it really spell the end of their species? No one knew. The universe was a dangerous place, and they didn't have any hidden strength to depend upon. It was all unsettling conjecture.

Yet the heavens seemed to favor humanity. It had given them Jue Di, Jun'er. The Clairvoyant...

Zeus-1 was moving so fast the view outside its windows were a blur. In an instant they were looking back at the rapidly shrinking Monteux. Majesty kept on its heels. Although the battleship was larger by a fair amount, it had its advantages. Its equipment was top of the line, and had several Paragons as support to ensure it could keep up. However, the ships

would need repairs after being so dramatically overloaded. The intense speed and flow of power damaged their internal components.

Before long Lan Jue spotted Middle Heaven looming nearby. It was easy to pick out – after all, it was a planet!

Middle Heaven was also on the move, and Su Xiaosu calculated a trajectory to bring them around its far side. Once in position they cut their speed and pulled into one of the bastion's docking ports.

Lan Jue let himself relax, just a little. He was confident in Middle Heaven's defenses. So long as they weren't too near the blast, they would survive. But then he realized they were moving toward Monteux, and didn't appear to be slowing.

After a moment of panicked confusion, Lan Jue understood. As he listened to communications passed along commanders he discovered five others were doing the same. Only two of the bastions weren't pulling out to the front.

The bastions were going to use themselves to block the blast.

Bastions were the pinnacle of human construction, and that included their defenses. They had the best chances of surviving the blast of a planetary explosion. Although humanity's forces were in full retreat, the planets could detonate at any moment. The bastions were determined to deflect as much of the blast as they could to give their people a chance.

It called to mind memories of Tyrannosaurus, when Admiral Kang had used the ship's bulk to defend his fleet from the alien asteroid shower. Now Lan Qing and five of the North's bastions were preparing to do the same. They tightened ranks, and waited.

Chapter 749: Big Bang

Lan Jue didn't know why the West didn't join the other bastions at the front. However, he did know it was the right decision.

Middle Heaven's impressive speed was on full display. Twenty engine fixed to its surface glowed red-hot as they pushed the planet forward. From the back it looked like a sun. It lead the other bastions toward Monteux.

The first set of ships to reach safety were the Easts. They had been ready for the withdraw order. Lan Qing could be selfless when the time required, but he also had no qualms alerting his people to danger even if it wasn't in everyone's best interest. He knew Kang Hui was going to give his own people more time than others.

Lan Jue didn't leave his own ship. Through communications equipment and radar he observed what was going on outside. When he saw ships bearing the insignias of the East fly passed An Lun and out into quiet space he heaved a sigh of relief. So far the East only had one bastion, and five fleets it was meant to protect. But where this might have been a problem for a normal ship, Middle Heaven was so large its whole entourage could fit safely in its wake.

Behind the warships were the transport vessels. They were ferrying An Lun's best – including the Bloodiron Kahns. Middle Heaven was moving forward so quickly to ensure that transport ships got behind it before Monteux blew.

And not a moment too soon. The four planets began to change just as the East's ships were getting to a safe distance. It started with their rotation, which slowed to a crawl. Even from out in space they could see the planet trembling. Thousands of acres of its surface collapsed into burning crevices that spat magma into the sky.

It was going to blow!

Northern Bastions had started to slow, then stop. Protecting their bastions were their first priority. Interstellar fleets and the people on

board were expendable by comparison. Luckily their reaction had been fast enough that most were already safely behind the moon-sized ships. Not so lucky were their transport ships which were a few minutes behind. Despite the real risk of losing his soldiers, Admiral Kang Hui couldn't put the bulk of his fleet – and the bulk of the North's military strength – in the path of destruction.

Not Middle Heaven. It surged forward like it was duty-bound to save as many lives as possible. In the face of the planet's imminent doom, it proceeded.

Boom- – – ! A blinding light suddenly turned darkness into day as Dakkar exploded. The luminescence from its death spread across the whole sector. The shockwave that followed was like something from a nightmare.

Lan Jue found himself unconsciously clenching his fists. Monteux hadn't blown yet, but he knew that when it did the results would be catastrophic. It was the largest of the four planets, which meant its death would be the most destructive.

Brother, you better have this under control!

He didn't dare disturb Lan Qing in this moment because he knew his brother was piloting the whole ship. Now was not the time to trouble him with nonsense.

The ships were getting closer. In the distance, Sagi and Bollen had also erupted, one after the other. Lan Jue could feel Middle Heaven being buffeted by the first blasts of the shockwave. His radar flickered and fought static interference.

Only Monteux remained, but it shook so fiercely it threatened to pull itself apart. The cracks that snaked over its surface glowed like angry wounds. It was going to die any moment.

Just then a white light sprang up before Middle Heaven, spreading out like a fan. The returning transport ships just made it just in time, vanishing behind the screen of light.

Like clockwork all of the bastion's engines shut off and went dark. Its forward momentum slowed, but the planet didn't turn around. Instead an array of circular engines extended from the front of it and immediately sparked to life. It lurched perilously as the engines fought inertia. They were powerful enough not only to stop its forward trend, but also immediately thrust it backward in the direction it'd come from.

In the same moment a shell of orange-red light appeared around Middle Heaven. It covered every corner. Moments later Monteux gave in. First it collapsed inward, and time stood still for half a moment before it exploded out in all directions.

Within Middle Heaven, silver light flickered as people were deposited into the control room. By the time it receded the figures already had their hands on conductor rods and were pouring their power into the ship.

They were the strongest men and women in the universe. In the middle was the first among them; Jue Di!

Jue Di, Luo Xianni, the Wine Master, Gourmet, Pauper, Driver, Pharmacist, Clockmaker and Lan Jue. All of Skyfire Avenue's leaders, as well as Bize, stood in solidarity in Middle Heaven's defense.

When the impact hit, Middle Heaven shook like it was rattling from an earthquake. The humans' faces were dour but firm. Clearly the ship had been too close to the blast, but no blame was pointed at Lan Qing. He'd done it to save their fellow soldiers.

Lan Jue knew his brother better than anyone, and he trusted him completely. Lan Qing wouldn't do anything he wasn't certain about, and if he flew in this close it was because he had faith in Middle Heaven's ability to withstand it.

The universe around them was a tempest of frantic energy. The waves of destruction that came from the planets crashed into them, again and again. The East's fleets rocked and trembled. They were the only one who had been able to get all their transport ships behind their bastion before the blasts. For the North and West, the fate of their transports went without saying. What small ship could withstand the death of a planet?

The answer seemed obvious. They would see who survived only once the dust had settled.

The raging explosions lasted more than ten minutes before they began to subside. Lan Jue felt like the East's bastion managed valiantly, perfectly in fact. Only the initial shock had rattled the planet-turned-starship. By the end they hardly moved at all. It was evident Middle Heaven didn't sustain much damage.

Sighs heaved through the control room. The Paragons staggered around like survivors of a disaster. If they had been closer to the center of the explosions, even with all their might they would have met their end. Only the Wine Master and the Photographer would have had favorable chances.

The Gourmet's face was ghastly pale. "These goddamn monsters are too cruel. They're evil. I wonder how the others are doing."

The rest of his family was fighting with the North. Most importantly, the hope of the Chu Family and their most recent Paragon had lead the ground assault team – Chung Cheng. The Gourmet worried his nephew may not have survived the blast, though he didn't say it outright. Paragons were strong, but the Northern transports had been left to their own devices. It was unclear how they fared. Outside was a universe of chaos. The fission of four planetary cores caused too much interference for any reliable communication.

Lan Jue took a breath, his mind already calm. Detestable as the enemy was it served nothing to spit curses at a distant foe. The aliens had suffered greatly as well. They'd left many of their number behind to confuse and bait the allied human forces. There surely were no survivors of those left behind.

This was not to say humanity got away without cost. Many from the North and West, including their ground and mecha teams, had fallen. However, thanks to prudent intelligence and the help of the bastions they'd kept their losses to a minimum. Nonetheless, a deep and abiding fear of their enemy would persist.

Without early warning the blow to humanity would have been crippling.

But as it was, the losses suffered by both sides made it palatable.

Lan Jue told the Paragons to rest while he himself went to go find Lan Qing. As he walked the halls he was in awe of Middle Heaven and its first display of ability. Undoubtedly, the West and North were cowed by what they'd witnessed.

Monteux was large, its blast intense, and Middle Heaven had been closer than all the other ships. And yet it had not cost them much to escape unscathed. Though it was not a contest, the East had escaped this tragic battle with the fewest losses and the most vital crystals.

"Brother!" Lan Jue entered the Admiral's office to find Lan Qing behind his desk, staring at his screens.

He didn't raise his head. "I told you, here you refer to me by my title."

Lan Jue walked to his side. "Relax, we've come out the other side of it."

Chapter 750: Analysis

From the side Lan Qing looked as cold as ever. There was no sign of joy after saving the lives of their ground team. On the contrary, he was scowling at the data on his screens.

“What is it? We shouldn’t have suffered any losses, right?” Lan Jue asked.

His brother nodded. “But that isn’t a mark of success. I should have known it was the enemy’s intention to detonate the planets. That was my failure. If it wasn’t for Jun’er and father, we would have lost many people – maybe even all of Star Division. You know what that would mean.”

Lan Jue’s heart skipped a beat. He was right, if they had been even a little late in discovering the alien plot, his soldiers would likely have been lost in the blast!

His body broke out into a cold sweat. If that had happened the blow to mankind would have been serious. If this battle proved anything it was that Adepts were best suited for fighting the aliens. The Skyfire Paragons cut them down in droves. If these powerhouses had fallen it would have crippled humanity’s ability to fight back. It would have erased the core of Eastern dominance in an instant. Even if they somehow survived the aliens after that, the East would have few deterrents against Northern and Western aggression.

Lan Jue’s face grew serious, and he nodded.

Lan Qing went on. “I’ll learn what we can from this experience. We mustn’t be caught in an alien trap again. What’s most important for now is discovering where the alien planets fled to. The war has only just begun.”

Lan Jue nodded again, fully understanding the implications. Indeed, there was a long fight ahead of them. The first play of the game had cost both sides, and it looked like that was going to be the norm.

“Then we should alert any occupied planets to be on guard, and search

for any trace of the enemy. If they're flying somewhere it's the best we can hope for. If they teleported, there's a fundamental flaw in our understanding of the aliens." Lan Jue said, brows knit in thought.

But Lan Qing shook his head. "No, you and I see this opposite. If they teleported it is the best situation for us. I trust in the Pharmacist's information, and believe it costs the aliens tremendously to use their teleportation abilities. Father also said that they must be suffering from the restrictions of universal protogenia. The energy loss from teleportation and universal protogenia would be a vast burden to bear for these monsters. Teleportation would have been their best tactic for leaving the scene undiscovered, which makes it more likely. But two successive teleportations must be draining, and it's unlikely they'll make a third within a short period."

Lan Jue's eyes lit up. "So if we find them again, we can encircle and suppress them with no chance of escape."

Lan Qing nodded in confirmation. "Just so. What worries me most at this moment is the psychology of our Northern and Western allies. The loss of four planets and potentially thousands of soldiers is devastating. Right now, this has the potential to cause us the most problems."

Lan Jue's face fell. He knew what his brother meant. A psychological schism could spell disaster for the species.

No alliance had the strength to face these aliens alone. Only together was victory possible. If their allies chose to abandon the fight, the monsters would continue their path of destruction unchallenged.

"We can't let that happen." Lan Jue said.

Lan Qing agreed. "I hope they hold up. The West didn't seem to get out in time, their losses will be the greatest. In a little while we'll be able to reopen communications and get a better feel for the situation."

Lan Jue's brows furrowed as he considered. "If it's just the West then the loss is manageable. If it's the North, that's another story. Should I go see Admiral Kang?"

Lan Qing shook his head. “No need right now. Kang Hui may be their commander but he isn’t the North’s leader. These planets belonged to the Northern Alliance, their loss was a disaster.”

Wait and see. That was the only thing they could do.

An hour or so later communications were reestablished. When damage reports started coming in the two brothers were shocked, though they had anticipated the worst.

Most of the North’s warships had made it back in time, but some had broken formation and fell behind. Three Capital ships, five dreadnaughts, and more than twenty battleships had been lost. Only a third of their transport vessels made it back. Luckily the Terminator and Chu Cheng were among them.

It was a significant blow, but it didn’t cut them to the bone. The North would recover. Things were much worse for the West.

The West’s two bastions refused Kang Hui’s suggestion to move in, which directly resulted in tremendous losses for the Western fleet. The reason was well-known, Western bastion defenses weren’t the best. They didn’t dare risk the pillars of their military strength, no matter the cost. They sacrificed their soldiers in order to keep their flagships at a safe distance.

Because of this only the West’s fastest ships had made it back. Half of their fleet was destroyed and nearly all of their transports. Shockingly few of their people made it back in one piece – notably Satan and most of his people. For the rest, their avarice had doomed them.

It was the Pontiff’s Citadel that suffered greatest. Reluctance to leave behind vital crystals forced them to stay until the last moment. They discovered something was wrong far too late, and only a handful survived. The Pontiff, Metatron and other Archangels were able to flee by virtue of their own ability to fly. The Pontiff was injured so severely trying to protect his people it seemed unlikely he would fully recover.

The fight was over. Looking out, the vista which had once revealed four beautiful planets was empty but for jagged remnants. No trace of the

aliens remained.

Lan Qing immediately opened a connection to Admiral Kang. He offered his plan to track down the enemy.

“I’m sorry, Admiral Lan. I’ve been given orders to return to Luo immediately. They have no appetite to continue right now.” After a minute of silence, Kang Hui gave him the unfortunate answer.

The North had succumbed to fear. Four of their planets had been lost. What of Luo? It was the heart of the Northern Alliance with ten planets in close proximity. If the enemy struck there it would spell the end of their nation.

“Admiral, we would like to request you put all occupied planets on alert. If there is any sign of enemy forces they should report it to us immediately.” Lan Qing requested.

Kang Hui sighed. “I’ve already given the order. I believe the West will do the same, if they haven’t already. But the areas we need to protect are too vast, and the enemy is only three planets. They can do what we cannot. What if they teleport the next time we pick a fight? We’re stuck in a passive stance, waiting for them to make the first move.”

Lan Jue spoke up. “But do you think we can fight the aliens with nothing but a passive defense? If they’re still in your territory, what will the North do?”

Kang Hui was silent for a time before speaking. “I know what you say is true, but this decision isn’t mine to make. The North is in chaos, and it will only get worse once news of what happened here gets back. Already many of our important families have begun to flee into deep space with their own ships and all their riches. If this continues on a large scale, then...”

Lan Qing’s pupils contracted as he stared at the screen. “Then we don’t have much time. Admiral, as soldiers our greatest responsibility is to our country. If we can’t do that we aren’t qualified to call ourselves military men. If you agree with my determination then I hope you can find a way to support us.”

Kang Hui nodded ever so slightly. “Your analysis makes sense, there’s a high probability you are correct. I will support you as much as I can personally. Be assured that I will continue to advocate for war. But I am just one man with limited power, I’ll need more support if I am to convince our leaders. If you’re able to convince the Terminator it would go a long way. After all, he has tremendous influence out here. With him and I together we may be able to convince the congress to act.”

Lan Qing nodded. Kang Hui’s promise had given them some measure of hope. With his responsibilities and status they couldn’t ask for anything more.

The Western military didn’t return their hails. Their bastions were already heading back toward the West with their tails tucked between their legs.

Things were worse than they’d hoped. Instead of ridding themselves of their enemy in one decisive stroke, they’d ended up worse off than when they began. Four planets were gone, along with all the soldiers that couldn’t get away from the blast. This didn’t only affect the North, the horror of their defeat would reverberate all throughout human territory.

Chapter 751: We Have to Go

Lan Jue looked at his brother. “Right now we can only think about ourselves. The Pharmacist has said that if we can recover Ultus and lay out the Banishing Strategy, we have a chance to eliminate the alien threat. We faced with the unavoidable, your only choice is to face it head on.”

Lan Qin responded. “We’ll go back. We’ll discuss it after we’re safely in the East.” He had his own pressures to consider.

The East had worries just like the North did. What were they to do if the enemy showed up in the middle of their alliance? Middle Heaven, the strength of the East, was absent along with five interstellar fleets. It was imperative that they returned to defend their territory as soon as possible.

Thus did the first joint military offensive of the human alliance end. Middle Heaven led the Eastern delegation back toward Skyfire. No one was in a jubilant mood. The aliens’ cunning and cruelty were giving them the advantage. Their destruction was beginning to seem inevitable. Under constant attack, it seemed only a matter of time before humanity was reaped for their DNA.

Once the Eastern government received Lan Qing’s request for vigilance, they set about disseminating it at once. Planets quickly began returning reports as they searched for any sign of the alien planets. Thankfully, so far there was no sign the monsters had moved into Eastern territory. They appear to have dodged the proverbial bullet once again.

However it meant all they could do was wait for the aliens to reemerge. Their history of clever and vicious determination meant they would certainly pick the most suitable place to show up again and strike at humanity. Once they knew more they could build a strategy.

Lan Jue didn’t converse much with his brother on the return trip. He understood that he wouldn’t be much help in the realm of strategy and tactics. Instead, he returned to Zeus-1 and set about cultivating with Zhou Qianlin. It was still important to consolidate everything they had acquired so they could succeed with their breakthroughs as soon as possible. Only

once they did would the power of the Harmonious Swords be fully available to them. That was how he could help his brother.

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Three days later.

“Lan Jue, come see me.” Lan Jue could hear the hurry in his brother’s voice. It was a rare quality to hear from Lan Qing.

He must have important news, Lan Jue thought, and he suspected he knew what it was. He stopped cultivating and left for the Admiral’s office. He didn’t bother asking for more information over the communicator. His brother would have explained if it was something he could discuss from afar. It was important enough for him to call Lan Jue over for a face-to-face talk.

When Lan Jue arrived there were several others in the office; his father, mother, and the Wine Master. None of them bore pleasant expressions, only Lan Qing maintained a measure of inscrutable composure. However, the chill in his demeanor was telling.

“Did you find them?” Lan Jue asked. He knew the answer, it was the only reason they would be reacting this way.

Lan Qing nodded.

Lan Jue’s next question was delivered with some anxiety. “In our Alliance?”

“No,” came Lan Qing’s answer. “They’re in the West.”

Although he knew he shouldn’t, Lan Jue was relieved when he heard. It wasn’t the East, they were protected for now.

Lan Qing heaved a sigh, then continued. “Two days ago the West’s bastions were ambushed while returning home. Both were destroyed by the alien planets. Only a few of their fastest ships managed to escape.”

“What?” Lan Jue gasped. Lan Jue had known the news wouldn’t be good. He hadn’t expected this.

The West had only three bastions. One of them had been taken by

Poseidon Group and brought to the East. The only two they had remaining were now gone. What did it mean? It meant the West no longer had the ability to protect itself!

The whole Alliance was at the mercy of these terrible interstellar predators.

A creeping dread filled Lan Jue's heart. What if the aliens had been waiting for them instead? What would have happened then? They wouldn't have fared any better than the West, and Middle Heaven would have fallen at the enemy's hands. Although Lan Jue liked to believe that they would have made them pay dearly.

"The North has also been informed of what's happened. Our enemy's target is undoubtedly the Western Alliance – their most populated area."

"Europa." Lan Jue blurted.

Lan Qing nodded. "That's most likely. We've told the West we're going there now."

Lan Jue's heart skipped a beat and he scowled. "Did they agree?"

"Whether they agree or not, I'm going," Lan Qing said resolutely. "If the West falls, who's next? It won't be the North, the strongest Alliance. It'll be us. And, I suspect, they'll use the hesitation they suspect we must be feeling to undergo their evolution. It won't take them long, and once they do what will our resistance mean to gods? So, no matter what the West thinks, we have to go."

Jue Di spoke up. "I agree. The aliens have proven adept at psychological warfare. We have to fight toughness with toughness. If they aren't afraid, they'll just keep racking up victories. Their greatest advantage is their ability to teleport, but Xiao Qing and I agree they won't be using that ability in the near future. It must have cost them about as much as we suspect."

"What about this, dad," Lan Jue offered. "They spent a lot of energy, but they must have gathered a lot from the four planets they conquered as well. That might allow them to teleport again. If that's the case they can

just do exactly what they did before.”

Jue Di shook his head. “It isn’t that easy. If recovering life essence was so easy would I have the troubles that constrain my powers? I’ve had time to carefully study the paragon-level vital crystal you recovered. It’s remarkably similar to a human’s Core. Once it reaches a certain level it becomes very difficult to simply support it by normal means. Teleportation requires their life force to galvanize the energy and complete the process. Creatures like the one you killed on Monteux can restore life essence, but the situation must be different for the alien home worlds. Even though they did consume four planets’ worth of energy, it will take time to convert it into power they can use. I don’t think I’m wrong in this.”

Lan Jue was suddenly reminded of something the Pharmacist had told him. He nodded. “Then teleportation is no longer an option for them. If we track them down they’ll have no choice but to fight.”

“Just so. Of course we’ll need more intelligence before we make a decision,” Jue Di cautioned.

Lan Qing cut in. “We aren’t going in for a direct confrontation. First we need to confirm what they’re up to, and what condition they’re in. If we can be sure they’re in the process of evolution, then we must attack right away and thus destroy them.”

“Does the North have anything to say?” Lan Jue asked.

Lan Qing calmly replied. “I’ve already alerted the Northern congress, Admiral Kang Hui and his Majesty the Terminator. Right now things are not going well in the North.”

Lan Jue smiled bitterly. “I can imagine. The North has suffered terribly and they’ll want all their strength centered on Luo. They have a reason to be scared. If the aliens return to Luo once they can teleport again, it would likely mean the end of their alliance.”

Lan Qing’s iron facade broke, revealing a brief glimpse of helplessness. “So it seems unlikely we’ll be able to count on the North’s help. We have only ourselves. We’ve also brought the majority of our power already – the

other two bastions are protecting Skyfire. It was difficult to convince our parliament to let us make this excursion. For the moment the only ones to fully endorse the decision is Poseidon Group.”

Lan Jue blinked. “So the Poseidon-class Bastion will join us as support?”

Lan Qing nodded. “A-Li’s proposal. If what he said wasn’t an exaggeration, then Poseidon should be just as tough as Terminator was. That will help us quite a lot.”

Lan Jue nodded. “If the enemy is trying to evolve then it’s definitely the time to go all out. I support your decision, let’s do it. I refuse to helplessly wait for death to come knocking. The West...”

He trailed off, his face going dark. Lan Jue had no love for the West, but their people were innocent! They were all part of the human family. Pulling the star map up in his mind he could recall eight planets in the vicinity of Europa. They were arranged in a circle and served as protectors for Europa in the interior.

Chapter 752: Changing Course

The barrows was one of those seven planets. Each one was – at most – two days journey from one another. Once the threat of alien invasion had become clear the West had urged nearly all their populace to migrate to this system. Though their population was the smallest among all the Alliance, that was still a billion people.

That was enough DNA to prompt the alien evolution. A billion lives...

An Lun changed course, pointing itself toward Europa. They were about to enter into the second phase of their war against the aliens.

After two days Middle Heaven crossed the border into Western territory. All the while bad news was flowing in from their neighbors to the North. Their government and their people were clearly uninterested in sending troops to help them face the planets.

They weren't alone in their thinking. So long as disaster wasn't on their doorstep people were content to bury their heads in the sand. But what did that help? Just as a tipped nest has no unbroken eggs, did the North not understand that disaster would be visited upon them all? But it seemed hopeless, they were already frightened beyond reason.

Another day passed before they got any news. More specifically, it was a message from Kang Hui. He confirmed what Lan Qing and Lan Jue suspected, that the destruction of those four planets had descended the alliance into chaos. Distrust in the government had reached a fever pitch.

Under these conditions the Northern congress felt it most important for their forces to remain close to home, protecting Luo. They couldn't dispatch any troops, no matter the problems others were facing. Although the Terminator was a respected man, he was but one person in a sea of dissenting voices. His reputation wasn't enough to sway the lawmakers to his point of view.

However the Paragons, Chu family and the Admiral refused to be hamstrung by the cowardice of others. With Tyrannosaurus and two fleets they left Luo without approval, headed for the West. The Terminator

brought all of the Great Conclave with him, including the adept army he'd established.

By the time the congress found out, they'd already left. They ordered the remainder of their army to track down and take back Tyrannosaurus, but that was easier said than done. With the destruction of Terminator, Tyrannosaurus was the strongest ship they had. Heron had been their fastest, but its capabilities had been greatly reduced. Under these circumstances, what could the army do?

What's more, how could the army not support its Admiral, and their mission to destroy the beasts that had slain so many of their countrymen?

Lan Qing and his forces had another ally, but he wasn't sure it was enough. The weakest alliance had become the leader in this desperate – and possibly final – assault against the alien menace.

Poseidon approached from a different corner of Eastern space and entered the West some distance away. They met up before continuing toward Europa.

Lan Jue knelt on the floor of Zeus-1. Right now, the only people in the ship were him and Qianlin. It was the most quiet and private place on the ship.

A pale blue light radiated from the center of his chest. A white light spread from Qianlin's. Both of them had come to the final part of their journey to become Paragons, reaching the final step. His father had continuously told him that he mustn't rush. Impatience was counterproductive.

Only the golden core of the thunder essence was left to be absorbed. It was a crystalline in appearance, strange and beautiful. It no longer seemed to possess any elemental quality, but instead vast amounts of pure energy were contained within.

After several attempts to understand it, Lan Jue came to the conclusion that he would only fully absorb this core once he broke through. It possessed the purest immortal qi he'd ever felt.

Zhou Qianlin's beauty continued to evolve. Every time they cultivated she slipped effortlessly into meditation, and in fact she seemed to have entered into a strange and enigmatic state. It was almost as though she was hibernating. She was oddly sluggish and a sheen of white energy hung over her flesh. Lan Jue didn't know what it was, but he figured it must have something to do with her inevitable breakthrough.

He'd asked his father if a Queen of Heaven Adept had ever broken through to Paragon. He'd said Qianlin may very well be the first. As a result, no one knew what to expect when she crossed that threshold. However, Xuanyuan Shishi was there for guidance, and said her condition was excellent. The immortal qi was holding and purifying her essence. The combination of her own abilities and the thunder essence was the reason for her rapid improvement and security. She had continued to change, quietly and furtively.

The two of them sat in stillness, exchanging their energies between one another. Lan Jue's All-Heaven lightning forged their bodies, and Qianlin's Queen of Heaven Discipline nourished them. Over time the powers melded to construct a shell of power that encompassed them as they meditated.

The Pharmacist was also cultivating. Ever since finding her new goal, she'd redoubled her efforts. She knew that galvanizing Ultus' power would not be easy, at least beyond the scope of her powers now. Even just recovering it from their foe was going to be a herculean task. But difficult as it was, recovering the blade was the only way for her to be reunited with some piece of her husband. One could imagine the significance that held for her.

Her condition had been different from a normal Paragons from the outset. She stood on an abundant foundation and grew with the aid of a Banishing Blade. Occisus' deadly power was the elementary force of her abilities, the power that shored up her iron will. Her progress continued unabated, without the bottlenecks encountered by typical Paragons.

In fact, with the understanding she had accumulated and Occisus' help, she would have broken through right to a Reflection of Heaven and Earth

if she'd held back. Though she wasn't there now, she was close. Her Domain continued to meld with the lethal properties of the sword, becoming one.

After drawing upon the essence of the sword more than once, she had used her comprehension of its nature to temper and perfect her protogenia. It served to stabilize and strengthen her own abilities, bringing her closer to the second-degree of Paragon.

This was the benefit of using a legendary astrum. Once she broke through, she would continue to quickly improve by virtue of the Banishing Blade.

The West was quiet, at least out in space. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and though the mighty aliens lurked nearby they could see nothing but an expanse of calm darkness. From the point of view of their enemy, the aliens had continued on the most effective path. Their unerring aggression had served to strengthen themselves and preserve their own lives. Any species would choose a similar path if they had reached the limits of their potential.

But to another race, the aliens were a scourge. For humans these mortal enemies would have to die, or they would.

Lan Qing was clad in his black military uniform, sitting straight upon his chair. He stared at the screen before him with a gentle expression – an exceedingly rare occurrence on his hard face.

Ever since he was small he had held himself to the highest standards. Compounded by Jue Di's influence, he had a dogged persistence toward perfection. While Lan Jue always looked up to his brother, he didn't know that Lan Qing's struggles were because his abilities were inferior to his younger brother's. He'd reached where he was today through obsessive hard work.

But even the hardest men had soft spot in their hearts. Lan Qing was no exception, but the tremendous weight of responsibility on his shoulders forced him to hide it behind an iron curtain. He sacrificed his happiness and emotion for the unending pursuit of strength.

Lan Jue had once told him walking that path would have driven him crazy. Thinking about it made Lan Qing smile. If his brother was here, seeing him grin from ear to ear, he surely would have wondered if this was his brother.

He sighed. Perhaps, he thought, if they were successful against the aliens it was time for a rest. He'd never taken the time to live his life. Perhaps it was time for a chance. If only you knew how much I envy you sometimes, A-Jue, he thought. But someone needed to take the brunt of father's expectations. I'm the older brother, these responsibilities fall to me. I never thought you would have to shoulder the same burdens.

An image swam up from his memory, an old street lined by quaint buildings. Two-thousand forty eight meters top and bottom. Although he hadn't spent much time there, the place called to him. He liked it. When things settled he made the decision to visit.

It wasn't time to retire, but a vacation wouldn't be out of the question. Inwardly he chuckled to think of his superior faces when the day came for him to apply for a few days off.

People worked harder when they had something to work toward. At least, that's how Lan Qing felt.

"Beep, beep!" His communicator buzzed.

He connected the call and a pretty voice answered. "Boss, we've arrived at the designated area."

Lan Qing's relaxed expression was put away in lieu of his icy default. "Wait for my orders, don't leave unless you have to, and don't act on your own accord. Wait for us to link up then you can continue your approach."

Chapter 753: The Austins Flee

“Alright. What about A-Jue?” Hua Li’s voice sounded concerned.

“He’s been cultivating,” Lan Qing replied. “He hopes to break through before this fight starts.”

Hua Li’s anxiety was clear. “You need to persuade him not to be too hasty. There are real risks.”

Lan Qing was calm as ever. “He’s fine, his foundation is solid. He could have broken through a long time ago if he’d wanted to. This is the most opportune moment he’s encountered so far. He won’t rush, don’t worry.”

Hua Li replied. “That’s good. Who’d have thought we’d really come to a day when we’d be fighting shoulder to shoulder, eh? A-Cheng should be coming with Tyrannosaurus. You think they’ll write stories about us? ‘The Battle of the Four Divine Monarchs’?”

Lan Qing’s voice betrayed his no-nonsense demeanor. “If you have nothing of substance to say, hang up.”

“Ugh! Guy, you really need to grow a personality. Alright, that’s that then. We’ll talk again in person.” Hua Li hung up.

Lan Qing shook his head. In reality he wasn’t thrilled with the fact Hua Li was commanding his bastion. Simply put the entertainer was too gentle. In the heat of battle you needed blood of iron, it was too easy for emotional problems to rise to the fore. Calm needed to be maintained.

Still, he was pleased with the help from Poseidon Group’s warriors. They were the richest army in all the alliances, and was well established. Their strength was undisputed, and their people boasted a host of talents. He just hoped their Poseidon-class bastion packed more surprises for them to exploit.

Three bastions, three planets. On paper they were decent odds. The alien home worlds were strong, but Lan Qing had faith in Middle Heaven. Even if their mission failed...

His face became stern. If the North had the strength, so did the East!

The air was thick and gloomy aboard the large blue ship. Sylva Austin sat within the cockpit, ghastly pale. He'd maintained this position for several hours already. When news that the West's bastions had fallen, the Austin family's ships raced to Europa. It didn't take them long to load up most of their riches and leave.

Although they were the West's ultimate political family, they didn't have anywhere near the riches Poseidon Group boasted. All they needed was a transport ship disguised as a merchant vessel. Their escape was tacitly agreed to by the Western government, since the Austins had held the reigns of power for so long.

Richard Austin stood at his father's side. He looked just as bad, distraught over having to flee his home and flying toward an uncertain future.

"Father. Us leaving like this... the West..." He struggled to find the words.

"The West is finished!" Sylva harshly replied to his son. Yes, the West was finished. Without its bastions it was like a naked woman waiting to be ravaged. There was no other outcome.

"But we can ask for support from the North. The Aliens wouldn't be able to ambush and destroy so many bastions at once." Richard was clearly loathe to abandon his home.

Sylva shut his eyes, pain written on his face. "Impossible. I know what is happening in the North. You are not a politician, you don't understand the problems politicians face. They can't do something simply because they want to. Their people are rioting, their last offensive served only to condemn many of their young men to death. Four planets were destroyed. Their failure scarred them deeply, and all they can do now is defend their homes. Of course, the destruction of the West just means their own death has been postponed."

Sylva opened his eyes. They were hard and bitter.

Richard was shocked. "So... you mean we aren't going to the North?"

His father replied. "Of course not. Why would we do? Become their vassals? We have been preparing, spending a lot of our hard-earned wealth to gather everything we need to resettle somewhere else. We have the technology to terraform a place to our needs, build a new ecosystem. We're leaving the territories traditional held by mankind – the farther the better. Our family and servants, three thousand people, will constitute the foundation of a new Western Alliance. Even if they defeat the aliens, the West as we know it know has passed into history. How will they treat us? The Austins survival must be assured by becoming leaders, as is their right!"

Richard opened his mouth, but said nothing. A bitter expression crossed his face. Europa... he'd grown up there, it was his home for as long as he'd been alive. He didn't want to leave the planet to its fate.

When the aliens came the people of his abandoned world would live a short life of pain and fear. The Austin family must become rulers? But what sort of ruler didn't protect their own people?

In an instant he felt like he'd grown up. A beautiful face appeared behind his eyes.

Qianlin... are you well? It's been so long since I've seen your face. Are you still with that man? I regret that I am so weak, or he wouldn't have stolen you away from me.

A formless pain filled his chest when he thought of her. It had been so long, and so much had happened. Now the pain was just a shadow of the stabbing obsession he'd felt before.

Love's ache didn't hurt so badly when one's life was in danger.

His thoughts were interrupted when a man in a captain's uniform approached. "Mr. Austin, we have a problem. An unidentified military force has blocked our path."

"What?" Sylva was shocked by the news. He shot to his feet. "Do you know who they are?"

The soldier hesitated. "We believe they're from the East."

“The Eastern Alliance?” Sylva’s brows knit tight as he thought. After the fight against the aliens the Eastern army should have returned home to defend their own territory. Why would they be here all of a sudden?

“Let me see.” He said.

The captain brought Sylva to a screen. There he saw a host of warships spread out before them. They were arranged in a formation that prevented further passage.

The captain went on. “Their call-signs and indications mark them as Eastern vessels. They’ve hailed us, requesting to speak with someone. Look here...”

Sylva scowled. “Open a connection.” It seemed strange to encounter Eastern soldiers out here without rhyme or reason. Perhaps they didn’t know the aliens where in the vicinity?

An officer appeared on the screen. “I am Senior Colonel Liu Feng. Please reply with your designation.” Liu Feng spoke curtly.

The officer by Sylva’s shoulder answered. “We are a vessel under the auspices of the West. By what authority are you entering into Western space without authorization? And you dare to ask our designation!”

Liu Feng was not cowed. “We’ve come to defend the West from alien invasion. Your vessel and status are unclear, it is protocol to hail all unknown vessels in proximity.”

Save them from the aliens? Even Sylva Austin couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Could this be true? The North was busy with their own affairs, but the East came instead?

Sylva Austin blurted out. “How many reinforcements did you bring?”

The Senior Colonel replied. “Report your designation.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Western politician answered. “This is the West’s Ninth Fleet. I am their commander, Chief Sylva.”

Liu Feng looked him over for a moment. “You’re an army Chief? Why aren’t you in uniform? As far as I know the West doesn’t have a ninth

fleet.”

“Newly authorized,” Sylva replied. “I request to speak with your commanding officer. Tell them President Sylva Austin wishes to speak with him.”

Liu Feng went silent as he tried to confirm the information. His computer verified that this man was indeed the Western President, and patriarch of the Austin family.

Liu Feng was an intelligent man. The Present’s presence on these unmarked military vessels was telling. However, Sylva was an important person in the West and in the military.

“Please hold on while I get the Admiral.”

Before long the Senior Colonel’s face was replaced by another, a youngish man with gallant features. His uniform was jet black, and four gold stars glinted on his shoulders. He regarded Sylva and his officer with a cold, hard expression. Richard Austin was immediately struck by his image, even on a screen.

This man’s aura was almost palpable.

Sylva Austin knew him the moment he saw him. He was a famous figure in the East – perhaps all across human space.

The An Lun super soldier, a star of his military generation. He was a Paragon in service to the Eastern military, but was also known as Prometheus of the Divine Monarchs. Lan Qing!

Chapter 754: Incorporation

“Hello, Admiral Lan Qing.” When he saw the Eastern luminary Sylva Austin felt more relaxed. No one of comparable age had as many military accomplishments. If they were here it meant they didn’t need to fear pursuit by alien forces.

“Hello, President Austin. Where are you and your entourage headed?” Lan Qing calmly greeted him.

The Western President adopted a grieved expression. “The alien planets have attacked our armies, and destroyed our last remaining bastions. The West has fallen into enemy hands and Europa has been occupied by our foes. We’ve had no choice but to flee our homeland under threat of death. We’re lucky to have run into you. You’ve come as reinforcements?”

Lan Qing regarded him like a statue. “It doesn’t seem as though you’re in any condition to fight. You’ve witnessed the enemy on Europa? What’s the situation on the ground?”

Sylva paused. He didn’t want to continue this line of questioning. For fear of unneeded trouble, for fear of judgement, he’d shut off all communications to Europa. He didn’t know what was happening back home.

“They’re everywhere, Europa has fallen. We were forced to run. We can’t know the conditions on the planet now. They’ve cut off all communications. I don’t know how many men you’ve brought with you, Admiral, but do you think you’ll be able to help us take back our home?” He lied straight-faced to the Eastern commander.

“We have one bastion and five interstellar fleets,” Lan Qing answered. “We plan to attack the alien planets in full force.”

Sylva’s words were thick with gratitude. “That’s excellent. We’ll get out of your way, and congratulations on what’s sure to be a successful campaign, Admiral. We’ll wait for your triumphant return to present you with our most sincere thanks.”

“No need.” Lan Qing replied.

“Hm?” Sylva saw the hard light in Lan Qing’s eye.

The An Lun super soldier continued. “I mean to say you don’t need to move aside. We’re requisitioning your vessels.”

“What?” Sylva stared at him with wide eyes. He could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“We’re surrounded, sir.” The colonel at the President’s side had just noticed the Eastern ships pulling up on either flank. They hadn’t considered this possibility since the others were military vessels and not aliens.

Sylva’s capitulatory façade fell away, and he faced Lan Qing with indignation. “Admiral Lan, this is the Western Alliance. What is the meaning of this?”

Lan Qing’s voice was cold as ice. “So you do know where you are. As President should you be en route to flee your own nation? You cannot face the enemy on your own, so we’ve come. We will achieve victory through unity. Toward this end we’re requisitioning your ships. We will ensure your safety, but your people are coming under our control.”

“This is unacceptable.” Sylva slammed his fist on the desk in front of him. These ships were meant to ensure the future of the Austin family. How could he just let them be taken? They certainly wouldn’t be given back. All of the wealth that had been painstakingly saved by his family would be robbed.

“It doesn’t matter what you find unacceptable. Lower your shields and stop your engines or you will be regarded as an enemy. This is how it is.” The connection was dropped.

Sylva Austin, President of the Western Alliance, stared gaping at a black screen. He erupted in a string of curses. How could anyone have anticipated that they would run into an army, into someone as pompous and arrogant as this Admiral?

But what choice did he have? They couldn’t revolt. There were five fleets

of the East's best soldiers just outside. Lan Qing was piloting a bastion. What could he do with his small handful of refugees?

But he couldn't stomach it! He couldn't simply give himself and his family to these pirates! If he did, his family would be lost.

A wild a ferocious expression overcame him. He snapped his head toward the colonel. "How likely are we to break free? Even if it's just us."

The colonel opened his mouth, but before he could answer Sylva grunted and collapsed to the floor.

He gasped. "Mr. Austin, you..."

Richard Austin stood over his father, the hand that had knocked him out till raised. His face was dark. "We are guilty in the eyes of the Western people. We cannot continue our sins. I also will not tolerate seeing anyone die by human hands when we have an enemy like the aliens at our gates. Follow Admiral Lan's demands. If our ships and soldiers can contribute to the liberation of our home, then we must do so in order to redeem ourselves. I am not a man who runs from battle, colonel. Are you?"

The officer stared at Richard. After a moment he replied. "Deep in my heart I never liked you. Now I see that I was wrong. I'm sorry."

He turned back to the control panel and opened up a link to all the ships captains. "This is an order, all ships of the Ninth Fleet lower your shields. Friendly forces will come to board your vessels. Put down your arms. We don't want any trouble."

The command brought the West's Ninth Fleet to a halt. Shields, which had been brought up when the Eastern ships had surrounded them, hissed as they were turned off. Boarding vessels were allowed to approach.

Two hours later the West's newest fleet was turned into the East's newest addition. To Richard's surprise the East didn't remove their personnel, instead simply leaving some of their own behind to supervise. The Austin family's people were left under the command of the colonel.

Austin brought his father, awake from his undesired nap, on the boarding vessel along with several of their closes descendants. They made

their way to Middle Heaven. It was safer there, and signified their capitulation to the East.

Sylva was quiet the whole way. He looked to have aged a decade in just a few hours. Richard sat across from him, also silent.

He wasn't sure what he should say, but he didn't regret his actions. If he was given the choice to do it again, he would. It had somehow put his heart at ease.

Sylva suddenly lifted his head and looked at his son.

Richard sat up straight, ready for his father to react harshly. Instead the elder statesman started with a bitter laugh. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I was too concerned with what our family could gain or lose. What I could lose. I forgot what it means to be human. I have sinned, and from now on I am no longer suited to running this family. That task falls to you. You're now the head of the Austin family."

"Father, I..." Richard wanted to explain, but Sylva lifted his hand and entreated silence.

"You don't need to say anything. I don't blame you, I'm not upset. I mean it, it took nerve to do what you did. I see you with new eyes. That nerve is precisely what's needed to keep our family going. I didn't want our family to end here, because of this. After a hundred years on the political stage. But so long as you remain, we will return to glory. The sins of the father will not be visited upon the son. Richard Austin will be the hero of our family, and the cleanser of our name."

Richard was stunned. Suddenly he felt so small before his father, with a burden so heavy placed upon his shoulders. He felt like in a moment his life had changed.

The small transport boat made it back to Middle Heaven without incident. Although everyone had heard of the East's newest Bastion, seeing the remolded planet with his own eyes for the first time stunned Richard to silence.

The soldiers were very respectful, and took pains to accommodate him

and his family. Richard and his father were brought to the control room, at the center of the bastion.

When they entered, both of them focused immediately on a single person.

Tall, straight, cold and resolute, but with a strangely gentle air. Both seemingly opposing sensations surrounded a single man harmoniously without contradiction.

Lan Qing, the Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven, senior commander of the Eastern army, Admiral of Middle Heaven – Prometheus! Title after lofty title flit through their minds. Richard felt small before the man, like he was looking up at a giant.

The soldier who led them quickly approached Lan Qing and stood at his side, speaking a few words. The Admiral then turned around to face them.

He walked over with long strides, unthreatening, but Richard still fell back a step. Sylva faced him tall and uncowed. “Hello, Admiral,” he said.

Lan Qing nodded. “Hello, President Austin. I appreciate your cooperation in this matter. Please relax, we’ll do everything in our power to help you recover what the aliens have taken. In a little while I’ll need to ask you some information, anything you can tell me about the state of Europa and its surrounding planets. Then you’ll be free to rest and recover from your flight.”

No mention was made of the East’s forceful acquisition.

Sylva had known this was coming, but the bitterness in him was still sharp. The Austin family’s years of leadership were coming to an end, but they would live. So long as they lived, there was a chance.

Chapter 755: Poseidon's Surprise

"I hope you're able to keep your promises, Admiral. Do whatever you can to protect our home." Sylva Austin was no longer concerned with the return of his fleet. There were more important things to consider now. Even if they were absorbed by the East, even if they became beholden to their Alliance, their survival would mean a chance for their family.

Richard saw Lan Qing from a different perspective. He looked so familiar! He looked like that man... the one who... why did they look so similar?

The sounds of footsteps approaching from outside interrupted his thoughts.

"I heard you took the Austin's fleet?" Lan Jue stepped through the door and called to his brother. He only noticed the other two men after he spoke.

Richard froze, but quickly his face turned dark and angry. This thief was the last man he'd expect to see here. He could see the relation between Lan Qing and Lan Jue right away. If only he had known perhaps he wouldn't have given his family's ships up!

Lan Jue cast him a glance, walked over to his brother's side, then laughed amicably. "We meet again."

Lan Jue could almost hear Richard grinding his teeth. "Zhou Qianlin? Where did you kidnap her away to?"

Star Division's commander heaved a sigh. "Please stop asking pointless questions like that. I'm fairly certain you will never have an opportunity to see her, ever again."

Richard paused, and little by little the rage drained from his face. This man, standing beside the Eastern Admiral, with an aura no less impressive than Lan Qing's, made Richard feel just as small. Why did he have to suffer such disgrace? Why was he not given a chance?

His bitterness showed plain on his face. "Is she well?"

Lan Jue scowled. "Not really."

"What?" Richard's anger flared again and he took a step forward. A hand shot out and grabbed Lan Jue by the front of his shirt. Sylva didn't have an opportunity to stop him.

The Western president was filled with dread. How could he son act so brazenly in their weakest moment? This was their ship – their lives were in the East's hands.

Richard's eyes were red as he glared at Lan Jue. "'Not really'? What's the matter with her?"

When he saw the look in the young man's eyes some of the distaste Lan Jue bore for Richard melted away. Whatever sort of man he was, he really did care for Qianlin.

"She got hurt trying to protect me. Don't worry, I'm working on a cure." Lan Jue said it like a solemn oath, and made no effort to extricate himself from Richard's grip.

The Austin successor's breath was quick and ragged. Eventually he loosened his hold. When he spoke his words were lilted with depression. "Care for her, keep her from harm. I know any chance I had with her is gone, but I still hope for her happiness."

"Yeah. I'll make sure of it." Lan Jue nodded resolutely.

Richard stared at him for what felt like a long time. All of a sudden he felt different, something clicked in his mind. It was a moment of maturity, and the animosity he bore for Lan Jue disappeared. So did the flame he carried for Qianlin. Instead, he heard the words of his father echoing in his mind.

Lan Qing had a soldier take the two men away. Only once they were gone did he address his brother. "Weren't you locked away, preparing? What brings you out?"

Lan Jue smirked. "I'm more or less ready."

Lan Qing's eyes sparkled. "So you mean..."

He nodded. "But I can still hold back. I believe the longer I resist the better the results will be when the time comes. When the Pharmacist broke through there was a surge of incredible energy – I think it was Occisus waking up. It was so powerful it scared the Violet Princess away. When Qianlin and I break through the burst will be twice as potent and I don't want to waste it. We're moving in on the aliens now, so this presents a good opportunity."

Lan Qing rewarded him with one of his rare smiles. "Good. When you break through we'll have to find a time to spar."

Lan Jue answered with a dark chuckle. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

Lan Qing muttered something, a few quiet words, but they wiped the grin from Lan Jue's face. "Could you not? This is revenge!"

Lan Qing's reply was indifferent. "It was father's decision, if you have a problem with it you should speak to him. If you could convince him then you don't have to worry about the title."

"Ruthless! I'm leaving." Lan Jue spat the words in irritation and spun around to leave.

"Wait a moment." Lan Qing called him back.

"Eh?" When Lan Jue turned back his brother was once more the definition of solemn duty.

"Early reports say things are pretty bad. Aliens have already taken several of the planets around Europa. I'm sure you know what they're up to. We're going to face the enemy with only three bastions and few soldiers. But sometimes few soldiers can have its advantages."

Lan Jue's heart jumped. "You think the aliens will underestimate us and rush in?"

The Admiral nodded. "If we came in with seven or eight bastions I'm not sure we'd have a better result than last time. We haven't done well with direct confrontation. But we're only bringing three, and I'm sure they'll know it."

“Father said those successive teleportations must have weakened them. At their level, if they get too weak they won’t have the energy necessary to resist the pressure universal protogenia. That would mean their immediate destruction. I imagine they’re more worried than we think. When you’re worried you make quick and stupid decisions, which I suspect they will if they think we’re in an inferior position. If we can confirm that they are beginning the evolution process then we should press the attack.”

“The problem we’re facing now is uncertainty in how long their evolution takes. That leaves us no choice but to hurry as much as we can. It’s a gamble, but gamble or not it’s the best option. We need intelligence, and I’m sure you know specifically what intelligence we need. If the aliens are distracted, that’s the time to strike.”

“You’re right,” Lan Jue agreed. “I’ll go. I’ll make every effort to find out what we can.”

A strange look overcame his brother’s face. “A-Jue, you know I hope this mission of yours isn’t successful.”

“Huh? Why?” Lan Jue asked, confused.

He explained. “If they’re doing all they can to prevent it, chances are high they are trying to hide their evolution. Prepare to dispatch. I’ve back two plans to formulate, and once they’re ready it’ll be time to act. Hua Li is nearby, we’ll be meeting up with him soon.”

“Alright!”

The Austin family had left with only a single fleet. However, as one of the most important families in the West their ships were special. They were better equipped and more powerful than standard military vessels. When the money flowed who didn’t want to spend some of it on security? Cost didn’t matter when the results were good and useful. It was as true for their mecha suits as it was for their ships.

The Austin’s ships were equipped with the best Western equipment their money could buy, as well as some choice items from the North. How they got their hands on it, you’d have to ask the Austins.

It didn't take long to incorporate them into the Eastern legion, especially with the cooperation of their crews. The stronger they were together, the better their chances of success. Six fleets now surrounded Middle Heaven as they continued deeper into Western territory.

A day later they stopped again, though not to intercept. This time they were joining up with friendly forces. A sky-blue bastion ship hung in the darkness of space before them. It was about half the size of An Lun.

Middle Heaven was the largest bastion ever created, and it was only possible because of the molinite discovered in its core. The fact that it was a planet with a lithosphere all its own constituted its size.

Meanwhile the other ship was constructed from some nameless blue material they weren't familiar with. Lan Qing and Lan Jue both looked at it from the window. After going over the analytics for the ships, they both shared a single thought questioning Hua Li's modesty.

Just looking at it they could tell it probably had more firepower than the North's Terminator-class. Its size didn't seem to affect this. It was also surrounded by four interstellar fleets, each ship coated in the same cobalt blue. Four full fleets!

Everyone always talked about Poseidon Group's riches, that they were the greatest human family. Lan Qing and his brother didn't know precisely what that meant until they saw the results of those riches hovering outside their window. Compared to Poseidon Group, the Austin family was hardly worth notice. If Hua Li and his people wanted to take over the West they surely could, so long as the East and North didn't interfere.

"You sure brought us a pleasant surprise, A-Li!" Lan Jue spoke to the pretty face looking back at them from the screen. Praise was evident in his voice.

Hua Li chuckled. "The Four Divine Horsemen are riding together into battle, we need to make a show of it. This is all of our family's strength and wealth. And they're all under your command, big brother 1. We serve at your command."

Chapter 756: Of No Use

“Alright.” Lan Qing answered.

Hua Li turned his attention to Lan Jue. “A-Jue, come on over when you have the time! Oh, right. I should go there. Am I welcome?”

Lan Jue chuckled. “Of course you’re welcome. If Tyrannosaurus would get there the Monarchs would be together again.”

Hua Li looked at him with a serious expression. “I’ll be there in a little while.”

After they hung up, Lan Jue spoke to his brother with a slight note of envy in his voice. “So this is the power of wealth, eh? You think we’ll have a family like this in the future, bro?”

Lan Qing was stoic as ever. “Not many families are as lucky as the Poseidon Group. Usually the more wealth and prestige you have, the more numerous are your enemies. Poseidon Group wouldn’t have invested so much in war machines if humanity wasn’t under threat – it would be taboo. Remember that the Poseidon Group traces its family roots all the way back to the former era. Luck and intelligence got them this far.”

Lan Jue chuckled again. “No need to school me on principles, I understand. I’m just making conversation. I mean, you’re lazy too am I right? All this hard work your whole life was so you could take it easy later. I remember you saying something like that when you were little.”

Lan Qing’s face twitched. He stared at his brother. “Stop with the nonsense. Go welcome Hua Li.”

“Yeah, alright!”

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Poseidon-Class Bastion Ship.

“You’re going over?” Mo Xiao looked at Hua Li, her face scrunched in a scowl.

“Yup.” He nodded, running a hand through her hair. “Don’t be like this.

Didn't we already talk about it?"

She sniffed. "Just because you're good to others doesn't mean they'll be good to you. The Austin family should be a lesson. They took their fleet, or didn't you notice? We're an important family, too, with many secrets to protect. You are the patriarch, Poseidon. IF something happens to you they'll be able to coerce whatever they like from us."

Hua Li frowned. "You think too much. There is no other group of people I trust more than them. Are you saying you don't trust Lan Qing and Lan Jue?"

Mo Xiao shook her head. "It's impossible to know what's in a person's heart, especially when it comes to the interests of their people. Are you sure you have your priorities straight? You've brought the full force of our family out for everyone to see. The rest of the family already doesn't agree. Without my help you would have had a million troubles on your hands. Now you want to walk over and put your safety in their hands. I won't allow it!"

Hua Li's face stiffened. "Whether or not you allow it doesn't matter. Don't think because people call me your wife you have the right to tell me what to do. You said it yourself, I'm Poseidon. Patriarch of this family. You don't determine what direction this family takes."

"You..." Mo Xiao's breath became ragged.

Hua Li continued. "What's more, even without me there's another successor already. This has nothing to do with that. Now I'm going." He stomped down the hall, never looking back.

Once his back was turned, tears began to stream down Mo Xiao's face. She shook with emotion.

"Why? Why do you treat me this way? Am I not good enough for you? Why?!"

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Lan Jue saw Hua Li an hour later. The two walked side by side to Middle Heaven's recreation area.

“You came just yourself? Your family isn’t worried we’ll detain you?” Lan Jue smirked as he said it.

The entertainer shrugged. “Detain me, then. I’m not opposed to sticking around. Just so long as you treat me right, big guy.”

Lan Jue scowled. “Come on. Who would want your pompous ass? You’re a waste of food. Now hurry up.”

Hua Li looked heartbroken. “Don’t you have a heart? We’ve traveled a long way to help you, and this is how you treat me.” His voice was lilting and pathetic as he trundled down the hallway.

Lan Jue shivered. “What the hell are you doing? A-Li, how can we be sure you aren’t actually a woman dressed as a man? You’re killin’ me here.”

Hua Li chuckled. If I was a woman in man’s dress would you like me? If there was no Hera?”

Lan Jue’s response was no-nonsense. “I’d have to think about it. Maybe. It’s not my fault you’re so pretty. It’d depend on who I met first. Now go on, drop your trousers and let’s make sure you aren’t a chick.”

“Screw off!” Hua Li hurried a few steps ahead.

It made Lan Jue happy to see his old friend again. It was the first opportunity he’d had to relax since the war began.

“Do you want to see the big guy?” Lan Jue asked.

Hua Li shook his head. “No need, I’m not interested in any of this military nonsense. He can communicate directly with Mo Xiao if he wants, I’m just a figurehead. You? How have you been? You haven’t broken through yet, what a wussy. I never would have thought of the four of us you’d be the last to break through.”

Lan Jue didn’t let his friend’s teasing trouble him. “You may have broken through earlier, but that’s like teats on a breastplate.”

“What’s that mean?” Hua Li asked.

Lan Jue regarded his friend disdainfully. “You don’t know? It means

you're damn useless."

Hua Li gaped. "Cursing? That's not like you!"

Hua Li chuckled. "Humans are multi-faceted creatures. You think I have time to just lay around like you? I'm busy from the moment I wake up. Besides, I'm going to break through soon. What I meant to say was that even though I'm not there yet you still couldn't beat me in a fight."

Hua Li huffed. "That's because I was holding back. I didn

T use the full power of my astrum, you see. I was afraid to hurt you."

Lan Jue changed the subject. "Are you staying here or going back?"

He thought for a moment before answering. "If I only had me to look after I'd be disinclined to go back and I'd hang out with you gentlemen. That'd be comfortable. But, if I don't go back Mo Xiao would have a meltdown. The family would probably read too much into it as well. I'm just here to visit, I'll go back in a little while."

Lan Jue nodded. "That's good, we're living in special times. Your family just wants to make sure things are stable."

"So what about your plans?" He asked. "You think we have a chance against these things?"

Lan Jue shook his head. "I don't know. Frankly speaking even now we hardly know anything about our enemy. We don't know what they're really capable of. But according to our best guess..." Lan Jue went on to explain everything they'd determined about the aliens so far, including what they'd learned from the Pharmacist's husband. Then he explained their battle plans.

They couldn't speak openly over the communicator before. The aliens were abnormally well-informed, but still humans had no inkling as to how they learned so much. As far as they'd been able to tell the aliens somehow were monitoring and intercepting human communications.

This was likely to be mankind's last stand. Because of the concerns the information would be leaked, Lan Jue had carefully omitted some of the

most important details of their plan in earlier discussions. Part of the reason he invited Hua Li here was to fill him in.

As he listened, Poseidon Group's patriarch nodded in understanding. He spoke thoughtfully. "It seems it's clear by this point. You're going in for another scout mission?"

Lan Jue nodded. "We don't even know what it would look like when these planets begin evolving, but we need to go in and learn what we can. When we know the situation we can move ahead with our plans. The more we know the better our chances. It hinges on whether or not the aliens can fight back."

Hua Li spoke with decisiveness. "I'll go with you. How can you leave me out of such a good time?"

But Lan Jue quickly waved him off. "No way. You are the predecessor of the Poseidon line. How can I knowingly put you in danger? And this is going to be very dangerous. You don't know how strong these things are – more powerful than Paragons who have become one with the Infinite. If it weren't for universal protogenia and the restrictions it brought, their full strength would have easily turned our species to ash and bone. If you go it'll send Poseidon Group into disarray, and that'd affect our whole plan."

Hua Li pressed him. "What about you? If you go it won't screw up the plan?"

Lan Jue smirked. "Don't worry. First of all, no one is more familiar with the monsters than I am. I've been a part of every successful intelligence mission and have plenty of experience against them. Secondly, I'm bringing a whole team of Paragons. Succeed or fail our chances of survival are high. Relax, nothing's going to happen. We'll run from whatever we can't kill. But you're staying put. I don't want to have to be the one to face Mo Xiao."

Hua Li's lips pressed tight. No, I'm not going to 'relax'. We're brothers, and brothers share joys and woes. Poseidon Group will be fine without me, they have Mo Xiao. We have a child, and he will be the next Poseidon. Even if something happens to me the family will go on."

Hua Li blinked. "You... you have a child?"

Hua Li was quick to interject. "Don't misunderstand, it wasn't like that. It was technological. Right now it's a fetus, but after some genetic engineering and time it will be born. Mo Xiao and I don't have those kinds of feelings for each other. How could we have kids the traditional way?"

"Hua Li," Lan Jue chastised. "This is no good. Mo Xiao treats you very well, we all see it. You two are married and you should act like it, at least try to love her. If there's someone else you love then make a decision. Short, sharp pains are better than long dull ones. Don't string this girl along."

Chapter 757: Another Journey

Hua Li sighed. “You understand how our family works. And you don’t need to concern yourself with it, either. I’m telling you I’m going with you. Poseidon Group will be fine.”

“No!” Lan Jue was firm. “If your family’s situation is as complicated as you say then all the more reason not to let you go. Your Poseidon-class bastion is an integral part of the assault, and if for whatever reason it doesn’t join the fight we’ll have no chance against the enemy.”

Hua Li understood, and hearing his friend speak this way he knew he wasn’t going to come along. He could only display his dissatisfaction with a sigh. “Fine. But you all have to be careful, take every precaution. There will be many opportunities while scouting so don’t put yourself in danger needlessly.”

Lan Jue chuckled at his friend. “It’s fine, Qianlin will be with me. I’ll be much more careful with her than I would be just by myself. I’ll take care.”

When he heard her name, Hua Li paused. “She’s recovered?”

“Soon,” Lan Jue replied. “We believe she’ll return to normal once she breaks through. She is my first responsibility, so you can be sure I won’t do anything to jeopardize that.”

Hua Li nodded. “If I’m not coming with you then I’ll head back.”

Lan Jue was surprised. “Why the rush? I’m not going anywhere for three days. Now that you’re here you should stay, we’ll talk a while. We can’t drink, but we can chat over a pot of tea or something. Come on.” He pulled Hua Li down the hallway.

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Now that the two bastions had joined up, they headed toward Europa together. They maintained some distance from each other, but were surrounded by their combined entourage. Although their total power didn’t match up to what it was during the first alien encounter, their number of support vessels was catching up.

For the time being they weren't preparing a frontal assault. They needed to confirm the situation before any decisions could be made. They also needed to wait for Tyrannosaurus to show up.

The Northern bastions took pains to keep their path a secret. Kang Hui would use a special encryption method to keep Lan Qing in the know, but most of the time they maintained radio silence. They took every precaution to make sure the aliens did know they were coming, otherwise they risked an ambush.

Middle Heaven and Poseidon, meanwhile, were less concerned. Together their defensive capabilities were significant. With them fleets and two bastions they could immediately fall into formation and mount a stiff response to anything they came their way. The planets would have a hard time attacking them straight on.

Besides, according to current estimations the aliens were more concerned with gathering DNA than dealing with human military. They wouldn't want to waste their energy. No, best was occupying Europa and its surrounding planets to devour life essence, and use the DNA for their evolution.

Hua Li stayed on Middle Heaven for a day, speaking at length with Lan Jue about all manner of things. By the end he spoke for a little while with Lan Qing before eventually returning to his own ship.

Although he didn't speak highly of Mo Xiao, he respected her deeply. The practical control of the family's bastion was under her command, and she was the mother of his child. He had to treat her well.

"A-Jue, we're about three days out from Europa. We should be joining up with Tyrannosaurus soon. You should begin your scouting mission now, so that once our forces are gathered we can make our move." Lan Qing said.

Lan Jue nodded. "We're ready to go. Mom and the Wine Master will go with me, and well as the Driver and Pharmacist. Counting me and Qianlin we aren't a big group, but it should be enough. Xiaosu will stay here to look after Star Division. Mika, Lin Guoguo and Xiuxiu will come with me. They'll fly the ship and be responsible for alien detection."

“Safety first,” Lan Qing reminded him. “We cannot lose this fight. Nor can we afford heavy losses. Do you understand?”

Lan Jue nodded. “I understand. Father said he’s coming as well, but I’ll try and make sure the old man doesn’t exert himself.”

For the last few days Jue Di had also sequestered himself away in meditation. The powerful vital crystal they’d acquired from the progenitor had had a significant effect on him. He could use it in place of his own life force to employ the power of his martial art, if needed.

Lan Qing nodded. “Then make it quick. The faster you leave the sooner you get back.”

“Yeah.” Lan Jue got it – this mission was fundamentally important to the mission. It was the foundation of their whole plan.

Three hours later Zeus-1 quietly slipped out of Middle Heaven’s hangar bay. It’s communications equipment and lights were shut off, and like a shard of shadow they pushed off into deep space.

For this mission they wouldn’t be able to send any information back, they would have to deliver it themselves. They couldn’t take the risk of the planets finding out.

Europa. Lan Jue had been there many time, but never under circumstances like these. It wasn’t only the West’s capital, but the location of both the Pontiff’s and Satan’s citadels. By now it was under alien control.

No one knew the condition of the two Western Paragons. Reports stated that few of the Pontiff’s Citadel’s upper echelons survived. It’d been practically wiped out. Most of the Dark Citadel’s leadership had been protected, but their hive of heathens was mostly empty. They had taken a serious blow as well!

Hades no longer had to fret over fighting with the King of Demons for control of the Dark Citadel. The Dark Citadel was no more!

Lan Jue couldn’t help but feel a tinge of disappointment at that news. The tides of time were inconsistent, and changed the landscape in its

passage. A lot of the universe seemed different now.

“Boss, we’re on course.” Mika’s voice called to him.

Mika was responsible for the controls and Xiuxiu kept an eye on their shields and weapon systems. As always, Lin Guoguo busied herself making their ship invisible to enemy forces. Ke’er had remained behind with Su Xiaosu to look after the Division.

“Alright, full speed ahead.” He replied.

Mika pushed down on the gear and Zeus-1 shot forward. Of everyone on board, no one was perhaps more conflicted than Mika. No matter what happened there, Europa was where she’d grown up. She was a Westerner, and though felt no affiliation to it anymore it was still her native land!

Satan was nowhere to be found. The news said he’d fled, but no one had been able to get in contact with him. That made things very uncertain.

Ever since conflict with the aliens broke out Mika had felt the enmity she held for her father decrease. She’d eased so much, in fact, that she’d saved his life with that message from Monteux. She hoped he lived, she repeated it again and again in her head. No matter what he was her father.

Xiuxiu turned back to look at Lan Jue from time to time. But every time she did and her eyes fell upon the beautiful woman by his side, her face fell just a little. For now Qianlin was not merged into Lan Jue’s body. She stood beside him on the bridge.

She was dressed in a flowing white dress, the one that was Lan Jue’s favorite. It was pure, simple, elegant. There were no flashy ornaments or designs. It allowed the ethereal beauty of the woman speak for itself.

The spirit in her eyes was still lost, but her face wasn’t as stiff as it had been. Occasionally her eyes would flit to Lan Jue, or sometimes her expression would change like she was thinking of something. It gave Lan Jue hope that she would recover soon.

It was his greatest hope.

If it wasn’t for this mission and the fight that followed, Lan Jue would

have broken through already. He desperately wanted her back. Xuanyuan Shishi had told him her chances of a full return of faculties was very good.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni kept to themselves, cultivating. They wouldn't need their help until the final moments. The Wine Master, Pharmacist and Driver were on the bridge with Lan Jue.

The Wine Master was chosen for his teleportation abilities, of course. The Driver was a long-range fighter, and the Pharmacist was their strongest. With Lan Jue, Qianlin, and their Harmonious swords, the team was well-rounded. If they weren't strong enough by themselves than Lan Jue's father and mother would intervene. No scouting party in the history of humanity came even close to what they were capable of.

Zeus-1 raced ahead at intense speeds. It had undergone maintenance after its near-miss with the explosion of Monteux. It was a particularly good ship to conduct energy, but having so many Paragons flood it with their Domain burnt out some of its components.

The Wine Master stood at Lan Jue's other side. He spoke, voice low. "No matter what, we need to be quiet and cautious. Don't rush ahead."

"Yeah." Lan Jue slowly nodded. He knew what the Wine Master was getting at. The aliens had already taken some of the planets, and just recently. The scenes they would pass would likely be heart-wrenching. The Wine Master was telling him to steel his heart. They had to proceed calmly.

Their main force would arrive in Europa in three days. They would reach the outlying planets in two. In a day and a half the farthest Western planet came into view outside Zeus-1's windows.

Chapter 758: Live Fire Reconnaissance

When they saw the embattled planets, their hearts fell.

It had become purple, as everyone had expected. But the sick color extended well past the planet itself and had begun to infect space around it. Aliens far as the eye could see surrounded it like a plague of locusts.

If the number of beasts they'd faced no Monteux had been overwhelming, what they saw before them was mind-boggling. They filled space as numerous as asteroids in the Shattered Starfields – more than humans had ever imagined.

"This is the aliens' main force?" The Driver asked. As the others began to wonder if he was scared, he added a sentence. "So many vital crystals!"

"Is there any limit to your greed?" Lan Jue muttered. "Mika, pull us into orbit and keep your distance. Let's take a look around, head for the nearest satellite planet then we'll go from there. Xiuxiu, start recording."

"Aye, aye!" The two women replied in unison.

Most of the creatures they saw were of the sort they'd witnessed before, however they were a few that were new to Lan Jue. Beasts over a thousand meters long were a common sighting, three thousand meters or more were rarer.

According to Lan Jue's estimations, the ones that were ten thousand meters long were equivalent to human Paragons. They likely possessed more energy than a typical Paragon did. The smaller they became the weaker they were. Of course, this didn't include those that could alter their appearance, like the Violet Prince and Princess.

As they continued their distant trajectory, only one word could describe the scene: Shocking.

It was staggering to behold. At least three times the number of enemies they'd faced in the North, and monsters stronger than they'd ever seen. When did they become so numerous? Ten times as many humans wouldn't be able to contend with an army this size. Some were smaller,

meant to force the enemy to waste their fire on them, but even those came in such numbers as to be a real threat.

“Can we get through?” Lan Jue turned to Lin Guoguo. Of course, he meant could they get into the thick of it without being discovered.

She frowned. “No, there are too many in close proximity. I can’t emulate that many signals at once. We’d be discovered right away.”

This was a problem. Lan Jue frowned at the horde before them. If he couldn’t get in closer, how were they to complete their mission?”

Lan Qing’s words ticked the back of his mind. There were so many aliens they couldn’t safely confirm the aliens’ condition. This was as good as confirmation – it meant they were probably undergoing their evolution.

Yet, they’d been wrong before. Being wrong this time could mean they lose everything. Had Jue Di and Jun’er not helped when they did, humanity was already have no means to fight back.

Failure was not an option. They had to confirm the planets’ condition or the next part of their plan could not be enacted.

He muttered to the others. “Continue on. I don’t think the creatures can have this much space quarantined. It doesn’t matter how many there are.”

“Aye, aye!” Zeus-1 continued its forward journey.

Indeed it appeared the aliens could keep everything locked down. As they got closer to the planets things became more difficult, but the space between was more navigable. But things were worse than they expected. Interspersed throughout space were many of the umbrella-shaped, jellyfish-like aliens they’d encountered before. In Lan Jue’s experience they had the strongest psionic abilities, both very sensitive and wide-spread. They didn’t have much in the way of fighting ability but they carried a small army with them wherever they went.

The pulses from the umbrella aliens were as strange as they were complicated, too complicated for Lin Guoguo to mimic. In addition, they noticed that the signals from them seemed to change, whereas other aliens’ calls were static.

This was made even more troubling by the fact that they couldn't tell how many aliens were contained inside one. For all they knew, one umbrella-alien could be transporting enough aliens to wipe out their little boat.

It took them a day to make a full circuit, observing every planet. The final analysis was the aliens were using overwhelming numbers and strategically placed umbrella-alien to keep this section of space locked away. The seven outer planets were sentries, and Europa was safely nestled inside. Learning anything more was beginning to seem impossible.

"What do you think?" The Wine Master asked Lan Jue. By now the bastions were already in position. Middle Heaven, Poseidon, and Tyrannosaurus were making final preparations. Yet they still had no useful information to present.

In fact the only news they had was bad news. Even without the alien home worlds there seemed to be more normal aliens than the human forces could contend with. If the three planets did appear their deaths would be quick and decisive.

Their mission was more important than ever.

"Live-fire reconnaissance!" Lan Jue replied.

"Live fire reconnaissance?" The Wine Master seemed unsure. "No, too dangerous," he replied.

Lan Jue turned to him. "Hear me out. We wouldn't all go out and pick a fight. We separate into two teams; Zeus-1 provides support while the second team moves in and kicks the hornet's nest."

"Explain," the Wine Master said.

He did. "You, me, the Pharmacist, Qianlin. The four of us move into enemy territory and try to get a reaction, see how they respond from a small-scale attack. Without a way to protect ourselves being detected would be unavoidable. Meanwhile the others wait here on the ship and give us backup. Your job will be to transfer us out of harm's way when the time is right. There is a danger, especially since it's likely we'll encounter

stronger aliens, but it's the only way to get a read on what's happening deeper in. We don't have to get to the center, we just need a clue."

The Wine Master considered his proposal. "I suppose it's the best plan we've got, though I don't like the risk. What do you hope to find? You say we don't need to penetrate too deeply, but there's a lot of space between the outer planets and Europa. If the alien home worlds can cloak themselves as we suspect, it seems likely we'd discover anything useful."

Lan Jue shook his head. "I don't just intend to break past the line. I intend to get around the back side of these planets. You've seen that the aliens are most numerous around the planets. If a progenitor has already taken control of the planet, why would it need that much support? There must be something going on that we don't know. We delve past their blockade and see what's on the other side. Then, we swing around the backside of a planet and take a look at what they might be hiding. If we can do that, our mission will have been a success."

The Wine Master thought for another few moments. "If that's the case I think we can assure a reasonable degree of safety. I can teleport everyone back."

Lan Jue smiled. "We might just be gauging reactions, but let's hit them with a solid punch. If we can teleport out, then we can teleport in."

The Wine Master nodded. "It's unsure whether there are any survivors."

When he said it everyone's face grew solemn. The West was truly lost. Most of their population had been gathered here ¹, so how many could have fled? Whatever the number, it was far, far too few.

As much as no one wanted to admit it, the Western Alliance was no more. Their planetary defenses couldn't hold out against so many enemies. Just think, their president was forced to flee. The chaos and devastation must have been staggering.

One of humanity's three great Alliance had collapsed.

The thought left a wound on every heart. They had witnessed the end of an entire nation. Which would be next? The North? The East? Once the

aliens completed their evolution, their path of genocide would continue.

“Let’s get ready. We’ll launch from the first planet, it’s closest to our own forces. When our mission is complete we’ll head back directly.” Lan Jue gave the final order.

Zeus-1 kept its course, heading back to where they they started.

“Boss, let me come with you, even just as Thor’s weapon.” Xiuxiu requested.

His response was low and serious. “Denied. Stay here on Zeus-1.”

His decisive tone left no room for Xiuxiu to disagree. She glanced at him, at Qianlin by his side, then turned her pained eyes away. She would not be the girl who stood by him in conflict.

As Zeus-1 returned to the launching point Lan Jue woke his parents and told them the plan. The Driver and Mika would not be enough if the dispatch team needed help, so his father and mother would need to be on alert.

No more data was needed on their way back, so they moved quicker. They returned to the first planet in half the time.

Jue Di turned to his son. “Go. I will be watching over you with my Far Sight. The moment things get out of control I’ll move in to help, but be careful. We still have no idea where the alien planets are.”

Chapter 759: Survivors

Lan Jue's heart fluttered. If the planets were close – or suddenly appeared – even his father's power couldn't protect them. But it was too late to change course now. The only path was forward.

One large figure and two smaller ones shot out into space.

The large one was Thor. Lan Jue and Qianlin weren't Paragons, so although they could survive in space it cost them less energy to rely on the mecha. What's more, the suit was still a help to Lan Jue.

The Pharmacist and the Wine Master sat on Thor's shoulders, Qianlin rested in Lan Jue's arms within the cockpit. The mecha's back sparked and flared as the Banishing Stone came online, making them indistinguishable from their surroundings. Thus hidden, they moved in closer toward the nearby planet.

Hailin was a planet rich in ocean resources ¹. Water covered sixty seven percent of the surface and it was one of the first planets discovered by the West after its interstellar migration. It wasn't large, but it was well suited for human life. No environmental aids were needed for people to live comfortably.

Sadly this once rich and fertile world had become a purple orb. Its beautiful oceans were murky purple marshes now. As they got closer they could see aliens in droves moving along the ground.

"Are we close enough, Wine Master?" Lan Jue asked.

"It's fine."

Thor slowly came to a stop at the border of the aliens' psionic reach. Trails of silver light followed the Wine Master's scepter as he waved it before him, which coalesced into auras of light that hung over the small party. He motioned again, and a door of light appeared.

Lan Jue needed no instruction. He piloted Thor through the portal. There was a flash, then the door and the humans were gone.

Breaking through such a heavy cluster of enemies was too difficult.

Simply teleporting past them was much simpler. The silver door appeared again on the reverse side of the planet's surface. Thor, the Wine Master, and the Pharmacist stepped out into a dead world.

Successful passage! None of the aliens seemed the wiser. The Wine Master's abilities had improved after his second breakthrough. His transfers were more precise and could be maintained over longer distances. This would have been impossible for the Skyfire chairman just a short time ago.

Lan Jue gave his old friend a thumbs-up from inside the cockpit. "Well done, we weren't discovered. Let's take a look around." As he spoke Thor squat low, and the mecha's radar was engaged.

His suit's equipment was the best money could buy. Not long after its systems were employed, large patches of alien activity were revealed to them. In one direction the purple hue was fainter – analysis stated it was the ocean. It appeared as though the aliens hadn't been here long enough to infect the deeper parts of the seas.

"Look for signs of life." Lan Jue ordered.

Thor continued to pulse the surroundings with its radar. It beeped to confirm the presence of life.

"This is..." It was only able to show the outline of the figures. An alien? Purple, too, but it had the appearance of a human! There weren't many – maybe around a thousand.

"What did you find?" The Wine Master asked.

Lan Jue's response was guarded. "Life. Human, but... purple."

The Wine Master was just as surprised as he was. "Could this mean they've already figured out how to shift into human form?"

The Pharmacist offered her input. "Should I go take a look?"

"We'll go together," Lan Jue said.

Thor crouched even lower, then launched itself in the direction of the human colony.

They raced passed buildings in various states of destruction. They were in the process of being dissolved away. It didn't take them long to reach where the radar said the human were.

Thankfully the aliens were few, in complete contrast to the thickly dotted space above them. So far their radar had only picked up a few sparse groups in the distance.

Thor was equipped with its own sort of cloaking device. Its presence would only be uncovered when it got close. It also boasted the East's most recent psionic shielding equipment. Unless they came upon an umbrella alien, typical monsters would only be able to sense Thor if they came close.

With the help of these systems Thor approached the building unseen. It must have once been a stadium. They kept their distance, observing the scene. The first thing to note was that it appeared to be missing its roof. Thor approached slowly instead of rushing in, creeping up to the lip of one of its sides and peering inside.

The same purple filth that coated the rest of the planet carpeted the interior of the stadium. What was strange were the cocoons that were interspersed among the fungus. They were about three meters long, and each of them was surrounded by a crowd of people.

Most of them were stained purple like the earth they stood upon. The sick color painted them from head to toe, and though they looked like humans their eyes were dull and sightless. They were larger than normal, and muscular like giants.

"They look like Western Converts." The Wine Master mused.

Just then one of the cocoons split open. Inside was a naked human, burly and tough. They looked very similar to the others milling around.

They continued to watch as several larger aliens appeared. They deposited groups of normal-looking humans. Some struggled, some cried, some just stood there in impotent shock.

Survivors. There were survivors!

The discovery thrilled Lan Jue, the Wine Master and the Pharmacist. After so many days they thought all the humans would have long since been devoured for energy.

The aliens heaved their victims forward, into the arena. Once inside they were deposited into vacant cocoons. As they closed the purple earth slithered in pleasure.

“They’re using humans as a basis for transformation.” Lan Jue discerned. They were transforming them instead of taking their life essence. For what reason? Was it to get a better understanding of their genetic makeup?

Lan Jue sighed. “There’s nothing we can do. Besides, we have a mission. Let’s see how these corrupted people react after their transformation.”

He didn’t even finish talking before Thor was on the move. It descended into the arena from overhead, surrounded by an aura of warped space.

Its metallic feet slammed into the fungus-ridden ground, causing it to shake. The rumbles were like thunder as bolts of lightning blasted out in all directions. The alien foliage didn’t even have a chance to tremble before the All-Heaven lightning erased it from existence.

Thor’s appearance was loud and fast, too sudden for the aliens to react. In the space of a breath the aliens were struck down by the lightning and reduced to ash. A few of the bigger ones left vital crystals behind.

Although Thor couldn’t amplify Lan Jue’s Discipline by much, it had no problem employing it.

Surprise flashed through the Wine Master’s eyes. He was impressed by how strong Lan Jue had become, and how quickly.

At last the humanoid aliens reacted. They screamed and howled, then rushed forward with complete disregard to their own safety.

Their speed alone showed they were no longer human. They were covered in thick, corded muscles and veins slithered up their necks like snakes burrowed under the skin. They moved like the monsters they’d become, and seemed no less capable of causing serious damage in a fight.

Thor leapt into action. It swept over the rush of monsters towards the cocoons behind them. Blasts of electricity split them open and the blue mecha saved the humans within, who had yet to be transformed by their ordeal.

The unfortunate infected were in close pursuit. Thor spun around and stomped its metallic foot. The force of the impact sent a shockwave through the ground and caused them to lose their footing.

Meanwhile a flood of power came their way, making the hair on the back of their necks stand on end. A swarm of aliens were headed in their direction.

The Wine Master took charge. "I've got a plan!"

He reached out into thin air and his scepter appeared in a flash of light. He waved it twice and two streaks of silver were left in its path. It blocked the survivors from the infected.

"Go!" He yelled. 2

Chapter 760: Save, Scout

Thor shimmered as it cloaked, and shot into the air. Lan Jue chuckled in relief. “I almost forgot you’re a space-time Paragon. Accommodating these people isn’t hard for you. But will they be safe in the temporary dimensions you create?”

The Wine Master proudly replied. “Have faith in my specialty.”

“So why hasn’t our specialist thought of this before?” He teased.

The elder Paragon was somewhat sheepish. “I’ve never tried it before, of course I wouldn’t just think of it. We can use this to save the humans we come across. My temporary dimension can safely store ten thousand people without issue. With effort I can support even more. We should take back some of the infected humans, and research the changes to their DNA.”

“Alright!” At first Lan Jue’s heart had been pained to see his fellow humans being killed and tortured with no way to help. But the goodness and righteousness of his character refused to let him simply stand by and watch. At his wit’s end the Wine Master’s abilities had revealed the silver lining to the dark cloud of alien atrocity. Bringing him had been an excellent decision. In a blink they’d saved a thousand people – most of them mutated, yes, but there was a chance to save them!

Thor continued its flight. Swarms of aliens approached from every direction, but the ones nearby were too few to cause alarm. Yet, Lan Jue wasn’t here to fight. Right now his interest was how to save more people, so he fled the area in lieu of fighting. They made for the horizon, Thor’s radar sweeping the ground for any more survivors.

A planet’s population was enormous. Lan Jue couldn’t allow these beasts to experiment on the unfortunate souls that had lived here. From the brief encounter Lan Jue could tell that those who had undergone mutation seemed to lose their faculties. However, their aggressiveness remained with a thirst for destruction. The integrity of their bodies remained, with the only changes seeming to be a massive increase in strength. It was like

being injected with a genetic decoction.

They couldn't know what specifically happened to these victims until the Keeper and Bookworm had a chance to take a look.

Before long Lan Jue discovered another group of humans in the midst of these torturous experiments. He didn't hesitate before rushing in to save them, making quick work of their monstrous captors. Thankfully this group seemed better off, and only a few had been turned.

After the third batch the Wine Master was reaching the limits of his capabilities. However, it was then they discovered the largest group yet. Thousands of captives were huddled in a large arena awaiting infection.

Meanwhile the planet was abuzz with alien activity. They descended from surrounding space, galvanized by the actions of Lan Jue's team and looking for any sign of the agitators.

"We can't keep this up, Jewelry Master. My carrying capacity is at its limit. This planet alone could have had a billion people, we can't save them all unless we take back the whole planet." The Wine Master's voice was solemn, but firm.

Lan Jue was crestfallen. He knew the Wine Master was right. The aliens wouldn't stand by while they freed their slaves. They'd only been successful up to this point because the creatures had had their attention on the skies. Now that they sensed a disturbance more attention would be paid to the ground.

Verifying that many survivors yet lived would have to be enough. They could consider ways to help them once their mission was complete, though the only way to save them all would be to retake the planet. Lan Jue let the obsessive need to help them subside, and he took a breath. "Let's continue with the mission."

Thor raced forward so fast that it became a beam of blue light. Any alien in its path was cut in two before it knew what was happening. Lan Jue and his team vanished into the distance.

They had a fair knowledge of conditions on the surface, including the

presence of survivors. They also confirmed that it was entirely under alien control. What was important now was the location of the alien home worlds, as well as their reasons for taking these planets. It was time to see what they could find on the far side of the world.

Lan Jue sped forward when suddenly the sky grew dim. A colossal beast descended from the heavens right in their path. The scene that unfolded shocked Lan Jue to his core.

It was an umbrella alien, psionically powerful but defenseless in a fight. Without a doubt they'd been discovered, but this wasn't what surprised Lan Jue. As they watched a host of mechas detached from the embrace of the alien and came their way, each of them radiating a dark red light. Soon they were surrounded.

Lan Jue's military experience helped him to recognize these mechas as Western army. Their color was slightly different, and the aura they radiated was sick and evil.

Lan Jue growled to the others. "It seems the infected keep their skills, maybe even a level of intelligence. They're just under enemy control. It seems even more likely we can save them if we can break the connection."

"Let's go!" He had no stomach for killing humans. Thor shot into the distance like a bolt of lightning, unfazed by the mechas attempts to encircle it. Herein was Thor's greatest benefit. In combat Lan Jue didn't need the mecha, but the suit and his Discipline together resulted in tremendous speed – even light speed for short periods. In outer space the aliens might have been able to keep up, but not within a planet's atmosphere. Catching Thor would not be easy. The only creatures Lan Jue feared encountering were the Violet Prince or Princess.

That didn't mean their troubles were over. Scores of the aliens were descending onto the planet. The more that appeared the less their cloaking equipment would help them. A hideous bird-like monster appeared in their path with speed nearly a match for Thor. It was nearly three times the size of Thor and shimmered with a metallic luster. With an ear-piercing screech it swatted a wing at the mecha.

“Hmph!” The Pharmacist’s tone was cold and commanding. A burst of white light spread out from her. Seven twinkling stars emerged.

The beast screeched again, but its cry was cut short as it split in two halves. Thor stood safely in the center as the corpse tumbled passed on either side. Occisus was more than a match for any of these beasts.

The Pharmacist stood upon Thor’s shoulder, steadying herself with a hand on the mecha’s head. With a flash of white light the Banishing Blade appeared in her right hand.

“You fly, leave the rest to me.” Her voice was calm, but the Wine Master was taken aback by the threatening aura he felt from her. The Harbinger Fairy was a sight to behold. As he watched she pointed forward with Occisus and a white light issued forth. It marked a path, but also covered them in a protective shell. The mecha was carried along with the sword’s energy.

Thor raced forward. As the Pharmacist instructed, Lan Jue focused on guiding the mecha, while the white light of Occisus obliterated anything in its path. A rain of corpses marked their passage.

The Wine Master cleaned up their mess. As they carved a path through the enemy he brandished his scepter. Flashes of silver sparked as vital crystals were snapped up. Not one was missed.

Lan Jue and the others continued their indomitable trek through the column of light. Nothing stood in their way. The Pharmacist’s mighty powers left their foes with the choice to either flee or die.

But just then, several monsters over a thousand meters long – stronger than the typical beasts – moved to bar their path. From experience they knew creatures like this were equivalent to ninth level Adepts, with deep wells of energy at their command. They were perhaps better equated to battleships, some even strong enough to rival dreadnaughts. The Pharmacist didn’t seem bothered and the light of her weapon continued to blaze a path forward.

The first one to reach them looked like a crocodile. It opened its maw and spat an orb of purple-black light at them. The air grew thick and ropy

like they'd suddenly been emerged in a swamp.

Futile!

A flash of white light from Occisus and the danger was gone. In the face of the Banishing Blade's incomparable power nothing the beast attempted could stop their charge. It was like a burning knife through bubble gum. ¹

The crocodile froze in mid-air, locked in their path as the light from Occisus passed through it. The Wine Master smirked, playing with a pale purple vital crystal about the size of his fist.

"Not bad. A good specimen!"

A crystal of this caliber was useful to even one of his status.

The crocodile slowly peeled apart and collapsed to the ground below.

Chapter 761: Extinguishing Vitality.

Lan Jue could feel the difference in the Pharmacist since the last time they fought together, when she faced Monarch. Her abilities had risen to new heights, and Occisus' manifestations were more biting than ever. It galvanized his own Banishing Blade, which hummed within him and stirred his spirit.

So powerful!

The Pharmacist' face was calm as always, standing tall with sword in hand against the flood of enemies. Wherever she pointed her weapon a thousand-meter swath was cleared and alien bodies fell away. Her own image trailed behind her as they raced ahead, after images that were becoming clearer with every moment.

The Wine Master was shocked to discover that her level of cultivation was visibly improving as she fought. What was this ability? How did she become stronger the longer she fought?

He did not know that this was the Pharmacist's Righteous Slaughter Domain, imparted through her connection to the Banishing Blade. She was different from Lan Jue in that she grew up with Occisus, all of her powers revolved around the sword. The legendary weapon had caused her great pain, but had also imparted great power.

Her Righteous Slaughter Domain was simple and direct. The longer she fought the fiercer she became, with every moment increasing her lethality and Occisus' cutting power. This meant the more time she had to accumulate lethality, the more dangerous she became for her enemies.

At this point, as her own image continued to solidify behind her, she was already as strong as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. It was the same for the strength of her Domain, further empowered as the deadly aura was recycled into energy. To defeat her one would have to have power enough to subdue her abilities or a weapon mighty enough to contend with her own. In all of humanity's history there were only three other weapons capable of doing that. Two were in the hands of her friends, only Ultus

was unaccounted for.

Thor was unstoppable. Soon they had covered half the distance to their target. All the while Lan Jue scanned the radar and was relieved to discover many groups of survivors like the ones they saw before. There was still a chance many of them could be saved.

But as they continued on Lan Jue saw another problem. The fungal growth beneath them was getting thicker as they approached the back side of the planet. The darker color and poisonous aura did not bode well. Lan Jue was sure the progenitor leeching energy from this planet was going to be among the strongest he'd encountered.

If they could kill it, liberating the planet would be easier. Every dead progenitor was a boon to their mission. Clearly the infection of the humans was performed through the power of the progenitor. Without it they could not subject the humans to that awful fate. What's more a vital crystal from those beasts was so useful even his father could employ its benefits. They were treasures to the Paragon community that made them all the more terrifying in battle.

Lan Jue's eagerness burned at the prospect of such a prize. Between himself, the Pharmacist, and the Wine Master they could do it. If they could defeat the progenitor their mission would be a flawless success.

However, the closer they came to the far side of the planet the more numerous and dangerous their enemies. Monsters over three thousand meters long began to appear, as mighty as Paragons with more energy at their disposal. Titans were arrayed against them, as destructive as Capital ships. In fact Capital ships would struggle against them.

Still, the Pharmacist continued to show them how life energy can restrain life energy.

A massive dragon-like monster dropped from above. It roared and a blast of energy spat like flames from its mouth. The Pharmacist's beam of light was dispersed, forcing Thor to come to a halt.

The Wine Master rose to his feet. As he was about to join the fight he heard a dragon's roar issue from the Pharmacist, a roar so loud it shook

the mecha they stood upon.

She raised her blade high overhead, the light from its point spreading far and wide. A perfect copy of herself shimmered behind her, three meters tall with the same cold expression and valiant aura.

Reflection of Heaven and Earth! Power that surpassed even the Wine Master's newly acquired level. He sucked in a breath, shocked by what he witnessed. This was...

The Pharmacist turned around and gave the sword to the manifestation of her dharma. The moment Occisus slipped into her hands its light bloomed. Ting! Ringing metal on metal sounded as reality shook.

The aliens all around them suddenly froze, unable to control their own bodies. The sound even made the Wine Master gulp in fear. It felt as though some unthinkable power was awakening.

Lines appeared in the pure white light emanating from the sword. They were hard to see, indistinct, but the images they traced were beautiful in their simplicity. They had to be runes from the blade, invisible until the Pharmacist had the power to reveal them. Rising to the power of a Reflection must have unlocked more of Occisus' potential.

The Pharmacist knelt. Her dharmic image took over standing beside Thor with sword held aloft. The dragon barring their path screeched and made to flee. Like all living creatures it was possessed of instinct, and its instinct was telling it to avoid certain destruction.

However, its size was an obstacle and fleeing was slow. The image of the Pharmacist flicked her wrist and a beam of white light shot through the sky.

The borders of reality around the streak of light changed, one half retaining color and the other drained to black and white. All sound died and any beast within the realm of black and white was so thoroughly destroyed as to leave no trace. Only twinkling vital crystal remained to mark where they had been. They hung in the air for but a moment before they too, were destroyed. Shattering like glass their contents coalesced and flowed like a river into Occisus.

The aliens on the colorful side of the schism looked on, unscathed. The dragon was unfortunate enough to be caught between the two. Half a mangled carcass remained.

So violent...

The Wine Master gulped. What... what is this power? Dimensional? No... it's not that simple. She erased their life force!

In a single stroke the Pharmacist had slain over a thousand foes. Her unique sword style had always left witnesses with a deep impression, but nothing compared to what the Wine Master had just seen. He wondered if he would have been able to survive, if he were on the wrong side of that sword. It was frightening to comprehend, so much that he struggled to quiet the dread in his mind.

"I need to rest." The Pharmacist spoke in matter-of-fact tones as the signs of her protogenia faded from the air. Obviously it was the first time she had used such an ability, provoked from the sword as the strength of a Reflection of Heaven and Earth was channeled through it.

Seated in Thor's cockpit, Lan Jue was just as dumbfounded as the Wine Master. It was the first time he'd seen such a level of destruction, beyond anything he'd imagined. What was his own sword capable of, once he broke through? To say he was anxious to find out was an understatement.

The Pharmacist had cleared enough space for Thor to try and hide itself again. The mecha darted toward the ground to try and lose its pursuers in the convoluted terrain.

The Wine Master shot the Pharmacist a furtive glance and suddenly felt the weight of his years. The world now belonged to this young generation of heroes. They might they possessed already far outstripped their predecessors.

IT was true for the Pharmacist, as it was for Lan Qing and Lan Jue. Lan Qing's talent and potential almost ensured he would achieve the same level of power as his father. The effect on the world of Adepts would be tremendous.

The alien invasion had already brought one of humanity's alliances to its knees. Recovering from this would be a nearly impossible task for the West. Meanwhile the East and its mighty heroes were poised to take advantage of the unfortunate situation. Their dominance was assured.

But first, the threat to humanity's existence had to be dealt with.

Once Thor reached the surface it was easier to conceal itself. It sprinted forward as fast as possible, all the while sensing the change in its surroundings. Lan Jue continued to monitor Thor's radar and mark the locations of survivor camps. It would serve them well when they returned to save them.

Above them the number of enemies had thinned. Clearly the feared whatever power had obliterated the others. Lan Jue took the opportunity to press forward, sticking close to the ground. It slowed their progress but kept them safe, making it the right decision.

"Something feels off. Wine Master, keep an eye out." Lan Jue's voice called to him within Thor.

Chapter 762: Doppelganger

“What is it?” The Wine Master asked.

Lan Jue tried to explain. “There are fewer aliens overhead now, and they’re thinning by the second. They wouldn’t just let us go, I think we have a stronger one coming.”

“Alright.” The Wine Master answered. He was instantly on guard.

As if in response flecks of silver light appeared in the air, hanging around them like motes of starlight. Thor continued to race ahead but it was somehow less distinct and harder to pin down.

Suddenly a wave of strange energy washed over them, so strong that it caused the air around them to tremble. It was like they’d flown right into a net, and Thor’s speed was sharply reduced.

The world around them became a sea of violet, and the air was thick as molasses. All of a sudden they were in another reality entirely.

The Wine Master gasped and thrust out his scepter. A silver light cut through the violet world and expanded, layering dimensions one on top of another

Domain!

Upon breaking through to the next tier of power, the Wine Master’s Domain had also evolved to dimensional compression. Layers of reality folded over one another produced vast amounts of energy that surrounded Lan Jue and the Paragons. They shimmered like half-real things caught between a dream and wakefulness.

Where the violet and silver met the air warped. They contended against one another, but the silver continued to carve open a path. However the Wine Master’s face changed after a moment, for he saw that the schisms he’d created were getting smaller. The pressure from the violet universe they inhabited pressed from the outside.

The pressure was stifling and the Wine Master’s heart beat rapidly against his chest. If Lan Jue was right, they were about to face a truly

fearsome enemy. The Pharmacist was still recovering, deep in meditation. Their safety fell on his shoulders.

The silvery light slowly began to become infected with violet. Where it had been in stark contrast now the borders began to blur and the Wine Master's Domain began to dissolve. The alien power superimposed itself again and again over the silver light, each time reducing it by degrees.

It appeared that the alien that had come to stop them didn't understand dimensional manipulation well. They were attempting to simply overpower it and squeeze it close in order to reveal the Wine Master and his friends.

Whatever creature this was, they were at least Nirvana-level or higher. Only a creature with that amount of power could force the Wine Master's rift closed. But he was not panicked, he held high scepter high and tendrils of light sprang up around him. They joined and spread until the Wine Master, the Pharmacist and Thor were encased in glimmering silver.

The layers of his Domain continued to retract in the face of the alien's power, but it did not seem to affect them. A moment later there was a blinding flash, and the humans were gone.

The layers of dimensional power collapsed and the violet worlds rose victorious. But there was no life for it to consume.

A middle-aged man awash in shining violet light appeared. His face was pinched in thought. Had Lan Jue spied him he would be surprised at how similar this one was to the Violet Prince. Though, this new alien royal was weaker by comparison.

There was another flash of light, and he was gone.

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Crack! Reality split apart with a glint of silver light ten kilometers away. Short-range teleportation... the Wine Master had struggle valiantly to break the hold of the monster and find a dimensional tear.

"Jewelry Master, we have to be quick. Whoever that was, they were strong – at least Nirvana. We're no match for them. We must complete

our mission as quickly as possible.”

“Understood.” He immediately set Thor in motion again. Sure enough, the highest class of aliens had appeared on the planet, but he was not nervous. On the one hand he knew his father was keeping an eye on them. On the other, he was confident that together they had enough strength to defend themselves against a Nirvana-level alien.

Aliens of comparable level were weaker in strength to their human counterparts. In part this was due to the addition of Astrum to focus and empower Paragons’ abilities, but also because of the human process of cultivation. By nature a human’s Discipline counteracted the aliens’, which was solely derived from their home worlds. Those of particular ability – like the Violet Prince and Princess – had minds of their own, but most only knew how to attack and destroy.

Thor shuttled back and forth, low to the ground. The area here had been poisoned to a deep wine hue. Hopes of fighting the planet’s progenitor had been dashed with the arrival of the royal beast. They had to simply continue with the mission.

As he continued on the sky began to darken. A black hole appeared in the sky above radiating dark purple. Its interior was so dark nothing seemed to escape. A stifling energy swept over them in waves, and each blast brought with it an ineffable fear. Whatever went in never came out.

It’s the same alien! It was using some special method to try and find them. It went without saying the intrepid humans had nowhere to hide. Thor appeared, and in a flash of light its occupants emerged. Lan Jue hung suspended in air, hand in hand with Zhou Qianlin. If hiding was no longer an option, the only thing left was to fight.

Although Lan Jue had faced many aliens, he had stood against their strongest echelons only a handful of times. With all the planets he’d been to occupied by alien forces this was still true, so it was safe to assume this would be the only truly credible foe they would have to fight.

Killing one shouldn’t be impossible.

When Lan Jue and Qianlin appeared, the Wine Master knew his

intention. He took a single, light step forward and suddenly he was in the air. His robes fluttering with the breeze, he began to swell. Blinding silver light radiated out from within him.

Skyfire Avenue's chairman was an old Paragon, one who had studied the secrets of the craft for many years. Every iota of learning had pushed him to be a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, with a foundation solid as iron. In this moment he channeled the whole of his knowledge through himself, calling upon every ounce of his power as a Reflection. He blazed with a silvery magnificence, a giant of a man.

He motioned forward with his scepter, and a strange sound issued from his mouth. It was a sort of buzzing, so thunderous that the whole planet appeared to shake.

A strange scene emerged. The black hole stopped expanding, halted by a ring of silver that had appeared at its edges. Meanwhile the Wine Master waved his scepter back and forth, drawing archaic symbols in the air. Silver light flickered erratically and everything around them trembled.

"Continuum Cataclysm!" The Wine Master's booming voice roared.

All of a sudden reality fluctuated, it was as though the world were turned on its head. Things seemed unreal as rips in spacetime larger than buildings sprang up in all directions. A flood of dimensional power threatened to fracture the planet.

Lan Jue had heard of this before. When a spacetime Adept reached a certain degree of power, they were capable of tearing apart the fabric of reality. They could teleport whole planets, though that would require truly legendary power.

Though the Wine Master was hardly capable of that feat, what Lan Jue witnessed was the beginning of it. The tears that stretched from the heavens to the earth were like open wounds that threatened to swallow everything.

The violet whirlpool of power slowed to a crawl. It could no longer retain stability in the face of the Wine Master's power and the warping terrain of spacetime around it.

Upon Thor's shoulder, the Pharmacist slowly opened her eyes. They sparkled like stars as she peered into the distance.

Lan Jue and Qianlin stood by, quietly waiting for their opportunity.

The chaos around then continued for several minutes before slowly dissipating, leaving the violet void half the size it had been. Still its power tugged at them. By now the Wine Master was a hundred meters tall and towered over the land like a god from the old tales. He brandish his scepter and a beam of silver chopped down on the vortex.

A screeching cry replied and a violet figure appeared before the whirlpool. The energy from it flooded into the beast, causing it to grow as well. The larger it became, the clearer it was to the distant onlookers.

Humanoid. Familiar.

Lan Jue gasped. "The Violet Monarch?" His voice was shaky when he saw who it was.

"No." The Pharmacist was by his side. "That is not the Monarch. The aura is wrong, weaker. He's a piece of him, a sort of doppelganger."

The violet figure continued to grow before their eyes while a formless aura of terror surrounded it. In a blink it stretched a thousand meters tall. As they watched the beast that looked like the Monarch thrust a single punch, and with the motion the Wine Master's dimensional fissures shattered like fragile glass.

A gust of pressure made the old Paragon's Domain shudder. He swung his scepter around and traced out a circle but the flood knocked him back before he could finish.

The Pharmacist's eyes sparkled. She pointed with her right finger and a single beam of white lot shot into the sky. She leapt forward with her hand held aloft in a claw-like swipe. Occisus cutting power pervaded the air.

The fledgling copy of the Violet Monarch looked her way.

Chapter 763: Separate Action

An enormous purple hand a thousand meters across came down from above to try and swat the Pharmacist from the sky. She fearlessly advanced with her weapon leading the way. There was a flash of white, a pained scream, and suddenly the Pharmacist was through the hand like it was nothing.

Lan Jue, holding tight to Qianlin's hand, lifted into the air as well. They were almost immediately surrounded by the light of their swords; Captus red, and Demortus blue. They were both inspired by the power of their brother Occisus, and pulsed with stifling power. With their swords held high they joined the Pharmacist in her charge toward the Monarch's doppelganger.

Waves of energy surged from the alien like an angry tide. It punched at the Pharmacist, forcing her to retreat before turning on Lan Jue and Qianlin. It reached out to grab them.

It was Lan Jue's first time fighting a creature like this. All of a sudden he felt as though everything around them was their enemy. The world wanted them dead. An unspeakable pressure pressed in from all sides, pure energy suppression – the same method he'd used to seal the Wine Master's Domain.

He leapt to the side to block Qianlin. With a flick of the wrist he carved out an angry red circle with Captus and everything within it imploded. A burst of energy shot out with enough force to catapult Lan Jue and Qianlin from the battlefield. They were gone, the pressure that assailed them collapsed on empty space.

This was the joining of Captus and Taiji.

In the next instant Qianlin sprang up from behind Lan Jue. She swiped her weapon, birthing a hail of blue barbs that filled the air. A hundred thousand bursts of Demortus' cutting bite raced for their target. Lan Jue was not idle and thrust his sword into the circular patch he'd carved in the sky. Though the movement was simple, the strength of the power it

exuded had the weight of a thousand pounds behind it. Like roaring waves it burst forth, sweeping through the pressure that had threatened to crush them.

A column of white light descended from above them, bearing the murderous aura of Occisus. Through the aid of her Righteous Slaughter Domain the woman had never encountered a battle she couldn't overcome. She was harder to fight the longer it took. Now that she was a Paragon the power of her sword was amplified greatly, and even the doppelganger's mighty capabilities couldn't deny her. For every onslaught that was rebuffed she returned with something stronger.

All of a sudden the alien shrunk, dramatically reduced to the size of a normal man once again. It stretched out its right hand to brazenly deflect the Pharmacist.

It was going to use its own body to contend against Occisus?

Ting! The Harbinger Fairy was violently thrust backward, the monster's puissance was simply too great. Yet it did not escape unscathed. A deep cleft had been cut into its fist which leaked poison vapor.

Occisus was truly a legendary weapon! It was foolish for any living thing to try and stand in its path.

Lan Jue and Qianlin linked hands and advanced. He cut toward the beast, focused flow! Behind him another river of blue power emerged – ten thousand blades as one!

Though the two lovers could employ the Harmonious Swords, their individual styles still complimented each other. Calm, graceful, strong. The emulsions from the two Banishing Blades flickered as they surrounded the Monarch's copy.

"Be careful!" The Wine Master shouted. Lan Jue had no time to react before an inexplicable power rammed into him, sending both he and Qianlin several kilometers away. As he flailed through the air he saw the spot they'd just occupied collapsed into a void of purple energy. If the Wine Master hadn't acted they would have been killed.

He scowled. Impotence in this crucial fight was unacceptable. He decided it was time.

Though he commanded the power of a Paragon, he was not one. It put him at an insurmountable disadvantage against a foe this powerful, he simply didn't have the energy to face him! They were worlds apart and no special weapon or substance could close that gap. After all, the enemy they faced was at least equivalent to Nirvana.

Comparatively the Pharmacist was doing much better, relying on none but herself and the strength of her weapon. Despite the alien's superior abilities it feared Occisus and had learned the dangers of getting too close. The Pharmacist and the blade were as one, and together they restrained the destructive power of the doppelganger to where his advantages could not overcome her.

The Wine Master leapt into action, joining her in the life or death struggle.

All of the humans together couldn't equal the strength of the alien. For this moment their focus was to restrain the beast. To this end the natural constraints of human vitality, and Occisus power, created a stalemate.

"We've got this handled, continue with the mission. I'll get us out when you're finished." The Wine Master's voice spoke directly into Lan Jue's ear.

"Alright." Lan Jue made the decision, following the Wine Master's suggestion. Right now they served no purpose here, and would only get in the way. They could use the Harmonious Sword technique, but it would be draining and best saved as a last resort.

Lan Jue and Qianlin disappeared into Thor's cockpit once more. The mecha lurched forward at incredible speed. The doppelganger turned as though to follow but was quickly cut off by the Pharmacist. Indeed she was becoming harder to manage as the fight continued, and the light from her and her weapon was unlike anything they'd seen before. Every strike was possessed of indomitable power and righteous intent, leaving the beast with no chance to catch its breath. Frightening as the sword was, the Monarch's copy didn't dare disregard its lethality. If the human bearer

struck it in the vital crystal, it would be no more.

He could also sense that the Wine Master and Pharmacist were beginning to flag. They were relying on their strongest abilities to defend themselves, but that could not be maintained for long. Soon they would tire.

Once it fled the battle, Thor darted through the sky like a fish in a stream. In a blink it was moving at top speed. The violet royal's appearance had scared off the other aliens giving it space to maneuver. A clash of Paragons was destructive enough to cause real danger simply by getting too close.

This was their chance. With Lan Jue at the controls Thor quickly covered ground toward the far side of the planet. With every kilometer that passed he was more astonished by what he saw; ground nearly black from poison and buildings on the verge of collapse. Not a single living human was anywhere within radar range.

More striking were the thick tentacles that served as the progenitor's arteries. They were writhing and prominent like varicose veins that all pointed in the same directions. If he didn't know better he could confuse them for the meridians of the planet itself.

Of course a planet didn't have meridians. It was obvious what these arteries belonged to.

He continued to race forward, eventually crossing over to the back side of the former human world. Immediately he saw that it was dark and gloomy, and his mind was invaded with a strange sensation.

Something, he didn't know what, wasn't right. Something he should be noticing but wasn't.

The gloom was an unnatural violet in color that hung over everything like a mist. He could feel within it a lurking presence, potent and all-pervasive.

Ah! Suddenly he understood. Something felt off ever since he'd come to the planet but he hadn't been able to put his finger on it until this

moment. This planet wasn't rotating.

Every cosmic body had its own rotational properties, even stars. Something that had no rotation whatsoever was exceedingly odd. Because some planets were slower than others to make one circuit it was sometimes hard to tell.

"Thor, access planetary data. Check to see if any of the other planets we've encountered have a rotation." Lan Jue ordered the on-board AI to check the scouting data they'd accumulated up to this point.

"Yes," the suit responded.

A few moments later Thor confirmed Lan Jue's guess, none of the planets were moving. They were perfectly still.

One of the dangers of a planet losing its rotation was forcing it out of orbit. It would go from a stable path to an enormous asteroid. That was a disaster both for the planet itself and all of its neighbors.

The aliens were capable of more than just destroying planets, they could stop them dead in their tracks. But why?

Thor continued on, and when it reached the far side of the planet, in that world of gloom and violet, Lan Jue could see far into the distance. His mouth fell open.

What he saw, he would remember for the rest of his life.

What was it?

The veins that slithered across the planet's surface gathered all together at a single point, and rose into the sky as a single column. It was similar to what they'd witnessed on Monteux, but this artery was at least a hundred times larger! It was like a straw rising from the world out into space that squirmed and wriggled. ¹

"Thor, rise!" Lan Jue shouted the order and Thor reacted immediately. He ascended with no concern for hiding, and no concern for the myriad aliens that waited in space. He was somewhat surprised that he didn't encounter any of the beasts as he rose. Soon he peaked over the clouds, through the

atmosphere, and into space.

Chapter 764: Predicted and Unexpected

The space above the planet was still without any alien defenders. It appeared as though they were all focused on the front-facing side. Now that Lan Jue was through the atmosphere his sights were unobstructed, he could see the violet artery stretch into the distance and disappear.

Incredible!

Lan Jue had guessed it, but seeing this umbilicus disappear into the distance with his own eyes was another matter entirely. He was filled with dread. What was it? If it connected to the alien home worlds that would explain a lot. But why, on Monteux, was vital energy siphoned into a single creature while here it flowed through the artery directly? What did it mean? The energies from a planet were enormous, it seemed obvious what they were being used for.

This was only one of seven planets. If conditions were the same on the others, Lan Jue was confident in his analysis. But what about Europa?

Lan Jue fought the urge to follow the artery to its source. Now wasn't the time, and stealing into the tiger's den had an uncomfortably high possibility of never coming out. What they had learned here was enough to call their mission a success, but he wasn't happy with it. It wasn't that the information was insufficient. On the contrary, it proved how dangerous their situation had become.

Thor turned around and began to head back. Lan Jue's eyes flashed and his breath quickened. They had to move in for the final assault soon, otherwise their alien aggressors would be triumphant. Humanity would be lost.

He retraced his steps, following the same path he'd taken. Radar was unnecessary, he just needed to follow the bursts of energy from the distance battle. He could see violet, silver and white clashes in the horizon. From what he could see the violet was getting stronger, and the white was fading.

The Pharmacist had expended a lot of energy before this fight, yet still

threw herself into it without restraint. Her will was indomitable but she was still just a Paragon of the Realm of Protogenia. Once the limits of her energy was reached she would no longer be able to summon the deadly power of Occisus.

Comparatively the Wine Master was faring better. He was a Reflection of Heaven and Earth and thus had more potency to draw upon. He was the primary threat to the doppelganger and the Pharmacist served as his weapon. Her aid helped even the playing field.

There was a flash, and a brilliant rainbow burst into existence.

The Wine Master and Pharmacist sensed it, and together their attention went to the rainbow. What they saw was a smear of color that seemed to split the sky. It cleansed everything in its path, wiping away the foul power of the alien horde.

The Monarch's doppelganger stared wide eyed at the phenomenon. It felt its body grow sluggish and an ineffable fear gripped its chest. It frightening it so completely that it made the immediately decision to flee, dissolving into a purple light and vanishing. Whatever that light was, it contained enough power to end its life.

The light did not chase the monster but rather swept up the two humans on its trek through the atmosphere. In a flash they were out in space and any aliens not fast enough to move out of the way were obliterated in the rainbow's passage.

The beam of light flew on far into the distance before eventually slowing.

"Go!" Lan Jue's weak voice urged.

The Wine Master didn't need to be told twice. Two humans vanished from alien territory in a spark of silver light.

The power of the Harmonious Swords was a real danger to the Monarch's doppelganger. It had the potential to wound it grievously, but to kill the beast would be very difficult. After all, neither Lan Jue nor Qianlin yet had the strength to summon the power of their swords.

Instead Lan Jue chose to use the technique to abscond with his friends and bring them to safety. Their mission was complete and the information had to be brought back as soon as possible.

Three quick successive teleports took the scouting party out of the enemy's reach. The Wine Master called Zeus-1 for exfiltration and after a few moments they were safely back on board.

Lan Jue and Qianlin both were completely drained. The Harmonious Swords had taken more than they could handle. The Pharmacist gave them pills to shore up their yuan qi ¹ and stabilize their condition.

Zeus-1 pushed its engines to their limit, heading back to where the human armada waited.

Lan Jue's faculties were returning, though he looked pale and exhausted. He grinned to himself and his expectations. Being so close to Paragon, he assumed he would have some energy left over after employing the Harmonious Swords, but he was wrong. The moment Lan Jue and Qianlin's hearts joined, Captus drank him dry. Not a drop was left.

Of course he could sense the strength of their technique had increased as well. In fact he'd hesitated, wondering for a moment whether it was a good idea to chase after the Monarch's copy and try to put it down. In the end he didn't want to risk it.

"What did you discover?" Jue Di looked his son over before asking.

Lan Jue had simply overtaxed himself, there was no harm done. Jue Di had watched them the whole time, but hadn't gotten involved because he knew the doppelganger didn't threaten their lives. Certainly the crystal that monster carried would be a grand prize, but Jue Di's presence would have captured a lot of attention. It wasn't certain he would be able to quickly slay the monster, either, so safety had to be their first concern.

"Predicted and unexpected." Lan Jue enigmatically replied.

"Huh?" Jue Di looked at him, confused. The others had gathered round.

With Xiuxiu's help he sat up. He then shared everything they discovered on the far side of the planet.

“So the world has stopped rotating and it funneling energy somewhere?” Jue Di scowled as he thought of the implications.

The Wine Master was stern and irritated. “What are these creatures planning? What’s their purpose?”

Lan Jue explained. “Our guess was right, it’s plain as day. The alien planet have decided to begin the process of evolution. That’s the only reason they would need so much energy all at once. These arteries must be piping vital energy directly to the planets themselves so they couldn’t dare leave them undefended. This is the most important goal of their species, so they won’t delay in completing the process.”

“They will want to evolve in the shortest amount of time possible and would be willing to sacrifice a lot to make it happen. All the humans they took from these planets would give them the DNA required as well. We need to attack right away before they have a chance to succeed.”

The Wine Master nodded. “I agree with Lan Jue. They can’t afford to feign an attack. By destroying the planets and two bastions they put the fear of death in everyone’s heart, giving them an advantage. They fled the North because it is the strongest Alliance, but not before striking a blow at its confidence and thirst for war. It bought them time, and then they chose the West because these eight planets are in such close proximity. Eastern systems are more spread out.”

Everyone felt a sort of guilt-ridden relief. If the aliens had chosen the East instead, would it have survived where the West fell? The answer was unsettling.

“We need to bring what we’ve learned to Admiral Lan as quickly as we can. Everything needs to be prepared.” The Driver said.

The success of their mission filled everyone with a sense of dire urgency. Their next fight could very well decide the fate of their species! There was no convincing the North after the horror they experienced, otherwise they would have sent their forces already. All they had were the troops at their disposal for a final, life-or-death struggle against the enemy.

But would it be enough against a foe that had bested them at every turn?

Their only chance was now, while their strength and attention was focused on evolving. But if this was a ruse and the alien home worlds were laying in wait, even Lan Qing's brilliance could not save them. Their chances of surviving would be close to zero.

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Tyrannosaurus-Class Bastion.

"Your Majesty." Kang Hui respectfully saluted the Terminator.

The North's mightiest Paragon regarded him with a small smile. "Kang Hui. Things have been difficult for you."

He smiled. "The choices have all been mine. I've made them, and I'm ready to bear the consequences of my decision."

Part of his decision had been to rashly steal away from the North with its mightiest bastion, defying direct orders. It was a tremendous risk, which would invariably end with him standing before a military tribunal.

Chapter 765: Alien Thinking

With Kang Hui's status and prestige, he could have lived a happy life in the North. Even under threat of alien invasion the army could hold them back for a while. What's more, after the last fight Northern diplomats had already begun to implement plans for migration. As the North's strongest bastion Tyrannosaurus would have been part of that. Kang Hui, long-time Admiral of the ship, would have had a place among them. He was in little danger of dying at an alien's claws.

But once he'd heard Lan Qing's assessment, he made up his mind. To him it was not a difficult decision. He was all alone, with few worries to leave behind. He never married, nor had any children. His life had been spent in service of his country. That is why he decided to risk it all and participate in this last-ditch effort. He believed in Lan Qing's decision. He believed in himself.

If mankind lost in these final hours it put them on the precipice of destruction. Yes, some would live when the migration ships left, but his species would never recover – never recapture the glory of those bygone days. Unfathomable billions would die.

Some would be saved – the wealthy, the connected – but what of the countless citizens left behind? What would they do? Kang Hui himself came from a normal family that did not enjoy the privilege of others. He felt that protecting those less fortunate was his civic duty, as important as protecting the country at large. If he couldn't do this, he couldn't call himself a soldier.

So he chose to come. He chose to participate in this all-important conflict despite the wishes of his superiors even if it meant his death. At least he would die without regret.

"What do you think of our chances?" The Terminator quietly asked.

Kang Hui shook his head. "Not great. We know so little about the enemy. Their inspiration for coming here seems obvious, to destroy a large swath of the human empire. The West and East are both weaker, but the

decision to teleport so far seemed counter-intuitive when you think about how much it must cost the enemy. Western planets were closer to the North than the East, though, and the planets are more closely gathered. That is likely the reason they chose to come here. The monsters are clever, and they know us well. We will need to surprise them if we want the upper hand.”

“The information Admiral Lan has sent us is certainly shocking. If we let these already mighty aliens evolve it will invariably mean our destruction. We’re left with no choice, we can only do whatever is within our power to try and stop them. Unfortunately the government refused to listen. If they had perhaps we would have more firepower, and better odds.”

Here the Terminator interrupted with a shake of his head. “No, you’re wrong. A full-on attack like last time may not necessarily mean better chances.”

Kang Hui looked skeptical. “Why do you figure?”

The Terminator explained. “I don’t have the keen military mind that you do, but I know how people think. The aliens mimic us and adopt our styles, not to mention they are highly intelligent themselves. Surely when they considered their plans they took into account the advantages and disadvantages. Try to imagine, if we were to dispatch all of our forces would we be able to keep that hidden from them? If they knew we were coming, how would they respond?”

“Indeed teleportation required a great deal of energy, but if they saw us coming and fled, we would give chase correct? By then what we anticipated would be a direct confrontation become s guerilla warfare. They have the ability to quickly and brutally overcome a planet. All they would need to do is implant progenitors at planets along the way and whittle us down until we can’t stomach it anymore. We would be wading deeper and deeper into an inescapable quagmire. That is why I didn’t give your proposal my full-throated support when the congressional leaders came asking. If I had we might be bringing another couple bastions, but that won’t help us much.”

The admiral looked at the Terminator in surprise. It was the first time he'd heard this.

The Terminator smiled. "Tyrannosaurus is our most effective bastion. The others may have the firepower, but they're lacking in leadership and experience. What's more, we can't let society descend into chaos. The North needs those bastions to maintain control. So, after thinking carefully, I decided Tyrannosaurus was sufficient."

"But aren't you afraid that makes our victory uncertain?" Kang Hui asked.

The Paragon shook his head. "If you think that way, we can assume the aliens will as well. They will underestimate what we are capable of and continue with the evolution – and therein lies our chance. Don't assume Lan Qing's abilities, I suspect he has the power of a bastion all by himself. He and his brother both have mighty resources at their disposal. What's more there are many Paragons who stand beside them and Poseidon Group as well. Three of history's strongest bastions gathered for a singular purpose, who can say we don't stand a chance? With well-laid plans we can come out victorious."

"Moreover, and more importantly, I trust him." The Terminator's eyes narrowed.

"Whossat?" Seated nearby, Chu Cheng finally spoke up.

Now that he had risen to Paragon, Chu Cheng had taken over the role of patriarch for his family. He was here representing their interests and honor in the fight to come.

The Terminator grinned. "Who but the Clairvoyant would command such faith from me? Before his passing he sought me out. We talked for a long time, he said that this conflict would be trying and confusing and that even he could not see the end result. But he told me that when the danger came to trust in fate. Trust in the child of destiny, and our chances of weathering the storm would rise."

Chu Cheng's curiosity was piqued. "'Child of Destiny?' What is that?"

“That is Lan Jue,” he replied.

“Lan Jue?” Chu Cheng repeated in shock.

The Terminator nodded. “In the interests of honesty I once wanted him dead. In some ways he is inferior to his brother, but in others he far surpasses him. He has a charisma that inspires people to his cause. Think about it; Jun’er, the Pharmacist, you, and many others have fallen into his orbit. He’s like a magnet, and those who know him come to trust him. It’s like heaven is propelling him along this path.”

Chu Cheng was surprised by the assessment, but after a moment’s thought came to agree with him.

The ultimate convert sighed. “I didn’t want to believe the Eye of Tomorrow, but over time it was clear the old seer’s words were true. To save humanity, I have no choice but to comply with heaven’s wishes.”

“Majesty, then we...”

He nodded. “What happens next is simple. Listen to Lan Qing’s orders, give him command of our forces and let him lead us into battle. You need not fear the North, to them you are their secret weapon. If we die you will be condemned as a traitor, slandered in word and print. But you were a single man on your own. If we are defeated it means humanity will vanish from the cosmos and no one will remain to curse your name. But if we win, you will return to the North a hero and likely our next military high commander.”

Kang Hui chuckled. “You’ve had this all planned.”

He grinned. “Not planned, so much as it is the right thing to do. I am going to tell you something, and I hope you understand. You mustn’t put too much pressure on yourself. When we begin the assault I don’t intend on returning. If we can’t defeat these aliens this time then I will use my life to make them regret wiping out mankind.”

“Sir! We’ve approached the prescribed area, and eastern patrol ships have been spotted. Shall we hail them?” An officer’s voice interrupted them.

“Open a line of communication, I want to speak to Admiral Lan as soon as possible.” Kang Hui ordered.

Tyrannosaurus had maintained total radio silence since departing from the North. They did not fear letting the alien home worlds know they were coming, so much as they wanted to avoid being caught in a trap. They were hardly a match for those planets on their own.

Before long Lan Qing’s cold features appeared on Kang Hui’s screen.

“Hello, Admiral Lan.” Kang Hui greeted him with a salute.

Lan Qing gave him one in return. “Salutations, Admiral Kang. We appreciate you and your bastion’s help.”

Kang Hui smiled. “It is my honor to fight side by side with the An Lun army. I’ve discussed it with his Majesty, and we are leaving all of our forces under your command. Henceforth me, this bastion, and our two fleets will follow any orders you give.”

Lan Qing paused, having not anticipated Kang Hui would simply hand over his command. After all Tyrannosaurus was the strength of the North given form. Kang Hui was a perennial commander with years of experience over Lan Qing. He wasn’t quite sure how to respond.

“Admiral Kang, you...”

Kang Hui cut him off with a smile. “I have faith in you, Admiral. We all do. Don’t worry about it.”

Lan Qing gave him a long, solemn look. “Alright, I will not disrespect you and your men by declining. Please order your captains to join up with our forces and come on board Middle Heaven for a war council.”

Chapter 766: Gathering

“Alright.” Kang Hui answered without hesitation. In times of peace, inviting one bastion commander to board another would be out of the question. These were special circumstances.

Tyrannosaurus was guided by the small ships to where Middle Heaven and Poseidon waited. Before long, the two mighty bastions were looming outside their window.

Kang Hui had seen Middle Heaven in the last fight, but it was his first time seeing Poseidon. He was shocked after seeing its size and the preliminary data they’d gathered on it. It... it’s even stronger than Terminator had been?

Kang Hui thought the power he was bringing would be superior to what the East could provide. But here he saw even Poseidon Group had come under the auspices of Eastern dominance. How strong was Middle Heaven, really?

He didn’t notice when the Terminator walked up to his side, not until his meaty hand landed on his shoulder. “We may not like it, but the East’s rise is unavoidable. If we survive, their Alliance will achieve incredible levels of strength and prestige. There’s nothing anyone can do to get in their way.”

Kang Hui was quiet for a moment, then nodded his head. “Right now, my only hope is defeating the aliens. I’m not worried over the East’s future. Besides, their ascent will lift all of humanity.”

The Terminator’s craggy face broke into a smile. He was no longer the somber, burdened man he had been. After achieving Nirvana he had been filled with joy, the problem that ailed him washed away. Yet, now he was able to discernibly feel the pressure of universal protogenia bearing down on him.

It was a sensation that defied explanation, dormant until he used his powers then suddenly clear in his own protogenia. It spontaneously devoured his life force, unhindered by his strength or will. It was an enlightening experience that directly led to his support of Lan Qing’s plan.

Now that he knew universal protogenia to be real, he understood that it restricted the aliens as well as him. That now was the time to act.

Deep in his heart he also yearned to know about this realm the creatures wished to create. If they could do it, then perhaps humans could rediscover the secrets as they had in ages past. He had only just achieved Nirvana. Jue Di, a man of the Infinite, was likely even more interested than he.

The Terminator hoped he might have an opportunity to confer with Jue Di at some point during this conflict. Few were the Paragon's interests in this universe, now. Meeting the man and helping to create a realm for them was top of the list.

Three bastions closed in on one another, with Middle Heaven – the largest – occupying the center. Poseidon was on one side and Tyrannosaurus was on the other. Between them and their twelve fleets, a host of soldiers spread across an impressive swath of space.

They were short five bastions compared to the last fight, but were comparable in the number of support vessels. In fact, their fleets were likely more effective than last time. The ships from Poseidon Group had weapons and systems that would make Northern engineers green with envy.

Under Lan Qing's invitations, commanders from all three represented powers arrived on Middle Heaven. From the East was Lan Qing and the Keeper, representing Skyfire Avenue. He was their foremost scientific and formerly one of the Eastern military's most lauded researchers.

For the North, Admiral Kang Hui and the Terminator came themselves. Chu Cheng was left behind and assumed command of Tyrannosaurus.

Hua Li came to represent Poseidon Group's interests. With him was Mo Xiao.

They gathered to discuss their plans.

The meeting room was a simple place, with no frills or luxuries to speak of. It was here that the fate of humanity would be deliberated.

Lan Qing began by nodding his greeting to everyone in attendance. “On behalf of everyone aboard Middle Heaven I’d like to welcome everyone.”

Nods and thanks answered. He went on.

“The situation for our people has become critical – our days as a dominant force in the universe are numbered. In order to protect ourselves from this threat we must create a plan, thus you have all been invited to help in the formation of that strategy.”

“Admiral Lan, has Lan Jue returned?” Hua Li couldn’t help but press the question.

Lan Qing shot him a glance. “No. He’s on his way back now.”

This seemed to relax him. “So long as he’s safe. What did he learn?”

“We’ll have to wait for him to return before we know,” Lan Qing replied. “Encrypted messages we received seem to suggest the information they have is imperative to our cause. He also says he’s confirmed our suspicions. The only thing he was not able to uncover was the precise condition of the enemy.”

He explained that any specific information was not safe from alien interception through long-range communication. They would learn more when Lan Jue was back in the safety of the ship.

The Terminator spoke next. “You’re saying that they’ve confirmed the aliens are evolving as we speak?”

Lan Qing nodded. “Yes. That’s why we need to have this meeting now. I’ll explain what we’ve come up with so far, then we will discuss the specifics and address any concerns you may have. We’ll make final adjustments when Lan Jue returns, based on his information. By then it will be time to act – time waits for no man.”

The Terminator nodded. “I agree. Please share you plan with us, Admiral.”

Lan Qing’s low voice echoed through the room. “At present our plan is predicated on direct force. We hit hard and push in. Our forces cannot

contend against the alien home worlds in a direct battle, and if they get involved our chances are slim. But we have no choice but to take that gamble.

“For this reason we first had to determine whether or not the aliens are in the process of their evolution. This greatly reduces their ability to fight back. What this means is our staunchest obstacles will be the fragments of those planets, the so-called royal family; the Violet Prince, Princess, and other avatars of their home worlds. It is important to note that these aliens possess capabilities at least Nirvana-level or higher.”

Chapter 767: Prometheus' Wisdom

Mo Xiao chimed in. "What if you're wrong? What if the planets have not yet begun to evolve and they appear on the battlefield? Isn't that gambling with the lives of everyone here?"

Lan Qing looked at her, and she met his eyes without inhibition. She was here representing the interests of the Poseidon Group. Not Lan Qing nor even Hua Li's hard gaze could silence her.

Lan Qing answered. "That's a possibility, so our plans must include ways to avoid that eventuality as much as we can. First, we won't be sending everyone in all at once. Middle Heaven and its entourage will comprise the main attack force. If everything goes as anticipated then our adversaries will be normal alien forces. I have faith that we will break their line and take at least one planet. We will use the recaptured world as a forward operating base to continue our push further in. Until that happens your people and the Northern soldiers don't need to engage. Once we're sure the alien home worlds won't get involved we can move in with all of our strength."

"Understand that there are a lot of risks in this campaign, but with risks come opportunity. These monsters all possess vital crystals, as I'm sure everyone knows. Even the simplest of them can be used for the exuvium process, and those taken from stronger foes can be used by our Paragons. The benefits are self-evident. The more we fight, the higher the possibility of obtaining those crystals. Whatever resources are captured belong exclusively to those who captured them. There are risks, but also rewards."

Lan Qing continued to fix Mo Xiao with his sparkling eyes as he spoke. "But I will remind you that there will be backing out once the fight starts. We must be of one heart and one mind in order to have any hope of winning victory. I'm sure we've all considered the potency of the crystals possessed by the planets themselves. Should we win, the benefits to all of us would be marvelous. So, although each of you have agreed to follow my orders during the campaign, I must reaffirm that everyone follows strict adherence to whatever commands they receive. Selfishness on anyone's

part will undoubtedly lead to the destruction of us all.”

Mo Xiao’s eyes were cold. She arrogantly looked down her nose at him. “Admiral, we have graciously offered our family’s resources as support. Although we have agreed to participate, safety and continuity of our interests is our primary concern. We are a business, a family, not someone’s tool. Due to these considerations I cannot exclude the possibility that we will flee the battlefield if the situation becomes too dangerous. I have a responsibility to the family.”

Lan Qing answered her with a faint smile. “If the situation becomes unmanageable I of course would have no means of stopping you. However, until things deteriorate to that point I will require you to follow orders. If you are incapable of following this simple request than I’d rather not have you as allies. I wouldn’t want to have to retaliate for the transgression.”

Mo Xiao opened her mouth to speak, but Hua Li rose to his feet and cut her off. He glared at her before speaking to Lan Qing. “We have no problems. We will follow whatever orders we receive from Middle Heaven.”

Her teeth clicked as Mo Xiao resentfully closed her mouth. She said nothing further.

Lan Qing then turned his gaze to Kang Hui.

The Northern commander nodded. “We will cooperate. The benefits do not concern me. Now that we’re here I don’t expect many of us will be returning home. Whatever the final result of our efforts here, we will not have held back. I will obey your commands, in service to our species.”

His staunch and direct support was set in stark contrast to Mo Xiao’s attitude.

The Terminator nodded. “He echoes my sentiments. Admiral, please continue with your plan.”

Lan Qing obliged with a nod. He pressed a button on the control panel before him that dimmed the room’s lights and summoned a three-

dimensional map of the star system between them. They could clearly pick out Europa and the seven planets that surrounded it.

“Our forces are limited, we can’t simply go all-in. Our first step is to recapture one of the planets and, using that as a foundation, see if we can’t confirm the condition of the alien home worlds. Once we do that, we move on to the next step...”

Lan Qing went on to explain their plan in detail. Kang Hui and Mo Xiao listened carefully and interjected their opinions where applicable.

Surprisingly they had little to offer. Lan Qing had been meticulous with the details, planning for every eventuality. He even had a plan for food and other resources if the fight took longer than expected.

In regards to firepower he chose a staggered approach, wherein every attack would be comprised of a different group of ships. They discussed the bastions as deterrent forces, specifics of unit employment, defenses – everything was gone over with a fine-tooth comb, no matter how seemingly trivial.

Even Mo Xiao, who had been suspicious and guarded with Lan Qing, couldn’t help her admiration from slowly showing on her face. He was certainly worthy of being the An LUn super soldier! He’d never commanded a large-scale battle, but it was clear he had spent a great deal of time and effort planning and reevaluating his decisions.

It took over four hours for the whole plan to be discussed. No time had been wasted in pointless nonsense or disagreement. Whenever they reached a new topic Lan Qing produced a packet of data which he handed out to the others, so that they might discuss it with their own staff officers later. This meeting was comprised of the top leadership, but specifics would need to be passed down for commanders to enact orders.

“That’s the situation as it stands. Is there anything that anyone would like to add?” He reached the end of the briefing, and even after the long and exhaustive list of information he didn’t seem fatigued. He was as calm and collected as ever.

Kang Hui sighed, sincerity clear in his voice. “After everything you’ve

told us I only have one thought. If the alien planets are not involved, our chances at victory are seventy percent or better. I doubt I could have formulated a better plan. Our decision to leave you in command seems to be the right one.”

Lan Qing did not gush over the praise. “This is a preliminary strategy. Things will change before we get under way once Lan Jue brings his information back. Right now we all have a general understanding of what’s going to happen. We will meet again when we know more.”

Chapter 768: Lan Qing's Shop?

Kang Hui nodded. "How about this, I remain here. Your Majesty, you could bring the information back and disseminate it among my people. Once Commander Lan Jue returns and we finalize our plans, I'll return."

The Terminator nodded. "That's fine. Then I'll return to Tyrannosaurus. Admiral Lan, I may not be proficient in military matters, but I must say I admire your skill. You are worthy of the titles people have given you."

Lan Qing bowed his head. "You're too kind, your Majesty. We won't know how effective our plan is until the fight is over. It's a little early to be praising my abilities."

Hua Li turned to Mo Xiao. "You return to the ship, I'm going to wait for Lan Jue to return as well. When we know everything I'll go back."

Mo Xiao shook her head. "You should go back. I should stay, I'm more –"

Hua Li impatiently cut her off. "You're trying to say you have more ability in this than I do? Don't forget, I've been learning all of this since I was a child. You can go back to Poseidon."

Mo Xiao struggled with herself, eventually fighting back the urge to argue. She took up the pile of papers and left.

Lan Qing watched her go. "Is she going to be a problem?"

But Hua Li shook his head. "It's fine, that's just how she is. The interests to the family are her only concern. Don't be upset with her, brother."

Lan Qing shook his head. "Of course not, she didn't do anything wrong."

"How long before A-Jue and the others return?" Hua Li asked.

Lan Qing leaned back in his chair. "A day or so. We've moved in pretty close to the outer ring planets already."

Hua Li smiled. "We might walk away from this heroes to our whole species, eh?"

"None of that is important," Lan Qing chastised. "What's important is that our people aren't wiped out."

The others left to rest and make their plans. Lan Qing took Hua Li to Middle Heaven's command center.

"A-Li, I sensed something between you and Mo Xiao. If it isn't dealt with a problem could affect our plans. You should return to Poseidon and assume personal command." Lan Qing mused openly.

Hua Li tried to assure him. "It's a personal thing she has with me, and Mo Xiao is good about keeping her personal life separate from her duty. There won't be a problem. Once A-Jue comes back and we hear what he's learned I'll go back. You should worry about yourself, I was amazed by how comprehensive your plan was but have you included yourself in all that?"

The Eastern Admiral was dismissive. "This battle is important, and we have little in the way of luck on our side. We can't know what will happen, so I can only prepare by doing everything I can."

This earned a sigh from his friend. "You have a tiring life."

"I'm used to it," he answered.

"Brother," Hua Li began, "what do you plan to do if we survive this? Continue with the army? It seems like all your life you've never lived for yourself."

"Me?" Lan Qing thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. Perhaps I'll find a place to live out a quiet life. Years of being busy should be rewarded with silence."

Hua Li looked at him wonderment, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Wait, am I talking to the right person? You aren't Lan Jue, are you? I'd expect something like that out of his mouth."

Lan Qing's response was tepid. "He and I are brothers after all, fundamentally the same. We've just chosen different paths."

Hua Li laughed. "I prefer this candid part of you – it makes you feel more like a real person and not some legendary soldier. You're always so aloof, no one ever has a chance to get close to you."

Lan Qing shot him a look. "I don't need anyone to 'get close to me.' Everyone has different goals in life."

Hua Li paused for a moment, struck by his words. A frown touched his lips. "Yeah. Different goals."

Lan Qing watched him for a second. "Why are you acting so strange again?"

"I'm fine," Hua Li answered. "Again?"

Lan Qing explained. "You've been very different since breaking through to Paragon."

Hua Li shook his head. "It's nothing – I'm me, same Hua Li as always. Ever since the aliens have showed up I've had no interest in the rock star lifestyle. Like you I just want to live a quiet life – we should look together, what do you think? A mid-sized planet somewhere."

"I've always liked Skyfire Avenue, but I don't need anything that fancy. We can find some ordinary street, set up a couple shops, start families. We can have A-Cheng come over, too, and all our shops can border each other's. A-Jue's got his own store, no need to push him for anything, so he could just open a small place and sell low-cost trinkets. A-Cheng can open a booze and cigar place, he likes that stuff. What sort of stuff would you sell?"

Lan Qing was quiet for a time. "I don't know."

"Well, what do you like?" Hua Li pressed.

But Lan Qing shook his head. He couldn't think of any hobbies or interests.

Helplessly Hua Li continued. "You're so rigid. You should sell traditional business suits. Your goods can be like you; stiff and austere."

Lan Qing couldn't stop himself from snorting a laugh. "So I'd be a tailor?"

"You would do incredible at whatever job you chose to do," Hua Li said. "If you wanted to be a tailor you'd be the best damn tailor there was."

Lan Qing turned it on him. “What about you, then? What sort of store would you open, a music shop?”

Hua Li looked like he'd been struck. “Ah, fine, I see. You think that's all I'm good for. Nah, not music. I'd open a bridal shop. I'd make 'em myself, you and I could work together. When you get married I'd make one special for you, whaddaya say?”

Lan Qing was understandably surprised. “I didn't realize you had such a hobby.”

Hua Li spoke wistfully. “I've always loved wedding dresses, even when I was small. Elegant, pure white, lacy... All kinds. I've always believed they were the most beautiful clothing we've ever created. They may not outline the curves like your Eastern qipaos, but the bearing it brings is impeccable. I want to be a wedding dress stylist. What do you think?”

Lan Qing was supportive. “Why not, if the day ever came? But can your family go without Poseidon?”

Hua Li shook his head. “I told A-Jue the same thing, Mo Xiao and I have already arranged for a genetically designed child. Soon the family will have their next successor, and that will mean my responsibilities are finished. My father was about my age when he cast aside everything. The family runs on autopilot, practically. Once there's a successor my work is done, and I can give up my role. Mo Xiao can handle the business end of things better than I can. I've always had an independent heart, I don't want to be tied down.”

Lan Qing frowned. “If you were one of my people I'd have you court martialled. You know how bad you are for morale?”

Hua Li chuckled. “You wouldn't be Prometheus otherwise. Ah, but now you're the Peerless Light emperor of Middle Heaven. Please, brother, enlighten me.”

Lan Qing's tone grew strangely threatening. “I'll make sure to come and find you once this is all over.”

“Uh... I've gotta piss. I'll see you later.”

Lan Qing's face softened as he watched Hua Li race away. He gently shook his head, but his mind lingered on the picture his friend had painted.

A small city, somewhere simple with a small shop on a quiet street. Would a tailor shop really suit him? He'd never even worn a suit. Skyfire Avenue had a tailor, perhaps he could give it a look.

He shook his head again and looked at the screens arrayed throughout the control room. The gentleness was gone from them almost immediately, replaced with a pensive wisdom.

If he wanted a peaceful life, there first had to be peace!

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Seventeen hours later Zeus-1 quietly returned to Middle Heaven's hangar bay. Lan Jue had recovered without incident, so his first order of business was to deliver the information they'd recovered. He went immediately to the control center to find his brother.

Lan Qing said nothing, only took the data that was presented. He put it in his computer and waited for the it to show up. Lan Jue didn't need to explain anything, Lan Qing's dour face said he understood.

"The Wine Master has already gone to find the Keeper with a copy of the data and the infected humans. He's going to ask the Keeper to see what he can discover about their condition. From the little we could gather we suspect up to half of the population is still alive, and based on what I know of the aliens these humans are more 'valuable' to them. Living specimens have more complete DNA. All things considered the likelihood that the aliens have begun their evolution is high. Otherwise I suspect they'd have done to these planets what they did to the ones in the North. They'd simply have killed everyone."

Lan Jue continued. "I then traveled to the far side of the planet and discovered that artery stretching off into the distance. I can't imagine where they would be going except for the alien home worlds. It offers even more evidence to support the idea that they've begun. Or that they're already finished."

Lan Qing scowled and scoured the information on screen. After a long time he finally spoke. “You’ve brought us both good news and bad news. The good news is we can confirm that the enemy’s preoccupied with their evolution. The bad news is conditions on the human planets.”

Chapter 769: Clever Beasts

Lan Jue paused. “Why is it bad that there are so many survivors?”

Lan Qing explained in his typical emotionless voice. “Did you think about why there were so many survivors? These creatures are on the top of the food chain, there have any number of ways to extract human genes. No, there’s another reason – to delay us. Once the fight starts I’m sure they’ll find a way to make us watch as they kill any human left. What will we do then? We don’t have a choice, we have to save them. We’ll have to save many people, from many planets, with an army barely large enough to do the job we came here for. How long do you think this rescue will take?”

Lan Jue’s face darkened as he understood what his brother was saying. He’d been focused on whether or not the planets were evolving because it was integral to their plan, but now he saw how tricky things really were. They had been right to assume the alien home worlds had begun the evolution process, but no one knew how long it would take. If they got bogged down in a massive rescue mission the worst case scenario was too dire to contemplate.

“They’re too damn clever.” Lan Jue shook his head. “But we can’t just leave them there. We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of people! Can’t we find a way to have it both ways?”

A spark flashed in Lan Qing’s eye. “I’ve been thinking about it. I’m going to summon Admiral Kang and Hua Li, then we’ll talk about it. There’s a lot we’ll need to change from the original plan.”

Lan Jue’s heart sank. Their situation was getting worse by the hour. If they focus their efforts on saving people they didn’t have enough soldiers to clear the planets of aliens, much less go hunting for the alien home worlds.

After a little while Kang Hui, Hua Li, the Wine Master and the Keeper arrived. They gathered together to discuss the plan. Lan Jue began by sharing what he’d learned, going over everything in detail. The others

listened with increasingly deepening scowls.

Lan Qing first swept his attention over to the Keeper. “Your Majesty, have you discovered anything about the infected?” He was likely here for just that reason.

The Keeper, his face dark and imposing, replied. “We’ve only just begun to see what we can learn, their condition is complicated. Simply put they suffer from a sort of disease – a terrible affliction that attacks the victim’s genetics and bodily functions. On the surface the symptoms looks relatively benign; it improved their strengths, extends their life, and releases potential by stimulating their genetic code to an incredible degree. However, at the core of it this disease poisons the victim’s mind. It interrupts and modulates brain-wave patterns, making them homogenous with all the other infected. We believe this is how the aliens control them.”

“So you’re saying,” Lan Jue cut in, “the aliens are capturing humans, then unlocking their potency in order to use them as their own tools? As a way to better understand our technology?”

The Keeper shook his head. “That was my hypothesis at first, but evidence disproves the theory. This affliction causes human DNA to activate and become more readily definable. This would allow them to see the advantages of our genetic makeup in order to assist their own evolution.”

“Isn’t this what you told us when you came back from the planets? They want to obtain genetic information from our people, which corresponds with my findings.”

Lan Jue nodded. “Is there a way we can turn them back? Reduce the number of afflicted?”

The Keeper frowned. “It’s difficult. We’ve never seen anything like this before, and understanding it well enough to develop a cure will take time and effort. This goes beyond any modern medicine we possess. With today’s technology it will take one or two years before we can research a cure.”

Lan Jue shrugged. “Perhaps there’s another method? Some scientific process or...”

But the Keeper cut him off with the shake off his head. “There is nothing suitable to be used in this case. This disease directly attacks the genetic code. We can’t simply start destroying the aberrant bonds. At best we return them to a persistent vegetative state which there is no cure for. So far as we’ve been able to tell there is only one option. There may be someone with sufficient willpower and strength to fight off the poison with their own immune system. If we can find anyone who is able to do this we can extract their cells and use them to develop an antidote. However, it is important to realize that the chances of finding someone with resistant genes is very small.”

The aliens and their poisons were strong. Indeed it would not be easy to find someone with the innate ability to resist them.

Lan Jue’s eyes flashed. “What if an Adept is infected? Our bodies are stronger than a typical human, would we be able to develop antibodies that could be useful?”

The Keeper balked. “In theory, yes, but the dangers are great. They would likely be enormously powerful, a fact I’m sure the aliens themselves had considered. It may be why they haven’t tried it.”

Lan Qing interrupted them. “This problem will have to be put aside for the time being. We must leave it to you to figure out, Arcane Magnate. Right now we need to focus on how to adjust the plan with the information we have at hand.”

Even Lan Qing couldn’t help but feel the pang of helplessness gnawing at his chest. Although his brother’s mission had been a success, the information he’d brought back was not what they wanted to hear. Allied forces were now faced with an impossible situation. They were duty-bound to save those people, but it would invariably slow their operation to a crawl. They would be leaving the alien planets to complete their evolutionary process unmolested.

Since no one knew how long it would take for their transformation to

complete, the situation was like standing before a ticking time bomb. When it goes off, it truly would mean the end.

Their plans were certainly going to have to change.

Kang Hui scowled as he thought. “Admiral Lan, as much as I agree that these unfortunate victims need to be saved, we must consider the facts. We simply don’t have the numbers to do it, and a single misstep could spell our undoing. We may not be the last of humanity’s strength, but this may very well be our last opportunity. You have to choose, which is more important?”

Lan Qing nodded in understanding. Everyone wanted to save whoever they could, but the effort would break them. It not only interrupted their carefully laid plans, but also risks losing them the war.

Lan Jue chimed in. “We can more or less confirm that the aliens are evolving, or at least preparing to. That means we won’t have to worry about the planets themselves getting involved in a fight. While we can’t be sure about Europa, it’s certain there are many survivors left on the other planets, and even more if we consider the infected. How can we live with ourselves if we leave them to their fate? But even then I believe what Admiral Kang says to be true. If it boils down to having to make a single decision, then attacking the alien menace is the only one to consider. They’re threatening all of us, all across human space.”

Lan Jue’s heart was in a knot even as he spoke the words. Of course he hoped he could save everyone, but did their situation allow it?

Lan Qing replied. “If we could have it both ways that would be the best, even if it brought considerable risk. But it would all rely on having enough strength to do the job. Let’s put our heads together and see if we can’t figure something out.”

Hua Li finally lent his voice to the conversation. “Doing both might be impossible. Admiral, I suggest you make preparations for a full attack. At the very least we’ll be ready to take any opportunity that presents itself, and at best we can make swift changes if a better solution is found. If we can’t find a way to save those people, it won’t detract from our ability to

strike when the time is right.”

His suggestion was the most sensible, even Kang Hui was conflicted with the dilemma they faced. The death of so many of his countrymen had left him with a deep and painful impression. He desperately wished for some way to save the Westerners from a similar fate.

Lan Qing nodded. At present Hu Li’s suggestion was the most suitable. At least for now, it was the best they could do.

“Very well, we stick to the original goals and make changes to the plan as necessary.” Lan Qing said, his voice hard and low.

Lan Jue sat there in silence. He already knew the plan very well, right now his sole focus was finding a way to save those people.

How many souls were left on those seven planets? They had families, spouses, children... now their homes were occupied by evil creatures that were tearing their lives apart. The thought went through Lan Jue’s mind again and again. He could feel their pain, see their hopeless expressions. His character demanded that he take any chance to save them, even if it were one in a million.

But they had another responsibility to the whole human race that was just as important, so a situation that attacked both problems was necessary. In fact saving these people had to rest on the premise of destroying the alien threat. Otherwise, what purpose would saving them serve? If the alien home worlds were allowed to evolve, it would only delay the inevitable.

Chapter 770: A New Plan

How could they save these people while not negatively affecting their main plan? Lan Jue's mind went over the question, considering every possibility.

The meeting went on for a long time. It had to, since the very thorough planning Lan Qing had done had to be thoroughly changed with the addition of Lan Jue's information.

"Alright, I'd like everyone to return to their ships and begin preparing your people. We move out in eight hours." Lan Qing stated. Now that their plan was formulated it was time to act.

"Wait a moment." Lan Jue, who had been silent up to this point, suddenly spoke up. He looked at his brother.

Lan Qing knew his brother's character, knew what had kept him quiet this whole time. "Did you think of a way?"

He nodded. "Part of the problem in splitting our forces is manpower, and the fact that we'd be fighting a war on many fronts. This would invariably result in a lot of problems. Perhaps in this situation we can aspire not to save everyone, but to give them a chance. I think I know how we can do that that may actually serve our bigger plan."

Lan Qing nodded. "Go on."

He looked around the table. "We kill the progenitors. We go around to each of the seven planets to kill a single target. From everything we've seen these progenitors will be strong, at least as strong as the one we faced on Monteux. We also know the alien home worlds are using these progenitors to pump vital energy and human genetic information right to them. If we kill them, this cuts off supply to the planets themselves."

"What's more, it looks as though the progenitors are needed to infect the humans. With them gone we can stem the rate of infection and keep the victims to a minimum. At the same time we begin the assault. The aliens outside of the planets will be too busy trying to stop us from pushing in to

get involved in a ground assault. In this way we can improve the chances of saving as many lives as possible, or at least giving them a shot, while leaving our forces open to do the job they came here to do.”

Kang Hui furrowed his brow. “But you say these monsters are strong. They may also have many powerful aliens as defenders. Killing them without military support may be too difficult.”

Lan Jue responded. “I’ve already considered that. Precisely because of the reasons you’ve stated, we need to keep our strike team small. We can’t drag our soldiers into it, they have another job to do. If we can do the job with a small team it’d be a benefit on many levels.”

His eyes sparkled. Lan Jue’s plan wasn’t impossible, but it hinged on who would comprise this small team.

He took a deep breath. “Star Division is adept at scouting and quick strikes. We have already gathered some of the most powerful adepts in the universe. I can handle one progenitor, and if we can arrange Paragons for the others we stand a fighting chance. With what we’ve got here I think we can split in two teams. They move in, kill a progenitor, then quickly move on to the next. Also, I think if we did this before the main assault...”

Lan Qing suddenly was struck with inspiration. If they could do as Lan Jue suggested and kill the progenitors first, the results would be dramatic. They were important to the alien forces, they knew, and killing them could throw their foes into chaos. Whether chasing down their enemies, cutting off supplies to the planets or the situation on the planets’ surfaces, everything would be affected.

Ever since the start humans felt like they were being led by the nose, forced to react to alien aggression, always on the back foot. Breaking their cycle of strategic dominance would serve them well.

Lan Qing weighed the option, then nodded. He agreed with Lan Jue’s plan.

Lan Jue went on. “Brother, my plan and the main assault shouldn’t have any conflict. No one is being pulled away to save lives, it’s a full attack with amended targets. In my estimation it at least gives the innocent men,

women and children down there a shot at survival. I'm begging you to let me lead this mission."

Lan Qing looked into the fiery eyes of his brother. He was moved by the passion he saw in them. Military planning required cold blood, a calm mind, and dogged focus on the mission. But people were creatures of emotion. Lan Jue's caring and passion were his crutch, but also a great boon. Where it not for these qualities, would he have so many women interested in him?

Hua Li looked at Lan Jue, his eyes bright. "The plan has my support, I'll go too..."

"Shut up!" Lan Qing and Lan Jue spoke in one voice. Of course he couldn't go, he had to consider his status. He was one of the leaders of their small alliance and commander of the Poseidon forces. How could they allow him to put himself in danger? The Poseidon Group would never agree.

Hua Li resentfully rubbed his nose. "Since when did you two start agreeing with each other?"

Lan Qing's ice-cold gaze turned onto Lan Jue. "You have eight hours to formulate a plan."

"Got it!" Lan Jue determinedly nodded his head. Most of it was already settled, it just needed to be perfected.

ζ

The three bastions gathered and began to make preparations. It was the same for the fleets, who transferred crew and practiced maneuvers. After all, this was a joint effort from three factions that had rarely worked together, at a time when unity was paramount. They had to perform like fingers from the same hand if they wanted to have a chance.

Hua Li eventually returned to his bastion. Lan Qing could only be assured of the Poseidon Group's full cooperation if he was there to watch them.

In the large conference room where the talks had taken place, now sat

humanity's strongest Talents. At the head of the table was humanity's mightiest warrior, Jue Di.

On either side of him were seated the Photographer and the Terminator, placed according to their station. Both were Nirvana-level Paragons. Indeed, the Terminator himself was coming for this mission.

Aside from them were other familiar faces – Satan, and the Pontiff!

Yes, the two Western Paragons had also made their way here of their own accord. They had escaped the clutches of the alien planets. However, the enemy had taken Europa, leaving them both homeless and without much support.

They were lucky to have happened upon Tyrannosaurus. They agreed with Lan Jue's plan and agreed to follow the Terminator into battle.

At present Satan seemed to be faring well enough. He was calm and steadfast in the face of tragedy. The Pontiff, however, was a different matter. The Pontiff's Citadel was destroyed in a single day, the Paragon's people lost to the planet's explosion. Only he and a handful of Archangels managed to survive. The West's once-marvelous Citadels, a match for Skyfire Avenue, had been wiped from existence. As the leader of one of them, the Pontiff's pain was deep and abiding.

His hatred for Skyfire Avenue ran deep, but the loathing he bore for the aliens sunk into his bones. He never said a word as he sat among the others – the once-calm religious leader now a volcano ready to erupt.

Besides them, the remainder were representatives from Skyfire Avenue, and the unaffiliated Bize. The only one among them who was not a Paragon was Lan Jue himself. He sat farthest from the place of honor at the opposite end of the oval table.

Within this room sat more than a dozen Paragons, representing the might of humanity. There was enough power gathered here to destroy an entire planet.

"Lan Jue, go on," Jue Di urged.

With Jue Di in attendance, even the unruly Satan didn't dare interrupt.

Lan Jue rose to his feet and began with a salute to the gathered Paragons. “Thank you, your Majesties, for agreeing to gather here. We’ve called you together because we stand on the precipice of a terrible war. Not long ago my team and I set out on a fact-finding mission...”

He went on to share with them everything they’d learned.

“Without question, our first priority is to end the alien threat and save humanity from destruction. However, there are innocent victims, our brothers and sisters, still alive on those planets that have been taken hostage. I’m sure you all know that we don’t have the forces to save them all. The Wine Master, the Pharmacist, the Driver and I tried, and we could only bring back a few thousand. Ten times... a hundred times more are down there now waiting for death.”

“Europa lies in the center of the chaos, and there’s no way we can slip in. Our ships are numbered and can’t afford to be spread thin to take the outer planets. Besides, they have a war to fight. So the task falls to us, to save as many of our fellow human as we can. We won’t save them all, but we can give most of them a chance to make it through this terrible time.”

Chapter 771: Three Teams

“Every planet has at least one powerful progenitor. They are the root of the aliens’ aggression and consumption power. I also believe they’re chiefly responsible for the infection that poisons our people. Killing them will at least ensure that no more people are transformed. Meanwhile our soldiers will push the main attack which will keep the alien forces busy, too distracted to retaliate against the innocent humans. Maybe we can save these people.”

“Who knows if we’ll win the final battle; this plan may just be prolonging the inevitable. But if this is to be humanity’s final moments then we must do everything we can. This is my plan.”

The gathered Paragons quietly listened to his speech. When Lan Jue went into detail as to how he planned to save these people, Satan and the Pontiff looked at him with genuine surprise. They were Westerners, and the condition of these people were their direct concern. Meanwhile their governments and organizations were never friendly. On the contrary, the West had routinely tried to cause trouble for its Eastern counterpart.

They’d assumed that their army’s presence here was all about self-preservation. If they won the benefits to them were clear. But when they heard him speak with such passion their opinions changed. They were willing to risk their lives to save people from another Alliance! It was completely impractical from a military standpoint. Nor was this a ploy to curry favor, since the West was effectively destroyed. Who would they hope to gain favor with?

It was as simple as people needing help, and them being in a position to give it. Satan and the Pontiff shared a glance, and both could see their surprise and disbelief mirror in the other’s eyes.

Lan Jue continued. “I want everyone to understand the dangers we will face. Based on our experience each of these planets should have a planetary doppelganger or royal alien as a defender. They will at least be equivalent to a Paragon of the third degree, Nirvana – I expect some will

have achieved the Infinite. What's more, there will definitely be lesser aliens planet-side that help them. The progenitors themselves will likely be Paragon-strength."

"So, I believe it necessary to combine our strength in order to kill these monsters. If at all possible, we should try to kill their powerful defenders as well. We can save our fellow humans and weaken the enemy all in one stroke. Each one we take down improved the chances for our main force."

"Our plan of attack calls for the armada to take and occupy one of the larger planets to serve as a base. This will be our first target. Once the target's been killed we'll move on to the next one. Based on current strength I think we can break into two teams, this will ensure a higher level of safety. Are there any questions, ladies and gentlemen?"

The Skyfire Avenue Paragons remained silent. Lan Jue had already proved himself to them. He had everyone's utmost trust and respect. They were also not suited for interstellar combat. It didn't play to their strengths.

"I support the plan." Satan was the first to speak.

The Pontiff slowly nodded his head, looking at Lan Jue with solemn eyes. If he had the opportunity he would have torn this young man apart – he had been responsible for a great deal of suffering for his organization. Now, however, in the face of destruction enemies became friends. They had a common foe that they could not face on their own. The time for personal grudges was past.

The Terminator also nodded. "As do I."

"Two teams isn't going to work." Jue Di was the voice of dissent. As the strongest among them, his voice bore the most weight.

Jue Di looked at his son and spoke with a matter-of-fact tone. "Three teams. I will be responsible for three planets myself. The remainder will be up to the rest of you, two planets each."

If anyone other than Jue Di had been so brazen as to make the suggestion, especially before such a gathering of Paragons, they would

have caused an uproar. But this man wasn't just anyone – wasn't just any Paragon. When he spoke everyone felt compelled to listen.

Lan Jue looked anxiously at his father. He wanted to say something, but thought better of it.

“Alright. That being the case let me set up the groups. His Majesty Jue Di will be team one, and will be responsible for three of the planets. For the remainder, his Majesty the Terminator will be leading one group. This group will be comprised of the Pontiff, Satan, the Cosmagus, the Epochrion, the Arcane Magnate, the Karmic Scholar and the God of Wine. Eight Paragons in total. The third group will be led by the Photographer. She will be commanding the Arhat of the Descending Dragon, the Driver, the Pharmacist, the Infernal Vanguard, Qianlin, and myself.”

As he listened, the Terminator seemed apprehensive. Although the Photographer had achieved Nirvana like him, the groups seemed stilted. His own team was comprised of eight Paragons, with the Cosmagus and the Epochrion both being Reflections of Heaven and Earth. Although Neither the Pontiff nor Satan were of the same strength, they were well-versed in the world of protogenia.

But the team Lan Jue was in had only five Paragons. Only the Photographer had achieved Nirvana while the rest were only part of the Realm of Protogenia. Lan Jue and Qianlin were not even Paragons. With Jue Di they would have been fine, but without the man their team seemed weak.

With his brows furrowed, the Terminator shared his concern. “Perhaps you should add another Paragon to your team. We can manage with one less.”

But Lan Jue shook his head. “Thank you, your Majesty, but to be honest with you Qianlin and I will be achieving our breakthrough very soon. We will have seven Paragons then. Qianlin and I also have a special style we employ together, so I believe this group is sufficient. In addition we will be responsible for helping the armada take their first planet and will have the help of Star Division thereafter, hence my grouping decision. So long as

we're together we'll be fine."

Hearing this, the Terminator had no more problems.

Of course Lan Jue had his reasons for choosing these teams. For a start he could not be on the same team as the Terminator, Satan or the Pontiff. It wasn't that he didn't trust them, but that he didn't want them to witness his breakthrough with Qianlin. They were allies in this fight, but some secrets had to be kept.

His team also had the Pharmacist and Occisus. Her skill on the battlefield was no less impressive than a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. The Driver's yin-yang lightning was similarly imposing. In a fight, the strength of those two was undisputed. With the addition of him and Qianlin and their Harmonious Sword technique, the team was anything but weak.

Though both the Photographer and the Terminator had achieved Nirvana, they were different. She had been immersed in the power of her station for many years. Were it not for fear of universal protogenia, breaking through to the Infinite under Jue Di's tutelage was not out of the question. With her leading the team, they could also teleport to safety if things became too overwhelming.

The team were set. All that was left were final preparations for the operation.

Jue Di had chosen three neighboring planets to be responsible for. He didn't seem at all troubled by the scale of his job. Only a few of those in attendance knew how powerful the man truly was. However, they were all Paragons. The deep and mighty aura that surrounded him was felt by all.

The other two teams also discussed their targets and made their decisions. Once finished the Paragons broke into their individual teams to discuss specifics. Jue Di participated in Luo Xianni's team.

"Father, your health..." Once the Terminator and the others left, Lan Jue broached the subject.

Jue Di silenced him with a wave of his hand. "This is hardly the time to

worry about that. Besides that crystal has been helpful. At the least it will help to employ my power. Perhaps I will be able to get more crystals to help me further. In the end this is likely the best decision for me, so you don't need to fret over it. So long as everything goes according to plan we'll be fine. Those planets and their denizens won't trouble me unless the home worlds themselves appear."

"Alright, but look after yourself." Lan Jue cautioned.

Jue Di chuckled at the concern in his son's eyes. "Look after your mother and make sure she doesn't do anything rash."

Luo Xianni sniffed. "Rash? Why don't you say what you want to say, eh Chi Bupang?"

Jue Di rolled his eyes. "Come now, you don't think I know you by now? The same goes for you, protect my son and daughter in law. Call if they run into a problem!"

"Yeah I'll call alright, I'll shout right in your face!" Her words were harsh, but her eyes never left Jue Di's face. The faint light of concern hid behind her disdainful expression. Even she wasn't sure about her spouse's condition.

After years of cultivation in the Infinite Jue Di was at the margin of what was permitted by natural law. However, unlike the alien home worlds he had no way to conceal it from the universe and its uncaring retribution. Though he had the knowledge and power to rise to new heights, he knew it would mean immediate destruction.

Yet, with the potential of facing increasingly powerful enemies would he be able to hold his powers back? Luo Xianni wasn't sure she could, much less Chi Bupang.

They would only know when the time came.

Three bastions and twelve interstellar fleets spread out in formation. They quietly cut through the darkness of space toward the seven Western planets.

Chapter 772: Winning the Initial Battle

According to Lan Qing's battle plan, the human forces would remain together through the whole fight, amassing at a single point. The bastions would give them support.

Although it was appearing more and more likely that the aliens were in the process of their evolution, Lan Qing was still preparing for the eventuality that they would join the better. Perhaps they completed their evolution quickly, or this whole thing had been a set-up. No bastion would survive being surrounded by the alien home worlds, their only shot was if they stuck together and faced the enemy as a unified front.

Of course, this was the worst case scenario. Lan Qing was trying to stick to the simplest strategy; stay together and punch through the enemy line. Head right for their heart.

The plan was hinged on many objectives that each needed to be successively achieved. Their first order of business was rather like life fire scouting, though on a much higher scale than when Lan Jue did it.

Before long a withered purple orb swung into view of the bastions. The poisoned planet was a shocking sight, as was the horde of aliens in the space surrounding it waiting for a fight.

Obviously they had predicted the bastions' arrival. There were three times as many now as when Lan Jue had come knocking, probably gathered from the other planets. Judging just by looks, the aliens seemed just as numerous as humanity's twelve fleets, perhaps even more. Meanwhile the purple planet hung in the background, still and silent.

At least as far as they could tell, nothing looked different from when Lan Jue left.

The three bastions advanced in a V-formation, with Middle Heaven in the lead. ¹ On the left, Poseidon. Tyrannosaurus was on the right. Their support ships fanned out around them with Capital ships at the fore and the weaker ships behind.

The two sides maintained a safe distance and eyed one another across a swath of empty space – what was soon to become their battleground.

The humans could see more alien forces approaching from far away to shore up their defenses. Now that they knew where the humans intended to attack, they concentrated their power to try and repel them. That was one of the differences between human and alien – they weren't afraid to use everything at their disposal, any method no matter how costly or cruel, to achieve their ends.

In the Shattered Starfields, they had used asteroids to pummel their ships. In the North they had turned planets into time bombs. This time they looked ready to face the human head-on, without aid. They were confident in their numbers and ability.

Lan Qing's voice resounded through all the ships. "Proceed with on-sight preparations. Do a final system's check. Get ready to execute the first part of the plan." It was wise to check that everything was in top condition after a long flight, especially before a battle. It was standard practice in interstellar battles.

The armada dimmed suddenly as ships conserved energy for the battle to come.

All of a sudden, twelve large ships launched forward. They were fast, and charged ahead at full speed almost immediately. No one spacecraft followed.

These twelve ships were some of the strongest in the armada. They were their fleet's flagships, each of them sovereign-class Capital ships. Although there was only a dozen of them, each ship was over ten kilometers long, and they burned toward the planet with an indomitable will. 2

Meanwhile Middle Heaven pressed forward. The front-facing section of its lithosphere actually split apart, revealing a honeycomb of densely packed cannons. One thousand and eighty altogether, their muzzles three hundred meters in diameter. Already an ominous light was growing in their depths.

Forget the aliens. The humans looked on in disbelief at what they were witnessing. Weren't they just told to hold and check their equipment? Why the sudden attack? Where they just going to start shooting?

The Capital ships themselves already had their cannons extended. The space around them crackled and they burned with energy, ready to rain destruction upon the alien forces at a moment's notice.

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

"Fire!"

...

The command was repeated through every ship, and in response their cannons released a bone-jarring barrage into the enemy. They had just come into range of their weapons, and their reactions were markedly sluggish. In fact they had hardly reacted until the Capital ships had begun to pick up speed.

The space before them was covered in a hundred beasts about a thousand meters long. They looked like silk worms, dumbly wriggling in space, blocking passage forward. Their disgusting writhing became more frantic and they stretched themselves out into fleshy cakes.

But they were too slow. The salvo from the human ships smashed into them before they had a chance to completely transform.

Capital ships were equipped with antimatter cannons that could only be employed in space. Aside from a bastion's main cannon, they were some of the strongest weapons in mankind's arsenal. The flash from their cannon fire briefly turned the universe white with burning power.

But a strange scene was revealed when their attack reached the oval-shaped beasts. They caved in as the beams of light reached them, but did not break. Instead the borders of the oval creatures lit up and spat out the

diffused cannon fire. It seemed as destructive as before, but spread out in horizontal waves.

If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, no one would have believed it. However this wasn't a complete rebuke of the Capital ship's power. The closest line of them couldn't resist the antimatter energy and were slowly dissolved into nothing. Still, their defenses served to greatly reduce the destructive power of the volley.

It was to the humans' advantage that these creatures were also slow. Gaped still remained in their defensive line. Where the cannon fire slipped through, all the aliens behind were burned away.

Screeches and sizzles filled the battlefield. The Capital ship's attack was like kicking a hornet's nest, serving to send the aliens into a violent frenzy.

Their main cannons spent, the Capital ships swung around and blasted back the way they had come. Their secondary weapons systems lit up as they fired into the encroaching alien forces to cover their escape.

Even lesser weapons on a Capital ship were a sight to behold. They weren't called the strongest fleet ships for no reason. Likewise their defenses were strong, and protected them valiantly as the ships fled from the field.

The front line of the alien attack was comprised of the shuttle-alien, which specialized in explosive speed. Although there were a myriad of breeds in the alien species, each with different abilities, size always seemed to indicate strength. This was the same for the shuttle aliens, whose front line were all a thousand meters long or more. In a blink they were on the Capital ships, smashing themselves into their shields.

Even dreadnaughts, mighty as they were, would have fallen to this assault. But these were Capital ships, and their might was more than the aliens could overcome. Their shields rippled as the aliens flung themselves against it but did not break. What's more, since they attacked from the limit of where their guns could reach, only a small number of the enemy were fast enough to catch them.

Suddenly the twelve Capital ships split, tearing off to either side. The

beasts chasing them did not follow, for they were caught off guard by the enormous thing that had been waiting just behind.

Middle Heaven!

The array of cannons lit up, an angry red. Just the energy that radiated from it was terrifying. So terrifying in fact that the aliens giving chase broke off and scattered.

For a bastion like Middle Heaven, what sort of destruction could it achieve?

The slower aliens making their way closer reacted the same and fled for their lives. The aliens were in disarray. Even those creatures thousands of meters across heaved their lumbering bulks away, desperate to avoid what was coming!

Without their home worlds there were no aliens that could withstand the guns of a bastion ships. Instead, their only plan of attack was to overwhelm the humans with superior numbers. However they had been drawn in before they realized what was happening, and the glowing barrels of Middle Heaven's cannons proved it way already too late.

As Middle Heaven inched forward the light from its cannons brightened. The promise of immediately destruction stopped the alien retaliation and sent them running.

Chapter 773: Profit at Another's Expense

With the buffer given by Middle Heaven, the Capital ships safely made it back to the safety of the armada. The other two bastions and their entourage were still, silently watching what transpired.

They returned to formation quickly, just in time to bear witness to Middle Heaven as its payload was released.

Blinding, angry red light erupted from the front of the remolded planet. It was so fierce that it painted everything before it in the same blazing light. Distant aliens were a riot of squirming bodies trying to flee.

But in the next instant they were stunned to find that the burst of fire from them only extended a thousand meters or so. Middle Heaven shot backward toward where the rest of the armada was watching.

Those weren't cannons... they were thrusters? They were using them for a quick retreat. Everyone – not just the aliens – were stupefied by the revelation.

What was Middle Heaven doing? Why thrusters? Those intimidating lights had all just been its engines getting ready to fire?

By the time Middle Heaven returned to position at the head of the fleet, the twelve Capital ships were back in formation and ready for orders.

After a moment of confusion the aliens gathered together once again. From across space it looked like they were getting ready to charge with their full strength. But the human ships were ready, their warships light up as all checks were complete. Preparations were made to meet the enemy head on.

Human technology gave them an advantage against the aliens at long range. Their enemies had nowhere to hide and no cover to protect them. The blitz attack had also caught them off guard and broke their formation.

Unfortunately the monsters were not impulsive, they were possessed of a superior intellect. They only surged ahead a short distance then stopped, like an enormous creature baring its fangs but refraining from the attack.

Invisible sound waves brought a chorus of angry snarls and howls. A portion of them shrunk back and concealed themselves behind the planet. Like in the North they used the planet as a shield.

As the aliens retreated the ships dimmed once more. Things returned to a quiet stalemate.

Lan Qing stood in Middle Heaven's control room, staring at the screen before him with grim countenance. He carefully watched everything going on. Their brief skirmish had slain over four thousand six hundred foes and his people got back without a scratch. It had only cost them energy.

Profit at another's expense, this was the first part of their plan. With all their troops the humans were still outnumbered and were in an unsafe position, even without the addition of the alien home worlds. A direct confrontation was not how they would snatch victory from their aggressors. They wouldn't be able to break the line, much less assault the enigmatic planets hiding somewhere behind them.

Because of this Lan Qing's plan was to weaken the enemy first. They would whittle down their numbers through several means. It would be difficult if not impossible for the humans to turn the battle to their favor if they fought a typical war. Reinforcements from other planets would continue to pour in if they got caught in a full assault and his own forces would be hard pressed to keep formation.

At present humanity's greatest advantage were their bastions, which were unparalleled by anything the aliens could put before it. In addition, humans had range whereas the aliens fought in close quarters.

Lan Qing's plan was to take full advantage of their strengths. Lan Qing had called it a rolling blitz.

Only the top commanders knew the whole plan, the rest only performed the orders as they were given. These orders were given face to face, for fear the enemy could hear their communications. The commanders themselves had shared nothing with their people prior to the surprise attack. Lan Qing's order to prepare had been the secret signal to act.

How could the aliens, who saw the humans arrive on such weak footing,

imagine that they would attack so suddenly and so fiercely? They had taken advantage of their Capital ships, Middle Heaven, and range to take them by surprise.

The difference in strength between the two sides was not much, though this was only because the alien home worlds were not present. The humans were fewer in number but had three bastions, and coming in for close range combat would cost the creatures dearly.

Lan Qing's plan was meticulous, and hinged on a simple premise; win enough small victories to win the war. Enough small changes can turn the tide of war.

The opening salvo didn't inflict heavy losses on their foes. Nor were they able to recover vital crystals from those they killed. Still the humans had got off cheap for the damage they caused. Although the blitz had been costly, Capital ships were possessed of systems to recover energy from the space around them. So long as they weren't locked in continuous battle they could restore what was lost through cosmic radiation. It was not so easy for the aliens to recover their forces.

But there was a deeper meaning for this opening attack. Ever since the start of this conflict the humans had suffered, and were ever at a disadvantage. Every clash had resulted in their unmitigated defeat.

It would be foolish to assume this didn't affect the morale of their soldiers. Although the first exchange was quick and small, it had been performed without any losses on the human side. This had a marvelous effect on morale, and strengthened cooperation and trust among the allied forces.

In this universe, truth was always more effective than promises. Actions spoke louder than words. Seeing the truth through action strengthened the bonds among soldiers. They saw themselves as a team, which was the basis for any victory. Once that unity was focused they could achieve anything.

Moreover, Middle Heaven had thrown itself into the fray in order to give their allies cover. It revealed its impressive maneuverability, and as

backup helped the Capital ships return without incident. As guardian it allowed for them to test the waters, to see how strong their foes were and how they planned to fight.

The simple act had revealed a lot to the humans. Describe it as a success didn't do it justice.

Both sides had withdrawn to their camps and – as before – stared at each other from across a stretch of empty space. Only now the enemy was shown not to be invisible. Middle Heaven had given them hope.

This latest bastion was brand new, so much that even the Eastern forces didn't know what it was capable of. But it was huge, no smaller than the alien home worlds themselves, and could move with surprise agility. Everyone was anxious to see what it could do.

Now that the surprise attack was finished, it was time to rest and reorganize. Next would be the real battle. Lan Qing had enough confidence in their formation and the strength of their ranged advantage that he didn't fear a sudden attack from the enemy. He would be happy if they tried.

Lan Qing called another meeting to confirm the next step in their plan. He summoned all the commanders now that the stage had been set. He would need everyone's support for the fight to come.

"You look tired." Lan Jue frowned as he walked into the control room and saw his brother.

Lan Qing was seated behind his desk with his eyes closed, thinking of something. Outwardly he looked normal, but they were brothers after all. It didn't take long for Lan Jue to see the sag in the way Lan Qing held himself. The older Lan typically was an endless font of energy, so it was a stark contrast.

Lan Qing opened his eyes. When he saw who arrived he sat up straight, and the sharp look in his eyes returned.

"I'm fine. Take a seat." He motioned toward a nearby chair. Lan Jue took it.

“Congratulations on your initial victory. I’m hearing nothing but praise.” Lan Jue said with a smile. Even he didn’t know about the plan for a sneak attack.

Lan Qing shook his head. “We’ve only just started. Save congratulations for when we win.”

The smile fled from Lan Jue’s face. “You... always so hollow.”

Lan Qing shot him a look. “Are you ready for your part? How you perform will directly impact the success of our campaign. The arrow’s knocked, the bow is drawn – there’s no going back. Once it begins I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how dangerous things will be.”

“What is there left to prepare?” Lan Jue replied. “The Paragons are as strong as they’re gonna be in a few hours. Qianlin and I have reached our bottleneck.”

Lan Qing’s brows knit as he looked at his younger brother. “You have to get back safely.”

Lan Jue was comforting. “Relax, I know what I’m doing. Even though the Violet Prince and Monarch are somewhere close, I don’t think they’ll put that much effort into hunting me down. We’re going to do everything within our power, don’t you worry. If there’s really no way to save those people we know the focus has to be on survival of the species.”

Lan Qing looked at him, surprise clear in his face. “I didn’t expect to hear that from you. I expected to have you come in here and demand we hold nothing back to save the hostages.”

Lan Jue smirked at him. “I know what’s important. Star Division will be leading the ground assault team, and I’ll link up with them once our own mission is finished. So, what’s next in your plan?”

Chapter 774: 48 Hours

Lan Qing fixed him with a flat stare. “You’ll know when you need to know. All I can give you is a time. Forty-eight hours, then you start your mission. We will have plans for our own actions at that time.”

“Alright! In that case I’m off to take a look at my division.” He rose to his feet and bade farewell to his brother.

Lately the Paragons of the Division had experienced much change. It was the soldiers that saw the greatest improvement. With the wealth of resources and support from Skyfire Avenue, Star Division had spared no effort in their training. Not only was their cultivation improved on an individual level, but their equipment was also a cut above.

Everyone knew their military exploits were already enough for the exuvium process. Skyfire Avenue had also assured them that if something should happen in the course of their service, the rewards from their exploits would be passed to their families. The people they love would be able to benefit from their sacrifice. It effectively assuaged family considerations that would have hampered their ability to act in the battlefield.

In contrast to the rest of humanity since the outbreak of war, Star Division had been running smoothly in every aspect. They had never been defeated, only forced to retreat. Star Division was the darling of military leaders, and no one had to worry about their morale.

The more they worked together the better they performed as a team. It was true for whole brigades and individual squads. In response their efficacy on the field had skyrocketed.

Skyfire Avenue’s independent research had also confirmed what they knew, that the aliens were especially susceptible to Discipline. Mechas flooded with an Adept’s powers were especially potent.

Star Division had their own section aboard Middle Heaven, a jurisdiction won through their continued success on the field. As they continued to develop as Skyfire Avenue’s military arm, even the Bloodiron Khans

couldn't keep up. In fact, there was no army that could compare.

Lan Jue drove a verti-car to the division's encampment. It was quiet when he got there, no one was immediately visible.

These guys... what are they up to?

Lately he had been busy performing scout missions and helping his brother draw up battle plans. He had had no time to check on the status of his division. But there were Paragons to look after them, and Su Xiaosu was overseeing their training. He wasn't concerned they were slacking. Still, as commander he had to survey the troops before the big fight and make sure they were up to snuff.

He parked the car and made his way to the training area. As he made his way he was accosted by a familiar face.

"It's you?" There were no honorifics or respectful exchanges. There was just surprise, and something strange underneath.

Lan Jue felt similarly awkward, as the Savage Goddess Tan Lingyun came his way.

It had been ages since their last interaction, ever since the creation of Star Division. Aside from training and missions they had had no interactions. He'd been too busy to spend time with his soldiers, and that included her.

She didn't seem any different on the outside, but the strength of her aura had certainly improved. She'd definitely gotten stronger, more confident. Her overbearing heroism was more refined and she held herself with poise. Tan Lingyun's eye-catching personage was helped by the skin-tight flight suit she wore.

Still quite the figure... Lan Jue said to himself. Tan Lingyun's body struck all the right notes, enough that she turned a lot of heads wherever she went. Lan Jue was a man and was just as susceptible.

"Why are you here?" She blurted out. Immediately regret passed across her face. She was, after all, speaking to her commander.

Lan Jue smirked. "I'm here to check on everyone. How are things? Are you accustomed to your post?"

Tan Lingyun's voice was calm. "No problems. If there's nothing then I'll head off." She started to stride off, but paused when she came to his side. But whatever she was thinking she reconsidered, and quickly left.

When she passed him Lan Jue had a strange sense – like this woman who had given him so much trouble in the past was different all of a sudden.

He hadn't noticed the moisture in her eyes. It wasn't because of him, but because of what she felt. She had felt conflicted about Lan Jue for a long time, a fact which confused her deeply. She had assumed the moment she saw him that he was garbage – a pretty handbag with nothing inside. Etiquette teacher... he seemed like such a joke.

But then she began to discover the abilities he had deftly hidden away. First was his command of spacecraft, and that was the first time she thought he might be worth more than he appeared. Then his spectacular display at the Grand Adept Tournament, even winning Champion. It was then her estimation of the man completely changed, when she realized he was the Lei Feng that had touched her so deeply.

She was a strong woman, who had pursued perfection with a dogged will. Lei Feng was the first man who had ever left such an impression. For a woman like her, only a man who could conquer her on the field of battle had what it took to conquer her heart.

Lei Feng had that power, but even Lan Jue didn't know the sort of effect he'd had on Tan Lingyun.

Because of this conflict Tan Lingyun liked the masked man the most. Cold, expressionless, pure power... Lei Feng was her preference. Knowing who had captured her infatuation had been startling, she would much have rather found Lei Feng to be a stranger.

But the world was full of instances where you didn't get what you wanted.

Every time she saw him the first thing she remembered was that effeminate, composed professor. Her heart only started racing when he put the mask on.

She didn't understand it herself. In reality they were the same person – she should like Lan Jue. But when she looked on his face she still felt confused and unsure, not excitement. Then he puts on the mask, and she feels like she loses her self-control.

Later, when Lan Jue stopped wearing the mask so much, it was like Lei Feng had disappeared. He was no longer a part of her life, but the brief moment she'd spent with him was something she would remember forever. She hoped he would return one day, perhaps in a different form, and she searched for him in Star Division all the time. After all, Skyfire Avenue's soldiers were rife with strong fighters. There should be someone suitable for her, she thought. But Lei Feng's impression had been first and had been deep, replacing him would be difficult.

When she was passing him, in a moment of weakness, she had thought to ask if he would wear the mask. Just so she could see Lei Feng for a moment. But thought the words hung on the top of her tongue, how could she make such a request?

They were on the precipice of a war like none of them had ever seen. She didn't know if she would make it back. Perhaps Lei Feng would always have to remain a pleasant memory.

It was just a passing feeling, but one she was not accustomed to. It made her feel weak and out of control.

When she passed him, Lan Jue stood with furrowed brow as though thinking. Then a moment later he continued on his way.

The inside of the training area was just as silent as the exterior, a fact that made Lan Jue even more curious. Shouldn't they be training, he thought? Why was it so quiet? They were just about to go into battle and needed to be in peak condition.

Just then his communicator buzzed. It was Su Xiaosu.

“Boss?” She sounded a little excited. “Any instructions?”

“Xiaosu,” he replied. “I’m in the Division training area, why isn’t there anyone here? Where is everybody?”

He could hear her snickering. “Oh – oh, we’re at the second training field. Wait there, I’ll come get you.” She asked where he was specifically then hung up.

A short time later Su Xiaosu came running up to him. She was also in the Division’s flight suit, and it certainly treated her well. Lan Jue was surprised to feel her acting like he hadn’t seen since she was the Moonfiend Empress. It seemed giving her command of the Division had brought back that old fire.

“You’re looking well.” Lan Jue said with a smile. Seeing her like this also made him feel better. He knew the Division was in excellent hands.

Su Xiaosu answered with a smile of her own. “Not just me, everyone is doing great. The troops have improved, and I think I can honestly that the Division can outperform all those fleets out there. Of course, including the Paragons.”

Lan Jue nodded. “The soldiers, then? Why don’t I see anybody?”

“Come with me,” she said. “They’re training in the second field.”

Lan Jue hadn’t come to the area An Lun had set up for Star Division, this was his first visit. Su Xiaosu quickly led him to the second field. When he arrived he understood why things were so quiet.

He stood in a spotlessly white warehouse filled with sim pods. They were the upgraded DreamNet pods, and each one of them had the red flame of Star Division painted on the side. The sheer amount of resources that must have gone in to acquiring all of these was staggering to think about.

The troops were logged in, training.

Of course! How could he forget? Lan Jue slapped his forehead. In both Discipline and mecha piloting his soldiers were among the best. The sheer amount of destruction they could cause, even by accident, was too much to

risk. A thousand Adepts in their suits would have torn up the bastion's surface.

After DreamNet's upgrade they could employ their Disciplines in the simulation, and didn't need to hold back when training with their mecha suits. This was the advantage to having a warehouse full of new pods.

Chapter 775: The Mighty Star Division

Safety concerns were just as true for mechas as they were for Adepts. In DreamNet it was almost impossible to tell the distinction between simulation and reality, even when piloting a suit. What's more, no one needed to fear accidents, safety was assured. DreamNet was undoubtedly the most suitable place for Star Division to train.

"How is the training going?" He asked Su Xiaosu.

She responded. "Very well. It was like the upgrade was tailor-made for us. The simulation is precisely what they would encounter in real life, even emulating levels of exhaustion. Training at full capacity their progress has been spectacular. Some of our people are god-ranked pilots already – one fourth of them, to be precise. And it's not just me saying it, boss. You may not be the best pilot in the crew anymore."

Lan Jue smirked. "That good, eh? That's excellent news."

Su Xiaosu stared at him. "Why do I get the sense you don't believe me?"

Lan Jue was playful in his reply. "Oh, it's not that I don't believe you! But to make sure don't you think we should test that out?" He was anxious to see whether their progress really was as good as she was saying. If it was they would perform well when their time came to infiltrate the planet. Once he was familiar with their strengths and limitations he could put them to most efficient use when the fight started.

"Alright!" She replied without hesitation. She brought Lan Jue to an open sim pod and had him enter. She then returned to her own.

Lan Jue deftly entered his login information. He wasn't playing with Newblet or any training mecha today. He would be piloting DreamNet's version of Thor. Of course this was an older version, sans the upgrades the real Thor enjoyed. In addition DreamNet could not handle any protogenic powers.

The technology that went into this upgrade was astounding. Not an ounce of energy users poured into the pod was wasted. It was also

equipped with an energy recycling system that stored charges from Discipline for portable use, like on a bastion. A single person using a single pod wouldn't generate much, but a thousand high-class Adepts together could create quite a stockpile.

It was a positive cycle.

Lan Jue re-familiarized himself with Thor's controls, testing the waters. Everything was as fluid as it always had been, and he felt comfortable even after so long away from the simulated world.

"Boss." Su Xiaosu's voice caught his attention.

"I'm here." He answered.

She went on. "How about I gather a small group for you to spar with, so you can see what I'm talking about."

Lan Jue chuckled. "Alright! But do you think a small team can compete? Perhaps you should make it a little bigger." He wasn't being boastful, he knew his own capabilities. At his level of mastery the number of opponents hardly mattered anymore, especially against less skillful contenders.

Lan Jue was a God-ranked pilot. With the evolution and improvement of his Discipline his body had also developed. He suspected his hand speed was about as good as the 'fastest hands alive', the Coffee Master. He could easily top one hundred commands per second. Once a pilot was able to reach those kinds of speeds all manner of complicated techniques were open to them. He was also a ninth level Talent. All things considered, he suspected that even if the Clairvoyant came back from the dead and came at him with his old mecha, he would stand more than a fighting chance.

Lan Jue was also well versed in martial arts, another style which could be employed with mecha suits. He'd tried it before with some success.

"We'll start with a small team then go from there. Boss, you mustn't hold back alright?" Su Xiaosu urged. Her mirthful voice sounded a little sinister.

"Alright, bring it on."

No sooner did he say the words than an invitation to spar popped up on his screens. He accepted, and half a moment later Thor was standing in a large arena. It was a standard competition-style battleground.

Head to head... at least they're confident. Lan Jue smirked to himself in the sim pod.

There was a flash of light, and ten more mecha suits appeared on the far side of the arena. They came in all different shapes and sizes, with the only similarity being the Star Division flame standing out against the metal.

Star Division received tremendous support, not only from Skyfire Avenue but from the Eastern government itself. All of their pilot data was stored on DreamNet, so as a result they were given two sets of mechas made specifically for them. One was for use out in the real world, and the second was for DreamNet. The two were exactly the same.

Lan Jue urged Thor to wave at the distant competitors. "Come!"

Their formation seemed sloppy, but the moment they saw Thor they shaped up. They raced at him in a semi-circle to try and surround the sapphire mecha.

Nothing special? Lan Jue mused. At first glance it didn't even look like they were working well together. They approached all at different speeds, but all of them seemed built for melee combat. There wasn't a single long-range fighter among them.

Lan Jue felt an excitement boiling within him. He had spent so many days in silence with Qianlin, stabilizing his Discipline. It was time to make a little noise.

He wasn't yet using his Discipline, but Thor raced ahead like a thunderbolt regardless. He made no overtures to juke or break the encirclement – he charged right in.

Lan Jue had great confidence in his piloting ability, a confidence that came from years of experience. Even if he was facing ten times the number of suits he was sure he could handle them easily. Thor would

weave among them like a fish darting through water and destroy his adversaries.

Thor was fast, blasted ahead like a beam of light. In no time it reached met the small team. The first one Thor encountered was a larger mecha, a kind he'd never seen before. It was at least twice as large as Thor.

A large size meant more energy, power and weight. But it also typically made this sort of suit cumbersome to pilot. Heavy attackers all suffered from this deficiency.

Appearing right in the midst of them so suddenly was also Lan Jue's attempt at seeing how they'd react. In a flash it vanished again and appeared at their flank. A sword crackling with electric energy was in its grip – Lan Jue's new preferred weapon.

He couldn't use Occisus in the simulation, obviously. But now that he'd chosen to use it in real combat, it was also his weapon of choice in DreamNet.

He thrust forward, aiming for the mecha's armpit. From here the sword would slip right through the armor and into the opponent's cockpit, immediately putting the suit out of commission.

Even such a simple strike was made very dangerous because of Lan Jue's speed.

The other team members saw it from a different perspective. The blue beam of light that was Thor appeared suddenly in front of their team leader. Then, leaving behind a warped afterimage, their target swept sideways and stabbed at their comrade.

But the expected did not occur.

His sword hit its target, but Lan Jue immediately felt like something wasn't right. He didn't sense any obstruction, his sword sliding in all the way to the hilt. This definitely was not normal.

He hadn't used any Discipline, and this sword wasn't especially sharp. What about the suit's shields? How could his attack have landed so easily?

As he pondered the enormous suit toppled on top of him like a corpse. Accompanying it was a powerful vacuum force that came from nowhere. In the same instant the other nine suits fell upon him like a swarm, suddenly several times faster than they had been.

The disjointed unit was suddenly on him, a circle of metal suits that gave him no route of escape.

Surround and destroy?

Lan Jue's smile spread bigger. They had a plan after all.

The large mecha was also changing. After falling it had actually started to get larger, trying to keep Thor pinned. His sword and half his suit's arm was stuck in the expanding trap. This thing seemed less like a suit and more like an ooze. Lan Jue was slowly being devoured by it.

What a unique suit! Liquid metal?

Lan Jue had to make a decision. He was in a dangerous spot, but even now he was not alarmed. He'd seen a lot on the battlefield, and though they had taken him by surprise this wasn't going to throw him.

Thor's body lit up as bolts of electricity shot out in all directions. A sound like thunder burst out from the suit, the sound of its shields. Lan Jue's mecha was God-ranked, hand-built. Of course it had its own tricks to employ.

The electric wave tearing through the air in the midst of the explosion caused the incoming mechas to pause. Lan Jue used the brief respite to get Thor free. The suit dissolves into a flash of lightning and rose, tearing itself from clutches of the hulking lump of metal keeping it down.

Chapter 776: Sparring

Lan Jue's face betrayed the ghost of a smile and his fingers danced over the controls like flowing water. Thor moved so fast its image blurred, breaking through a gap in their encirclement before soaring into the air.

But Lan Jue didn't escape without cost. The sword Thor bore had been buried too deeply in the liquid metal mecha, and he'd been unable to pull it free. Said mecha reformed into its typical portly form before crouching low. The other attackers quickly spread out, unperturbed by Lan Jue's escape.

Star Division's commander didn't press the attack. He was more interested in seeing how well this team worked together, how strong they'd become. Their opening gambit had been pretty good. If he had been slower, if it wasn't for Thor's superior construction, that fat mecha would have gotten him.

Lan Jue wasn't given much time to think about it. The large mecha suddenly launched itself into the air like a cannonball, heading straight for him. In response he pulled Thor to the side to try and dodge – one could imagine the damage something that heavy could do, even if it clipped you.

But just then Lan Jue felt the controls grow sluggish. Though he dodged the fat mecha's charge something had set him off balance. His sapphire mecha staggered in the air. He instinctively looked to the ground where he found another mecha who'd captured him in a beam of yellow light.

Gravity capture, he suddenly understood. The Adept below was using their gravity Discipline to try and pin Thor down. But it was still the fat mecha that surprised him most. Hovering behind him in the air it underwent a tremendous transformation.

Its lumbering body compressed, changing from a silvery soldier to an angry violet orb. Tentacles lurched out from within it and tried to wrap around Thor.

An alien planet?

He was flabbergasted, it was the last thing Lan Jue expected to see. Could an alien planet just appear here? His shock and alarm took its toll, Thor hesitated. Another mecha appeared over his head, while the one that had been dragging him from below vanished.

The sudden change in the gravitational field put him off balance again. He pulled Thor around and urged the sapphire mecha toward the ground. But, just then, an explosion burst from above him. A rush of air struck his Thor, sending it careening out of control right for the liquid metal warrior.

Alright guys, time for my Discipline.

Violet tentacles groped at Thor, ready to wrap him up. Lan Jue was forced to employ his Discipline. At just the right instant a blue light sprang up from within the mecha to create a net of electricity around it. The airburst behind it was cut off, and the tentacles in front met a wall of lightning.

Thor descending toward the ground and extricated itself from between its foes.

Fighting in the air against a gravity Adept was inadvisable. Although the Discipline didn't effect Lan Jue much, its effects were significantly magnified against Thor's weighty body and made control much more difficult. On the ground the adverse effects wouldn't be as dramatic.

He had to deal with the enemy's battlefield control first. He came up with a plan.

Opponents who could control the flow of battle were the most troublesome. Through their skills they broke one's rhythm and forced them to fight on their own terms. The fight was already ten on one, making his position even more precarious. So, Lan Jue's first target was that gravity-manipulating Adept.

Thor slowed as it reached the ground – a result of increased gravity. Clearly this Adept was pretty strong, ninth rank he suspected. Anything less wouldn't be effecting him so dramatically.

Lan Jue figured it out, but by now it was already too late to use the

information. His only course was to reach the ground and deal with the Adept with his lightning Discipline, in order for Thor to be able to use its speed advantage.

Lan Jue was heading right for his target, but all of a sudden his path was blocked by another. A large mecha appeared with a mighty shield between it and Thor.

Thor suddenly sped up and punched at the shield with a fist. A sword constructed of amalgamated lightning burnt into being within its free hand. Making a weapon with his Discipline was no difficult feat for the Demon Drillmaster.

Boom! Thor laid into the shield with the full force of its weight behind it, but the shield bearer only retreated half a step. He watched the shield undergo three changes in rapid succession; first it shook, bent, then snapped back into shape.

The expertly timed flexibility diffused Thor's attack. What's more, it stopped the mecha in its tracks.

Impressive shield control.

He only had a moment to appreciate the skill before a blinding light and teeth-clenching impact struck.

Lan Jue had only just coalesced his powers into the shape of the sword, so Thor would need a moment before the weapon could be employed. Evidently his opponent had planned for this and was ready. His foe would not be thrown aside.

But Thor staggered backward a few steps.

Meanwhile, the 'alien planet' above them descended to join the fight. The others mechas surrounded him again.

Lan Jue figured the shape-shifting orb of metal was his wretched apprentice. There were others besides him who's Disciplines involved metalmorphosis, but none so crafty as to know that changing into an alien would frighten his opponents and give him an edge.

The one who got him with the sneak attack in the air had to be an Adept with control over air. Their mecha piloting abilities were stellar, he hadn't seen the attack coming until he was right on top of him.

The door in front of him had also left an impression. Crowd control and shield defense. The defender's Discipline had to involve the shield somehow, otherwise they wouldn't have such precise control.

Screech! The ear-splitting sound of an alarm filled the cockpit. Lan Jue's screens were reading an energy systems crash.

"What?" Lan Jue looked at the error messages, which told him the energy transfer line had been cut. Thirty percent of Thor's energy was gone.

Cloaking! His fifth enemy had the ability to make themselves invisible – their whole suit invisible. But that was impossible! Did the mecha have a cloaking system as well?

He had to react. Thor split into identical copies, each one going a different direction. Ghosting. The invisible opponent just made this fight much harder.

One on one things would have been different Lan Jue would be able to make quick determinations and enact a plan. But this wasn't one on one! There were ten enemies, and each of them were formidable. With all this support the cloaking mecha had plenty of opportunities to make his life hell.

He suddenly realized Su Xiaosu must have cheated him.

This couldn't be a single unit. All of them were at least ninth level – what team had so many strong adepts? It's was the only way to explain how much trouble he was having.

But I hope you don't think you're beating me.

Lan Jue grunted, and he drew his electric sword through the in air a circle. Both Thors performed the same action to separate itself from the series of successive attacks.

One of the double images vanished, revealing only the true form. He thrust forward with his sword, and the arena shook from the sound of crashing waves.

Focused flow!

As he struck with the weapon, Thor seemed to enter an entirely different state. It sparkled with a deep blue light like it had suddenly become a living gemstone.

To his opponents, it felt as though the air had turned thick like mud. Their speed suffered markedly. Although Thor pierced only the air with its weapon, to the other pilots it felt like that sword was coming right at them.

Everyone felt it, powerful and overbearing. A beam of blinding light was spat from the crackling weapon that drew all the light from the blade itself, leaving it a deep cobalt blue.

All at once the arena looked as though it was submerged in water, everything was painted that shade of blue. Waves of energy crashed through the opposing mechas.

Discipline and martial arts. It doesn't matter if your Disciplines change a thousand times, I'd still keep you down with this. Direct strength overcomes!

This is all he did. But then something happened he did not expect.

After a moment of surprise his enemies reacted. They were slower but could still move – after all they were ninth level Adepts with mechas that enhanced their abilities.

Chapter 777: Pleasant Surprises

A blinding light erupted from behind the mecha with the shield as its thrusters sparked to life. Its shield also flared with illumination, and emerging through the blaze was a bright yellow tiger's head.

A wave of vigorous energy answered Lan Jue's own, as lofty and indomitable as a mountain. Behind the glare was the fat mecha, almost certainly piloted by Tang Xiao. He'd transformed back from the alien planet to a standard mecha shape and hid behind the defender. All other members of their team quickly followed and lined up for protection.

Gravity went wild. One moment it was almost too much for him to move his arms, the next he was completely weightless. The constant, erratic changes were making it impossible to control Thor in its descent toward the line of contenders.

A figure suddenly appeared behind him. The deadly glint of a swiping dagger was coming at him again, aiming for another energy transfer pipe.

Thor's armor and shields were impressive. How else could they get past his defenses unless by sneak attack? His opponent knew it too, so they had no delusions of destroying Thor outright. Evidently their plan was to cripple him, and give their companions an opportunity to land more devastating blows.

The speed of these fighters was top-notch.

Lan Jue acted as though he didn't see the mecha from behind, and did not immediately react. Thor's sword was pointed firmly ahead toward the others. But just as the blow was about to land Thor seemed to give in to the gravity and dipped – just enough to avoid the deadly daggers.

Ting! Thor's sword rang against the metal shield. At it did the tiger emblazoned on the shield grew clearer, and almost seemed to move like it was biting at the sword.

Unfortunately for the shieldbearer a surge of energy burst from Thor's weapon, submerging the tiger in electric power and eventually swallowing

up the mecha that bore it.

It was immediately consumed, leaving no trace behind.

The team's defender was no more.

Next Thor swung its left fist backward, as though for a wild punch. Yet a dragging vacuum force sprang up from behind. It was strong enough to nearly freeze the sneak attacker, just enough for Thor's fist – flickering with black and white power – to come crashing into it.

Boom–! The cloaking mecha exploded, filling the air with thunderous noise and shards of smoldering metal. Two opponents down, but they could take solace in the fact that their loss wasn't a deficiency of skill. It was due to the enormous difference in Discipline. Lan Jue's peak-ranked power, Thor's outrageous construction, and his martial arts knowledge had turned the tide of battle. Lan Jue managed to defeat the most menacing of his enemies, the cloaker. Focused flow All-Heaven lightning removed their shieldbearer from the equation.

The advantage of strength was revealed.

Thor continued to power forward, through where the defender had been, following the course of the sword as it headed for the fat mecha. The sounds of crashing waves grew louder.

Momentum was focused flow's strong suit. It struck with the strength and consistency of mighty ocean waves. Just like the ebb and flow of the tide, Lan Jue's next attack came on the heels of the first.

The large mecha didn't try to dodge. In fact, it couldn't. Instead it lunged forward to meet the electric blade without hesitation.

Liquid metal can't survive All-Heaven lightning, why is he acting stupid? Lan Jue silently chastised. But when he saw his disciple dissolve into a puddle of mush and avoid the strike he didn't know whether to laugh or curse.

If he hadn't had to spin around and deal with the sneak attacker he could have focused on the sword, becoming one with the technique. But as it stood his flow had been broken as had his forward momentum. Of

course, part of the reason he had to stop was for fear of being stuck in the puddle of student beneath his feet.

The floor of the arena was metal, and under Tang Xiao's direction it turned to sludge below Thor. In the same instant a crushing gravitational pressure pressed down from above, hastening its sinking.

Even Lan Jue had to admit the team of Tang Xiao and this gravity Adept was something to behold.

Now the other mechas were coming in to attack. However, it was evident that Thor's display of power had frightening them and changed their tactics. If they didn't go all out now, they may not have another chance.

Two reached him first. One of them was shaped like a beast and lunged at him without a sound.

Good job, kid. It was Jin Tao, Lan Jue noted. From the beginning he had been hiding behind the others, hiding his presence from his teacher. Now he burst out, holding nothing back.

He chopped with his sword, while in the same moment channeling his Discipline through Thor's feet. The fluid metal holding him down fractured into minute splinters.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes as the electric light of his blade carved through the air, right for Jin Tao. But just as it looked like the lion-shaped mecha would be put down, it suddenly shivered and split into two, completely avoiding the strike.

Ghosting? Jin Tao's that fast?

That technique was something only god-level pilots could pull off, and Jin Tao already seemed to have a good grasp on it. It was no accident he used it in just that moment.

Impressive job kid, you're improving quickly! In a flash the metal lion was within clawing distance. Both images closed in on him from either side.

Lan Jue was adept at ghosting, and knew its benefits. Thor took a step

back and whipped its sword around in a circle – Taiji sword style.

Jin Tao only felt the energy in front of him change, and half a breath later his mecha could hardly move. He saw himself moving toward the arc of the electric blade almost in slow motion.

With a deep and guttural roar Jin Tao's mecha fused back into one and reached out with its claws. A golden light burst from within him and spread out in a corona of light. The force of it wrenched him free from Thor's control. Its two front appendages, claws glinting, tore toward Thor's head.

Lan Jue was positioned just right to thrust his weapon into the lion's chest.

Jin Tao did not dodge. His name, the Frenzied Lion Mastiff, was not given in vain. In every fight he viciously fought in the face of death. His opponents feared him. What's more he was an expert at close combat, and it could be said he was the hardest soldier in Star Division.

If Lan Jue went ahead with the thrust it would leave him open to Jin Tao's claws. He would hit his mark, but not without being punished for it.

Lan Jue didn't back down, he had faith in the strength of his Discipline. He saw that Jin Tao wasn't going to retreat either. The young man was assured his ferocity and outright strength would shake his opponent to their core.

The lightning sword slipped into the lion's chest, its doughty armor was no match for All-Heaven lightning. As electric light coursed into the mecha he could see it struggling.

But in a move that shocked the Jewelry Master, the lion mecha's claws blasted off at the wrists and toward either side of Thor's head. If it was just Lan Jue he could easily have dodge the surprise attack, but Thor was less nimble. By the time he was preparing the mecha to react, it was already too late.

Bang-bang! The two blows, one on top of the other, caused Thor to shake. The lion's claws were lodged on either side of its head.

“Not good!” Lan Jue muttered to himself.

He barely got the words out before a bone-jarring explosion erupted above him. The claws’ explosions were so intense it actually knocked the other mechas back a few steps.

Thor, of course, got the worst of it. In this critical moment Lan Jue didn’t hold back and reached out with the full breadth of his lightning Discipline to try and mitigate the concussive damage.

But it was too quick. Thor’s head and shoulders were a mangled wreck. Thankfully his Discipline had saved the cockpit.

Insane. That was the only words he had to describe his disciple.

Little more than half of his mecha remained, but Lan Jue wasn’t out of the fight yet. Thor sprang to its feet and lashed out with its sword. The movement birthed a hail of electric bolts that covered the ground. Tang Xiao’s slippery mecha was instantly shot full of holes.

Liquid metal twice as strong would be no match for All-Heaven lightning! Tang Xiao was taken out of the fight.

Like a demon-possessed corpse Thor flailed. The unstoppable power of focused flow tore erratically across the battlefield. All of the remaining mechas were annihilated, but in the end more than forty percent of Thor had been obliterated.

Their tactics had been strange, but Lan Jue could tell his opponents weren’t working wholly in unison. If they had, things would have turned out worse for him.

There was a flash, and Thor’s lumbering remains appeared outside the ring. The pilots he’d battled against were waiting.

“Professor!” Tang Xiao’s beaming face met him.

“Professor!” Jin Tao’s happy greeting was half a second behind.

Lan Jue grunted. “I see how it is! It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you two, and this is how you greet me?”

Chapter 778: Guardian Angel

“Heh heh!” Tang Xiao chortled. “We just wanted to show off a bit for you, Professor. We haven’t been lazy! You should blame Jin Tao, he’s overzealous. It was him who damaged your mecha.”

Lan Jue also chuckled. “Enough finger-pointing, tell the truth. The claw thing was your suggestion.”

Jin Tao spoke up without giving Tang Xiao a chance to answer. “Professor is so wise!”

Tang Xiao yelped at the injustice. “I’m not responsible for everything bad!”

Lan Jue scowled at him. “If not you, then who? You’re right, you both have improved quite a lot lately, it was I who was lacking. I haven’t been around to guide you. Later I’ll make sure to direct your cultivation.” As he spoke, an insidious grin spread across his face.

Never mind Tang Xiao, the markedly tougher Jin Tao also shook at the prospect. “Professor, we have cultivation to attend to. We have to go.”

The two of them fled, with the others from their team in hot pursuit. The Demon Drillmaster’s particular brand of instruction was well known throughout Star Division. They weren’t anxious to experience it unnecessarily!

“Boss,” Su Xiaosu’s voice interrupted. “Are they up to your standards?”

Lan Jue looked her way. “They were one unit?”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “Leaders from ten units, but I didn’t have a choice. Everyone wanted a chance to spar with you when they heard you were here. I had to pick the best representatives. Their cooperation was less than perfect, as I’m sure you noticed.”

Lan Jue watched his soldiers as they fled. “They have pretty good battlefield experience. That puts me at ease.” Indeed he could tell that group only just started working together. However, although their teamwork could use some polish, they were still able to play off each

other's strengths. A battle rhythm can't be rehearsed, it comes through cooperation. That was the only way to kick their efficacy up to a new level.

With this in mind Lan Jue was very pleased with the result. If all of Star Division's unit leaders were like them, his group of fighters was in excellent shape.

"Let's go," Lan Jue said to her. "I want to look in on their training."

Su Xiaosu led him to another area. He didn't join them, but instead looked down from his bird's eye vantage as they drilled below. He could tell at a glance that the individual units' tactics had been trained into their marrow. Surprisingly, this training area was a lot like Monteux, complete with simulated alien foes.

These sorts of war games were especially helpful for Star Division. They must have recorded the environmental data of Monteux and the aliens themselves to use in their training, so that it was as true to the real thing as possible. It was clear this hard work over the last few days was a result of their passion and resolve.

As he looked down from on high, the battlefield was like a raging fire that spread out in all directions. His soldiers were stable, methodical, and worked well with their brothers and sisters in other units. Close-range and long-range specialists were well coordinated. Then there were support fighters and their myriad abilities which counteracted alien attacks.

"It looks like there are even more aliens than when we were really on Monteux!" Lan Jue swept his eyes over the horizon.

Su Xiaosu confirmed. "Yes, by quite a lot. This is a prerequisite for this maneuver. The more pressing the odds, the more likely they are to fight to their full potential. Anyway, who's to say how many enemies we'll face when the real fight begins? Right now they're simulating a situation where they have to fight a vastly stronger enemy force on limited energy reserves to see how long they can hold out. I think it's very useful for them."

Lan Jue nodded in agreement. "Very good. It's also integral that they learn as much as they can about alien fighting styles. You all have been working hard."

Xiaosu beamed at Lan Jue. All of their progress was, of course, under her direction.

Lan Jue looked back down at the others. “Our offensive begins in forty-eight hours. Let them rest for the last twelve hours before we’re dispatched. No training, let them regain their strength. We want them to be in top shape to avoid casualties. I won’t be commanding them in the beginning, Xiaosu. I need you to do that for me.”

“Of course, boss!” She responded without hesitation.

Lan Jue left without interrupting his soldiers’ hard work. He was impressed by what he saw, pleased by progress he hadn’t anticipated. He was even more confident of their chances now, when the final hour arrived.

He wasn’t privy to all of Lan Qing’s plans, there were some aspects of the assault he wasn’t clear on. He didn’t know anything about how he intended to face the creatures outside the planet. Lan Jue wouldn’t be involved in that part. Most importantly for him was taking care of what he was responsible for.

When he returned to his cabin, Lan Jue looked more relaxed than when he’d left. Qianlin was seated on the bed in silent meditation. A pale white light hung over her. It wasn’t bright, but thick with mystical energy like the aura of an immortal.

Lan Jue walked over to her side and sat, but did not meditate. Instead he just sat there and watched her.

Lately the sense of manifest destiny pushing things along had followed him wherever he went. Everything the Clairvoyant had told them had come to pass, all but the end result. Lan Jue had been striving now for a long time to help humanity’s chances. For his friends, for Qianlin. No effort would be spared to save them from a gruesome death at the hands of a heartless enemy.

I dragged Qianlin into this, he thought. But she isn’t the only one – everyone’s affected. Everyone must be considered. She will be safe by my side.

After some time, seated cross-legged across from her, Lan Jue also slipped into a meditative state. These last few days he had refrained from cultivating with her, since they were both at the border of ninth level. If they continued to work together as they had, it was likely neither would be able to hold back their breakthrough. It was better to work independently to stabilize their own Disciplines and prepare for that fateful moment. They had to hold back as long as they could to get the best result.

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Two days passed quickly. For forty-eight hours a strange calm settled over the human armada, although troops moved consistently from one place to another. On the eve of the attack Lan Qing had his people within view of a mid-sized planet in the outskirts of Europa's system.

He moved like this to keep the aliens guessing and confound their planning. If they didn't know what the humans were up to they couldn't formulate a plan of defense. Lan Qing also knew that many aliens were hiding on the far side of the planet, a fact he wouldn't be aware of were it not for Lan Jue's scouting data.

Forty-eight hours may have sounded like plenty of time at first, but the soldiers soon found the time vanished like a message written in water. Their preparations were done quietly and orders were often given in person to prevent interception by enemy forces.

Each division, brigade and unit was only given enough information to perform their part of the plan. Only a select few had all of the information.

Zeus-1 quietly slipped out of Middle Heaven's hangar. The moment it was free of the small planet's orbit the ship engaged its Blinding Stone. Aboard were all of the Paragons who were to participate in the operation, as well as Lan Jue and Qianlin. Zeus' Amazons were responsible for piloting the vessel.

Everyone's face was hard and solemn. For good reason – the task before them was daunting, perhaps more important than any other part of the plan. The main force could retreat if the situation started to sour. Lan Jue

and his people didn't have that luxury.

Several days had passed since their last scout mission, and it was impossible to know how many survivors remained on the planet before them. But Lan Jue held out hope that there would still be many lives to save. Innocent humans were being kept as hostages, as experiments, harvested for their genetic material. They would be saved, even the ones that had been twisted by the poison of the progenitors.

Zeus-1 approached the planet from the side. A direct assault would result in failure. There were too many aliens for that to succeed. They had to slip in, and avoid psionic detection to the best of their abilities.

The planet that was chosen had an auspicious name; Angel. Snow covered vast swaths of its frigid land mass, which was shaped like a seraph with its wings spread wide. Sadly, its once pure white hue had been corrupted and stained purple.

The second part of Lan Qing's plan had a code name. He called it operation Guardian Angel.

Zeus-1 approached at a forty-five degree angle relative to the armada. It came to a stop when it got close and cut all electronic systems. There, in darkness and silence, it quietly waited for its chance.

Jue Di had not come with them. He was strong enough that there was no need for him to use a spaceship. He had left before them to prepare, for he was responsible for taking three of the planets by himself. No one knew how he intended to do it, but everyone had faith that he would succeed.

Chapter 779: Again the Main Guns Brighten

Lan Jue sat quietly aboard his ship, looking out at Angel through the window. Qianlin sat behind him with dull expression, although from time to time her eyes would flit his way. She had come to rely on him, and when he wasn't around she was visibly agitated.

Lan Jue's team, Team Three, was led by the Photographer. Under her command, besides Lan Jue and qianlin, were the Arhat of the Descending Dragon, the Driver, the Harbinger Faerie, and the Gourmet – seven people altogether.

Zeus-1 would drop them off on Angel first before moving on to the other planets. Because of Angel's importance to their overall battle plan, they would be dispatched first. They were just waiting for their moment.

The Driver made his way over to Lan Jue's side. "Are you nervous?" He asked quietly.

Lan Jue cast him a sideways glance. "Are you?"

His friend chuckled in response, his words heavy with pride. "Don't forget my name – I'm the Driver! I've been chasing adrenaline my whole life. It doesn't look like there'll be a more heart-pounding mission for me to participate in for all the rest of my days. I'm thrilled. If you're scared big brother can intervene, ask the Photographer to leave you behind."

"We're all going!" Lan Jue quickly retorted in irritation.

The Driver sat beside him. "My only regret is never having found a wife. I was always looking for the next adventure, keeping women at arm's length. Ah..."

"Are you afraid you won't be coming back?" Lan Jue asked.

The Driver shook his head. "Whether I do or not isn't an issue, really. I just wish I had a son of my own. Someone to pass my skills on to from a young age. I would have trained him to be the greatest Driver in the

universe. Who knows whether that day will ever come.”

Lan Jue shrugged. “Who’s to say it won’t? On the contrary, it must. Did you think you would be a Paragon one day? Now you are, what does that tell you?”

The Driver laughed gently. “This is true. You know these ladies that follow you around are quite something! When did you plan on introducing one to me?”

Lan Jue stared at him flatly. “You have a mouth, introduce yourself and leave me out of it.” Introducing other men... it would spell the death of him. Those ladies were already nursing hefty resentments against him, Lan Jue didn’t dare even think about offending them again. If they survived this fight then he would have to find a way to solve his women problems, but they had to live first. Thinking about it made his head hurt. These weren’t the old days, when having many wives was common practice. He couldn’t just wed them all, nor was he such a man.

At this time Luo Xianni also came wandering over. “What are you two young gentlemen talking about?” She asked. Outwardly she didn’t look much older than either of them, but they knew the truth.

He glanced at her and chuckled. “Auntie, we’re talking about having children.”

Her eyes immediately lit up. “Children? Children are wonderful! A-Jue, have you decided to have kids soon? You should, quickly and en mass. I’ll help look after them, I’d love the opportunity since I’ve never had any of my own.”

Lan Jue cast his adoptive mother a helpless look. “Alright, alright – at least wait to see if we live through this fight.” He didn’t dare tell her the prospect of her looking after his kids worried him. Without question the sentiment would not go over well.

“Eh?” She said suddenly. “It’s starting?”

Lan Jue’s pupils contracted. He shot to his feet and peered out the window toward the armada. Just as she said twelve ships had separated

from the others. They weren't moving forward, but instead were spreading out. Middle Heaven was in the lead, a bright spot against a deep black backdrop.

The twelve ships followed as the East's bastion pressed forward.

The other two bastions – Poseidon and Tyrannosaurus – were on the move as well. They slowly moved forward in a triangular formation with Middle Heaven in the front and the support ships filling in the spaces in between.

They weren't fast. On the contrary, they moved at a snail's pace, but ever forward toward their destination. It filled everyone with a suffocating sense of pressure, like a rolling war machine that promised to crush anything before it into dust.

The aliens reacted, with beasts surging toward the planet from all directions. They also arranged in formation. It was then a strange scene emerged.

A thick and impenetrable mist gushed out around them – a violet smokescreen that was belched from beasts that looked like mutated pufferfish. They waddled to the front lines with their big bellies and spat the smog before the arrayed defenders. It took only a few moments before everything was lost in a purple haze.

The Keeper stared at the spectacle with furrowed brow. "This smoke likely isn't just to hide their positions. It will affect our radar systems, too."

Zeus-1 was still keeping its position secret, so its systems were still offline, including radar. However the Keeper's hypothesis was sound, and they knew enough about their cunning foe to know their actions were anything but random. There was a reason for this.

As time stretched on even Angel disappeared in the poisonous fog. A vast swath of space was hidden from view.

But the human armada made no signs of stopping. They advanced with the same slow, indomitable pace. Middle Heaven revealed its honeycomb of guns once more, their barrels glowing ominously.

As it had shown before, Middle Heaven could use this barrels to launch itself backward and out of harm's way. This time the rest of the human army was spread out behind it like the wings of a swallow, with nothing behind it. This meant Middle Heaven could advance and retreat at a moment's notice.

Meanwhile the smog was only growing thicker. It billowed like a cloud of cosmic dust that no human instruments were able to penetrate. Indeed the aliens had many tricks up their sleeves, and this was one they'd never encountered before. It was a tactics well suited to their weak ranged fighting capabilities.

Human ships could not see the enemy, nor could their systems get a lock on any target. The advantage of their ranged guns was severely curtailed.

"Admiral, sir! All of our scanning and targeting systems are unable to penetrate the fog. Our guns can't find their targets." Lan Qing and his people discovered the problem quickly.

He nodded. "Keep our scanners up, stick to the plan."

"Aye, aye!"

Lan Jue was seated behind his desk in the control center, with a hundred soldiers busily checking systems all around. Middle Heaven was different from traditional bastions. The Admiral was, of course, responsible for all of the ship's final decisions. However, he also personally managed several of the ship's systems. The control board in front of Lan Qing was large and complicated.

The opposing sides were drawing nearer by the second, and human ships had all begun to shine as their weapons were charged. The battle was about to begin any moment. Yet the humans could no longer see any sign of their enemy through the fog.

Lan Qing spoke through the special communications channel they'd set up. "Begin!"

"Aye, aye!"

With his calm command Middle Heaven's myriad guns blazed orange in

much the same way it had before. The aliens, meanwhile, remained a mystery though there was no sign of movement. They hid behind the screen, seemingly unperturbed by the threat of Middle Heaven's weapons. Their bastion's guns would strike the planet first, and the explosion of a planet would obliterate anything near it – including the humans. What's more, the aliens were sure their attackers wouldn't put their own planet in danger.

Judging solely by Middle Heaven's size, its main guns were more than likely capable of destroying a planet. The aliens believed this without a shadow of a doubt. This was their reasoning behind using the planet as a shield.

If their leaders decided to cast out their misgivings and destroy the planet, the morale of their people would collapse. It would be pointless anyway, because the humans could not know the location of the home worlds behind the seven planets. If they dared to push through they would be surrounded and summarily destroyed. The power of the home worlds had been revealed to the stubborn humans more than once.

Finally, Middle Heaven slowly came to a halt a short distance behind where it had been during its first attack, though still within firing distance. The aliens did not rush to meet them. They just waited... waited for their prey to come closer.

If the humans fled from the mist that would serve their purposes just as well. They would not pursue them. Their main objective was to stall for time, so they did not rush to engage.

Suddenly Middle Heaven lit up – more accurately, its guns flared to life. A wall of angry red energy burst forth. They fired without pretense, not in a sustained stream but instead as a hail of energized orbs. They sizzled and burned as they made their way toward Angel.

Without question, this was Middle Heaven's main weapon.

Were the humans really going to disregard the safety of their own planet?

Because Zeus-1 was position closer to the side of the planet, Lan Jue

could spy some of the condition behind the mist. He saw the aliens moving erratically as the orbs neared.

Chapter 780: Circular Attack

Of course, no alien was interested in facing a bastion's main gun! They quickly moved to the sides, trying to avoid Middle Heaven's attack.

Kang Hui, who had been seated behind the control board in Tyrannosaurus, shot to his feet when he saw the red orbs. He thought he knew the plan, but it didn't involve attacking one of their own planets!

Wasn't the plan to use their ranged advantage to weaken the enemy? Why, then, would Lan Qing use his main guns right out of the gate? It was completely different than what they'd discussed!

He didn't know the full scope of Middle Heaven's capabilities, but he could guess. Lan Qing's confidence in it, he had to assume the East's bastion was formidable.

Angel would be no more.

Angel wasn't a particularly large planet. If Middle Heaven's blast didn't outright destroy it, at the very least the damage would be apocalyptic. It would likely never recover or be used for human habitation ever again.

Yet as he watched, a scene unexpected by all revealed itself. As the orbs reached the halfway point between the bastion and the planet, they changed. Where they had been tightly packed spheres of energy, now they began to break apart.

Their angry red light flared brighter, like the corona of light from a space ship's engines. At first it was kept close but soon spread out as the orbs themselves vanished into nothing.

All of that for nothing? Was Middle Heaven really so useless? Doubt filled the minds of those who looked on, let down by the spectacle. The aliens were just as confused.

But the truth was quickly revealed. Indeed the individual orbs had dissolved, but that didn't mean their energy had dissipated. The many tightly compacted salvos of energy had broken apart and merged into a sweeping blast of power.

The scope of it had obviously been precisely calculated. As it collided with the wall of mist a magnificent display was revealed to the human spectators.

A breadth of misty space was burned away in a circular shape. A red light burned at the borders that disappeared as the mist receded. Then, with a burst of light and an ear-splitting roar, an explosion of red light emerged. It was so bright and so fierce that Angel was lost in its glow.

What was that?

The concussive force of the blast rippled all throughout the purple haze, ripping it apart. Its shockwave roared across space and burned away the fog like the crisp morning sun. The alien forces behind were revealed.

The blast embraced and surrounded Angel, but caused it no damage. The aliens that had fled from the assumed trajectory of Middle Heaven's attack now found themselves in the middle of it.

In an instant scores of aliens were reduced to a field of mangled flesh and blood. Those creatures which were specialized in defense survived much of the initial damage, but only just. This was Middle Heaven's might, and destruction was unavoidable! Countless scores of the beasts were no more.

The shock of what they witnessed stunned every spectator. Not only did it clear away the mist, it also ripped their enemies apart. The surprise was similar to their first fight against the alien home worlds, though this time the bitter realization that they knew nothing was suffered by alien and not human victims.

Lan Qing had pondered over a solution to the alien tactic of hiding behind planets since witnessing it in the North.

Middle Heaven's primary power source was molinite. It powered the ship's engines as well as its engines – the main gun array included. Because the element was so unstable by nature, it would have been impossible to amass enough of it in a single shot. Eastern scientists then came up with a novel solution; prime diffusion.

By using rare metals that reacted well with molinite, they constructed an array of guns instead of a single cannon. They were constructed all over Middle Heaven and could be used either as weapons or as engines. How they were used depended on the amount of energy used and how it was channeled. It just needed to be programmed in advance. This attack had been modeled after the burn patterns from rocket engines.

If the payload had maintained their orb shape it would have frightened the aliens, but otherwise not caused a lot of damage. At best it would have pressed them together, or had them hide behind the planet.

But the humans' tactics were clever. What started as a salvo of compressed energy quickly broke apart at the halfway point, just long enough for the aliens to have moved from their path. However, they couldn't fly fast enough to avoid the detonation.

Strike where it is not expected. This single surprise attack had killed far more than the twelve Capital ships from before had put down. The alien forces around Angel were thrown into chaos.

The human armada sped their approach and quickly charged their weapons. With high spirits, riding the momentum of Middle Heaven's opening attack, they charged into the fight.

Was this the true power of Middle Heaven? Admiration was clear on Kang Hui's face as he witnessed the aftermath of Lan Qing's initiative. Scope, power, control... that attack worked flawlessly on all fronts, designed to blaze a path for them to follow.

Preparing everything in two days had not been an easy feat. Yet Lan Qing, in silence and alone, had set everything up perfectly. His opening move had not only annihilated their foes but also inspired his troops. In a blink everyone was in position and moving in to press the attack.

The twelve Capital ships rushed into the remaining alien forces, guns blazing. They held nothing back. Meanwhile Tyrannosaurus and Poseidon pressed ahead without engaging. They were quietly waiting in the wings, though just their presence was a deterrent against alien aggression.

Just then, an orb of dark purple was launched from Angel's surface. At

first it was inconspicuous but quickly broke atmosphere and entered space. It garnered notice when it shrugged off three blasts of Capital ship fire.

It was revealed to be an enormous creature in the shape of an enormous globe. The only reaction it had from taking three direct hits was to flatten out, and thus deflect the shots away.

This alien was over ten thousand meters in diameter – among the largest they'd ever seen. When the danger of the Capital ships had passed it stretched again to create a protective shell that warded off five more shots. It hung there brazenly denying the power of human technology.

All of a sudden the creature began to spin as though it were caught in a whirlpool. Several of its smaller brethren were sucked into its orbit, saved from destruction. All the while shots from human vessels bounced off its surface.

For a moment it seemed as though the titanic beast collapsed in on itself, only to burst out like an overripe tomato a moment later. A host of aliens were blasted from its corpse right into the human armada, over a thousand of them.

In an instant the separation human ships were depending on was gone.

But they had a plan. Once the Capital ships had come into firing range and released their payloads, all the support ships had begun to slow. Lan Qing adhered to the principle of exploiting one's advantage to the fullest, and humanity's range was among their greatest assets.

The soldiers slowed, then stopped, then sped up, then stopped. The timing and rhythm closely followed Lan Qing's commands. The tactic was employed to make sure all ships stayed in formation, and didn't break from the alien assault. It protected his troops from losing focus as the alien forces were flung their way.

The first ship to react was Middle Heaven, and it did so without quarter. Beams of red light fired from the forward array. The barrels glowed like angry eyes, glaring at the encroaching aliens.

Chapter 781: Cosmic Battleground

In being thrown across the battlefield, the aliens had no formation to speak of. They were subject to the combined might of the human armada the moment they arrived.

Among them was a thousand-meter long monstrosity that looked like a crocodile. It wildly swung its tail, and spat orbs of dazzling purple energy from its maw at the ships closest to it.

But in the midst of its thrashing strikes an orange glow met it. The force of it knocked the creature a thousand meters away. Although its defenses were strong enough to protect it from being destroyed outright, the explosion stunned the monster. Its attacks missed, the human ships were safe.

The humans in their orderly formations were effectively defended. More than a thousand foes were cast at them, but their ships were many and their fire concentrated. Under the sustained barraged the wave of enemies were quickly destroyed.

Vital crystals of carrying sizes twinkled like stars, marking where an alien had died.

In the distance, the large shapeshifting alien had already flung the second wave their way. It had had more time to prepare this time, so this second batch was three times the size of the first. While the humans were busy with those, aliens from around the planet closed in on their defensive line.

The orb-shaped alien had swelled to ten times its size, a hundred thousand meters of undulating purple flesh. Even compared to the planet it came from it was a sight to behold. It turned once and swallowed up a host of creatures, turned again and spat them forth.

Humans may have puzzled out a way to counteract their enemy's tactics, but so had the aliens found a way to render their range ineffectual. Throwing them into the humans like this wasn't to cause damage – though it was great if they did. It was intended to send the humans into

disarray, to disrupt their cooperation and make them weak.

A host of monsters from the planet came buzzing toward the armada like locusts. Their main force was drawing ever nearer. It was clear they had prepared better than the humans had thought.

This was not to say Lan Qing wasn't ready for them. Middle Heaven fires back like an angry hornet's nest, firing beams of saffron light into the aliens as they neared and wiping out the first two batches thrown toward them from the planet. The stronger ones survived, though they were shot away and barred from damaging nearby ships.

The human ships quickly retreated. As they fell back they pummeled the aliens with secondary fire. Their withdrawal was orderly, and included the three bastions. It was an impressive feat by itself to maintain order among the twelve fleets – more than ten thousand ships, all told.

They punished the enemy as they fell back. Though individually these fleets could not compete with the destructive power of a bastion, together the carnage they wrought was no less impressive. Beneath the hail of cannon fire the monsters were kept at bay.

The defender class of aliens were too slow to get to the front and protect their brethren, while the faster attackers could protect themselves from being blasted to bits. The humans' retreat was not fast, but was just fast enough so that the aliens couldn't overcome them.

The mightiest defender they faced was Middle Heaven, which remained between them and the rest of the human ships. It lashed out at them with bursts of yellow light like a deadly guardian. It pinpointed the most threatening parts of the alien horde and pick them apart, protecting the smaller vessels much the same as the aliens had done by protecting themselves behind a planet. In both attack and defense Middle Heaven was indispensable.

Despite the aliens' natural defenses and survivability, they couldn't withstand the sustained battery from their prey. By retreating and attacking at the same time they were able to maintain their ranged advantage.

Yet the aliens were malleable in their tactics. The massive orb gathered up another bunch of aliens to throw at them – this time exclusively tortoise-like defenders. They were thrown to the fore where they immediately linked together to form a tightly-packed shield. Instantly the efficacy of human cannon fire was greatly reduced.

However, so was the aliens' ability to attack. They remained safely behind the turtle shells, pushing them forward. The defenders were well adapted to protecting themselves but did not have the speed of the attackers. In order to protect themselves the fighters had to push the shell before them in order to avoid being blown apart.

Even so, the aliens advanced faster than the humans could retreat. The distance between them began to shrink. The creatures were adept at close-range fighting, and their goal was clear – get in close where human ships could no longer rely on their guns.

From the start of the battle, humans had relied on Middle Heaven to keep them in a favorable position. However the aliens were not pushovers. They quickly recovered from the shock of being outplayed. They came in now from all sides to surround the human, too many to deal with all at once – at least five times the number of warships they'd brought. None were particularly large, but they came in such numbers that they were nearly as difficult to put down.

Now was the key, whether the humans could survive against the full strength of the alien horde. At present, at least in regards to strategy, the humans were not in an inferior position. Whether or not they would ultimately succeed only time would tell.

At long last, it was time for Zeus-1 to make its move. It moved in from the side of Angel, silent as a ghost. Now that the aliens were engaged in an all-out fight with the human armada, their numbers were fewer around the planet. Lan Jue's approach was made much easier with fewer defenders to spot him.

Zeus-1 shot forward like an arrow under Mika's deft control. Between Lin Guoguo's psionic pulses and the Blinding Stone, they were effectively

invisible. They flit between groups of aliens rushing to join the attack, drawing closer to the planet's surface by the moment.

Everyone aboard the ship knew their roles. They were ready, and anxious to do their part. Lan Jue held tightly to Qianlin's hand as he waited for his opportunity.

Their task was the most difficult. The bulk of the alien force might have been directed at the armada, but the strongest ones would be amassing on the planet. Taking on the progenitor would be easier said than done, as difficult as it was dangerous. It would undoubtedly be defended by mighty protectors.

Alien strength was on full display this time, mightier even than they'd shown during the campaign in the Northern Alliance. Although they were proving capable enemies against Middle Heaven and the others, it also served to prove Lan Jue and his brother right. Their home worlds must be in the process of evolution.

Where they not, no matter how clever Lan Qing's plans the humans would have been outmatched. If they were here humans would be no match for the devastation they would cause. At best they would be an irritation.

As they passed through the thinning purple mist, Lan Jue's eyes grew sharp.

"Take care of yourself!" The Terminator, who until now had not spoken, strode forward and clapped his massive hand on Lan Jue's shoulder.

Lan Jue answered with a resolute nod, then walked ahead. The others of his team followed, headed for Zeus-1's hangar doors.

Zeus-1 wouldn't be able to land. They would have to disembark and descend to the planet themselves. From there they would seek out and destroy the progenitor.

"Boss! Go get 'em!" The four amazons cried in unison.

He grinned and shot them a thumbs-up.

Once they hit the atmosphere Zeus-1's Blinding Stone was less effective. The ship appeared and disappeared in the thin purple atmosphere. The frantic glimmering caught the attention of two nearby aliens. They heaved themselves around, preparing to attack.

But just then two foreboding beams of white light shot out. The two large creatures froze for half a breath, then split into two halves and tumbled away.

Several figured ejected from the sapphire vessel once the coast was clear and headed for the surface. Zeus-1 peeled away, leaving a contrail in its wake as it re-entered orbit. Once it was again out in space, it disappeared from view.

Lan Jue tightly gripped Qianlin's hand. With his mind fixed on the task at hand, he led the way. He didn't bring out Thor, it was too obvious a target. Nor was it suitable to use with the team.

The Pharmacist, Pauper, Driver and Gourmet splayed out behind him. Luo Xianni was nowhere to be seen. Six figures shot through the air toward the far side of the planet.

They didn't have time to hide themselves or evade detection. They raced ahead as quickly as they could. This was a blitzkrieg, their job was to burst in, cut off the head of the snake and retreat.

They were discovered by nearby aliens right away. One of them that looked like an eagle let loose an ear-piercing shriek. It then charged at them with talons bared.

The Harbinger Faerie glared at it was an expression cold as ice. In a flash she was in the front of their team with her first two fingers extended forward. Twinkling starlight appeared around her, when all of a sudden scores of copies of her legendary blade appeared in the air. They swung and stabbed all around, protecting the humans within. Under their security they pushed on.

Chapter 782: Unstoppable

The eagle-type alien was destroyed by the sword array moment after calling the signal. At present no one in the Avenue could match the Pharmacist in sheer attack force. Her Domain fed off of slaughter, and the more she killed the stronger she became.

Many aliens from the surroundings came to heed the eagle's cry. If it were not for Lan Qing and his army in the space around the planet, Lan Jue's team could have twice as many Paragons and they would have quickly fallen. But as it was the situation was made easier by the beast's reduced numbers. There were few enough that the Pharmacist was able to defend them by herself. She was unstoppable, and the path she carved was lined with the mangled corpses of her enemies.

Strangely, the vital crystals that emerged from the slain aliens vanished as soon as they appeared in flashes of pink light.

Under the Pharmacist's guidance the team continued toward the far side of the planet.

Elsewhere, Zeus-1 was racing for another world, bringing the next team to its target. Mika was squeezing every bit of speed from the ship as she could. She didn't know the situation her boss was facing, all he knew was that her way of helping was to put pressure on the other planets under alien control.

Zeus-1's systems were operating and overloaded capacity. So long as they held this pace, they would reach their destination in a matter of hours. Once they were free of Angel's orbit they locked in to a trajectory, free from alien menace.

Mika turned her head just as Satan was approaching. Right away a chill came over her face. She defiantly turned her eyes back onto the screens.

"Mika!" His deep voice intruded.

She didn't respond, as though she hadn't heard.

A biter grin spread across the former leader of the Dark Citadel. "Don't

be angry with me, not now. Perhaps I won't be coming back from this fight, and I wanted to use this opportunity to explain a few things."

A slight change came over Mika's harsh countenance. Yes! This fight held the future of humanity in the balance. Her boss had accepted the most important and most dangerous task. So had her father.

Her features softened ever so slightly. Whatever their history, she was Satan's daughter. His demonic blood flowed through her veins.

"What do you want to say?" She offered.

Satan responded with a sigh. "I've made many mistakes, but few fill me with regret. I have come to understand what happened to your sister – who did it isn't important. Whether or not we win against these monsters, Europa is gone. The Citadels are gone. The chances are that I will be gone. I was hoping you might promise me to take over the mantle of the Dark Citadel."

Mika paused. Eventually she turned her face back toward him. "Take over the Dark Citadel? I have no interest in commanding a group of sordid, evil men. As far as I'm concerned the Dark Citadel shouldn't even exist."

When Satan looked at her his eyes were bright, burning. "You're looking at it too one-sided. Sometimes that which you see with just your eyes isn't true. Sometimes what's most important isn't immediately visible. You're right, the Dark Citadel was filled with evil and compulsion. Do you think the Pontiff and the other hypocrites are any better? What they've done is far more evil than anything I've ordered."

Satan made no effort to modulate his voice. The Pontiff, seated a short distance away, heard all. However he did not react, and sat in silent meditation.

Mika scowled. Her father was right, she knew a little of the dark deeds the Pontiff's men had performed. The former Moonfiend Empress had shared them with her.

"None of you are any good!" She seethed.

When she said it the surroundings Paragons looked at her with strange expressions. The Keeper outright laughed. She was probably the only person who would dare to say such a thing to these men.

Satan was not embarrassed. Instead his grin deepened. “You’re absolutely right. But listen to what I have to say; the Dark Citadel commands the dark underbelly of the Western Alliance. Its soldiers are powerful, temperamental, and varied. I’m not sure you’ve considered how much damage they could cause if you simply let them loose in the worlds of man.”

Mika didn’t reply, but it was clear she was carefully weighing his words.

He continued. “They would cause turmoil, everywhere.”

“What could the ‘mighty’ Dark Citadel do, now?” She countered. “What is stopping governments and armies from exterminating the rabble?”

Satan sniffed derisively. “So naïve, child. You believe they hate us – you are wrong. What is light without darkness? Without us, many faiths throughout the human worlds would be rendered pointless. What’s more, you underestimate the world of darkness, its ability to repopulate. If there is nothing to control it, the darkness will grow and spread out of control. The chaos it would cause, while not comparable to the destruction these aliens have wrought, would nonetheless consume the worlds of man.”

“The Dark Citadel was not created solely to wield power. It is a check against the spread of evil. It is built to manage it before it becomes unmanageable. Under my vigil the corruption of it is contained, and its deeds curtailed. So long as there is good there will be evil – it will never be eradicated. But, it can be controlled. Have you ever heard of these ‘sordid, evil men’ causing problems in the West? The Dark Citadel handles these problems before they arise. Our purpose is a service to mankind, which is more than I can say for our sanctimonious counterparts. Do you still think the empire I built is so wretched, now?”

Mika had grown up in the Dark Citadel, but this was the first time its mission was explained to her in such a way. She didn’t know this was their purpose. For years she’d wondered why the Citadel was allowed to exist,

why it wasn't simply wiped away by other government leaders. At first she thought it was because of Satan's strength, but now she understood the truth.

"You see that the poison part of mankind needs to be retrained. If they aren't, think of what these monsters could do in the wake of this tragic time." Satan's disposition became imperatorial. "You are my daughter, the blood of demons surges within you. There is no shirking your responsibility."

Mika was silent. She quietly felt the weight of this responsibility settling on her heart.

"Do you think I'm strong enough to command their respect?" She asked.

Satan smiled. He knew his words had struck a chord.

"They will respect you – not because of me, but because of who you are, and the man you call your boss. Humanity faces a storm of apocalyptic proportions, and if we lose then there is nothing fret over. Survivors will scatter to any dark corner they could find, every man woman and child fending for themselves. But if we defeat them there will come a period of recovery. During this period much will change, not least of which the disappearance of the Western Alliance. After all, its most important planets have been all but demolished. Who do you think, in this situation, will pick up the pieces? The North's cowardice has struck a mighty blow to their image. You can bet the East will take advantage of the power vacuum. Much of what had belonged to the West will come under Eastern control, or perhaps they will come to some agreement with the North. Already your boss is a commanding voice in the world of Adepts – for all of mankind, in fact. With his support, there is nothing you won't be able to accomplish. I am sure his accomplishments will one day surpass even Jue Di's. What do you have to fear, with such a mountain of a man at your back?"

Mika's anger flared. "I will not cause the boss any trouble."

Satan chuckled at her. "This isn't causing any trouble, child. You're preventing it. Do you think he wants to see the dredges of society run

amok?”

“There is the Hades bloodline,” she countered. “I’m sure they would want to take control.”

Another chilling sniff was her answer. A flash of yellow light lit up the Paragon’s eyes. “After so long do you think the Hades bloodline has what it takes to manage the Citadel successfully? If that were to pass the chaos would be felt throughout all the Alliances. Do you suspect that is what Skyfire Avenue wishes to see happen? Rather than put such an important task in the hands of amateurs, don’t you think they’ll support a family with a history of achievement? With your Talent you need only give yourself to the demonic blood and becoming a Paragon would be easily accomplished. Once you cross that threshold, there would be no reason the dwellers of the darkness would not follow you.”

Mika paused. Uncertainty filled her heart.

Satan did not try to convince her further. He rose to his feet. “Think about it. Motivating the strength of your bloodline may affect your character, but you and your boss have been together a long time. With his abilities, I’m sure he would be able to find a way to help you.”

With all said, he turned away and returned to his seat.

A realization suddenly came over Mika, and she snapped her head around.

Were these going to be his last words?

Chapter 783: Commencing

Satan seemed calm as a lake surface, with no change in his expression. However, Mika could see the struggle hidden behind her father's eyes. His deep eyes were pits of blackness.

The Dark Citadel had been thoroughly wiped out. How could this not be a significant blow to the king of devils?

As Zeus-1 continued to pick up speed, Mika's heart was heavy. At the end of this fight, no one knew who would be going home. She was just as uncertain whether they'd defeat their enemies.

Come one! We have to win! Mika grit her teeth. Everything depended on killing the alien menace.

In the distance they could still see the battle raging between the human and alien forces. Flashes of glaring light flashes over and over again. The armada continued to fight on its back foot, retreating as its guns fired at full bore. They managed to keep the distance that was so integral to their ranged strategy, however the aliens were slowly closing in.

Some of the vessels had begun to suffer damage. Rare were the aliens that slipped through the hail of cannon fire, but when they did they threw themselves at the ships with abandon. They could hardly see each through the flashing lights and clouds of gore.

Middle Heaven was a resolute boulder in the center of the stream. It stayed at the rear of the retreating forces, shielding its allies by virtue of its secondary weapons systems alone. So far none of its fighter planes had been deployed.

The aliens were enraged at Middle Heaven's brawn. Incessantly they threw themselves at the ship, desperate to destroy it. Only once the planet-turned-warship had been destroyed could they clear away the humans. But despite their reckless charge, no matter what the sort of alien, they were all destroyed or thrown aside before the might of Middle Heaven.

The bastion's energy stores seemed endless, and it alone destroyed nearly as many of the aliens as all twelve fleets that accompanied it. From its position between the humans and aliens, Middle Heaven was perfectly positioned to punish the enemy while protecting its allies.

However, the aliens' numbers seemed equally limitless. They'd caught up to where they were pressing in on the armada from three sides. As they continued to add pressure, they closed the distance to their prey. They just needed to get close – once the distance was covered the beasts could employ their powerful melee attacks to wreck the human vessels.

All of a sudden both sides were assailed by a thunderous roar, as a blast of energy was released. The massive beam was white-hot but quickly turned red, like a laser shot but far too large. In a blink one one-hundredth of the alien horde was burned to ash. All that remained were their glittering vital crystals, hovering in space. As the residue of the attack's power hung in the air, the aliens were visibly taken aback, causing the pressure of their charge to ease a little.

The humans were quick to take advantage of the pause and continued to fire indiscriminately into the enemy forces. The distance between them began to increase again.

But what just happened? There was only one thing of human creation that could cause such destruction, and that was a bastion. Tyrannosaurus' main cannon sizzled in the cold vacuum of space as it continued to retreat.

Up to this point neither Tyrannosaurus nor Poseidon had engaged the enemy. If Middle Heaven was the armada's shield, these two were the spears behind it. As the danger to the humans increased, Tyrannosaurus at last bared its fangs.

As the battle raged, alien forces had been unable to spot the Northern bastion charging its guns. As a result, a gaping hole had been carved through the heart of the horde. Aliens were painfully reminded that it wasn't just Middle Heaven they faced. There were two more like it! Poseidon's guns were still dark, and since the beasts had never

encountered Poseidon Group before they did not know what to expect. But it was larger than Tyrannosaurus, and usually that meant more firepower.

Lan Qing sat behind his control panel, watching intently as streams of data flit across his screens. He rarely gave orders as the battle raged, and when he did they were rich with code words and secret meanings.

The first phase of their war plan was in full effect. Lan Qing had been careful not to underestimate his enemy, whose numbers were three times what Lan Jue saw in his scouting mission. The Eastern admiral had prepared for the worst eventuality and it served them well.

Why were Tyrannosaurus and Poseidon not firing their weapons like all the others? To conceal their power. If they had started the fight throwing everything they had at the creatures their enemy would grow cautious and cunning. The likelihood of gaining and losing ground increased.

Lan Qing didn't want to see that happen, it was unpredictable and they needed to create space for the Paragon strike teams. A base of operations was needed before they could push further in.

Hiding behind the planets had been an effective tactic, one that had perplexed and frustrated the humans to no end. The circular sneak attack was effective but it would only work once. These were intelligence creatures, and the only way to really punish them was in outright war.

Attacking and retreating was not just advantageous for creating distance and maintaining a range advantage. It drew their enemy away from any defensible positions or places to hide, revealing their numbers and exposing them to mankind's strongest weapons.

Tyrannosaurus' attack proved the efficacy of their plan. Ten thousand aliens or more had been felled in a blink, and their momentum was thwarted.

Lan Qing was unconcerned with the prospect of the aliens fleeing. Surely they felt they had the advantage. Recharging a bastion's main gun took time, giving them the opportunity to press the attack. If they gave the humans a chance the next attack would hurt them even worse.

As he anticipated, Tyrannosaurus attack threw the alien horde into a frenzy. Scores of beasts rushed ahead heedless of cannon fire. They braved the hail of burning light, desperate to snuff out these puny human lives.

The alien creature that had depended the planet and thrown aliens at them had also flown in to join them. It moved with incredible speed, catching up with its smaller brethren moments later. Its presence on the battlefield threatened to give the enemy an edge.

Now, in the presence of the mighty leader, the alien attack was much more menacing.

The human ships continued to be pushed back, and inch by inch the bloodthirsty aliens closed in. With each passing moment the humans were in an increasingly disadvantageous position. Tyrannosaurus was still recharging for another blast. All that was left was Poseidon, but was it enough to stem the flood?

ζ

Angel.

A rain of blood followed in the Pharmacist's wake. The aliens continued to throw themselves at her, only to be impotently cut down by her storm of steel. Lan Jue's party was quickly nearing the far side of the planet.

The attempts to dissuade them never let up. The further they pressed ahead the larger and more powerful their foes became. Several monsters over a thousand meters long attempted threw themselves at the humans, seeking to stop their invasion with their huge bodies. Yet it proved a foolish endeavor that only put them in the path of destruction. Faced with the Pharmacist's deadly rush they were cut apart before they knew it, and the humans had another vital crystal.

With unstoppable vigor Occisus' array conveyed the party toward the planet's far side. Soon they would arrive at the progenitor's location.

Lan Jue pulled Qianlin along at his side, gripping tightly to her hand. Their powers were in constant communication, and as Lan Jue's powers flooded into her her powers likewise were conveyed back to him. They

modified each other, fused, then shifted again in perfect harmony.

Under such conditions, what could be expected to happen?

Lan Jue's face bore a slight smile. He'd waited for this – waited so long and fought so hard to suppress his powers, so that he and Qianlin might advance.

Now they had come to the final, integral step.

In the distance they could see the aliens' numbers receding. The obstacles that kept them from their target were fewer, and in response Occisus' manifestations flung around them even faster.

Under the Pharmacist's direction they arrived. Not far off the enormous and cancerous vessels were in full view. Without question, the progenitor they were about to face was bigger than any they'd seen before. It had to be, if it was funneling vital energy directly to its home worlds!

Suddenly the sky went dark. A familiar sensation tickled at Lan Jue's mind from somewhere before them.

Chapter 784: Infinite Violet

As the light dimmed, the air around them suddenly felt thicker. Its quality changed, and the presence Lan Jue felt wasn't moving toward them, but instead toward the progenitor.

A doppelganger? From Monarch. Lan Jue knew the chances of running into one of them was high, but all the same his heart began to beat faster. These monsters were at least equivalent to a Nirvana-level Paragon, and if the progenitor was as strong as they suspected this fight wasn't going to be easy. They were deep in enemy territory, beset on all sides by danger.

"Everyone be careful!" Lan Jue cautioned. His mother was close, but they had to rely on their own strength too.

A violet-gold light flashed in the horizon, and a sense of foreboding that difficult to describe swept through the area. The oppressive pulse of intention even sent Occisus' sword array into chaos, causing them to vanish and revealing the people that had been hidden within.

Lan Jue stared with wide eyes. The strength of Nirvana couldn't do what they just witnessed. A terrifying thought occurred to him – what if the home worlds were disguised as humans, and were hiding on these planets? What would they do?

If this was their ploy it would be a good one. Foregoing evolution to draw the humans in for a sneak attack... it would spell the end of their species, without question. What sort of carnage could a creature on the cusp of immortality produce?

As the thought wormed through Lan Jue's mind he narrowed his eyes. It was the nightmare scenario, but he was wise enough to know the chances of it happening were slim. Prior to evolving they were subject to the restrictions of universal protogenia. They would be putting themselves at tremendous risk if the alien home worlds chose to fight. But, what if?

They had been surprised before. They thought the aliens couldn't teleport twice in a short time, but they were wrong. The beasts spent a great deal to do precisely what the humans weren't expecting. Who was to

say they wouldn't make a similar gamble if it meant destroying the humans' final line of defense?

"Careful!" He urged again.

The Pharmacist seemed to understand his worries. "That isn't him, it's fine." She had had the same thought, but it was different for her. She knew Monarch better than Lan Jue did.

She had come face to face with him in the Shattered Starfields, during her failed assassination attempt. His riposte had been weakened, having just teleported, but she could feel him through her connection to Ultus. She knew Monarch's aura as well as she knew her own.

What she felt from the nearby aura was very similar, but lacking in one key component. She couldn't feel Ultus, and that meant this couldn't be him. At worst the creature had powers of the Infinite – not an immortal. They had a chance.

Lan Jue shook off the fear that had gripped him. Excellent, this wasn't the real thing!

In the distance the image of the Violet Monarch glared coldly at them. Forsaking needless chatter, it stepped forward and greeted them with a single punch.

Everything between them and the alien doppelganger warped. It was like reality was compressed then exploded in all directions. Instantly the humans were bombarded with a painful sensation that threatened to drive them mad.

The Pharmacist was in front. She lifted her right hand to defend herself and Occisus appeared in her grip, milky white like it was made of flawless jade. In response her dharmic image appeared, and the boon of her Slaughter Domain once more transformed her into a Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

In an instant woman and sword were one. The promise of murder hung thick in the air as her image swelled. As it did, Occisus grew and brazenly swiped the air before it.

A flash of white energy tore through the sky. The power from the doppelganger's punch was cut in half and pushed to the side. In the same instant a dull grey light burst from behind the Harbinger Faerie and shot into the distance, evading the enemy's punch.

It was the Gourmet, Infernal Vanguard. Using Hades' unholy flame he'd paved an escape route for them. It removed them from the scope of the doppelganger's attack. The backdrop greyed as suddenly the humans were deposited closer to their attacker.

The Monarch doppelganger grunted, vanishing in a blink and appearing before the humans. Its hand shot out, fingers bent like hideous claws as it groped for the top of Lan Jue and Qianlin's head.

It was incomparably fast. By the time the humans were delivered from the Infernal Vanguard's route of escape, it was waiting for them.

A dragon's roar shook the earth, and a golden serpent coiled up around the two non-Paragons. Instantly the doppelganger's attack destroyed it, but Lan Jue and Qianlin were spared for the moment.

Gripping tightly to Qianlin's hand, Lan Jue didn't hesitate. Both of them became bolts of lightning and fled. Before the doppelganger could follow it was surrounded by an expanse of white energy from the Pharmacist. This time Occisus' power was deadly frigid.

Monarch's doppelganger held its ground. Both of its hands lashed out, one toward the Pauper and gourmet, the other reaching for the Pharmacist's Banishing Blade. The two men were thrust away.

Just as it seemed ready to grab Occisus, its hand turned over and it flicked out a finger to strike the flat of the blade. "Ding!" The Pharmacist and her weapon were knocked away, but the doppelganger didn't follow.

It was finding Occisus' deadly power to be troublesome. It showed the truth, this beast wielded the power of the Infinite!

In only this brief exchange the truth was revealed to them. The doppelganger's powers were inferior to Jue Di, though indeed ranked among the Infinite. Still, in a blink it had forced three Paragons to retreat.

Its strength was clear.

Only one more of their number was close enough to engage. The Driver.

He engaged a step behind the others. Bolts of crystalline purple light coiled around his fist as he delivered a simple and unobtrusive punch.

Captus appeared in Lan Jue's hand and his eyes burned with fervent light. Likewise there was a flash of blue by his side when Qianlin's Banishing Blade was summoned. The two of them looked silently at one another, looking at their reflections in each other's eyes.

In perfect harmony both sword were thrust forward, toward the dominating alien.

A bright light burned in the doppelganger's eyes, red and violet and angry. It stood in defiance of the Driver's punch, reaching out to grab him with its own hand.

Its purpose here was clear; to destroy all the humans. Of course killing a handful of Paragons was certainly easier said than done. Even at the doppelganger's level a human's Talent had a constraining effect. And indeed this creature was just a shadow of its true self, and did not possess the protogenic comprehension of its victims.

The monstrous effigy moved in to destroy the Driver, before turning its attention to the others. However, much to its surprise, the moment its hand clapped onto the Driver's fist it felt lightning rip through it. As though struck by lightning the doppelganger shook and shivered from thousands of empowered volts before retracting its arm. The Driver fled before it had time to recover.

As its prey ran the beast lifted its arm. The hand that had stopped the Driver's attack was partly hidden beneath burning coils of electricity, but the damage was clear. Of course the Driver himself was not nearly strong enough to cause lasting damage to something so strong. However, it was important to remember that his combined yin-yang lightning was sanctified with immortal qi.

Immortal qi, an enduring legacy from the immortal realm of the ancient

days. What alien creature could match it? It bore the power of tribulation lightning in its depths.

What Lan Jue and the others did not know was that tribulation lightning was created from universal protogenia. It was the foundation of that terrible, destructive force. The realm of immortals was used to shield the universe's most powerful from this.

Defending oneself from the constant threat of elimination was taxing, so the wisest of the ancient conceived of methods to protect themselves. Among them was channeling universal protogenia, transforming it at just the right time into a weapon.

It became necessary that one needed to know how to manipulate universal protogenia to become an immortal. Only if it was proven they could command those forces would they be allowed to serve their functions in the immortal realm and contribute to their shared protection. Thus where they able to call upon the power of the immortal realm.

For the alien home worlds, that which they feared most was what they fought so fervently against – universal protogenia. Monarch's copy could not defend itself from the echoes of tribulation lightning that lived in the Driver's Discipline. It had surprised the beast, for it thought it knew the scope of the human's power. Carelessness had brought consequences.

Its reprieve was short lived, as a moment later Lan Jue and Qianlin's sword attack caught up with it. Focused flow and a thousand swords as one – Harmonious Blades, without reservation!

Against a foe as powerful as this, Lan Jue didn't dare hold back. It was now or never – the time to break through had come.

Chapter 785: Ascending to Paragon

Glimmers of blue and red light intermingled in the air, bound by a halo of gold. Where the attack passed through the air it left a wake of motley color. Lan Jue and Qianlin's attack quickly reached the piece of Monarch.

The doppelganger's face fell as it witnessed their attack coming. It turned to flee its scope.

But at that moment a captivating voice called out. "Take advice from Luo Xianni. A camera is all you need."

Ka-cha! As the sound of a camera's shutter clacked, Monarch's avatar froze in mid air. All the space around it was thick and still, only allowing the light of the Harmonious Swords to pass through.

At the crucial moment the doppelganger called on its enormous power to its full advantage. An explosion of energy erupted from it, and the beast itself was lost in a violet vortex. Luo Xianni's pocket of frozen space shattered under the hurricane force that was the monster's power.

No longer a man, the tempest that was the doppelganger was too large and unwieldy to avoid the attack that came at it. However its size was a boon, and the Harmonious Swords could only strike a piece of it instead of its whole form.

When the gold-wrapped power arrived the violet energies around it were quickly defeated. Lan Jue and Qianlin reappeared. Then a marvelous scene was revealed.

A flash of brilliant cobalt blue emanated from their location, quickly followed by a milky white counterpart. The two swelled in strength and brightness until they were interwoven columns of luminescence that rose into the sky.

All of the earth and sky was caught in the splendor, imbued with an unnatural stillness. A magnificent and staggering aura swept through the area before the dual columns of light burst out in all directions.

It was a strange power, once that filled the surrounding Paragons with a

sense of clarity in mind and body. They felt cleansed, energetically and spiritually, and empowered. It wasn't a fleeting sensation, either. The power lingered within them, strengthening them to their core.

Among them it was the Driver who felt it deepest. It was like all the lightning and thunder contained within him was seething, crashing in waves all through his body. More than just his energy, the transformative nature of this power seeped into his very essence.

The violet light in the sky brightened and was interspersed by flashes of gold. They illuminated every minute detail of the world below. In the distance the violet light coalesced to reform the body of the doppelganger. It stared in disbelief at its attackers.

What was this?

Once again the tell-tale ka-cha of Luo Xianni's camera arose. The doppelganger froze again. What was different this time was that he had been injured by the Adepts' Harmonious Swords and breaking free of Luo Xianni's control was more difficult.

As the cloud of golden light expanded above them, nearby aliens fled. They sensed the power in it, and not only refrained from coming close but fled from the area altogether. Whatever birthed that light felt invincible and even beasts would not carelessly throw their lives away.

But could they really elude destruction?

The golden cloud continued to spread, and wherever it expanded scores of aliens fell from the sky. They crumbled into ash before ever reaching the ground. On the earth below, the purple fungus that caked the surface roasted as though beneath an intense heat, eventually withering away into nothing. Even the enormous artery rising into the heavens shook, and a screech of terror filled the air.

A titanic, purplish-black creature lifted itself from the depths of the earth. It looked like an octopus, and heaved itself out of the ground with its tentacles. Its body alone was five thousand meters in diameter, and stretched to ten thousand if one included its appendages. The shadow of the colossus stretched over a wide area.

It belched a poisonous black fog in the direction of the golden cloud. The beast seemed intent on containing the deadly power it emitted. However, before it got to close the mist would burn away.

From the aura the creature exuded, the humans knew it had the power of Nirvana. Precisely as they expected, the progenitor was the strongest they'd ever encountered. They suspected that this was the perfect specimen, the apex of its breed, in order for it to provide for the home worlds as it did.

The two columns of light piercing the clouds eventually merged into one and changed to gold. Everything around it was painted in spectacular light. Locked in the air, Monarch's doppelganger struggled against Luo Xianni's bonds.

The Photographer herself appeared among the other Paragons. None of them moved in to fight or take advantage of the marvelous display. The power that flooded their bodies, enervated them, was so intense it locked them in place.

Still it increased, growing with every passing moment. One second was like a full day of rigorous cultivation. The Driver's reaction was most intense, but it was the Pharmacist who received the greatest benefit in the moment.

She was still channeling her Slaughter Domain, which through conflict had swelled her power to a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Beneath the light of the golden cloud she could sense its influence flowing through her. Occisus pulsed with energy, and with the addition of this strange power she was surprised to feel her status as a Reflection solidify.

In other words, in just a matter of seconds she had broken through to the next degree of Paragon. Had she held back on her breakthrough to Paragon there was a chance she would have achieved this on her own. However, she did not, and the bridge that spanned the two levels was vast. It was unthinkable that she should so easily rise to the next level.

In addition, her breakthrough also seemed to break another seal holding back Occisus' power. The runes on its surface flared and two more were

added. Its aura swelled and merged with its mistress to where it became difficult to tell what was the Harbinger Faerie and what was the Banishing Blade.

The surprise in the doppelganger's eyes deepened. The golden cloud actually filled him with dread. It could sense the universal protogenia flowing within it, slowly gathering together.

Lan Jue and Qianlin were finally revealed, kneeling within the column of light and the banishing blades floating at their backs. Both Demortus and Captus shimmered with light, and golden runes blazed on their surface.

Lan Jue sat in stillness, peaceful as a Buddha. Behind him an image had slowly begun to take shape. It was stately and ancient in appearance, from another era. Though it was only a faint outline, the aura it exuded made the onlookers want to prostrate themselves in worship.

Another image appeared behind Qianlin. This one looked exactly like her.

A corona of blue light pulsed within Lan Jue's chest, growing clearer with each moment. Its influence spread through him until Lan Jue looked like a glimmering statue of sapphire. The air around Qianlin was misty and ethereal and made her seem all the more like an immortal goddess.

Monarch's fragment sucked in a breath and began to swell. A blinding purple light shot out from it as it called upon all of its power. But just as it was preparing to attack, a deafening peal of thunder stayed its hand.

Brrrrruuuuummmmm. All of the power the doppelganger gathered scattered. The sound frightened it so deeply that it immediately turned and fled. Glistening pearls of light twinkled in the depths of the golden cloud, hints of lightning rumbling within. Just the prospect of it terrified the beast and forced it to run for its life.

The progenitor, until now only threatening violence, shook violently. All of its tentacles dropped. But it could not flee like the Monarch's avatar! It was rooted here, deep in the earth with no way to extricate itself.

"What is that?" The Pharmacist stared in awe at the golden cloud above

them.

It was clear that Lan Jue and Qianlin had chosen to break through right after using their Harmonious Swords. What the Pharmacist didn't understand was the spectacle they produced. No one seemed to know what the two were doing.

Luo Xianni had been ready to attack, but the thunder had darkened her features. She shook, just like the alien beasts, and her power fell away.

"That is the presence of universal protogenia. It seems to have taken a form similar to tribulation lightning, like in the ancient days." She couldn't be sure, either.

"Tribulation lightning?" The Pharmacist said in shock. "How is that possible? Didn't it disappear with the immortals?"

Before she finished the thought another blast of thunder sounded. A single bolt of golden lightning ripped through the cloud and descended toward Lan Jue. In the same instant – whether it was Luo Xianni, the Pharmacist, the Gourmet or the Pauper – all of them fell from the sky. It was as though an enormous, invisible hammer had come crashing down from above that none of them could withstand.

"It really is tribulation lightning!" Luo Xianni cried out in shock and alarm as she desperately tried to protect herself from the pressure. She simply couldn't understand why such power would appear now, or what Lan Jue and Qianlin had done to summon it. It was unimaginable, where they even human?

Tribulation lightning was a manifestation of universal protogenia, the most destructive force in all of time and space. How was it that Lan Jue was able to withstand it? Even she and Jue Di would be burnt to ash if they were struck.

It was the first time she had felt it, this fabled lightning. Although it had not be directed at her, the fear that gripped her was so absolute she couldn't move a muscle much less save her son.

Chapter 786: Tribulation Lightning?

The sole Paragon who seemed to fair well against the staggering force was the Driver, still hovering in the air.

As he watched the golden bolt of lightning viciously strike Lan Jue, a cracking sound surrounded him as well. His own Discipline flared out of his control to create a shell of purple lighting. After striking his friend, the golden lightning released a burst of energy that crested against the Driver's purple shield. Their clash made his whole body shake, but his Discipline was infused with a pale golden hue.

Luo Xianni watched what was happening in the air above them with shock clear in her eyes. She expected Lan Jue to be immediately turned destroyed, but instead the unexpected revealed itself. Not only did Lan Jue survive, he was still peacefully meditating as before. The image that had emerged in the air behind him was clearer.

What was going on? Tribulation lightning was somehow useless against her son?

The cloud cover above them shifted, changing from gold to deep blue. The light filtered through it and spread across the ground, turning the world blue as well.

The lightning was changing? Typically that was a sign that it was getting stronger.

The Pharmacist, standing beside Luo Xianni gaped at the scene as well. Even under the protection of her legendary weapon, she couldn't move.

Lan Jue chose this moment to breakthrough because of what he saw from the Pharmacist. She had taken the plunge in the midst of battle as well, and in that moment she had called upon Occisus' power – summoning the Gates of Slaughter – which frightened away the Violet Prince and allowed them to escape.

His assumptions were well founded. Breaking through with Qianlin, they could call upon the might of two swords. If they could command

something like the Gates of Slaughter, their combined abilities would prove even more potent. It greatly increased their chances of destroying the progenitor.

What he did not anticipate was that their combined breakthrough would inspire such changes to the protogenia around them. The reaction was entirely different than what had occurred for the Pharmacist. They were in an abstruse state that he had no means to control.

The golden cloud became blue, but the aura it exuded only became stronger. It flashed again, and another bolt of pristine blue light lashed at Lan Jue. This time the result was different.

When the golden lightning tore into him, Lan Jue was surrounded by a blooming golden light. It filled him entirely, and shone from his every pore so that everything around him was a shining gold. The manifestation of his dharma was even more distinct.

Now when the blue lightning came crashing down, it struck him dead center and disappeared. There was no flash or outward sign other than the continued clarification of the image at his back. There wasn't even a blast of thunder, as though Lan Jue had completely absorbed every ounce of energy from it.

The Driver watched it all in awe. He couldn't help it when he spoke. "Hey, this guy... he doesn't even leave me any. I'd even take the leftovers!" He could acutely feel the benefits Lan Jue's breakthrough was having on him.

He had also absorbed some of the immortal qi from the thunder essence, and through it he knew that the lightning that assailed Lan Jue held similar power. It was also why he was not affected as much as the others, and obtained the greatest benefit.

However, Lan Jue completely absorbed the second blast and left nothing for him to draw on. In the last few moments he could sense his powers surged through the Realm of Protogenia and approach Reflection of Heaven and Earth. He was more than halfway there, and if he could just squeeze a little more from his friend's breakthrough he might be able to

cross the threshold! How could he not be impatient?

The corona of light around Lan Jue slowly receded back into his body. He seemed different, not just in his crystalline appearance but also his temperament. A stately and imperial air hung over him, much as it did the tribulation lightning.

The cloud changed again, darkening from blue to purple. The Driver felt this change most prominently, and the power within him rose sharply in response to it. His whole body trembled.

This was...

Brrruuummm!! A roar of thunder rattled the earth.

This time the lightning was split in two; one thick and imposing, the other minute and agile. The larger one sought out and struck Lan Jue, while the smaller one arced away and toward the Driver.

When it landed, the Driver's body was wracked with shivers. The surge of power burned so badly his eyes rolled back in his skull and slowly merged into him to strengthen his aura at an alarming rate. Something appeared in the air behind him as well, the image of a black hole. Something seemed to be trying to fight its way out from within it.

All the Paragons below looked on, dumbfounded.

Three times they witnessed the lightning fall from the sky to strike Lan Jue, and three times they saw him unharmed. They could distinguish the effects of this lightning through what it did to the Driver. Almost instantly the aura surrounding their friend rose to its limit. It was unthinkable! When did improving a Paragon's cultivation become so easy?

That's not to say they weren't affected. Each of them could sense their essence nourished by this strange power. It wasn't just cultivation, but their intrinsic knowledge of protogenia that improved. A small but hugely substantive change.

It was very difficult to change the protogenia of a Paragon once they solidified it. It only happened when they rose to the next level of power. That was the moment of adjustment. One could imagine how much

influence Lan Jue and Qianlin were having, if they could modulate one's understanding of protogenia.

After three blasts of lightning, everything seemed to change.

Yet it wasn't over. The cloud above them changed color for a third time, now turquoise in hue. Strangely it was nearly translucent, making the sky seem clear and calm.

The progenitor had begun to sag under the power exuded by the cloud. It lay prostrate on the ground, never daring to move for fear it would draw the lightning's ire.

What was Nirvana in the face of such intensity? Even the Monarch's avatar, bearing the might of the Infinite, fled in the face of it. Even a true immortal would deign to elude this legendary presence.

This time, three bolts fell from on high. Though they were all the same color, they bore three distinct qualities.

Chapter 787: Lan Jue's Dharma

The first bolt was deep of color, with profound depths of power and a jade-like glossy shine. It was rife with vital energy, and when it struck Lan Jue the man seemed to be full of it as well. Suddenly he was a conduit of life, and the ground below which had been rid of the progenitor's pestilence actually began to sprout new foliage. In an instant the ground below could almost be described as lush.

The second bolt descended, measurably calmer. However this one was thick with a sense of righteousness. Lan Jue was baptized in the electric fires and his aura swelled tremendously. While it grew, his powers were likewise calmed, and the image behind him was clearer.

The third bolt was clear as crystal. When it landed Lan Jue was cleansed of all things negative and diminishing. It was as though the bolt that ran through him filtered away what was not needed and affixed him as the center of the universe in this moment.

Zhou Qianlin was also affected by these lightning bolts. Her figure shifting in hue after each one.

The rise of Lan Jue's presence was staggering, and before anyone could react he had pierced the barrier to Paragon. Throughout the process the image behind him proceeded to coalesce. Now it was indistinguishable from reality.

It was a man, over a thousand meters tall clad in a snow-white robe. Thousands upon thousands of twinkling lights shone from it like a host of stars. All of a sudden everything was illuminated as though by the rising sun. Even the lethal cloud could not conceal the beautiful skies above. However it was not the sun, but the light of countless stars that glimmered in time with the sparkling lights upon the image's robes.

Looking closely, one could see the face of the dharmic manifestation was Lan Jue exactly. Upon its head was perched a violet-gold crown encrusted with gemstones. It stood with its hands clasped at the small of its back and an expressionless countenance, while Captus floated in the air before

it.

The Banishing Blade's reaction was to buzz in response to this enormous presence. For a moment it was as though sword and image regarded one another, sensed each other's essence. Neither moved.

Possessed of boundless simplicity the image peered into the distance. Where it's stern eyes were cast a murderous impression prevailed. Lifting its hand, the manifestation casually waved at the turquoise cloud.

In response the cloud shifted colors again, this time adopting many at once. A rainbow of colors roiled within it before six separate spears of electric light were released. All of them hit Lan Jue in quick succession. Though they were all different, they descended so quickly that no one could individuate them.

Beneath the hail of lightning Lan Jue voiced a small cry. This time his presence underwent a fundamental shift, while the clothes that concealed him were ripped apart. A pure white robe – exactly like his image – replaced them, and his head was adorned with a crown. The heroic young man, now in his robe and crown, looked all the imperial.

His eyes were shut when a line of enigmatic light etched itself on his forehead. They were stars whose luminescence fluctuated in the glare.

Qianlin was also undergoing her own metamorphosis. The image behind her had also begun to grow, quickly matching Lan Jue's in size. Streamers of soothing white light waved around the beautiful figure before settling upon Qianlin and covering her in its pure embrace. The girl's body shook, then rose only to settle across from Lan Jue.

A halo of white light radiated around both of their heads. An arrow appeared between them, the Arrow of Compassion, which blazed with a blinding light. It pulled the two inexorably together until there was a flash of white light. The two merged, and all of a sudden there was a deluge of potency from Lan Jue. The sky went dark, but all was still clear by the light of the myriad stars.

Beams of starlight fell upon him, through him, and for a moment Lan Jue was indistinguishable from the essence of the universe.

“Nirvana!” The Photographer gasped in surprise.

After delivering the last six lightning strikes, the cloud that had caused such awe and terror dispersed. The oppressive energy that cowed the Paragons had gone, but the shock remained. None of them could comprehend the extent of what they’d witnessed. How was it Lan Jue could advance so far so quickly?

Nirvana? Was it even possible to rise to such heights directly? If so, it would be the first time in all of human history.

“It is not just his power,” Luo Xianni determined. “It is the two of them.” Just as it had been before their breakthrough, once Qianlin joined with Lan Jue their powers increased. It was a terrifying prospect for Adepts, and much more so for a pair of Paragons. Undoubtedly the two were at least Reflections on their own.

First it was Lan Qing, now Lan Jue and Qianlin. Without question the next generation of Paragons had already surpassed their predecessors. They were the new masters.

Luo Xianni found Lan Jue’s dharmic image to be somewhat familiar. Although she couldn’t put her finger on it, she was certain it was no less potent than Lan Qing’s Vairochana dharma.

They were different, certainly. Vairocana issued a sense of calm, its light illuminated all things, and it was full of a boundless compassion. Lan Jue’s image was towering as the clouds, grandiose, supreme. That deadly aura and scornful stateliness was in precise contrast to the calm of Vairochana.

Lan Qing’s dharma was mighty, but not vicious. It was a power of forgiveness and benevolence. It was power delivered through the Buddha. Yet Lan Jue’s was entirely different, his dharma was as imperious as it was deadly. Even tribulation lightning moved to its command. Even in ancient times, the appearance of this incomparable power was rare.

What precisely his dharma was, only Lan Jue and Jue Di knew. Lan Qing also must have had some inkling. If Lan Jue did not understand it so thoroughly, could he have succeeded to completely in his breakthrough?

Lan Jue's dharmic image pulsed with an overbearing aura that filled the onlookers with abject fear. At last the starlight dimmed and the storied scene had passed.

The image lifted its massive hand and Captus rose from above Lan Jue's head. It released a flood of angry red light as the weapon grew to massive proportions in the image's grip.

Chapter 788: Master of Stars, Supreme Emperor

It brandished the weapon almost casually, then a red light arose that filled the spectators' eyes. It stretched to the horizon where an eruption of red light lit up the skies. It collapsed upon screams so loud and desperate the seemed to spread across the whole planet.

Ever since the golden cloud had appeared no aliens dared come near. The only creature that could not flee was the one Lan Jue's dharma target; the progenitor.

The artery that connected the earth to the sky disintegrated beneath the power of Captus. Waves of vibrant vital energy rushed out from it in waves, then were directed back into the ground with a wave from Lan Jue's mirror image.

Only a crater remained where the Nirvana-level progenitor had lain. The jagged indentation looked like it had been carved away and swallowed up by a black hole.

Lan Jue's dharmic representation peered onto the surface of Captus, peering into the golden runes etched on its blade. A frightening and enigmatic power surged from the weapon. With a smile, both man and weapon shrunk. Eventually the image vanished into Lan Jue, and Captus returned to hovering above his head.

The runes had concealed themselves again and left behind seven twinkling lights. They were clearer even than what Occisus had produced.

Was it done?

The surrounding Paragons swallowed and fought for words after the spectacular scene. Was this mighty beast felled with a single stroke of the sword? Only the Harbinger Faerie, bearer of Occisus, had an inkling. She sensed that Captus' power had awakened in the hands of Lan Jue's dharma. Thankfully the strength of it was enough to reign Captus in, otherwise its power was enough to split the planet in two!

Luo Xianni understood it from another perspective. She recognized Lan Jue's dharma as an inherited legacy and these kinds of innate dharmas awakened ancient wisdom. These hints of forgotten knowledge solidified one's comprehension. That sudden period of enlightenment allowed the Paragon to perform great feats, like destroying the progenitor.

Put simply, a display like that would not be happening again any time soon, not unless Lan Jue could attain the power of the long lost immortals. Or, alternatively, if he were to somehow tap into the ancient knowledge again.

Lan Jue remained in meditation as though all the chaos around him passed outside of his comprehension. After a while, his eyes opened. He could sense everything that occurred, felt the changes. He awoke an entirely changed entity.

The energy within him was unchanged – not increased, and in fact reduced. However, now he was a part of the universe around him, as inexorably tied as the stars. Protogenia was molded by his every thought and gesture. The power of reality was at his fingertips.

Control. Control over everything.

At last he had arisen to the status of Paragon. Like his brother before him, he did so in large strides to emerge as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. No... he had gone further.

When he joined with Qianlin he felt the energy of the stars, the planets, and all living things as a part of them. He could feel them as clearly as he sensed himself. With a thought he knew all that was happening in the nearby battle out in space.

His consciousness stretched out into the vast expanse of deep space. But something made his expression change, a suffocating sensation of pressure coming in from all directions. It hit him so hard he lost his breath and threatened to break his mind.

With a heady sigh Lan Jue retracted his perception. Immediately he felt better.

Universal protogenia? He was stunned to discover he could sense it so soon after breaking through.

He turned and draw his eyes to the spot where the progenitor had been, now a hole one thousand meters deep. The red light of Captus had consumed it and any residual sense of the creature's presence. As far as he could see the fungal growth it had produced was quickly withering away.

Even more stunning was how quickly things were returning to normal. As the poisoned earth was cleansed, new life sprang up. Wild explosions of vegetation arose from the desolation. This must be a result of his dharma, he thought, redirecting the progenitor's vital energy back into the ground. Although some of the devoured energy was gone forever, what remained was enough to restore a large amount of land to its former splendor.

Success. The first part of their plan had been accomplished. The enemy was stronger than they had predicted, but it'd all worked out. Things would be easier now.

Lan Jue descended from the sky. The other Paragons were below to greet the newly awakened Paragon.

The Driver sighed emotionally. "Missed it by just a little bit – a little more and I would be a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. So unfortunate." Indeed, in the end he was not able to employ Lan Jue's emulsion of power to push him into the next level. However he was guided to the border of the realm of Protogenia. He need only solidify his dharma, then he would be able to take the next step.

He was not the only one who learned from the experience. The Gourmet, whose progress since his breakthrough had been slow, could sense a qualitative improvement. The Pauper could feel growth as well. His dharma was inherited just like Lan Jue's, and his comprehension of it was deepened. He was also just a step beyond becoming a Reflection.

Just as a normal Paragon's ascension was beneficial to Adepts, Lan Jue and Qianlin's breakthrough was a great boon to the Paragons nearby. It was an unforeseeable but welcome circumstance.

Lan Jue smiled. “Don’t be greedy, how many people do you know who have improved as quickly as you?”

The Driver chuckled. “Hanging around you was one of the best decisions I’ve made.” Ever since training yin-yang lightning with Lan Jue, his Discipline had skyrocketed. It was so fast even he could hardly believe it.

With time his strength had grown to glorious heights, he’d become a Paragon, and now he saw the next step looming on the horizon. None of this had been within the realm of his imagination just a few years ago! All of this was made possible by Lan Jue, and though he didn’t often say it he was deeply grateful for the friendship they shared.

Luo Xianni smiled happily at her adopted son. “All of us were aided by your breakthrough. But why would this process summon tribulation lightning? It is supposed to come when one crosses the threshold to immortality!”

Lan Jue shook his head. “My breakthrough has nothing to do with tribulation lightning. That wasn’t what you saw. That was a thundercloud, and the lightning was there to help me through the process not impede it.”

Luo Xianni’s curiosity got the better of her. “What is your dharma?”

He grinned at her in response. “Its name is even longer than my brother’s. I’d rather not say.”

Her eyes sparkled. “What are you doing? Keeping secrets from your mother?”

This earned a sigh from Lan Jue. He muttered his answer. “Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety.” ¹

For a long moment the others just stared at him.

The Gourmet was at a total loss. He’d grown up in the North, and though he came from Eastern blood he was never taught the history and mythos of ancient China. The Driver was similarly flabbergasted, though he had some inkling as to what it meant.

The Pharmacist and the Pauper stared at him with wide, unbelieving eyes. Both of them had inherited dharmas and were possessed of deep historical knowledge.

Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety? What in the world was that?

This ancient deity had many names; Master of Stars, Attendant of the Highest Stratum of Heaven. In ancient times he was lauded as guardian of the golden gate of immortals. It was also said he was a transformation of the great Yuan Shi. The one who made Captus, Celestial Master Lingbao, was one of his contemporaries and a Pure One.

Respect for the Heavenly Emperor was loftier than the North Star. He was among the greatest deities of the Taoist pantheon, hence his position as the North Star, master of the Purple Subtle Enclosure. His Buddhist name was the Blazing Light, Taoists called him the Mysterious Celestial of Jade. Master of Great Learning and Integrity. Gatherer of All Under Heaven. 2

Among the Taoist pantheon he was ranked just under the Jade Emperor. Known as Master of Stars, Supreme Emperor.

When the Pharmacist realized what Lan Jue had inherited, she grinned from ear to ear. No wonder... no wonder Captus was glad to reveal its full splendor in the hands of his dharmic image. It was the Emperor of Purple Subtlety!

Immortals who existed in the realm of Daluo could call upon the full might of Captus. How much truer was it for a Heavenly Minister? It was as powerful as the underlying truth that composed the universe.

Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety... and the Palm of Five Lightnings.

With that thought, the cloud of heavenly lightning began to make sense. The first golden bolt destroyed ignorance, the Way of Execution for the Five Lightnings. The second blue bolt was Lan Jue's specialty, All-Heaven Lightning, created when Pan Gu split heaven and earth. The third purple bolt that was shared with the Driver because it was his own Primordial

Lightning.

The fourth were the three turquoise bolts as one, Triple Purity.

At last were the six lightnings employed by the Palm technique to punish evildoers. Individually they were; Heavenly thunder, Earthly thunder, Cloud thunder, Water thunder, Demon thunder, and War thunder.

Thunder magic was a gift of his inheritance, and what allowed Lan Jue to possess and employ his dharma.

He held back for so long, and allowed the magic to gestate within him. When it was released his explosive growth was nothing short of astonishing. The Emperor of the North Star was no less potent a dharma than Vairocana, and in fact in combat was more advantageous. After all, the Emperor of the North Star was noted for his prowess on the field of battle.

Chapter 789: 11-Word Title

Luo Xianni blinked sluggishly at him. “This is your father’s doing?”

Lan Jue nodded.

“Chi Bupang, you won this one,” she muttered.

Lan Jue’s protogenic manifestations had changed over time. His Discipline was thunderbolt, so he chose the moniker and likeness of the God of Lightning Zeus. When he re emerged onto the scene, although his ascension agreed with his powers it lacked the tempering needed.

Becoming a Paragon was always assured for Lan Jue. The question was how far he’d go afterward. Under Jue Di’s tutelage, with the thunder essence and the immortal qi within, he was guided to the source of the Emperor of the North Star. With help Lan Jue was given the most suitable dharma for his powers.

It seemed like the long months of suppression had finally paid off.

After his breakthrough Captus seemed less mysterious and inscrutable than it had been. Its secrets had begun to be revealed to him. Of course he would need time to stabilize his newfound powers, but right now there was a mission to complete.

Lan Jue’s communicator had been destroyed in the process. Only Thor’s Promise and other metallic and moisture-containing items had survived the electric fire. His modesty was preserved by the coagulation of his energy into the robe of the Emperor of the North Star.

Luo Xianni gave her communicator to him. He immediately dialed in his brother’s number.

“It’s done.” His report was two simple words.

“You broke through?” Came the response.

“Yeah.”

He was about to hang up when he heard his brother speak again. “Alright, Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple

Subtlety. Eleven words... not bad. Don't worry, I won't tease you too much."

Lan Qing hung up before his brother could respond.

"You-" He was speechless. Karma, it was revealed, was a real bitch. He had been merciless in the abuse of his brother for the name he inherited. Now look what that got him.

"Can we just call me the North Star?"

"Did you help when father gave me my name?"

"Fine, you win!" 1

Eleven words was eleven words, what's the big deal!

All that had occurred on Angel had been visible even out in space. When the golden cloud appeared it lit up the far side of the planet. The aura it produced had frightened all the aliens nearby and sent them into a panic. That alone positively influenced the battle in humanity's favor.

Out in space, humans had been in the weeds. An overwhelming number of alien enemies had been closing in on them inch by inch. Despite the pressure they'd held ranks and maintained their range advantage. Although humans were fighting on their back feet, the aliens were the ones who took the most punishment.

However if the aliens broke their line the situation would have quickly reversed. It would likely have become a massacre on par with the loss of the North's Seventh Fleet.

But would Lan Qing give them the chance?

The moment that powerful, globular beast joined the fray human tactics changed. Or, more accurately, Middle Heaven rose to the occasion.

Deep blasts issued from the warplanet as it rushed into the enemy's midst. Like a monumental cannonball it tore through their ranks. The humans watched, stunned and alarmed. They weren't aware this was part of their strategy.

Although the bastion's strength and defenses were formidable, the

aliens were also more than your typical foe. Enough ants could kill an elephant. Once it was surrounded how would Middle Heaven protect itself from destruction? What's more, they relied on the bastion for the success of the mission!

The aliens would not give up an opportunity to finish the fight in one strike. Middle Heaven's brazen charge crushed a number of aliens, but scores more came swarming in to replace them. They came at Middle Heaven with their strongest attacks.

Then, all of a sudden, the bastion lit up on all sides. The honeycomb cannons that had been on just one side now appeared on practically every inch. It blazed like a star that was birthed in the center of the alien horde. The red light that poured from it threatened to outshine the nearby sun.

The heat and pressure warped everything within a certain radius. Red eventually gave way to incandescent white. Any alien caught within the scope of the blaze were immediately charred, their defenses incapable of withstanding such intense temperatures.

However the range of the burn wasn't overly large, perhaps three thousand meters in every direction. After that the heat quickly dropped off, in sharp contrast to its earlier attack.

But don't forget, the aliens were adept at close combat. In order to cause Middle Heaven any damage they had to crowd in, so the area around the bastion had been thick with enemies. The intensity of it was so sudden and so overbearing that what wasn't immediately destroyed was temporarily blinded by the light.

Countless numbers of alien creatures were killed in a matter of seconds.

In fact the force of it was such that even the temperature on Angel increased by several degrees.

Shocking was the only way to describe this sudden change. The other bastions and the twelve fleets had only been given one order. Shield your eyes.

It was an important order to follow, lest Middle Heaven's daring act

blinded their own people.

The white-hot fires easily consumed all beasts within range. The thick press of aliens that had rushed in was now a field of ash.

The light continued for a whole minute before eventually dampening. It left behind a smoldering Middle Heaven that seethed red and angry like a ball of flame. Its entire surface was an undulating field of golden red that warred with the frigid environment of space. The heat was so acute that it didn't need defenses. Any alien that got close would sure burst into flames.

All around the bastion vital crystals twinkled in the red glow. They were all different – some large and some small – and they glittered like gems lain upon black velvet.

Suddenly there was an ear-piercing screech. The titanic beast that had nearly rushed in to attack Middle Heaven shook with rage. A powerful vacuum force was directed at Middle Heaven – not in the hopes drawing the bastion near, but to gather the scores of vital crystals around it.

The creature had made a quick and effective choice. It'd rushed in like the others to try and put the bastion down, but its reaction had been quicker. Once a living creature reached a certain level of power, it could sense dangerous intentions no matter who the enemy was.

When Middle Heaven charged into the horde the beast had made to meet it, but an ominous sensation stayed its reciprocation. This moment of hesitation had saved its life. Its smaller brethren, who rushed in to block its progress and attack, were no more.

Middle Heaven hovered in the pocket of clear space, making no attempt to recover the vital crystals on behalf of humanity. For the aliens, so long as they didn't lose the vital crystals the destruction of a body meant little. The vital energy held within could fortify their numbers quickly.

Then space lit up once more. This time, though, it didn't come from the bastion, but instead from behind it.

A beam of burning white light a thousand meters in diameter pierced

the darkness and where it passed reality bent from the disruption. Rippled spread out all around them.

The beam was well aimed and struck the alien orb dead center. The creature's vision and perception had been affected by Middle Heaven's blaze, and so it didn't have a chance to evade. Though the ominous sense had remained, without vision the monster assumed it was still Middle Heaven.

The attack was too sudden.

The white light ripped through its enormous body instantly, slicing through it like the beast wasn't even there. Its passage swept away any smaller aliens caught in its path and though it persisted for less than a second, it had erased a huge swath of foes from existence.

On the heels of the beam came six crystal clear blue orbs. Their approach had been concealed by Middle Heaven's girth until spreading out once they reached the battlefield. Each one of them was at least five hundred meters around, not terribly impressive to look at, like small crystal asteroids caught in Middle Heaven's orbit.

Chapter 790: Soft Water Bomb

The crystal orbs floated silently through the darkness of space and toward where the alien forces were thickest. The aliens, meanwhile, were in total disarray.

Middle Heaven's sudden charge and attack was so fast they still hadn't recovered. When their senses returned the highest order of business was protecting oneself by any means necessary. Then, the spear of light erased scores more of their brethren and destroyed their leader. All of a sudden they were a snake without its head, how could they not be mired in chaos?

So it was that when the orbs arrived the aliens didn't know whether to advance or retreat. They glimmered prettily as though they were comprised of gemstones. Within them were ripples of power, like a world of water was contained in each one.

They looked slow, but it wasn't long before they penetrated the clusters of aliens. Once surrounded by enemies they quickly swelled to several times their size.

There was no violent explosion or blinding flash. The orbs' expansion was silent as death but spectacular to behold. Whatever it touched instantly froze solid like an ice sculpture. Alien victims hovered in air unmoving. The creatures looked like the orb had, crystalline and transparent. However the state was short lived for moments later they dissolved into water and melted away. Only their vital crystals remained. The blue light was like an exfoliating current that washed their bodies away.

After expanding the six orbs covered a huge area, even larger than Middle Heaven's blaze. They so dazzled the spectators that every eye was locked on them.

In a matter of minutes the situation had turned. Under the weight of sudden disaster the alien forces collapsed. In a blink one fifth of their forces had been destroyed – not something that could be easily shrugged off.

Screams of terror filled space as the beasts fled for their lives.

The human armada had begun to move after the appearance of the crystalline orbs. They halted the retreat, and with guns blazing, turned around and pressed the attack. There was too much happening at once for anyone to keep track of, but the end result was clear. The alien forces were routed.

All of this was part of Lan Qing's plan.

From the beginning, the humans had been in an inferior position. In the hearts of these soldiers a fear had begun to creep into their hearts that the enemy was too much for them to overcome. But was that the truth of it? Were these alien monstrosities invincible? Lan Qing used his own prowess, his own masterful command to show them that the aliens were not to be feared. Their foes were not the perfect predators. Like anything else, they had their weaknesses.

Indeed, Middle Heaven revealed its true strength in transforming itself into a small sun. The warplanet itself was its greatest weapon. Its Solar Flare was one of the bastion's most potent attacks.

All of its cannons had been flooded with molinite and fired simultaneously, putting the newly discovered element's potency on full display and thereby obliterating everything around it in spectacular fashion. It was the first time an attack like this had been attempted.

During the research phase this wasn't intended to be used as an offensive maneuver. Solar Flare was designed as a defensive technique to escape encirclement. As could be expected, the powerful attack also had its detriments, most important being its limited range.

It wasn't that the scope was limited by design, the amount of energy it consumed was nothing short of stupefying. Middle Heaven's molinite core couldn't sustain it for long without becoming unstable. If they tried it would likely result in a cataclysmic explosion.

Thus was the Solar Flare attack limited in scope, and reserved for instances like this or when facing the alien home worlds' tentacles.

Lan Qing had used his enemy's advantage against them. With Middle Heaven as bait he drew them in, and Solar Flare did the rest, with tremendous results. What's more, while the enemy was blinded by the glare, it had given Tyrannosaurus and Poseidon enough time to charge their main guns.

Typically it was difficult for a bastion to effectively use its main guns in the midst of battle. For one, the energy it consumed was prohibitive. Also it left them open to counterattack since they couldn't employ their weapons again for a time afterward. Timing was imperative.

Lan Qing had carefully studied all of humanity's previous clashes with these alien creatures. The two he paid closest attention to were their defeat in the Scattered Starfields, and the disaster in the Northern Alliance.

He learned that the aliens feared their bastions' main cannons. Humans had managed to discover weapons of great destructive power, possibly surpassing even universal protogenia. But because bastions were not living things, they weren't constrained by the same restrictions the alien planets suffered.

Lan Qing noted that the aliens did whatever was necessary to prevent the bastions from using their deadly weapons. And they were successful, Lan Qing could not find a single instance when a bastion's attack actually hit an alien home world.

His enemy's fear of these weapons could only mean they were effective. Against the aliens, and against the living planets they came from. He formulated his plan so that the armada could employ these weapons of mass destruction to their fullest capabilities. In this way they could turn the tables and punish their foes.

Originally the aliens had been spread out, specifically to avoid having large numbers of their troops caught by bastion fire. They also understood these human weapons, and knew that they needed time to charge before use. It was obvious when bastion ships were preparing to use them.

Frightened as they were by the power of these hips, the aliens learned

effective ways to prevent them using their weapons. They became so good at it, in fact, they began to look on them with disdain.

Their hubris was viciously punished this time.

Firstly, the aliens knew little to nothing about Middle Heaven. They didn't think its fighting systems would be so different from its predecessors. What's more, the ship had recently used its main guns and wouldn't be able to again for some time. At least so they thought.

But how could they know Middle Heaven was replete with molinite, and possessed stores of energy that put any other bastion to shame? The time needed to charge its guns was significantly shorter. Nor was the circular blast Middle Heaven's real main attack.

They were caught entirely by surprise, much to their dismay. Under the cover of Middle Heaven's impressive display, Tyrannosaurus was able to furtively charge its own guns and in one fell swoop put down the enemy leader. Its white beam had destroyed no small number of smaller aliens as well.

The six orbs had, of course, come from Poseidon. Just like Middle Heaven, the aliens did know what to expect from the mysterious bastion. The orbs themselves were called Soft Water Bombs – a name that didn't inspire fear by any measure. However they were also sometimes called Poseidon bombs, as they were the bastion's main attack.

Soft Water Bombs were the product of the Group's own military research and development. Using their own secretive methods and materials, they were able to create a unique material they called Soft Water. It was especially adept at assimilating all sorts of matter, especially living things.

This meant that if human ships attacked Poseidon, its bombs would do little to the attacking vessels themselves. However, all life within would be consumed, leaving them empty husks – ghost ships. Even more terrifying, by its nature the Soft Water Bombs slipped passed most defenses effortlessly.

This was Poseidon Group's secret weapon, one which only its highest

leaders knew of. Even Mo Xiao was only made aware of its existence once she was chosen to bear Hua Li's child.

Poseidon Group's decision to participate in this fight was about confidence, but not confidence in Lan Qing. The group had great confidence in itself, and held nothing back to prove it.

They had already done their research to ensure the Soft Water Bombs were effective against alien forces. The six shells it released far surpassed Middle Heaven's Solar Flare in enemies destroyed. It was particularly suited to contend against the aliens. Like the beasts the Soft Water consumed what it touched and turned it into harmless dihydrogen oxide. Only their vital crystals, protected by its vibrant life energy, survived the baptism.

Middle Heaven remained still, never moving from the spot where it ended its charge. Meanwhile Tyrannosaurus and Poseidon went on the offensive, following the twelve fleets as they chased down the fleeing alien survivors.

Chapter 791: Defeat

After sitting in stillness for over five minutes, Middle Heaven began to move again. It chased after its own armada in pursuit of the enemy, back toward Angel.

Solar Flare was a strong attack, but it had its drawbacks. The heat it produced was so intense all of the ship's systems overheated after use. The ship needed at least five minutes to cool off and come back online. This was only possible because of An Lun's rocky surface which acted as a heat shield. Without it the situation would be worse for the Bastion. Middle Heaven would have needed over an hour to let the heat radiate off. Right now Solar Flare could only be used three times in a day to ensure it didn't damage important systems.

Poseidon's Soft Water Bombs bore similar restrictions, they cost the ship a lot of energy to produce. The ship even had a specialized area where volleys were made and prepared, but even then they could only be used three times. Afterwards they needed three days to replenish energy stores and prepare another battery. The problem lay in soft water's inability to be stored. It had to be used in a short time because there was no way to contain it safely.

In this way the balance was maintained; the stronger something was, the more serious its consequences or challenges. It was the same for universal protogenia.

The aliens fled quickly and with wild abandon. They made the wise decision to try and spread out and run in all directions from the danger. The human pursuers could only clip off the stragglers, leaving the bulk of the alien force free to make their escape.

Still, humans made gains at their enemy's expense. The value of the vital crystals they harvested was hard to measure. They simultaneously shot down the fleeing beasts and took their precious crystals, for the future betterment of their species.

Once the fight was finished the crystals would be divvied up among the

three factions that had participated. How, precisely, had yet to be discussed but it all hinged on surviving the encounter.

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A dim light brightened the sky, and Lan Jue lifted his eyes to observe. They could not know the state of the battle from their vantage on Angel, but there were clues that alluded to Middle Heaven's Solar Flare. It certainly wasn't normal for half the sky to suddenly light up like the birth of a new sun.

Extensive tracts of the planet's surface had already recovered from the progenitor's poison touch. The release of vital energy from the creature's destruction had reinvigorated it. The Paragons all gathered together. No aliens remained nearby, frightened away by what they'd witnessed.

The cloud that looked so much like Tribulation Lightning had filled their enemies to the bone with terror. Just the presence of it conjured images of their bodies being turned to smoke and ash, and inspired them to run for their lives. Even Monarch's avatar wasn't spared.

"I wonder what's going on up there." The Pharmacist said in curiosity. There was still a long way to go before a final human victory, and they couldn't know what was happening on all fronts.

Lan Jue grinned. "Don't worry, I trust that guy. He's always got an ace up his sleeve. If we really didn't have a chance he wouldn't have brought us into this fight. Anyway, on with the plan."

Now that the progenitor had been taken care of, they were responsible for helping the ground assault team take Angel and save the survivors. This included the humans that had already been turned, so that they could be brought to Middle Heaven for treatment.

The first part of their mission was done, and as of yet they hadn't been met with a large number of alien forces. This hinted that the battle out in space was still being fiercely waged, that humanity was holding its own.

Luo Xianni spoke up. "Let's go take a look. I'm sensing powerful waves of energy, and that means there's a strong enemy nearby. I've checked and

I can't get any communications through, the interference is too great."

As one they shot into the air, high above the ground so that they might get a clearer picture. From their vantage it was even more evident how quickly Angel was recovery. It virtually glowed with life. What was more surprising to the humans, however, was the lack of an alien presence even from their overwatch position. They were gone entirely.

"It looks like those beasts are really scared of you!" The Pauper said with a chuckle.

"No," Lan Jue replied, "they're afraid of the cloud. It's gone but none of them are interested in making sure. Unless I'm mistaken, our armada is also on a winning footing."

The Pharmacist's heart raced. "I'll go take a look and confirm." There was no fighting on the planet's surface for them to concern themselves about. Strong as they were, Paragons weren't best suited for gathering up survivors. They had the ground team for that.

The turn-around on Angel was faster than any of them would have anticipated. No enemies remained to contest their control of the planet. Where they fled to, though, no one could say.

"Don't engage them yourself, and be careful on the Monarch's doppelganger," Lan Jue reminded her.

"Let's wait for the ground team. If they get here soon it means we've taken this sector. If not, then there's been some kind of problem. We should be ready to go in either event." Lan Jue decided.

As much as he wanted to help save lives, he and his team were the core of humanity's strength against the aliens. They had to keep up the pressure in order to win. Saving their strength and directing it wisely was more important than gathering survivors. They could protect more lives that way.

Just then, the communicator on Lan Jue's wrist buzzed. He answered the call.

"The alien forces have been routed. The ground assault team will be

arriving in ten minutes, prepare to join up with them. Once the planet is secure, continue with your mission.” Lan Qing’s voice was cold and even as ever, as though their victory was insignificant. But even his brother’s simple report caused Lan Jue’s spirits to soar. The faces of the Paragons around him lit up.

Lan Qing went on. “Jun’er has confirmed that Angel is in no danger of exploding. The Terminator has also led his team to their destination and Zeus-1 is landing as we speak. Father’s situation is as yet unclear.”

“Alright, got it.” Lan Jue answered, in the same sparring manner.

He hung up and pumped his fist. The others grinned and chuckled, pleased with their initial victory.

“Winning any ground against these monsters is no easy feat!” Luo Xianni remarked. Lan Qing’s words may have been calculating and simple, but the fact of the matter was that this had been humanity’s greatest victory against their attackers to date.

The bulk of the aliens’ forces had gathered here to deter the human armada. They had to be dealt with before Angel could be retaken, and at present it seems like that’s precisely what Lan Qing had achieved. If this didn’t bring joy to the human fighters, what would?

“I don’t know how he did it.” Lan Jue sighed in relief. His brother hadn’t shared all the details of his plan with him, so he wasn’t sure what had happened while they were dealing with the progenitor.

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Tyrannosaurus-Class Bastion.

Admiral Kang Hui’s face was a sea of emotion. This was an incredible victory! When he saw the aliens turn and flee, his legendary calm broke and he roared in triumph. They had been waiting for a victory like this for a long, long time. A series of painful lessons had put humanity against the ropes, but now they were fighting back.

Tyrannosaurus presence here was in defiance of the people’s wishes and without government support. Northern citizens demanded to be protected,

ignorant of the fact that they were simply waiting to die.

They'd risked much to disobey the government and the people, but Tyrannosaurus and the Terminator had come to see this situation realized.

Lan Qing had demanded all information regarding their bastions from Kang Hui and Hua Li while making his plans. In truth Kang Hui had hesitated – after all, this wasn't just asking for secrets of their strongest weapon, it could reveal much about the North's construction and research processes. After discussing it with the Terminator, they conceded to Lan Qing's requirement.

Then Prometheus made his plans.

Only Lan Qing, Hua Li and Kang Hui knew the full scope of their battle plan. They had been aware from the opening salvo, to drawing the enemy out, up to the sudden counter strike. All the while Lan Qing was the invisible hand that moved pieces across the board at just the right moment.

Kang Hui considered himself a first-class commander. However, in the face of Lan Qing's victory he felt small and ineffectual. The An Lun super soldier, God of Wisdom, led his troops with the skill and finesse of an orchestra conductor. He was in complete control of every aspect of the fight, and they won with strength to spare.

He thought back to Middle Heaven's omnidirectional blast, like the sudden birth of a small sun in the midst of the enemy forces. His soldiers had followed Lan Qing's instruction and shielded their eyes, but not Kang Hui. The admiral's Discipline lived in his eyes, he could modulate the effect of light on his cornea. He had stared in awe as Middle Heaven seared a path through the enemy – an attack on a planetary scale! That was the moment the tides changed in their favor.

Chapter 792: Confidence, Resolve

Admiration for Lan Qing and his abilities filled Kang Hui. Not only had he brought them victory, he restored humanity's long-lost confidence! Through action he proved to everyone that their enemy was not invincible.

What's more, it was the first time Kang Hui had seen such cooperation among Bastions before. Cooperation he didn't know was possible. Without Middle Heaven's cover Tyrannosaurus and Poseidon wouldn't have been able to conceal their preparations from the enemy. What's more, they never would have been able to put down so many aliens in the crossfire.

It was amazing to think that the East never had enough bastions for this commander to employ until now! How did he even think up this plan? Never in the history of humanity had there been a battle where cooperation on this level was necessary, leaving Lan Qing no precedent to lean upon. The bastions were so strong on their own there had previously been no need to think beyond dispatching one into a fight. Lan Qing showed them what they could do if they worked together.

Kang Hui believed that the experience of this battle had opened his eyes. If he had to describe Lan Qing's fighting style, he could only think of the ancient Chinese phrase; inscrutable as the spirits. Lan Qing's tactics didn't adhere to a single set of rules – sometimes it was radical, sometimes it was conservative. Sometimes he charged the enemy front lines, sometimes he appeared when he was least expected. He treated the battlefield like a chessboard, and he knew every maneuver ten moves in advance.

The aliens had been routed. They weren't even fleeing to Angel, instead opting to abscond to farther harbors. They had other planets they could run to, but now humanity had broken their defensive encirclement and gained a foothold.

It was the first, crucial step. Whether what came next was good or bad, at least they'd won one victory and made the alien creatures hurt.

Next they were faced with recovering Angel and constructing an

operating base. Now that they were in the lion's den, there was no going back.

Despite their impressive triumph the aliens were not in an inferior position. They had created conditions that left humanity unwilling to blindly proceed, up to and including the possibility of facing the alien home worlds.

Today's success was only the beginning.

Still, the significance of it was enormous. The human fighters were filled with confidence and momentum, morale ran high. For soldiers facing such overwhelming odds, the importance of high spirits was evident.

The twelve fleets had spread out into surrounding space. Eight of them were faced outward to stand guard against approaching foes. The three bastions remained in the center, maintaining triangle formation as they moved in on Angel. When they got within range they stopped, and their entourage formed up in an impenetrable wall of deadly technology.

The ground assault team had long been ready, awaiting deployment from Middle Heaven. Over five hundred assault ships were dispatched and burned their engines for Angel. Aboard these ships was more than thirty thousand troops, a combination of fighters from all three factions. Among them was the universally lauded Star Division.

Majesty led the ships to the planet's surface, the vessels in its wake glittering in the light of the distant sun. Two hundred battleships flanked them, serving as an escort in the event of alien attack. Of course, the chances of that were low.

The aliens had not only fled nearby space, but Angel's surface as well. They had given up the planet for lost, going to extreme length simply to ensure their own survival.

An encrypted signal hailed Majesty. It was connected, and Lan Jue's face appeared on the screen. A cheer rose through the ship. Before the operation they knew Lan Jue was infiltrating Angel before their arrival.

"Boss, how are things on your end?" Su Xiaosu's face was red – not from

embarrassment, but form excitement. They'd all watched the fight from screens within the belly of Middle Heaven. After watching the creatures flee for their lives, the soldiers were elated.

Lan Jue smiled. "We've taken care of the progenitor, everything's fine. Land at the coordinates we gave you and proceed with the mission. It's an arduous one; the aliens have retreated, but they left behind many infected areas and mutated humans. Be cautious, some of them may explode on contact, and they're dangerous fighters. Make sure you let our allies know."

"Aye, aye!" Xiaosu immediately relayed the report to the other officers.

It seemed as though their mission would be somewhat more relaxed than they anticipated. No powerful aliens remained to impede them.

"Boss, did you break through? The light we saw on the planet, was that..." She let her question trail off. Tang Xiao, Tang Mi and Jin Tao had gathered around the monitor. They were all invested in the success of their commander.

Lan Jue nodded.

Another cheer burst from the crowd. They'd been waiting for this day for a long time. Ever since Lan Qing's breakthrough they had been waiting for Lan Jue to do the same. This made him the youngest Paragon ever. His compatriots Hua Li and Chu Cheng had also advanced, making Lan Jue the last of his crew to succeed.

At the time it had troubled them, since they knew their teacher was a prideful man. For everyone around him to become Paragons while he did not must have been difficult, they surmised, but they didn't dare ask him about it. And then, before the operation began, Lan Jue had told them of his imminent breakthrough. They were ecstatic, overjoyed for their teacher's future success.

A smirk split Lan Jue's lip, and an ice-cold glint flit across his eyes. "We'll talk more about it when the fight's over. Be careful."

A familiar face appeared on Lan Jue's screen, the Savage Goddess – Tan

Lingyun. The two of them stared at one another.

He broke through? He was a Paragon? Still so young, it was hard to believe! He was Lei Feng, the same man even without the mask – he was that man!

She took a deep breath, an attempt to get herself under control. She turned her face away. Tan Lingyun knew this man old never be hers. It was true whether or not he wore the mask.

Lan Jue cut the connection, then turned around the survey everything around them.

He stood in the center of the stadium they'd visited during the scouting trip. Not aliens were gone, for the beasts created by the progenitor which thrived on its corruption had nowhere to go. Without their master the creatures were mindless, out of control. Eventually they withered and died. However, the mutated humans remained.

When they saw Lan Jue and the others, they raced ahead to try and rip them apart. There was no time to lose, these poor souls could explode at any moment, and were dangerously feral.

The plight of these innocents dampened everyone's spirits. If they found survivors in the midst of their rampage, the results would be unthinkable. Every moment that passed there was the possibility that the survivors were being picked off.

However in their flight to this place they had performed some quick checks. Up to now they had found no one that had been spared the mutation. Nearly if not all remaining humans had been changed into mindless beasts by the progenitor's poison touch. Scores and scores of them had been left behind.

Luo Xianni used her interdimensional abilities to freeze the ones in the stadium. However that only stopped them from attacking, their sickness remained.

The Keeper's research had reached an impasse. Human genetics was mysterious, and returning them to normal would take time. Nor could they

remain sealed in Luo Xianni's powers, that way led to death. What's more there were more of them than they could count, thousands upon thousands just on a single planet. It was possible their numbers could reach into the hundreds of millions, if not higher. This posed a real problem.

"Don't think on it too much. Rest, you just broke through. You don't have time to solidify your powers completely, but you can't continue fighting with an unstable base." Luo Xianni gently patted his shoulder.

"Yeah." Lan Jue replied. He took her advice and removed himself to one of the observation platforms on the arena. He found a quiet corner, but did not immediately meditate. A strange look lived behind his eyes, revealing concern.

Indeed he was hesitant, for what he was about to see could affect him all the rest of his life. Among his reasons for wanting to break through, one of the most important was returning his love to consciousness. Yet now that the time had come he was filled with anxiety.

He and Qianlin had trained together, grown together. Now they had broken through as one and risen to extraordinary heights right from the start. So far, everything had gone right...

Chapter 793: Idiot

What Lan Jue discovered during their breakthrough was a sudden and intense emotional and psychic shift in Qianlin. He reacted by fusing the two of them into one. Clearly the breakthrough had had an effect on her, perhaps she even recovered her consciousness. But there was a chance she didn't, or even gotten worse. In that event he didn't dare release Qianlin into perilous surroundings. If it was revealed she wasn't better it would influence everyone, affecting their mission.

Humanity had won an important victory, but what would he do with Qianlin? Would she remember anything about how they got here? Moreover, he had barely spoken with her since learning the truth about her and Hera. This made things far more complicated.

Now wasn't the time to help her remember. Nor was it the time to discuss their relationship. Nothing was more important than winning this war against the aliens. And yet, if he didn't help her through this period she couldn't fully recover, and the Harmonious Swords would be inaccessible! Without cooperation between them, he feared they wouldn't stand a chance against the alien home worlds.

Taking a deep breath, Lan Jue's expression finally became resolute. Whatever the result, he had to face it. He couldn't run from the truth.

A light flashed in his eyes, and gradually a lithe figure emerged from behind him. The figure was white as snow as it separated from his body. It was Qianlin, but in contrast to before when she separated without clothes, this time she wore the robes that had concealed her during their breakthrough. The flowing gowns made her look all the more like an angel, stunning in her beauty.

He didn't know why, but for a moment Lan Jue hoped she hadn't recovered her memory. Yet he did know, he knew that he feared how she would react to him if she knew it all. Her reaction to the whole truth was important.

They cooperated well now, and the Harmonious Sword technique they'd

learned together showed that. What would happen when she got better?

Zhou Qianlin stood there silently. She seemed no different other than the potent waves of energy that pulsed from her. All was just as it had been before their breakthrough. It didn't work? Her consciousness had not returned? A sense of loss, of pain, filled Lan Jue.

"Qianlin," he softly pleaded.

Her eyes slid toward him, calm and indifferent. Nothing different.

Reaching out with his perception he sensed no changes in mood. The burst of psychic energy he'd experienced when they became Paragon had given way to the same steadfast calm as before. A calm that broke his heart.

As they stared at one another moisture gathered in Lan Jue's eyes. His hopes were gone, like a popped bubble. What he'd strived so hard for had not come to pass.

It was small consolation that he and Qianlin could continue to use the Harmonious Swords. A small and unsatisfactory comfort.

He took a deep breath and calmed his aching heart. He stepped forward and gently pulled her into his embrace. She was surrounded by a sweet fragrance he couldn't put his finger on, comforting and gentle. As he held her he felt the swirling energy within him, vestiges of protogenic power still agitated by his breakthrough. They suddenly grew calm.

It was the influence of the Queen of Heaven, he suspected, helping to stabilize their respective abilities after reaching Paragon. He would rather have her mind returned.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't bring you back, Qianlin. It breaks my heart, did you know? All of this is my fault – I did this to you. But don't worry, I'll be by your side forever. Only you are my wife. Hera is gone, and you are all that remains. I'll be with you until the day we pass, caring for you, loving you. When I come to the end of my life, I'll help you pass too. You and I will leave this universe together, so that no one can harm you to get back at me. Qianlin, I will love you no matter what condition you're in."

His body shook with silent sobs. The day he'd looked forward to for so long had not come, and his love was still lost behind a haze. The pain it caused him was unspeakable.

Qianlin's hands had risen and encircled his neck, unnoticed during his vows. Her face rested against his shoulder.

"Do you really want a woman who lies to you?" A soft, somewhat hoarse voice answered him.

"I do, of course I do. You never deceived me, it was nothing but a white lie. After the Clairvoyant explained everything to me I just needed to straighten out my thinking. I held Hera's love close, and I do the same now for you. You are not her substitute, not –" Lan Jue spoke excitedly, obstinately swearing his love when all of a sudden he stopped. His body straightened and he held Qianlin out at arm's length so he could see her face.

Qianlin stared back at him with a dull expression. There was no change.

"Am I hearing things? That wasn't her just now?" Lan Jue stood, confused. He grinned sheepishly. "Maybe I miss her too much."

"Idiot!" Qianlin suddenly spat, then jumped forward to wrap her arms around him. She pressed her lips to his in a desperate kiss.

As their lips touched Lan Jue felt her chilly, trembling flesh. It was followed by a surge of something inexplicable. All of a sudden his world was turned on its head. His mind went blank.

She kissed him passionately, venting all of the emotion that had been bottled up for so long.

In her mind the words he'd said reverberated over and over. When I come to the end of my life, I'll help you pass too. You and I will leave this universe together, so that no one can harm you to get back at me.

They weren't beautiful prose, but the sentiment filled her with warmth.

Lan Jue eventually recovered from his stupor. He no longer passively allowed her to kiss him. Instead he channeled all of the love, the loss, the

pain and expectation into the kiss. He embraced her with all the strength of his affection, holding nothing back.

This time they didn't merge. They remained two people, filled with love for one another.

All the unhappiness, misunderstandings, and misgivings were dissolved with this kiss. Their bodies did not combine but in this moment their hearts were as one. Everything they had gone through was absolved as this singular, heart-bursting moment arrived.

After an indeterminate period of time a cough interrupted the two lovers.

Luo Xianni looked at the two of them with a faint smile on her face. "Is this how you young folks 'stabilize your domains' these days?"

Qianlin dropped her reddening face, suddenly unable to meet the woman's eyes.

A blush also crept into Lan Jue's cheeks. Yet he never let Qianlin go, as though he were afraid that if he did she would disappear.

"My domain is stable, mother." He said awkwardly.

"That's emotional stability," Luo Xianni chided. "Fine, I won't bother you two. You two go on – ey?" She stopped mid-sentence, and in a flash was at Qianlin's side.

Lan Jue jumped. "Mother, what is it?"

Qianlin lifted her head. Despite her pale cheeks painted red with embarrassment, her beauty was still breathtaking.

"Your aura...? This is..." Luo Xianni stared at Qianlin as though deep in thought. She muttered the words.

Lan Jue confirmed. "I felt it, too. Qianlin's aura is especially gentle, I felt it when we held each other. When I said my domain is stable, it was because the protogenia within me reacted to her aura. She calmed it, and as far as I can remember from father, that means it's stable."

Luo Xianni nodded. "Just so, your protogenia is being released in steady

waves. It's incredible. I've never seen anything like this, arising from the Queen of Heaven Discipline ascending to Paragon. There probably never has been a Queen of Heaven Paragon before. Child, can you sense any new powers?"

Qianlin answered in somewhat of a dazed tone. "I'm not sure." After breaking through she had merged immediately with Lan Jue. When they separated her mind was on other things. She hadn't even thought about exploring her newfound strength yet! All she knew was that she was stronger, that she seemed able to sense all the world around her. Other than this, nothing seemed different.

But at Luo Xianni's suggestion she began to feel it, a subtle difference from who she used to be. A rippling wave of protogenia spread from her.

Lan Jue and Luo Xianni were also Paragons, and she could feel the protogenia that came from them. However when their powers interacted with her own they softened. She didn't know how or why, but all their energy seemed to assimilate as they mingled together.

Chapter 794: Zhou Qianlin's Protogenia

This didn't change the powers so much as sublimate them. It was subtle, but the increase in Lan Jue and Luo Xianni's strength of Domain was measurable.

"This is like some sort of amplification protogenia." Luo Xianni mused.

The Queen of Heaven discipline was known for its self-sacrifice in service of others. It was described as the most selfless power. Even before ascending to Paragon she could bring someone from the brink of death. Paragons, in a sense, were pure humans, did it mean she could influence other Paragons now?

Was her protogenia meant to empower others?

Luo Xianni's brows were furrowed as she immersed herself in the waves of power emanating from Zhou Qianlin.

"Girl, release your Domain. Let me feel your power." She said.

For Paragons, drawing their Domain into the real world was the strongest reflection of their protogenia. Having just broken through to Reflection of Heaven and earth surely she would not be proficient in the use of her abilities, but summoning her Domain shouldn't be difficult.

Qianlin nodded. Now was not the time to gush affectionately over her love. Her eyes hardened, and a moment later pale light flooded the area around her. It surrounded Lan Jue and Luo Xianni, enveloping them in its embrace.

The warmth of comfort of her power became clearer. Lan Jue felt a sense of well-being that was difficult to describe. Nothing seemed strange or disconcerting. However, Luo Xianni's reaction was much different. She stared at Qianlin in utter disbelief. "This is impossible!"

Lan Jue looked at her in confusion. "Mother, are you alright? What is it? What is Qianlin's Domain?"

Luo Xianni turned her head to look at him, fixing his eyes with a firm gaze. "You've sure chosen a fine wife, my son! I can sense two things from

her Domain – truly stupendous things.”

“Stupendous?” Lan Jue was even more surprised by her dramatic description. “Why don’t I feel anything?”

Luo Xianni’s response was impatient. “That’s because you haven’t called your Domain. You’re already in your prime state. The first part of her Domain is stabilizing and recovering protogenia.”

“Domains by their nature are not stable. Protogenia changes due to influences in its environment. To put it simply, if an enemy were to attack with your Domain active, Qianlin’s abilities would prevent it from being overcome or dispersed. It wouldn’t matter how strong your foe is, your Domain would prevail – that is, until her strength is consumed. But that isn’t as important as protogenic recovery. With her by your side you could use your strongest attacks, and your stamina would be immediately recovered through her Domain. It seems to apply to everything within its scope. This is her Domain.”

Lan Jue blinked in surprise. “That’s incredible.” Lan Jue was well versed in the many types of Adepts. Many were involved in healing and recovery, like Skyfire Avenue’s Doctor. However, these Adepts did not become Paragons. Their Disciplines only applied to humans, and didn’t benefit super-humans like Paragons. Once an Adept broke through, they were considered an aspect of protogenia.

If they couldn’t manipulate protogenia, how could they become a part of it? Because of this, healers who reached peak level were already extraordinary. Still they could only apply their abilities to humans and Adepts who had not broken through. They could not help Paragons.

Luo Xianni’s surprise made her explanation less than perfectly clear, but Lan Jue understood. Qianlin’s ability to recover protogenia was extraordinary and immensely powerful. In a fight Lan Jue wouldn’t need to worry about holding back or maintaining stability. With Qianlin present, all of the Paragons within the scope of her Domain could fight with everything they had.

“There’s more!” Luo Xianni’s eyes burned as she looked at the younger

woman. “And this second power is even more marvelous than the last – a firefly compared to the light of the moon.”

Something more powerful than protogenic stabilization and recovery? Lan Jue looked at his mother, almost disbelieving. “Aren’t you exaggerating?”

But she shook her head, denying his claim. She smiled. “With her ascension to Paragon, your father and I will not die. Do you think I exaggerate now? Her Domain’s second ability is to shield against universal protogenia!”

Lan Jue froze. The face he made now was as shocked as Luo Xianni’s had been when she felt it.

Shielding against universal protogenia? This meant that his mother and father didn’t need to fear retribution when using their powers within Qianlin’s Domain. They could finally employ their full strength.

A firefly’s light before the moon indeed!

Luo Xianni went on. “So long as the two of you are together, it doesn’t matter how strong you become. The Infinite and beyond, her Domain will protect you! It’s amazing that such a Paragon could exist, much less that I would know her. When the two of you achieve Nirvana you will know it more clearly. What an incredible revelation. Chu Bupang, the old coot, won’t have an excuse to hold my powers back any longer. Look after me, I’ll prepare now.”

Lan Jue’s heart suddenly skipped a beat. Break through? She was already a Paragon at the border of Nirvana. That meant... the Infinite!

In all of human history the only one to have ever achieved such strength was his father. If his mother could rise to such heights, free from the tyranny of universal protogenia with Qianlin’s help, the benefit to humanity would be colossal.

“Auntie, shall I use my Domain to help you...” Qianlin hurried asked. 1

Luo Xianni’s response was crouch and discontent. “What’s this ‘auntie’ nonsense? You’re with Lan Jue, call me mother. You don’t need to call

your Domain directly. Just be near me, that's fine. Your presence will help stabilize the protogenia. I won't need your shielding abilities until after I've broken through. When I need you to use your Domain, I'll let you know."

"Alright." Qianlin replied. Her face was red, but Luo Xianni's words had made her happy. It meant she accepted her. She stole a glance Lan Jue's way, only to spot him looking back at her. The stolen moment made her blush all the more.

Luo Xianni's style had always been dramatic and resolute. She dropped immediately into a cross-legged position and a pink aura sprang up like a blanket.

The Infinite, she was about to break through to the highest degree of Paragon! Lan Jue looked upon his mother in awe and admiration. After becoming a Paragon himself, he sensed things differently. Only once the veil to protogenia had been lifted could one sense the scope of power being manipulated.

The changes to protogenia, the control of this power, was not about pure energy. To an extent, it required controlling the rules of the universe. The universe, in turn, strove for order and balance, and worked to suppress perversion of its rules. Thus when one person was able to manipulate reality in such a way, reality fought back.

In many ways the universe could be understood as an integral whole – a single ever-expanding body. It had its own rules and protogenia it lived by. Creatures within it that could change, ignore, and create their own rules were like a sickness. Like the human body it would try to protect itself by exorcising the offender and curing the ailment.

In this way Paragons could be compared to cancer in humans. Universal protogenia was like white blood cells. If the mutations didn't have a way to hide from the white blood cells, they would be destroyed.

There were only two results that could arise from this. The vast majority of the time universal protogenia destroyed the offending lifeform. But if it didn't, if the Paragon grew strong enough to threaten the universe itself,

then reality itself could detonate. A new Big Bang, with new rules to replace the old. The lifeform, if it survived, would be the new universe.

This was the theory of universal replacement.

Lan Jue's familiarity with the idea deepened after becoming a Paragon. He was also beginning to understand, at least a little, how the destruction of the immortal realm came about.

According to legend, the immortal realm of ancient times was expansive. Powerful beings resided within it, not least of which the Three Pure Ones and other mighty gods. Together they created the immortal realm, and it was there they lived.

It served as a protective screen to separate them from universal protogenia – like how cancerous cells trick the immune system. The body that was the universe didn't know it had a sickness growing within it.

Chapter 795: You're the Only One in my Heart

In the end, the realm of immortals was more than the universe could bear. The beings within it were too strong, and even the reality they carved out for themselves couldn't contain the aura they collectively created. The universe at large sensed the tremendous danger, thus descended upon them with the full strength of its special protogenia. In the end the realm of immortals was destroyed, along with everyone living in it. All manifestations of it – heaven, the Buddhist realms, all of it – were gone in an instant.

The immortal realm was gone. With no immortal realm, the Infinite became the pinnacle of human achievement. There was no way to grow stronger.

Lan Jue's mind was filled with revelations, a level of understanding he'd never known before. Everything seemed clear, reasonable. Now his mother was attempting to rise to this universally imposed limit.

Were the aliens not also constantly contended with the threat of universal protogenia? They were trying to create a reality they could survive in like humans had before. They wanted to live and grow strong, free from threat.

Growth was the goal of any living thing. It was as true for aliens as it was for humans, the creatures they fought against were just further along. If these monsters succeeded in creating their own immortal realm, who was to say whether it would suffer the same fate as mankind's had?

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled. Here he realized it must have been the ultimate goal of the ancient immortals to design and enact their own universe. They would have been able to supplant the universe's rules for their own and live in absolute freedom. A life without boundaries was their ultimate pursuit.

It was something Lan Jue also yearned, but would not strive, for. Right

now he needed nothing beyond Zhou Qianlin. A life with his love and compatriots was enough. He knew that one day his goals may change, that when he reached that stifling level of power he might have to chase immortality. But that time wasn't now.

For now he just wanted to eliminate these aliens, and live in peace.

These revelations would help his future improvement, for he had glimpsed behind the curtain and spied the truth of the universe. This knowledge greatly benefited his comprehension of protogenia.

The immortals may have perished, but had the echoes of their presence really disappeared entirely? Lan Jue didn't think so. If it had, how would his breakthrough have produced the image of the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety? It meant that some piece of this mighty individual lived on, a portion of their energy injected into the universe as a whole. His breakthrough had galvanized that portion and awakened what the mighty immortal had left behind.

Faced with the destruction of everything they knew, Lan Jue was met with the weight of everything he wanted to pursue. There was too much he wanted to see and experience. Yet, this life of struggle was what made it novel, gave it purpose. It filled the universe with imagination and possibilities.

Lan Jue's face bore a small smile.

Qianlin looked his way and saw the fleeting expression in his eyes. She smiled self-consciously, thinking he was smiling at her. She quipped at him. "What are you smirking about?"

He chuckled. "I'm smiling because I'm happy, of course. I'm thinking about our future, how could I not be cheerful?"

Qianlin's face reddened. "Who's future?"

"Yours and mine, of course," he replied. "If not you, then who else? I'm no playboy, I've already begged after your affections. Besides, mom has approved of you. You want me to beg again?"

Qianlin paused. She wanted to tease him, to say she didn't accept, but

with the Photographer within ear shot she didn't dare.

"You're going to bully me." She said, turning her face away.

Lan Jue's eyes were full of warmth and affection. "How could I bully you? I love you, caring for you is all I want."

Qianlin looked back at him, her gaze also soft and loving.

Lan Jue continued. "Do you know how anxious I've been this whole time you've been lost? Do you recall anything that's happened in this time?"

She gently nodded her head. "I felt it all, but it was like I was in a dream. I could see and feel everything you were doing, but I couldn't rouse myself. I never stopped struggling but the haze never lifted, not until our breakthrough. Once the dream was over I could finally be happy."

Lan Jue was suddenly enlightened. No wonder she never seemed put off by her surroundings or what they were doing, or why she so readily accepted him. She had been present the whole time, just unable to interact.

Lan Jue pulled her close, into another warm embrace. They remained close to the Photographer so that Qianlin's aura could assist her in her breakthrough.

Qianlin wriggled in attempts to get free, a blush in her cheeks. "Mother's right there." She said it quietly, but hearing the words from her made Lan Jue smile.

He saw this is a good omen. Now, in the midst of this frightening time, when humanity stood on the brink of destruction, his lost love has returned. It meant good things were on the horizon.

"It's fine, you two love birds go on and display affection. Don't mind me." The Photographer's voice echoed in both their minds.

A Paragon one with the Infinite was nothing if not ubiquitous.

Qianlin's blush intensified. She wriggled again to free herself from Lan Jue's embrace but he wouldn't let her go. In the end she yielded and leaned in to his hug.

“What do you think about getting married once this fight is over?” He asked her.

“Ok.” She answered with a nod. Her voice was soft. “What about the other women with you? I can tell they all like you.”

Lan Jue’s own voice was low, contemplative. “I’ve thought about that for a long time. Other than Xiuxiu, I saved those girls from bad situations. I can’t face them, can’t bear to tell them to just go. I gave them a home, jobs, stability... so long as I’m around I will be the center of their lives. That’s why after we marry we should just go. Without me around, perhaps they’ll realize everything they’ve been missing.”

“You want to run away?” She challenged.

He shook his head. “It isn’t running away. I don’t have to go anywhere, but I’ve thought about it and I see things clear. What they feel for me isn’t really love, and I can’t give them the affection they want. If we all stay together it will only cause unnecessary pain. It would be better to leave, and come by from time to time to check up on them. I’d make sure others around the Avenue would watch over them too. If they could just live their own lives I’m sure they would grow to be incredible women. I’ve thought of many possibilities, but this is the best one.”

For a few moment, Qianlin was silent. Eventually she spoke. “But after everything we’ve experienced, I don’t mind. If you liked someone else, I could understand...”

“But I wouldn’t find it acceptable. The only person I want to be with is you, for all the years to come. I don’t have a big heart, and the center of it is smaller still. Only one person occupies it, and that’s you.”

Qianlin smiled, a happy smile. She didn’t speak, only held him tighter.

Lan Jue looked down at her. “You should rest, I’m here. I don’t think we’ll have much opportunity to rest in the near future. Now that the war had begun there’s a lot we’ll have to take care of.”

Becoming Paragons didn’t just mean they were stronger. Their responsibilities also increased, something Lan Jue understood well. This

was a stolen moment that wouldn't last long.

Qianlin shut her eyes. She had no interest in cultivating now, she only wanted to lay like this against the chest of the man she loved. To feel his warmth and take joy in the moment.

The pink light hanging over Luo Xianni flickered in and out of existence. Although her aura wasn't any more powerful, Lan Jue felt the difference in her. It was like she wasn't there, and yet was everywhere all at once.

What he didn't see was that the sky and environment outside of the arena had taken on a pink hue. It was silently spreading out in all directions, while within it shadowy projections of Luo Xianni appeared. At first it was only one projection every ten thousand meters, but as time went on that shrunk to one every thousand meters, then everywhere. The waves of power that wafted from her kneeling true self weren't powerful, but they were unique.

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Majesty drilled through the atmosphere to witness the strange scene below.

The other fighter units didn't know what they were looking at, but Star Division did. It was a branch of Skyfire Avenue and their leaders knew the face of Luo Xianni. They knew right away this was no enemy, but an ally. Although they didn't know what she was up to, they knew it had to be for their benefit. They quickly told the other ships in their wake it was nothing to be concerned about.

Chapter 796: Controlling the Situation

Majesty deftly set down on Angel's surface. Star Division immediately disembarked and spread out in all directions.

This time the ground assault team didn't set about installing a defensive perimeter, since they didn't bring the materials for it. Retaking the planet was the first step, followed by saving the remaining humans. Those were their primary directives.

This work was not nearly as entertaining as battling aliens.

Lan Jue had sent them all images of the mutated humans, showing how they fought and their extraordinary condition. Killing them wouldn't have been a problem, of course – nothing a laser rifle couldn't handle. But they were humans, compatriots! They had to do whatever was necessary to safely capture and return with them. That's where things got hard.

Luckily Lan Jue's last expedition had returned with many treasured resources. This time the soldiers had been outfitted with specially crafted weapons designed to capture instead of kill.

"Begin. Spread out, no less than five to a unit and keep all lines of communication open. Unit commanders keep your head on a swivel, you could be engaged any moment." Su Xiaosu shouted the orders and Star Division leapt into action. Using radar to guide them, they went out searching for survivors.

Majesty lifted back into the air and provided them air support. It's more powerful radar equipment could scan farther.

The rest of the ground assault forces were dispatched similarly and without incident. They were greeted with a much different situation than they'd faced on Monteux. The aliens' retreat had been complete, Angel had been entirely abandoned by the enemy.

The pink light in the air grew thicker and Luo Xianni's mirror images more clear. At some point and from somewhere a deep chanting hum buzzed. For the soldiers it was just a curious sound, but its effect on the

mutated victims of Angel was profound.

Star Division found the first group wandering through the streets of a ruined city. Scores of them came charging at the Avenue's warriors. Compared to when they were human their strength had been multiplied tremendously. They could leap cars and climb buildings. No terrain impeded their mindless desire for destruction. Some of them had even developed powers like Adepts.

Star Division's long-range attacks began, with balls of light spouting from their mecha suits. As the orbs sped out they expanded into nets that ensnared their targets. The lightning nets immediately filled the unfortunate monstrosities with electric current. They shook so fiercely they couldn't counterattack. Eventually they fell limp.

It was a very effective way to deal with their charges. It didn't cause any lasting harm, but it effectively shut them down. Under Star Division's disciplined assault it wasn't long before most of the mutants were laying helplessly on the ground.

Then the hymns of Luo Xianni's power began to echo.

A kindness spread through the chests of Star Division's soldiers. A comfort beyond expression that refreshed their minds and bodies. The mutants had a different reaction, holding their hands to their ears and howling in pain toward the heavens. They would eventually freeze in place like statues.

To say it surprised Star Division was an understatement. However, it was clear this was to their advantage so they didn't stop. Majesty quickly collected the mutant humans.

Similar scenes popped up all around Angel. Countless mutant victims were frozen solid by the echoes of Luo Xianni's power.

Lan Jue started to get reports five minutes later. He looked in shock at his mother, seated cross-legged nearby as though nothing was going on. He was filled with admiration for her, pride for his mother! With such an aggressive display of power, was it possible she could control the whole planet on her own?

But Lan Jue was quick to moderate his disbelief. What seemed sudden and incredible was, in fact, to be expected. He had just arisen to Paragon status, and in the process awakened spectacular power through the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole of Purple Subtlety. His mother, on the other hand, was striding the gap from Nirvana to the Infinite! Two full degrees above what he was capable of. Amazing as all of this was, he had to remember the levels of power she was working with.

Lan Jue also had no idea what the limits were for a Paragon who joined the Infinite. He'd never seen his father employ the full extent of his powers. Clearly, even planet-covering capabilities weren't out of the question.

Indeed the truth of it was staggering, as Luo Xianni discovered. She had quickly slipped into the process, and with the Queen of Heaven's stabilizing help propelled her forward without concern or misgivings. After all she had been at the cusp of the Infinite for a long time. It had been Jue Di who had helped to keep her powers repressed, for her own safety.

Jue Di was the most talented Adept to have lived in the last thousand years, and the last to join the Infinite. In fact, however, Luo Xianni's talents were no less exceptional. She had helped to establish Skyfire Avenue, and was its strongest member for a long time. She had spent many grueling years perfecting herself while she searched Jue Di. For a long time her intention had been to beat the hell out of him.

After they reconnected and worked through their differences, Jue Di had told her about the dangers of growing her Domain. He told her about how universal protogenia was eating away at his life force, killing him despite a natural death being hundreds of years distant. He'd helped her to keep the final breakthrough at bay.

Now the fears had been assuaged. She opened her heart to the full extent of her interdimensional protogenia and spread herself farther than she'd ever dared before.

The mutant humans may have been corrupted, but they still possessed a

soul. It was their tainted souls that Luo Xianni was sealing away. Interdimensional powers were extensive in their control once risen to a certain degree. Not only was she able to seal sections of space-time, but destroy or create at her whim. More incredible was the ability to control all manner of dimensions, including the spiritual realm.

Every living creature had spiritual energy, a power that resided in the spiritual realm. The name was mystical but its presence was real nonetheless. Upno striding across the divide into the Infinite, Luo Xianni felt like she was suddenly part of it all. She could sense every minute detail in all possible dimensions. Some were strong, others weak. Their size was related to the amount of power contained within. The spiritual realm was particularly active.

Coming to appreciate this truth, her breakthrough materialized. Nirvana was everywhere, but the Infinite was all-encompassing. All of creation was at her fingertips. Luo Xianni was the planet, and the planet was her.

Luo Xianni had her own Paragon title, though she almost exclusively went by the Photographer. Because she had been gone for so long most who had known her had forgotten it. She had once been known as the Continuum Conduit. Simple, at least compared to the likes of Lan Jue. But in her day the name resounded even louder than the Eye of Tomorrow.

The Photographer, Continuum Conduit, and the Clairvoyant, Eye of Tomorrow. The two of them together were the pillars of Skyfire Avenue. It was through them that the mighty adept organization was created and able to thrive.

Luo Xianni didn't like the title – she never found it cool enough for her taste. Unfortunately once the populace knew of one's name it was virtually impossible to change it. Still, her heart was never in it.

Now the title simply wasn't applicable. Her powers had grown beyond the continuum. She was a conduit for the soul.

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In another dark corner of the cosmos.

A tall man hung in the blackness of space, silent. His gaze was on a purple planet in the distance, unmoving.

Just as he was approach to approach something caught his attention. Shock was painted on his expression as he stared through the blackness.

She's attempted to break through? She must have encountered a foe she was unable to contend with. Furrowing his brow, he cast his perception far into space. Strong as he was it was not difficult to pinpoint the source of his feelings. He frowned, surprise evident in his face.

"This woman never listens." He wasted no more time, and in a flash was off toward the purple planet.

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When Lan Qing got the news, he was also stunned. Nirvana, omnipresence! It was the first thing he thought of when word of the strange hymn reached his ears. Somehow his mother was able to project herself all across the planet – an act he thought must have been incredibly draining. He only knew of her decision to break through after calling his brother.

Undoubtedly this was a tremendous boon for the ground forces. Now the assault team's mission had changed from 'capture' to 'recover'.

However the sheer number of infected humans was massive, far more than they'd anticipated. The amount of them discovered while searching surprised even the ground troops. If it wasn't for the three bastions, the twelve fleets would have been hard pressed to find space for them.

Lan Qing called Hua Li and Kang Hui for a quick meeting.

"We've already found one hundred million survivors among the wreckage, and the number keeps climbing." He wasted no time in getting to the point.

Chapter 797: Guanyin, Queen of Heaven

Hua Li frowned. “This is good, but also troublesome. A hundred million people. Our bastions can accommodate them, but it’s like housing a hundred million ticking time bombs. One misstep and it can all blow out of control.”

Kang Hui nodded his agreement. “I also feel we can’t bring them onto the ships. We don’t know if there are alien spies among them, and the ones that take human form are their strongest. We can’t afford any trouble from within. I recommend leaving them where they are, containing them on the planet somehow.”

Lan Qing’s face was solemn, this was a problem indeed. They’d had a plan, but part of it had been contingent on some of the humans having avoided mutation. Now it seemed all of the survivors had been tainted by the aliens. This was a problem because these unfortunates now had to be contained and fed, and given adequate space.

The three bastions had brought along a lot of energy reserves for the fight, but its food stores were limited. Providing for so many people was impossible – maybe over the short term, but no one could know how long this war would last. Sending them to another planet presented a whole other set of problems, since they couldn’t know how much trouble a hundred million aggressive mutants would cause. Then there was the time it would take to send them all.

What to do? It was a problem Lan Qing was struggling to resolve.

“Bring Lan Jue in on the conversation, see if he has any suggestions. He knows the aliens better than anyone.” Hua Li suggested.

“Right.” Lan Qing dialed in the number to his brother’s communicator.

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“I understand.” Lan Jue quickly grasped the breadth of the problem his brother was describing. “I think Hua LI’s right, we can’t bring them onto the bastions. We are humanity’s last hope, destroying the aliens has to be

our main priority. We can leave them on the planet for now and figure out what to do with them later. We can also contact the Eastern and Northern governments to send food and aid, they shouldn't be too reticent to help with that. We just won a major victory, they won't have any choice but to help us."

Lan Qing nodded his head. "This is an option, but remember it isn't just this planet we have to consider. There are seven others where we can expect similar situations, and we don't have enough soldiers to even keep an eye on them. We couldn't even if we had twice the amount of forces. Not when we have the alien home worlds still to fight."

Lan Jue's face scrunched in thought. He seemed to come to a prompt decision. "If we can't control them then we simply don't try. Once we take care of the progenitors on these planets we just ignore the infected for the time being. We leave them to their own devices until the alien menace is handled, then we can tackle that problem. These mutants are hardier than normal humans after their infection, they'll be fine for a while."

The others mulled the idea for a moment. It seemed like the best option.

Suddenly, Zhou Qianlin's voice intruded. "A-Jue, can you bring one of the infected here to me? I feel like there's something I might be able to do for them."

The other three heard her as well. When he heard the voice a small smile spread across Lan Qing's face. He knew then that their breakthrough had been a total success, and Zhou Qianlin had awakened.

Hua Li was surprised by the revelation and rapidly blinked his eyes. "Qianlin's back?"

Lan Jue nodded, smiling.

Only Kang Hui was out of the loop. "Who is this? She has an idea of how to handle the infected?"

"I'm not sure," Lan Jue replied. "She and I have just ascended to Paragon. Her powers are focused on healing, so we can give it a shot and see if there's some way we can help them. Keep the line open, we'll try now."

“Alright.”

Lan Jue raced off. A few moments later he returned with two infected victims, a man and a woman. Both of them had had their spirits sealed away by Luo Xianni’s powers and had slipped into a coma-like state.

When Lan Jue put the two of them before Qianlin, something strange happened. Even before she did anything the two victims seemed to sense her presence. They shook and jerked violently as a purple mist steamed off of them. As the toxic cloud was dispersed by the wind their bodies also began to change, shrinking back to normal proportions as the purple hue that tainted their flesh receded.

“This...” Lan Jue had believed her when she said there may be a chance she could help them, but he did not expect the presence of her aura to be enough. It was incredible.

He shut his eyes and extended his perception toward the infected humans, searching their bodies for mutations. Quickly he discovered that they both had something like a Core nestled in their chests. Both were fractured and an energy spilled from them, manifesting as the purple mist they’d witnessed. The toxic cloud dissipated without foundation wherever it drew near to Qianlin, all without her needing to do a thing.

Without this aberrant Core altering them, the victims’ bodies quickly returned to normal. Their blood flow slowed and the abnormal swelling of their organs was reversed, followed by the rest of their bodies.

Qianlin waved her hand, birthing a wave of white light that settled over the two of them. Instantly the rate of recovery hastened. In a few short minutes they were back to normal.

Lan Jue and the others he was connected with watched the whole thing. The four men gaped at what they saw. This perplexing dilemma that faced them was dealt with after almost no effort, and in short order.

Lan Jue performed another quick check of the victims and discovered no residual problems. They were healthy as could be, but for the fact their spirits were still locked away. That was the only thing keeping them asleep.

Lan Jue called out. “Driver, bring more of the infected over here.”

But Qianlin shook her hand. “No need, I’ll handle it.” As she spoke she took a single step forward, remaining close to Luo Xianni. A white aura sprang up around her and slowly began to spread out. As it did an image appeared at her back, the dharmic manifestation that looked so much like her.

The image grew to several times the size of Zhou Qianling, its white gowns fluttering in an unfelt wind. As it hung suspended in air, arms spread, a saintly aura flooded the arena. All of a sudden the white aura surged in all directions.

The Driver, Gourmet, and Pharmacist had been grappling with the problem of how to deal with these poor souls when suddenly that white light swept by. To them it felt like their protogenia was stirred to life and all traces of exhaustion washed away. The Driver felt it with particular sensitivity. After gaining insight from Lan Jue’s breakthrough his powers had been tempestuous and wild, but the white light set them at ease.

They watched bewilderment as the mutated humans began to change, their monstrous appearance melting away as mists poured from their orifices. All traces of the poison were borne away by the white light and wiped from existence. The demon-like casualties were returned to normal before their eyes.

“This is...”

They were stunned as they saw the biggest humanitarian problem ever faced handled without explanation. Then they saw the image floating in the sky. The image of Qianlin was rich his holy emanation, suspended above them like a faerie goddess.

“This... this is a living Guanyin!” A stunned Pharmacist said aloud to herself. She had a great deal of faith in her own Domain, but upon seeing Qianlin’s she couldn’t help but be filled with admiration.

Not only was she beautiful, but her presence brought with it a breath of nourishing warmth. Pathogens and evils of all sort were cleansed in the light of her aura, and the whole arena was blessed.

The three Paragons felt the urge to bow their heads in worship to the image, to say nothing of the normal forces that had come to join them.

“Guanyin, Queen of Heaven. What do you think of this name for a title?”
The Gourmet offered. ¹

The Driver’s smile was a ringing endorsement. “Not bad, it suits her.”

The image returned to Qianlin’s side, that welcoming smile ever present on her perfect features.

“That sounds fine.”

Lan Jue took her into his arms and gave her a gentle kiss. “My love, you are incredible. The Gourmet thought we might call you Guanyin Queen of Heaven. I think that’s a fitting name.”

“I wouldn’t dare blaspheme the goddess of mercy,” Qianlin hurriedly said.

But Lan Jue was insistent. “How is this blasphemy? You help bring the goddess’ light to all people. Helping so many honors the Buddha and brings happiness.”

Qianlin couldn’t help but smile. She was a good person, and there was nothing more pleasing to her than saving lives.

Chapter 798: Luo Xianni of the Infinite

“Was summoning your Domain like this tiring?” Lan Jue asked.

Qianlin’s response was thoughtful. “At first it was, since I was using my dharmic image. But in the scope of this arena I don’t think it’s necessary, my Domain alone should be enough. The mist from these people seems to absorb my powers, but they return quickly. I’m not sure what happened, but it felt like my powers increased and became more stable.”

Lan Jue gaped at her. “Your protogenia is really something extraordinary. What is it? I mean, what is its true essence?”

Her response was somewhat vague. “I don’t know! I was always a little mystified by it, even before becoming a Paragon. I never really knew my Path, I suppose I’m lucky to have even broken through.”

Lan Jue was at a loss, for he wasn’t expecting such an answer. However, it was clear that Qianlin’s protogenia was something spectacular. Although it didn’t have much implication in a fight, its benefits to all was undeniable. The stronger she became, the more integral her presence.

“Her protogenia is Salvation.” The Photographer’s voice joined the conversation.

Lan Jue swept his eyes her way. His mother could speak while in the breakthrough process?

“Salvation? Deliverance? Guanyin, Queen of Heaven is certainly a worthy name.” Lan Jue mused with a smile.

“Wait until mother finishes, then we’ll go on saving people,” Lan Jue confidently told Qianlin. “With my help we’ll return them to normal as quickly as possible.”

After their simultaneous breakthrough, the two of them could still merge. In doing so their powers would rise to the level of Nirvana, which in turn would increase the scope of their Domain. This would certainly help them in quickly saving the victims of the progenitor. What’s more the fusion ceased to be one-sided. Now both of them could take control.

Angel had quickly begun to shed the purple hue left behind by its alien oppressors. Without the progenitor's support, the planet's own restorative abilities were coming into play. After all, the progenitor had not been here long enough to completely drain the world of its energies. With the addition of the vital energy released at the moment of the progenitor's death, Angel had the chance for a full recovery.

With the dissolution of the purple stain, a pink hue had come to take its place. At first the color was pale and hardly visible, but with time even the clouds above were painted pink. If one were to witness this through a telescope they would discover that the color was the result of many thousands of humanoid images layered one on top of the other. As they became clearer, the color deepened. The scene was nothing short of marvelous.

When Lan Qing saw it on his screens, he figured it could only be his mother rising to the next level. He just couldn't believe she would chose this moment to do so. The Infinite... was this the extent of her newfound powers?

After learning that Qianlin could heal the infected, and in a large area, Lan Qing's worries eased. This solves a serious problems, for whether now or later it would have proven a tremendous burden – a disaster waiting to happen. Hundreds of millions of people! Practically all of the people of the West, their leaders among them.

The West was gone, but its people could still be saved. If they could be healed then reconstruction efforts could be undertaken. Politically speaking Qianlin's assistance would mean they would be beholden to the East. It would mean great things for their alliance in the future.

For now they would wait to learn more about the other planets. Many scout ships, equipped with cloaking devices, had been dispatched to learn what they could. This included the fate of Europa.

The chances were high that Europa was where they would find the alien home worlds. The last battle had been intense, yet the home worlds had

never appeared. The ferocity and sheer number of the alien defenses spoke to the high probability that the evil planets were indeed in the midst of their evolution. The only question that remained was how long this process took.

All they could do was pray. Once the evolution process was complete humanity didn't have a ghost of a chance, this was certain. How terrifying would immortal aliens be? Beyond anything they could contend against.

However his father's determination, along with Lan Qing's own and the opinion of several others, was that creation of an immortal realm like what existed in the ancient days was no easy feat. It certainly wasn't something that could be achieved in a short time frame. The alien home worlds had chosen this time to attempt it because they thought humanity no longer had the ability to stop them. Or lacked the desire.

They may have won their first battle, but there was still much to come. They had to tread carefully, for a single mistake could spell disaster. A single mistake could mean utter destruction for their species.

Lan Qing looked calm on the outside, but how could his heart not be straining under the pressure? The fate of humanity lay in the balance!

As he fretted over their task, he saw the color surrounding Angel suddenly thicken. Then the unthinkable happened. Angel vanished.

Indeed, the whole planet simply ceased to be. When the pink color had covered the whole thing it simply disappeared without a trace. All he could see was empty space and a backdrop of stars.

"What..." Lan Qing rubbed his eyes. It didn't matter who witnessed it, no one would believe it. How was this possible? How could a whole planet simply evaporate into nothing?

Just as he was struggling to comprehend what had happened, the planet returned in a flash of pink light. He was surprised to note it had returned to its original rotation.

He witnessed it all in crystal clear clarity, and knew it meant Angel had recovered. This bode well for the future of the planet.

Did his mother do that? Lan Qing had some doubts. The three alien planets were immensely powerful, so it was conceivable they could halt a planet's rotation. But his mother was just one person. For her alone to return the planet to its former state would have required tremendous ability.

A faint smile spread across Lan Qing's face. His hands linked in front of him. Everything was beginning to go their way.

Suddenly he saw all the pink light begin to converge on a single point on Angel's surface. They flowed like rivers until all of it was swallowed up. For a moment the planet was back to normal, then there was a blast of pink light, and once more the planet disappeared...

Lan Qing just stared in disbelief. He might have been able to explain away the last one, but twice in a row? The planet was really disappearing. This...

What amazing power, to simply cut a whole world from reality! Was this what happened when interdimensional protogenia was perfected?

Angel reappeared and promptly disappeared for a third time. When it came back once again it seemed to finally return to normal.

This is the power a Paragon who joined the Infinite could command. The soldiers who witnessed it would surely remember the scene all the rest of their days. Lan Qing had to quickly alert the troops that Angel's dramatic and perplexing behavior was the result of their own side and not to be alarmed. The planet was under their control.

After their recent victory, Lan Qing's prestige among the allied forces was legendary. Their triumph over the alien forces had been nearly absolute, instantly making the God of Wisdom a treasure of humanity.

Video of the battle quickly made it back to the Eastern and Northern Alliances. Copies of it were transmitted across video feeds throughout all the human occupied planets, including those in the West.

It served to pacify the fear and rage among the populace. Humanity's victory would mean nothing without the support of the people. Loss after

loss had eroded the people's faith in their governments, which frightened their leaders terribly. Without the faith of the people, all was lost.

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There was a flash of light, and Lan Jue smiled. As he watched the flows of pink light swirl around like a dream, looking upon the ethereal form of his mother, he knew she'd broken through.

The Infinite, boundless and eternal, present in all things. It was a sensation that could only be felt and not expressed, but Lan Jue could sense the astounding change in his mother. She was no longer like a Paragon. In this moment she was an arbiter of time and space.

A white light extended from Zhou Qianlin to settle over the Photographer. It isolated her from everything, especially universal protogenia.

Luo Xianni looked younger than before, no older than Zhou Qianlin in fact. Her breakthrough had restored her to a young woman.

Chapter 799: Salvation, Purification

Luo Xianni's body became solid once more. A faint smile played on her lips.

"It feels pretty good. Universal protogenia used to be an ever-present ache. Luckily I have my daughter with me." Her eyes opened and a sense of calm hung over her. Everything seemed normal, and Lan Jue could feel no surges of power or protogenic fluctuations wafting from her. His mother appeared no different than she had a moment ago.

To Lan Jue, Luo Xianni's breakthrough was nothing spectacular. However he had been in the arena the whole time and was unaware of what had happened outside. His only metric was his perception, and there were no flashy displays of power or waves of energy he could feel. The most marked difference was physical, as his mother seemed in prime health. She seemed less inhibited.

Qianlin's Domain had masterfully concealed Luo Xianni's powers. It had allowed her to stretch, fully expressing her protogenia without fear of universal retribution. So long as Qianlin was near, Luo Xianni could use her full might in a conflict. It went without saying that this was good news, much better than the struggle Jue Di had faced during his breakthrough.

Luo Xianni lifted her arms and let it fall carelessly around Qianlin's neck. "What a wonderful daughter-in-law. This feels wonderful. When the two of you marry I'll hang around with the two of you, what do you think?"

Qianlin bashfully dropped her head. Lan Jue chortled. "That would be wonderful. Us and dad all together. But we still have a lot to do. Mother, Qianlin's Domain is able to heal the aliens' victims, so we're going to go handle that problem. There are still the other planets we need to retake from the progenitors. Our mission is far from over."

Mika had sent them correspondence saying Zeus-1 was on its way back to Angel. The planet was vast and there were many victims to heal before

she returned. Lan Qing had already passed down the order for the ground team to try and gather the mutant humans as best as possible.

“This is not difficult,” Luo Xianni assured. “I’ll help you – twice the result with half the effort. Come.” As she spoke she waved her hand, and a pink light arose in the air before them. To Lan Jue and Qianlin it was like reality sped around them. Suddenly they were in a different place.

Luo Xianni continued to flit her hands back and forth, tracing lines of pink with each motion. Where they appeared the air rippled, but they didn’t move. However, below them vast numbers of infected humans vanished without foundation. They blinked back into existence crowded together in a mass of frozen monstrosities.

There were no limits to the influence of the Infinite. Clearly Luo Xianni’s breakthrough had catapulted her already incredible abilities to new heights. The entire planet seemed firmly under her control.

Lan Jue could faintly discern images in her mother’s eyes. They were scenes of other places around Angel, where Luo Xianni was picking up the infected and depositing them here. From their lofty vantage they could see the crowd below growing ever larger.

“Release your Domain!” The Photographer commanded.

Qianlin obeyed, and quickly the white light of her Domain spread out across the sky. The light of Guanyin settled upon the ten square kilometers of mutated victims below. It was the farthest she could extend her newfound abilities.

Lan Jue floated behind her, then wrapped his arms around her slender waist. Immediately upon contact Qianlin could feel her capabilities improve. The breadth of her Domain swelled to several times its former size.

This was the difference between Reflection of Heaven and Earth and Nirvana.

Qianlin’s dharmic image reemerged from nothing, and with Lan Jue’s help it was clearer than ever. Even people in space could see the rapidly

thousand-meter tall manifestation of Qianlin's power.

Its lily-white robes fluttered as white light poured out in all directions. To the allied forces it was like watching a true angel descend from heaven, spreading its holy light over the blighted landscape.

The victims below had begun to react. Tendrils of poisoned mist were expelled from the millions of infected bodies. It created a haze of toxic fumes, but the light of Guanyin quickly burned it all away. Within the span of a few seconds nothing remained of the progenitor's corrupting influence.

Lan Jue's perception was razor sharp, he could feel how draining Qianlin's Domain was on her. However, that lasted only for a moment, for after the full extent of her abilities were released her strength rapidly recovered. She recouped more than she spent.

As their powers mingled Lan Jue could distinctly feel her protogenia flowing through him. It nourished him, feeding his cultivation. Just expressing her Domain could improve one's cultivation – incredible!

Luo Xianni's words echoed in his mind. Qianlin's Salvation protogenia was not difficult to understand, saving others and delivering them from pain was what her powers excelled at. In performing this service her cultivation increased and her protogenia was perfected. Saving these poor souls from the hell of infection was precisely what she was meant to do. Though the changes to her protogenia were subtle and her improvement slight, her expression was perfectly stable.

The light of Qianlin's Domain continued to grow. Flecks of gold had begun to mingle with it, interspersed through the calming light and although the gold wasn't very obvious it lent a mystical air to the image.

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"That's..." Tang Mi sat in the cockpit of her mecha. She stared wide eyes and open mouthed at the familiar face suspended in the sky.

That woman, a thousand meters tall and resplendent as an angel... that was her.

Zhou Qianlin? When did she get so big?

“Damn! That’s Qianlin?” Tang Xiao’s voice crackled through her comms system.

The surprise was clear in Tang Mi’s voice as well. “It’s her, no question. By how is she so huge? What’s going on?”

They both knew Qianlin was with Lan Jue, but they had not seen her for a long, long time. They were also completely unaware of the trials she’d suffered, and to suddenly have her appear like this was shocking beyond words.

Tang Xiao’s voice adopted a strange tone. “Reflection of Heaven and Earth – that’s her dharmic image. That’s the only thing it could be. Man! Qianlin’s actually broken through to Paragon, incredible. If I was a woman it’d be so much better, I could marry the professor and he’d make me a Paragon!”

“You pudgy idiot, keep talking like that if you want the Professor to kick the crap out of you. Married my ass.” Jin Tao interjected.

Tang Xiao had no time to trade barbs with him. His eyes were trained on Qianlin’s image in the sky.

They didn’t just know Qianlin. They went to school together, joined Star Division together! Only, the Qianlin they saw now was completely different than the one they’d known. Just her image made them want to bow in worship.

Such pure beauty, replete with a benevolence that was hard to describe. The light of her presence felt cleansing, as though her gaze washed away negative emotion.

All of the soldiers stopped dead in their tracks with their faces turned toward the sky. Those who were closer could see the infected victims returning to normal. They watched as their swollen bodies shrunk to normal proportions, their demonic appearance melting away, until at last they were as human as the rest of them.

Once the first batch was completely cured they vanished in a flash of

pink light. Then, another group appeared to take their place. The white light washed away their illness, too, drawing out the toxins and dissolving it away.

Lan Jue, Qianlin, and Luo Xianni worked in tandem to heal the afflicted. Qianlin slowly closed her eyes and immersed herself in the changes her protogenia experienced. The smile on her face was all the more genial. Feeling these poor people healing under her cleansing light was wonderful.

Qianlin was happiest when she was helping people, staying true to her benevolent nature. She had been this way ever since she was small. But her kindness did not mean she was weak – she was strong of character, a soul of steel in a gentle shell. It was her compassion that allowed her to employ the Queen of Heaven Discipline.

When she grew older and the Clairvoyant told her to get close to Lan Jue, her mood began to change. They experienced so much, and ultimately Lan Jue came to accept her. Yet all the while Qianlin knew it was based on a lie. She had concealed the most important parts of her from him. It had not pained her, for she had learned to separate herself from the reality of it. But she had always been reluctant.

When she had suffered the Astral Phantom's poison, caught in the dream she could not stir from, she felt the tender care Lan Jue had given her. His meticulous and tender care made her hell-bent on waking up, but she could not. All the while she could feel the immortal qi conveyed to her through Lan Jue's thunder essence. She sensed how it altered her Queen of Heaven Discipline and empowered her abilities.

Then, she broke through and awoke at last. By then everything was different. After being asleep for so long it all suddenly seemed unreal.

All of that brought her to this moment, where she could feel the people below healing from her efforts. Now her heart was still, everything felt true and right. It was beautiful. Yes, salvation. That was her protogenia.

Chapter 800: Reprocessing

This was not absolution or transcendence. It aiding that which needed to be aided. It was soothing ailments and helping the afflicting to a place of warmth and joy.

She opened her heart to and felt herself become one with the essence of her protogenia. In this moment she was truly Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven. She was truly a Paragon.

The white light continued to glow. Group after group of the afflicted were presented before her for cleansing, millions at a time. Once their bodies were healed the seal that locked their spirits was removed, and their consciousness returned.

The experience of having their bodies so thoroughly poisoned was catastrophic for these unfortunate people. The pain had been so tremendous they'd wished for death. Their minds were returned but that horrible experience was seared into their hearts. They tried to control themselves, to lock it away, but the progenitor had tainted them down to their genes.

Seeing the pain visited upon their friends and family they wanted to lash out, to destroy everything within reach. The will that was returned to them still followed the genetic manipulation they'd undergone.

But as the light of Guanyin continued to shine upon them they felt like parched ground under a cool rain, felt the soothing energy flow through them. Its light helped them to find themselves beyond the haze of rage and pain.

Then they saw the beautiful image suspended in the sky. Beneath her gaze they felt an unprecedented sense of belonging. In all it lasted but a few moments before they were suddenly someplace else, but none of them would forget the angelic visage that had brought them back from madness.

Salvation. Real salvation! Whoever that was had shown them the path to a new life, a rebirth from the ashes of their suffering. They searched the

skies and even from a great distance could see the thousand-meter dharma image shining her light upon the land.

It wasn't clear who the first one to throw themselves on the ground toward the image was, but soon the others followed. One by one they prostrated themselves before their savior. Tears fell, and cries of pain and happiness rippled through the crowds. But this was only an expression of grief over their experience. All other negative emotions were washed away. No rage or vengeance remained.

These Western believers had found new faith.

The golden light continued to influence the pure white of Qianlin's Discipline. Her aura also continued to rise in strength and prominence and spread even farther toward the horizon. Lan Jue could feel the reprocessed energy from Qianlin surging through him in suffocating waves, purer with each passing moment. They had only just broken through, but also he sensed their Domains getting stronger.

Improving one's abilities once becoming a Reflection of Heaven and Earth was difficult, as the Terminator could attest. It required a deep understanding of one's protogenia to progress. Lan Jue and Qianlin were already possessed of great insight, and this flood of unending energy was serving to galvanize their protogenia further. It was something neither of them could have anticipated, nor would they have believed it unless they felt it themselves.

Although it wasn't near enough to evolve their protogenia on a qualitative level or promote them to Nirvana, it certainly would shorten the length of time necessary to reach the next level.

Up to now Lan Jue had lead them in their cultivation. Qianlin followed his direction and benefited from his guidance. Now, though, Lan Jue was the one to ride upon her coattails. He drank of her recycled energy to fuel his own growth.

Lan Jue had a peculiar sense, and peered out into the distance. There he was the scores of people kneeling before their goddess – the one in his arms!

More and more of the infected were delivered into the cleansing light. As they did Qianlin grew stronger, and the scope of her influence grew. Minute after minute passed in this way, scores of Western victims returned to health. After recovering from the incredible scene, the ground forces set about gathering and consoling the masses.

The populace walked around in a daze. This was their homeland, and though the aliens had razed it to the ground, they saw that there was an opportunity to rebuild. The aliens hadn't had control for long, not long enough to devour all the life that had existed here. If it had, the progenitor would already have moved on.

Once they were gathered together ships began arriving with food and drink, which were dispersed among the survivors. Then the remaining Westerners set about seeking out friends and familiar places.

In the future they would still need much more help, but for now they were safe.

Lan Qing had taken the initiative in recording everything they saw on Angel and sending it to the other Alliances.

Both of them were still in the midst of conflict. The government had lost the faith of the soldiers and the people, and unrest was widespread. The victory over the alien forces had pacified some of that anger. This latest news, however, calmed them.

The vision of that woman, blazing like a goddess in the heavens, healing the afflicted, was inspiring. It caused tears to stream down the faces of the people all across human space. It was a scene that united humanity, an uplifting promise that they would always have the strength to save those in need.

The turmoil subsided. At last humanity began to speak in one voice, urging support for this righteous battle.

Lan Qing and Kang Hui hurriedly made their requests. Their initial appeals were not for more troops, but for food – a lot of food. There was undoubtedly more people to save on other planets, and they would need food and water. Other aid would mean nothing if they starved.

The keen observers knew, of course, that this was just the beginning. The enemy was still out there, and no one was safe until they were exterminated. Reconstruction would come when the alien menace was cleansed from the universe, but the weight of that responsibility rested solely on the army.

Lan Qing had finally earned himself a short rest. He sat on a nearby sofa and shut his eyes.

His mind raced, going over everything that happened and all that was to come. The first phase of their plan was complete. Now they had to wait for their scouts to return with news. Most important was the location and status of the three alien planets. They couldn't proceed until they knew where their targets were hiding.

The possibility of the planets teleporting again was included in Lan Qing's plans. In fact, he wouldn't be very worried if they did.

The reason was simple; if they did teleport, it meant they weren't evolving. No matter where they went the amount of energy required to teleport would be massive, and likely would capture the attention of universal protogenia.

In addition the aliens had suffered a significant loss against the humans in the taking of Angel. Many of the vital crystals they relied upon were now in human hands.

The Northern Alliance still had Bastion ships to spare. If the aliens reappeared in their territory they could at least defend themselves. The East also had their own countermeasures... Although they only had a single bastion, that didn't mean it wasn't without more furtive defensive capabilities.

The East had a high population, but they were concentrated in a relatively small area. They were the first Alliance to prepare for the alien invasion, so they'd had ample time to install planetary defenses like railguns at the places most likely to suffer an alien attack. The planets themselves would be their protection against the enemy.

It wasn't enough to completely repel the aliens, but if it came to it this

would at least buy them time.

As for the allied forces, they would retreat the moment confirmation came that the enemy had teleported away. The Eastern planets would be put on alert, and their railguns – though limited in capabilities – would come online to provide what defense they could. But in addition, the East had a trump card – an ace in the hole that Lan Qing had suggested they prepare.

In the most populated areas, the East had constructed enormous transmission arrays. The Wine Master and Photographer had been involved in their design and creation. The best transference power gems money could buy went in to their construction, and no effort was spared to put them together. In fact they were made to be used multiple times, if necessary. It functioned similarly to the one Lan Jue and the others had used in their excursion to the Shattered Starfields.

Its corresponding power gem array was built into Middle Heaven. It was modified so that molinite could be used as a power source.

With the Wine Master and the Luo Xianni working together, they could teleport targets over incredible distances. One trip could carry ten people.

That is to say the moment Eastern space was invaded by the enemy, ten of the most powerful Paragons could be transferred from Middle Heaven directly into the fight. They at least would be able to hold off the aliens for some time. The enemy home worlds would be too weak to attack with overwhelming force.

The Paragons would need only hold the line until the allied forces returned. Then, the military come close in on a weakened enemy fighting on two fronts.

Of course there was the possibility that a sneak attack would cause great devastation to Eastern worlds. But so long as they could survive until the military got back, they could turn the tide of battle.

According Lan Qing's determinations, the risk the East would assume in such a case would not outweigh the possibility of a decisive human victory. After all, it was very likely the alien home worlds were attempting

to evolve in this very moment.

Chapter 801: The Mission Continues

The alien home worlds' main objective was not the destruction of humanity, but completing their evolution and establishing an immortal realm of their own. It didn't serve them to wipe out the human species, and it was a task that would be much easier once they became god-like.

All the possible scenarios raced through Lan Qing's mind. His train of thought was precise and clear.

Lan Jue and Qianlin had finally become Paragons, and Luo Xianni was now part of the Infinite. Both of these happy circumstances went better than expected. After breaking through Lan Jue was no weaker than the An Lun admiral himself. With the addition of his Harmonious Swords, he and Qianlin were incredibly effective on the battlefield, inferior only to Jue Di, Luo Xianni and the Terminator. The Northern Paragon would be hard-pressed to contend against their combined strength if ever he had to.

With their advancement the total strength of the human attack force soared. Their initial victory against the aliens had been achieved with minimal losses. But it remained to be seen if they could keep this momentum through the final battle.

"Report!" An anxious voice called out.

"Speak!" Lan Qing's eyes popped open and turned toward the messenger. Current standing orders were to bring any important information to him immediately.

"We've just received correspondence from Scout Team 16. They report two of the planets are no longer purple." As he spoke the messenger hurried forward and handed Lan Qing the data in his possession.

Lan Qing looked it over. A small smile spread across his face – his father was indeed Jue Di! The strongest human alive wasn't just something they called him. If the purple color was draining from them, it meant the progenitors were dead and the planets were freed. Only Jue could accomplish such a magnificent feat in so short a period.

“Have we received any information from the scout teams heading for Europa?”

“Not yet,” the messenger replied. “They should be arriving at their prescribed location within an hour. So far communications seems normal, but they haven’t encountered anything out of the ordinary.”

“Alright, let me know the instant we get any more intelligence.” Information about Europa and the alien planets was paramount. They could only proceed once they knew more about the interior of the solar system and the presence of their primary targets.

As of the latest reports the routed alien forces had regrouped at two nearby planets. However, they’ve made no overtures to advance, as though they were intending to protect those two worlds in particular. One of those planets was the Terminator’s responsibility, and the other belonged to Lan Jue’s team.

No news was forthcoming from the Terminator’s strike force. Although, they did know they managed to successfully infiltrate the planet while Lan Qing was busy with the initial assault. Specific circumstances were not forthcoming.

Lan Jue and his people hadn’t moved on to their second objective yet. They were treating the mutated survivors of Angel.

The problem Lan Qing faced now was whether to concentrate or split his forces. Was it better to attack both clusters of enemies at once, or focus on one?

The aliens were not adept at long-range fighting, but they made up for it with incredible speed. Most human ships couldn’t outrun them. It was how their forces had managed to escape without being obliterated.

If he split his forces and the enemy set up an ambush it would put them in a dire situation. If he brought his forces to bear against just one group, the other one would be free to harass and possibly retake Angel.

And so, while their inaugural victory had been inspiring, the enemy had not been routed. The fight was more complicated than ever, and having

experienced what a head-on engagement cost them it was difficult to assess how the aliens would adjust their tactics. They would certainly lean on their speed superiority, and to address that would force the human forces to give up advantage in other areas. This was a problem Lan Qing had to consider carefully.

“We bide our time, wait for an opportunity.” Lan Qing muttered to himself.

Kang Hui had already contacted him once, asking if they should continue the assault. However, Lan Qing vetoed the idea. He chose to allow their forces to rest and reorganize in preparation for the next phase of their plan. He knew now wasn't the time to rush in. They had to establish themselves on Angel first, then they could make their decision.

The enemy forces were a problem. He had to endure.

Although the alien planets were almost certainly in the process of evolving, moderation was integral. What he wanted was to create a situation where the aliens would be forced to initiate the attack, and fight on humanity's terms. In this way they could hurt the enemy with the least effort and cost possible. Yet if they didn't overcome the alien forces definitively, assaulting their home worlds would be impossible. Lan Qing saw the problem with acute clarity.

Beep-beep! His communicator buzzed.

“What is it?” He asked.

Lan Jue's voice answered on the other end. “We've worked it out. There are no more infected humans on Angel. Who'd have thought Qianlin's abilities would extend to this. Pretty lucky, eh?”

Lan Qing smiled. “You and your team rest for a little while, then continue your mission. The alien forces have split into two, and are hiding at the planets you and the Terminator are meant to liberate. I can give you a way in, but you'll need to kill the progenitor quickly and get back as soon as you can.”

“Relax, we have faith.” Lan Jue's voice was full of determination. Luo

Xianni had now arisen to the same level as Jue Di – a powerful denizen of the Infinite. With the addition of Lan Jue and Qianlin after their sharp rise in strength, the situation was well within their ability to handle. What else need be said?

Zeus-1 had returned to the planet a while ago. It was waiting for Lan Jue's team to continue the mission.

Lan Qing went on. "It's wonderful that Qianlin's protogenia can heal the afflicted, but I will remind you that they are not in a position to be saved yet. If you make that your priority you're just putting them in danger. Your objective is the destruction of the progenitor and returning vitality to the planet."

"Alright, I understand." Lan Jue was clear on his role and his brother's instructions. Their plan had been to clear and retake Angel, not any of the other planets. They didn't have the soldiers for it. If they divided their forces it was just inviting disaster, he knew that.

A pale light flickered around him as Lan Jue grinned. He'd waited a long time for this day. He was anxious to show off his capabilities.

After disconnecting with his brother, Lan Jue, Qianlin and Luo Xianni returned to the arena. They gathered the other three Paragons, then contacted Mika and boarded Zeus-1. It was time for them to leave for their second objective.

Lan Jue and Qianlin didn't need to rest. Healing the afflicted had solidified Qianlin's powers, and Lan Jue had also benefited from using her as a conduit. What's more, Lan Jue was surprised to discover that Qianlin's actions had empowered her with no small measure of faith-based force.

Without question, the Pontiff enjoyed the highest levels of faith among the human worlds. The Pontiff's Citadel had scores of faithful and years of effort had cultivated a base of followers to support their organization.

Yet now the Western Alliance was all but wiped out. It was to be expected that their faith would be shaken. With Qianlin appearing as she did to deliver them from torment, convictions had quickly changed.

The benefits of the power of faith were largely a mystery to Lan Jue, but he was able to sense that Qianlin's Domain was strengthening faster than his. Not only that, but her progress was stable and consistent. This was the benefit of the Queen of Heaven. She had no battlefield utility to speak of, her powers were designed for the salvation of mankind. Giving up one aspect enhanced another. Her strength and prestige were a reward for Zhou Qianlin's pure nature.

Luo Xianni knelt quietly in a corner, recovering the energy she'd spent while also solidifying her recent advancement. It went without saying that Qianlin's presence was immensely beneficial. Her Domain eased many of Luo Xianni's concerns in breaking through, and served to help her stabilize her new heights of power.

As the three of them worked in tandem to heal the mutant humans, pushing Qianlin's Domain to its highest point, Luo Xianni had been the most positively affected. Although it had cost her in energy consumption, the stabilization of her protogenia was critical. The more stable her powers were the easier it was to control them, so that she might deceive universal protogenia.

As she looked at Qianlin and Lan Jue, Xiuxiu's eyes were gloomy. She had always been acutely aware of the difference between her and Qianlin. Now that her mind had recovered, she knew she had no chance with her boss. The other Amazons handled it better, her disappointment was deepest. But what could she do? Emotion wasn't something you could simply will away.

Zeus-1 roared ahead toward the second planet they were to free. Lan Jue's mind was on the information about their next destination.

The planet was somewhat smaller than Angel. It was pockmarked with splotches of black due to steady volcanic activity. Of all the eight planets, conditions on this one were likely the worst. It was a blessing in disguise that the human population was the smallest. Still it was a planet rich in natural resources which produced a great deal of rare metals, and thus was considered more important than Angel to the West.

Its proximity to Angel also influenced its naming scheme. The West called it Demon, as much for the poetry of it as for its special characteristics. Volcanic eruptions acted in much the same way mythical demons did.

Volcanoes brought destruction, but also new life. Volcanic ash was rich in mineral substances that nourished the earth, so the vegetation that did grow on Demon was rich in vital energy. More than most other planets.

Chapter 802: Sheol

It was no accident that this resource-rich place was one of the aliens' targets.

Three hours after departing from Angel, Sheol appeared on the horizon
1. The surface was a darker hue of purple than Angel had been, but that was likely because the planet's natural color was darker.

Even from this distance Lan Jue could see the host of alien creatures in the space around it. These were the remains of the main force that Lan Qing had defeated. They were here to protect the planet, but also to wait for an opportunity to pay the humans back for the pain they'd visited upon them.

Zeus-1 took a wide tack, approaching from the side but keeping a safe distance. The fiends were too thick for them to infiltrate at the moment. The human armada had departed for this sector of space at the same time Lan Jue had left. Now they just had to wait.

After holding their position for some time, the three bastions were again on the move. Meanwhile its twelve support fleets remained behind in perfect formation. Middle Heaven, Tyrannosaurus, and Poseidon advanced on Sheol in the triangular arrangement that'd worked for them so far.

They moved slowly, but that only made them seem all the more imposing after their recent victory.

Middle Heaven again took the lead, the largest and least attractive of the three. Not that appearance was a big concern in a warship, but An Lun was anything but pretty to begin with. It looked like splotchy stone ball spinning through space.

However the aliens would not soon forget that this rocky orb could turn into a blazing sun at a moment's notice. The memory of their fiery defeat would forever be seared into their memory. Middle Heaven's combat tactics were also varied and unexpected, and the aliens still weren't sure what the bastion was capable of.

Poseidon and Tyrannosaurus followed in the rocky war-planet's wake. Tyrannosaurus, its metallic luster glinting in the dark, was the most traditional of the three. Poseidon was the most beautiful, with its sky-blue exterior.

As they approached an invisible, inexplicable pressure filled the space around them.

Not long after the bastions appeared within view, the aliens tasked with protecting Sheol began to move. They gathered into formation and fled to the far side of the planet, staying true to their previous tactics. Clearly they feared what these human ships could do.

For good reason. They had watched their brethren die horribly from the bastions, and it filled them with fear.

Lan Jue sat in Zeus-1 with a thoughtful expression on his face. "It looks like the aliens are trying to delay. This is good."

Biding time meant the alien home words were indeed evolving. These weaker beasts were trying to buy them enough time to complete the process. For the present they wouldn't have to worry about the planets showing up out of nowhere. Once they completed their transformation, however, things would be different.

Of course Lan Jue had strong feelings toward that eventuality, but right now delaying indicated the best of all scenarios for humanity.

"Prepare to set out!" Lan Jue gave Mika the command.

Zeus-1 started to move again, on a trajectory toward Sheol.

Lan Jue knew that the aliens had to have stealth capabilities of some fashion. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to react as quickly as they did to the presence of bastions. Lan Jue also understood the psychology of these monsters. They preferred a straight fight, hence their predisposition for head-on assaults. They had the necessary strength to overwhelm and destroy the human armada, too. Only, they knew little about Middle Heaven and didn't understand its fighting abilities. That lack of intelligence had already cost them dearly.

Since their loss the aliens had chosen to forego direct confrontation. Now evasion was their main tactic. This confirmed that their main aim was to delay the human forces, and use the seven outer planets to act as stumbling blocks. If they fled from planet to planet the humans would be forced to take them in a circuitous route that would take days. The aliens knew they had the advantage of speed.

Lan Jue was confident that if the bastions moved in for a full attack the aliens would withdraw. They would stretch the human ships thin and use that to their benefit. That was precisely the situation Lan Jue did not want to see. His brother saw it, too.

As they moved in closer to the planet, its surface was made clearer to them. It was composed of many peaks and valleys, with cities concentrated on tracts of flat land where they could be found. From orbit they could also see the bases and infrastructure left behind by the West. They were all in various states of destruction.

Only a few aliens dotted the path ahead. Through Lin Guoguo's psychic obfuscation, they slipped by and entered the planet's atmosphere. The ground came rushing up to meet them.

Meanwhile the bastions continued to approach, pressuring the alien forces. This had given Lan Jue and his party the opportunity to sneak in, but left them open to siege.

When Zeus-1 was a couple thousand meters above the ground it stopped. Six figures dropped out, disappearing in flash of pink before materializing on Sheol's pock-marked surface.

They were immediately met with the faint odor of Sulphur. This wasn't a trait of the aliens' presence. The purple corruption they expected to see did not cover everything, either. Those areas were active volcanoes sprang up had burned the creeping fungus away. In fact, there was no life to be found near the smoldering scars.

Lan Jue and the other five stood quietly and waited. They would wait until Zeus-1 was safely away before continuing on. If their means of escape was discovered they would have to rush to its aid.

However Zeus' Amazons did not disappoint. Zeus-1 quickly disappeared into the sky. They couldn't see it with the Blinding Stone, of course, but they could be assured everything was fine from the absence of combat sounds.

Luo Xianni knelt on the ground while flickers of pink danced in her eyes. Her fighting style was different now that she'd entered the Infinite. Quick and decisive victory was her *modus operandi*.

The Pharmacist looked toward Lan Jue. "Do you need me to lead?" She asked.

Lan Jue smiled. "Let us try. You can be backup. Driver, Pauper, guard our flanks."

Everyone nodded. No one doubted Qianlin's power after seeing what she did on Angel. These two young folks achieved levels of power beyond their reach with their simultaneous breakthroughs. They could only accept that the younger generation would be their superiors.

It was the same for the Pharmacist. She broke through to a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and had a Banishing Blade at her command.

Lan Jue and Qianlin stood side by side, hand in hand, immersing themselves in each other's thoughts and sensations. Smile smiles were on both of their faces.

Envy flitted across the Pharmacist's expression as she looked at the two young lovers. Her heart filled with sadness. If her husband were here perhaps they would act similarly.

Ultus had to be recovered! The Pharmacist pursed her lips in determination.

"Found it." Luo Xianni's eyes suddenly popped open, sparkling. All of a sudden six streams of light appeared beneath everyone's feet.

In a flash everyone disappeared. For them it was like reality clicked, like the shutter of a camera, and they were somewhere else. The scene was one of expansive pink, covered entirely in writhing alien bodies. The sky above, the ground below – everywhere replete with enemies. Obviously they were

on the planet's far side.

Just as on Angel they spied the enormous artery stretching out into space, connecting heaven and earth. At its base the progenitor writhed its gargantuan bulk as it gorged on the world's vital energy.

The alien numbers were beyond imagining. Lan Jue could also see a familiar figure hanging in the air. It was the Violet Prince.

He floated in the center of the alien horde while the lesser beasts roiled in his orbit. In the skies overhead a couple creatures several thousand meters long could faintly be seen. A mighty array of foes was putting it lightly.

Luo Xianni spoke to them. "We're in a parallel dimension of my creation. They can't see us, but we can see them. The progenitor is below, surrounded by who knows how many alien guardians. That is the Violet Prince, whose power you are familiar with. Now that I've advanced I'm sure I can keep him tied up, but I'm not sure I can defeat him. When the time comes I'll initiate the attack and focus on him and the aliens closest to him. The rest of you take this opportunity to go after the progenitor. Once it's slain, we'll escape."

If Lan Jue and Qianlin hadn't broken through, or if Luo Xianni hadn't chosen to rise to the Infinite, than this plan would not be possible. There were too many powerful aliens for them to contend with all at once. It would have been as impossible as pulling embers from a fire without burning one's hands.

The progenitor were getting stronger with each time they found a new one. This one was probably Nirvana-level or higher, more than enough to keep them tied down and allow the other beasts to swallow them up.

However, now that they had a Paragon of the Infinite on their side the chances of retreat were high. Even the Violet Prince was no cause for alarm. This plan could work.

"Mother, I suggest we wait. This isn't the best time to move in." If another one of the alien royalty or a doppelganger appeared, they could easily get overwhelmed.

“So what do you suggest?” She asked.

Chapter 803: Harmonious Dispatch!

Lan Jue explained. “My brother will continue to press them, you’ve seen how they react to the bastions. As they get closer the aliens will have to respond in some fashion, maybe even leave the planet. If their aim is buy time then they won’t want a straight confrontation – I think we’ll have a better opportunity.”

After thinking for a moment, Luo Xianni nodded. “Alright, we’ll wait and see what happens.”

As the minutes passed the aliens swirled in a chaotic tide. Only the Violet Prince was still, a boulder in a stream of writhing purple bodies. His eyes were closed as though he were deeply thinking on something.

The waves of energy that radiated from him were no different from the last time they encountered him. However, Lan Jue sensed something more in the beast, like he was more... human. With all the victims of their recent attacks it was likely he used their genetic material to improve himself as well.

Lan Jue watched the time. His brother never told him how he intended to harass the creatures, but he did tell him how long the window would be before they turned back. In less than an hour the bastions were due to return to the fleet.

As anticipated, as the bastions drew nearer to Sheol’s surface the aliens grew more agitated. However, there was little change in their formation. As time crawled by, they swirled through the skies and crawled along the ground as the progenitor writhed. Its massive tentacles swiped erratically, and caustic mist belched upward in an unending stream.

None of the aliens dared draw near the progenitor. It seemed as though they feared it on some level. By contrast there were any number of monstrous creatures surrounding the Violet Prince.

Waiting was sometimes a form of torment. Such was the case now as the humans looked on, yet they had no choice. The time was not yet right.

Finally, as the time for withdrawal was nearly upon them, Lan Jue saw a slight change in the Prince's face. He began to wave his arms. In response the aliens around him soared into the skies above.

Are they leaving? Lan Jue's heart began to beat faster.

Then, all of a sudden, they sensed something looking at them.

"No good!" Lan Jue growled as blue light sprang up around him. Luo Xianni also reacted immediately, and after a brief flash of pink their surroundings changed.

Now they were in the sky, but they could sense the violet power brazenly penetrating Luo Xianni's parallel reality. All around them an oppressive tension descended.

Now wasn't the time to ponder how they were discovered. The first to act was their strongest, Luo Xianni, who transferred her other five teammates several hundred meters away.

Half a breath later the Violet Prince's fist was bearing down on the Photographer. His whole arm went through her face. To his surprise, her only reaction was to ripple. All at once the world around him changed and he was caught in a vortex of power. He fought to extricate himself, and when he eventually did he was out in space. Utter darkness closed in on him, but only for a moment before a pink light started to creep in from all directions.

"Quick!" Lan Jue and the others heard Luo Xianni's voice in their ears. They had already started moving once they saw their team leader capture the Violet Prince in the vortex.

Ten tentacles thick as buildings were already coming their way. Each one of them was covered in enormous suction discs, and their vacuum force was felt even before they arrived. Stranger still, this suction force didn't affect their bodies, so much as it started to drain their life force.

The progenitor below was upright. Its enormous body was riddled with grotesque lumps. As its tentacles wildly whipped through the air, everything around them was consumed in a fog of purple.

In this poisoned environment the humans could feel their vital energy begin to warp.

Paragons had a level of control over their bodies that approached legendary levels, and yet despite this they could feel the creature draining their essence from them. One could imagine how immediate and catastrophic the result would be for a normal human. They would be a desiccated husk before they knew what had happened.

The Pharmacist grunted, and a beam of white light erupted from her and into the sky. It shattered into tens of thousands of glittering shards, sharp as razors, roiling through the area like a tempest. The Harbinger Faerie released her slaughter Domain, and with it a tide of murderous energy surged through the area.

The Driver reacted next, calling his Domain to bear. He pressed his power to its limit, nearly a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Since experiencing primordial lightning for himself his comprehension of his own powers had deepened. The opportunity to sense its true nature had empowered him significantly.

A dense net of purple lightning was constructed around him, and diffused outward until him and all of his companions were contained within. The nearest tentacles were blasted back, and their suction discs fell away. They sloughed off, as though some inexplicable corrosion had infected them.

The Pauper's body rocked, and then he appeared a short distance away. His hands were pressed together in front of him, and at his back the image of his Taming Dragon Arhat appeared. When the dirty man thrust his arms toward the heavens a golden dragon burst from him.

The Pauper vanished, but the golden dragon he'd summoned roared and rose toward the skies. It continued to grow until mere moments later it was a majestic beast thousands of meters long. With a roar it shined its golden light all around them, an aura thick with power that clashed with the aliens as they descended to the progenitor's aid.

Lan Jue and Qianlin exchanged a glance. Their hearts as one, a flash of

light heralded the appearance of their swords.

The moment Lan Jue took Captus into his hand, pockets of reality around him collapsed. Qianlin took up her own blade and in doing so, countless wisps of blue light sprang to life. With the appearance of the Banishing Blades, in addition to Occisus' aura, the progenitor's tentacles were suddenly uninterested in coming their way.

The Pharmacist thrust forward with her weapon and the dharmic image at her back mimicked the move. She and her manifestation fused into one, and Occisus swelled to a hundred times its original length.

A brilliant wave of white light issued forth. Where it passed the air would change from a prismatic display to a stark canvas of black and white. It was though the beam of life carved a schism between life and death, separating two halves of reality. Ten of the monster's tentacles froze mid-squirm then disintegrated as their life energy was consumed.

The progenitor screeched from the sudden, blinding pain. Several more tentacles quickly grew to replace the ones it had lost. These monsters were among the apex of their species, thus were they able to recover from nearly any injury. So long as they had vital energy to support them, and weren't sudden killed, they could overcome tremendous punishment.

Though its tentacles were quickly replaced, the beast didn't dare press the attack. Yet the Pharmacist did not let up. She was a whirlwind of motion, releases waves of protogenia that swept passed the Pauper's golden dragon as waves of sword-swipes.

As a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, her sword technique was different than it had been before. Each bloom of light cut through the aliens in their path as though they were nothing. Any creature unfortunate enough to meet Occisus' power was cut into dozens of pieces and slain.

With her Slaughter Domain and Occisus power as one, nothing could withstand its bloodcurdling power. It of course went without saying that as the Pharmacist grew in strength, so too did her Domain.

Two figures were then spotted above the progenitor. Behind Lan Jue, a regal image appeared wearing a golden crown. Middle Heaven Emperor of

the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety. Behind Qianlin was her own dharmic image; Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven.

With their dharmas revealed, Lan Jue and Qianlin did not merge. Instead, together as one, they thrust forward with their Banishing Blades.

With this simple movement the skies shuddered. A rainbow of colors radiated from the two of them.

A series of resplendent gold runes appeared within the emanating power of Captus. As the dharmic image at Lan Jue's back motioned a halo of indigo light arose. It reflected off of Captus' blade, which hummed in response, followed by sparks of red electricity.

A haze of white descended upon them. As the Queen of Heaven's powers washed over Lan Jue and Qianlin, they felt their abilities grow.

Ten thousand swords focused flow! The invincible Harmonious Swords! As the weapons struck in tandem a colorful beam of light descended unto their target, rich with lethal and imperial power.

When that light appeared, the Violet Prince – locked in combat far above the planet – shuddered. Disbelief shimmered in his eyes.

Luo Xianni also unconsciously cast her eyes toward Sheol 1. In contrast to her foe, she smiled.

For Lan Jue and Qianlin the attack was nearly automatic. As he looked on, Lan Jue saw that his partner's unique style was even more fluid and ethereal than it had been. Both of them only had each other in their hearts, mutually devoted, resulting in the Harmonious Swords!

Sensing the danger it was in, the progenitor retracted its tentacles and coiled them tightly. Wrapped up in an undulating purple column, it thrust them into the sky in attempts to withstand the beam of rainbow light.

But it was to no avail. Where the tentacles and light met, the monster's appendages disintegrated. It was incapable of stopping the righteous onslaught. Like a spear descended from heaven, the column of light pierced the progenitor.

Squelch! It penetrated the beast's sickening purple flesh then began to spread. It struck with such force that the light was reflected off the ground and bounced back into the air as thousands upon thousands of individual shards of power.

Chapter 804: Saving Heaven's Light

Lan Jue and Qianlin became translucent, then invisible. Only Guanyin and the Emperor of the North Pole Star remained visible in the sky with the Banishing Blades in their hands. Guanyin was crystal clear, but in contrast the Emperor of the North Pole Star was diaphanous.

The hum from Demortus and Captus filled the air as they stretched out together – not to attack, but to lead. They directed the stream of technicolor light that descended from on high toward its singular aim.

One of the monsters, thousands of meters long, sensed the danger approaching. It turned to flee, wildly raking the air with its metallic claws. But the torrent of light swept passed before it could escape, piercing through its forehead and beyond. One after the other all aliens in its path were cut down.

The two dharmic images rose higher into the air. White light radiate from the Queen of Heaven and fell upon a vast expanse of land. Sizzling mists arose from the bodies of all aliens caught within the light. They screeched and cried in pain, flying aimlessly toward succor. The other humans, bathed in the light of Guanyin, felt their protogenia swiftly recovering.

The Emperor of the North Pole Star indicated a direction with Captus. Meanwhile, a blue cloud gathered ominously over its head. Several bolts of typical-looking lightning were cast from it. They sought out and incinerated the monstrous creatures as they writhed within Qianlin's Domain. All victims of lightning were erased from being, with nothing remaining to mark their existence but a vital crystal.

The Emperor's Domain, the Palm of Five Thunders, was lightning based. Although it was far weaker and less dramatic than the cloud that had appeared during Lan Jue's ascension, the appearance of All-Heaven Lightning still struck a cord of fear even among the Paragons.

Even Lan Jue and Qianlin hadn't suspected defeating the progenitor would be this easy. The Harmonious Swords were draining, but now that

the two of them were Paragons and commanded the forces of the universe, the technique's cost was reduced while its efficacy skyrocketed. They could continue to fight even after employing it.

With the death of the progenitor, the nearby aliens were uninclined to race in and throw their lives away. Lan Jue and Qianlin exchanged a look before raising their swords once more, but the Pharmacist's voice stopped them. "Let's charge in!"

"Alright!" The Pauper fell in beside Lan Jue and Qianlin, with the Pharmacist on the other side before all four leapt into the air. The Driver remained behind, and with a shivers dozens of lightning bolts erupted from him. They didn't seek out aliens, rather they struck the many vital crystals strewn around the battlefield and recovered them. Primarily they wanted the progenitor's crystal, a real treasure for humanity that simultaneously robbed power from their enemies.

Lan Jue marked their path by pointing with his weapon. Where he indicated, a sea of power rushed through – focused flow. In the same moment Qianlin's weapon exploded into tens of thousands of twinkling lights – Ten Thousand Swords as One, Demortus' cutting power spread far and wide.

One focused and heavy, the other light and diffuse. As the two of them shared an intimate look their techniques melded and the rainbow light appeared once again. It shot into the sky and painted everything in myriad shades of color.

Nothing could withstand its passage. Anything remotely near the rainbow was massacred. By the time the Driver caught up to them the column of light was so wide it swallowed all five Paragons into its bosom. Suddenly they were moving at incredible speed, and in a blink they had swept through the atmosphere back out into space.

Most of the enemy forces were gone, only a few stragglers remained. They made no move to stop the humans, for they did not dare contend against the rainbow light.

In the distance they could see flashes of pink and violet clashing. Waves

of staggering energy were released with every blast. When Luo Xianni saw the rainbow light split the darkness of space she knew their mission was complete. In a flicker of pink light she rejoined her team.

The Violet Prince was hot on her heels, and reached out with his hands. A piercing violet light fell over the humans.

Lan Jue and Qianlin didn't wait for permission, and again struck out with the Harmonious Swords. For a third time a beam of rainbow light was born. But the Violet Prince didn't balk, didn't back down. The two beams met each other halfway.

At first contact the rainbow light buckled beneath the intensity of the purple beam. However, soon signs of weakness showed in the Prince's attack, as its edges disintegrated before a rapidly strengthening Harmonious Swords technique.

The Prince could sense it acutely, his life essence boiling within him. The power he contended against was sometimes focused and sometimes scattered, a fact which stopped his strength from assailing it directly.

He roared in anger and frustration, pouring even more of his capabilities into the violet stream. As it seemed he would overcome the humans' powers there was a burst of blinding light. His prey was gone.

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Lan Jue and the others reappeared in a flash of pink light. This time they were safely aboard Zeus-1. Luckily all six had restrained their powers when the flash appeared. Otherwise the sudden burst of power from so many Paragons would have undoubtedly obliterated the ship and everyone on it.

Their mission was a complete success.

The Driver extended a thumbs-up toward Lan Jue and Qianlin. After their breakthrough, their powers were simply incredible. Both were irreplaceably assets on the battlefield. Their actions also proved that an Adept's powers could counter and restrict the aliens', capable of causing fatal damage. With the Banishing Blades they were even able to deflect the powers of the Violet Prince, whose strength far outmatched theirs. The

technique still wasn't even perfected.

Lan Jue chuckled wryly. "We only had about forty-percent of our energy left. The Harmonious Sword technique is incredibly draining."

The two of them could not be fused and use the technique at the same time – after it, It required a pair. This meant the technique was driven by the force of Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Still, they were able to use their inferior powers to contend against a much stronger foe – at the cost of great effort.

The Pharmacist smiled at them both. "Very good. Now as your power increases you should continue to train the technique in order to call on it's true might."

Lan Jue nodded in agreement. After three consecutive uses he felt exhausted. Much of the energy they poured into the technique wasn't directed into the attack. In fact, it required tremendous strength and concentration to keep the manifestation stable. Qianlin had suffered for a long time in a coma, and though their hearts were as one they needed to continue training their cooperation. Individually they were very proficient with their styles, but together they needed practice.

However the foundation of the Harmonious Swords technique was a union of hearts. Thankfully this was something they had already achieved. The technical aspects of it were much easier by comparison and just required mutual cultivation.

Zeus-1 picked up speed and vacated Sheol's gravity well. Lan Jue took the opportunity to get in contact with Lan Qing and let him know what happened.

"A-Jue, you can't come back yet. The Terminator has run into some trouble, powerful enemies they've so far managed to keep off. We can't move the troops in time so you need to get there as soon as possible. The bastions are headed back to rejoin the armada, and when we do we'll move in for support. You should head there directly."

When Lan Jue heard the news he couldn't help but feel anxious. The elation they felt for a successful mission quickly subsided. "Alright, we're

on our way.”

“Mika, change course for Heaven’s Light.” Lan Jue ordered.

Mika whipped her head around and looked at him, surprised. “Boss, Heaven’s Light...”

Lan Jue interrupted her concern. “Don’t worry, the situation now is unclear. Lan Qing has asked us to go and aid the Terminator’s team. Quickly now.”

“Aye, aye.” Mika complied, her heart racing. Her father was with the Terminator. Although she hadn’t been a part of the Dark Citadel or that man’s life for years, it was where she grew up. That man was her father.

Her mind harkened back to the conversation they’d had before the mission began. Suddenly her heart sank and an inexplicable sense of oppression settled on her shoulders. She wouldn’t accept it but the heart was not susceptible to her deception. She still cared for him, she wanted him to live.

Daddy!

Zeus-1 veered off of its intended course, burning full speed for the next planet in the system – Heaven’s Light. They were a streak of brightness against a black backdrop.

Lan Jue could feel Mika’s anxiety. He replaced Lin Guoguo at the captain’s chair and lent the ship his powers so it would move faster. The ship was too small to support much of a Paragon’s abilities, however, so Lan Jue was more than enough to give it the juice it needed.

After making their overtures against Sheol, the bastions had since turned around and were returning to the fleet. Their next target was Heaven’s Light.

According to the information they’d gotten, the Terminator had encounter no small obstacle to completing their mission. They were beset in enemy territory and were fighting for their lives. Normal aliens were not the concern, for they certainly could not harm these Paragons. What was frightening by the Terminator’s report was it meant more powerful

foes had come up against them.

Three humanoid aliens had appeared.

All three were avatars of the planets; Monarch, Empress and Consort. The last two were similar in appearance to the Violet Princess, beautiful and deadly, but slightly older. The only way to tell them apart was by their hair, one purple and one red.

Chapter 805: The King of Devils

Queen, Consort and Monarch – the three most powerful aliens outside of the home worlds themselves. Luckily none of them were strong enough to ascend to the Infinite. However three Nirvana-level enemies was enough to cause the Terminator and his allies significant trouble.

The Terminator himself had achieved Nirvana, but only recently. Besides him the Wine Master and Clockmaker were Reflections of Heaven and Earth. The others were still within the Realm of Protogenia.

The seven of them together, employing their full strength, were able to keep the enemy at bay. At least for now. The valley they fought in was scarred by the marks of their conflict. From overhead it looked like a jagged crater.

Roars and explosions filled the air, competing against one another as the chaos continued. A gigantic image of a man with pitch black skin, ten thousand meters tall stomped through the area. His body blazed with a blinding golden light, and every time he threw a punch hundreds of aliens were eliminated.

Scores of enemies threw themselves at him. Their blows landed, but only transient marks remained from their efforts. None of the lesser beasts could overcome his defenses. This was the Terminator's dharmic image. The others were managing to avoid destruction because he had taken the fore.

Once they had infiltrated the planet, the Terminator had quietly lead his team toward the progenitor's location and waited for their opportunity. But when the space battle had begun, the situation here had been less than ideal. Many aliens remained surrounding the progenitor. That was when they found the three who would give them the most worry.

When the battle was at its height the Terminator could wait no longer. They had two planets they were responsible for liberating, and seven Paragons waiting to do their part. They could not delay!

He formulated a plan; He would use his own body to shield the others

while they dealt with the progenitor.

Unfortunately for them the creature was also Nirvana-level. Their plan appeared to be working at the outset, with the Terminator relying on his overpowering strength to single-handedly keep the three doppelgangers at bay.

However, although the other Paragons exclusively turned their attacks on the progenitor, they weren't strong enough to bring it down. The best they'd managed was to injure it. Meanwhile, the doppelgangers were commanding the alien forces to surround and besiege them.

A Paragon's protogenic recovery rate was quick, which meant their staying power in a fight was similarly impressive. However, while this planet used to be human territory it belonged to the enemy now. The progenitor's corrupting influence acted as support for the creatures helping them to heal and replenish rapidly, while also empowering the planets' avatars.

Mission success was tantalizingly close when they started their assault. With their target within view, how could they retreat? But as time went on the situation worsened. The Paragons had to fight harder as more aliens came to the progenitor's aid. The air was so thick with enemies even the clouds were blotted out.

At last the Wine Master sent out a request for help. Things had spiraled out of their control, and if they fell here the cost to humanity would be immense. He used his dimensional powers to keep the enemies at bay by opening portals in front of the encroaching forces. In their headlong charge the monsters would barrel through the portals and find themselves far away.

Now, loud roars filled the air. A mushroom cloud lifted debris high into the planet's atmosphere, followed by a powerful shockwave. For a moment that section of horizon burned like a sunrise. Scores of aliens tumbled from the sky.

The fight had raged at a fever pitch for several hours with the Paragons slaying countless numbers of aliens. Unfortunately their vital crystals were

swallowed up by the fungus-infested earth and returned to the enemy. Ultimately they suffered no losses.

The Terminator's team took turns resting and pressing the attack to try and conserve energy, but continuous battle was beginning to take its toll.

An inferno of dark red fire repelled a group of aliens. Satan's face glowered in the stark shadows his fires created. All of a sudden he rose sharply into the air, outside of their defensive formation.

"Satan, what are you doing?! Get back here!" The Keeper shouted.

Satan turned his head and peered back at the researcher. Suddenly he smiled. "Get ready to break out of the encirclement!" As he spoke his pale hands were pressed together in front of him. A sea of fire erupted in all directions with him at its center. This was enough to force the aliens around him to fall back. Simultaneously, a strange black light lingered between the King of Devil's palms.

It grew into a pitch-black sword that was strange to behold. It was long and thin, even its handguard oddly dainty. On either end of the handguard were two identical black gemstones, complimenting a third at the base of the pommel. They glimmered with a strange and bewitching light, but the blade itself was a flat black that reflected no light whatsoever.

When the rapier appeared all light in the vicinity dimmed, swallowed into its inky surface.

"This is..." The Pontiff stared in surprise.

Satan's demonic star was fixed on the aliens. His lips moved as a low, guttural chant slithered through the air. A pair of enormous wings burst from his back and spread wide, matched by a pair of dark red horns drilling out from his forehead. Satan's aura rapidly swelled in power.

This dramatic transformation captured the attention of the three doppelgangers. They had continued to try and rush in to end these humans, but the Terminator's power had so far kept them at bay. The Northern Paragon was riddled with wounds, but with the help of the Wine Master and Clockmaker they'd managed to keep their party safe – but

only barely.

Satan turned his attention back toward the Keeper. “When I’m gone, give this blade to my daughter. And watch that hypocrite, make sure he doesn’t get his hands on it.”

The Dark Citadel’s former leader erupted into thunderous laughter. His body was consumed in an inferno of hellfire.

Satan’s aura intensified by several orders of magnitude. With a flourish he flipped the blade around and hugged it toward himself. The sleep blade slipped into him, right where his heart was located.

The second it pierced his heart, everything within five hundred meters of the Paragon froze in place. Suddenly they crumbled away into ash.

Satan’s body became the center of a massive black vortex. A manic surge of demonic energy whipped around it like a tempest.

The Pontiff looked on, struck dumb with amazement. He and Satan had been adversaries for decades and knew each other like brothers. He knew what this was.

“He... he’s broken the stygian seal?” He gasped.

“Stygian seal? What’s that?” The Keeper asked. The Avenue’s ultimate researcher could feel that the energy Satan was releasing far exceeded his typical capabilities, and it was still rising. The protogenia around him was solidifying, as though in anticipation of something terrible.

“The power of the Satan bloodline is derived from the King of Devils. It grants them incredible power, but corrupts their hearts and devours their souls. There is never a good end for members of their cursed bloodline. Eventually their soul comes under the command of the Devil, and they become puppets of pure animalistic evil. Only upon becoming Paragons can this possession be halted, and in turn the Adept becomes a Devil in the flesh. Satan is the only one of their ilk I’ve seen who has been able to thoroughly seal the corruption of his blood right. By piercing his heart he releases the full power latent in his blood, the only way to summon the full strength of the King of Devils. But it comes at the cost of his body and

soul. The mythical King of Devils has powers even beyond the Infinite. Even a shadow of its presence would be harrowing.”

The Keeper didn’t completely understand what the Keeper was saying, but he grasped enough. Satan intended to sacrifice his own life energy to overcome the aliens. The Arcane Magnate had never held Satan or his despicable bloodline in high regard, but in this moment he looked upon the man with respect. A Paragon’s life was long and highly cherished, the Keeper knew this well. This man was willing to give up his life without complaint. That was true strength.

Satan’s eyes were a ghastly blood red. His body and aura grew before their eyes.

“I am the King of Devils – greatest of my generation. Surely you lesser creatures cannot hope to shackle me? Ha-ha-ha-ha!” His mad cackling cracked like thunder and with a vicious yank he pulled the rapier free from his chest. It, too, had grown with the rest of him, and now his demonic aura had drowned all the world around them.

Shadows coalesced around him to create a red cloak that flapped at his back. His pale face had become leathery red and monstrous. The light in his eyes was no longer human.

With a single beat of his enormous wings Satan was suddenly on the other side of the battlefield. The aliens around him only felt a sudden burning sensation, then all of a sudden an area a thousand meters in diameter was swallowed up in red light. They were cut off from the rest of the battle.

The Terminator acutely felt the power that came from the demon and knew that even his Nirvana-level abilities would not be able to contend against him.

Satan’s ice-cold features regarded the North’s Paragon defender. “Terminator. I have a request.” His voice was cold as death.

The Terminator continued to fight, but was paying close attention.

Chapter 806: Satan's Last Words

"Spit it out!" The Terminator said between world-shaking punches. Satan was sacrificing his life so that the rest of them might live. How could he ignore his request?

Satan's voice was low and solemn. "If my daughter decides to take over the Dark Citadel, I want you to support her claim. If she refuses let the Hades bloodline take control. I bequeath my demonic blade to my last remaining daughter. I trust you, and I trust the Avenue, but I will place no faith in that snake the Pontiff. Keep Mika safe."

"Alright!" The Terminator agreed without hesitation. Sorrow flitted through his eyes.

For a hundred years the number of Paragons in the world had remained constant. Only within the last year or so were new names added to the list. Both of them were old established heroes of a bygone era. To witness his contemporary's life cut short in this way, the Terminator was filled with admiration.

Every Paragon had some extreme measure hidden away in case of events such as this, but they also had misgivings. The Terminator, for instance, couldn't sacrifice himself because the North needed him. If he were to fall the North would have no one to contend against the daunting power of the East.

Satan's courage was as surprising as it was praiseworthy.

Satan chuckled. His right hand lifted and pointed toward the heavens. "Go!" He roared.

The area of smoldering red around him suddenly became a tornado of energy that swallowed up the Paragons and spat them into the air. Demonic flames lapped at their heels and burned so intensely they kept the alien avatars at bay.

The fires began to consume Satan's body. His powers hovered on the cusp of the Infinite.

“So this is what the Infinite feels like, the power I was meant to command.” Satan stepped forward into the center of the tornado. If he remained within it and left with the others there was a chance he could survive. But he was the King of Devils – he sought a glorious death in combat.

“Come! Children of the alien fiends. I will show you the power of a real monster.” He swiped his rapier through the air, sending waves of crimson energy in all directions.

Monarch’s doppelganger retreated a step and lifted its hands. An orb of violet light issued from its palms and burned away the encroaching attack. Queen and Consort came closing in on Satan’s location from either flank.

Satan watched them come with fearless countenance, ready to face them alone. The hellfire that clung to him flickered dangerously and burned brighter. The avatars were reluctant to get close, for they knew the heat from those fires could scorch them down to their souls.

The red tornado had flung the other six Paragons with such force they were in the upper reaches of the planet’s atmosphere before they knew it. Many lesser aliens had rushed after them, but of course could not block their escape.

The Terminator’s expression was uncharacteristically angry. As he flew at the head of the group his big hands grabbed whatever beasts dared get too close before ripping the life out of them in grotesque fashion. It was the only way he could release the pain and resentment that ate at his heart.

The other Paragons didn’t utter a sound, but similar feelings were clear on their faces.

The Wine Master, Clockmaker, Keeper and Bookworm were all glowering. Skyfire Avenue adhered to a strict code of fairness and justice. The Keeper had been prepared to use his own power of last resort, but Satan had been faster.

Even the Pontiff’s face betrayed a sense of loss, almost disbelief. He would never have suspected Satan to take this measure. As an emissary of God it should have been his responsibility! But he didn’t have the courage

his contemporary had.

The Paragons slaughtered their way out of encirclement, eventually fighting their way out into space. Once they had some breathing room the Wine Master waved his scepter and a silver light enveloped them. When it receded they were far from the planet's surface. Without the doppelgangers the aliens couldn't prevent them from escaping.

Just then a streak of light arrived, a beam that was there one minute and gone the next as it swept through the pursuing alien force. A bone-jarring explosion ensued that sent the monsters reeling in all directions. Zeus-1 appeared suspended in the darkness nearby.

The Wine Master dare not delay. Waving his scepter again his protogenia conveyed them into the small ship's interior. Immediately Zeus-1's Blinding Stone was reengaged and Lin Guoguo concealed their presence with her psychic force. They peeled off to evade their enemy's search.

Zeus-1 was nearing its limit. It had been working beyond capacity the whole way to Heaven's Light, a feat only possible because Lan Jue was feeding it energy. When they returned to the fleet his ship would need serious repairs.

When he saw the group of Paragons appear on the bridge Lan Jue's first reaction was to sigh in relief. He made it in time to save them. But his satisfaction was brief, for soon he saw the problem. They were short one.

"Where is he?" Lan Jue had noticed it immediately, and so had Mika. She had approached the moment they appeared. There was a tremble in her voice.

It was the Terminator who answered her. "In order to save our lives Satan pierced his own heart with his demon blade. He used the King of Devils true power to cover our retreat..."

"What?" For a moment Mika's eyes went dark. She felt faint.

For years she had hated Satan, withholding forgiveness for his alleged crimes. But, in her heart he was always undefeatable – an indomitable

force that could overcome all obstacles. Like all little girls she believed her dad could conquer the universe. He was the Devil of this generation.

Now they were telling her that this man, this indestructible force of nature, the man she'd despised for so long, was...

"Mika, don't rush to conclusions. Let's take a look, maybe there's something we can do." Lan Jue had come to her side, helping to keep her steady.

"Lan Jue you mustn't rush in!" The Wine Master warned.

"With our gathered strength we can escape unscathed," Lan Jue said. "My mother has risen to the Infinite." His own eyes sparkled as he allowed his aura to be revealed to them.

Surprise appeared on their faces as Lan Jue's aura washed over them. "You broke through?" The Terminator asked.

The Paragons of Skyfire Avenue were aware, but the other were not.

Lan Jue nodded. He then turned back to Mika. "Pull yourself together."

Mika was tough. She grit her teeth and nodded.

"The target for this planet still remains, we need to make sure it gets done. Let's go." Luo Xianni's stoic voice intruded. With a wave of her hand, all the Paragon aboard Zeus-1 vanished.

Chapter 807: Homage to the Stars

A flash of pink light, and the Paragons were hanging in the purple atmosphere of Heaven's Light. This time their assault team was twelve strong; Luo Xianni, the Terminator, Clockmaker, Wine Master, Pharmacist, Driver, Keeper, Bookworm, Pauper, Pontiff, Lan Jue, and Zhou Qianlin. These were nearly all of humanity's strongest warriors.

In the distance they could see the red tornado slowly sputter out.

The Terminator spoke in a solemn voice. "There. That's also where the progenitor is."

Another flash of pink and they were conveyed to where Satan had released his power. Wild energies flit through the air, potent and stifling. Yet, they were beginning to weaken.

Lan Jue saw Satan right away.

He was once again human form, and Monarch's doppelganger had him by the neck. Lan Jue could feel the vital energy draining from his ally at a rapid pace. The demon blade he'd used to pierce his heart had become spectral in appearance, opaque. The alien avatar tried to take it for itself, but its hand passed through as though trying to grasp at air.

There was a flicker, and the sword vanished.

Satan's eyes weakly turned to compatriots, pain clearly in his twisted expression. However, there was neither fear nor sadness, but defiance.

BOOM-! The area was bathed in an explosion of red light, throwing everything into a furor of energy. The release of power from a Paragon in the moments before their death was incredible, more than the avatars could entirely defend against. They went flailing through the air.

"Die-!" Luo Xianni roared. Her tiny pink camera appeared in her hands.

Ka-cha! With the click of the shutter, the creatures froze in mid air. A white light sprang up that settled over the Paragons, and with it the Terminator and his team felt their drained protogenic might recover.

Yet, despite this they were not surprised. All of them were struck to the core by Satan's death. Brilliant lights erupted from the human warriors, toward the avatars and the lesser beasts around them.

Three strange orbs of purple light shimmered, and all of a sudden the immobilized doppelgangers were gone. Then, overhead, three enormous silhouettes blotted out the sky. The alien home worlds. Their aura bore down on the surface of Heaven's Light like a torrent of power. Lan Jue and the others froze in their charge and shook with shock and fear.

The alien planets?

As their nightmarish foes appeared the whole of reality was immersed in purple light. The aura of power that surrounded the Avatars buffeted them in ever more powerful waves. In the space of an instant they were on the upper border of Nirvana. It wasn't just their progenia, either – every ounce of them was bursting with empowered energy.

As the humans looked on, a strange scene unfolded. All the surrounding aliens turned and headed for the doppelgangers. When they got close their bodies disintegrated into eddies of purple mist, and wormed their way into the planet's representatives.

Despite the many experiences these Paragons had in fighting the aliens, this was the first time they'd witnessed something like this. Everyone's face fell, they knew what the avatars were doing; consuming the energy of the creatures around them to increase their strength.

All of these monsters were creations of the three alien planets, and were destined to return to them. In this way they were all one, though it was the first time they witnessed it in such a literal fashion. If this kept up it wouldn't be long before these three creatures commanded the power of Infinite, or close to it.

"Attack." Luo Xianni's voice was cold, calm. She lifted her camera and a pale pink light emerged as dual columns descending from the sky.

Suddenly reality split. Where there had been one unbroken purple horizon now it was cleaved in half. The gathered alien avatars were violently thrust apart, as though deposited in separate dimensions.

Luo Xianni's fighting style was complicated. She saw that these creatures were strong, but they were strongest together. As such their best chance was to divide and conquer.

Although the Photographer's breakthrough was still fresh, and her familiarity with her newfound powers in its infancy, she was still a denizen of the Infinite. Even beneath the strengthening light of the planets, she was still their superior.

The avatars were on the move. Lan Jue and Qianlin reacted first by becoming dual bolts of lightning and heading their way.

Lan Jue waved his hands and the misty environment around him parted. Emulsions of the aliens' power vanished in his vicinity, replaced by a universe of purple light. Out in space the soldiers aboard the human warships saw a singular star blaze in the sky, preceding a strange sight. It was like someone dimmed all the other stars and planets, dialing down their intensity.

In truth this was Lan Jue, employing the might of his Domain for the first time. Even he wasn't entirely sure what to expect.

Middle Heaven Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety was master of the stars, or so he had been called. All the stellar bodies payed homage to the North Star, and constrained their light in its presence. Although Lan Jue was only a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, the strength of his Domain was evident.

Within the glittering luminescence of his Domain crackling lightning danced in and out of existence. Each arc of electricity was a different color from the one before it, changing from gold to blue to purple and countless others. Each crackling bolt also bore a different feel, a unique sense – a staggering fear.

An alien came charging in from overhead, headlong into Lan Jue's Domain. The moment it crossed the border the field around the Jewelry Master lit up as dozens of lightning bolts surged toward the intruder. It was reduced to smoldering powder after the first blast, even its vital crystal was atomized. Whatever energy was contained in the beast

dissipated through Lan Jue Domain and left no trace.

Boundless Starlight, Palm of Five Lightning. This was the power bequeathed to him by the Emperor of the North Star.

Modern humans had thus far been unable to manifest the dharma of these long-lost gods. But Lan Jue's destiny was beyond compare, his luck supernatural. With the thunder essence and the echoes of tribulation lightning it contained, as well as his own lightning Discipline and Jue Di's tutelage... with his dedicated cultivation and constant restraint, the assistance of immortal qi and his painstakingly evolved All-Heaven Lightning, he was able to grasp the vestiges of Purple Subtlety and thus solidify his progenia.

Chapter 808: A Domain of Boundless Starlight

It went without saying that Lan Jue's luck was exceptional. Lan Jue earlier conjectures had proven time and again to be close to the truth. And everything, once it reached a certain level of power, would either break through to new heights or be destroyed.

The ancient realm of immortals succumbed to the second eventuality and passed into history. But how powerful were those being that created a space that could contend against the universe itself?

The Middle Heaven Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety was not the mightiest of this legendary beings, but he was certainly among the strongest. One can imagine the resilience and potency of his primordial spirit. What remained of his influence was enough to empower Lan Jue.

Having just broken through Lan Jue hadn't had enough time to wholly understand this gift. However, through his environment and experiences he already had a connection to it that fused them together.

The Banishing Blades were stupendous weapons of power. In the hands of the Emperor of the North Star, they were incomparably destructive. In fact, only the gathered Banishing Blades would be capable of causing harm to a god and his godblade.

Thus with this mystical inheritance Lan Jue was able to galvanize the potential of Captus with great success. It was why he and Qianlin were able to employ the Harmonious Swords style to such abundant success.

In the first moments of releasing his Discipline, Lan Jue felt like the heavens and earth moved at his behest. Within the scope of his Domain he was master and creator, and his protogenia was the motive force for everything that existed. Stars dimmed because they were lending their energy to his pocket reality, translating into the blasts of thunder that snaked through it. It was the foundational energy of the Palm of Five

Lightnings and produced a Domain few could contend against.

Lan Qing's Buddha's Revelation Domain was held in high regard as one of the strongest as well, but the Buddhist faith was lenient and pacifistic by nature. It was mostly defensive and empowering, where Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain was designed for direct force. It even has some similarities to the Banishing Strategy. If the Emperor of the North Star himself summoned this Domain, nevermind the alien planets, whole swaths of the universe would cease to exist.

Lan Jue, of course, was nowhere near those levels of power. However when his Domain was released the potential that pulsed within it was staggering.

Qianlin stood by his side, saying nothing. Her Queen of Heaven Domain linked with whatever power was nearby in mutual support. It was inevitable that the stronger one's power was, the more unstable it was by nature. But bathed in the light of the Queen of Heaven the dangers were abated. White light hung over the domineering image of the Emperor and swelled the manifestation of its Domain farther by half. Lan Jue did not feel drained even despite the expansion of his influence. On the contrary he felt more rooted.

Their target was designated, Monarch's avatar. There was a flash of purple, and the Boundless Starlight swept up to meet their foe.

When this war started Lan Jue and Qianlin had not been Paragons. They had been Adepts mere hours ago, and now possessed strength enough to challenge a foe who bore the power of Nirvana – and the strongest of the planets' doppelgangers.

From all intelligence and information gathered, Lan Jue knew that if the alien home worlds were still evolving then these beasts in human skin – along with the Violet Prince and Princess – were the alien's strongest line of defense. How strong he could not say for sure, but some could at least contend with the Infinite. Beyond a doubt, cutting down one of these top generals would be a tremendous blow against the enemies of humanity.

Satan had died in the conflict, but he had used his death to give mankind

a chance. Here were gathered nearly all Paragons, and if they could leave behind the corpses of these doppelgangers and their alien pawns it could turn the tide of battle.

The suddenness of Lan Jue's Domain and the fact it could overtake it at all was a surprise for the avatar. But he didn't have time to marvel over it long, before in a flash an arc of golden lightning was blasting toward him. It was the strongest of the five lightnings – chaos.

Monarch's representative swung its arms in a circular pattern and the essence of its violet energy was summoned, coalescing into a shield to block the lightning's path.

When the two met there was no dramatic explosion or deafening blast. When the chaos lightning reached the violet light it simply vanished. However, the avatar's shield was covered in a misty golden hue. It began to melt away before their eyes.

Amazement was the word to best describe the avatar's features. Its body trembled then shot into the distance. Strong as it was the beast did not desire to face chaotic lightning head-on.

But the lesser monsters continued to tumble from the sky as All-Heaven Lightning hunted them down. As Lan Jue's chosen specialty it was only slightly less destructive than chaotic lightning. Lan Jue was not the Emperor of the North Star, and his powers were a mere shadow of the ancient god, but it was more than enough to strike fear in the hearts of these monsters.

B-o-o-o-m—The peal of thunder was so intense it made the doppelganger's shield tremble.

More glittering bolts of electric power came crashing down from on high. The searing purple of primordial lightning, the three turquoise bolts, and more assailed the doppelganger. The creature was pinned and its spirit rattled, forced to rely on exuding pure energy to defend itself.

Even Lan Jue was surprised at the fortitude of his Domain. Whatever the circumstance he was still just a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. It spoke volumes to his abilities that he was able to suppress a monster that was a

full degree of power above him.

The pressure from their clash was palpable in the air. There was a flash of light in Lan Jue's eyes as he thrust Captus forward. He closed his eyes, and suddenly he was one with the essence of his Domain.

A beam of red light streaked forward. As it raced forward bolts of all the different sorts fell into its wake. Monarch's avatar hovered directly in its path of destruction.

Boom- — — To the doppelganger it was as though reality collapsed around it. The blasts of lightning that tied him down grew ever stronger. Within this terrible state he could feel a wild energy tearing at his body.

The Five Lightnings were righteous by nature and suppressed the power of evil. Captus was a weapon forged by the gods. Together, and empowered by his Domain, the force at Lan Jue's command was overwhelming.

It might be expected that Lan Jue and Qianlin, with their Harmonious Swords, could defeat a progenitor of Nirvana level. It was a different thing entirely that Lan Jue, empowered by the image of the Emperor of the North Star, could face down one of the alien generals on his own and not be in too inferior a position.

The only person who could compete with him in sheer talent was Lan Qing. This was true in both dharmic image and Domain. But don't forget that Lan Qing was not the bearer of a Banishing Blade. Nor was Lan Qing's powers focused on offense, but control. Thus Lan Jue, with all the tools at his disposal, had the sheer destructive power of the likes of Luo Xianni and his father. Even the Terminator could not say for certain if he could win a one-on-one encounter with the young man.

However Lan Jue had not recognized this. After all since his breakthrough he had just known the strength of the Harmonious Swords. He had only anticipated their combined strength to be enough for the task ahead. He would only come to know the scope of his personal abilities through trial by combat – as he was doing now.

The aura pouring from the Monarch's avatar was threatening. Although,

it was less terrifying than it had been prior to being consumed by Lan Jue's Domain. Boundless Starlight seemed to be repressing the monster's cultivation while simultaneously peppering it with attacks. Lan Jue was as surprised as anyone when he saw his Domain fuse perfectly with the tide of Captus' power. The Five Lightnings worked in sync with the Banishing Blade to great effect.

The alien general was cut off, surrounded on all sides by the reality-piercing might of Captus. Meanwhile Lan Jue's Domain worked with a mind of its own. Lightning strikes of various colors traced their way through the air in a mass onslaught.

Monarch's avatar threw its head back and roared at the sky. The pain was excruciating, and the power he needed to free himself was fleeting like water through sand. Destruction was a terrifyingly real possibility.

All cognizant beings knew terror. The more powerful they were, the deeper their fear ran. When the circumstances of one's demise were laid bare, that dread became unescapable.

Such was the truth Monarch's representative faced. Scales began to emerge on its skin. Where its face had once been handsome and gallant, now it was a mask of feral inhumanity. It could no longer control itself and defend against Boundless Starlight, and was forced to reveal its true nature.

In the instant Lan Jue thrust forward with Captus, Qianlin mimicked the motion with her own sword. But her attack was absent the overwhelming power of Lan Jue's. Hers was possessed by a faintly discernible immortal presence, and emerged as a hail of piercing blue light. Ubiquitous as rain in a summer storm.

The myriad blue lights served as guides for the power of the Five Lightnings. The centralized blasts of electricity dispersed, but only to attach themselves to the fragments of sword energy.

First the incisiveness of Demortus, then the sheer force of the Five Lightnings, together forged into a hail of catastrophic intensity. Each beam of blue light was like an atom bomb that pummeled the avatar's

defenses.

It couldn't keep it all out. The shield around one of Monarch's mightiest agents collapsed.

Chapter 809: Death of the Doppelganger

In the moment the creature's defenses shattered, its full and terrible potential was unleashed. A wave of dark purple light spread out from it like ink from an octopus. Wherever the slithering light touched an infection bloomed that constrained the power of the Five Lightnings. As the contamination spread the Monarch's avatar disappeared within it.

The thick, plum-colored taint spread quickly, swallowing everything it came across. Lightning continued to blast at it from all corners of Lan Jue's Domain, but couldn't seem to burn it away.

Lan Jue scowled. This inky energy was strangely unique, composed of condensed vital energy and possessed of a ruinous hunger. It surged with an ebb and flow, constantly creating and destroying as it spread out through his Domain.

That should have been power only the alien planets could control. Understanding was beginning to dawn on the Jewelry Master. He thought life and death were as incompatible as fire and water, but in fact they were the extremes of one another. Destruction was the end result of life, and life was born from ashes of destruction. The two were inexorably combined.

The alien evolutionary process required unceasing destruction of humanity. Through consumption of their vital energies they expanded their own, a common fact of nature and one they had been involved in for many years.

Thus did they continue to rise in strength to their current level. Their whole reality was incessant consumption, and through it they understood vitality and creation, death and decay. It was their reality, their protogenia. This was the only way they knew how to fight against the tyranny of universal suppression.

As life and death coiled among each other, the aliens' protogenia continued to change. It was a constant cycle of consumption, assimilation and creation. The planets created more of their species but had to deprive

others of life to do so.

Creation and destruction. It was also the crux of the universe. The death of one universe invariable gave rise to another.

Lan Jue had to acknowledge that, although the aliens were a threat to his species, their understanding of the natural way was profound. It had to be, otherwise they never would have reached the heights they enjoy today or have the power necessary to create a realm of their own. If they continued on their path, who's to say they wouldn't eventually threaten the universe as a whole?

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin exchanged a wordless glance. Their hearts as one and their aim identical, a pair of lights sprang up around them.

Behind Lan Jue appeared his dharmic image, the Middle Heaven Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety. The Queen of Heaven, Guanyin, towered over Qianlin. As their dharma manifested, both of their auras surged.

The light of the Queen of Heaven was marvelous, almost crystalline. Qianlin was a vision of benevolence and protection. Lan Jue's presence, meanwhile, adopted an imperatorial air with a promise of bloody judgement.

Direct confrontation of protogenia was the best way to resolve this conflict with the enemy.

The Emperor of the North Star was commander of the cosmos, back when the immortal realm existed. He held authority over life and death, simultaneously creator and destroyer, whose knowledge of the correlation between the two was complete. Lan Jue's knowledge, by comparison, was superficial at best. Yet still he had access to a depth of understanding far beyond what the aliens had accrued.

The Queen of Heaven was a power of pure deliverance, perfectly selfless and rooted in virtue.

As the two powers mingled the connection between life and death faded into the background. What was important in this moment was their

relationship to each other. Their affections had survived numerous trials and transcended all, leaving only their love. Qianlin had been willing to sacrifice herself to destruction in order to save Lan Jue, who in turn would give up his life for her.

In this integral moment the only thing in their hearts was each other. Against the backdrop of creation and annihilation their love bloomed.

Suddenly the light of their swords flared. Both Paragons merged into the images of their dharma. The Emperor of the North Star took Guanyin's hand in his own, and the two stood side by side. The kingly image of the former god was different now than it had been upon Lan Jue's breakthrough. At that time he had channeled the primordial spirit of the Emperor, rife with disdain. Brimming with power and contempt, it scared the Monarch's avatar enough to force its retreat.

This time the image looked more like Lan Jue. His influence was not settled, and the light of the cosmos did not live in his eyes as it did for the Emperor of the North Star. Instead the image of the beautiful woman beside him was reflected in their depths.

Dual beams of red and blue burst forth. Hand in hand, Lan Jue stood with Captus gripped in his right fist. Demortus was nestled in Qianlin's right. As the two of them lifted their godblades, their light combined. They were separate only in appearance, for their spirits were one as the Harmonious Swords were released in a resplendent rainbow beam of light.

Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain and Qianlin's Queen of Heaven abilities combined. An unprecedented sensation swelled through both of them, washing away any barriers that remained. Only the great affection they felt for one another was left.

Lan Jue's face betrayed a contented smile, as did Qianlin's. In fact it seemed as though they'd forgotten the presence of their mighty enemy. The multifaceted flair of the Harmonious Swords erupted from them and fractured into a shower of light.

The poisonous light of the avatar continued to grow, roiling with the powers of life and death, creation and destruction. However, as the

rainbow of colors shone upon it the inky darkness was dispelled like a mist before the morning sun.

The emulsion of energy from the couple continued to grow and spread across a huge area. Their Domains were channeled through the Banishing Blades to both empower and be empowered.

As reality continued to unravel around it, the alien general felt like it was trapped in a universe of suffering. Tens of thousands of shimmering bolts descended upon him. As they pierced the darkness things became strangely surreal for the avatar. The power derived from the home worlds he put so much faith in was revealed to be fragile in the face of the Harmonious Swords.

So fragile, in fact, that it seemed resistance was futile. The beast's body proceeded to swell, proceeded to regain its true monstrous form. But even as the full might of its abilities surged through it, the dagger-like beams of color pierced its flesh only to burst out of the other side. All of a sudden it was a creature of pure, shining light.

The feeling of the inevitable overcame it. Monarch's avatar slowly closed its eyes as pieces of the creature began to chip away. Panic set in and it thrashed, trying to find any way to evade the purifying light. No succor was found.

It didn't make sense. By all that they knew these humans shouldn't have been able to harm it. However the moment their Domain consumed it, the doppelganger was cut off from the others. When these glimmering lights came the connection it had to the home worlds was severed as well.

An eruption of blinding purple light burst from its chest, impossibly bright and alarming. It was as though something within it was fighting tooth and nail to get free.

It was revealed to be an orb, shimmering and translucent like a gem. It looked like a miniature version of the Monarch planet.

Rays of purple light blazed into the blackness of space just as Lan Jue and Qianlin dropped their swords. The purple orb hung suspended in nothingness, but was soon enveloped by an enigmatic power. It was

something even the alien planets couldn't grasp, an energy that sealed the evil will of the crystal and cleansed its poisonous nature. A few moments later it was nothing more than a crystal of pure vital energy.

The kaleidoscope of light continued for a full minute until, little by little, it faded into darkness. When Lan Jue and Qianlin opened their eyes, their dharmic images were gone. It was only them, hand in hand, swords at the ready.

It was a little awkward that the other Paragons were standing nearby, gaping at them in abject confusion.

Lan Jue blinked at them, and with a little cough, asked, "What happened?"

Luo Xianni sounded incredulous. "You don't know?"

He shook his head. "Last thing I remember is employing the Harmonious Swords against Monarch's avatar. Then she and I slipped into some kind of meditation... it's hard to describe. Everything after that is fuzzy. I suppose we killed it?" He asked, uncertain.

Luo Xianni nodded. "It looked like you really grasped the power of that technique. The Monarch's doppelganger couldn't flee. When you released that light the other two seemed to have felt it and escaped. They used the images of the three planets we saw to somehow ferry them away."

Lan Jue looked around and discovered that the other Paragons had slain the remaining alien forces. Most of the progenitor's corruption was already gone.

The Driver was almost fierce as he came upon Lan Jue. "What was that? When did the two of you get so strong?"

Lan Jue grinned ruefully. "If I told you I actually have no clue, would you believe me?"

The Driver just stared at him. But the truth was, Lan Jue and Qianlin really didn't know how they'd managed to kill Monarch's avatar.

Chapter 810: Mika's Decision

Thinking back, Lan Jue could only recall the moment their Harmonious Swords technique combined with their Domains. It must have been under their combined might that the avatar fell.

Together Qianlin and Lan Jue were not inferior to Monarch's doppelganger. However, they did not have the benefit of the home worlds' support. In fact the monster had ample opportunity to flee, but his downfall came as a result of underestimating his foes. Specifically Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain.

When the human Domain overtook it, the power of Boundless Starlight cut it off from the rest of reality. Suddenly the avatar was lost in a world where the rules were stacked against it. Normal Domains would not have such control over it, but Lan Jue's inheritance came from an ancient and powerful line. Although he was only capable of summoning the simplest of its powers, Boundless Starlight was nonetheless a legendary gift even in its own day. Even the highest caste of immortals would flinch at its presence. Lan Jue's strength was not yet matured, but the Monarch's avatar could not match up to even the lowest sort of immortal!

Hubris had made it want to kill Lan Jue and Qianlin in the fastest and most direct fashion possible. Its own demise never seemed possible. Yet, when the power of transference was cut off and the overwhelming might of the Harmonious Swords descended upon it, hubris proved its end. If it had avoided being absorbed by Lan Jue's Domain it could have fled. Now, of course, it was too late.

The progenitor was slain, Monarch's avatar eliminated. It was a grand day for the forces of humanity and a mighty blow to the strength of their enemy.

The rest of the alien forces had cleared out. They fled with the doppelgangers of Consort and Queen into the recesses of space. The Pharmacist, the Pauper and more gave chase while others like Luo Xianni and the Driver remained on the planet. They feared perhaps the expense

in energy would do the two of them harm. However, it seemed their fears were unwarranted.

“It seems we can no longer look at you through old lenses!” Luo Xianni praised. She could see the difference in Lan Jue’s eyes. He was an equal.

Lan Jue took up Qianlin’s hand and smiled. “Let’s return to Zeus-1.”

Their victory was grand, but it wasn’t without cost. Satan had fallen and the effect on Mika was sure to be tragic. He had to look after her.

Heaven’s Light was retaken. Now only a single planet remained for them to liberate, and with all the Paragons together it would not be a problem to achieve.

When they got back to Zeus-1, Xiuxiu had taken over as pilot. Mika was to one side of the cockpit in a daze. A long, thin sword lay atop her lap. The spindly weapon radiated a dark light that gave it a sinister charm. It was her father’s weapon, Archfiend.

Lan Jue hurried to where she sat and knelt before her.

“Mika.”

She lifted her head and managed a thin smile. Her eyes were red but no tears fell.

“Boss, I’m sorry. I think I have to go.”

Lan Jue paused. “Mika, you...”

She cut him off. “The Dark Citadel was his life’s work. He forged it with his blood and sweat. Now that he’s gone I want to keep his memory by maintaining what he strove so hard to create. If we survive, I want to reestablish the Dark Citadel and continue his legacy. I’m sorry, boss.”

For a time Lan Jue was silent. From the start both of them had intended to keep her as far from the Dark Citadel as possible. Not all of those with the demonic bloodline could control their monstrous nature as well as Satan had. Even the fallen Paragon had to go through a period of madness before he found his path.

Mika was strong, but it would be some time before she became a

Paragon. More than a few of Satan's remaining lieutenants were more developed than she. Would they listen to her? Would they follow her lead under these circumstances?

More than any of those concerns, however, Lan Jue didn't want to see her succumb to the darkness of her bloodline. He didn't want her to lose her humanity.

Mika sensed his reticence. Her voice was soft. "Boss, it's fine. I will always remember what you told me, and I won't lose my way no matter what. I'll follow the righteous path, and under my guidance the darkness will not turn to chaos. I'm sorry, I have to do this."

Lan Jue understood the position she found herself in. He sighed deeply. "Mika, I will support any decision you make. I will be at your back forever to give help whenever it's needed. I'll help you track down the survivors."

But Mika shook her head, denying his help. "No, I need to do it myself. It's a task only I can accomplish. What he did, I must do."

She said it with a steely resolve. She had always been a child of demons, but repressed it because of her life in service to Zeus' Jewelry Shop. Satan's death was a catalyst, allowing her to let her true self flourish. Ever since that encounter with her father things had changed, she was no longer the same person.

She supported Archfiend with her hands and lifted it off of her lap, turning her vision to the porthole and its view of space. There was a flicker and crimson light slowly filled her eyes.

Lan Jue patted her shoulder. "You got this."

The Pontiff was not far away, sighing with subdued emotion. Satan had a fine daughter! Making decisions like these with such clarity in the face of disaster was no easy thing. What of himself, he thought?

For better or worse the Dark Citadel's core power had remained intact. Could the same be said for the Pontiff's Citadel? He wasn't alone, but only the highest echelons of his organization were left. He couldn't know the state of things back on Europa.

The final outlying planet was abnormally easy to free from alien control. In fact, they couldn't even find a progenitor. By the time they arrived the only sign it had been there was a deep hole and receding fungus. Evidently the aliens were no longer interested in sparring with the humans over these territories. Not a single alien remained, only mutated humans were left to wander the desolate planes.

Their missions were a success. In the fastest time they could muster these planets were returned to human control. Resources had already begun the trek over. Most was from other Western planets that had escaped the scourge, so they would arrive soon.

At this time it wasn't the three admirals who were busiest. In fact it was Luo Xianni, Lan Jue and Qianlin. The Queen of Heaven Domain and its fabulous abilities were needed all throughout the system. It was the first time since the ancient days that a power like hers was revealed, and soon Guanyin's purity was known far and wide.

When her image appeared in the skies, saving the souls of the unfortunate, her prestige soared. Even just seeing pictures or video excited the masses and filled them with hope. Humanity had its savior. It was great fortune for so many to live after alien domination.

The Western government had passed out of existence. For now, temporary control of the administrative planets was passed to the allied military forces. As control was enforced and people returned to health, the heart of the people began to settle.

The survivors in particular were quiet with their demands. Weathering this awful catastrophe was enough. Coinciding with their deliverance was a change of faith. They had seen their goddess descend from heaven and save them from a tortured existence. Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven – words that shone like the sun in the hearts of Westerners. Through her they had been granted new life, and Qianlin could feel their faith spanning across the solar system.

It took three whole days and nights for them to cure everyone.

However, through this process they encountered trouble. In the process of healing the afflicted and clearing the alien toxins, Qianlin's Domain continued to improve. As faith in her powers increased with each life saved her abilities were amplified. Lan Jue similarly benefited from her augmentation, and it was this constant amplification that allowed them to accomplish the task so quickly.

However, just as advancing too slow was a problem, so was growing too fast!

Lan Jue and Qianlin exploded in power as they ascended to Paragon. With their powers combined and through the strength of the Harmonious Swords they could already slay a Nirvana-level foe. But with speed invariably came instability.

Lan Jue's situation was somewhat better, after all he had been forced to recultivate all the way back to the peak of ninth level. The process had made his foundation remarkably solid. For Qianlin the circumstances were different. Much of her growth had been with Lan Jue's assistance, and that had steadied her powers.

Now she was possessed of tremendous energy, empowered by the faith of those she'd saved. In only a matter of days both she and Lan Jue were pressing against the barrier to Nirvana. And this after shedding as much impure energy as she could manage.

Chapter 811: Bracing Domains

However, even though everything but the purest of their energies remained, Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin continued their meteoric rise. Especially Qianlin, who was already trying to hold herself back from breaking the bottleneck to Nirvana.

This was wonderful on some level of course. Qianlin was the only one who need not worry about the dangers of universal protogenia. The suppression of the cosmos had no bearing on her – she was truly unique.

But her rise was too fast. For a Paragon to breakthrough directly to Reflection of Heaven and Earth was already shocking. Now it seemed she would achieve Nirvana in a matter of days. However if she did, it would make her foundation insecure. She would find it difficult to control her own powers, turning their benefits into a ticking time bomb.

A Paragon's power was built on their ability to control it. A master with tremendous power who could not command it was inferior to the one with less strength but more control. What's more, it was safer even for the Paragon as losing control could lead to harm – to themselves and the people around them.

When Jue Di returned and learned about Qianlin's abilities, it was for these reasons he forbade her from rising further. For the time being she needed to keep herself firmly as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth until she could master her own capabilities. Once she could do that they might consider ascending to the next level.

Lan Jue's condition was much better. It was true that the Emperor of the North Star's lineage granted him tremendous power. However, it also demanded he accumulate even more energy and understanding than the typical Paragon before rising to new heights. Because of these requirements he was able to shoulder some of the energy Qianlin acquired through the faith of the masses. It prevented her from directly breaking through to Paragon and also helped him along his own path.

Lan Jue was also near the upper borders of Reflection. According to his

earlier plans getting to this point would have required at least three years of studious cultivation to achieve – assuming he did so with Qianlin and everything went smoothly.

Up to now it had been Qianlin who had benefited from Lan Jue's presence. Now the proverbial tables had turned. Through years of study Lan Jue's control of his powers was solid. At this point he didn't break through to Nirvana simply because he didn't want to.

"Right now both of you need to work on control. If you don't you invite danger." Jue Di instructed.

And he was right. As the power of faith continued to flood into Qianlin her powers would only increase. If she didn't learn to control them the situation would only worsen.

Qianlin was seated before him, surrounded by a pale golden aura. She also was not interested in breaking through just yet, but the faithful were multiplying faster than she could keep up.

Altogether humanity numbered in the tens of billions. Without question the people of these seven planets were converts to Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven. They were fervently devoted to their new savior. Where it began to get out of control was the scores of people who saw video of her actions, who chose to follow the light of the goddess though they were light years away from danger. This is what ultimately made Zhou Qianlin's faith-amplified powers difficult to bear.

When she spoke there was concern in her soft voice. "Uncle I would my transformation influence Lan Jue?"

"Certainly, to some degree," Jue Di answered. "You are connected by blood, and what happens to one will be reflected in the other. There are also the vows you made – set up by that old kook Clairvoyant. Thus in many ways the two of you are one entity. Injure one and both suffer, nourish one and the other benefits. You are inseparable, and what problems are visited unto you Lan Jue must bear as well."

His response caused her to worry. "So what should I do? I'm already having trouble controlling my power."

Jue Di smiled comfortingly. “Don’t worry, there is a way. First, you mustn’t show yourself in public for a little while. We have to limit your exposure to the masses, and that will limit the spread of faith. Likewise I’ll tell Lan Qing to get in touch with the leadership of the Alliances, and have them stop spreading news of your actions. The power of faith should abate by then. Still this only deals with the symptoms and not the problem.”

“For the two of you your priority needs to be stabilizing your newfound power and strengthening your control. At the Nirvana level, simply not wishing to break through is no longer enough. It comes down to how long you can fight back. But even if you do the faith of the people isn’t enough to push you into the Infinite. Once you achieve Nirvana you need only be careful when employing your Discipline and you shouldn’t get in too much trouble.”

“Both of you should hole up and work on steadying your cultivation. Qianlin, your powers are steady by nature, and cultivating together will help Lan Jue bear the pressure better. You need to consolidate your internal energies, and your protogenia. Work on your mutual connection so that if you do break through, Lan Jue can help you manage it. With his level of control you shouldn’t have a problem. His own Domain is powerful enough as it is. After all, the Middle Heaven Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety was a king among gods. He has a long way to go before he can fully grasp that inheritance. This also means he can absorb far more energy. Wait until both of you have more discipline, then you will certainly have a way to deal with the enormous energies at your disposal.”

Jue Di had decades of experience in suppressing cultivation. In fact for the last several years it had been his sole focus. Due to this he was able to recognize and suggest the best method for Lan Jue and Qianlin to solve their problem.

La Jue chimed in. “But with the situation as it is, there’s a lot we need to do. Sequestering ourselves –“

Jue Di’s response was somewhat irritated. “Will there be no more pork

without Lan the Butcher? 2 We'll be fine without you. Besides you won't be gone for long. Already your Domains are stabilizing thanks to Qianlin's abilities. I want you to seal yourselves off from distractions so you can learn more deeply about yourselves and what you've gained. You must cultivate the correct way and that will be enough. Did you think I wanted you to lock yourselves away to improve your cultivation?"

Despite his harsh tone Lan Jue noted that his father was in high spirits. Their missions had been successful, and the revelations of Qianlin's abilities were a great boon to everyone. For instance, the influence of her light had been tremendously helpful for Luo Xianni. When Jue Di returned to the others the first thing he'd done is ask why his lover had chosen something so dangerous as breaking through to the Infinite.

Luo Xianni then explained to him what she'd learned of Qianlin's abilities. Jue Di then sought her out to see for himself, and discovered that her abilities helped him as well. Of course, the discrepancy in cultivation meant the effects on him were less than on Luo Xianni. Even so, using his powers while within her aura stopped the universe from draining his life force.

Many Paragon-level vital crystals had been recovered after this last mission. Of particular note was the one that had belonged to the Monarch's Avatar before Lan Jue put it down. That orb of pure energy was a fragment of Monarch itself, born from its own body. While energetically it possessed the powers of Nirvana, it had come from something nearly immortal. Its benefits for Jue Di were considerable. It would increase his lifespan by at least a decade, while also allowing him to employ his full strength at least for a short period.

One day, if Qianlin achieved the Infinite, then she could conceal him from the dangers of universal protogenia as well. It was a pleasant surprise for him, for Jue Di had given up hope that an answer to his slow demise would be forthcoming. But an answer had revealed itself.

Lan Jue rose and, taking Zhou Qianlin's hand, led her to a place where they could be alone. They requested three days of solitude from Lan Qing to complete the process, and for these three days Lan Qing would be busy.

Control of the seven planets surrounding Europa had been returned to the humans. The implications of this were important, it was the first time they had won a total victory in the face of this alien menace.

However, by the same token the responsibilities of liberating these planets were taxing on the allied forces. Their enemy had not withdrawn entirely, and bands of aliens still harassed the planets from time to time.

They were populated by survivors. It took a great deal of trouble and energy to cure them of their illness, so the allied forces couldn't simply leave them to their own devices. But protecting them meant the armada would need to split its forces. It opened them up to the possibility that alien bands would pick them off one by one. More importantly, their forces would need to remain stationed there.

This was a problem even Lan Qing's lauded intelligence couldn't solve with any satisfaction. The best they could come up with was to gather the survivors together on a single planet to better protect them. Of course this meant the others would be abandoned, but it was the only way their war could continue.

So far none of their scouts had returned from the inner recesses of the solar system with actionable intelligence. Some would disappear entirely while others would return with nothing of consequence. The only thing they could say with certainty was that any ship that headed for Europa didn't come back. Whatever was happening out there they could not know.

While it looked like humans were on the cusp of victory, Lan Qing knew better. The aliens were still in control.

Chapter 812: Return, Discuss

If the alien planets were in the process of evolution than their goal was delaying the humans. Once their evolution was complete, nothing could stand in their way.

Time was the enemy of humanity.

Should they rush in, then? No one was sure how many of the alien forces had survived and pushed deeper into the center of the solar system. Aside from the progenitors, their only serious loss was Monarch's avatar, which Lan Jue and Qianlin had killed on Heaven's Light. The majority of their strength remained intact, and who knew what they were doing in the darkness around Europa.

Whatever ships and personnel they had in this hodge-podge group of soldiers was all that was left of mankind's defense, they couldn't be allowed to lose. If they did then all of their efforts up to this point had been for naught. It would mean the potential destruction of their species.

With risks so high Lan Qing had to keep his responses measured. What he needed was more precise data before they could plan their next step.

A series of discussions ensued between him, Hua Li, and Kang Hui. The talks were aimed at hammering out the next phase of their plan.

Right now the armada was busy shuttling people from the planets and gathering them on Angel. From there they would be able to protect them more efficiently. While they worked to evacuate the survivors, they were also waiting for backup and resources from elsewhere.

The first shipment of food and drink came two days later, and helped ease the anxious situation the allied forces had found themselves in. Without food and water the survivors were at risk of rioting, but now that they had sufficient stores all was well. It was still too early for them to ponder on everything they'd lost. What they wanted more than anything was to leave this place and flee the danger that haunted them.

Lan Jue's ¹ decision was contrary to their wishes. For the allied forces,

and in order to ensure the best chances at victory, none of these Westerners could be allowed to leave Angel until the fighting was through. They simply couldn't spare the ships to get them to safety.

The Western government had been destroyed by the sudden alien attack and no help was forthcoming. There were grumblings from the survivors who clearly didn't like the decision, however they had been saved by these outsiders and had to accept reality. The root of their hope for the future was that these soldiers didn't fail.

There was power in numbers, and as resources began to pour in the survivors set about caring for themselves. Thankfully Angel, though ravaged, had much that could be recovered. They set about restoring their homes.

Lan Qing ordered a simple census and found that the survivors were talents in their respective fields. That was to say that the alien only chose the more outstanding humans to keep for their mutation process – the weak, the infirm, the young were reduced to energy for consumption. Their reasons were clear – to look into their DNA and see what made them special.

There was a silver lining to the cruel efficiency of the alien selection process. After a brief period of chaos these elite citizens banded together and started to organize their own recovery. With the military's support they began to rebuild.

Scant though materials were, Angel still had a fair amount left once its vital energy had been recovered. The aliens were only interested in vital energy, so things like ore were of no practical use to them. The building blocks required to salvage the planet remained, though of course the process would be long and slow.

It was the best Lan Qing could hope for. At least the survivors had something to keep them busy instead of harassing the soldiers.

The second shipment arrived on the afternoon of the fourth day. It was also the day two of his most important agents appeared in his office. When he saw Lan Jue and Qianlin, his face relaxed from its typical stony

expression.

“What did you need to see us for in such a hurry?” They’d received the summons to see Lan Qing the moment they stepped out from isolation.

Lan Qing pursed his lips. “I need you. We still don’t know anything more about the alien home worlds. We’ve sent out many scout teams but haven’t heard anything back, we suspect they’ve all been destroyed. We even sent a small contingent of five Paragons out to learn what they could, but they were met by five Paragon-level aliens. They only just managed to escape.”

Lan Jue furrowed his brow. “They’re still trying to cut off intelligence. This is a problem.” Without more information about their target they couldn’t formulate a plan. They didn’t even know if the planets were still there. They could just fly the whole armada into the center of the solar system and see what they could find, but that posed considerable risk.

Lan Qing was trying to turn the situation around, but if they lost this war Middle Heaven was the Eastern Alliance’s last hope. As admiral Lan Qing couldn’t ignore that fact. As a result his tactics were moderate, and heavily relied on Lan Jue.

The admiral explained. “I need you to go yourself, you have more scouting experience than anyone. Between you and Lin Guoguo, you have the highest chance of success. What we need you to confirm is that those planets are still here. If they are we can continue.”

As he’d mentioned, Lan Qing had asked a group of Paragons to go scouting during Lan Jue’s sequester. Lin Guoguo had gone with them, but they were nonetheless discovered. The alien blockade was dense, and the closer they got to Europa the harder it became to push on. A net of umbrella-type aliens stood vigil, in search of human scouts and backed up by the alien generals. So far no intelligence sorties had completed their mission.

Lan Qing was knew his brother very well. Lin Guoguo would perform differently with her boss present, and Lan Jue knew the aliens’ particularities very well. It seemed like his younger brother was the all-

around best choice for the mission.

“Alright, I’ll be ready to head out soon. Has there been any change to the battle plan?” Lan Jue asked. He knew the dilemma they faced by the time he returned to Middle Heaven. How they broke the enemy lines would be critical.

Hesitation flickered in the admiral’s eyes. “The core plan hasn’t changed. However the aliens are more cunning than we thought. We may seem to have the upper hand, but they continue to determine the pace of the war. We’re being led by the nose. I have a sneaking suspicion that they haven’t used their full strength against us yet. They have suffered losses, but their strongest are still out there somewhere. This fight is still under their control, and I’m sure once we penetrate into the middle of the planetary system we’ll be under heavy assault. If I were them, I would have taken my cue from the fight around Angel. I’d stop any attempts at frontal assault and resort to guerilla warfare – picking off our numbers and forcing us to waste time until the home planets have finished evolving.

Lan Jue offered his thoughts. “I’ve been pondering it myself. They certainly didn’t leave these mutants here out of the kindness of their hearts. They knew we’d have to deal with them, it’s part of our nature to help our own despite the trouble it’d cause. They probably hoped the survivors would riot and force us to change focus, dissuade us from our offensive.”

Lan Qing nodded. “Just so. Luckily Qianlin’s abilities saved us that headache. Otherwise we would have really been in trouble. But things aren’t all bad – at least I’m fairly certain the planets are near Europa and have started their evolution process. If they weren’t their current strategy wouldn’t make sense, they would have more than enough strength to wipe us out. Yet for now they haven’t made any move to fight back, which means one of two things. First, the planets aren’t here. Second, they’re evolving. It goes without saying that the second eventuality is far more likely, but we need to confirm it first and find a way to get close.”

After a moment of silence, a sagacious light glimmered behind Lan Qing’s eyes. When he spoke again his voice was even and low. “According

to recent estimations there are two things that are integral to our future success. The first is to coax the enemy into a direct confrontation. If we can manage that I'm sure we can weaken their forces even further. We have an advantage with our bastions, but it isn't absolute. In fact the alien forces are most likely to destroy them during an all-out offensive, but it's also where our opportunities are greatest."

"The second is to interrupt the alien home world evolution process. Right now that seems very difficult due to the sheer number of monsters protecting them. We also know they're intelligent and cunning – I'm sure there's some defensive plan they have in place we're not aware of yet. Depending on what that is we may not cause them much damage even if we charge in with our full armada. In fact I'm fairly sure our earlier victory was achieved because our enemy allowed it."

"Ah?!" Lan Jue was stunned by what he'd heard. "They lost on purpose? Why?"

Chapter 813: Difficult Situation

Lan Qing explained his reasoning. “If my guess is correct, then their goal is simple. They don’t want us to throw caution to the wind and rush in. They want us to have a false sense of superiority. Our bastions are superior weapons, they want us to think, and we have a chance – that’s already how the soldiers think. The East and North saw our victory and it gave them hope. Under these circumstances do you think they’ll send reinforcements to help us? The answer is no, of course not. They’ll want to keep their forces close to protect against the threat of them teleporting into their alliances again. Especially the North. What they want is to tie us up and make us forget the danger. If they waste enough of our time, they achieve their goal.”

A cold sweat lingered on Lan Jue’s back as he listened. If this was true the aliens were as undefeatable as they originally feared.

Lan Qing narrowed his eyes. “Their retreat was too disciplined and unhurried. I didn’t think we could recapture these planets as fast as we did, either. Taking these worlds back may seem like a grand feat but actually it’s all a farce. The enemy didn’t anticipate we could revert the mutated humans so quickly, but the situation is still firmly under their control. If what I’m saying turns out to be right I suspect our chances of survival are less than ten percent.”

Lan Jue heaved a shaky breath. Their victories had been a ray of sunlight in humanity’s darkest hour. Now, with his brother’s explanation, he saw that things weren’t so straightforward.

“Have you told anyone else?” Lan Jue asked.

Lan Qing regarded him with an impatient scowl. “Do I look like an idiot? I need to support morale not crush it. The fact is we have no recourse but to soldier on, even if we know we’re walking in to a trap.”

Lan Jue frowned at the prospect. “IS there really no chance?”

“Not entirely,” Lan Qing answered. “I have an idea, but it’s very dangerous.” He quietly explained his strategy to his younger brother.

Surprise was evident on the Jewelry Master's face. He didn't know his brother had been crafting such a plan, and while it was certainly a shot at the moon he could see how it had the makings of a brilliant reprisal.

"That's the backup plan, the hope is my guesses are wrong. If I am we won't need to try it, best scenario. But if I'm not..."

He trailed off, staring pointedly at Lan Jue. Hesitation appeared in the depths of his eyes, for just a moment.

But Lan Jue's face was calm. "I understand. Whether you're right or not it's something we have to do. In fact I think we can improve our odds. I'm sure the aliens are watching us now, otherwise how would they know if we have the strength needed to defeat their home worlds. What if they break off their own evolution? I agree with your plan and I'm anxious to carry it out. I'm confident I can do it."

Lan Qing's breath became just a little more haggard. He turned to look at Qianlin. She smiled back at him. "He and I are of the same mind."

The admiral heaved a steading sigh, and after a time his expression eased. "Go prepare. There's scouting that must be done. The army is mostly ready, and we'll follow the plan. Step by step."

"Alright," Lan Jue answered. Then he added, "Ah yes. I also had something I wanted to run past you."

"Oh?" Lan Qing looked at him in curiosity. "What was your idea?"

"Have you thought about employing Star Division directly in a space battle?" He asked.

This gave Lan Qing pause. "Star Division?" Actually he hadn't. The aliens had fought tooth and nail when they actually engaged, and so had his soldiers. But he did have that trump card yet to pull.

"That's right," Lan Jue said. "Star Division didn't do much during these last ground excursions. It doesn't look like future encounters will need ground forces much, either, aside from Europa. As far as I'm concerned saving Star Division for that alone is underutilizing their abilities. The East and Skyfire Avenue have invested a lot in them, both in regards to their

skills and equipment. I think they'd do quite well out there. Day by day they're working better with one another. Their mecha suits are equipped to fight out in space as well. If you use the Paragons as the tip of the spear and follow up with Star Division, it'd be like dropping an army in the middle of their forces unexpected. Time and again it's been proven that adepts do more damage to these aliens than conventional weapons."

Lan Qing's eyes narrowed as he carefully considered Lan Jue's proposal. It was no exaggeration to say Star Division was humanity's strongest mecha division, and they were phenomenally equipped. He admitted that they weren't as useful doing their current mission as they might be elsewhere.

Even Lan Qing was sometimes more conservative than was necessary and had been keeping his mechas for planetary operations only. Lan Jue's suggestion opened up new possibilities.

It was better that Lan Jue came up with the idea. Though they were brothers, Star Division wasn't under the admiral's direct command. It was an extension of Skyfire Avenue's power, which was participating in a supportive role and not under the auspices of the Eastern government. Lan Qing couldn't demand much of them with this being the case, but that was not so for Lan Jue. His brother was the chairman of Skyfire Council and commander of Star Division. He had decision-making powers when it came to the Avenue's assets.

"If you think they can handle it, I have no problems. But discuss it with the Paragons. Establishing Star Division wasn't easy, I'm sure, and it is part of Skyfire Avenue. Fighting in space is dangerous, as I'm sure you understand."

This was Lan Qing's way of voicing his concern.

Lan Jue nodded. "I'll talk it over with their Majesties. I don't think it'll be a problem. Qianlin's powers are terrific support in a fight, we'll see what sort of damage we can cause when the time comes. And while the aliens are fast, their advantage isn't absolute. Majesty, for instance, is a match for any one of them if we push it to top speed. They're trying to blockade

Europa, right? A sneak attack might serve, but with a whole fleet they'll see us coming. Not so with just one mecha division."

Once more Lan Qing was surprised by his brother. He was a smart man, and at Lan Jue's suggestion his mind filled with corresponding strategies. They were sure to be particularly effective against the enemy.

A small smile spread across Lan Qing's face. "Alright, go talk it over with the others. Then I'll speak to them myself and formulate a plan. Afterwards we'll be ready to put it into effect."

Lan Jue bid his brother farewell then led Qianlin away. They sought out the other Paragons and explained his idea. Everyone agreed. So far Star Division's use had been limited, but they were about to show how good Skyfire Avenue's people were in a fight.

On land mecha suits were towering and imposing war machines, but out in space they seemed almost miniscule. Even the smallest space ship – even fighter drones – were considerably larger by comparison. However their size did not speak to their fighting capacity, which was no less impressive than the ships that dwarfed them. Star Division enjoyed the full support of the Eastern government and Skyfire Avenue, and was populated by talented Adepts that put the equipment to good use. They knew how to hold their own.

Lan Jue's soldiers were also itching for a good fight. Their mission on Angel had been downright depressing without any enemies to test themselves against. There were only mutants, which Luo Xianni quickly dealt with on her own. They were given no opportunity to show off their competence.

Not only were the aliens worthy adversaries, they were also the bearers of treasure! The vital crystals they earned from killing the monsters were their prizes for meritorious service, and Admiral Lan had relayed the order that all crystals earned by a division were theirs to keep. They could be used to strengthen the unit as well as be allocated among the soldiers.

It was effective encouragement, directed at the soldiers of the landing teams. The ships and their crews had a unified system of allocation, and

their actions were tightly bound to the overall battle plan. Thus, they were not given the same incentives. Still, crew members were still given the opportunity to take from the crystals their ships took in battle.

Proper rewards and punishment inspired soldiers to fight with their all. Lan Qing knew this well.

Star Division had a wealth of experience fighting aliens by this point. They were practically masters at identifying a monster's crystal and how it corresponded to their power. Also, many of the aliens they encounter during ground missions aren't true aliens at all, but puppets of progenitors. They don't have vital crystals. Any creatures they encounter out in space would be different – they'd be the real deal. Even the weakest ones had vital crystals. The more powerful the creatures they encountered, the better the prize.

If they were allowed to take their skills to space, Star Division could once again assert their dominance as humanity's greatest mecha division. Whatever vital crystals they obtained would be theirs. Star Division was over a thousand strong. To allocate enough for so many...

Chapter 814: Action

What Lan Jue didn't know, was that his suggestion to Lan Qing instantly had the support of all the unit leaders. Not a single member of Star Division protested.

Normal people were frightened of the aliens, but that was never a sensation that crossed a Division soldier's mind. In all the encounters they had with these beasts, they'd never been defeated. On the contrary, every fight had ended in total victory. In addition they had many Paragons at their backs in case things got out of hand. As far as they were concerned, any risk was worth the reward.

Not to mention these men and women had been training for this fight for a long time. They were only too anxious to have something to show for it.

Their eagerness pleased Lan Jue. After speaking with Lan Qing it was decided that the Paragons would lead his troops into battle. They would be dispatched in smaller units as they had always been, and their efficacy evaluated in this new battleground. Their loadouts would be adjusted accordingly.

Star Division was raucous in their excited preparations. Meanwhile Lan Jue quietly left Middle Heaven to begin his scouting mission.

Lan Jue's plans were not the same as Lan Qing expected. His present self could not be compared to the past, for now he was a true Paragon. Some of the Paragons still needed to be acclimated to working Star Division, so he wished to bring only four others with him. Nor would they take Zeus-1. With nothing but the clothes on their back, they would fly through the vacuum of space toward Europa.

Aside from Lan Jue and Qianlin, the other two participants were the Pharmacist and Luo Xianni.

Lan Qing was too busy with his other duties to follow the state of Adepts closely. Luo Xianni had broken through to the Infinite, and her interdimensional abilities were nothing short of legendary. At full strength

she could spirit them away, even if the alien home worlds themselves appeared. For a scouting mission who could compare to the might of the Photographer!

But Lan Qing didn't ask her directly for a reason. Now that she was part of the Infinite she had to be careful. After all, she had begun to come under scrutiny from universal protogenia. But with Qianlin in attendance she could use her powers without reservation. In the end, after discussing everything with Lan Qing, they agreed on the small team. Three Banishing Blades and a near god-like Paragon were enough to deal with most problems they were likely to face.

As for Jue Di, he was currently absorbing the power from the doppelganger's crystal to extend his own life. He would lend his full strength to the final battle.

A pale white light hung over the four infiltrators as they began their journey. Under the Queen of Heaven's power they didn't even need to breathe. Cosmic radiation was absorbed and transformed to sustenance to keep the small group healthy.

Exhaustion wasn't a concern for Zhou Qianlin. After three days of isolation she and Lan Jue had emerged with a new and deeper understanding of their powers. Qianlin was also able to exert some measure of control over her cultivation, though of course this was only temporary. The power of faith was always flowing through her, empowering Guanyin. In fact, because of the surplus it was to her benefit that she use as much energy as she could. Not only did it bleed away the excess but it also made it easier to control her rate of cultivation. Rising too quickly was counterintuitive, so it was better to delay as long as possible.

Meanwhile the energies derived from Qianlin also benefited Lan Jue. They fed his own cultivation, vicariously through the faith in Guanyin, and pushed him closer to the upper border of Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

The vastness of space stretched out before them. Swaths of glittering starlight twinkled at them from the far reaches of the galaxy in a beautiful

display. Lan Jue couldn't remember how many times he'd seen scenes such as these, but somehow this time it felt different. After inheriting the wisdom of the Emperor of the North Star these distant lights seemed like a part of him. With every breath he drew in their essence, becoming one with the stellar cavalcade.

The power of the Middle Heaven Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety was as vast as the cosmos. After three days Lan Jue was only just peeking behind the curtain. But even just this preliminary understanding aided him greatly, guiding him to a new heights.

The Pharmacist, flying by their side, looked at Lan Jue from time to time. Her younger brother had become quite a presence! After becoming a Paragon his every move bore a mysterious impact. It wasn't strong, but it was enough that she couldn't help but hold this younger man in high respect.

She'd never experienced anything like it before.

In her heart there was little that could compare to Occisus and the power it bore. However, she couldn't forget witnessing Lan Jue's breakthrough. She could still see the image of the Emperor of the North Star with Captus in hand as though it had just happened. The blaze of light from Lan Jue's godblade was overwhelming, a sign of allegiance to the might of Lan Jue's dharma.

The Emperor of the North Star was not inferior in any way to the earlier master of the Banishing Blades, Celestial Master Lingbao. They were cut from the same cloth! ¹ If Lan Jue could truly master his inheritance, his future prospects were bright indeed.

"What are you plans, Jewelry Master?" The Pharmacist couldn't help but ask, now that her mind was on what was to come.

This gave him pause. "Plans? To kill the aliens, obviously."

The Pharmacist chuckled. "I mean for the future. After these monsters are dealt with."

He cast her a curious look. "Sister, don't be anxious. We will certainly

survive this!”

“I’ll admit I used to be worried,” she revealed. “But not anymore, not after watching your breakthrough. Even if we’re somehow defeated I don’t think it will mean the end of humanity. After all, we’ve been masters of this corner of the universe for ages. No matter how powerful the aliens become, they can’t track us all down. So long as there are survivors we have the opportunity to retake our rightful place. But more importantly we have you. Once you grasped the inherited knowledge of the Emperor, that was the moment we became invincible.”

Lan Jue paused, then chuckled with a wry smirk. “I’ve only grasped a shadow of what the Emperor of the North Star commanded. The difference is astronomical.”

She chuckled politely. “You shouldn’t underestimate yourself. The fragments of the Emperor you gathered the day you broke through was no ‘shadow.’ That was a part of his eternal spirit, a living part of our history. There has never been anything like what you achieved in all of history. You must understand that if you continue to walk the path, one day you will be the next Emperor of the North Star. Then the alien planets would be beneath contempt, hardly worth notice.

This caused Lan Jue to chortle. “You overestimate me, sister. Even if I did have that sort of potential, universal protogenia would never allow it. I wouldn’t be able to hide that sort of power from the cosmos.”

But Luo Xianni answered him with a derisive snort. “Why not? I won’t pretend rising to such a height would be easy, but for you it certainly isn’t impossible. You have your wonderful wife to thank for that! Her Queen of Heaven Domain can go a long way in protecting you. All you need to do is live, and through your Boundless Starlight Domain you can continue to grow strong. Do that and one day you will achieve what she says, then even creating your own immortal realm wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility. They did it before, why can’t it happen again?”

Luo Xianni’s assurances struck a chord in Lan Jue. If current trends persisted he and Qianlin had a very good shot at achieving the Infinite,

and evading the universal protogenia that would come seeking them. But if there really was a path to immortality the benefits to humanity's Paragons went without saying. Mankind would be masters of the universe, and if another threat like these monsters should appear the immortals would need only wipe them from existence.

Of course creating an entirely new reality was easier said than done! Lan Jue shook his head. "A story for another time, mother. We can discuss the possibilities later, but for now our focus has to be overcoming the alien threat."

Luo Xianni smirked at him. "Who's to say this is another story? Your father is already considering the opportunities. You and your brother are growing quickly, it won't be long before you meet us in the Infinite. None of us have experience in molding reality, but that's not to say it's impossible." Her face revealed an inscrutable and enigmatic expression.

Lan Jue gaped at her. "Are you telling me father has an idea?"

She snickered. "Why did the aliens choose us to attack? Because there's something in our DNA they need to evolve, right? Their 'evolution' is just an equivalent to the power our species used long ago to create the immortal realm. But if we can't do it, how can they? Because they know something we don't – but it's something we can learn and emulate. Yes these beasts have been a disaster for our species, but they also pose an opportunity. Let's see if it's an opportunity we're able to grasp."

Chapter 815: Establishing an Immortal Realm?

This was the first time Lan Jue heard the aliens regarded in this way. Surprise lit up his face. His mother and father were wise, their thinking profound.

Luo Xianni went on. “Don’t look at me that way. I’m sure your father will discuss this with you when we’re almost done dealing with these monsters. The vital crystals have helped him to contend against the restrictions of universal protogenia, and I’m sure they’ll be of use to us as well.”

The two women opened his eyes, revealing a whole new realm of possibilities to him. Creating a new immortal realm would be wonderful for humanity, certainly. Whether or not it was possible, at least it was a valiant goal to strive towards. The first to benefit from it would be his father and mother!

The four Paragons continued to soar through space, with Angel shrinking into the distance. Getting their bearings out in space was not a problem for a technologically advanced species like theirs, so they need not worry about the distance between where they were and where they were going. Typically it would take five days to reach Europa from Angel.

However, the small group didn’t have to haul much of anything. What’s more they had the benefit of Luo Xianni’s tremendous power. It only took a few long-range interdimensional shifts to get them in the vicinity of their target.

“Aliens!” The Pharmacist cried out, her eyes narrowing. Instantaneously a thick and murderous aura surrounded her. As her righteous Slaughter Domain continued to improve, it was easier for her to call it to bear. Especially when her foes were the aliens, victims of her irreconcilable hatred.

Indeed, in the distance some dozen or so creatures had spotted them.

They were quickly moving in to intercept.

When compared with the inconceivable scale of space, a single human meant nothing. This was true even compared to the bulky alien warriors. However when the shuttle aliens drew close they slowed, proving that the humans had been discovered. Powerful beings had a powerful presence, and this was true of the four Paragons even if they weren't employing their Domains.

The Queen of Heaven's light gave them pause, however. They felt its cleansing power even from a distance. Once they sensed something was amiss they reacted quickly, adjusting trajectory to try and swing around from behind. The aliens they came with had longer range attack capabilities, leaving them to flank the humans from behind.

It was a solid plan. But the humans they were unfortunate enough to come across were some of the strongest who ever lived.

There was a streak of white light that split the starry sky, like a bolt of cosmic lightning. Each of the here shuttle aliens caught within it were sliced into four equal parts. The other creatures that had been slower to approach turned without hesitation and fled.

Or, rather, they tried to. Unfortunately for them they were never given the opportunity.

A dazzling streak of blue came on the heels of the white beam. This time it was true lightning. Of course lightning didn't exist in space, and it was so bright the solar system's central star dimmed in the face of it. Lan Jue felt something surge into his body, instantly strengthening his abilities by some inexplicable power. The emulsion of electricity didn't seem to drain him at all.

With Master of the Stars as his lineage, space was undoubtedly the best arena for Lan Jue to use his powers. Here the Emperor of the North Star was most frightening, for through the latent power of the cosmos he could empower his own attacks.

It was only the beginning. Fast as the speed of light the remaining aliens were painted cobalt blue before being vaporized. When Lan Jue returned

to the others he held several vital crystals in his hands.

For him and the others these crystals held little practical purpose, but he couldn't simply leave them lying about. For every crystal they pilfered the alien planets grew weaker. At the very least it was irritating for their enemy. And while they had no use for them, there were many who did.

It had taken them only a few short moments to put down the alien cluster. They had been no threat, but now they knew they were entering enemy territory.

As expected, their deaths had attracted attention. Already Lan Jue could see scores of alien coming toward them from the distance. Through his heightened senses he figured there was about a hundred of them, with no lack of stronger breeds.

The small team was in no hurry to leave, and hovered silently as their enemy drew near. Indeed they were here to scout, but if that was all they accomplished it was a waste of their talents.

A hundred or so aliens was not terribly exciting. They were led by a beast roughly three thousand meters long that looked like an enormous cockroach ¹. A set of translucent purple wings fluttered from its back, and with each beat a hazy violet mist was expelled. Somehow it seemed to increase its speed, but more impressively the creatures it led were also hastened by it.

Lan Jue looked toward the Pharmacist and smirked. "Shall we?"

Her response was nonchalant. "Leave it to me. My Slaughter Domain isn't suited against righteous humans. Against beasts such as these, however, it serves to great effect."

As she spoke, the Harbinger Faerie stepped out of Qianlin's protective Domain.

Right away her body stretched to great heights. Out here she didn't need to worry about causing a planet harm. With her Reflection of Heaven and Earth powers released she rose over a thousand meters tall, and a sword of equal magnitude glittered in her hand. Dharma and astrum as one, she

raced ahead to meet the mutant cockroach as it came.

Her foe felt the terror creep into it the moment her dharma appeared. Its wings disappeared behind a dark carapace as the monster curled into a protective ball. Meanwhile the aliens around it scattered in all directions, but only so that they might surrounded the Pharmacist.

Occisus and the Slaughter Domain fed each other, pouring through the Pharmacist and empowering her cultivation. She held nothing back, lashing out with the full might of her Domain!

The blast of white light lasted only for a moment. The cockroach was sliced in two as though it were made of tofu, leaving it only just enough time to cry out in pain. In the next instant countless thousands of white rays erupted from the Pharmacist like a white rose, spreading out in all directions.

Bloom of a Thousand Swords! The Pharmacist flooded the area with the full force of her mighty Domain.

The remaining aliens were shredded beneath the lily-white onslaught. Clearly the Pharmacist's mastery of the godblade had improved greatly after her breakthrough.

With righteous purpose, justice was ruthless.

But just then something crossed Luo Xianni's expression. Her right hand shot out and clawed the air. The vital crystals left in the wake of the massacre, the recently reverted Harbinger Faerie, and the others vanished in a flash of pink light.

Not a moment later the place where they had stood was flooded with violet light. Two figured appeared in the space they'd vacated.

It was the Violet Prince and Princess. The aura that came off of them in waves was more powerful than ever.

The Violet Prince openly scowled. "This aura... human."

The Princess crinkled her nose prettily. "It is familiar. I believe that man is nearby."

For a moment something crossed the Prince's face. "You mean the one who evolved on the human planet?" The faintest echo of fear hid behind his eyes at the mention of Lan Jue. The presence of the Emperor of the North Star was strong and made him shiver.

The Violet Princess nodded her head. "This is his scent, I am not mistaken. I fixed his presence firmly in my memory the first time we met. I am determined to couple with that one. His genetics are the best I've encountered among the humans."

The Violet Prince frowned, unconvinced. "But he is strong. The power he released during his evolution surpassed even Monarch. That might have been only a moment, but we don't know how much of it he can command now. After all, were it not for that would I have abandoned our first line of defense so readily? Perhaps he used some special methods to achieve it, but I can sense that the human will cause it quite a lot of trouble. We should kill him the moment we get the chance."

"No, you are wrong. We mustn't kill him!" The Violet Princess was uncompromising. "His genes are different from all the others. I was not present for his evolution, but from your description I know it is different – special. What he possesses must be of great use to us."

The Prince's expression was almost petulant. He was appearing more human by the day. "Perhaps. They must be trying to learn what they can about the place they call Europa. We should go as well and make sure they don't learn too much."

Haughtily, the Princess replied, "What does it matter what they discover? Do you think they have the ability to stop what's in motion? I don't think they have what it takes to do what is necessary."

Chapter 816: Europa and the Home Worlds

There were two beams of purple light, marking the withdrawal of the Violet Prince and Princess.

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The second flash of pink light deposited Lan Jue and the others in a different sector of space. After achieving the Infinite, Luo Xianni's transference capabilities could send her charges over vast distances. She could teleport between planets without aid, though distance did play a factor.

The moment she sensed the two Infinite-level beings closing in, she gathered the other three and fled.

"We should be near Europa." She glanced at the map on her communicator.

"Mother," Lan Jue said, "there are going to be no small amount of aliens nearby. If you wouldn't mind..." His perception was itching with the presence of many powerful beings.

She nodded. Another flash and they were gone. A few moments later a host of aliens swept into the area after sensing the humans, but found their targets vanished.

Lan Jue and the others arrived at their destination. When they were safely within the bounds of reality again, Star Division's commander checked his map. However his glance was quick, for out of the corner of his eye the silhouette of Europa caught his attention.

But was it Europa?

As he gaped at the scene, his disbelief was mirrored by Qianlin, the Pharmacist and Luo Xianni. The planet occupied the same space it always had, but that was where the similarities to the Europa they knew ended. It had been a large planet – larger than Skyfire – that boasted the famed city

of Reims, its beautiful cathedral, and the Dark Citadel as its opposite. It was the capital of the Western Alliance, replete with resources and citizens to use them. It was considered one of the greatest planets colonized by humans after their stellar migration, second only to Luo.

Evaluating a planet occurred on several levels. These included economic status, political environment, and individual military strength. It was only recently that Skyfire had begun to close the gap between them. Some recent evaluations even put the Eastern capital above Europa, after its recent meteoric rise in strength and influence.

The planet Lan Jue and the others gazed upon now was not that same jewel of the West. Its beauty was gone, and what lay there now was grotesque and uncomfortable to look on.

The entire surface of the world wriggled and squirmed, making it look like some kind of mutated uterus. The planet beneath was hidden from view beneath what could only be described as a placenta that sported large black arteries pulsing along its surface. Some indescribable viscous fluid pumped through the vessels.

At last they were able to confirm the presence of the three home worlds, so long absent from view. They surrounded Europa while tentacles thick as mountains penetrated into the afflicted planet's surface. Purple light hung over all three of them as they appeared to inject Europa with their energies. The power that radiated from them was intense and seemed to hum through the vacuum of space.

The home worlds were so close to Europa it seems like their atmospheres were shared. It wasn't as simple as draining Europa of its vital energy this time. They were changing it, somehow.

They'd learned from the spirit of the Pharmacist's husband that the planets were planning to evolve. But no one knew what that evolution looked like, or how the process worked. Looking on this strange scene the only conclusion they could come to was that their assumptions were correct – they were evolving, and it somehow involved the Western capital.

Their first thought was the human cost. Europa had been one of the

most populated planets in human space. Now it seemed all of its population had been sacrificed for alien domination. A stabbing melancholy settled in the hearts of the human scouts. Europa and everything it used to be was gone.

Lan Jue was tight lipped and glared with hatred at the scene. Qianlin could bear it no longer and looked away. Indignation burned in the Pharmacist's eyes, and she seemed to only barely contain her need to rush in. It was understandable, for the last remnant of her fallen husband was in Monarch's clutches – right in front of her. It took everything within her not to try and take it back.

“We have to go!” The Photographer's face was expressionless. She didn't wait for them to recover. They absconded in a flicker of pink light.

Countless lumbering bodies surged toward the now empty space. They were led by the Violet Prince and Princess. Unfortunately for them there was nothing to be done against a Paragon with Infinite interdimensional power. Only the home worlds would have been able to stop her.

Luo Xianni and the others hopped fissures in space-time. Although her face was even, Lan Jue could see the coldness in her eyes.

They'd recorded everything. The intelligence they'd gathered was the most important piece of information in the whole operation. Their mission had been a success.

They had finally confirmed the planets' location and condition, and the fact that they were indeed in the process of evolving. The decisive battle of the campaign was on the horizon. Their success or failure hinged on stopping the home worlds from completing their transformation.

Luo Xianni didn't even let them play part of the distance. With help from Qianlin's Queen of Heaven Domain, she continued to hop fold space around them until they returned to Middle Heaven. Lan Jue raced to Lan Qing immediately with the recording.

Half an hour later Lan Qing, Kang Hui, Hua Li, and all of humanity's Paragons including Jue Di were gathered around the holographic projection. The image of Europa hidden beneath the pulsing membrane

soured everyone's expression. They could only imagine the devastation that had occurred.

The Pontiff had his eyes shut tight in pain. He knew Reims was finished, all of its people – his people – gone. Nothing could have survived. The others were not Westerners, but they scowled at the scope of the tragedy.

“It's confirmed, the planets are evolving. We should immediately petition the North and East for more military support.” Hua Li's voice was cold and thin. His family came from this territory, and though their relationship with the West was largely economical these were their former countrymen!

Poseidon, the Group's home planet, was not yet a victim of the alien attack. However how long before it was? They could not know what the next target of their insatiable hunger would be.

Kang Hui scowled and sighed. “I fear that will be difficult. ‘Distant water will not quench present thirst,’ they're too far and too reticent. Even if they agreed to help it would be a while before they could send a sizeable force. We must act as soon as possible. Admiral Lan, you have to make a decision.”

The planets were confirmed to be near Europa and undergoing their transformation. Their single highest priority had to be stopping them. Kang Hui's intentions were clear; they had to abandon the rescue efforts here and make for the heart of alien strength. Destroying the home worlds was the only way to eliminate the threat.

Lan Qing furrowed his brows. After a moment he slowly, but resolutely shook his head.

“Admiral, now is not the time for a woman's kindheartedness!” Kang Hui's voice raised a few decibels. “These monsters have killed an inconceivable number of our brothers and sisters. I share your pain, but consider the priorities. We cannot hide behind the guise of protecting humanity and hesitate when it's time to strike. We will lose our best and possibly last opportunity to save our species. Everyone here knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that if we allow their transformation to be

completed we will all come to a violent and bloody end. We have a chance to fight back but that chance is now. Admiral Lan, you must decide!" He pressed the Eastern commander again, firmer.

Lan Jue couldn't hold back, adding his voice before Lan Qing had a chance to respond. "Unacceptable. We put out tremendous effort to save these people – a billion people! How can we simply cut them off? Think about it, what would happen if we bring our whole force forward only to have them waltz behind our lines and retake Angel? What would that do to morale? Those people down there may be Westerners, but they're fellow human beings just the same as you and I. How would you react differently if it was our families down there? I understand what you're saying but under these conditions we have to find a way to have the best of both worlds."

Kang Hui's smirk was bitter. "I suggest haste, but only because our opportunities are limited and fleeting. Best of both worlds? Can you think of a way to make that happen?"

Many days had passed since their initial victory against the alien horde. The fervor of triumph had cooled. As an experienced and storied commander himself, Kang Hui knew to expect tragedy in the midst of achievement. The final battle was yet to come, Armageddon still loomed on the horizon. What they decided right now could spell the end of their future as a species! This was not the time to take circumstances lightly, or be victim to one's gentler feelings. Kang Hui had wracked his brain for days searching for a solution, but no answers had been forthcoming.

Chapter 817: Breaking the Lines

Lan Qing was an outstanding commander. However, even with his lauded intelligence he simply couldn't see a way to make an omelette without the need to break a few eggs. There was no better option, and victory would come with a gamble no matter the circumstances.

Lan Jue opened his mouth to reply but was silenced when his brother lifted a hand. "Admiral Kang Hui's determinations are reasonable. But that can't be our path." His tone was adamant. "We spent a lot of time and energy to save our Western brethren. We did not take them away, and instead promised we would keep them safe. If we go back on that promise now I can promise you it isn't just the military that will suffer. The soldiers, and even I, will see victory as an impossible task. Yes, Angel was a trap – but we recognize its dangers and we can refuse to be cowed by them. We must protect this place."

Kang Hui sighed, trying to maintain control of his excitable mood. "Protect? How do you propose we do that? Even at full strength, with all of our soldiers, our chances of victory are slim. If we separate our forces how can we hope to defeat the aliens?"

Lan Qing's response was measured. "I've ordered all the railguns we could spare from the three bastions to Angel's surface. Most of them have already been installed on the surface. If we tried to salvage all seven planets then you would be right, protecting them would be a fool's errand. But we are responsible for only one, and I'm confident we can keep these people safe. After all, if the aliens want to stop us they'll need to focus their main force against the armada. If they are busy with us at the front, Angel will have far fewer concerns if they decide to split their own forces."

Kang Hui frowned. "It's the best we can do for the moment, but I'm not confident that railguns alone will protect them from the aliens. If that was the case these planets wouldn't have fallen so readily in the first place." Each of these worlds had to have had their own defensive installations prior to the aliens' arrival. Clearly they proved insufficient.

Planetary defenses were a force to be reckoned with, but their disadvantage lay in their inflexibility. These creatures were particularly fast and used their advantage to overcome the deterrents.

Railguns were powerful and could be used at extreme range. However they were stationary, and cumbersome. Adding more didn't ameliorate the problem. Any admiral knew this.

For railguns to have the best effect they needed to have an interstellar fleet tie up the enemy. If the enemy was kept at bay the railgun could pick them off from a distance. But that needed soldiers.

Kang Hui knew this, as did Lan Qing. When the Northern admiral heard Lan Qing's plans he relaxed. Though Middle Heaven's commander spoke with force and high authority, in the end they shared the same determination. There was nothing for it but to accept fate.

Lan Qing continued. "Planetary defenses alone aren't enough to repel an enemy attack, but we have other assets we can leave behind to shore them up. We know that our Adepts are most effective in the fight against these monsters, their abilities are natural checks to their strength. We have seen that Star Division is particularly adept at doling out punishment, especially with the help of the Paragons. No less effective than an interstellar fleet, perhaps more. So I have decided to leave Skyfire Avenue's mecha division behind to protect the planet and defend its installations."

Kang Hui's eyes went wide with surprise. Even Hua Li couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No, how would that work? It's too dangerous – you're leaving those soldiers right in the line of fire. Once they're annihilated the cost to all of humanity's collective adepts would be catastrophic!"

Lan Qing looked at Hua Li in surprise. He hadn't expected such vocal opposition from him. Hua Li seemed strange to him, somehow.

"Admiral," Poseidon's leader continued, "I'm telling you the facts. Star Division is capable but their chances are slim to none against a large alien force. Besides we need these Paragons on the frontlines, otherwise how are

we going to counter their generals? Unless you leave the Paragons here you leave Angel open to a sneak attack from the enemy. You see the contradiction.”

Lan Qing smirked and looked at Lan Jue. “You tell him.”

Lan Jue obliged. “It may seem like a contradiction, but we have a solution. We’ve already set up a large transference array on Angel’s surface. There’s another one here on Middle Heaven. So long as they don’t get too far apart we can use them to move resources. That is, we can put Star Division wherever they’re needed. After discussing it with Admiral Lan, we’ve decided this is the best course of action. The Paragons will be left on Angel to defend against a sneak attack, then will transfer to the front when they’re needed.”

Kang Hui’s eyes sparkled at the prospect. “Can this really be done? If so that’s an effective way to break their lines.” Kang Hui was also a wise commander, and recognized the worth of the strategy quickly. Indeed it was their best shot. Assuming several of the Paragons and Star Division remained behind, adding several fleets wouldn’t help much. The armada was free to engage at full strength.

Indeed there was no better option. However, it put a great deal of pressure on Star Division and the Paragons. They would more than likely be the crux of two major battles.

Hua Li looked at Lan Jue with some concern. “A battle on two fronts... do you think that’s too much for your people to handle?”

“Does it matter?” Lan Jue replied. “If we survive I’ll consider us blessed. There are no other choices, this is all we’ve got. I’ve already discussed it with the other Paragons and they’ve agreed.”

Kang Hui nodded. “It’s the best way, even if it is difficult for our illustrious Paragons. Please keep yourselves safe. Without you we will not be able to achieve final victory.”

Lan Jue smiled at him in response. “Don’t worry, I would like to keep breathing.” No one laughed at him making light of the situation.

As this final, definitive battle neared a great pressure had settled on everyone's heart. There was no leeway here; victory would be humanity's greatest achievement, whereas defeat would spell their doom. If they lost here, mankind's only course of action would be to flee, hiding in the deepest recesses of space and praying they can keep hidden from these new dark gods.

No one wanted to ponder that eventuality, but it lurked unbidden in the back of their minds nonetheless. They had to do their best, for everyone's sake.

Kang Hui, Hua Li and the others left once the plan was hatched. Only Lan Jue and Lan Qing remained.

"A-Jue, have you thought enough about it? That plan is dangerous." His face betrayed hesitation once more.

Lan Jue smirked. "Dangerous? I don't think so. In fact, I think if we handle it well we have a good chance at success. When the time comes it's not just me, you're going to need to work hard as well! I'm going to need you to provide me with the opportunity."

Lan Qing heaved a sigh, and his eyes hardened. He reached out and rested his hands on his little brother's shoulders. "We don't have any other choice!"

Lan Jue firmly nodded his head. "That's right. No other choice."

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When the allied armada began to move again, their stern engines were burning away from Angel, leaving the planet behind. Everyone was agitated.

This operation had garnered the attention of everyone, everywhere. When the aliens appeared in the North they had brought with them a cloud of panic and despair. Now, Lan Qing and his armada was bearing the hopes of billions deep into enemy territory.

Admiral Lan Qing had won victory over the aliens, and liberated their human victims. Under his leadership soldiers from each of the Alliances

were chasing down a bruised foe. If they succeeded in wiping out the alien threat, mankind could rebuild. Humans multiplied quickly, and with today's technology it would not take long for them to recover their former strength. Ten years, the experts said. A decade would be enough to repair the damage these monsters had wrought.

The governments of the East and North watched with bated breath.

Twelve fleets and three bastions departed from Angel. Officially, the planet they were vacating had enough railguns to qualify it as a hedgehog. Enough, they hoped, to protect it against a large alien force. The common folk trusted in their power, though others with military backgrounds pondered how effective they'd really be.

Even if they had misgivings no one would dare utter a word of doubt. The mission these allied forces were on would decide everyone's fate, some sacrifices might be necessary. After all, the West was all but destroyed, and the soldiers who were risking their lives came mostly from the North and East. Their higher military authorities had everyone's lives in their hands. Western brothers and sisters would have to secondary to the survival of the species.

And so, strangely, there was no opposition to Lan Qing's tactical decisions – almost unheard of in modern history. No democratic representative attacked their choices on the front lines. They understood doing so would subject them to the ire of their constituents.

Chapter 818: Goddess!

Every minute was a battle for a life and death, so no one spared any effort in supporting the soldiers on the front line. They cheered and praised even though the benefits were meager. At least the soldiers had no regrets, and they felt their odds were improved.

Lan Qing, Kang Hui, and Hua Li focused this passion. They were heroes to all of mankind, and their victory of the alien horde had imbued the people with hope. There were rumblings among the Northern populace, asking why they hadn't sent more troops with Tyrannosaurus. The politicians had no words to answer them. Sometimes the people's sentiment changed with the wind.

The nervous buzz was almost palpable as people waited for news – good or bad.

Middle Heaven, Tyrannosaurus, and Poseidon flew on in v-formation. It had proven to be the best arrangement, capable of defending against enemies coming from any direction. In a departure from earlier, the supporting fleets were not around the bastions but within their formation, flying in the spaces between them.

This had been Lan Qing's idea, and the purpose behind it was simple. Bastions were the most defensible ships humanity had produced, and were best suited for protecting against strong alien offenses. The supporting vessels were more effective when they didn't have to worry over protecting themselves. Nor did they get in the way of the bastion's armaments.

The drawback was that this formation was anything but agile and their speed suffered. But, like a hedgehog, they could bristle up at the first sign of an enemy and be ready for battle. None of the fleet commanders found fault in the decision to use this formation, including Hua Li and Kang Hui. With so many lives under their command they were glad safety was considered. It cost them more time, but it was better than costing lives unnecessarily. In the vastness of space there was no shelter and their foe could appear at any time.

Another battle could erupt at any moment, one that could mean defeat for them and their species. Every soldier quietly waited for that moment to arrive.

Lan Jue, Qianlin, and the other Paragons had all been left on Angel. This time their group included the Master of Wine, Bize.

Granny Bess, as she had once been known, had absconded to the Barrows while the army was making its preparations. There she explained their situation to Aubert de Villaine and both Paragons had returned together. It was strange to have the man among them, appearing as a sentient knot of vines, but he was still a Paragon. Any help was appreciated and improved mankind's chances.

Star Division had also been left behind. Their role as rear defense was important, and no one knew what the aliens would throw at them, if anything. It was wise to assume the monsters knew the armada had left Angel, leaving their back exposed.

"Temporary residents of Angel, your attention please. Heed the recording."

The planet-wide announcement captured everyone's attention. Survivors from all seven planets had been gathered here, but it didn't feel crowded. Many had lived, but many more had died as a result of the alien aggression.

Over the last several days the survivors had started to settle down and reestablish themselves on the planet. With the army's help they'd managed to accomplish much in a short period of time.

As resources continued to flow in the residents were at least able to live with some small measure of comfort. They still needed to have food brought in to sustain their colony, however. Recreational areas had even been constructed, so that the people could gather and hear news from the outside.

Holographic images appeared all around the planet, piped through the existing infrastructure that survived the attack. There was no functional concept of family anymore, and everyone was huddled in homes with

whoever else needed shelter.

“Our soldiers have been dispatched to Europa, ready to give their lives for the future of our species.” The image changed, showing the three bastions and twelve fleets advancing toward the system’s center.

The viewers answered with shock and anxiety. Could they win? Was there a chance? As the thought flitted through their minds an invisible fear gripped them. If the army is gone, what will we do, they thought.

Yet as the fear took hold the picture changed again. Rows of imposing artillery appeared before them.

“We know this can be frightening, but take heart. Our planet is well protected by a defensive array no less than ten times stronger than Angel’s had been originally. These installations will protect us from any enemy presence and guarantee your safety. We ask that you go about your lives normally and wait for news of victory from our heroic warriors abroad.”

The impressive guns calmed some of their fear, but these citizens were still survivors of a very recent catastrophe. The moment of confidence was short-lived, replaced with dismay over their future.

Of course they had planetary defenses before the aliens arrived! However even if they bolstered these system, would it be enough to protect them against another attack? Now that the allied forces were moving in for the final battle, did that mean they’d abandoned them?

The survivors of this tragedy were the elite. They were smart enough to recognize this problem after only a moment’s thought. But what could they do? There was nowhere to run, were they just to remain here and wait for death?

The holographic message wasn’t finished. The picture changed again.

“We have a message from a familiar person – or perhaps goddess is a better name.”

Goddess?

Through the haze of panic the survivors turned their attention back to

the broadcast. They gaped in disbelief at the image that greeted them. It was a woman, in a spotless gown of lily white with black hair that fell down her back. Her azure eyes sparkled like stars and were full of warmth.

She was beautiful... a flawless beauty like the immortals of old. So absolute was her purity that no hint of profane contemplation dared cross the onlookers' minds.

She really was the goddess!

None of them had forgotten, in their moment of great pain and desperate need, the face of this beautiful woman. That infinitely merciful face was forever burned on their soul. But at the time she had been a thousand meters tall, a blazing image suspended in air like a guardian angel. This time she appeared before them as a woman – a real flesh and blood person – though no less stunning.

Was it truly her? Their goddess? The question rattled through their shocked minds.

“Salutations everyone. I am Zhou Qianlin. My Paragon title is Guanyin, Queen of Heaven.” Her voice was soft and gentle as a spring breeze. The sound of it alone was soothing as the survivors listened, rapt. Some of them recognized the voice from the time of their salvation. It was even more soothing than they remembered.

Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven – Zhou Qianlin. A Paragon? This was their goddess? Paragon was a title that affected them profoundly, for to the common man Paragons were nearly indistinguishable from gods. It confirmed their conclusion that she was super human.

It was her, it was certainly her. She had been the one who saved their lives.

She smiled warmly, and to everyone watching it was as though she was looking right at them, right into their souls. As they watched she was surrounded by a halo of white light, followed by the appearance of the large dharmic image they knew well. There was no doubt she was their savior.

“Please, be at ease. I am here with you, along with ten other Paragons. You have not been abandoned, just left in our care. So long as we draw breath no harm shall come to you.”

The images of the other Paragons appeared beside her. Several of the faces were ones they knew, such as the Pontiff, the North’s mighty Terminator, and luminaries from Skyfire Avenue. Their presence confirmed their goddess’ status.

Many fell to their knees, faces streaked with tears. Life was precious, more important than anything, and this woman had gifted them new life in the wake of disaster. Now she stood before them and promised to live or die by their side. Their fear and panic was washed away, replaced with an abiding reverence.

She was a true goddess!

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Even before the broadcast ended, Qianlin helplessly felt the surge of faith pouring into her. There was nothing to be done for it, after discussing it with the others everyone decided it should be her to soothe the masses. After saving so many it didn’t matter that no one knew who she was, her influence was lofty as the heavens. Even the Pontiff paled by comparison.

Calming the populace was integral to keeping them safe. These intelligent and capable people would still play an important role in their fight. So it was she came before them and entreated calm, to great effect. Not only was their fear allayed, but their fervent support assured.

Called reverberated through the planet; I fight with the Goddess, they cried! Angel rang with the promise of duty.

Chapter 819: Do you Dare Acknowledge?

The Driver nudged Lan Jue with his elbow. He spoke in low tones. “So what about it, Jewelry Master? Do you dare acknowledge your relationship to the new goddess? I’m pretty sure these Westerners would rip you apart if they found it.”

Lan Jue’s response was tepid. “They’ll figure it out sooner or later. Even goddesses have lives to lead, and she’s mine.”

A chortle arose from the rugged Paragon. “I dare you.”

Lan Jue fixed him with a half-hearted glare. “Stop the nonsense. You should be working on crossing the threshold to Nirvana. The sooner you do the better things will go for all of us. I’m going to look in on our people.”

Star Division likely had a tough mission before them, staying here. There were ten Paragons to back them up, but if the aliens did come it would certainly be with considerable might. If that ended up being the case it was unclear who would come out the victor.

Lan Qing had told them that, if the battle should be more than they could handle, their first choice should be to flee through the teleportation array. Being hawkish in the face of destruction was unwise, even if it meant abandoning Angel.

Lan Jue, of course, did not want to see that happen. He wouldn’t leave until the last possible moment, when all other avenues had been exhausted. It didn’t matter how many powerful alien foes came for them, all it meant was there were less to impede Middle Heaven and the others.

Star Division had been separated into several companies, roughly a hundred soldiers each. Each one had a Paragon as its commander, responsible for their care and operation. Lan Jue himself led one chosen from his own brigade, the four Amazons, and several from the National Eastern University.

He wouldn’t be piloting Thor. After arising to the rank of Paragon the

suit no longer aided him as much as it had before. In fact it had started to become an unnecessary burden.

The ten companies were spread out all across Angel. They quietly waited for the enemy to arrive.

The armada had disembarked, but left a cache of supplies for them to use in the planet's defense. This included radar and defense systems, which were manned by specialists from An Lun. Su Xiaosu commanded Star Division as a whole.

While their mission wasn't so dramatic and high-profile as the front lines, Star Division was populated with world-class soldiers. Protecting Angel was just as important as bringing the fight to the enemy. There was the potential for it to be even more dangerous. Still Lan Jue was not worried, for in addition to the many 'normal' Paragons they also enjoyed the protection of Jue Di and Luo Xianni.

Originally Lan Jue had hoped Jue Di would travel with his brother and keep him safe. However Lan Qing vetoed the request, as he felt his father and younger brother would be a more capable team. With Qianlin's help, Jue Di could utilize all of his strength without fear of universal repercussions. If he was needed at the front they could be there quickly though the teleportation array.

In the end Jue Di remained on Angel with the others. Neither he nor Luo Xianni were tasked with leading a company and remained with Lan Jue and Qianlin instead. With two Paragons of the Infinite by his side, Lan Jue had total faith in their ability to deal with any problem. In fact he was curious – he'd never seen his father's full strength, even so this day.

"Father." Lan Jue finished his meditations and opened his eyes to see the man in front of him. He was standing by a window, looking out over the horizon. Lan Jue could see he was pondering something, but didn't know what.

After absorbing the energy from the avatar's vital crystal, Jue Di appeared younger than ever. Not much older than Lan Jue, in fact.

"You up?" Jue Di turned around and regarding both his son and Zhou

Qianlin.

Qianlin was still struggling against the influx of faith energy, only barely managing to keep herself from breaking through to Nirvana. Thankfully she had Jue Di and Luo Xianni by her side to give her guidance. With their help she was able to restrain the power of her Domain and keep it stable. Meanwhile Lan Jue reaped the benefits. He was already at the border of Reflection.

Zhou Qianlin took a long breath. "I think I've finally managed to get my power under control. But I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep it that way."

When he looked at her, Jue Di's eyes were soft and fatherly. He looked upon this virtuous woman with affection, like a daughter. The sentiment wasn't as simple as reacting to her aura, he remembered that she used her own body to protect his son. She had been willing to give her life for him. That meant a lot, and even though he knew their relationship had been a ploy by the Clairvoyant he didn't mind.

Jue Di smiled at her. "Suppressing your abilities is an exercise in strength, laying the groundwork for future success. It's a way to improve every aspect of your powers. Other people would be unable to do what you're doing, but you have this great opportunity before you. When the time comes that you truly can't hold it back any longer, you'll be ready to take full advantage."

"Yes, uncle." She replied.

Jue Di turned his attention to his son. "A-Jue, your mother told me she spoke with you about the possibility of creating an immortal realm. What do you think?"

"I support it wholeheartedly," he replied. "It would be a great day for all of humanity. If any more creatures like these aliens show up, we'll be able to face them more confidently. If we didn't have to worry about universal protogenia I'm sure you would have dealt with the alien home worlds already, father. We might have been able to avoid all of this suffering."

Disappointment flit across Jue Di's expression. "Indeed! As such I'm

inclined to work toward creating a new immortal realm, but it isn't something that can be built in a day. I've spent years studying the possibility, but haven't learned enough. But after absorbing the power from that vital crystal, the benefits were wide. The method by which these monsters gain energy is entirely different from ours, but you could say it's different paths to the same result. There were memories sealed in the avatar's crystal I was able to unlock, memories that were crucial. I have begun to glimpse their evolutionary method."

Lan Jue's heart rate sped up. "The way they intend to make their own immortal realm?"

Jue Di nodded. "Of course I've only grasped the general principle. However, if we can defeat the planets and retrieve the crystal from Monarch itself I believe I can extract the knowledge we need. The knowledge they possess was tempered from years of effort, and more importantly the creation of a new plane of existence will need a core of energy. A core about the size of a planet, which shows how near they are to success."

"However in all their history the aliens have never achieved such heights – there have never been alien creatures to achieve what our ancestors have. We have a legacy in our DNA of when our forefathers built the immortal realm. Between our endowment from the achievements of the past, and the knowledge of the universe these monsters possess, we have fair shake at succeeding again. If we can create even a small realm, our powers can grow exponentially until we have the strength to spread it far and wide. One day we will be able to create our own heaven."

His father's words filled Lan Jue with inspiration and drive. It was a dream come true, if it were possible. The aliens were the key.

"Father," Lan Jue began, "something has been inkling at me ever since I've broken through, something I feel through the Emperor of the North Star. I'm not sure if I'm right, but I should tell you. Universal protogenia and the immortal realm they created..."

Lan Jue explained his thoughts to his father, explaining the contentious

relationship between the universe and the gods of old leading to their ultimate defeat. Jue Di's rapt interest was clear in his face. Even at Jue Di's levels of mastery he had been incapable of understanding the breadth of the ancient immortals' power.

Jue Di's own inheritance was very powerful, so he had some nagging perception, but not so deep as his son's. He also hadn't spent a lot of time pondering the issue. It was only recently that he had begun considering the possibility of creating another immortal realm. He had never sensed the essence of that eldritch reality, nor possessed Lan Jue's insights.

"It seems likely your assumptions are true. This means our ancestors battled valiantly against the fury of the universe. Every universe has an age, and ours is young. The fact that our species survived after the universe wiped out the immortals is nothing short of miraculous."

Lan Jue thought for a moment. "What if after the clash the universe assimilated the immortal realm in some way? What if it wasn't destroyed but absorbed? It would answer why threads of the Emperor's essence remain. The universe certainly has enough power to wipe every trace of the immortal realm – and all of us – out of existence."

Jue Di's eyes sparkled. "That's possible. What if the immortal realm won? Have you thought about the result then?"

Lan Jue paused, shocked. In truth he'd never considered it. Yes! If the immortal realm of old triumphed over the old universe, what would occur? What would happen to the gods and goddesses and the heavens they inhabited? They would become the new universe, and then where would they be? The answer was 'everywhere.'

Jue Di patted his shoulder. "We may never know all the secrets of the past, but we can achieve the same levels of strength. If we succeed perhaps one day we will achieve what they did, then all of the universe's secrets will be ours. What do you say – are you interested in exploring the possibilities?"

Chapter 820: Hello, Goddess

Lan Jue looked at his father, eyes bright, but after a moment shook his head. "I'm sorry, dad. I don't have such ambition. I only want one thing after this fight is done – I want to live quietly with Zhou Qianlin on Skyfire Avenue. Immortality doesn't interest me, I think I'd be happier as a man."

Jue Di was stunned. He spoke after a moment with a playful derision in his voice. "You lazy kid, you always have been. Fine, everyone has different aspirations and if this isn't yours then so be it. We'll talk more about it later."

Lan Jue smiled back. Of course he would support his father in his attempt to create a new immortal realm, but he wasn't interested in living there himself. He wanted the life of a normal man, to have a wife and children and friends. That's all he wanted, a simple life of happiness.

Zhou Qianlin didn't offer her opinion. She stood by his side and took his hand in hers.

Just then, Jue Di's head snapped toward the window. His eyes narrowed. "They're here. We should get ready to greet them!"

Lan Jue's heart skipped a beat. He gripped Qianlin's hand tight and lifted his communicator to his lips. "The enemy approaches, prepare to defend. Let's go!"

Both he and Qianlin vanished from the room in a bolt of crackling lightning. In the next breath they were hovering in the sky outside.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes and let his perception spread, reaching out past the sky into the cosmos beyond. A glint of understanding flit through his expression as he realized that if the enemy was here, it meant the frontlines were likely already embroiled in battle.

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Space.

Middle Heaven began to slow down its forward momentum. In the distance the armada commanders could see the wave of purple headed

their way.

The hue was, of course, from the scores of alien arrayed to meet them. There were about half as many as what met them around Angel. They were spread out wide and approached slowly.

The atmosphere was instantly tense, battle would break out at any moment.

Lan Qing watched them come with frigid expression, glaring at the screen before him. His voice was cold when he gave the order. "Change formation!"

Middle Heaven stopped and the warships around it began to readjust their arrangement. Some rose higher and others dipped low to create a stratified formation with their cannons primed and pointed straight ahead. The benefit of this structure was in giving every ship a clear line of fire, with nothing in their way to dampen attack capabilities. On the other hand it gave their enemy access to every one of them. If the aliens got close enough the humans would be forced to take the full brunt, like a surge barrier before a tsunami.

The alien forces continued to draw close, expanding ever wider. Clearly they'd learned from past defeats and spread out to minimize the humans' range advantage. They came to a stop just outside of weapon's reach.

Attack? They were in no hurry, it was the humans who were racing against the clock. These monsters were here to slow them down.

Once the armada was in formation the two sides maintained their distance and stared at each other across the darkness of space. Neither was eager to act rashly, for the first side to act would be the one to suffer the greatest losses and lose battlefield advantage. Lan Qing knew it, as did whoever – or whatever – was leading the alien forces.

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Angel faced a different circumstance. The fight started the instant the monsters arrived, so many that they blotted out the sun. From below the whole sky seemed to turn purple in a matter of seconds from the press of

enemy numbers.

Lan Jue maintained a line of communication with his brother. From the Jewelry Master's vantage there were far more alien attackers than when they first came to liberate Angel. His enemy was cunning, they didn't begin the assault until they were all around the planet and could attack from all sides.

The An Lun engineers were masters of their craft. All of Angel's new planetary defenses were online and primed to face the enemy. These were some of the same railguns they used on bastion ships so one could imagine the stopping power they possessed, but they weren't without drawbacks. They had a long cooldown period, were less maneuverable and more.

However they tried to get around that with sheer numbers, with these reserve weapons spanning far and wide across Angel in only a matter of days. Now the planet resembled An Lun with its fields of bristling cannons. Energy rounds glittered in the dark barrels, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

Star Division was already suited up and headed into battle.

Meanwhile Lan Jue and Qianlin hovered in the air. They surveyed the scene hand in hand, with their Godblades at the ready. Thankfully the common folk were not near enough to see. If they saw their goddess hand in hand with some strange man they might have been heartbroken.

A small smile played across Lan Jue's lips. He turned his face toward Qianlin. "Hello, goddess."

Her face reddened. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know why," he answered, "but knowing other people worship you and I am the one who gets to hold your hand makes me happy."

Qianlin giggled a pretty laugh. "You and your naughty thoughts."

Lan Jue's voice dipped low. "Oh I've got naughtier, if you want to give them a try."

She blushed furiously now. “You pick a fine time to talk about this.”

This earned a chortle from him. “You’re my wife, no matter what time it is! Is it not entirely normal for a man to be attracted to his partner?”

Qianlin had been nervous seeing so many aliens approach, but Lan Jue’s patter helped her to relax.

Their enemy was practically on top of them now. They filled their view, from earth to sky and all across the horizon. Leading them was a beast twenty thousand meters long¹ that looked like a warship. It was larger than a human Capital ship and was just as imposing.

Behind the titanic creature was two figured, much smaller but no less terrifying; the Violet Prince and Princess.

When he saw them Lan Jue sucked a breath through his teeth. He knew that aliens were going to harass Angel, but he hadn’t anticipated the arrival of two of their strongest generals. Both of them commanded the powers of the Infinite. The monster they rode was just as mighty.

Was this their main force? Here to retake Angel?

The Violet Princess felt the unseeable attraction as well and looked toward him. A faint smile pulled at the corner of her pretty lips and a hungry light shone in her eyes.

Lan Jue’s heart beat against his chest. He remembered the first day he saw her on Moonfiend, back when he thought she was simply a beautiful woman. Later he would discover she was a nightmare in the flesh. She’d proved that when she struck down the Barber, revealing her Nirvana-level power. She was even stronger now.

However, the Infinite wasn’t the advantage it seemed to be. Like Paragons, they had to be feeling the effects of universal protogenia.

Star Division was gathered and arrayed before the Paragons that led them. In both numbers and size these young men and women were like ants before the alien horde. Still, they faced their enemy fearlessly. After all, they had ten Paragons on their side – what was there to fear?

Tan Lingyun, NEU's Savage Goddess, had been placed in Lan Jue's group. Her heart ached a little when she saw her commander hand in hand with Qianlin. Her mind harkened back to the time she spent with the masked Lei Feng. From behind, was he not just the same? All he was missing was the mask.

Both sides watched each other from across the rapidly closing space. Out in orbit around Europa the humans and aliens stared at each other, buying time. But here their enemy hoped to split the frontline's attention and collapse their rear. The atmosphere was entirely different.

The Violet Prince thrust a hand forward and two wings of his horde came charging forward. More than five hundred wriggling purple bodies flung themselves at Star Division's flanks.

A veil of rainbow-like color sprang into existence between the two forces. As the aliens crossed it their lightning-fast approach was brought almost to a stand-still, charging in slow-motion.

The Epochrion. As her powers manifested they were joined by a resplendent beam of white. As it swept past the unfortunate creatures were sliced in halves before they could react. They were dead before their bodies completely separated.

With her dress fluttering in Angel's winds, the Pharmacist stood beside the Clockmaker, surrounded by Occisus' bloodthirsty aura. The sudden death of five hundred beasts quickly boosted her Slaughter Domain, which spread out like a righteous tempest.

What was a terror for their enemies brought courage to allies. As the Harbinger Faerie's powers washed over them, Star Division's soldiers seethed with the need for righteous battle. They could hardly hold themselves back.

Two Paragons had, with little effort, eliminated five hundred alien attackers. It made a strong impression.

Chapter 821: Star Division Collision

The Violet Prince grunted in irritation, and gestured once again. This time a host of umbrella-shaped aliens spread out, and under the protection of armored turtle-aliens they began to approach.

He could see already that, while these humans were small in number, they commanded great strength.

On the other side, Lan Jue was quietly giving orders. Suddenly a barrage of blinding white light erupted from the planet's surface. It surged toward the aliens like a murderous tide. The first salvo from their railguns!

Over a hundred burning streaks of energy slammed into the enemy forces.

But the Violet Prince was ready. The beast he rode upon writhed violently, and a surge of mental energy burst from it. The smaller creatures around it seemed to explode outward, flung in every direction. Most of the salvo hit nothing but air. Trying to get a lock of these aliens was going to be harder than they thought.

Only a handful of shots found their mark, striking the several thousand meter long monstrosity that protected them. However, the beast itself was safeguarded beneath a chitin-like shell. Its thick plating absorbed the railgun fire without incident. No even a scratch remained to mark where the guns had hit their target.

The enemy was stronger than expected, but Lan Jue wasn't flustered. He glared at the armored aliens coming their way and, with eyes narrowed, nodded.

Star Division saw the signal and was on the move. A thousand soldiers spread out to meet the armored foes head to head. This time the Paragons didn't react, instead keeping their eyes trained on the alien generals.

Tan Lingyun led her small team toward a target, one of the armored beasts. She knew this breed to be lacking in defenses power but well defended. They could survive a direct shot from a battleship. They were

large, cumbersome, and hard to crack.

The next wave coming in behind them was a host of monsters that looked like evil centipedes. As Star Division moved in to intercept the turtle-aliens they rushed in as support. A spray of purple beams shot out. The salvo was cunningly arranged, with each dozen-meter wide ray aimed right for a mecha suit.

Star Division then proved their worth on the battlefield.

Tan Lingyun led the counteroffensive in her emerald-green mecha. She launched off of the turtle-alien with the tip of her mechanical foot and launched herself into the air. In her hands glinted the pair of short swords that were her weapons, and she swiped them downwards. The speed of their movement left behind a streak of aquamarine power that spread out in a wave. The wave seemed almost soft, but in its passage the air rippled strangely. The beams of purple light that had been cast their way were reflected back as they encountered the sword-swipes, no small amount of which pummeled the turtle-alien in front of them. None of the shots reached Tan Lingyun's team.

Hers wasn't the only team to evade the attack, similar tactics were employed for the other units. For instance, Tang Xiao morphed himself into a shield – teasingly formed in the shape of a turtle – that protected his team.

The aliens were strong, but their strength only came into play within a certain scope. They could defend themselves well enough against warships, but Star Division was another matter.

Not every team chose to take the blasts head on. Some had more clever solutions. The turtle creatures were over a hundred meters long in some cases, and though cumbersome made for effective barriers. The largest human mecha suits were twenty meters, max. Lan Jue saw some of the teams knock the turtle a hundred and eighty degrees and use it as a shield. Their shell was the alien's greatest advantage. If a human couldn't break it, then how could these centipedes?

The shells were strong, but didn't cover the alien from head to toe. Like a

turtle they had limbs and a head, and those were its weakest points.

Star Division's reaction was quick. In what looked like just a flash of color, the beasts were immobile or dead. Many of their vital crystals had been extracted and recovered by the soldiers. Meanwhile the centipedes continued their hail of fire to no effect.

A hundred turtle-aliens were dead or turned to the enemy's profit. The Violet Prince's face was a dark thunderhead. These humans... they were proving troublesome.

He looked upon Lan Jue with some small measure of fear. He had felt the power released when he and Qianlin had broken through. Even now his human-like heart beat with trepidation.

It was this fear that stopped him from sending in a full charge. However, it was beginning to seem as though typical alien soldiers were ineffectual. When did their turtle brethren become so weak? It was as though they didn't have any armor at all.

Of course that wasn't true, their defenses were strong as ever. But now they faced human Discipline, mighty powers enhanced by technological mastery. It was particularly effective against their own strengths, which relied on vital energy. It was proving far more fatal than pure energy alone. The turtles were dealt with before they could serve their intended purpose.

At last the Violet Prince engaged. He waved his hand and a flood of purple light spread out from him, swallowing his lesser soldiers in its wake. As the power washed over them the aliens' eyes darkened to an angry wine hue. Their bodies swelled, and a fierce aura hung over them.

Amplification?

Lan Jue smirked. Did he think they couldn't play the same game? He needn't say anything, Qianlin was already releasing her soothing light over the soldiers. Over a few short days she had been imbued with an enormous flood of faith. She was only too eager to release some of it.

The power of faith was a pure form of energy, suppressing it was

difficult. If it had been the Pontiff in her place, he would have been only too happy to turn that faith toward personal benefit, to make himself stronger.

However the faith he had commanded was borne of tradition, whereas Qianlin's was the result of salvation. The Pontiff's people begged for peace within them, and Qianlin's followers had been directly saved. The purity of it was entirely different. She was their redeemer! Faith like that was sincere and powerful, how could Qianlin not benefit from it even if she didn't seek to?

The white light spread far and wide, even covering the nearest centipede monsters. To them the light was like the fire from a thousand suns. They screamed in pain and fled before they were destroyed, trailing plumes of acrid purple smoke. Even direct orders from the Violet Prince fell on deaf ears. Fear and instinct overrode his commands.

Human reactions were reversed. Under the light of the Queen of Heaven they felt refreshed, renewed. Any energy they'd expended was returned to them in an instant, but there was something more. It was as though there was something in the air, something that merged with them and communicated with their Disciplines. A strength they'd never felt filled their bodies.

The more experienced Adepts understood – this was protogenia. What they felt was the pull of their truth living in the threads of the universe. It was only the faintest hint, but to them it was almost miraculous. Just like Lan Jue had in years past, using his protogenia through his Ascension to amplify his powers, these soldiers were strengthened. It lifted them up in every way!

Lan Jue's decision to bring Star Division into the main fight was not random. By now the leaders of every unit of Star Division was a ninth level Talent. Their mecha suits were custom made to blend with their abilities seamlessly, resulting in formidable destructive power especially harmful to aliens.

But this was secondary. Star Division wouldn't be able to stop the full

alien army by their own strength alone. Even with a couple interstellar fleets as backup, the enemy was simply too strong, and powerful though the railguns were their efficacy was limited.

The Paragons were the true power. Star Division's primary directive was to keep them safe. Making sure they survived was paramount to the success or failure of the human assault. Prior to making his suggestion to Lan Qing, he'd made sure to have Qianlin try her Discipline on normal Adepts first.

They were pleasantly surprised!

Under the Queen of Heaven Domain, these Adepts could begin to sense their own protogenia. They couldn't control it, but its presence was enough to amplify their abilities by three hundred percent or more.

What's more, Qianlin's abilities restored their energy the same as it did for Paragons. She was a one-woman support team for the whole Division, and with her help their chances of survival rose sharply.

Chapter 822: Queen of Heaven

Amplification

Under the light of the Queen of Heaven, the soldiers felt their Disciplines change. Their Cores were unlocked, their potential released. That unexplainable carefree sensation made their confidence soar, and when the aliens came crashing down on them it was like colliding with a dam. The human soldiers didn't give them an inch of ground.

Of course, the Paragons were not idle.

A small, quaint clock appeared in the Epochrion's hand. Its top and bottom halves separated, revealing a universe of stars within. The twinkling globes danced in strange patterns. In response, time became a lazy river that forced the encroaching aliens to a near-standstill. Once they got close to Star Division's line the Paragon's Domain made them sitting sucks.

Control over the flow of time! Easy for someone of the Clockmaker's strength.

There were powerful beasts among the alien invaders as well, but since they were all borne from the same source their powers were all drawn from a singular well. Humans though – and especially Paragons – were all unique in their abilities. Each one was possessed of their own strengths.

The Epochrion and the Cosmagus worked together to bring their foes low. While the Epochrion took away the advantage of their speed, Skyfire Avenue's Wine Master was responsible for helping Star Division's fighters. When a soldier began to tire or was in mortal danger, a flash of silver conveyed them behind the front line. This prevented their unified defense from being broken. The Wine Master handily controlled the battlefield, eliminating the creatures he deemed too much for Star Division and expertly extracting their vital crystals. With the help of the two Paragons, Skyfire Avenue's private army was having no trouble stemming the purple tide of gnashing teeth and swiping claws.

For now. The enemy was many, numbering in the tens of thousands. How long could they continue at this pace before their energy ran out? Eventually they would run out, and be drowned.

Angel's new planetary defenses delivered its second salvo. The enemy had charged at the humans in a group, which strengthened their charge. However, it also made avoiding the railguns more difficult. The largest creature leaned on its doughty defenses again, but couldn't protect all of its smaller compatriots. Many were felled by the hail of fire.

All the while, the Violet Prince's eyes were fixed on Lan Jue with a burning hatred. This clash between Star Division and the alien force was only the overture. The true battle would be the contest between both sides' generals. Lan Jue had proven himself a foe to be feared after cutting the life from Monarch's avatar. The impression his victory left was deep, especially within the heart of the Prince. He was no longer so sure of his supremacy.

The Prince also sensed another, stronger power hidden somewhere in the wings. From time to time he could feel the enigmatic aura, but only for a moment before it would vanish again. Whatever human commanded that strength was a real threat to his life. He watched from his vantage atop the enormous monster he rode in on, watching and biding his time.

He would wait for the most opportune moment, when his forces broke the human defensive line. Their Paragons would be forced to engage and weakness would be revealed. That was the time to strike.

Lan Jue was also measured in action. On the one hand the situation was under control, and on the other this was good experience for his people. This would not be the last time Star Division would need to fight against overwhelming odds. It was important they grew accustomed to space combat, to Qianlin's augmentative powers. So long as the danger wasn't too great, allowing them to cut their teeth on these enemies was the best sort of training.

The human defenders felt more courageous and powerful the more they fought beneath Qianlin's soothing light. Their enemies were strong, but so

were they. Within the protective confines of their mechas beams of light fired out at their enemies, some over a hundred meters long. Under their combined fire the aliens fell like flies, and the leaders of each unit led their soldiers into the fray.

The stronger aliens were still to come, but for now the situation was well in hand.

The Pharmacist cast a glance toward Lan Jue. He, in turn, shook his head. Now wasn't the time to reveal their full strength. They had to find the right time not just to stall these monsters, but to slay as many as they could.

Time ticked by, minute by minute, as the battle raged. Signs of exhaustion were beginning to show, in the pilots as well as their suits. But the soldiers' training and battle experience served them well. Already more than three thousand of these monstrosities had been killed, many relinquishing their vital crystals.

Quite the showing, considering this was Star Division's first battle in space.

The Wine Master continued to recall soldiers too tired to continue. As their numbers dwindled Star Division began to be pushed back. The mass of creatures that had been waiting for this moment began to writhe anxiously.

Lan Jue's eyes sparkled, and when he spoke his voice was low and even. "Driver, Pharmacist. You're up."

The Pharmacist had started to feel impatient. The hatred she felt for these monsters seeped down into her bones. Lan Jue's order was hardly out of his mouth before a hail of stabbing white light erupted from her.

The sword-swipes moved with remarkable speed, plowing into the enemy force in a matter of moments. Lan Jue cast his attention toward the ground and shouted another order.

The railguns below were commanded to fire at will, turning Angel's surface into a bristling field of light. The mighty weapons fired again and

again, maintaining pressure against the enemy.

The Violet Prince surveyed his own warriors and saw that they were beginning to fracture. If this continued he wouldn't be able to keep control of their formation.

The first two rounds from the railguns had been at reduced power – one-third of their capabilities. Lan Jue had been holding back. He knew the alien understood humans, their weapons and tactics. He used their confidence against them by appearing weak while waiting for the perfect moment to strike back.

This salvo punished the aliens for their hubris. With the sudden, explosive arrival of the Driver and Pharmacist on the field, their losses were great. The tightly-bound clusters the aliens were in was just what the Pharmacist wanted. The more of these fiends she killed, the stronger Domain became.

Meanwhile the Driver was also wreaking havoc. He shot into the midst of the aliens as a bolt of lightning then released his Domain like a bomb. He was on the cusp of becoming a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and his understanding of primordial lightning helped him tremendously. He had come to call his Domain Primal, in honor of this power that had transformed him. As it spread out, his pocket of the cosmos became a dazzling display of thunderbolts.

This manifestation of his protogenia was mighty indeed, and any aliens caught within range was devoured by the burning light. Although primordial lightning was not as strong as All-Heaven lightning, the difference was small. Each bolt disintegrate scores of aliens as it streaked through space.

The Paragons and railgun fire stabilized the front line and halted their gradual retreat. The steady slaughter of the monsters continued.

Their Prince had begun to feel a nagging sense of unease. He had fought many battles against the humans, including their strongest. He felt he understood them. As far as he had seen there were only a handful of these pink creatures that could cause him harm. Even these so-called Paragons,

by and large, did not possess the power needed to cause him fear.

However as he watched the Pharmacist and Driver eliminate his soldiers, the Prince had to admit that there were some among his prey who were worthy adversaries. The force at their fingertips was devastating to the aliens, and inhibited their vital energy.

He stamped his feet, and the beast upon which he rode screeched a terrible roar. However, roar was not the proper word for there was no sound. Instead a wave of gut-wrenching turbulence ripped through space and toward the human line.

The aliens that were caught in the shockwave rode it forward, their bodies rippling grotesquely but otherwise were unaffected. The humans would not meet it so easily. It first was met by the Clockmaker's Domain and rush through without stopping. The Epochrion felt it shatter beneath the force of the wave before roaring passed toward Star Division. It looks like a collision was inevitable.

Suddenly, an impenetrable wall appeared between the shockwave and Star Division. A wall of flesh. Scores of people, each one a thousand meters high, stood with their hands linked and facing down the blast. A golden light and awe-inspiring aura surrounded them all.

The acoustic attack crested against them like a storm surge, but went no further. The figures stood with their feet planted and didn't move an inch. The two forces were separated by the enormous golden silhouettes, with whatever forces remaining behind them quickly put down by the Pharmacist and Driver.

"Titans!" The giants roared in one voice. Then, in a single fluid movement, they all lashed out with a punch toward the enemy.

The power they unleashed took away the breath of the human onlookers. Aliens several times their size were thrust away like they were made of paper. The aliens' murderous advance was abruptly turned back on them. Now it was the Prince's camp that was beginning to lose ground.

There were only a few among the humans who had the power to single-handedly turn the tide of battle. This time it had been the Terminator.

Nirvana, ubiquitous power! After rising to the next level his transformations became myriad. This new ability, Titan, was what they witnessed now. Once again he emerged in the midst of battle, putting himself between his people and danger. Without him the seven Paragons on Heaven's Light would never have survived.

Chapter 823: The Golden Titan

After breaking through to Nirvana, the Terminator's abilities surged to new heights. His combat prowess was the stuff of legends. All of the problems of his construction that held him back before had been resolved, effectively transforming him into a congenital Talent. A real Nirvana-level master.

His appearance now was intended to turn away the enemy and give his human comrade an advantage.

The Violet Prince's eyes flickered with a cold light, and whatever dark purpose crossed his mind was shared by the beast below him. The enormous creatures hurled itself forward, leaving the Prince and Princess behind in the emptiness of space. Every meter of its snake-like body squirmed and writhed as it raced for the titans. When it arrived the monster whipped around and lashed out at the golden line with its tail. Where the appendage passed the universe seemed cleaved in two.

The golden titans glowed with an aura of tungsten light. As the evil wyrm's tail came crashing through they they did not flee. None of the enormous images ducked or dodged, simply taking the beating head on. However, something strange was revealed, for as the titans were struck they were not destroyed or thrown away. Instead they stuck to the tail like plaster, melting into an adhesive liquid that coiled around its body.

One after the other they suffered the lash of the monster's tail, only to stick tenaciously to it. Even as large as the creature was, the weight of these titanic defenders was proving to be more than it could stand. Its tail began to droop, and as it did the liquid gold reformed into a titanic image even larger than before. This one was over ten thousand meters tall, dark skinned and heroic – the Terminator. He channeled the powers of Nirvana through himself to create this unique, melee fighting style.

Dozens of savage dark-gold spikes erupted from the Terminator's flesh and dug into the monster. As it brandished its tail, desperately whipping it about to free itself from the Terminator's clutches, the humongous

Paragon only dug in deeper. Aliens too slow or too foolish to move were smashed to a fine mist as the Terminator was flung around.

The massive alien beast roared in pain and frustration, struggling with ever more violent maneuvers. But the Terminator would be removed, no matter how valiantly it struggled. The two were locked in struggle between the two armies.

Star Division took this opportunity to catch their breath. Under Qianlin's restorative Domain they quickly began to recover their strength and stamina.

The Pharmacist and Driver split up, each going to the opposite flank to defend against aliens trying to get around. On the planet below railguns were still firing. The aliens still could not find a way through the defensive line.

Lan Jue's cold, hard eyes glared at the Violet Prince and Princess. The aliens didn't have the upper hand yet, but they also had yet to advance on the humans with their full strength. Victory or defeat rested on whether the two alien generals could be dealt with.

A strange look played across the Princess' face as she looked upon Lan Jue. A stream of purple light shot forward quicker than anyone could react. In a blink, she was standing before Star Division's commander. Her hand reached out for him.

Lan Jue didn't know much about the enigmatic alien royalty, but he did know her to be as strong as she was cruel. He saw her intentions in her eyes moments before she acted, and stood his ground fearlessly.

Lan Jue and Qianlin, blades in hand, struck back. They reacted as one, slipping seamlessly into the posture Apparent Close-up. Focused flow combined with the Taiji style was both majestic and dignified. Lan Jue faced the Princess' advance as solid as a lofty mountain.

Qianlin's Thousand Swords as One technique together with the posture was agile as the wind and gentle as spring rain. The motion simultaneously sealed any escape and slipped into every opening. 1

Their movements were mirrored, their intentions one. Harmonious Swords. The rainbow-colored light that emerged between them formed a shield that blocked the Princess' aggression.

Bang! The moment they made contact the rainbow light expanded like a detonation. The violet light that had threatened to swallow Lan Jue up was deflected away like waves against a Cliffside.

Both Lan Jue and the Princess didn't budge, attack and defense evenly matched. All of the other Paragons were thrown back by the force of the Princess' charge. However in the midst of their shock they also breathed a sigh of relief. Qianlin and Lan Jue, hand in hand, could stand on their own against an Infinite-level foe.

Lan Jue's reaction was internal, his exclamations ringing in his heart. Not long ago he was little more than a thorn in the Princess' side, hardly above the worth of a stray dog. Where before he had no choice but to flee from her, now he could stand against her power.

After their temporary isolation, both he and Qianlin were more familiar with the nature of their protogenia. This was also true for their Harmonious Swords technique. Jun Yongye and Xuanyuan Shishi taught them that it wasn't necessary for them to pour all of their energy into the technique. The Harmonious Swords were about application of swordsmanship in combination with intention. A little internal energy could go a long way when paired with technique. Not only did this reduce the energetic cost, but also made their attacks stronger.

The most important part of their isolation had been studying the Harmonious Swords. Now they put this new knowledge to good use in defending themselves against the Violet Princess.

Surprise was revealed on the alien royalty's face. She hadn't witnessed Lan Jue's breakthrough herself, only heard the details from the Prince. While she always recognized his potential, she still assumed him to be her inferior. He was not an adversary, but a potential mate. Now, though, she began to wonder if her determination was wrong. Perhaps this man was stronger than she gave him credit for.

In the moment of collision she had felt a strange power resist her, causing space and time to collapse. This collapse stymied her powers and kept them from spreading out, instead being swallowed up by the void. It was swiftly followed by the sensation of a hundred thousand needles digging into her soft flesh. If she had continued her attack she might have even gotten hurt. As such she had not yet countered Lan Jue's Harmonious Swords.

The two Paragons shared a look, seeing each other reflected in the depths of their eyes. As one, they reached out again with their Banishing Blades. Red and blue light burst forth, mingling together into a panoply of color. The Harmonious Swords, giving shape to the depths of human vengeance!

The spirits of the swords arose unhindered as a torrent; focused flow, ten thousand swords as one.

The rainbow of color took on a life of its own, flaring with incomparable force. The breadth of its power filled space.

A cold anger glinted behind the Princess' eyes. Ten dagger-like nails sprang out from the tip of each finger and she swiped at the air. Purple streamers followed in the wake of her claws as she tore at the righteous light. Then she pulled her arms apart, as though trying to rip the emulsion of the Harmonious Blade in two.

Vicious and feral, that was the alien fighting style. Both Lan Jue and Qianlin felt their protogenia destabilize as it came under assault. Suddenly the Princess' power was everywhere all at once, surrounding them in her terrifying presence.

Just as she seemed to have them in her clutches, the Princess' face changed. Her suffocating bearing weakened, and instead of the light of the Harmonious Swords being ripped apart she staggered.

The light pushed back, struck her, and forced her back. However Lan Jue could see it didn't cause any lasting damage. With powers that were borne of the Infinite, her resilience was legendary.

Ka-cha! The Violet Princess was painted pink from head to toe as the

sound of a camera shutter snapped in their ears. She was frozen in place. A menacing aura as powerful as her own descended upon them. It was so stifling it almost made Lan Jue and Qianlin drop their weapons.

A light as brilliant and mesmerizing as beams from heaven shone from on high. Everything outside of the god rays darkened to nothing. All the rest of the universe seemed inferior to what was appearing before them.

For the first time, fear was plain on the Princess' face. She wanted to struggle but found she could not move. Lan Jue shared a mysterious smile with Qianlin and then, suddenly, they vanished.

A towering staff descended in the midst of the golden column of light. In fact the light was radiating from its bronze surface. Reality tore itself apart at the borders of it, like everything they knew was being swallowed in a sea of black holes.

All light, all energy was swallowed up by the staff. In the distance the Violet Prince stared with pale face, but couldn't run even if his legs would let him.

Somewhere far away they both heard the derisive grunt. The Violet Princess was encased in a shell of purple light that burned away the pink that had been holding her.

The staff crashed down upon the crown on her head. The blow threw her thousands of meters away.

The purple light cracked and fell away like an eggshell, followed by spider web fractures slithering all over the Princess' body. She began to slowly disintegrate, but was saved from destruction when another shell of purple energy enveloped her. Despite this she continued to bleed profusely. After suffering such a tremendous strike, she could no longer control the form of her body.

Jue Di appeared by Lan Jue's side. His hard, cruel eyes glared into the distance. "Give me everything you've got. If you can."

Silence answered him. The Violet Prince had recovered the Princess and returned her to his side. Clearly she had suffered a nearly mortal blow.

Her beautiful face was pale and streaked with blood, and her eyes wide with fear and alarm. She had felt death coming for her, sensed her essence fleeing.

Lan Jue narrowed his eyes in thought. From the start he figured the Prince and Princess would make an appearance. By virtue of the ten Paragons on the human side, he was confident that even with royalty as their adversaries they could hold them. The Prince and Princess were strong, but they would not bring the Avatars and leave the solar system's interior entirely undefended.

Chapter 824: Winning Buddha Legacy

Because of this, their strength was limited. For now Lan Jue was relying on the strength of his fellow Paragons, and waiting for his enemy to make the first move.

Lan Jue had faith that he and Qianlin's Harmonious Sword technique could resist the Prince and Princess, despite their power gap. He'd done it before, all that was needed is to give his mother and father a chance to act.

Their foes could vaguely sense his mother's presence, but they didn't know his father was also near. Jue Di was the strongest human alive, and had explored the secrets of the Infinite for an untold number of years. One on one, neither the Prince nor Princess had what was needed to best him. Only Monarch was a threat.

Lan Jue had hoped that either one of the royals attacked him. If they did, his mother and father could move in and cut them down. If one of these alien generals could be destroyed it would be a great victory for the humans. What's more, their vital crystals would definitely be of great help to Jue Di.

Unfortunately his hopes did not come to fruition. He did not expect the two aliens to defend each other so well, enough to ward off his father's full attack.

When Jue Di's staff came crashing down, Lan Jue felt the force of it. Not even the Harmonious Swords could defend against something like that. His father's strength was truly awe-inspiring.

He knew where his father's inheritance was derived from. It was the essence of a mighty being passed down from antiquity, no less mighty than the Buddhas of old. He had been called the Winning Buddha – Great Sage Equal to Heaven! ¹

Jue Di's astrum was a weapon of his own creation, modeled after the golden staff that was favored by the Great Sage. In regards to strength it was no less potent than a Banishing Blade, and in fact had some advantages the swords did not.

Yet, it still was not enough to kill the Violet Princess.

Jue Di was not put off by the failure of his sneak attack to end her life. He hovered in the air with an imperial air, and though he did not press the attack he had become the center of the battle.

When the ultimate Paragon revealed himself the humans' spirits soared. The aliens sensed his stupefying aura and hesitated. Their leader, the Prince, scowled. Four flashes of purple lit up the space around him revealing four figures, but only one of them was an avatar.

The avatar took a step forward, and in a blink it was past the Prince and standing in front of Jue Di. Flickers of purple light hung over its figure.

But its powers were only Nirvana-level.

“You are also a robust creature. You have achieved such heights, why do you remain in conflict with us? Our realm with certainly have a place for the likes of you. Together our people can overcome the tyranny of the universe! Sure you understand this truth?” The monstrous voice it spoke with had a peculiar quality to it, an allure that inspired capitulation.

This was Monarch's voice, or some shadow of it. Though the alien patriarch was not present it could speak through these copies. As he gazed upon the shell of light that crackled around the beast Lan Jue suddenly understood – it had been Monarch that saved the Violet Princess.

The revelation struck him like a ton of bricks. Were they not in the midst of their evolution? How were they able to express their power so far away? It meant that they were a threat regardless of where they were. Did this portend that Lan Qing would be facing the power of the three alien home worlds in his own campaign? What chance did they stand now?

Lan Jue felt like he was being drowned in an ocean of despair. A terrifying chill filled him.

Jue Di's response was calm. “Not bad. Contending against universal protogenia is important to us as well. But you have your people, and I have my own. Your methods of overcoming the universe are based on the destruction of humans, my brethren. Already you have slain so many. Do

you expect me to stand at your side after the atrocities you've committed? Those who are not of our blood do not hold the same ideals. Even if you succeed to creating your realm it would be no place for me – we are not the same. A whole new universe wouldn't be big enough for both of us.”

A chilly tone entered Monarch's voice. “You aren't strong enough to stand against me. Once we succeed and I rise to new heights of dominance, I will consider halting the destruction of your species. It would hold no more interest for me. But I will only let you live if you cease your resistance now.”

Jue Di laughed openly in the monster's face. “What are you, three years old? Nothing but empty words. You would simply go back on your word the moment your realm was created. My people and I would be slain. Our destiny is in our hands, so continue your evolution if you can. We'll see who dominates in the end.”

The avatar glared at Jue Di with cold, feral eyes. After a moment, it nodded. “Very well!”

The purple aura drained from the avatar and it returned to normal. The host of aliens around them began to slither away, breaking off the attack.

The titanic monster struggling with the Terminator roared. Its tail broke free, shed like a lizard's. Then it and its smaller brethren returned to the Prince's side where they receded into the darkness of space as one.

They were retreating. Jue Di's authoritative appearance had pushed them back, resulting in a stellar victory for humans. Many alien creatures were destroyed, while mankind had emerged without casualties.

Lan Jue did not give the order to pursue. The enemy's retreat was slow and orderly, and there was high chance of an ambush if they chose to go after them. Their mission was to protect Angel, which they had.

“Let's head back.” Jue Di grumbled at them.

Star Division set about gathering vital crystals from the corpse of their fallen foes. Only then did they head back to the safety of the planet.

Repelled! The enemy had been pushed back! The good news flew to all

corners of Angel. They had really fought back the tide of destruction!

But Lan Jue and the others were not overjoyed. This was only the start, information about the others was their new priority. Once news of the armada's situation got back they would decide whether or not to join Lan Qing on Middle Heaven.

They learned of their status soon. Though Angel was safe, the armada was locked in a deadly stalemate at the front lines.

"Excellent!" After hearing about Lan Jue's success a fierce light shone in Lan Qing's eyes. Now that their rear was secured, they could push forward without worry.

Hua Li and Kang Hui also got the news.

"Shall we begin, Admiral Lan?" Kang Hui's deep voice queried.

Lan Qing nodded. Now was the time for them to do their part.

A few moments later, Middle Heaven began to stir from its silent vigil.

The Violet Prince, Princess, and at least some of the avatars were absent from this battlefield. Lan Qing's forces faced only a few of their top echelons, marking this as their best opportunity to press ahead. He'd been waiting for news from Angel, and now he had it.

An angry orange glow sprang up behind Middle Heaven, pushing the warplanet forward toward the enemy. Their foes did not have human worlds to hide behind this time, their only option was direct combat.

The three bastions started ahead at the same time, with the twelve fleets in neat formation around them. All together they slowly advanced.

On the enemy's side their formation shifted. Creatures that were leading the charge split off from the main force and began to trace a route toward the armada's flanks. The beasts in the rear were revealed.

Soldiers huddled by the windows of their ships saw the monstrous aliens appear from behind the front lines. Each one of them looked like giant winged crocodiles over ten thousand meters long. All told there were twelve, and each one bore a humanoid finger standing on its head. Avatars

of the three planets.

Twelve enormous beasts, and twelve avatars to command them. 2
Twenty four Paragon-level monstrosities headed their way. Most were equivalent in strength to Nirvana, but at least three bore the power of the Infinite.

Seeing so many powerful foes arrayed against them caused Lan Qing to suck in a breath. Their forces were more capable than he'd anticipated. This showed that the aliens had never employed their full strength against the humans. Perhaps they hadn't needed to before. Now, however, their presence spoke volumes.

Kang Hui scowled at the scene. He'd downplayed Lan Qing's warning when he'd told them the aliens had not yet showed their full hand. He suspected the Admiral of being overly cautious. If they had the strength, why didn't these monsters simply overrun the humans from the outset? Lan Qing had shared his reasoning but Kang Hui only agreed on the surface.

The truth of Lan Qing's words was proven now. The terrifying might of their enemy was revealed to them. Comparatively the humans didn't even have twenty-four Paragons to answer with.

"Should we ask the Paragons to join us, Admiral Lan?" Kang Hui asked.

Chapter 825: The Battle for the Universe Begins

Lan Qing shook his head. "Don't be hasty. We'll call them when we need them the most." He had his plans, the core of which were secret even to Kang Hui and Hua Li.

Kang Hui couldn't help but admire the Admiral as he looked at his calm façade through the screen. It was more than impressive that he could maintain his composure in the face of this alien threat. No wonder he achieved the rank of admiral so young.

He made no further complaints. The Eastern leader's fortitude washed away any final doubts he had.

Middle Heaven didn't stop or slow after the appearance of this mighty impediment, and maintained the same forward momentum. Its honeycomb array of cannons stretched out, smoldering with orange light. They were ready to fire at a moment's notice.

The three bastions and their twelve support fleets moved into battle formation.

The center of the alien force was the twelve crocodile titans and the twelve avatars that rode them. The rest of the horde spread out on either side, far enough to avoid taking too much damage from human long-ranged attacks. Measures were taken to even the playing field and reduce their enemy's advantage, learned from a wealth of experience on the battlefield.

It was necessary. Out here in the emptiness of space there was nowhere to hide, and so long as they were outside of melee distance they were inhibited. What's more, their loss at Angel meant they didn't have a rear force to fall back on.

Somewhere behind them was Europa and their home worlds, trying desperately to succeed in their own breakthrough. But the aliens didn't fear, they were confident the humans couldn't break their line.

Lan Qing's guess had been correct, the aliens had not used their full strength at the beginning this war. One important reason was they feared destroying the human soldiers outright would reveal to them how strong they would need to make their next attempt. The creatures didn't want stronger opposition.

Now the human armada was proving to be more troublesome than they'd predicted. The only way to make sure they were stopped was to finally reveal the strength the aliens had been hiding this whole time. Victory would come at a cost, but it was necessary. If another group of humans of comparable strength showed up, they could negatively impact their masters' evolution.

And so a dogfight was inevitable where the aliens would try to do as much damage as they could while maintaining their own numbers. As ever their goal was clear – stall for time.

So far, at least on the surface, they appeared successful. The humans had made it into the solar system's interior, but it'd cost them dearly in time and resources. Every moment brought them closer to the ascension of their home worlds to godhood. Even if the humans sent another group, by the time they got here it would be too late.

Stretching over two thousand meters tall, the central avatar seemed to lead the others. Its head snapped up, quickly followed by the others. Twelve thunderous roars were released as one from the monsters they rode.

The waves of sound and energy were so intense they shook the empty space between the two armies. Miniscule cracks appeared in reality as the wave of power headed toward the human ships. A shockwave, their version of a long-ranged attack.

Lan Jue had provided his brother with more than news of their victory. He'd also handed over a full recording of the encounter, and with it integral information about this massive fiends. Armed with this knowledge Lan Qing had ordered all ships to have their ships on and at full capacity.

Middle Heaven responded by releasing a barrage of orange light back at them.

The rays of energy burned holes in the shockwave that bled off its power. Still, the combined ire of twelve Nirvana-level beasts was intrepid.

Danger to the bastions themselves was limited, large as they were – the worst they might suffer was a good tremor. However, the smaller ships fared less fortunately. A few were blasted out of formation and strained the armada's steel curtain.

Just then the aliens rushed in like locusts from either side, madly gnashing their teeth and swiping their claws. The titanic monstrosities followed close behind, propelled forward by beating wings. Their target was Middle Heaven.

The commanders of the alien horde were cunning. They knew the key to routing the armada was to first destroy the largest of them. With Middle Heaven destroyed human morale would plummet. Victory would be in their clawed grasp.

Standing in the command center, Lan Qing was unfazed by the deadly tide bearing down on them. Instead he only muttered to himself. "This is all you've got?"

"Interstellar fleets, proceed."

Helmsmen aboard the scores of human vessels received the order and the ships began to move. The three bastions threw open their hangar bays and belched out clouds of drones. Like launched like guided missiles. Drones were typically between thirty and fifty meters long, though each bastion was equipped with slightly different aircraft.

Drones from Tyrannosaurus were a sky-blue color and were marked with a dinosaur insignia. They were fifty meters long, equipped with a laser blaster and four antimatter missiles that packed as much punch as a small positron cannon. Only the North, with its deep pockets, could outfit their drones with so much firepower. Neither the North nor West could compare in this regard.

Poseidon Group, however, was another story. As the richest organization in all of human history, it was impossible to understate how highly they regarded their flagship. Nothing was spared in its construction nor in the fleets that accompanied it. Up to now those fleets had proven their technical superiority, in some ways performing better even than Tyrannosaurus.

The drones aboard Poseidon were forty meters long, slightly smaller than their Northern counterparts. They were a deep, cobalt blue and had the Poseidon trident emblazoned on their surface. They also bore laser blasters, two instead of one, and six guided missiles. Two of those were antimatter missiles, and the remaining four were soft water bombs. Their destructive power far outstripped Tyrannosaurus' drones, and boasted of Poseidon's wealth.

Laser fire was the proverbial bread and butter of fighter drones. It's how they stayed in the fight. Missiles were damaging, yes, but more importantly was whether the ships had enough energy reserves to stay in fray longer. Arming these drones with two laser guns proved Poseidon Group's faith that they had enough energy to meet and surpass their brethren from other alliances – the result of extensive scientific research.

Ten thousand drones were released from the bowels of Tyrannosaurus, a truly stunning number. However, not to be outdone, Poseidon boasted eighteen thousand fighters of their own – even more than the North's fallen Terminator bastion.

Middle Heaven's drones were white and were marked with the ensign of the Bloodiron Khans. They were a surprising sixty meters long, even larger than Tyrannosaurus'. Were it not for the sheer size of Middle Heaven, it wouldn't be capable of housing very many such machines.

Although they were long, their construction was exceedingly slender and streamlined. None of them were fitted with missiles, but they did have four laser cannons as replacements. They were specialized to only one mode of combat. Flame decals adorned their tails.

Three very different classes of fighter drones, each as effective as the

last. Poseidon's vessels appeared to be the most punishing, but were also the smallest. Appearances were deceiving. Tyrannosaurus' drones were middle of the road in regards to size, and showed off the North's technical superiority.

Finally there was Middle Heaven's squadron, largest of the group. However size was not the most important factor in interstellar combat. Larger ships made larger targets for the enemy! What's more they didn't have any missiles as secondary artillery. Contemporary military strategists would conclude they were the weakest of the three classes.

The four laser cannons were notable, but largely disregarded as laughable especially for Northerners. The North had more bastions – and thus more experience with them – than any other alliance. The drones aboard Tyrannosaurus were the result of all their research and expertise. They struck the perfect balance between attack, speed and maneuverability.

Chapter 826: Who is Mightiest?

To the North, the Poseidon-class bastion was an upstart, new to the game. It was strong, certainly, but essentially purchased through the Group's stupendous wealth. Meanwhile Middle Heaven's fighter drones seemed unreasonable.

The cost of laser guns were not cheap. Although they were reusable – unlike missiles – they had to be practical in function otherwise they were just decoration. How much energy did they require? At the North's current level of technology equipping their drones with two laser weapons was already pushing the upper limit. Continuous use of both drained their energy reserves quickly, making returns to the bastion for resupply more frequent. On average, a drone needed thirty minutes to charge their stores back to full capacity. That was thirty minutes away from the action.

Drones weren't just used for harassing the enemy, either. They performed well at causing interference, which meant the longer they could remain on the field the more effective they were.

Four laser guns looked impressive, and they could probably cause some damage, but how many shots could you get off? They were sitting ducks once their energy stores were exhausted without missiles to back them up, making them essentially useless. Half the time they'd spend docked on the bastion, charging.

Middle Heaven had shocked the commanders of other vessels again and again throughout the war. Yet despite this Northern military officers scorned these new drones. The East was the East, they joked to one another, ever inferior. These fancy drones were little more than a ploy to trick the public into thinking they were strong.

Their derisive comments would change, however, as the fight unfolded.

As the three bastions released their cloud of drones they spread out to the armada's periphery. The ships were small, but were superior in both speed and maneuverability to their larger counterparts. As they burst passed the defensive line they didn't rush in for direct conflict against the

aliens, and instead swung wide around their edges. Their goal was to harass and distract the enemy to protect the rest of the fleet.

Numbering in the tens of thousands it was unwise to disregard even these tiny drones. Before bastions they were the forefront of military conflicts. After all, a million ant bites could bring down an elephant. A single drone couldn't do much, but a wave of them could be devastating.

Drone pilots were carefully screened. They were among the highest trained, with their best surpassing god-ranked mecha pilots in skill. They couldn't capture a battlefield on their own, but a solid pilot could give the assistance needed to win the day.

Three sets of colorful drones darted among the enemy, each with their own style. The sky-blue ships from Tyrannosaurus charged in, spreading out in all directions at the last moment like a blooming flower. Then, like a giant blanket, burned ahead to meet the encroaching alien forces.

Tyrannosaurus' secondary weapons systems went live, firing beams of light into the enemy. Fleet vessels nearby lent their firepower to the frontal assault as well.

But the aliens were determined to fight and die for their home worlds. They pushed ahead into the deadly barrage with complete disregard to their individual safety. Fighting at a distance was not their specialty, they had to press in close in order to destroy these pesky human ships.

The first line of aliens were shredded beneath the hail of laser fire from Tyrannosaurus and its entourage. But the creatures were not foolish, the creatures at the fore of their charge were ones most suited toward defense. They were pummeled by the salvos but pushed ahead a good while before succumbing to their wounds. As they did, the beasts behind them picked up speed, desperate to close the gap.

Tyrannosaurus' fighter drones began to show the aliens their strength. All at once the two thousand drones leading the charge fired their antimatter rockets. Northern training was on full display as the attack was executed in almost perfect synchronicity. Only their targets were varied, to spread the destruction of their missiles over a wide area.

Space lit up as the missiles found their marks. The sudden, intense blast flew the oncoming alien horde into chaos as the sturdier beasts fled to avoid the aftermath.

Another thousand drones moved in from the rear and began peppering the enemy with laser fire. Attacks were coming from all sides and the aliens weren't sure which way to turn. The tactic was simple but effective; hit the enemy hard then use superior speed and maneuverability to escape out of range. Meanwhile the main human fleet was still tearing through swaths of foes, and Tyrannosaurus was turning to position its main gun while spraying fire from their secondary cannons. The bastions and its surrounding ships punished the creatures with the full might of their weapons, stopping the charge.

Poseidon was even more effective. It was larger than the North's former flagship, Terminator, and was equipped with a plethora of secondary weapon arrays. The rays of energy it spat were a deep blue, as though it were spouting torrents of sea water at the enemy.

Aside from its main weapons, Poseidon was also equipped with twelve auxiliary heavy cannons. They were strong enough that one blast was enough to rip apart aliens three thousand meters long. The dense bombardment from their secondary weapons systems and railguns also outstripped Tyrannosaurus.

Their drones' fighter style was also unique. They arranged themselves in circular formation around Poseidon, creating a defensive perimeter. When the aliens got close those stacks of rings ring expanded and released its laser payload. Round after round of burning energy tore through the enemy ranks to create a perfect cover for the Group's home vessel and forced the monsters back.

Poseidon's main weapon was yet to be employed. Compared to Tyrannosaurus, it was holding back the tide of aliens with ease. The preponderance of resources available to the Poseidon Group was on full display as their bastion's remarkable capabilities were revealed.

But it was Middle Heaven that was under the greatest pressure, for they

didn't face the lesser breeds of monsters. The East's flagship was the focus of the twelve titanic fiends and the twelve avatars that rode them. Their goal was to destroy Middle Heaven and strike a blow at the heart of the human armada. Middle Heaven was the core of human resistance, and its command center. If they didn't hold the line, it would spell the armada's destruction.

Chapter 827: Sacrifice?

Middle Heaven held nothing back. The moment its drones were dispatched they shook the heavens with their offensive response.

Fifteen thousand drones flooded the battlefield like wasps from the hive. All four of their laser cannons were blazing from the outset, forcing lesser creatures back before they ever got close. The spread of their guns was so ubiquitous and intense they could rival four interstellar fleets.

Five such fleets surrounded Middle Heaven now, but for now their cannons were dark. It seemed like they were waiting for something. Likewise Middle Heaven's honeycomb of cannons were on full display, but were not firing. The saffron yellow energy that twinkled in the depths of its guns could be seen, but no one knew when they would explode into action.

One of Monarch's avatars was the commander of the enemy forces. It lifted its arm overhead and in response the crocodile-like monsters picked up speed. Once more they roared a challenge at the human ships, but the shockwave they produced was aimed at the drones instead of the bastion.

Your bastion may be able to withstand our shockwave, it must have thought, but can your paltry drones?

It went without saying that shockwave was a restrictive force of the drones. The wide-spread attack limited their actions. But Middle Heaven had an answer.

The drones broke off and scattered in all directions to try and avoid the blast. Meanwhile the barrels at the rear of Middle Heavens fired all together, hurling the bastion forward like an enormous cannon ball. In the same moment the myriad of guns on its surface began to radiate with yellow light.

Lan Qing's earlier surprise attack, Solar Flare, was fresh in the enemy's mind. It'd served as a profound lesson for them.

The titans broke off their charge and the avatars that rode them swelled.

In an instant they were a thousand meters tall, evil giants in human flesh surrounded by a stifling aura. They didn't attack right away, waiting for the perfect moment. When the opportunity presented itself they would strike and destroy this bastion that had caused them so much suffering.

The titans themselves were no less commanding than sovereign-class Capital ships. The avatars that commanded them were equivalent to Nirvana-level Paragons. They were confident in their overwhelming force, assured in the inevitable destruction of their prey. Although bastions were a danger, their technology-based attacks were limited by resources.

As they'd learned, Solar Flare was terrifyingly destructive but only within a certain scope. The avatars had the advantage of speed and knew Middle Heaven's plans, so the humans could not lure them close enough for the attack to do them harm.

For the moment the battle was at a stalemate, but the aliens had the advantage of numbers.

Middle Heaven launched ahead alone. Saffron light flickered against the purple skin of the beasts as the distance between them closed.

Suddenly the frontal cannons on Middle Heaven lit up. Just as Monarch's avatar thought a frontal attack was incoming, the whole bastion flared with blinding light. Its rear thrusters opened wide and the ship blazed ahead like an indomitable comet.

The sheer power radiating from the bastion was enough to strike fear in the hearts of the avatars. Almost automatically they tried to avoid where they thought the attack would come from but Middle Heaven didn't stop. On the contrary it continued to pick up speed, and all the while the bright yellow energy encasing it grew brighter. It looked like preparation for Solar Flare.

More surprising to the fragment of Monarch was the erratic, almost unstable pulses of energy it felt from the bastion. The faster it went the more precarious it felt, like the entire ship could detonate at any moment.

Was it planning...?

After a moment of surprise the avatar understood what Middle Heaven was going to do. Middle Heaven wasn't moving in to attack them, it was heading right for Europa. It was a blazing comet on a collision course with the Western capital.

Sacrifice itself?

Monarch's doppelganger was bewildered. The alien forces were confident they could repel the humans, even destroy them. However, it had never occurred to them that Middle Heaven would throw itself into one of the humans own planets.

Middle Heaven, remember, was a planet that was remolded into a ship. The sheer catastrophic force of two planets colliding was terrifying to ponder. What's more, the fluctuating waves of power radiating from the ship far surpassed what the aliens imagined it was capable of. It was comparable to the energy of an exploding star!

Even if the alien home worlds completed their evolution, the explosion like that might be enough to destroy them.

Unthinkable! Monarch's avatar released an ear-piercing shriek, calling the titans back. They swung around and charged toward Middle Heaven, desperate to stop it at all costs. They could not allow the bastion to collide with Europa.

Pressure on the remaining ships eased as the avatars were pulled from the battlefield. Though Middle Heaven was no longer in play, the five fleets it left behind and its drones were able to hold the line together with the other two bastions.

Their long-ranged advantage continued to serve the humans as the battle progressed, substantially increased by the addition of the drones. The containment strategies and sheer number of the smaller ships made up for their lack of close-range combat ability.

Much to the surprise of commanders on Poseidon and Tyrannosaurus, Middle Heaven's drones stayed in the fight despite its bastion leaving. Their stores of energy were far superior to the others even employing double the number of laser guns per ship. One drone packed the punch of

a battleship.

If it were a few ships it wouldn't mean much, but fifteen thousand such vessels was unheard of! One salvo cleared out a huge area of foes, and the attacks were perfectly executed. Clearly their training and cooperation were also superior. After evading the enemy shockwave, they quickly became the main force for front line. Under their protection the five interstellar fleets continued to tear through the enemy with their own weapons, while reducing their own losses.

Chapter 828: The Strongest Drones

Good man, is there anything Lan Qing can't do?

Hua Li wasn't as surprised by the status of Middle Heaven's drones as the Northerners were. After all, he knew Lan Qing better, and their relationship went beyond mere cooperation. Kang Hui's mind raced and decided that the East must have found some special method of energy use. It was the only way they could use four laser cannons over such a long period and not have to recharge. It was a truly game-changing development that he was completely unaware of until this moment. If not for this war his military would still be in the dark.

It was incredible to see this alliance, which the North consistently looked down on, rising to such technological prominence so quickly. Middle Heaven was an example, superior to the North's fallen Terminator-class bastion. Kang Hui figured his alliance would need three bastions if they wanted to bring it down in a fight. Nor were there any commanders on his side that could compare with Lan Qing.

The Eastern admiral had told them he would use Middle Heaven to lure the main force away and do whatever it could to reduce their numbers. He had not, however, told them how he'd planned to do that. When Kang Hui saw Middle Heaven blazing toward Europa he was just as surprised as the avatars. But he also knew the only way to truly deceive the enemy was to hide the truth from one's own side.

Under Lan Qing's leadership a single bastion was inscrutable, and had limitless utility. Even his own soldiers didn't fully know what he was capable of or what his goals were. It was his greatest strength.

By now Middle Heaven had stretched far from the main body of the armada, but the blinding light it emitted was clearly visible. Was he really planning to sacrifice himself and his ship in a kamikaze run? Whether or not it would succeed, the courage was stunning.

If his own troops believed he was charging in for a final collision, of course the aliens did as well. Twelve lumbering monstrosities raced after

the burning bastion, guided by twelve avatars of the aliens' home planets.

Meanwhile the human and alien forces continued to pummel one another, neither gaining the upper hand. No one knew what would become of the valiant Middle Heaven either.

Lan Qing stood in the bastion's control center, his eyes glued to the screens before him. His face was the same expressionless mask it always was. All of the ship's energy was being called on and the temperatures inside were reaching scalding levels. Through his enhanced perception Lan Qing could sense every wave of erratic energy pulsing from the molonite.

This was precisely the sensation he was looking for. How else would he get the alien generals' attention?

If the twenty four monsters that followed him were allowed to wreak havoc among the ship, humanity's chances of victory were slim. It didn't matter if the aliens break their lines or the humans pressed ahead to Europa, the result would be close combat. The aliens had them beat in that regard.

So, Lan Qing conceived this plan before they set out. A suicide attack!

These creatures were hell-bent on evolution. Destroying the human race wasn't their main objective. Lan Qing grasped this, and so he pushed the molonite that powered Middle Heaven to its limit. Its precarious nature made them a threat even if Solar Flare wasn't used.

He ignored the mighty beasts that sought to stop his charge, and pressed ahead. Whether or not they followed, he didn't care. If they didn't give chase his suicide run would be unhindered and their mission would be successful.

Lan Qing knew how much energy was contained in the molonite that powered his bastion. He knew what sort of devastation would be caused if it was released all at once on the alien home worlds. At the very least, one of the planets would be completely obliterated. If the three were close enough he could kill all three.

If sacrificing Middle Heaven meant the destruction of his enemy, Lan Qing considered that a worthy price. Not just for the East, but for all mankind.

Of course, as he anticipated, the aliens had come after him and with a vengeance. They put their speed advantage to work and were on a course to intercept.

“Turn!” Lan Qing coldly ordered.

Middle Heaven’s trajectory slowly started to change. It traced a burning arc in attempts to avoid being caught, then swung around again to keep Europa in its path.

While Lan Qing wasn’t sure of the planets’ precise location, Lan Jue’s recon intelligence had proven that they were here. Somehow Europa was involved in their evolution, so they couldn’t be far. Europa’s location was no secret, so that’s where he was headed.

The twelve crocodile-beasts swung around to continue their pursuit. They gave up trying to cut the ship off and opted to attack its flanks directly. Furiously beating their wings to keep up, orbs of sickly purple-black energy were spat from their mouths. At the same time the avatars that rode them leapt from the creatures and raced ahead with frightening speed. Their thousand-meter tall bodies blazed with the light of their powers, and together their auras threatened to drown out Middle Heaven’s star-like luminescence. They hoped to forcibly bridle the bastion’s speed.

The closer they came to Middle Heaven, the sense of instability grew more intense. It could blow at any moment, and when it did the aliens would have no chance to flee. So, although the avatars had the strength to stop the bastion, they nonetheless held back. Although they were simply fragments of the planets they came from, they still had a consciousness. Anything with a mind of its own feared death.

Terrifying was the only way to expression the combination of the twelve titans and the avatars that commanded them. Middle Heaven’s shields were increased to their highest levels to withstand their attempts to slow it down. As a result its speed invariably slowed. However the wild

fluctuations of energy never ceased.

They were now far from the main battlefield.

Merciless light flickered in the eyes of the primary avatar, another from Monarch. Its arms had become two massive tentacles that spread over Middle Heaven. They swelled larger as the suction pads that covered their underside sucked away the shield's energy. The human bastion had no way to cut itself free, but it could blast them away.

A slithering cold crept up the avatar's spine, enough of a sensation to force it to react. Its tentacle-arms detached like a lizard's tail, and it shot far into the distance as a beam of violet light.

A dark golden light erupted from the position it'd just abandoned. Below, a silhouette was visible on the planet's surface.

CRACK! The golden light became an enormous golden staff. The first beast to feel its wrath was one of the crocodiles, as the weapon smashed down on its enormous head. Its mighty skull caved in and the brains within were destroyed.

Three more images appeared as the monster was cut up into dozens of pieces. It became a cloud of blood and gore hovering in space.

An image appeared just outside of the bastion, a figured clad head to toe in glittering golden armor. The parts of its body which were revealed were covered in coarse golden hair, and its eyes were a smoldering crimson-gold that shone like dual suns. In its hand was the giant staff that had slain the giant beast.

The image lunged toward the next group of enemies, swinging its staff. Its mighty aura alone frightened several avatars away. However the ten-thousand meter long crocodiles could not so easily elude the attack. One by one they were smashed apart by the staff.

Jue Di had joined the fight, releasing the unbridled might of his Winning Buddha dharma. The ultimate Paragon's appearance relieved Middle Heaven of its tormentors.

On the other side of Middle Heaven a flash of pink flit by. Another

beast had only half a moment to react before it froze solid. A surge of rainbow light painted the creature in a myriad of colors before burst into pieces. A vortex of red energy appeared moments later to swallow the remains of the creatures into nothing.

Several of the twenty-four mightiest aliens were slain in the sudden sneak attack. Meanwhile blinking lights heralded the arrival of several more figures around the bastion. Middle Heaven continued along its arc but no longer headed for Europa. Now it was burning back toward the main battle.

The aliens were unprepared for the sudden change in circumstance. Losing two titans dropped their total power by no small amount, but they would not be deterred. They came around for another charge at Middle Heaven.

Having transferred back onto Middle Heaven several minutes ago, they had been waiting for the right moment to strike back. They wanted to punish the creatures with their first appearance.

This had been Lan Qing's plan all along, though he'd been taken aback by the full strength the monsters brought to bear. Still Jue Di and Luo Xianni had blocked three of their strongest – Infinite-level powerhouses like themselves. The other Paragons spread out to deal with the remainder.

Humanity undoubtedly was inferior to the aliens in terms of sheer numbers. This was a disadvantage for them when considering aggregate power. However they had Middle Heaven to rely on, and its honeycomb of cannons were effective support in thinning the alien horde.

Chapter 829: Head-On Conflict

Lan Jue and Qianlin's Harmonious Sword technique fought off two more avatars and one titan. Captus and Occisus was empowered by Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain. Together, not only were the two not in danger, they even held the upper hand.

Boundless Starlight, enhanced by the Queen of Heaven Domain, captured the three beasts within it. Lan Jue's Palm of Five Lightnings was also a great boon. Since the monsters had to work harder to defend themselves against the Domain, their Harmonious Swords forced them to stick together and combine their might to ward off destruction.

It was still unsure which side would win, but for the moment the humans were not in danger of losing.

The Terminator fought off two of the monsters by himself. Already intrepid and formidable, his strength swelled beneath the light of the Queen of Heaven. He was no less frightening than the creatures that assailed him, and keeping them at bay was not an issue.

Things were going less happily for the other Paragons. The beasts were all of Nirvana-level at least. Other than the Pharmacist whose Slaughter Domain helped her keep up despite being a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, the others needed to double up against their foes.

Those avatars not locked in battle with the Paragons focused their attacks on Middle Heaven.

"Aagghh!" Monarch's avatar, commanding the power of the Infinite, roared in feral rage. The other avatars cried back in response. They broke off their attacks on Middle Heaven and focused entirely on the Paragons.

Jue Di and Luo Xianni stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting off three more Infinite-level aliens. Lan Jue and Qianlin were still at war against two avatars and a titan. The Pharmacist had one avatar to herself. The Driver was focused on a titan, relying on the power of his primordial lightning to keep it pinned down. The Terminator was using all the strength available to him to battle two avatars.

Yet this was only ten of the creatures. The remaining twelve fell upon the rest of the human defense; the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Pauper, Keeper, Bookworm, the two Gods of Wine, the Pontiff, and Gourmet.

Just in terms of numbers they were at a disadvantage. What's more, they couldn't match up man to man in terms of Discipline strength.

The Clockmaker had already summoned her dharmic image, the enormous grandfather clock manipulating the flows of time to their benefit. The remaining eight Paragons fought for their lives head to head against a superior enemy.

"Go help them." Jue Di said to Luo Xianni at his side.

The two of them were faring well against three Infinite-level monsters. Jue Di's golden staff was almost more than his foes could protect against. They were forced to defend themselves with everything they had and had no way to fight back. With the addition of Luo Xianni's mystical camera they had already managed to cause them some harm.

But while they were gaining ground, their allies were in dire straits. Jue Di had to make a decision. Luo Xianni stared at him for a moment but offered no resistance. In a flash of pink she was gone, off to help their friends.

"Take advice from Luo Xianni. A camera is all you need!"

Click!

With the sound of the shutter all area above the twelve aliens was painted pink, twelve mirror images of Luo Xianni appeared from nowhere. The aliens froze in place.

The rest of the Paragons saw their moment. The Keeper and Bookworm's Positron Cannon, the Wine Master's Dimensional Compression, Gourmet's soul fire, Pauper's Taming Dragon Palm, and the others' special attacks were unleashed all at the same moment.

At last some respite.

But containing so many Nirvana-level creatures was not easy for the

Photographer. They remained frozen only for a moment, but at last the situation was coming under control.

As Luo Xianni left, the pressure on Jue Di rose sharply.

The three avatars he faced were the closest in strength to the planets themselves. Their experience in war was varied and extensive. Resilient tentacles lashed around the Paragons and he drew upon his Deva-gati Domain to hold them back. Suddenly this sector of space was filled with copies of the man, but when faced against the planets' doppelganger they had little deterring effect. All they could do was distract and harass. Together the three monsters began to chip away at his Domain. While he quickly patched the holes they created, he was slowly losing ground.

All the while Jue Di faced his foes with a calm face. He swung his staff in an endless flurry of attacks, pummeling them with his Thousand-ton Cudgel technique.

The avatars worked together to defend themselves. Queen's avatar split into several copies, revealing her master of interdimensional powers. Her images flit in and out of existence, attacking Jue Di's blind spots. Consort's fragment hovered by Monarch's avatar and manipulated time around them.

Achieving such heights of power, the home worlds were knowledgeable in all the ways of the universe. Creation, destruction, space-time – all of them were fundamental powers of reality. In order to evolve and create their own realm, these were the powers they'd focused on cultivating.

Monarch's avatar was encased in a shell of dark purple light. It glared at Jue Di with a ghastly face. Its arms had split into countless tentacles that seemed to swipe at the human from everywhere at once. Its own Domain fluctuated between creation and destruction, in constant conflict with Jue Di's imposing aura.

Jue Di was strong, but even he had his limits within the Infinite. Facing three enemies of similar strength, even with all his knowledge and fighting experience, turning the tide to his favor would be extremely difficult.

The war continued on three fronts. Suddenly, a light erupted around them.

While the aliens were busy with the Paragons, Middle Heaven had slipped away and rejoined the main battle.

So far the armada had not gained ground, but were holding their own. The most dramatic fights were among the Paragons, but winning victory on the main field was key to success. If they could destroy the enemy's primary force it would take the pressure off the human ships and give them more leeway.

Lan Qing did not join the Paragon battle, but not for lack of desire. He had a more important task to manage.

When Middle Heaven returned the alien leadership did not follow. Seeing their mighty bastion return unscathed, the human soldiers felt their hearts surge with hope.

The moment it returned to battle, Middle Heaven's array of cannons were unleashed. With its molinite contained, the energy was refocused toward the bastion's devastating attacks. Meanwhile Middle Heaven's drones were finally able to return and charge their weapons.

After so long nearly all the drones from every bastion were low on energy. They had to return and recharge before returning to the front. For the moment, the armada was in a weaker position as its backup dwindled. They had to hold while their drones recharged. This was why Middle Heaven hurried to return to their side.

The alien forces had sacrificed much, but were nearly through the human defensive line. The armada had begun to suffer significant losses. However as Middle Heaven came in guns blazing, the aliens were shoved back. The fleet commanders had some space to breathe.

As one side gained ground the other responded, back and forth as the fight continued. The stalemate kept both sides from dealing a definitive blow. Now it was a matter of who could hold out longer.

At present it appeared as though it was the aliens who were suffering

greatest. Though the humans had to maintain a continuous rate of fire, they were not losing many ships and could hold out against a thinning alien horde.

However they were only gaining against weaker breeds of creatures. The stronger ones among them were withstanding the attacks, so the losses they faced were only their lower caste. The core of the alien army remained intact.

Hummmm. A strange buzzing sound arose as suddenly six glittering blue halos appeared. They spread out among the aliens, washing over them and freezing them in place.

Poseidon's main weapons fired, six Soft Water bombs detonating in the midst of their enemies. All of a sudden their side of the field was less crowded. Though the attack was hardly flashy, the efficacy of Poseidon's primary weapons were uncontested. In this fight they were even more effective than Tyrannosaurus.

The Northern bastion did not employ its main cannon, the cost would be too great. The enemy was too spread out and using it would be like trying to hit a mosquito with laser rifle. Under these conditions it was more useful to siphon that power into their shields, keeping them in the fight as long as possible.

Though they were holding their own, the situation was looking less favorable for the humans. This was especially true for the Paragons, who were stretched thin. If one fell, it could cascade into a torrent that would turn the battle against them.

Lan Qing wasn't the only one who saw it. Kang Hui and Hua Li recognized the danger as well.

"Lan Qing, I'm going in to join them. We can't afford to lose that fight." Hua Li said impatiently to Lan Qing's image on his screen.

Chapter 830: All-Out

Only a Paragon could participate in a Paragon battle. Only Hua Li, Lan Qing, and Chu Cheng were not yet involved as they were commanding forces.

Lan Qing answered Hua Li's statement with a thoughtful frown. He heard another voice from beside the Poseidon Group patriarch. "No, you can't go. You are the symbol of our people. If something happens to you our soldiers may be routed."

Certainly the voice belonged to Mo Xiao. Lan Qing happened to agree with her too. Just as he was needed on Middle Earth, Hua Li was this generation's guide and commander. If something happened to him while he was off ship, Poseidon Group would suffer.

"Mo Xiao is right. You can't go." Lan Qing decided.

Hua Li hurried to respond. "You think Poseidon Group is so fragile that they can't survive without me? I have to go, A-Jue and the others can't hold out for long and I'm doing nothing for our cause on this ship. Mo Xiao, you keep my absence a secret – don't let anyone know where I've gone." Hua Li hung up before anyone else could voice objections.

Poseidon-class Bastion Ship.

"No! You can't go!" Mo Xiao clung to his arm. She looked at him but not in anger, instead imploring him with her eyes.

But he regarded her with firm determination. "I have to go. How can I abandon my brother? Besides, Paragons are the backbone of our strategy, we're the only soldiers who can win this war. My addition might be the last straw needed to break the aliens' back."

Mo Xiao opened her mouth to protest further, but before she could Hua Li turned to water in her grip. He collapsed to the floor in a cascade of gentle blue light and vanished.

Tears fell unbidden from Mo Xiao's eyes. She stared at the spot he'd stood with a deep pain writ plain on her face.

“Why?” She asked the air. “Why do you treat me this way? I’m your wife!”

Poseidon was inspired to join the fight. Elsewhere, someone else with fire in their heart joined the battle.

Two beams of light – one blue, one red – appeared in space among the ships. Grey flames licked the wake around the stream of red light as it cut a bloody swath toward the other Paragons. Meanwhile, Hua Li faced little resistance. The enemy was still trying to recover from the Soft Water bombs.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to help yourself.” When he saw his friend, Hua Li grinned.

Chu Cheng sniffed pridefully. “What do you mean ‘help myself’? I am the very definition of undaunted, this is courage you’re looking at. Aren’t I heroic?”

Hua Li looked down his nose at his friend. “Heroism or horse-shit? Prove it on the battlefield! Let’s go!” The two of them raced toward Lan Jue and the others, leaving brilliant trails of light behind them.

They’d only stepped foot in the Realm of Protogenia, but any help would draw pressure from their allies.

As they shot off to join the Paragons, things were changing on the main field as well. Not more than five minutes after Hua Li’s charge, thousands of drones poured from Middle Heaven’s hangars.

During the last clash a tenth of the bastion’s drones had fallen to alien attacks. Now their numbers had shrunk to thirteen thousand, but still enough to be a decisive presence on the battlefield. The total number still hovered around fifteen thousand if you included the thousand or so other fighters that had joined unexpectedly.

Star Division had also transferred over with the Paragons!

The allied forces had thrown everything they could toward victory – every ship, soldier and weapon. Star Division had had no more than an hour to rest after their fight on Angel before being thrust into the main

conflict. But their morale was high, and their lust for glory strong. Finally, they had an opportunity to really show the universe what they could do. If they survived, they would come back as heroes of humanity.

Skyfire Avenue's great fighting force already proved their worth by repelling the alien sneak attack on Angel. This time, though, they were fighting on their own. There were no Paragons to back them up but they were not needed. With Middle Heaven as backup, Star Division quickly stabilized the field and prevented the aliens from breaking past the armada's lines.

Lan Qing's mission for them was simple; fill in the gaps.

Allies forces were doing a fair job at being everywhere at once, but they weren't perfect. Inevitably some aliens would break through, and once they did they caused considerable damage. Star Division's job was to spread out in units and kill the beasts that found their way in.

This sort of fight suited them just fine. Individually they were strong, but that didn't help them in a space-battle where large-scale cooperation was needed. However mopping up whatever was left they took to like fish to water.

Their presence shored up the allied defenses and protected their back line. The situation on the field was less volatile with their presence.

Kang Hui was shocked when he learned that Middle Heaven's drones were back in the fight after only five minutes.

"How is this possible?" His own drones needed at least twenty minutes before they were fully charged. He wasn't sure about Poseidon Group, but he figured it had to be similar. But why would it be different for Middle Heaven? It was beyond anything he'd witnessed before.

It was an Eastern secret, which Lan Qing was of course not permitted to share. At any rate the North couldn't replicate Middle Heaven's fighters even if it knew how. Each one of the drones used a small amount of molinite as their reactor core. They used the same power that gave the bastion life to power their own systems and weapons.

Their core design was based on the energy from molinite, and optimized for its use. However they could not store the energy for long. Due to its unstable nature the molinite would decay quickly. In other words, the drones could only function if they remained near enough to Middle Heaven for them to recharge regularly. If they were gone too long or too far, their fighting capability fell off sharply – nothing more than flying scrap metal.

In the end, even the East couldn't replicate Middle Heaven's drones.

However, so long as they were around Middle Heaven, they were the bastion's trump card. Another interesting aspect of their construction had to do with their missiles. While molinite afforded the drones' tremendous staying power in a fight, their erratic energy made bombs unstable. Bombs made out of the stuff were simply too likely to explode when you least wanted them to.

But despite the dangers molinite far outstripped any other energy medium for drone reactor cores. They only took three minutes to recharge, with a minute each to dock and redeploy. One-fourth the time of anyone else.

It took Kang Hui several moments before he regained focus. He couldn't help but admire Middle Heaven's strength. The speed and dominance of its drones was so superior, three bastions would likely struggle in a fight against it. That was before one considered Lan Qing's keen military mind.

Once its drones were back in the field, Middle Heaven also began to react.

The greatest boon to the human forces now was the fact that the strongest of the aliens were split in two. One portion of them had been busy near Angel and hadn't returned. The remainder were currently warring with the Paragons. Neither could lend their influence to the main battle.

Although the number of aliens throwing themselves at the armada was sizeable they were nonetheless weaker by comparison. This allowed the ships to punish the creatures without much fear of reprisal.

Lan Qing called out an order through his dedicated communications channel. “Engage Warplanet status!”

Sirens wailed all throughout the bastion and personnel were racing to their stations. If some omnipotent being were watching they could see everyone strapping themselves down with sturdy harnesses.

Middle Heaven began to shake. Somehow the molinite that powered the ship was galvanized and began to pulse with waves of energy. The oscillations were so intense they could be seen from kilometers away.

Flickering orange light shuddered through Middle Heaven and erupted from its rocky surface in bands of color. The honeycomb cannons that dotted its surface were retracted as the light completely enveloped it. In some ways it looked like it had when preparing for the Solar Flare.

“Mo Xiao, use Poseidon to engage the enemy with your full arsenal. If you want Hua Li to return without incident we need to throw everything we have behind a decisive victory right now.” Lan Qing’s stern, cold voice crackled through Mo Xiao’s screen.

She looked back at him with an equally frigid expression. She never liked the Lan brother, but she was an intelligent woman. She had to be in order to lead the Poseidon family business. Lan Qing was right, if she wanted Ha Li back it started right here.

“Activating Poseidon’s Trident Mode.”

It was Poseidon’s turn to shiver as the whole bastion began to change. The spherical ship stretched as its innards peaked free, completely modifying its shape. A shape-shifting bastion! It was incredible to behold.

Kang Hui stared from Tyrannosaurus’ bridge in wonderment. The ship he commanded was a traditional one, and that meant balance among all the normal bastion systems. But there was nothing normal about either of the bastions he was allied with. He had no idea what Middle Heaven was up to, and Poseidon was in the middle of a stupendous transformation.

Little by little Poseidon Group’s bastion split and reformed, until it rearranged itself in to a humanoid shape. It even bore a weapon, an

absolutely humongous golden trident.

Chapter 831: Transforming Poseidon

Kang Hui wasn't the only one with his mouth open. Lan Qing was just as surprised. Suddenly Poseidon looked like a mecha suit the likes of which the universe had never seen. Even the titanic aliens – which before had been terrifying to look upon – were like worms beside the Group's flagship. It was easily ten times the size of the largest aliens, enormous even in the backdrop of space!

Especially dazzling was the trident it bore, a sparkling gold weapon that stretched almost its whole length. Soft water bombs could be seen strapped to either side of its chest, and the whole ship radiated with a gentle blue light.

Just being able to change the way it did must have cost Poseidon Group twice what it cost to transform An Lun into a bastion.

Lan Qing, as the highest military commander of the armada, knew that plans for a mecha-style bastion had been proposed before. The benefits of such a creation were obvious, first among them the variable fighting style a human-like body could afford. Deeper study into bionics could improve both its offense and defense.

He knew the mecha proposal had undergone a lot of debate and analysis, but in the end it was deemed impractical. The cost was astronomical, and getting the thing to maintain equilibrium out in space was a significant challenge. A circular construction simply made more sense. Gravity, for example, was easier to manage for a sphere. A planet-like structure was most suitable.

Because it was the path of least resistance, science and technology had kept to those standards. Gravity was far more complicated to control in a human-shaped ship, both technologically and in terms of resources.

In the end nothing concrete came out of the discussions. Even the North, with all their wealth and technology, abandoned the thought. They kept the idea of bionics but went in a different direction.

In this moment, however, Poseidon Group announced to the universe

that not only did they complete a transforming bastion, but a mecha-style one. It had the myriad benefits of a traditional spherical bastion, but also a mecha. ‘Shocking’ did not give it justice! Its creation heralded a new era in research and technology.

Now Lan Qing understood why Hua Li had such confidence in the bastion. It was nothing short of extraordinary. He could also appreciate his friend’s secrecy. This was privileged information that gave the Group an upper hand. Mo Xiao wouldn’t have revealed it unless as a last resort.

Poseidon swung its golden trident, sprightly despite its size. A golden light spilled from its tri-pointed head and pierced a group of aliens like a pillar from heaven. With both hands firmly gripping the trident’s shaft it swung the weapon all around whilst its primary and secondary weapons exploded into action. In an instant its offensive capabilities swelled to twice its former levels.

By the time it swung into action, Middle Heaven had also completed its own transformation.

Piercing beams of saffron light spat out in every direction, turning Middle Heaven into blazing hedgehog. Every column of light was like a blade three kilometers long, and they covered the bastion’s surface in a dense and bristling coat. The ship began to rotate.

It started slowly, but before long Middle Heaven was spinning fast as a top. When it seemed like spinning any faster would rip it apart, the warplanet launched into the midst of enemy forces. Aliens began to fall like meat in a grinder as the bastion abandoned the need to maintain distance.

Whether Poseidon or Middle Heaven, both bastions’ fighting styles relied on their overwhelming size. It went without saying that their new tactics drained far more energy than normal. Middle Heaven had the molinite to support it, but only Poseidon’s leaders knew what kept their bastion going. The Group’s history and supremacy were long, their secrets profound. Even now there was much the rest of humanity didn’t know about the secretive organization.

Situations on the battlefield changed as the two bastions tipped their hand. The stalemate that had developed was reversed. Middle Heaven crashed through the alien forces at blinding speed, churning through them like a scythe through dry weeds.

Poseidon crushed its enemies just as easily. The giant copy of Triton pummeled the aliens with its weapon system, but it was the trident that caused the greatest turmoil. Whatever material was used in its construction was a mystery. Though witnesses had seen it's construction in multiple stages through the transformation, it seemed as sturdy as a single piece. Whatever its golden light passed the aliens were disintegrated. Even the strongest were struck down.

Lan Qing watched his screens as the systems analysis flickered by. All he could learn from the data was that antimatter energy surrounded the transformer-bastion's weapon. What sort of energy was needed to keep a machine like that operational during a battle?

Changes in the main battle were also influencing matters in another section of space. So far the human Paragons could only describe their situation as hanging on by the skin of their teeth.

Jue Di was actually able to hold his own against three aliens, alternating seamlessly between attack and defense. Although he had lost the upper hand, he was still able to keep his opponents fully engaged. Relying on the versatility and power of his golden staff, he kept the three Infinite-level avatars from harassing the other Paragons.

But circumstances were less favorable for the others.

Lan Jue and Qianlin continued to wage war against three of the aliens. Though they were in a dominating position to start, Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain was incredibly draining. Even with Qianlin's help it was exhausting to maintain his Domain at full strength while simultaneously fighting off three Nirvana-level monsters!

As strong as the Harmonious Swords were, their enemies were not run-of-the-mill. Two avatars and a titan, with their Creation-Destruction Domains combined, were the equivalent of a Paragon who'd reached the

Infinite. For now both sides refused to give in, but Lan Jue and Qianlin were inferior in cultivation. They were beginning to feel the pressure.

It was a dramatic display. Heterochromatic blasts of lightning filled the blackness of space, glaring off of the Emperor of the North Star's sow-white robes. The aliens were vortices of purple-black madness that swirled chaotically, eroding the Boundless Starlight Domain. As the Five Lightnings continued to roar and crash, reality collapsed in on itself all around them.

When beings of such total power clashed, technique was less important than force. Besides styles like the Harmonious Swords, which amplified ability, their war was one of direct protogenic superiority.

As exhaustion began to set in, Lan Jue found it increasingly difficult to maintain his dharmic image. Qianlin's Domain was stretched to its limit, but she had more than just Lan Jue to consider. She was responsible for the breadth of where her power touched and all the Paragons within it. Beneath the mad rage of these monsters, they were only just managing to hold back destruction.

Their one spot of luck was Qianlin's skills, which allowed Jue Di and Luo Xianni to express the totality of their strength while the aliens had to hold back for fear of universal protogenia. Were it not for the Queen of Heaven, they would have been crushed under the might of the alien avatars and their titans.

Yet the weight on her shoulders was an enormous load to bear, and Qianlin was tiring. Faith from the people she'd saved was how she persevered.

The shifting dynamics of the main battle worried the alien generals. But contrary to Lan Qing's assumptions they did not move in to support their failing army. On the contrary they fought harder against the Paragons, proving that they saw the Adepts as their greatest threat. Saving their soldiers but leaving the mighty humans alive was pointless.

Chapter 832: Forced Advancement

Lan Jue and the others felt the pressure mounting when suddenly the alien offensive reached a wild crescendo.

“Hmph!” The Pontiff lurched with a grunt, and the staff clutched in his hands cracked. The holy light that enveloped him dimmed visibly as a trickle of blood exited the corner of his mouth.

The loss of his perennial adversary lingered in his mind, a sadness that ate away at him. After all, what was light without darkness?

He fought with everything left in him, especially after witnessing the hell that had descended upon Europa. His heart broke to look upon the carnage, to know that the Pontiff’s bloodline would likely end now with him.

The power of his holy light was strong against the heathen alien force, especially under the empowering light of the Queen of Heaven. But his enemies were too strong. A momentary dip in defenses had left him open to a blast from one of the titans. This half beat of exhaustion made his protogenia unstable, it felt like his organs were on fire. Qianlin’s Queen of Heaven Domain had, thankfully, prevented his loss of control from consuming him entirely.

However the Paragons were only just holding their foes back. A single chink in their armor could spell disaster. Luo Xianni reacted quickly, tricking the enemy and sending several of the aliens into deep space. For the moment they were removed from play, but even then the Paragons were on the precipice of losing control.

This wasn’t the first fight these valiant men and women had fought, even within the last few hours. Each of them had fought hard against the Violet Prince and his coterie mere hours before. They had leapt from the frying pan to the proverbial fire the moment they returned to Middle Heaven.

After the Pontiff began to falter, the Bookworm and Keeper began to show signs of fatigue. It was enough for the enemy’s Domain to prosper.

Both were blasted away, bleeding from serious injuries.

All seemed lost.

A terrible howl shuddered through everyone. Their eyes were stabbed by a light so bright and resplendent they winced against the intensity. A crystalline, purple blaze spread out all around them that was quickly followed by an incomparably powerful aura.

Purple. A purple that swallowed the entirety of the universe. A noble, terrible purple spreading through the whole battlefield. Even the mighty warriors of the Infinite stopped to stare in wide-eyed wonderment.

Lan Jue's heart sank, his face stern. The image of his dharma, the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety, was clearer than ever. The myriad stars that twinkled in the distance dimmed. Even Europa and the three alien planets were less visible.

The aura that enveloped him inflated with stunning speed and intensity, so intense that an entirely new consciousness seemed to spring up in the universe around them. Even the stars submitted themselves to it.

This ubiquitous awareness appeared as Lan Jue's aura exploded outward by orders of magnitude. His dharma loomed large, golden runes blazing into existence upon the blade of Captus gripped in its hand.

In the same instant a change overcame the image of Quanyin. The outline of an arrow was etched in her forehead and moments later Qianlin's image was painted a pale shade of gold. So intense was her light that it could be seen burning from the surface of human planets in the far distance. Not only was her dharmic image clearer, but ghost-like copies spread out behind her. Instantly the influence of her light surged and the Paragons each felt no less than ten percent more capable. Those that had been injured felt their progenia quickly recover.

This...

Did they break through?

The aliens stared in shock, but it was a state mirrored by their human enemies.

Lan Jue's face vanished, replaced with one very similar but far more imposing. The golden runes etched into Captus flared and as their light spread out the tint of purple was washed away. A beautiful, starry expanse took its place.

It was like the entirety of the universe was being pressed into this small space. The countless stars clustered around the powerful beings present, man and alien alike.

Boom- -!

The vibrations from the explosion reverberated through the souls of everyone present. The Emperor of Heaven expanded to a hundred times its size, making Poseidon look like a child's toy.

It slowly carved a path with its weapon, leaving behind a curtain of red that covered everything.

Weaker alien monsters felt their vitality vanish, burned away in an instant before the eternity of death overtook them. In the midst of everyone appeared a great portal of light. Three words hovered above it: Gate of Cataclysm ¹

Blood-red light flickered from the portal like a giant vortex. It drank up the souls of the monsters from every corner of the battlefield.

The three Infinite-level alien generals were the first to react before being destroyed. They released the entirety of their power without reservation, spreading their Domain out to its limits to ward off the deadly glare of the gate. They were thousands of kilometers away before the gates was fully open.

Other aliens also attempted to flee, but the hunger of the gate was more than they could contend against. The first to be consumed by its light – one of the titans – didn't even have time to scream before death came for it. One was quickly followed by two, then a third as the slower monsters were swallowed up. Three Nirvana-level generals lost their life to the Gate of Cataclysm.

However in the midst of this terrifying display, the three alien home

worlds suddenly grew brighter. Violet light erupted from their surfaces like a haze. It stretched all the way out to the beleaguered alien generals, and when it crested over them they were swept away. Vanished.

The burning words above the portal began to weaken, the majestic image of the Emperor started to fade. Though it shrunk back to its former size the strange consciousness it had birthed remained all around them, omnipotent and eternal.

Lan Jue reappeared among the others, kneeling in the vacuum of space hand in hand with Qianlin. Both of their faces were oddly flushed, eyes closed.

Jue Di looked at them with furrowed brows. He swung his golden staff and a golden light surrounded the human Paragons. In a flash they were gone.

The violet light from the alien home worlds dissolved and suddenly everything was back to normal. And yet it wasn't, for the aura of those planets was still palpable. Who could say if they were now capable of fighting back?

A few breaths later the alien generals returned, though they weren't alone. This time they were joined by the Violet Prince and Princess, and their horde. They started for the main battlefield.

Poseidon and Middle Heaven gave the enemy creatures no quarter. With the aid of their drones, the aliens were on the verge of destruction. Poseidon's trident was particularly devastating, obliterating anything unfortunate enough to be in the path of its light.

Hummmmm! The buzzing sound came over them like a wave. Finally the aliens, until now indomitable in their will to fight, broke off their attack and retreated. The Violent Prince, riding his giant monstrosity, came bearing down upon the armada with his generals at his side. Their eyes burned with lust for destruction.

The fighting stopped. Middle Heaven and Poseidon paused, waiting. The allied fleet had suffered significant losses over the last few hours, but the aliens had suffered far worse. In terms of sheer numbers the humans had

come out of the battle victorious. But whether that would remain true if the fight continued was hard to say. After all, for all their strength the Paragons had proved incapable of defeating the alien commanders.

The alien horde fell back behind the Prince, falling into formation. The two armies kept their distance, staring.

Drones from the various bastions returned to their ships to charge. Once more, they found themselves in a stalemate. Their war shook the heavens, both sides needed a moment to catch their breath.

Lan Jue and Qianlin were teleported back aboard Middle Heaven with the Photographer's help, though they themselves remained unchanged. They knelt across from one another as flows of protogenia whipped around them erratically.

Qianlin's Domain appeared and disappeared in maddening flickers of power. From time to time her pretty face would twist into expressions of pain.

In those last moments their situation had become critical. To save the lives of his compatriots, Lan Jue had decided to force a breakthrough.

His cultivation had already been at the border of Reflection of Heaven and Earth, as had Zhou Qianlin's. Both of them had been trying to repress the draw of Nirvana.

They had no choice. The only way to free themselves from the alien onslaught was to take drastic measures. They were in danger of being overrun, and the creatures had left them no opportunity to flee.

They couldn't afford to die. If they did, if the Paragons were lost, then humanity was lost. Lan Jue was forced to decide, and he chose to break through.

Rising to new heights of power galvanized his protogenia. It also solidified the disparate pieces of his inheritance and summoned the consciousness of the Emperor of the North Star. As Lan Jue had hoped, gathering the spirit of the emperor had temporarily catapulted him into incredible levels of power. The power and influence of his Boundless

Starlight Domain soared, to the point where it unlocked the profound truths hidden with Captus and summoned the Gates of Cataclysm. Three of the mighty alien creatures were swallowed up by its terrible power.

But this time his breakthrough was different. He was rising to a new level of Paragon, whereas before he was transforming from an Adept. Crossing the threshold to a new understanding of protogenia and the changes it wrought were distinct.

Before he rose sharply as a result of accumulated learning. This time he forced a breakthrough. Power summoned from the vestiges of the Emperor of the North Star was less potent.

Chapter 833: Collapsing Crisis

An important distinction was control. Although Lan Jue managed to regulate the flows of protogenia to some degree, management of it was difficult. If he and Qianlin had been on more solid ground, their Harmonious Swords technique would have slain a third of the alien hierarchy.

He saved the lives of his friends by breaking through early. But now there were after effects to contend with.

The couple were struggling against a sea of raging protogenia that threatened to swallow them up or shatter altogether. The pain of it was unimaginable.

For Lan Jue the situation was slightly better because of a solid foundation. The problem was more serious for Zhou Qianlin.

Their connection meant his breakthrough catalyzed hers. In many ways they were one entity, and one couldn't cross the threshold to another level without the other.

Qianlin's foundation was less stable than Lan Jue's, and her protogenia sputtered as she struggled to keep it under control. If not for the Queen of Heaven's inherent ability to soothe these energies she would already have been consumed by the raw power.

Lan Jue helped as much as he could, absorbing the excess energies and protogenia from her. He fought to help her assimilate these powers, taking on the pressure of two peoples' breakthrough. He would be able to stabilize his own ascension, but Qianlin needed his help.

The alien horde was not aware of Lan Jue's precarious situation. All they witnessed was the breakthrough of the two young lovers. Fear of what they could do was part of what stayed their hand.

"What can we do?" Luo Xianni asked of Jue Di.

Lan Jue's father shook his head. "There is nothing we can do, only they have the power to get through it. Their breakthrough isn't complete until

they've learned to control it. Their condition is dire, but they're managing for the time being. The more time we give them to sort it out, the more likely they are to succeed."

Instead of being at ease from his determination, Luo Xianni was shocked. "Are you saying they could collapse?"

Jui Di nodded solemnly. "He did it to save us all."

At the time it was necessary. Lan Jue knew there was a risk he could lose control, but the aliens were too strong.

His decision was well timed. The Violet Prince and Princess arrived only moments after their escape. If they had delayed any longer there was a good chance many Paragons would have died. Breaking through then would have been too late. Lan Jue's rash decision had saved their lives and given them a chance to keep fighting.

"Is there nothing? No technique we can try?" Luo Xianni asked. "We can't help them bear the pressure?"

Jue Di categorically refuted. "No, it would only add to the chaos of their protogenia..."

He trailed off as Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin's features changed. Thin cracks appeared in space-time around them and frightening gusts of errant protogenia surged.

"No!" Luo Xianni gasped. Without hesitation she released her interdimensional powers, transferring her children and Jue, as well as herself, out into space behind Middle Heaven.

She had no choice. Unrestricted power from two Nirvana-level Paragons could tear the Eastern bastion apart from the inside.

Lan Qing had been given the news and stood within the control center with his hands clenched into fists. The screen in front of him flickered as it changed to the scene outside, focused on his little brother and future sister in law.

Flickers of lightning snaked around Lan Jue. Qianlin, too, was

surrounded by a blinding white light like a thousand thunderclaps. Both of them were on the verge of total protogenic collapse.

Breakthrough's were a tricky thing. Too slow and you hampered development, but too fast and you risked losing control of the powers that used you as a conduit. That was the problem they faced now.

Luo Xianni's chest heaved as she battled her fear. Jue Di's hands had curled into white-knuckled fists.

Both of them could do nothing but fear for the lives of their children.

Something he'd heard from the Clairvoyant suddenly sprang up in Lan Qing's mind. Lan Jue was the key to surviving disaster. So long as he lived there was hope. But if he died...

The admiral shut his eyes tight. He fought the dread that roiled within him so fiercely he didn't notice his fingernails digging into his palms, drawing blood.

A-Jue, endure!

He was trying, but the intensity of his breakthrough with Qianlin was tremendous. Nirvana, vast and pervasive. It felt like his protogenia was fragmenting. All the different kinds of it, everywhere all at once. He could feel it spread out through the universe like an inseparable part of the fabric of reality.

He knew so little of this truth, a knowledge that only scratched the surface. Qianlin was altogether unfamiliar with it. Neither of them knew what they faced or how to control it!

The cultivation process was about deepening one's understanding. Through exploring one's own protogenia a Paragon uncovered the secrets of the universe as they pertained to them. Reaching milestones of knowledge was how one rose to higher levels.

Lan Jue and Qianlin had reached Nirvana from being Adepts in the space of a few days. Their outstanding success in breaking through catapulted them to Reflections of Heaven and Earth. Then, through the power of faith they were ascended to the border of Nirvana. Climbing so

fast was not just unthinkable, it was dangerous.

Before them, there were only three other Paragons of comparable strength. The Terminator was an old master, one who had used many years of studious learning to achieve his strength. Lan Jue and Qianlin achieved the same realizations in a fraction of the time!

Fissures in reality continued to appear around them as wild protogenia began to snowball out of control. Pain and pressure mounted as time stretched on.

Protogenic collapse inevitably lead to mental breakdown. When their will collapsed, so would the rest of them.

Despair crept into Lan Jue's heart. Although he'd been a Paragon only a short time, he'd experienced the world of protogenia through his Zeus ascension for years. He knew what collapse meant, knew what it felt like when it crossed the line into chaos. He'd reached a point of no return.

If he was concerned for himself alone, he could prevail. But focusing on himself would abandon Qianlin to destruction. Could he give up the woman who so selflessly sacrificed herself for him? Of course not.

Had the time come for the two of them to pass into history, as he promised they would, together? Lan Jue was unwilling to accept it, not because he feared death -crossing into the spirit realm with his love was not such a bad thing – but because he couldn't free humanity from the scourge of alien covetousness. Not even his death would give humanity a chance to survive.

His body began to grow translucent. Cracks and fractures that had appeared around him were absorbed into his ethereal form to make him seem... incomplete.

Jue Di could stand it no more and shut his eyes against the pain. He, too, knew there was no going back. Lan Jue had lost control of his protogenia.

Qianlin was better off, but only slightly.

It was done. Everything, lost.

Luo Xianni's eyes were wet with tears. Why... why didn't she decide to sacrifice herself in his place? If she hadn't been so selfish with her own life perhaps these two could have lived. Why did she hesitate?

Something began to flicker in the center of Lan Jue's chest. A sound like shards of shattered glass colliding hung over him. It was followed by a golden light which, though it was not brilliant, quickly spread out around him like a star's corona.

It spread farther, encompassing both Lan Jue and Qianlin and painting both of them gold. The waves of erratic protogenia they released slowed, their figures becoming more substantive. ¹

Suddenly the universe around them seemed to light up. For a moment it was like all the stars in view burned brighter to bear witness. The alien forces, on the verge of continuing their assault, were taken aback by the unexpected change. They fell back for fear of reprisal at the command of their Prince and Princess, returning to the home worlds.

As the starlight rose constellations were marked out on Lan Jue's body. Sensing something, Jue Di opened his eyes.

He witnessed beams of starlight converging on the beleaguered body of his son and coiling around him. Like glue they fixed the fractures of reality around him and forced them shut and soothed his form.

Lan Jue's ethereal form stabilized. Behind him the image of the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety emerged.

Stars gleamed brighter as his dharmic image revealed itself, enhancing each other's beauty. The power of the stars concentrated upon Lan Jue and stabilized his protogenia – consolidating his ascension. Beneath the sublime starlight he was remolded, body and soul.

Little by little his body started to glow. The light came from acupuncture points, where within each one seemed to burn a miniature star. All of a sudden Lan Jue's body was almost indistinguishable from the backdrop of glittering celestial bodies. Likewise Lan Jue's image was reflected in the light of every distant star.

Nirvana, vast and pervasive!

Jue Di stared with his mouth agape, the pain in his expression replaced with shock. It was inconceivable that his son should be saved in the moment of his destruction. Something had pulled Lan Jue back from imminent collapse.

What he could not know was the pendant Lan Jue had on his chest, given to him by the Clairvoyant, had shattered and disappeared into the cosmos.

Chapter 834: Jue Di's Esteem

It was years ago when the Clairvoyant had given the Four Divine Monarchs his pendants. For the others the charms had been used up upon their breakthroughs. Only Lan Jue's remained, even after becoming a Paragon.

The Clairvoyant's gift, Lumina, wasn't made to heal Lan Jue. In fact, its purpose was to provoke the stars.

Lan Jue's inheritance was the Master of Stars, the Emperor of the North Star. The namesake of this inheritance controlled the myriad burning bodies, but control worked both ways. The stars also possessed a direct line to their master. At the moment of his destruction Lan Jue received the nourishing power of the stars, thoroughly remaking his body. With the help of his cosmic brethren his protogenia was stilled and his breakthrough completed.

Once Lan Jue was out of danger, Qianlin's condition improved as well. Under the light of the stars Lan Jue understood the intricacies of his protogenia and shared his epiphanies through their connection. In this way he helped her to stabilize her own protogenia.

Qianlin's Queen of Heaven abilities were stable by nature. So long as the initial steps of her breakthrough were completed, the rest would take care of itself. Now that the threads of protogenia within her were disentangled her aura calmed and her Domain spread out. Her familiar, soothing white light enveloped them both. Through it their protogenia was steadied and the power of starlight united with it. Not only were they out of danger, but their cultivation even strengthened some small degree.

With a sigh, Jue Di shook his head.

Luo Xianni also relaxed, and when she spoke her voice was thick with relief. "They're fine. Why do you sigh like that?"

Jue Di never took his eyes from his son. "I never respected the old shyster. I only ever saw him as a charlatan who liked to show off his skills. In the face of true power, prophecies were an illusion. I see now that the

old me was wrong. The reach of his divinations are long and their influence vast. His power saved my son. His vision could see past his own demise to what humanity needed in its hour of need. Eye of Tomorrow... he couldn't have had a more fitting name."

Luo Xianni smiled, a small smile that lit up her face. But when she spoke she sounded disappointed. "Yes! If he were alive, perhaps we'd be better equipped to face these beasts."

Jue Di sniffed. "What is dead is dead. What worth is there in lamenting?"

Luo Xianni rolled her eyes at him. "Aren't you the little green-eyed monster."

His lips curled into a scowl. "I prefer killing the purple ones. ¹ It looks like the aliens have retreated. I suspect they've fled to defend the planets. We've got serious troubles ahead."

Luo Xianni followed his eyes to where the alien home worlds hovered. Her teasing expression gave way to solemnity.

The aliens were too strong. They weren't going to win a direct confrontation, as the last battle proved. Even if they defeated the monsters, what would be the cost? Both sides would be decimated.

Most importantly, they discovered the planets still had some means of influencing the fight. Monarch had exerted its strength in the perfect moment to save its generals, even strengthening them. They weren't even sure whether or not the planets could fight back directly. How much time was left before their evolution was complete?

Mankind's allied forces didn't have the strength to rout its enemy!

"We must make the best of what we have. If we really aren't strong enough, there's nothing to be done." Luo Xianni muttered.

Jue Di's voice was cold. "Don't rush to conclusions. Monarch and the others are not invincible. Their auras are strong, but they have no way to enter the battle directly. If they did our fight would have been ended long ago. Lan Qing has a plan, something that will solve our problem. Perhaps there's still a chance, but we can only know it by probing the enemy's

defense. If our sacrifice means the destruction of these monsters, then it's worth it. When it comes to the pivotal moment, who can say..."

His voice trailed off, his face stern.

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Lan Qing watched the situation unfold from his screens. He sighed in relief as his brother, by some miracle, was saved from destruction. So long as Lan Jue and Qianlin escaped unscathed, he could call their battle a success.

"Do we have statistics on battle damage?" Lan Qing returned his attention to the matters at hand.

"They're here now."

A report appeared before the admiral.

Allied forces losses could not be described as light. Over five thousand drones had been destroyed, as well as three hundred warships of various types. Six hundred more were damaged, among them a capital ship that could no longer participate in the fight.

All three bastions had expended tremendous energy in the clash, especially Poseidon. At least for a while they would not be capable of transforming as they needed time to recharge. Tyrannosaurus spent the least. It'd only fired its main cannon twice throughout the conflict.

Middle Heaven appeared to have spent the most in energy stores, but thanks to its molinite core those stores were being quickly replenished. Of course, the drawback came in that core's instability.

The allied forces had suffered losses, but thanks to the tenacity of their defenses those losses were kept as low as could be expected. Casualties were kept within the boundaries of Lan Qing's expectations.

Star Division lost thirty of their soldiers in the attack, the first time they'd lost a single person since their inception. But in a fight for the future of humanity, against some of the strongest creatures they'd ever faced, how could they expect to emerge unscathed?

War with the alien menace was horrifying for humans, but the losses for the enemy were astronomical. At least sixty thousand beasts were put down between the battles on Angel and the front lines. These were monsters capable of fighting in space, not the mutated copies created by a progenitor. Among the enemy's dead were no less than five generals, though unfortunately only two of their vital crystals had been recovered. What happened to the three beasts slain by Lan Jue's Gate of Cataclysm, no one knew.

Best estimates posited that these battles cost the alien horde a fourth of their total numbers. Stunning, when one considered how inferior humanity's numbers were. With the aliens in full retreat the allies were cheering their victory, but also going about the business of recovery. The burden of time was on them, for no one knew how long it would be before the alien planets completed their evolution. Once repairs were complete, another attack would be initiated immediately.

What's more, although the home worlds themselves were incapable of fighting directly, most of the alien power structure was still intact. The Violet Prince and Princess had returned from afield, doubling the number of Infinite-level aliens protecting their leaders. When it came to direct force humanity was in the weeds, even with Lan Jue and Qianlin now crossing over into Nirvana.

The situation required careful thought. Only the perfect plan could give the humans a chance at survival.

After this fight, Europa and the alien planets were within sight. Regardless of how dire their position had become, this was the closes the allies had ever come to their target. Kang Hui had already sent requests to the Northern government for reinforcements. If by some stroke of luck the alien evolutionary process was still a ways off, reinforcements might be useful.

The North agreed. However, no one knew for certain how long it would take to mobilize and dispatch these reserves.

Star Division.

The surviving soldiers stood in orderly formation, hats off and heads bowed. They stood in silent respect for their fallen brothers and sisters.

Fighting out in space, the chance of recovering corpses was almost zero. Finally, death had come to claim their brave compatriots. Although they had lost the fewest of any military division, the pain was no less biting.

“Vigil is over.” Su Xiaosu’s voice was solemn, but stern. The soldiers lifted their heads.

Xiaosu addressed the company. “The heroism of our fallen compatriots will forever be recorded in the annals of our organization. Whatever honors and spoils they earned will be given to their families to help them through this difficult time. After this victory all of our families have earned a run through the exuvium process. This is true for their families as well.”

“They can rest, but our fight isn’t over. We must continue to fight for our brothers and sisters who still live, for every man, woman and child of our species. If we lose, none of our spoils will save us. The exuvium process will mean nothing if our people are made extinct by an apocalypse of purple. So it is – soldiers, fellows – that we mustn’t mourn. In honor of those we’ve lost, and those remain, we must fight even harder.”

“Now I’m sure you’ve all learned much after these two glorious battles. Rest and meditate on what you’ve learned, then return in twelve hours. We’ve got more training to do!”

“Aye, aye!”

Star Division was dismissed, soldiers departing to their quarters to recover after the fights. A few moments of peace were a luxury in war.

Without a doubt the soldiers were fatigued after their two concurrent campaigns. Especially with the loss of their fellows, their hearts had taken a blow.

When her charges left Su Xiaosu fell exhausted to the floor and curled her legs beneath her. Her chest heaved as she fought for breath.

How could she not be drained? Star Division had been under her command since Angel, and she was responsible for every one of them. Her careful command, her orders to look out for each other, were what kept them alive.

At last, Star Division had shown their worth, emerging as an integral part of this battle's success. It was their back line defense that ensured the allied ships weren't destroyed, and kept their guns firing. Finally, Star Division had found their proper place in the allied forces. The first battle was over, but there would be more to come. Would the alien home worlds be destroyed quickly?

Xiaosu was so tired all she wanted to do was curl up in bed. But then a warm, comforting sensation washed over her. She lifted her head and spied Skyfire Avenue's doctor headed her way.

"What's wrong? Are you alright?" He asked.

Chapter 835: Queen of Devils

Su Xiaosu shook her head. “I’m fine, just a little tired. Would you help me up?”

The Doctor offered a hand to help pull her up off the ground. “You should go rest. I fear we’re going to be facing stronger monsters in the fights to come.”

“Yeah. I also wonder how the commander is doing. He’s in a dangerous state.” Xiaosu replied. Anxiety was clear in her voice.

He smiled reassuringly. “It’ll be fine. If it were serious we would have lost the war already.”

Xiaosu smiled back. “Yeah! The boss is invincible.”

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Invincible. Kang Hui might use a similar phrase to describe Lan Qing. When he led Tyrannosaurus from the North, he was ready to become a martyr for their cause. Yet so far they had turned back the deadly alien tide at every turn – they were even beginning to gain ground.

Since the beginning of their campaign the allied forces had recovered seven human planets, saved and healed millions of victims, and pushed ahead with a plan for every eventuality. They had simultaneously defended Angel and dealt a crushing blow to the enemy’s main force, resulting in a better position than ever for humanity.

Kang Hui had absolute faith in the Eastern Admiral. This young man was worthy of being lauded as the greatest soldier of their generation. Without him, he feared the war would have been lost already.

Their final goal was within reach. Despite the odds, Kang Hui felt a strange sense of ease. Now that they were here there was only one thing left to do. Fight – fight with everything they had left!

His mind went back to the allies they’d lost; the commanders of the Arachnid and Terminator, comrades in the fleets that were destroyed in the Shattered Starfields. He swore on their sacrifice that he would fight to

the last man. Retreat was not an option, and the war would not end until those alien planets were destroyed.

Despite his treasonous actions in taking Tyrannosaurus away from the North in its time of fear, now he had their full support.

But that was now. If they lost Kang Hui knew he would be demonized back home. If they won the North would claim it was the plan from the beginning. Victory would clear his name, and even if he died they would name him a hero of his people. The thought didn't bring him any cheer. Hero... victory or defeat, every last soldier who fought with him against these aliens were heroes!

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Middle Heaven conference room.

Lan Qing was given no repose. After the battle he had busily passed down orders for repairs and preparations, then invited the Paragons to meet with him.

Lan Jue and Qianlin remained in space, stabilizing their new levels of power. Luo Xianni had remained behind as well to look after them. The remaining Paragons had answered his summons.

Lan Qing stood at the head of the table, but did not sit. Instead he greeted all of them with a deep and sustained bow.

“Thank you, all of you. Your actions, in spite of considerable risk to your own lives, saved our armada from destruction.” He spoke solemnly and straightened.

The Wine Master replied. “No thanks are required, Admiral Lan. Without your expert command even our strength would have meant nothing.”

Lan Qing finally took his seat. “I’ve invited you here to discuss the next step in our plan to combat the enemy. Let me begin by saying Star Division’s display during the last battle was nothing short of remarkable. Their ability to combat these monsters in close range offset the deficiencies of our fleets. As such I would like to request that the North

reinforce their numbers with mecha pilots of their own. In this way we can protect ourselves if the aliens break our lines and get close enough to fight back.”

The Terminator nodded without reservation. “Not a problem. I’ll see to it personally once we’ve finished our meeting. And not just Northerners, I’ll make sure we tap any resources available to us. This is likely to be our final stand, every advantage must be employed.”

The Pontiff nodded in agreement. “My Citadel’s strength is all but destroyed, but we will lend whatever power remains to fight for you. The Dark Citadel –“

A voice interrupted from the doorway. “The Dark Citadel will also join you in defending humanity.”

Mika strode across the threshold into the conference room.

Although the table was surrounded by the greatest leaders and strongest warriors in all of human space, Mika was not cowed. She stood tall, with a confidence and commanding air that rivaled all of theirs. She took up a seat at the foot of the table.

Her red hair seemed a deeper hue of crimson now, and a dangerous fire burned in her eyes. Her body was surrounded by flows of power. Although she was not yet a Paragon, she was close – the peak of ninth level.

Although only a few days had passed since the death of her father, Mika was like a different person. There was a coldness in her, even as the devilish power of her blood surged around her like a tide.

Such a rapid successions of breakthroughs could only mean one thing. She’d accepted her devilish lineage, and released the power she had so long fought to contain.

Chu Cheng and the Gourmet exchanged a glance. The Gourmet’s expression was questioning, perhaps seeking guidance. Although he was older, Chu Cheng had taken the mantle of Hades and thus the role of patriarch for their family.

Chu Cheng answered his uncle’s unspoken question with a shake of his

head. Humanity was in crisis, this was not the time for infighting.

In taking command of what remained of her father's organization, Mika had proven her strength. The Gourmet feared she would prove to be a formidable Queen of Devils in the future.

Lan Qing regarded Mika with an even stare. After a small moment of surprise he nodded. It was in Lan Qing's nature to be repelled by the forces of evil. His Vairochana lineage was diametrically opposed to what she stood for. However, even though he could sense the darkness that had taken root in her, he saw in her eyes that it had not yet influenced her righteous spirit.

His nod was a signal that she was welcome, and her command was accepted. She nodded back. Expressionless her eyes swept around the table and took in the faces of the others but did not find the one she was looking for. She couldn't hide the surprise she felt from showing in her face.

The crisis Lan Jue and Qianlin had encountered was top secret, kept hidden from the rest of the armada. Only the Paragons knew, for they had been there to witness it.

Lan Qing went on. "Now that we're all on the same page, we will share resources. Our efforts together will be unequivocal and unified."

They proceeded to discuss how Adepts would be used in the fight to come. Humanity's war had reached a decisive moment – they had one foot in heaven, and one foot in hell. The final step in either direction would be determined by their efforts.

"Alien resistance is stronger than we anticipated, with more higher-tiered beasts than we thought. It is my hope that your Majesties might coordinate with me while we consider ways to deal with their superior strength. Alone, traditional war is unlikely to win us the victory we need. Together we may prevail."

At present humanity's total strength was inferior to the alien horde, even before considering the influence of their home worlds. However, despite their weaker position humans had still managed to strike a

stinging blow to the alien power structure. Poseidon and Middle Heaven's transformation had been instrumental in making them pay.

As a result the aliens' superiority in numbers was reduced. Allied forces still didn't have enough soldiers, but the three bastions made up for what they lacked. Bastions were large enough that they could produce what an army lacked, especially resources the bastion's needed to be most effective.

As he listened, the Terminator nodded in agreement. There were significantly more top-tier aliens than they had thought. Facing them would be difficult. In fact, were it not for Lan Jue and Qianlin's sudden breakthrough their losses would have been catastrophic. Thankfully they were able to tap into the essence of the Emperor of the North Star and summon the Gates of Cataclysm.

In the coming battle, sacrifice might be necessary even if they fought their hardest. Final victory was more important than keeping everyone alive.

The meeting continued without conflict. All of the Paragons were more than willing to cooperate with Lan Qing's plans.

One of mankind's advantages was Adepts' natural ability to restrain the power of alien Discipline. Between the Paragons and the three bastions, they had a chance of defending themselves even against a force superior in strength and numbers. In the end, though, which side would emerge triumphant would not be known until the fight concluded. To have any chance of winning at all, the alien planets could not be allowed to take the field.

When the meeting was concluded the Paragons left to handle their individual tasks. Lan Qing rose with them and caught up with Mika.

"Admiral Lan," she said, "where's the boss? Why didn't he attend the war council?" When she didn't see him at the meeting, Mika had tried to reach Lan Jue through her communicator. When he didn't answer she'd begun to worry.

Satan's death had wounded her deeply. If something happened to her

boss, a man she respected and relied upon, it would break her. She could sense the stress from it galvanizing her demonic blood.

Something flashed in Lan Qing's eyes. He placed a hand gently upon her shoulder.

Mika felt a power flush through her like a torrent of fire, draining through her shoulder and into her heart. The urge to react, the sense of something terrible just beneath the surface, suddenly eased as her strength of will was reinforced.

Lan Qing's voice was low but tough. "You've made your choice, now you must learn to control yourself. You can't afford to make careless mistakes. A-Jue is fine, he's meditating. Soon he will have another mission and won't be participating in the main attack. That's why we didn't need him to participate in our meeting."

With this said, his arm dropped and he left down the corridor.

Once she knew Lan Jue was fine the pressure in Mika's chest was released. Lan Qing's words were simple, but they were precisely what she needed. From now on, she was the only one she could rely on.

Chapter 836: The Breakthrough is Complete

When Mika made the decision to take over her father's legacy she removed the seal holding her powers back. Her poisonous inheritance filled her blood and caused her Discipline to surge. Through the struggle of controlling her demonic blood she rose to the height of ninth level in only two days.

Certainly, Satan asking his daughter to succeed him was not a decision made of desperation. The fallen leader of the Dark Citadel had made that decision when his daughter was still young.

Mika's talents were storied, much greater than her older sister's. She had even more potential than her father did at her age. After the tragedy that befell her family Mika fled, and with Lan Jue's help sealed off the darkness within her. Still her power rose quickly, eventually reaching ninth level sixth rank.

For her to rise so high without the help of her bloodline spoke to her natural abilities. With willpower this intense, she might have become a Paragon with nothing but her own willpower, completely avoiding the corruption of her inheritance.

However things did not always go according to plan. Satan was dead, and Mika now had to shoulder the stress and responsibilities he left behind. To perform this job she needed to awaken the demon within her – a demon which granted her great power, but at tremendous cost.

The corruption of her blood lived in the back of her mind, a poison consciousness that gnawed her will at all hours. She struggled mightily against it, warring for her soul in a way she thought she would never have to suffer again. For now it was under her control, but she feared the next time the demon would rear its head.

After her breakthrough, Mika scoured Tyrannosaurus for the remaining members of the Dark Citadel. Luckily the core power of her father's legacy

remained; the vampire bloodline and werewolf bloodline were intact, as well as their powerful warlocks.

Naturally these monsters did not easily pledge themselves to Mika's service. Although Mika had risen in prominence, commanding their respect would not be a matter of simply asking. However, she was surprised to discover that the man she thought would be her fiercest opponent – Lucifer – chose to stand by her side. With his help she convinced the others to follow her lead.

Europa's plight did not just pain the Pontiff. Spirits were crushed and emotions flared through all levels of the Dark Citadel at the destruction of their dark playground. Denizens of the dark underbelly of humanity were known for solving their problems with violence. When Mika came to them, promising an opportunity to exact revenge on the monsters that wronged them, no one resisted.

Her efforts over the last few days had been a struggle, fighting not only against the remnants of the Dark Citadel but also herself. When she didn't find Lan Jue in the war council meeting, the demon within her had started to stir.

Lan Qing's words helped her force the beast down, even marking her heart with a Buddha's calm. It helped her contain the monster's rage. She knew that, at least until she broke through to Paragon, she needn't worry about the corruption in her blood taking control.

"Boss, you better live through this!" Mika muttered to herself.

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Lan Jue's condition had improved considerably. Since benefiting from the power of the stars, he and Qianlin's protogenia had stabilized and the two of them were cultivating normally. Thanks in part to Lan Jue's reckless absorption of Qianlin's erratic protogenia, she was also recovering well and found her powers on firmer ground.

Now her Domain could be released without fear, and its calming properties once more benefited them both.

Once their condition was no longer critical Lan Jue began to reinject the protogenia he bore for Qianlin back into her Domain. Bit by bit he let her reabsorb what he took in a way that was secure, so that she might complete her breakthrough into Nirvana.

After experiencing the nourishment provided by the cosmos, Lan Jue's understanding of his own Boundless Starlight Domain had grown more profound. He had learned the premise of relying on the strength of the stars.

Now he could truly see he was employing the power of his inheritance. Out in space the light of the stars was everywhere, their influence omnipotent. The essence of this power's founder, the Emperor of the North Star, energized the might within him and sped up his cultivation.

Even just at the cusp of Nirvana, Lan Jue had begun to experience the pressure of universal protogenia. It was a strange, ever-present feeling like he was being constrained. It was almost imperceptible when he didn't use his powers, but when the energies within him stirred so did the ire of the universe.

It was a profoundly uncomfortable feeling, like his soul was being choked. His heart raced like a normal man in the midst of a heart attack. As Paragon his body fought to keep up to ease the load, but he could feel the increased metabolic processes aging him. It also undermined the stability of his protogenia.

Only once he'd felt it himself did Lan Jue understand how frightening universal protogenia was. Finally he understood why his father would choose to seclude himself, and be so cautious with his powers.

If it was so acute for him, after only just entering Nirvana, how terrifying it must be for his father! Jue Di's rapid loss of vital energy could only be the result of universal protogenia.

And yet it wasn't all bad. The pressure of universal protogenia stimulated his Domain to create a protective screen around him that kept the harshest consequences at bay. It was like being protected by a thousand stars.

He wasn't the only one stunned by the revelation. Even Jue Di, who conveyed this inheritance unto him, did not know such a thing was possible. Indeed the Emperor of the North Star was worthy of the title Master of Stars! It was the power to create an entirely new universe.

Lan Jue's comprehension of these mysteries had only scratched the surface, but the benefits were more pronounced day by day. What he knew of his inheritance and the Domain it granted him was advancing by leaps and bounds.

The power of starlight was his to command, and it was a power pure and malleable. He could mold it into whatever he pleased, whether it was to his benefit or to groom Qianlin's abilities.

The Queen of Heaven was a strange and wondrous lineage. Protogenia was calmed within its sphere of influence, which served to promote her own cultivation to surprising levels. Of course, where it benefited her it also helped Lan Jue in much the same way.

Neither of them knew how long they were lost in meditation. They awoke only after their powers had stabilized and they felt replete with the energies they'd consumed.

Lan Jue's first reaction was to smile as he looked at Qianlin kneeling across from him. She smiled back with the ease of someone who was relieved of a heavy load.

"I thought I'd only have the opportunity to be your wife in another universe." Qianlin said teasingly.

Lan Jue chuckled. "To live through tragedy means we haven't yet fulfilled our destiny. No matter what and no matter where, I will always be with you."

"Yes," she answered. "So long as you're near I don't feel afraid. Even death seems trivial. Now that we've lived through it everything seems clear."

Lan Jue took her hand and the two of them rose to their feet. He took her into his arms, and felt at peace.

“Alright, I’m sure there are many people watching.” Qianlin said, gently pushing away.

The two of them turned their eyes toward the nearby bastion. There was no doubt that several cameras had been trained on them this whole time, and now that they were awake news was being spread.

The thought caused Lan Jue to laugh. “Let them watch. Are you afraid to let them see we love each other? We’re man and wife, after all.”

Qianlin pursed her lips. “I don’t remember us ever being married. And don’t forget, I’m a goddess now. Would you dare take me as your wife?”

Lan Jue answered without hesitation. “In a heartbeat. You could be queen of all humanity and you would still be my queen. You always have been. Now let’s head back.”

Although Lan Jue wanted nothing more than to spend his time with Qianlin, Middle Heaven’s presence meant the final offensive was yet to begin. He and Lan Qing had an appointment, and there was critical business still to tend to.

After a few moments the two of them were back aboard the bastion. As they anticipated, there were people waiting for them.

“Are you alright?” Lan Qing’s voice called to Lan Jue from the communicator on his wrist.

“I’m fine,” he answered. “We’ve secured our Domains. The breakthrough is complete. You know, finally surpassing you almost killed me! I’ve waited for this day for a long, long time.”

Lan Qing’s answer was indifferent. “Congratulations. But I’m afraid you’re likely to face harder challenges soon.”

A chill crossed Lan Jue’s heart. He knew what his brother was talking about. “I know. How long has it been since the last battle?”

“Five days.”

Chapter 837: Before the Final Conflict

“Five days.”

Lan Jue was shocked when he heard his brother say it. Five days? Had he been gone so long?

“Already? That means you’ve been waiting for me, so...” Lan Jue realized he and Qianlin had probably delayed the whole army while recovering.

“We weren’t just waiting for you. Victory and defeat are determined by a large number of factors. However, it is nearly time. Come see me, we’ll go over the plan.”

“Alright!” Lan Jue’s response was resolute. He and Zhou Qianlin left for Lan Qing’s office immediately.

The army had not been idle the past five days. Soldiers busy collected the dead, repaired ships and recovered energy stores. When they weren’t doing that they were training. Humanity’s war machine never stopped.

Over by the three alien planets, the creatures were preparing for anything but made no overtures to attack. After all, time was on their side. Humans were the ones racing against the clock.

Indeed Lan Qing had been honest when he said he wasn’t only waiting on Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin. There were many things he needed to prepare before the final assault. For instance, Poseidon needed time to recover the energy it’d spent during transformation.

The bastion’s fantastic transformation had been an integral part of their victory over the aliens in the last fight. However, it had been draining and the Poseidon Group needed time to recover. It went without saying that their impressive strength would be needed in the fight to come.

That was merely one example of dozens Lan Qing had to manage, each one another piece in the puzzle needed to win victory over his enemy. Five days had been enough to handle nearly all of them.

Although they were closer now than ever, it was still difficult to tell precisely what situation Europa and the alien home worlds were in. All

they had managed to record were the flows of energy from that direction, gathered by long distance radar.

Part of the failure in learning more specifics was the alien army. They were so thickly spread across space that they blocked vision of what lay behind. They were specifically arrayed to keep the human armada blind.

Lan Qing and his brother spoke privately for about an hour. Afterwards, Lan Qing called together the leaders of the human resistance for another meeting before their assault began.

Twelve hours later, everyone was gathered in the conference room.

Everyone was under the assumption this would be their final push. Under Lan Qing instruction every soldier was given an electronic document. In it they could say whatever they wished, and address it to whomever they pleased. These documents would then be given to the Northern and Eastern governments for safe keeping. For those who died on the field in the fight to come, their final words would be delivered as requested.

No one had any illusions that these documents were anything but their last wishes. Lan Qing didn't want any lingering doubts to hide in the hearts of his soldiers. It was a way for them to come to peace with the possibility of their death.

Everyone – from Lan Qing down to the lowest private – prepared to meet their end. Fear of death was prevalent in everyone's heart, but behind it was the hot-blooded determination of these warriors.

After three hours all of the documents had been gathered and sent off. Then, starting with Middle Heaven, all contact with the outside world was cut off.

Nothing that might affect morale could be allowed to reach them for the next nine hours. Until the fight was done they had to maintain a singular focus. The ban would be lifted once the operation was complete.

All training ceased, and weapons were readied. All preparations were nearing their end. The drums of war were beating, and the soldiers were

moving frantically to their pace.

The nervous atmosphere was palpable, even the aliens were agitated.

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The room was a large, semicircular area with a ceiling that stretched a hundred meters high. Its walls and floor were covered in metallic casing. An intricate and archaic pattern scrawled across the floor, ultimately coming together in a complicated diagram. There was something scientific about its perfection, and the placement of the nodes painstakingly set within the pattern.

A power gem sparkled within each node, making the whole room seem strangely mystical.

This room was the most important location on all of Middle Heaven. No one – not even admirals – were permitted to enter without express permission. Right now five people were standing within.

“Have you really thought about this? This mission is especially dangerous. You also aren’t bringing enough power to make it back if things go wrong. I should go with you.” Luo Xianni fussed over Lan Jue.

Lan Jue answered with a shake of his head. “No, mom, this time you’ll be staying here. Once the final battle starts you and dad will need to be in the center of it. Without you the main force will be at a massive disadvantage and will likely fail. It’s fine, even if we can’t destroy the enemy we have a chance to protect ourselves.”

Luo Xianni scowled at his assurances. She couldn’t understand why Lan Qing would choose now to dispatch his younger brother on a scouting mission. What in the world was he scouting for?

But Lan Qing had his father’s support, and Lan Jue was more than willing to do his part for the cause. Luo Xianni could only go along with their foolish plan.

The room they stood in was Middle Heaven’s teleportation array, created by Luo Xianni’s own hand. It was constructed to transfer people over long distance – like from Angel. It was also capable of casting people over vast

distances without a landing pad, though with reduced accuracy. Still, with Luo Xianni's interdimensional Discipline at the level of the Infinite, accuracy was not a concern.

Besides Luo Xianni and Lan Jue, there were three others in attendance. Lan Qing, the Pharmacist, and Jue Di stood around him with stony expressions.

Qianlin was not with them.

Jue Di looked upon his son with burning eyes. "You're sure about this?"

Lan Jue resolutely nodded his head. "It's our best chance. The risk is worth it if it means we can end this war."

"Good, then we await your triumphant return." Jue Di said nothing more than these final words of encouragement.

Lan Jue turned to the Pharmacist. With a shared nod, they stepped forward into the center of the teleportation array.

Lan Qing followed him with his eyes. "You may have reached Nirvana first, but that doesn't mean you've beat me. You better come back to prove it. You said it – it's an opportunity you've long been waiting for. Right?"

Lan Jue smirked at him. "Of course. Relax, I'll make it back."

Lan Qing sighed, and the two brothers shared a quiet look. A thousand words were shared in that gaze alone.

"Mother, it's time." Lan Jue knelt upon the ground.

Luo Xianni's eyes had reddened at the edges, but the pink light came regardless of her fear.

Jue Di stared at his youngest son, trying to commit his face to memory.

Suddenly the power gems sparkled to life. Reality around the two Paragons shifted uncomfortably as beams of light shot upward from the array.

Luo Xianni's expression was one of unspoken pain. She turned to look at Lan Qing. "Why must Lan Jue go on this scouting mission now?"

Lan Jue grew solemn. "I'm sorry, mother. I can't go into detail. You'll find out soon, but for now I must return to work." The final battle was upon them, and as Admiral there was still a lot for him to do. With all that responsibility came no small measure of stress.

His answer wasn't good enough, but when she moved to say more Jue Di held her back.

Lan Qing turned and left the teleportation array with a quick and purposeful stride. The decision was made. Now, for his brother's safety, he had to make sure everything was perfect.

"What are you grabbing me for? Aren't they brothers? Why is he always sending A-Jue off for these dangerous missions? Especially now, isn't this a suicide mission he's sent him on? Sending them behind Europa to spy on the planets... if they're caught you know what will happen to them."

Jue Di was silent for a moment before answering. "I know, and they told me why it must be done. When they first came to me with the idea I wanted to say no, but I knew I couldn't. It really is our best chance. Don't fret over their relationship as brothers – remember that I am not their real father. In all the universe they only have each other. They're blood. If there was any other choice do you think Lan Qing would let his brother risk his life? Have you noticed that Lan Qing's hair has begun to go white at the temples? No one has borne more for humanity than he has – no one has had to shoulder the pressure he carries every day. Right now the only thing you and I can do is support our sons with everything we have."

Luo Xianni was speechless. Eventually she turned and pressed herself against Jue Di's strong chest. "Perhaps I'm biased," she muttered to herself.

Chapter 838: Intercepted

Jue Di smiled. “Every parent has their favorite, you’re already better than most. After all you met A-Jue first, and first impressions are important. You’ve spent the most time with him. And don’t worry, this sort of thing doesn’t trouble A-Qing. Come, we have preparations of our own to make. It isn’t certain our old bones will make it through this, but if we do I’ll lead you to humanity’s next immortal realm. I can assure you it’ll be an interesting journey, I’ve been preparing for it for ten years.”

Jue Di looked at her with eyes full of vigor and excitement. A golden-red power flickered in their depths.

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A pocket of space began to ripple, growing in intensity until a cleft of pink light split it apart. Two figures emerged into the emptiness of space, lit by twinkling rays from the stars.

Lan Jue and the Pharmacist stood shoulder to shoulder. They took a minute to modulate their protogenia and recover from the uncomfortable sensation of being thrown across such a distance.

The Pharmacist fixed Lan Jue with a deep and serious look. “I should be doing this alone. Why did you insist on coming?”

Lan Jue grinned back at her. “How could I let my sister go alone? How do you not grasp that your problems are mine as well?”

She smiled in response. “It’s rare for you to be so relaxed. It eases my worries, too. You know I’ve been waiting for this opportunity for so long, I almost couldn’t wait anymore. But now as we’re starting out, I can’t help but feel troubled. Not for myself, but for you. I don’t want to put you in danger. You’ve helped me so much, ever since you agreed to be Jun’er’s adopted father. Now you’re here risking your life with me.”

“Stop speaking like we’re strangers,” Lan Jue told her. “You’ll have a chance to pay me back when we’ve finished our mission. I’d like you to be godmother when Qianlin and I have our child. I can’t think of anyone else

with better experience.”

She chuckled. “Sure! I lived in bitterness for years as Jun’er grew. So long as we survive I’ll help you and your family face life with peace and positivity.”

Her words were a joy for Lan Jue to hear. Ever since he’d known her the Pharmacist lived her life in despair. Breaking her out of that shell had been very difficult.

The two of them cast their eyes into the distance. Pleasant smiles melted away before grave expressions.

From behind, Europa was even more hideous. It was wrapped in pulsing veins thick as mountains, like a diseased uterus. Beneath the writhing tubules one could hardly call Europa a planet anymore. A sick consciousness lived within it, ready to break free of its shell at any moment.

Lan Jue took a deep breath and set his jaw.

“Let’s go!” The two of them began their approach. Their mission wasn’t as simple as scouting out enemy positions. Luo Xianni was right to consider it strange.

Monarch, Queen, and Consort hugged Europa closely. Each of them were surrounded by a violet haze that seemed only partially real. Like cancerous tumors they clung to the beleaguered human planet. If one looked closely they could see minuscule changes occurring in the alien home worlds.

Lan Jue’s first impression was they looked like enormous gelatinous orbs. As Europa continued to squirm the three worlds seemed determined to press into it.

The sight made Lan Jue’s heart skip a beat.

Jue Di’s assertion that the planets would need a core of tremendous energy to achieve their goal was spot on. Europa was that core... did that mean they were trying to transform the Western capital into their own immortal realm?

From where he was standing it looked as though they were pouring their energies into the planet to transform it. Was this their evolutionary process?

He couldn't know, but it seemed the most likely explanation. If that were true their process would be complete once the planets were completely absorbed into Europa.

But how much time before they were finished?

A cursory glance revealed the home worlds were about the same size as they'd always been. However, they were oddly transparent. A closer look revealed that their outer shell was maintained to keep up appearances of size, but the energies within them were being funneled into Europa. Though he couldn't tell exactly, Lan Jue suspected it wouldn't be long before they achieved their goal.

Europa drew ever closer as he pondered the scene before him. The modulated communicator on his wrist was recording everything he witnessed – including his analysis – and was beaming it to Middle Heaven.

If their only aim was to take a peek and leave the dangers were limited. Most of the aliens were on the other side of the planet, and the two humans were fast enough to make a fast escape if necessary. However they were sensitive to energy waves and immediately recognized it when Lan Jue sent his communique to Middle Heaven. He and the Pharmacist turned and fled once the information was delivered.

From here they were at least two hours away from the armada. With the Pharmacist riding the burning light of her sword and Lan Jue a streak of blue lightning, the two of them shot into the distance. None of the three planets appeared to react, and the two sped away unmolested.

They couldn't return to the armada directly, it was too far through enemy territory. Now they had to wait. Carefully positioned behind the main force, their chances for succeeding in their true mission were good.

As they made their escape a beam of light shot passed. It stored before them, revealing a foreboding orb of light ten meters across. It flickered as two figures emerged from its depths.

Lan Jue and the Pharmacist gaped in fear, their pupils contracting. The two who met them were old acquaintances by this point; the Violet Prince and Princess.

Lan Jue had suspected they would be found by the planets, but he didn't think they would dispatch the two royals so quickly. Fleeing now that they were faced with two Infinite-levels enemies was out of the question. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist exchanged a look, then released their dharmic images.

The Harbinger Faerie was clearer than ever before. The slaughter she perpetrated against these monsters had strengthened her Domain and empowered her abilities. Her status as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth was not only solid, but steadily rising. All the while the Pharmacist's connection to her Banishing Blade grew closer.

With the appearance of Occisus, a bloodthirsty aura sprang up around them. The expanse of white it exuded was entirely different from the soothing glow of the Queen of Heaven. Qianlin's powers brought deliverance and healing. The Pharmacist's Domain promised only death.

Lan Jue also summoned his Boundless Starlight Domain without hesitation. The stern visage of the Emperor of the North Star glared at his enemies.

Captus shimmered with angry red light, and golden runes danced along the length of the blade – a sign that more than ten percent of the weapon's potential was being drawn upon.

Lan Jue was a different man than he was before – a Paragon who was one with Nirvana. Where he any less of an Adept he would not have agreed to this mission. If they hoped to flee with their lives, they would need to rely on their strength to carve a path.

A stern grunt was issued from the Violet Prince. Without a word he thrust a fist toward Lan Jue, initiating the attack.

Meanwhile the Violet Princess only watched him, head tilted, with a curious and hungry light in her eyes.

The Harbinger Faerie was first to react. Stern of countenance the dharmic image lifted Occisus high. Instantly the image crystallized into reality, sword and bearer as one.

Pale light arose through the space between them. Not the crushing power of before, but something intangible and enigmatic. Still this strange power gave the Prince and Princess pause. The target of this evil human weapon wasn't their bodies, it was their souls.

Occisus was the most savage of the four Banishing Blades, the death it promised didn't stop with the body. After rising to the status of Reflection of Heaven and Earth, the Harbinger Faerie could call upon Occisus' 'Beheading the Three' technique to sear an enemy's spirit. [1]

Without counting Jue Di, the only other Domain capable of rivaling the Pharmacist's pure destruction was Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain. Though there were only two of them, they commanded more power than a coterie of Paragons.

As the influence of her aura impacted the Violet Prince, the power of his attack was greatly diminished. Lan Jue focused his Domain to meet what remained and they clashed. Poof! The Boundless Starlight Domain was ripped apart and dissipated. Lan Jue himself was gone without a trace, as though the Prince's attack had atomized him.

A thick reddish-black aura sprang up around the two alien luminaries, thick with the essence of their strength. Behind them appeared their own images, two reptilian monstrosities identical to the titans they'd faced in the last battle – only larger.

The Violet Prince's eyes burned as he groped out with a pale hand. His overpowering will stretched out, reflected in his eyes as a nightmarish violet-gold.

1. During the process of Taoist cultivation, it is said that humans are possessed of three evils, they use the character for 'worm.' They represent our base desires that keep us from the immortal, and must be 'destroyed at the root' if we desire to transcend mortality. They are: peng hou, ignorance (I think willful ignorance), located in the head;

peng zhi, worry and vain delusion preventing peace, located in the chest; peng jiao, covetousness and gluttony, located in the abdomen.

Chapter 839: Deadlocked

The Pharmacist's ethereal sword was set in stark contrast against bleak aura of the aliens. Two opposing beams of light issued forth and collided in space with a blinding flare.

The Pharmacist grunted. Her eyes dulled as she focused on defense, and her dharmic image appeared less corporeal. However, their clash also forced the Violet Prince to be pushed back and set him off balance. The simple fact she wasn't instantly destroyed was an incredible circumstance when one considered the vast gulf in power between them.

The Violet Princess joined the fight. She splayed her arms wide, and her fingers wiggled in a strange rhythmic motion. Strands of light, thin as spider silk, appeared in space around her. They coalesced into a net of light.

Lan Jue appeared within the net, but he seemed unperturbed by the situation. Slowly and without concern he lifted Captus and drew it through the air. Its blade was an unsettling void that flashed with color – the light of five lightnings.

His Boundless Starlight Domain reemerged, cutting a stark boundary between himself and the radiance of the Princess' power. Bolts of lightning fired in quick succession to blast away the net of light that contained him, all while Lan Jue was manipulating the arc of his Banishing Blade.

Pockets of existence began to collapse, creating barren fields that stood out against the starry backdrop. The Princess' net was devoured into nothingness – as well as Lan Jue and the Pharmacist.

"They're trying to flee!" The Prince hissed. With a grunt he thrust reached out, and a hand a thousand meters long groped for his prey. Lan Jue and the Pharmacist leapt from the obfuscating fissure in disarray.

A sinister laugh rattled from the Princess' throat. The radius of her domain surged as she attempted to swallow the humans within it.

Lan Jue spun around and lashed out with Captus. In a flare of red light, dozens of images of himself appeared splayed throughout space. Once more his Domain reached out, but instead of lightning its interior was dotted with brilliantly shining stars. Beneath their light each of Lan Jue's mirror images became more real.

Thousands of Lan Jue's sliced the air with thousands of Captus'. Their myriad beams of power coalesced into a single column of light that smashed into the Princess' expanding Domain.

A ripple tore across space and time as the conflicting energies destroyed one another.

Surprise once more revealed itself upon the aliens' faces. Both of them were interested in this human's potential, but until now they didn't consider him a match for their power.

The first time the Princess encountered Lan Jue she thought him weak. Her interest in him came when he tried to diffuse the conflict they found themselves in. She found his approach novel and curious. Through the traits she inherited in consuming human DNA she knew of human emotion, including affection.

Of all the humans she'd encountered Lan Jue was the only one to catch her eye in a way that pleased her. He would be very suitable as a mate, she thought, and from that point forward she was loathe to kill him. At least, not until they had an opportunity to couple.

No matter what creature she devoured, the desire to mate was strong, and came with many pleasant sensations. She found herself fascinated by the concept.

All of the aliens were fragments of the home worlds, but the Prince and Princess were special. They were the only creatures to receive a true inheritance of genetic material. In a way they were the planets' only true children.

The Violet Prince was the result of genetic material from Monarch and Queen. The Princess, on the other hand, was borne from the Queen and Consort. They were the true commanders of the alien army while the

home worlds underwent evolution.

His last attack proved Lan Jue as an equal, a fact almost inconceivable in the mind of the Violet Princess. It had taken her millenia to cultivate herself to this point, but it had taken this man only a few short years. If this trend continued he would soon rival Monarch!

The potential of humanity truly was something to behold.

It served to only deepen the Princess' desire to couple with this extraordinary man. She spread her hands and once more the flood of purple light was born, thicker than before. It surged like a flood toward Lan Jue.

A pallor had come over his face. After all, Lan Jue had only just stepped over the threshold into Nirvana and it'd taken his full strength to deflect the Princess' attack. He could feel it already, the pressure of her influence was more than he could contend against.

He flicked his wrist and Captus carved a circle in the air in front of him. Its edges were red but its interior was infinitely black, as though the sword had birthed a miniature black hole. Somehow, small though it was, it forced the wave of violet power to break off.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh of relief, but did not stop. One after the other he drew out circles of all sizes around him, crackling with motley colors. His many copies followed suit and they combined to create layer upon layer of circles.

Captus and the secrets of Taiji sword melded well. Without Qianlin by his side this was Lan Jue's strongest defense. In combination with his Domain, he managed to ward off the Violet Princess' violent attacks once after the other.

As they fought the Princess wracked her mind for whatever human knowledge she'd accumulated. Suddenly a sentence crossed her mind, one that she felt suited this situation.

Every dog had its day!

It felt not so long ago when she first met him, so frail. To have grown to

where he can repel her attacks so quickly was more than impressive. How strong would he grow, given more time? If there was a next time they met, she was unsure she'd be his superior. The only option was to capture him now and make him her mate.

As the thought roared in her head the Princess' eyes took on the same violet red as her brother. Her crushing will came at Lan Jue like a deluge, all purple fury.

Nearby the Harbinger Faerie was under fire.

He was too strong. He'd been shaken by the Beheading of Three technique but the gulf in power between them was too great. She valiantly fought against the onslaught of his domain, but she could feel her sword getting heavier. It was like she was caught in a mire that was growing stickier by the minute. Her dharmic image was less effective in defense.

The poison golden light in his eyes darkened, like he saw all. He was always a step ahead of her sword.

She bit her tongue, and her face flushed with an unnatural red. Occisus flared with intense light. As the golden etched into the metal began to flicker a murderous will burst forth, and she was thrust forward.

The Harbinger Faerie's target was the Prince and she launched herself forward with abandon. Her image shrunk, but also became more material. In the moment before she reached the Prince her image was about the size of a normal person.

She, along with Occisus, shrunk so acutely that they slipped passed the enormous hand. Her timing was impeccable. She released the condensed power of her image and allowed its energy to pour into the Prince.

All of a sudden Occisus expanded to twice its size and channeled a beam of golden light from the tip. It was aimed right between the Violet Prince's eyebrows. Ting! Just as it seemed her attack would land his middle finger knocked the golden ray away. It shattered majestically, hiding the Pharmacist as she followed through. Suddenly she was right in front of him.

The Violet Prince's hands came up with a bestial sort of instinct. He clapped them together in front of his chest as though in prayer. Caught between his palms was the cutting edge of Occisus.

Her murderous qi fought against his control, pushing hard to bring that blade even closer. Yet she failed, the power of the Prince traveled through the black back toward the Pharmacist.

Occisus flickered as it struggle against the invasion. It fought to rid itself of the corrosive power of the Birth and Destruction domain but to no avail. The Prince was more than the Pharmacist could handle. She could only watch as her blade was swallowed up by the cancerous power.

Her ruddy expression drained to pale white. She'd given it all she had but the difference between them was insurmountable.

Lan Ju was fairing slightly better, but not by much.

The Violet Princess' full strength was nothing short of terrifying. After absorbing so much human genetic material she was more like her prey than any other alien. Her crudeness was gone, as was displayed in her alluring form as she fought. Then her body changed.

Lan Jue's transformation summoned pieces of himself in many places to diffuse her attacks and empower his own, yet it proved no use. The pressure of her strength began to close the circles of Taiji energy he'd created. There were few styles more suited for disarming overwhelming strength, but this was almost more than he could deflect.

The Violet Prince grunted. Suddenly the Pharmacist felt a jolt of psychic energy rock through her head like a hammer, strong enough to knock her head back.

Everything went white.

Chapter 840: Captured

The alien's purple-black Domain rebounded and swallowed the sword gripped in the Pharmacist's hand, and with it the Pharmacist herself.

"Sister!" Lan Jue cried. Captus burned with crimson light but there was little Lan Jue could do. He was barely managing to defend himself. A blue light sprang up around his body, strange and monstrous. As it coiled around him Lan Jue's aura surged in strength, so much that the Princess was struggling to keep him contained.

Lan Jue brought his sword down like a hammer, and a fissure of power shot out with a thunderous roar. The power of Captus raced for the Violet Prince, pregnant with All-Heaven lightning. Red and blue light coiled around each other and caused space to ripple uncomfortably around them. A stretch of space a thousand square meters long collapsed into a void.

The Violet Prince snapped his eyes toward Lan Jue's attack. Moments later his head stretched and bulged, twisting into the nightmarish visage of a crocodile. He spat an orb of purple-black energy that collided with Lan Jue's attack.

The Prince's Birth and Destruction Domain swallowed everything in came in contact with. Even All-Heaven lightning, for all its strength, was quickly castrated.

Next, tendrils of the corrupt energy splayed out like tendrils and wrapped up Skyfire Avenue's leader. The Violet Princess took advantage of his distracted and appeared at his back. She reached out to grab him.

But he stumbled forward seven quick steps and lashed out with his left hand. Seven Star Hammer! Boom! The difference between Nirvana and the Infinite was highlighted in close-combat. Suddenly Lan Jue felt a pressure crushing him from everywhere at once, so intense he could hardly breathe. He felt like every bone in his body was going to shatter.

His Seven-Star Hammer fist was formidable, but the power that enveloped him caused him to stagger. The Prince had risen overhead

while he struggled, and thrust a palm down toward the top of Lan Jue's skull.

He was already at the limit of his capabilities. The might of his Boundless Starlight Domain kept the influence of the aliens' power from him, but had shrunk to where it only barely covered him. No strength remained to force his territory wider.

Points on his body began to twinkle with starlight, like an inseparable fragment of the Milky Way. A storm of All-Heaven Lightning erupted around Lan Jue as he thrust Captus at the Prince in a last-ditch effort.

The radiance that surrounded him was born of his intrinsic protogenia, a power he was taping into to temporarily swell his powers to the Infinite. However, this was akin to quenching thirst with poison. He was injuring his body's flows of energy. If they survived the effects might actually decrease his cultivation – maybe even his lifespan. It was a desperate attempt against two enemies that surpassed him in strength.

The Prince and Princess didn't confront Lan Jue directly, and instead retreated under his self-destructive advance. His attacks hit nothing. Though he'd managed to free himself from the clutches of their Domains, it wasn't enough to open a path of escape.

The golden runes etched into Captus' blade had begun to dim as Lan Jue weakened. The burning energy around him was showing signs of collapse. "Aaaagghrrr!" The Violet Prince roared and attacked with the same method he'd used against the Pharmacist. The Princess answered him with a shriek.

The two sounds combined to create a strange sort of incantation. It reverberated into his soul. He felt something deep within him quiver and his mind became muddled. The blue light that encased him dissolved away.

Both violet figures attacked. The Prince approached from behind and struck Lan Jue in the back. Where he hit, Lan Jue's clothes were burned away to ash. Captus tried to protect its master with a shell of red power but the Prince broke through.

A handprint appeared where the Prince had struck, black and purple and full of evil intention. Immediately lines of dark veins began to spread from the wound as the aliens' poison spread.

“Aahh!” Lan Jue screamed. His body began to twist, plagued by unendurable spasms. He felt like he was being pulled apart, while at the same time a maddening energy was worming its way through him. It was headed for his Core.

The pain didn't persist for long, then Lan Jue felt himself lose control of his body. Pain was replaced by absolutely numbness – he couldn't move a finger.

This was the end!

A singular thought crept up to Lan Jue through the haze that was consuming him. Then, everything went dark.

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The Prince watched as Lan Jue floated in the vacuum of space, unconscious. He scowled at the human as though in thought.

The Princess, on the other hand, was elated. She pulled Lan Jue to her side and pinched his face in her hand.

“In the human way, I should thank you. I will bring him back with to mate with.” Her words were full of a dark satisfaction.

The Prince continued to look thoughtfully at the two of them. “His Core has not been completely overcome. There's something left, something that rejects my genetic invasion. Be cautious, there's something different about this human.”

“This is as it should be,” she replied. “If he were a typical male why would I choose him as a mate? Our progeny will inherit strength from both he and I. Whatever power he possesses that locks us out will become a part of us.”

The Violet Prince nodded. “That is likely. I will also bring this female back with us, I can feel a connection between her weapon and the one

Monarch possesses. He also told us the weapon your male bears is the same. You shall have his.”

As he spoke he produced Captus from the clutches of his Domain and handed it to the Violet Princess. He kept Occisus for himself.

Both of the Banishing Blades quivered as though unwilling to yield to these monsters’ control. But their struggle was to no avail, not against bearers who could call upon the powers of the Infinite.

The victorious alien royals shot back toward the home worlds as dual beams of light. They penetrated the strange, gelatinous exterior of Monarch and penetrated deep within.

Truly controlling the potency of the godblades was no easy feat. Both the Prince and Princess had felt the danger hidden within Ultus. They knew nothing of the creation of human weapons, but they could guess that these were the product of that bygone immortal realm.

Commanding these weapons would undoubtedly bolster their strength and aid with the evolution. Once the process was complete and an alien immortal realm created, they could quickly increase their cultivation without fear of universal reprisal. This was the home worlds’ plan, to propagate more powerful aliens to join them, and thus strengthen their fledgling reality. Over time they would have enough power to threaten the universe itself.

Lan Jue and the Pharmacist appeared with them in the depths of Monarch. They were placed in orbs of some jelly-like material.

“You first, or shall I?” The Princess cast an eye at her ‘brother,’ clearly eager to begin.

The Prince looked over the ethereal sword cradled in his hand. “You go on,” he said. “I’m in no rush. Besides, the humans are on the move.”

“Very well! Then I will begin.” She wasted no further time. The clothing that concealed her melted away to reveal her too-perfect figure. Her alluring frame would have toppled mountains in the world of man, but here the Prince paid her no mind.

She lazily lifted her right hand to motion at Lan Jue, and in response the thick slime that encased him peeled away. Lan Jue was revealed, also without clothing.

Tendrils of cancerous veins crept out from the mark left by the Prince and anchored Lan Jue to the ground. He hovered there as though he were weightless.

A strange light burned in the depths of the Princess' eyes. She ran her long fingers along her face. "I feel... hot. Is this the influence of human genes?"

"We've evolved to assimilate many human qualities," the Prince replied. "There are likely to be side-effects. Couple with him, see if this catalyzes some change in you."

She grinned. "Yes. Now let me think, how do these creatures reproduce?" She knelt by Lan Jue's side as though admiring a piece of art. Her eyes ran up and down her perfect human specimen.

The Violet Prince's body had been designed to be perfect, but for some reason the Princess wasn't the least bit interested in his carefully crafted appearance. She knew his true form, and that was the image that stuck in her mind.

This human male was different. He'd left her with an abiding impression from the moment she met him. She had assimilated human DNA into her own just a short time before their first encounter, getting accustomed to her new skin.

Human emotion was also new – vibrant and novel. Alien society was focused solely on growth. Consume, adapt, strengthen, repeat. Nothing else was important.

She was different. After remolding herself in the image of these humans, she had begun to change mentally as well. Though her emotions could not rightfully be described as human, they were alike enough. She was curious to learn more.

Chapter 841: Risking Life for the Cause

After her human transformation had been complete, she met Lan Jue for the first time. He'd 'saved' her from the other humans. That was what made him stand out. Starting then and several times after she had had several opportunities to kill him. Yet she had not, and instead the desire to claim him as her own grew.

Now she was more human than ever. The potential of their DNA coursed through her, but it also made her yearn for sensations these humans immersed themselves in. Monarch and the others saw no use for them, but they made the Violet Princess more curious about how these lesser life forms lived.

She was not alone in these sensations. The Violet Prince also felt the tug of these emotions, though his were different.

To her, Lan Jue was special. She held no interest in the other of his kind. In fact, she'd lost count of how many she'd killed by this point. Now it was finally time to take what she desired.

She rested her hand upon Lan Jue and traced the muscles of his chest. The look in her eyes was anything but human, absent human desire and replaced with a strange curiosity. She searched the secrets of the DNA she'd consumed, and her body grew flush. She looked more beautiful than ever from this internal glow.

Suddenly the Violet Prince's eyes narrowed. He turned and peered into the distance. Whatever he felt, the Princess also sensed.

Anger filled the air, so thick it could choke a man. "These humans... so reckless! They dare to attack directly. They need to be destroyed!" The Princess hissed.

The Prince answered with a grunt. "Let's go. We can't allow them to get close, they might have something planned we're not aware of."

They left, leaving the strange cavern in silence. Its walls undulated sickeningly like the intestines of some awful creature.

Lan Jue lay upon the ground. From the top he seemed fine, but he was still connected to the floor of the cavern through the black veins extending from his back.

He remained there for a long time. Then, he started to shake. A white light radiated outward from his chest.

It spread out in wispy tendrils like a fog until gathering into the shape of a woman. Zhou Qianlin.

She was covered in a thin gown of pure white gauze fabric. When she looked down at Lan Jue she couldn't stop a tinge of red from rising in her cheeks.

A moment ago she truly was at a loss for what to do. If the Princess had had the time to... would she have tried to stop her?

More painful was the realization that she couldn't have done anything anyway. Attacking the alien would have only served to get her caught as well.

She wiped the cold sweat that had accumulated on her brow. Thankfully it had not happened, otherwise she would have had to helplessly watch...

She shut her eyes and extended her perception outward, trying to sense everything at once. Her Queen of Heaven Domain quietly manifested itself as a shield around her.

She looked around, and after a quick moment spied the corrupted godblades discarded nearby. They pulsed with the Birth and Destruction domain of the enemy.

She took a deep breath. So far everything was going according to plan.

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"A-Jue, I have a plan. But it's dangerous, and will require you to risk your life. The payoff is that if you succeed – even if the main force is destroyed – there's a chance we can destroy the aliens outright." Lan Qing fixed his younger brother with a solemn stare.

He had mulled over this suggestions for a long time before making it.

But as the chances for a human victory became more remote, he realized he had to bring it up.

Lan Jue searched his face. “Go on, what’s the plan? Danger doesn’t matter if it can help us win this war.”

Lan Qing continued, his voice low and even. “I want you to try and infiltrate the enemy lines. Specifically, I need you to bring Ultus back.”

Lan Jue’s heart began to quicken. It wasn’t the first time the thought had crossed his mind. In fact the Pharmacist’s husband had urged them to do just that. The Banishing Strategy was locked in Ultus’ memory, and if they could recover the weapon it could be used to destroy the aliens.

The Banishing Strategy – one of the most deadly relics of the ancient days. Even mightiest denizens of the immortal realm would flee before it in terror.

“I understand. But getting to the surface of the alien planets is all but impossible. We won’t be able to approach unnoticed.”

Lan Qing explained his thought process. “Have you noticed that the aliens are very interested in the elite of humanity? On Angel, the victims they chose to mutate were all professionals and higher class citizens. Put another way, the more unique you are the better your chances of survival. This is due to their interest in our genetic code. In theory, then, if we give the aliens and opportunity to capture a Paragon alive, I believe there is a sixty percent chance they’ll take it. Once captured they would have to take the Paragon to one of the home worlds.”

Lan Jue followed where his brother was going. “So you want me to go on a scouting mission, but get caught?”

Lan Qing nodded. “And that’s where this mission gets dangerous. There’s a forty percent chance you’ll be killed from the onset. Then, you’ll need to recover your strength and find Ultus in hostile territory. Once you find it, you then have to flee with the godblade and make it back to us.”

“I’ve thought about this for a long time, ever since you brought back the information from the Pharmacist’s husband. Originally I had decided

against it, but after seeing how quickly you've grown it has proven how much potential these swords bear. With the four weapons together and the Banishing Strategy laid out against our enemies, even if they complete their transformation we have a good shot at victory."

"You and Qianlin would begin joined. You will be captured, chained, maybe even sealed. However Qianlin's powers should be capable of restoring you to full strength as quickly as possible. From there you can proceed with the rest of your mission. I believe you are the only person who can do this. No one else can get in and recover that weapon, and I can't ask any of the others even if they could. It's just a rough thought, so I'll need you to tell me if you think it's possible."

A wry grin spread across Lan Jue's face. "Are you really my brother? Asking me to do something so dangerous. I'm guessing the chance of success doesn't even break thirty percent."

Lan Qing was typically indifferent to his teasing. "Humanity's looking at no more than ten percent, but we have to try. That's ten percent chance of winning in a direct confrontation against the alien horde. If you're telling me thirty percent, then we have a chance if we work together from both angles. But the bulk of it will rest on your shoulders."

He paused for a moment, fixing Lan Jue with fervent eyes. "A-Jue, in all the universe you're my only blood kin. I know that I might be asking you to head out to your death. If you sacrifice yourself, then I want you to know that no matter the result of this war I will accompany you to the other side."

Lan Qing said it calmly, but Lan Jue knew his brother. If Lan Qing said it, he meant it.

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Qianlin was cautious, carefully searching the area with her protogenia. To her surprise this cavern seemed like a universe all its own. Try as she might she could sense what was happening outside.

This had to be the interior of Monarch, she surmised. She thought – or at least she hoped – that the alien ruler was too busy with its evolution to

notice their presence.

This whole plan was rife with danger and uncertainty. Luck would have to be on their side if they wanted a chance at success.

At least so far, luck seemed to favor them.

She supported Lan Jue's body as it lay prostrate. As she prepared, she pondered the possibility of death. Her deliverance Discipline prepared her for this, and if her death meant that others would live she was happy with the result. Of course, so long as she and Lan Jue were together.

As for the Pharmacist, Lan Qing approached her himself. Even Lan Jue had not known she was going to participate in the mission. It was important that they got these weapons, whatever the cost. Even if they weren't able to employ the Banishing Stance, simply having the Banishing Blades together would boost their strength.

Only Lan Qing, Lan Jue, Qianlin, the Pharmacist, and Jue Di knew this plan in its entirety. Even the likes of Luo Xianni weren't privy to all the details. As far as she knew Lan Jue was just going for a scouting sortie.

Sending the scouting data back was actually Lan Jue sending his brother a signal. He was ready for the Prince and Princess. Lan Qing and his soldiers were ready to begin the final engagement.

Lan Qing's part of the plan was simple. He had to keep the enemy busy, so that they didn't have time to 'experiment' on Lan Jue and the Pharmacist. Thankfully Lan Qing had the foresight to plan for this. If not, Lan Jue may very well have been subjected to the depraved desires of the Violet Princess. Qianlin would have been powerless to stop it.

Both Lan Jue and the Pharmacist, in order to trick the aliens into a false sense of security, did not hide their weapons. They also had to fight as hard as they could and subject themselves to unconsciousness in order to sell the ruse. Otherwise, how would they trick two creatures with Infinite power?

With no danger evident, Qianlin set about her work. She placed her hands against Lan Jue's chest and channeled the light of Guanyin through

him. She constrained the Queen of Heaven powers so that they remained just around her charge in order to avoid detection.

As she directed her consciousness into him with her energy, she ran into a problem.

Chapter 842: Expel! Arrow of Compassion

All of the arteries and veins in Lan Jue's body had become a sickly purple, especially the ones near his heart. They writhes as the corruption continued to flow through his body. Only his Core was spared, with a shell of pale blue light that kept the corruption from swallowing it up. It was the only part of Lan Jue that was yet to succumb.

After absorbing the power of the thunder essence, immortal qi flowed throughout Lan Jue's Core. His inheritance from the Emperor of the North Star also imbued it with the power of the five lightnings. Although the Violet Prince was strong, and his power great, it was still difficult for him to overcome Lan Jue's natural abilities.

Qianlin poured her Queen of Heaven Discipline into him, but found resistance from the alien influence. The Birth and Destruction powers they commanded had taken root deep within Lan Jue's body and was radiating outward, blocking her powers.

Not good! Qianlin was stunned to discover that the problem with their plan wasn't what was going on outside, but within Lan Jue's body. The Violet Prince's influence was strong and deep. She continued to try and force her Discipline into him, and noticed that the more she tried the darker her surroundings became. Soon the same toxic hue that flowed through Lan Jue had taken over the walls of the cavern. The environment had become a part of him, and he a part of it.

Qianlin, like Lan Jue, had achieved the lofty heights of Nirvana. Unlike him she was not adept at combat and really understood very little of her power now that she was a Paragon. Now was it her body she was trying to work with. One mistake could harm Lan Jue, and that was what she feared the most. That being the case she was hesitant to employ her full strength.

Her second most pressing concern was the changes in the cavern around them. The aliens would surely notice something had changed when they got back and their plans would be discovered.

She was running out of options. With a flash of light Demortus

appeared in her hand. She planned to cut the vessels that connected him to the planet, then decide what to do from there.

She tenderly lifted him up. Then, with Demortus' blue light flickering across its blade, she pulled the weapon across his back. They tenaciously clung to him, but Demortus was a Banishing Blade and severed the vessels from her lover. She held him close.

As she supported his weight she looked down in horror to discover blood oozing quickly from his back. It poured thick and black from the ends of the vessels, draining his life force.

"Ah!" Qianlin gasped. Much to her surprise the tubes that'd connected him to the planet had completely integrated themselves with his body and circulatory system.

Once again she summoned her powers to try and staunch the bleeding. It worked, but only in limited scope. The writhing ends of the vessels refused to close, whipping through the air like tony snakes. The power of the alien overlords was proving more than she could handle.

What could she do? What could she do?!

She was flustered and scared. Their plan was predicated on the hope that everything went perfectly, but their knowledge of these monsters was so limited – especially where the home worlds were concerned. It was likely they were the first living beings to make it here.

A flickering light appeared from Zhou Qianlin's forehead. She felt a strange sensation rising from within her that cleared her mind. A focused golden light sprang from between her eyebrows and fell over Lan Jue's back.

It was an arrow, bright and gold, and when its light hit Lan Jue's back it spread over the corrupted skin. Where the luminescence fell the veins writhed sickeningly, in sharp contrast to the steady power she released. Lan Jue's vessels changed from purplish-black to a healthy red. The wounds on his back began to heal. After a few moment he looked like nothing had ever happened aside from a halo of golden light that clung to him.

The Arrow of Compassion!

Zhou Qianlin understood the moment she saw it. The weapon had been the product of their combined blood, manipulated by the God of Wine Bess and imparted unto them. After their breakthrough to Paragon the arrow chose Zhou Qianlin and her Queen of Heaven Domain, searing itself as a rune on her spirit. Until now she hadn't known what to do with it.

The gold light receded back into Qianlin's forehead. With a groan Lan Jue's eyes fluttered open. The first thing he noticed was the warmth against his back and a familiar presence.

"Qianlin, did we succeed?" Lan Jue pulled himself into a sitting position and searched his surroundings.

The cavern's interior had returned to its previous violet tinge, like nothing had happened. The air was thin, and bore a faintly odor, but was otherwise fine.

Qianlin told him what had transpired. When he heard of the Princess' plan to have her way with him, he gaped at her.

She looked at him, frowning. "You're thinking about it, aren't you! She's gorgeous, after all."

He looked back at her with slight indignation. "Nonsense. She's not my breed much less my type, and my heart knows what it wants. I have my goddess and there's no room for anyone else – human or otherwise."

"Alright," Qianlin conceded. "Save your sister. I'm not sure what to do."

Lan Jue looked toward the Pharmacist who was still enveloped in an orb of alien power. He moved quickly to her side, and after a moment of thought, pressed his right hand against her head.

The tell-tale flicker of lightning traveled down his arm. The coalesced Domain of the aliens melted, but began to flow up his arm.

Lan Jue didn't resist. Instead he took a few steps back and allowed it to continue to cover him. His eyes adopted a blue light, and within twinkled a

galaxy of stars. Poof! The crawling sludge dissolved into smoke and flitted away on the breeze. Without the Violet Prince to lend it strength, the Birth and Destruction domain could not hold up against Lan Jue's All-Heaven Lightning.

He repeated this a few more times until eventually the Pharmacist was free. It was somewhat awkward when he discovered that she was also nude, and quickly had Qianlin lend her some of her own clothes.

Meanwhile Lan Jue looked over their two captured swords. Both he and the Pharmacist had fought hard against the Prince and Princess, even going so far as to attack with all their might. However, they did keep some things hidden, like the secret powers of their swords.

If they'd drawn on the potential of their Banishing Blades it would not have been so easy for the aliens to capture them. One of them likely would have escaped, if one were willing to sacrifice themselves.

But none of that was necessary, as their goal was to trick their foes. Even the seals on the swords were actually placed there by Lan Jue and the Pharmacist, insurance policies in case they needed to contend against their own swords. If they were taken they needn't fear – they could summon the weapons back within a thousand kilometers.

He took Captus back into his hands. There was no need for his thunderbolt Discipline now, for the sword reacted immediately to his touch. It flared with power, radiating an angry red light, and the seal was broken.

Lan Jue hid the sword within himself right away, in order to conceal its power from Monarch. Ultus had to be here somewhere, and with Captus awake it would stir the sword. Monarch would know something was amiss.

For this mission his greatest fear concerned the planet itself. How much power could it employ, he wondered, while in the midst of its evolution?

Zhou Qianlin galvanized her Domain and used it to wake the Pharmacist. When she opened her eyes and noted her clothes were different, her cheeks reddened. She looked towards Lan Jue and saw his

back turned.

Once she rose and recovered Occisus the three of them reconvened.

The Pharmacist spoke first to Lan Jue. "Alright, we've managed the first step. What's next?"

Lan Jue's tones were sober and earnest. "In a moment we'll need to start searching for Ultus' aura. Once we find it, we need to think about how we're going to flee. We know nothing about this place."

She looked back at him with firm expression. "I can use my connection to Ultus to find it. Then we cut our way out as fast as possible. There isn't much time to think it over, we have to do whatever we can, quickly. Complete our mission and escape at once."

Qianlin added her voice. "From what we saw in orbit, the planets have reached the key period of their evolution. These worlds are hollow, meaning most of their essence has been funneled into Europa. Their cores mustn't be here, otherwise Monarch would have discovered us already. The fact we're still breathing shows I'm right."

Chapter 843: Reengage!

Lan Jue nodded. “Qianlin has a point. Sister, search with your consciousness. We’ll protect you.” As he spoke he took up Qianlin’s hand.

So long as the two of them were together, they were confident in their combat abilities. In all of humanity, the only Paragon who surpassed them when they were hand in hand was Jue Di. In fact, if they were to use their Harmonious Swords even Jue Di wouldn’t necessarily beat them in a fight.

This fact was part of the reason why they agreed to undertake this dangerous mission. If he’d really been in danger of being slain by the Violet Prince or Princess, Qianlin was prepared to reveal herself, and the two would have employed the full might of their swords without reservation.

The most dangerous part of their mission was after Lan Jue and the Pharmacist were captured and subdued. If their subjugators changed their mind, Qianlin would have had to face them herself.

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While Lan Jue and his team were performing their task, humanity’s armada had moved in to re-engage with the alien forces.

They received the communication from Lan Jue an hour before the operation was to commence. It surprised the leadership, but Lan Qing had ordered everyone on high alert two hours prior.

The three bastions ships were arrayed in their triangular formation to protect the fleets as they advanced. All together they slowly moved in toward the alien home worlds. Moments after Lan Jue gave his brother confirmation and analysis of their enemy, the admiral shared the data with Kang Hui and Hua Li. However, he didn’t share with them Lan Jue’s true mission.

He also did not share with them the fact that their grand assault was also a distraction. It was a two-pronged approach; if the armada was able to defeat their enemies then grand, but if they lost Lan Jue was also

fighting for their right to survive.

Lan Qing and his brother were blood. Especially since the both of them had become Paragons they were connected through this bond. At least up to this point Lan Qing could sense Lan Jue, and knew he was still alive. If he was still breathing so long after sending the last data dump, the signs were good. The plan was proceeding as they'd hoped, presumably, and there was still a chance.

In order to give his brother the best chance at survival, Lan Qing ordered a general offensive. Middle Heaven led the charge, anxious to break the lines and attack Europa. All of its cannons were on full display, but were not yet charging.

Star Division was already deployed, traveling among the fleet ships. They were responsible for the defense of the entourage behind Middle Heaven.

Among them were the recently organized Adept corps from the North. They were hand-picked by the Terminator, three thousand strong, and none of them lower than fifth level. They didn't hold a candle to Star Division, but were nonetheless a boon to have at one's side on the battlefield.

The Dark Citadel's remaining forces were also ready to engage. Only a few of them piloted mechas, one of them being Mika. She sat within the cockpit of her suit, Jezebel, regarding the scene with a calm expression.

She'd tried repeatedly to get in contact with Lan Jue, to no avail. She'd begun to worry for his safety until she received a message from her boss.

He told her that he'd been dispatched on a secret mission. No matter what happens, he instructed, he had to keep a level head and a steady heart. She couldn't allow herself to be swallowed up by the darkness.

Mika was less anxious after the message. She focused on the remnants of her father's power, the three hundred representatives of the Dark Citadel. It was a good company, with a fair number of strong fighters.

It was a bleaker situation for the Pontiff's Citadel. Metatron and a handful of Archangels were the only ones left by the Pontiff's side. Su

Xiaosu, the one they called the Morning Star, was not among them. They knew where she was, but they also knew her new position. As chief of Star Division, there was no way they were getting to her.

Nothing was held back. Every soldier, every weapon was being prepared for the final fight. After five days, Poseidon was also ready to employ its humanoid transformation once more if needed. Middle Heaven's molinite core was also prepared for peak load.

The waiting had been grueling. For five long days everyone had been living under a cloud of anxiety. Since no one knew when the aliens would complete their evolution, every minute was agonizingly slow as they anticipated the worst.

Good news come to them from Angel. Several successful resupply shipments had come and gone, and the survivors were doing well. At least they wouldn't have to worry about looking after the survivors.

Everything was prepared for the final confrontation between man and monster. The time had come for victory or defeat to be determined. The finality of it settled over soldier and officer alike – billions of lives hung in the balance, and they were aware their chances of success were creeping closer to zero with each passing minute.

No one knew for certain when the home worlds would complete their evolution, however they knew this was their last chance to do something about it. Even if the North agreed to send more forces, time had run out.

This was to be the end, either way.

Lan Qing had made no attempts to hide the severity of it. He told everyone under his command that if they lost, humanity was lost.

The aliens did not float idly by as the armada approached. They moved in to intercept the fleet quickly.

The horde spread out across a wide breadth of space in a way similar to the formation they'd employed last time. Both flanks were populated by typical alien soldiers and their central core were the elite. This time, it was the Violet Prince and Princess who led them.

The Violet Princess' expression was particularly frigid, and a deeply murderous glint lived in her eyes. An elusive human sensation had been within her grasp and these meddlesome soldiers had interrupted her. She was full of an unspeakable rage.

As many as twenty two avatars stood by their side. Twenty four of the mightiest enemies humanity had ever faced stood between the last hope of mankind and their ultimate victory. Five of them commanded the power of the Infinite.

In many ways a creature of Infinite-level power was equivalent to a bastion ship. Middle Heaven was about as good as two, maybe three. In the fight to come it would come down to mastery of command.

But small and powerful was a deadly combination on the battlefield. That was why Paragons were so highly regarded by military leaders.

The two sides neared. Tyrannosaurus spun its lumbering body to position its main cannon – targeting the cluster of elite aliens.

Suddenly a harsh orange light began to flicker around Middle Heaven. It looked like it was preparing to charge.

The support fleets were in tight formation and their weapons were trained on the enemy forces, ready to fire at a moment's notice. Their shields were also engaged a full strength which covered them in shimmering shells of opaque light. They waited with baited breath.

A cold light radiated from the Violet Prince's eyes. He glared at Tyrannosaurus but made no indication he was going to dodge its deadly blast.

Kang Hui stared back, seated within the bastion's control center. Lan Qing's face was on the screen beside him as they spoke through their dedicated channel.

"Begin!" Lan Qing gave the order, cold and somber. But to Kang Hui, for some reason, it sounded almost fervent.

"Firing main cannon!" Kang Hui slammed his hand onto the red button in front of him.

A shudder rumbled through Tyrannosaurus. Then, the cannon released a deafening blast as it fired at the alien commanders.

A column of white light spat forth that carved a stark path through space. Flagrantly it blazed towards its target.

In the same instant, Middle Heaven made its move.

An eruption of orange light brighter than ever before was belched from its rear. The warplanet was catapulted forward at tremendous speed. Swarms of drones tumbled from the hangars but didn't follow the bastion. Instead they spread out and returned to where the rest of the armada waited as though abandoning ship.

Middle Heaven and Tyrannosaurus attacked at nearly the same moment. As the Eastern bastion barreled towards its foes it glowed with a blinding orange light in much the same way as before. It looked like it could erupt into its Solar Flare at any moment.

How powerful was a bastion's main cannon? Strong enough that an alien planet would avoid it by any means necessary. They wouldn't dare risk a directly blow.

Lan Qing's opening gambit was a simple one; attack with Tyrannosaurus' strongest attack and send Middle Heaven in for a kamikaze run. If the aliens didn't stop him, he would turn An Lun into the most terrifying bomb in all of human history and obliterate Europa. He would sacrifice Middle Heaven if it meant blowing the alien planets into dust.

Chapter 844: Control

The information sent back by Lan Jue confirmed all of Lan Qing's suspicions. The alien home worlds were nearing the end of their evolution process. Destroying Europa would not only prevent their evolution, but may also fatally wound or even destroy them.

Before the battle Lan Qing ordered everyone off the bastion, leaving only a skeleton crew.

Most of the soldiers abandoned the bastion aboard its drones. Those who could pilot mechas were already out among the fleet. Normal mecha pilots weren't very effective against the aliens, but in a battle like this even the smallest advantage could earn the humans victory.

The Violet Prince's face was a scowling mask as he watched Tyrannosaurus' attack and Middle Heaven heading his way. It wasn't that he didn't want to avoid them, he couldn't.

He and the other elite aliens were able to intercept human messages through psionic waves. Through the consumption of human genetic material he could understand their language, even how they thought.

In the process of commanding the humans, their admiral Lan Qing had used the most direct methods of communication with his subordinate, Kang Hui. The alien leader was able to uncover their plans without much effort at all, even the condition of Middle Heaven and its molinite core.

Then Lan Qing ordered his troops off the bastion. The Violet Prince knew only a few souls were left, the bare minimum needed to pilot the war machine. It was open tactics, equivalent to Lan Qing looking them in the eye and saying 'this is my plan, what do you plan to do about it?'

The Violet Prince couldn't afford any risks, for he knew the power contained in Middle Heaven. If it were allowed to approach Europa, the damage to the home worlds would be horrific. He couldn't be sure it would destroy his masters outright, but at the very least it would ruin their plans for evolution.

The aliens had prepared this moment for hundreds of years. Centuries of planning and gathering resources. At last final victory was within their grasp.

If their evolution failed it would be nothing short of a disaster. Who knew how long it would take for them to acquire the resources necessary to try again, or whether the home worlds could continue to hide away from the cruel lash of universal protogenia.

Humans were not the only ones fighting for survival. For the aliens, this moment would also define the future of their species.

The Prince realized that dodging Tyrannosaurus' blast left the way open for Middle Heaven. He had no choice, he had to face the enemy head on.

The beast upon which the Prince rode belched a roar that shook the pillars of heaven [1. Yes.]. It's hideous, thirty-thousand meter long body lurched forward while the Prince, Princess, and three Infinite-level home world avatars were surrounded by an aura of purple.

Five shimmering orbs of light fused into one, forming an enormous void of black that blocked the bastion's path forward. The beast that had conveyed the Violet Prince was ripped into countless chunks of bloody meat, which subsequently became orbs of crackling dark energy. They coalesced into a single orb which was then fired at Middle Heaven.

The war was underway.

The alien leadership feared no sacrifice. The Prince readily forfeit a near-Infinite level creature to attack the human bastion and warded its progress with his own body. Potential fatal were the attacks from Tyrannosaurus and Middle Heaven, but he stood in their path regardless.

The Violet Prince was wise, and he knew the humans let their plans slip on purpose. It was all in order to let that planet-sized bastion through. Yet for all his intelligence he was left with no options. Protecting the home worlds was his primary objective, and nothing could threaten their evolution. What if this machine-planet hybrid – which had already surprised them on numerous occasions – actually managed to succeed?

He knew this was their plan all along, yet he had to face it on their terms. However he was confident the humans wouldn't expect him to sacrifice one of his own top warriors to contend with the threat of Middle Heaven. He knew how important this one bastion was to the human defense forces, and destroying it would weaken his prey by at least half.

Everything happened quickly, almost too fast to keep track of.

First was the blast from Tyrannosaurus' main cannon. , a column of searing light that pierced the center of the alien's Domain. As the power of the bastion's gun came crashing onto them all of the alien leaders – including the Prince and Princess – scowled in dismay.

They were powerful, yes, but the main cannon from a bastion ship was unparalleled in the world of human weaponry! It possessed enough destructive energy to easily obliterate a planet.

Crackling sparks of power snakes across the surface of the aliens' power as it struggled to ward off the attack. It threatened to collapse at any moment. The five powerful aliens poured all of their strength into maintaining the vortex. Tyrannosaurus was capable of sustaining continuous fire from its cannon for a full minute. Its targets would have to hold out for at least that long.

Meanwhile the remains of the titan were closing in on Middle Heaven. A figure appeared in space outside of the ship, followed shortly after by a gateway of pink light. The portal was as lofty as it was sudden, but vanished the moment the aliens' attack passed through it. Another portal appeared and spat the attack back out, only this time it was aimed back at the enemy forces.

The bastion's defender was none other than the Photographer, master of space-time – Luo Xianni.

Long before becoming a Paragon of the Infinite, Luo Xianni had perfected her art. Her gateways were capable of absorbing and redirecting all sorts of energy – even living creatures – at a whim. As her power grew, she was capable of altering ever more powerful flows. By now she could transfer the entire fleet if she pushed herself.

Of course the larger her target, the shorter the distance she could move it and the more likely problems were to arise. This time the two sides were close, so her biggest struggle was the sheer amount of energy she was trying to redirect.

When the orbs reappeared they were struck by arcs of copper light. Although they emerged from Luo Xianni's portal intact, the blow from the golden cudgel made them unstable. The orbs erupted into violent bursts of dark energy.

Sacrificing the life of a thirty-thousand meter long beast produced a staggering amount of energy. Not only was it replete with the Birth and Destruction Discipline of its race, but also tremendous destructive power. As it grew unstable and erupted, huge swaths of space became bogs of sticky, corrosive energy.

All aliens caught in the 'mire', no matter how strong, were quickly dissolved.

Luo Xianni was artful in her manipulation. The orbs appeared directly in front of one wing of the alien horde, thus turning a potential threat against Middle Heaven into a screen that prevented the aliens from assaulting it.

The aliens had raced ahead with their whole strength, and the counterattack was too sudden for them to stop. Scores of the monsters raced headlong into caustic cloud that stretched tens of thousands of meters across. Their death strengthened the mire and caused it to grow.

Luo Xianni appeared before Middle Heaven, her face pale. Errant bolts of pink energy crackled around her, dangerous and unstable. Creating and manipulating that portal had been debilitating and for the time being she was too weak to continue. She observed her handiwork for a moment, then returned to the bastion to recover.

The explosion, and the deadly cloud it created, barred a third of the alien horde from joining the fray. Most had stopped before rushing headlong to their death, but it would take them a few moments to circumvent the deadly area. Suddenly the alien formation and their defensive plans were

thrown into chaos.

Who was Lan Qing, but the lauded God of Wisdom? He would not let such a fine opportunity go to waste. Once he saw his mother's achievement he began to shout a string of orders.

Twelve fleets let their weapons go hot, firing into the flank that wasn't barred by the corrosive cloud. Capital ships kept up a hail of fire with total disregard of energy stores. In the space of a breath, a barrage of punishing laser fire was bearing down on their enemy.

Lan Qing had warned Kang Hui and the other commanders against being conservative in the final fight. Now was not the time to be economical with their weaponry. They had to execute the alien menace with extreme prejudice, hit them with everything they had. That was the path to victory.

The smallest patrol boat to the largest Capital ship, all of them needed a cooldown period after continuous fire. It came down to frequency, so the earlier in the fight they depleted their payload, the sooner they could recover for a second volley.

For this reason Lan Qing held nothing back, not for this battle. Tyrannosaurus' guns proved more than effective, not by eliminating enemy forces but by keeping the alien elite out of the fight.

Chapter 845: The Art of War

Conditions on a battlefield changed quickly. It took only a minute for Lan Qing to react with a string of commands.

The right wing of the alien horde was blocked by the corrosive cloud they themselves created. Their left wing was coming under heavy bombardment from the armada that turned their frontlines into purple mist.

Still, the aliens had the upper hand when it came to total strength. Their elites were more numerous and more powerful, though the number of lower tier beasts had been significantly reduced after the last encounter.

With their right lost behind a deadly cloud and their left being punished by starship cannons, the aliens were at a disadvantage.

Faint golden light flickered near the right wing, followed by a voice. "Bigger – bigger – bigger!" Each cry made the golden light gleam brighter until it was revealed as an enormous staff. The Chinese character 大 [1. Big.] was etched on its shaft.

The Compliant Rod! [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruyi_Jingu_Bang]

The staff stretched thousands of meters in the space of an instant. It began to fall, then swept a golden path through space.

The aliens behind the cloud had been scattered, their formation broken. Most of them were trying to move over the top of the deadly area when the staff appeared. The aliens directly in its path were slowly ground into nothing just by the presence of it. Jue Di's Compliance Rod had no special qualities, just unadulterated force. Enough to erase its foes from existence.

Total annihilation! That was the only way to describe it.

Jue Di's frigid expression was covered beneath a sheen of golden fur. Copper light flickered around him in a half-real shell. The Compliance Rod moved at his command.

Lan Qing knew from the start that a direct confrontation – like last time – offered only a remote chance of victory. Even if they won here, their

remaining forces were unlikely to be strong enough to destroy the alien home worlds.

This time, his strategy would need to be different.

His foes were intelligent, of this there was no doubt. However where they differed from humanity was in their homogenous nature. Every alien was designed for slaughter, for consumption, in order to feed their evolution.

Humans, however, were unique even on an individual basis. They didn't have the dogged, singular focus of the aliens but they made up for it in diversity. Each human brought their own advantages.

Such is the art of war! Passed down from the ancient days of China was the knowledge of Sun Bin [2. A descendant of Sun Zi, who is attributed to be the author of the Art of War.], the lauded commander and author of the Thirty-Six Stratagems [3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty-Six_Stratagems. There is some debate as to the true author, though Sun Bin is one possibility.]. Even all these years later, the truth contained in the pages of that book applied.

Lan Qing was employing a variation on Tainji's horseracing strategy. [4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tian_Ji]

Your elite outnumber ours? We cannot face you directly, instead we shall avoid the weakness and strengthen our advantages.

The allies' forces greatest advantage was their range. Even Infinite-level aliens didn't have a means to fight back from a distance. This was a fact Jue Di had revealed to Lan Qing long ago.

Few were the adepts capable of contending against the alien forces. Nor were their soldiers in any great position. But at least as it applied to the normal aliens their range advantage made the gap negligible.

Lan Qing's tactics were to remove the monster's fangs and claws; take away their strengths and then deal with the alien leadership on more even terms.

Tyrannosaurus' main cannon was a distraction. Luo Xianni was the only Paragon aboard Middle Heaven. Jue Di had been hiding in the darkness of

space awaiting the perfect moment to strike. As for the other Paragons...

Once the armada's bombardment of the left flank ceased, several figures could be faintly discerned in its vicinity. Each one of these mysterious figures radiated with power.

Two positron cannon explosions suddenly lit up the area like a pair of miniature suns. Half a moment later the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Terminator, Pontiff, Pauper, Driver, Gourmet, and the Wine Masters made their move.

None of them held back.

A nightmare of destruction descended upon the aliens, so inferior to the Paragons that they had no option but to die in agony. The humans spent nothing but sweat to put them down, and the whole process took no more than a dozen seconds.

By the time the Violet Prince and Princess could react, both wings of their horde were decimated.

Aliens had always maintained the advantage over human forces, ever since the start of this conflict. It made them complacent, their tactics weak. Especially after the crushing defeat they delivered to the humans in the North.

The three bastions Lan Qing led now were a far cry from the eight the aliens faced before. Hardly worth considering, in their estimation. Yes, the humans had won some victories. However, as far as the Prince and Princess were concerned, they were flukes and easily reversed.

But in the course of the last two battles humanity had proven more tenacious, more deadly. Only now was the Violet Prince seeing the allied forces for the threat they were. He was surprised at how cunning the humans had suddenly become.

In truth Lan Qing's original plan had been more complicated, and arguably less effective. But the Violet Prince had been eager for a quick and decisive victory. Sacrificing one of his own had created an opportunity which the humans exploited.

Who was Luo Xianni? It was important to remember that she was one of the founders of Skyfire Avenue. When she saw the opportunity to make the aliens pay she took it, and created the best situation for her people that she could.

Above the cacophonous din of his soldiers dying, the Violet Prince released a howl of his own. The other elite – those not resisting Tyrannosaurus' cannon fire – split off to join the fight in either wing. Three made their way to Jue Di, while the rest left to deal with the other Paragons.

Tyrannosaurus' sustained cannon fire was beginning to wane, and as it got weaker the murderous fury in the Prince's eyes grew. If his prey had the gall to invade his horde and slaughter his soldiers, he would do the same to them.

But before he could retaliate his eyes were filled with shimmering blue light. Six enormous orbs were headed his way.

Poseidon's Soft Water bombs were en route!

The Prince and the others were too busy battling the power of Tyrannosaurus to keep track of Middle Heaven's exact position. The Violet Prince's first order of business was to pinpoint this bastion, which he determined was the most dangerous enemy. But Poseidon didn't give him a chance. Its Soft Water bombs came right on the heels of Tyrannosaurus' cannon.

Want to fight back? It wasn't going to be that easy!

There was no comparison between the lethality of Poseidon's Soft Water bombs and Tyrannosaurus' main cannon. The cost in energy and resources that went in to just six bombs was astronomical. They were also imbued with vital energy, making them particularly deadly to alien forces.

The Violet Prince could not hesitate or delay. Now he had another bastion to contend with.

Tyrannosaurus' energy beam was not yet completely depleted, so he couldn't dodge out of the way. Suddenly he felt like a spider caught in its

own web. If he'd dodged Tyrannosaurus' attack from the outset he wouldn't be caught like this.

Middle Heaven also engaged its primary weapons systems, just moments before Poseidon's bombs arrived.

Lan Qing fired the weapons himself.

If one looked closely, they might spy a faint golden haze hanging over Middle Heaven as it tore through space. That wasn't a manifestation of the bastion's power, that light came from Lan Qing's Vairochana dharma.

Throughout human history there had never been a Paragon who was also a bastion commander. Lan Qing was the first. As such he was the only one who knew how to manipulate the ship with his own protogenia.

This time Middle Heaven's main weapons were completely different than before. Roughly a third of its front-facing guns were fired, releasing a flash of orange light. They seared through space until joining some distance in front of the bastion. Once joined, the orange light became a strange conglomeration of hues.

Pink and orange mingled among one other, encompassed by a faint sheen of gold. 'Orange-gold' was the best way to describe it.

The threads of tungsten that came from Middle Heaven's guns were bright and non-transparent. When they combined they created a sustained beam no bigger than the light from a single small cannon, but the orange-gold energy was crystal clear. It was stunningly beautiful, but also incredibly deadly.

The attack had a name: Terminal Ray.

They'd come up with the plans for it when Middle Heaven was still An Lun. It took ten years of research to complete. Compression without explosion, cohesion and distillation. That was the only way to describe how Terminal Ray worked.

Lan Qing urged Middle Heaven forward, risking the wrath of the alien planets, and it seemed about to pay off. The East's ultimate bastion was as versatile as it was powerful, and that was where its danger lay.

To use Poseidon as a comparison, it was created through the blood, sweat and tears of the Poseidon Group. Nothing was spared in its construction. This was also true for Middle Heaven whose construction was driven by the Eastern Alliance. Once Middle Heaven's inherent benefits were revealed, Eastern scientists used all of their knowledge and analyses to reach a single conclusion: they could build the North's worst nightmare. A ship that was more terrifying than five of their bastions put together.

Chapter 846: Terminal Ray

The hopes and dreams of the Eastern people were in every bolt of that bastion ship. Their alliance had been stuck under the thumb of the North for years, waiting for the opportunity to rise above their oppressors in a single brilliant move.

This is why although Middle Heaven already proved its might several times over in battles past, it still had more surprises in store.

And Terminal Ray was nothing short of devastating. Lan Qing's plan had been to save revealing it for a surprise attack on the alien home worlds! Now, though, his target was different.

That relatively insignificant line followed in the wake of Poseidon's Soft Water explosions. However the burning trail it blazed was not pointed at the Violet Prince or Princess. Jue Di had explained to Lan Qing that the connection between them and the home worlds was exceedingly close. There existed the possibility they would be teleported to safety if their lives were threatened.

A weapon that could kill an Infinite-level alien could still be resisted for a time. At least long enough for the home worlds to react.

Terminal Ray was a danger, but also a great burden on Middle Heaven. A single use consumed nearly everything in the bastion's stores.

There was no one around to witness it, but if there had been witnesses in the bastion they would have found Lan Qing with eyes blazing gold. Before him was a smaller figure - that of Jun'er.

She held her astrum, the Eye of Tomorrow, aloft in her tiny hands. Her body was encased by the nurturing energy of Lan Qing's power. His own hands danced like butterflies over the controls before him. Several screens in the area around him began to flicker and change.

Terminal Ray was guided by the power of prophecy and assessment. Both were used to aim the laser where it was needed most.

The orange gold ray blazed for but a moment. Unlike Terminator's shot,

which went on for a time, Terminal Ray was gone in a blink. It passed through a cluster of five aliens, and little else.

Those were the aliens dispatched by the Violet Prince to reinforce his flank. When the light flit passed them they did not react. On the contrary, they grew very still.

For ten seconds no one moved. Then, fleck by fleck, the avatars crumbled away and spread out through space as a fine ash. In a single shot five Nirvana-level beasts were erased, sending a shock through the alien forces.

The aliens' greatest advantage was in strength and numbers. They had more Infinite-, and Nirvana-level warriors than the humans by far.

In the moments after Middle Heaven's attack, the Violet Prince and Princess felt their breath catch in their throats. A palpable fear swept through them just as Poseidon's payload was beating down.

Middle Heaven broke off its charge after eliminating the avatars. The peeled quickly to the side, toward Jue Di and the horde's right flank. Between the scourge of the corrosive cloud and Jue Di's attack, the right wing was nearly crushed. But the beasts were many, more than Jue Di could destroy in a single strike.

As Middle Heaven bore down on its remnants, it engages its secondary weapons. Those monsters which slipped passed Jue Di were faced with the firepower of the bastion.

Within Middle Heaven's control room Lan Qing had returned to normal, and Jun're had found a place nearby to sit quietly. The ship shook from the cost of using its ultimate weapon.

Lan Qing was nothing if not efficient. A single shot and not only had he reduced the number of his powerful adversaries, but also terrified them. He wanted them to know they weren't invincible. If Lan Jue were not down among the alien planets somewhere now, he would have preferred to save it as a surprise strike on the home worlds themselves.

Chapter 847: Gaze of Gold and Fire

If the Violet Prince and Princess joined their brethren in an attack on Middle Heaven, the bastion was doomed. The two of them burst onto the field after breaking free from suppressive fire, summoning a screen of purple-black energy. The screen blocked the alien warriors from Middle Heaven's railgun fire and even reflected the blasts back toward their origin.

Once pressure on their flank was eased the alien forces surged ahead. Their target was the bastion. A seething hatred burned in the Prince's eyes as he led the charge. These hateful humans must be destroyed!

His avatar generals had been so thoroughly destroyed by the bastion that even their vital crystals were disintegrated. Each one of those doppelgangers were repositories of tremendous energy, now lost. Such energy would be needed to support the home worlds after their evolution, in order to create the universe they envisaged.

Losing five avatars was a sharp blow.

Middle Heaven couldn't retreat as fast as the aliens could advance. As the two sides neared a clash seemed fated.

All of a sudden a host of drones came screaming passed, enough to blot out the horizon. They were Middle Heaven's ships, reinforced with drones from Poseidon. They came in guns blazing, pummeling the monsters with miniaturized Soft Water bombs and laser cannons. Zones of glittering crystal blue were pierced by burning laser trails.

The sudden addition of thirty thousand fighter drones changed the dynamics on the field. The alien horde was violently blocked in their charge by the hail of fire, and even the generals found their path forward blocked by smears of golden light. Jue Di.

Jue Di was a conduit of his enormous power. His body was covered in course golden hair, and his Compliant Staff glinted dangerously in his hand. The mighty weapon seemed capable of splitting the universe in two.

The Violet Prince paused in a moment of fear. The first time they met the Paragon nearly killed him. It was Monarch who saved him then, with a timely intervention.

At the time his transformation into human form was still new, his powers had not completely adapted. Still the Prince knew he was no match for this human. Jue Di was the strongest foe he'd ever encountered.

Jue Di's eyes were wells of burning golden light. He swept them across the field and over the alien elite, who each felt his gaze pierce them.

They couldn't control themselves or hold back. Suddenly their humanoid shapes gave way and their bodies swelled, revealing their true selves. At three thousand meters long each the field quickly grew crowded. Chaos ensued as the alien formation was jostled around.

Gaze of Gold and Fire! One of Jue Di's penultimate dharmic abilities.

The Paragon pointed forward with his staff, and suddenly he was a flash of sparkling golden light. Before anyone could react he shot across the field, reappearing above the Violet Prince. He hovered there for a moment with a tyrannical presence so intense it rivaled the weight of a mountain.

UpEnder! [1. <http://www.wuxiaworld.com/sfl-index/skyfire-avenue-chapter-628/>]

The Violet Prince felt his breath catch in his throat. Crushing pressure bore down on him, on everything around him, and even before Jue Di's attack arrived the Prince felt like his body might explode.

As the pressure mounted the Prince felt the changes in his Domain. His powers hinged on the play between creation and destruction, but the creation portion of his powers were being staunchly suppressed. With half of it locked away the Prince's Domain was under the enemy's thumb. He could also feel the acute danger of universal protogenia coalescing around them. But if he was feeling it so was Jue Di – it was a danger that threatened them both.

The Violet Prince lifted his arms high, and his eyes burned with violet power. Suddenly his humanoid body exploded to monstrous proportions.

Beside him the Violet Princess was also changing, though her transformation was more dramatic. Her body shimmered with violet and golden light as it reshaped itself into a herculean blade before settling in the Prince's hand.

His reaction was quick. The moment the sword touched his palm the Prince heaved it at the Compliant Rod and the two crashed into one another.

Boom--!! An explosion of residual power burst out in all directions once the two weapons met. It was so intense the newly transformed avatars were blasted backward, so say nothing of the normal aliens which were summarily torn to shreds.

In the darkness of space dark gold and purple gold battle for supremacy. The more they fought against each other the wider their sphere of warring power grew. Jue Di – with nothing but a stick – was holding back the leaders of the enemy horde.

Jue Di hovered in space, unchanged. Across from him the hate-filled eyes of the Prince glared back. Neither budged.

The human moved first, whipping his body halfway around and striking thrice with his staff. It was so fast the images of their passing hung in the air for a moment as light struggled to catch up, fast as lightning.

The Prince was quick, but even still he only had time to lift up the Princess-sword in his hand to try and ward off the blows.

Boom-boom- boom! Three ear-piercing explosions followed one after the other. The other alien elite had just recovered from the last explosion and were suddenly blasted backward again.

Three Thunderclap Impact!

With so many powerful foes pitted against him, Jue Di had to keep the situation under his control. He couldn't take them all at once.

The Violet Prince took three staggering steps back before steadying himself. A faint ringing reverberated from his sister-turned-weapon.

With some space between them Jue Di's staff stretched to three times its original length. The monkey-like Paragon whipped it around him to carve out a circle. When it was completed he sensed within it the enigmatic power of yin and yang joined together. To the aliens it was a chaotic vortex.

In response the alien general cut wildly through the air to one side and a half-moon shock-wave of power was released. It produced a tear in the fabric of space and time to protect him from the vortex's influence. However the lesser aliens were not so lucky, as they were thrown violently about by the chaotic forces.

Meanwhile bolts of azure blue had started to rain upon the right flank. Poseidon had repositioned and was joining the fight on this front. So far it had not employed its mecha transformation and was still using traditional weapons fire. Together with Middle Heaven it was effective in keeping the enemy at bay.

On the other side of the battlefield humanity was gaining an edge. Paragons, fleet ships, and Tyrannosaurus hammered the left flank with everything in their arsenals. Under such an overwhelming offensive the aliens were losing ground. They couldn't get close enough to do any damage, but they were being obliterated.

Once Jue Di's circle was drawn he stood still behind it. Continuous, high-level combat had captured the attention of universal protogenia and he was feeling it.

After so long the Paragon knew his body intimately. He was drawing on the progenitor's vital crystal to support his life energy, but it was still being drained. He was only one man, and by virtue of his power alone he was holding back nearly all of the enemy's strongest. It was not getting easier as time went on.

Bookmark

Chapter 848: Jue Di the All-Powerful

Other than Lan Qing himself, Jue Di was the only one who knew the whole battle strategy. The Violet Prince's estimations had been correct in that if he hadn't blocked Tyrannosaurus' shot – if he'd elected to dodge – Lan Qing had been ready to turn Middle Heaven into a weapon. Terminal Ray would have been used to carve a path, and the bastion would detonate itself against the home worlds and Europa.

With Luo Xianni aboard, they would have been teleported to safety before the detonation could claim them. The plan had been dangerous, but the chances of the alien planets escaping from such a dramatic play unscathed were slim to none.

Though it required Lan Qing to gamble with his life, Jue Di knew his son was ready to give his life for the cause.

When the admiral had discussed his plans with Lan Jue he'd been the picture of calm, but in fact his heart was in turmoil. As commander he had to send his only brother into the heart of the enemy's forces, perhaps to die. He had no choice despite the stabbing protests in his heart.

In secret Lan Qing had told his father that he would not retreat until Lan Jue returned safely. He would give his life to give his brother a chance, if necessary. This made him more dangerous than the aliens realized for he could detonate Middle Heaven at any moment, and as captain of the ship he would not be easily convinced to abandon ship.

At the time Jue Di had said little. But as a father how could he stand by and watch his son with his own eyes? His greatest pride was his two sons and the men they had become, even more than his own accomplishments. If they survived the conflict those young men would grow to be more powerful than he ever was. Perhaps they could even create an immortal realm and live forever.

Lan Qing wasn't the only one willing to give up his life for the opportunity of another's future.

The Violet Prince appeared like a ghost before Jue Di. He could sense

that the human was suffering greater than he from the pressure of universal protogenia. Jue Di's life energy was weakening.

At last he was free from the power of the humans' strongest deterrents and could take the offensive. In combination with the Princess-blade he was sure he could at least entangle Jue Di and keep him from wreaking havoc on the battlefield. Once the avatars could rejoin the fight the tide would change in their favor. The bastions would be destroyed, then they could deal with the situation on their other flank.

Clang! The ringing sound burst through the air. This time it was Jue Di who staggered backward.

With the strength he possessed Jue Di could defend himself with few worries, even with the Prince and Princess attacking together. However it had been many long years since his ascension to the Infinite, and the punishment that universal protogenia had wrought on him had only gotten stronger with time. The effect on his vital energy was severe. Now, after fighting so hard with all of his might, the cost was tremendous. Were it not for his dharmic reflection one would see his hair had gone completely white.

"Release!" Jue Di growled the word, and a burst of energy issued from his astrum. Beams of light illuminated tens of thousands of mirror images of the Compliant Rod hovering in space around them.

Ward of the Jade Palace! Lost knowledge of the Staff of a Thousand Strikes style – and among its most draining moves [1. This one really sent me down the rabbit hole. When looking up the strange combination of character it lead me to a poem by none other than Mao Zi Dong. I'm sure I'm not doing it justice but I'm reading it as; The Golden Monkey bears his cudgel The dust clears ten thousands li around the Jade Palace We cheer the arrival of the Great Sage Sun (the monkey king) / For the monsters have come again. According to what I read on the internet this was written as an artistic way for Chairman Mao to decry the actions of the Soviet Union who, at the time, was disparaging of the Chinese communist system. It's meant, I think, to evoke the imagery of the great monkey king clearing away all enemies.]

Once more the Violet Prince was thrust back, and the other elite were forced farther from the confrontation.

Dazzling light blazed in Jue Di's eyes as the golden light around him was released to create a vortex of energy so mighty it threatened to swallow everyone up on both sides. His already tyrannical aura surged by several orders of magnitude that manifested in a supernova of energy.

Reality around him rippled from the strain. Universal protogenia was thick in the air and its promise of complete destruction washed over the Violet Prince like a suffocating tide. He stumbled backward in fear.

Normal aliens and humans existed without fear of universal protogenia. It was of no concern unless one reached vaulted heights of power, and only then did one learn to appreciate and fear it.

Lan Qing watched from within Middle Heaven's control room. Throughout the battle his features had been calm, even cold. But now he stared in nervous surprise. He knew what Jue Di was doing.

"Father!" Lan Qing couldn't stop himself from gasping in alarm. Emotions roiled within him, outside of his control.

A gentle hand fell upon his shoulder. When Lan Qing turned he saw the tear-streaked face of Luo Xianni.

"You must continue to command your troops. Don't lose focus." She said in a soft voice.

"You knew?" He asked through his shock.

She answered him with a smile that was full of sadness and pain. "A parent cannot sit by and watch their children give their lives. We are willing to face any danger to ensure your safety. He made this decision a long time ago, anxious for the opportunity even. He's been deceiving you – those crystals we've found have only ever had a very limited effect on his vital energy. For years he's been one step away from godhood, and has struggled against universal protogenia because of it. In ten seconds he's going to perform a miracle just for you. Don't squander it, child."

Lan Qing's body shook visibly, but the light in his eyes was resolute.

Whatever pain was eating him up within he couldn't show, for he was the leader of humanity's last stand. The soul of their resistance. If he broke down now his father's sacrifice would be for nothing.

He forced himself into a state of numb serenity and proceeded to deliver a string of orders. Middle Heaven began to fire in earnest, but ignored the elite aliens. Poseidon began the process of its transformation.

The halo of light around Jue Di grew more intense as time stretched on. Universal protogenia – typically invisible – aggregated around him in rippling streamers of light as it tried to constrain the Paragon. So far it was unable to stem his flood of power.

Jue Di's body began to shrink until he returned to his normal size. Then, a strange energy pulsed out from him that erased the shell of copper light he emitted. It was replaced by a soft white-gold haze.

"Immortal qi... so this is what it feels like." The ghost of a smile touched Jue Di's lips. Beneath the shimmering light he looked like a man in his twenties with a handsome heroic face. Red light flickered in and out of existence behind his eyes. His staff became solid gold.

The fear that gripped the Violet Prince was so intense he forgot to press the attack. Even his weapon, the Princess turned steel, seemed to shake as the scene unfolded. The two of them could feel Jue Di acutely and the power he commanded, and they recognized it as the same sensation they felt from Monarch. The alien ruler could not employ their full strength once they reached this level of strength – not because it couldn't, but because it didn't dare.

What Jue Di released went far beyond the Infinite and into a new level entirely. Even universal protogenia could feel the pressure of might this lofty. For this reason the universe answered with ten times the power, resulting in apocalyptic destructive force.

Once Monarch became this strong, it and the others 'became' planets to protect themselves. It was how they survived until now. Ever since then they had explored any means to combat universal protogenia, finally culminating with this attempt to evolve.

Now, before their eyes, this human was pushing himself to the same level. Was he not afraid of what universal protogenia would do to him?

Dozens of desperate thoughts shot through the Prince's mind. First the first time, retreat was among them.

But it was too late.

Jue Di but glanced at his staff and it took on a life of its own. In a blink the golden weapon carved out another circle, though much smaller than the first. However, despite its size the power that surged from it swallowed up all the alien elite, including the Prince and Princess. Before anyone could react they all vanished, along with Jue Di himself.

Emptiness. Nothing remained of the Paragon or his enemies.

All of the alien horde's commanders were gone, sending the beasts into chaos. Middle Heaven sat in their midst, a burning globe of orange as its weapons fired at full capacity. The heat was so intense An Lun's mantle was beginning to melt.

Poseidon's transformation completed and once more the towering mechanical mecha and its trident appeared on the battlefield. It thrust the enormous weapon into the enemy's midst, and together with the help of the drones they mounted a counterattack.

ξ

Within an expanse of golden light, Jue Di stood tall and proud as though he were the center of the universe. Be it the Prince, Princess or avatars, all of them had shed their humanoid shells and hovered in the light in their natural forms. Even still they were nothing before the all-pervasive might of humanity's greatest Paragon.

Slowly he pointed with the head of his golden staff, aiming at the Violet Prince.

The Prince's reaction was to lash out with his Princess-sword as quickly as possible. A tear appeared behind the beast, trying to pull him from this reality.

However all it took was a flash of red-gold light from Jue Di's eyes, and the fissure was sealed.

Bookmark

Chapter 849: Jue Di's Immortality

Boom-! The impact caused dozens of cracks to appear along the Prince's weapon while he spat up a mouthful of black blood. He was knocked violently away, but in the midst of his uncontrolled retreat he lashed out at a nearby avatar with his right fist.

A dark light arose from the monsters forehead and spread down to its tail, then dissolved it entirely. The light was then consumed by the Prince and he was immediately in better shape. The cracks on the Princess-sword quickly mended.

This was the great advantage of these alien creatures. So long as there was vital energy they could draw upon, they would not easily die.

Jue Di watched with an emotionless expression. He attacked again with his Compliant Rod, an attack precisely the same as the first. Three more strikes, and three more elite aliens were consumed to keep the Prince and Princess alive. But the scowl on the Prince's face said he knew his time was limited. Once there were no more aliens for him to draw from, he would die.

Although this human was not in complete control of his new powers, the might at his fingertips was far greater than the Prince's own. Were it not for the blood of Monarch in the veins of he and his sister, they would already have been destroyed.

Jue Di lifted his staff again, but this time crackling bolts of lightning appeared in the air around him. The lightning was strange – erratic but tightly compact. They were almost like shackles that wrapped themselves around Jue Di.

Regret passed across Jue Di's face. His voice was bitter as he sighed to himself. "Unfortunately there wasn't enough time."

He stopped his attack, kneeling in the midst of the golden universe he'd created. As he shut his eyes his whole body began to slowly fade from existence.

Indeed this was his universe – an immortal realm, not a Domain. He'd poured himself into its creation for the lives of his sons, for the chance to defeat the alien menace. For victory. For humanity! He threw caution to the wind and spat in the face of universal protogenia's throttling power. With understanding and determination he had taken that final step to break through and join the ranks of immortals. The first in ten thousand years.

Upon ascending to immortality his Domain had become an immortal realm. Here he was the unchallenged master of reality. However Jue Di was not able to fully control the breadth of his power, otherwise he would have easily destroyed half of these monsters before the universe came to shut him down.

Ten seconds. That's only as long as he was given after achieving immortality. Then the universe claimed him.

As master of this small universe he had complete control over the passage of time, and after bringing the monsters here each second stretched by a factor of ten. Were it was almost two minutes here, only ten seconds had passed in the universe where his son was at war.

If he'd continued to fight the reality he created would have crumbled as universal protogenia took him. Killing one more avatar wasn't worth keeping this creatures locked down.

Jue Di's mouth continued to move as he muttered something inaudible. A small smile was on his face, a face filled with solemnity and compassion.

The Violet Prince could sense the vital energy flowing out of Jue Di. However, he didn't dare move in for an attack. His knowledge of immortality was broad, but he was not sure how this human would react in the moment of his destruction which would come at any moment. He would wait and see what happens.

He and the Princess were different from the avatars. Those doppelgangers had the will of the home worlds branded on their souls, whereas the Prince and Princess were proper descendants. Only they

possessed the genetic combination making them offspring instead of copies.

They knew fear. Survival was paramount, and right now their survival was uncertain.

**

Lan Jue and Qianlin carefully searched the area, exiting the 'cave' and finding themselves in a strange reality.

It was a place constructed of countless veins like the ones they'd seen before, only now they were inside them. Each one was like a channel. Lan Jue could feel that they were a part of the home worlds, but it was different from where they had been imprisoned. He knew they were closely tied to the planets. Injuring them would alert the monsters to their presence.

From their earlier encounter they knew roughly where Ultus was contained, but this place was a mess of writhing veins. They couldn't start cutting them away without risking the mission, so they were left with no choice but to follow the winding paths created by the vessels as they searched for Ultus' precise location.

The Pharmacist stopped frequently during their search, reaching out with her perception to search for the sword. Occisus and Ultus were close ever since the Pharmacist and her husband discovered them. They had a connection, and she knew Ultus' energy as intimately as she knew her own. With the other two Banishing Blades nearby, they were even more sensitive to their missing companion.

She stopped. "Suddenly the sensation is weaker!"

Something flit across Lan Jue's eyes. Suddenly all the vessels around them contracted.

They huddled together, surprised by the abrupt change. Since they couldn't risk being discovered they were forced to avoid the squeezing veins by drawing closer together. All at once they were squeezed into a confined space. There was no danger, but it was uncomfortable.

“Monarch is stirring,” Lan Jue muttered.

The Pharmacist’s brows furrowed. “The evolution shouldn’t be finished yet...”

He shook his head, and spoke with a low voice. “No, it shouldn’t be this soon. It’s more likely its reacting to the war nearby. I can almost feel the unease in its vessels. Unless I’m mistaken, whatever is happening out there is in our favor.”

Despite the considerable gap in strength between man and alien, Lan Jue’s faith in his brother was unshakable. He was sure Lan Qing would find a way to capitalize on any advantage. He would give his best, and the rest would be left up to the fates.

Monarch’s vessels continued to squeeze and writhe for several minutes, but eventually relaxed. The Pharmacist scrunched her face in thought for a moment then piped up. “It’s back. That way!” She marched on.

In contrast to the Pharmacist’s excitement, Lan Jue was filled with an inexplicable sense of unease and discomfort. He felt like something bad was happening. Did something happen to Lan Qing? No, that was unlikely. He was safe in a bastion and was a powerful fighter in his own right. But what was it?

As they traversed the vessels, following winding turns and branching veins, Ultus aura was becoming more distinct. The maze of channels were complicated and forced them down many detours, but they were getting closer with every meter. So far it seemed they’d escaped Monarch’s notice, for the way was unhindered.

“There?” He asked the Pharmacist. He could feel the sword clearly now. Clearly they had to be close.

The Pharmacist took a deep breath, trying to conceal the fervent look in her eye. Recovering this sword meant saving her husband’s spirit from the clutches of these monsters. It was the only thing left of him, but it was enough.

The three of them moved slowly, taking pains to conceal their aura. Lan

Jue led the way while Qianlin and the Pharmacist were a step behind. They had a plan for when they found the sword. Even if they had to destroy the walls of the vessels to get to it, once Ultus was in hand it was Lan Jue and Qianlin's time to act. Together they would employ their Harmonious Swords to carve a path to freedom. Surprised and distracted by their evolution, the planets should not have time to stop them before they fled.

In front of them, a section of the purple-black vessel walls was glowing with turquoise light. It was the light from Ultus' aura.

The light time they encountered the sword things had happened so fast, Lan Jue hadn't seen clearly. This time he sensed the aura, strong and potent, like his own body was drinking it in.

They passed through a narrow vessel that opened into a wider space. In the center, floating in air, was Ultus. It was surrounded by purple-gold threads like meridians, but its turquoise light shone through.

The whole sword was blue-green from pommel to tip, like a wave frozen in time. Even here, captured and contained, its deadly might was palpable. The flickering light that surrounded it said the sword knew of their presence.

When they saw it, instead of joy a darkness fell over the humans' faces.

Beneath the sword there knelt a man. Yes, a man!

He was handsome and rugged, perhaps in his thirties, and clad in luxurious golden-purple robes. He was the very picture of dignified nobility, and here in this poison place how could there be any mystery as to his identity?

Just his presence filled them with a sense of gloom and oppression.

Monarch!

This image, this aura... they knew it from their first real conflict with the aliens in the Shattered Starfields. Who else could it be but Monarch?

But it wasn't – it was more accurate to say that this was another avatar. The aura they felt was strong, but not strong enough. Even so Lan Jue

could sense that this doppelganger commanded Infinite-level power, and they were in enemy territory!

“I’ve been waiting a long time for your arrival.” Monarch’s avatar slowly opened its eyes. Their depths burned with golden-purple light.

Bookmark

Chapter 850: The Alpha Avatar

When the creature opened its eyes Lan Jue could feel the true power of the avatar. This beast was stronger than the Violet Prince and Princess. There was a flash, and suddenly the undulating walls of the vessels they'd traversed were gone. Now they found themselves in a boundless world of violet.

More specifically the 'floor' was violet, and the sky was the same shade of purple-gold as the avatar's eyes. The deep, sick hue painted the humans who were caught in it in similar colors. They stood side by side with Lan Jue in the middle. To his left was Zhou Qianlin, and to his right the Pharmacist.

Each of them glowered, but there was no sign of fear or cowardice.

Before accepting the mission they all knew there was a real chance they wouldn't make it back. Nevertheless they came, because even the slightest chance of success could mean the rest of their people survived.

Early success had did not make them overconfident. And now, they ran into an unexpected problem.

"You knew we were coming?" Lan Jue asked in even tones.

Monarch's response was similarly tepid. "I knew the moment you were brought here. This is my body, did you think you could sneak around unnoticed? I can feel that this weapon is somehow connected to you – it led you here, to the center of me. You are foolish to assume we are not wise enough to protect ourselves."

Lan Jue was silent, in fact he had not thought Ultus would bring them to the center of Monarch's planetary body. If they could destroy it...

The Avatar went on. "In fact, everything you tried to accomplish here has been in vain. We are nearing the end of our ascension, and as we three merge into one the immortal realm we deserve shall be created. Immortal Realm... a phrase we've taken from the memories of your people. We find it fitting. Your sad species has ceased its growth, but there is much in your

genetic material that we can draw upon. I can feel that the three of you are outstanding among your people – you possess real potential for growth. If you submit yourselves and allow us to plant our seed within your protogenia you will live on as a part of immortality.”

A fervent light burned in the monster’s eyes. “In truth we did not seek to make an enemy of your species. You were nothing more than food. Your people have experience with the realm of immortals, you should know that the universe is their creation. It is nothing more than a body – the largest and most powerful of bodies. It is within this body that I was born, here that I evolved, but when I became too strong what you call universal protogenia began to reject me. It fought back against us, draining our live force. We have had to consume whatever living things we come across in order to survive.”

“However I never saw the universe as selfish. Universal protogenia was our test, to ensure we were strong enough to replace it. Like everything the universe must adapt and grow. We believe there is not one universe but many, and they constantly consume the weak in order to strengthen the self. In the process they evolve, and the simplest way to do so is to be replaced. The strong overcome the weak. Once we create our immortal realm a conflict with this universe will become inevitable. If we defeat it, then our reality will become the new reality, we will control all of this dimension. If we fail another species will rise to make the same attempt.

“Perhaps the immortal realm your species created went through this process already. Maybe it was victorious, maybe it was not. For several millennia the nature of universal protogenia has not changed, and it remains a way to test whether or not a species is worthy of taking control. The creation of such a realm is the only way for us to grow stronger until, one day, the time has come for us to test ourselves against the universe. Is there not a phrase your elders have used? ‘In the beginning, one became two.’ Taiji, yin and yang, split from the pureness of being to create all that we see. What your elders called that purity was nothing more than the universe we exist within – the very beginning of it. A single body or consciousness. Through it the many worlds were created, as were we. Just

as it evolved so must we.”

“After countless years of struggle, we are close to the first step. Finally we are at the threshold to creating a new universe to challenge the old. You would not support this endeavor? You have the potential to achieve success, should we not work together toward perfection? We can make it stronger, strong enough to challenge the universe itself. It is the same goal the strongest of your species also pursue.”

Lan Jue saw the zeal in Monarch’s eyes, faced him with a stoic expression. “There is some truth to what you say. But everything you’ve done – the aggression you’ve shown to all races, the destruction you’ve wrecked, all you’ve consumed – it’s nothing benevolent. We call it ‘survival of the fittest,’ and at its heart that means survival.”

“There is no denying that yours is an apex species. You’ve grown wise. But you also have a fatal flaw, and that is you feel nothing. You lack the most fundamental part of being human – emotion. As a result you are nothing more than machines that take and consume. Saw you succeed. You create your realm, overcome this universe and even conquer all the rest. What then? Toward what end? Your quest is eternal and will never bring you happiness because you don’t even know what that feels like. Or perhaps you do, but it is nothing like what we humans know.”

“We also value strength, but existence is about more than accumulating power. Kinship, love, friendship, countless experiences for us to enjoy. Through our exploration we have also been aggressive, but we can appreciate the beauty of the universe we find ourselves in. It’s a part of who we are, curious to explore the unknown and reflect on its majesty. We don’t have just one thing that we pursue, but many. Our evolution has been slow but we don’t care. We enjoy the process. Being quick to accomplish something doesn’t always lead to happiness.”

“I’m sure that the closest you’ve ever come to contentment was when you started your evolution. Over time you grew strong and felt the universe begin to bear down on you. You were left with no option but to struggle in perpetuity for a way to become mightier than the thing that was keeping you down. Your fledgling sense of joy was never fostered and

died beneath the weight of that struggle. How long was it before your ‘evolution’ decided emotions were weakness? When was the last time you even thought about it?”

Lan Jue pressed Monarch with one question after another, and the avatar’s face slipped into an expression of contemplation. He did not interrupt Lan Jue, and instead seemed to consider his words.

When Lan Jue was finished he nodded his head, ever so slightly. “I can see the reason in what you say. Perhaps earlier I would not have paid it any mind, but after obtaining the genetic material of your people I can accept it. However, we already stand at the precipice. All that can be done is to continue the path we’ve chosen. What you say is still within our grasp to achieve, if my species is but willing. When I come to govern this reality and your people are a part of me, perhaps I will learn of the emotions your species love so dearly and change them. That is the power granted the master, but to creatures such as yourself – with no power of your destiny – the words must have no significance.”

“Who says we have no control over our destiny?” Lan Jue retorted. “It is your species that invaded, we’ve done nothing but defend our homes. Your species is strong but you haven’t won yet. We humans have a saying, ‘those who are not my people cannot know my heart.’ Do you think our two people will ever resolve these differences? You’ve already slaughtered millions of my brothers and sisters, and in doing so you’ve made yourselves into our greatest enemy. Either you will die, or I will.”

Monarch’s eyes went from curious to cold. “If you will not accept this opportunity then you will be destroyed. But I will keep your genetic material – your quick progress intrigues me. Soon our evolution will be complete, and the planet you call Europa will be the foundation of our immortal realm. We will store your DNA there, or perhaps I will remake you and force your own evolution. Perhaps you will help me discover more secrets about what your species knew of those bygone realities.”

“Don’t assume you’ve won,” Lan Jue growled. “How do you know we aren’t a match for you?”

Monarch answered with cold certainty. “Law of conservation of energy... this is how you humans phrase it, yes? There is nothing you can do against a power like mine.”

Lan Jue slowly lifted Captus. “I’m not sure your power is so much greater than ours.” A pale blue light sprang up around him, and reality shook as his power warred against the avatar’s.

Bookmark

Chapter 851: Between Life and Death

In the midst of that gold and purple world a host of sparkling stars emerged, their light fighting past the haze. It was strange when the avatar's overwhelming power became a backdrop for such a beautiful display.

Beams of starlight descended upon Lan Jue, making him appear more substantial and dignified. His aura surged as well to ten times its typical strength.

Even here – deep in enemy territory, captured in an avatar's Domain, nearly lost in the immortal realm of these monsters – Lan Jue was able to summon the power of Boundless Starlight. Despite the terrible circumstance he was still successful in bringing his power to bear.

Nirvana!

But his level of strength went beyond Nirvana, especially in comparison to aliens of similar rank. Lan Jue had inherited the essence of the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole of Purple Subtlety and thus the power of the stars themselves.

Light from these stars permeated all of the universe, even in the hellscape that was Monarch's planetary body.

A small smile played on Lan Jue's handsome features. Through the power of the stars Monarch's influence was reduced.

A white light arose behind him. Within it were flecks of gold that hung in the air like sprites. The light of the Queen of Heaven. Qianlin was the first of her Discipline to reach such tremendous heights of cultivation, and as she broke through to Paragon her protogenia underwent another phase shift. Now her powers and Lan Jue's joined, filling them with that enigmatic golden light.

Golden thunderclouds gathered overhead, and bolts of lightning began to flash through the Domain. The air was thick with the promise of a storm. Despite the avatar's vast strength, even he couldn't hide a slight

anxiety from crossing his eyes.

“Is this the power of your immortals?” He asked with genuine curiosity.

Lan Jue could not answer. In fact, he’d never experienced the realm of immortals and did not know what to expect. He became to approach the avatar, and with every step the blaze of starlight that surrounded him increased. It shone out from points all over his body in patterns that echoes the stars overhead. Each passing moment saw his aura grow stronger.

If the Pharmacist’s Slaughter Discipline augmented her strength, this was doubly true for Lan Jue. He had fought back as hard as he could against the Violet Prince and Princess but had not combined his skills.

Now he channeled his Boundless Starlight Discipline inward, swelling his power to the upper borders of Nirvana. That was the limit, for any further increase would thrust him into the realm of the Infinite. At that point the dangers of universal protogenia were too great.

Lan Jue advanced upon the avatar with Captus raised, choosing to make the first move. His movements were slow for he was fighting against the planet itself. However the purple Domain of the beast gave way, moving before Lan Jue and his Banishing Blade in a wave, pushed away by his determined charge.

Monarch’s avatar watched him come and offered a small nod. “Interesting. We did not believe your species could be this strong, much less amplify your abilities. The fact that you’ve dared to come here reveals that you are in possession of sensitive knowledge. Unfortunately for you, it will not be enough.”

As he spoke the avatar waved a hand, almost lazily. The waves that Lan Jue created were instantly calmed and the golden undertones gave way to an angry black that spread from earth to sky. Only the avatar himself retained that resplendent golden glow.

Lan Jue felt it acutely. Half a moment passed and suddenly the world around him was an inhospitable black hole of energy. Crushing pressure fell upon him from all directions and constrained the spread of Lan Jue’s

Boundless Starlight. The ubiquitous light of those burning stellar bodies was being blotted out.

Monarch couldn't stop the starlight entirely, but he could obscure and disrupt it. As it shone down into his Domain it was swallowed up, depriving Lan Jue of its aid.

Yet Lan Jue and Captus never stopped. They pressed ahead, slow but refusing to be denied. The reflected starlight coalesced around the godblade, creating ripples. Beneath those ripples were voids of darkness that drank from reality around them.

The starlight was absorbed and became a part of the weapon.

Captus began to shine brighter and golden runes burned along its length. Even without the starlight Lan Jue shone like a beacon, an authoritarian blaze. The essence of the Emperor of the North Star emerged around him once again.

Lan Jue was one with the will of the sword. For the first time he truly felt like the weapon was a part of him, inextricably bound to his mind and spirit. For the first time he felt capable of controlling the power within it. Captus' influence was fed back into him, and in a sudden epiphany he understood the meaning of the runes on its blade.

Red light coalesced at the tip of Captus, gradually deepening to a rich crimson and eventually black. If the avatar's Domain was an enormous black hole, then the darkness at the top of Captus was the singularity within it.

Captus moved ever forward. Small though the orb at its tip was, the sense of danger surrounding it was intense.

The Pharmacist, Occisus in hand, was right behind Lan Jue. Her Slaughter Discipline was different from before, forsaking its typical murderous style for a light and easy air. The light of Occisus even seemed to dim.

Her otherworldly weapon appeared for all the world like a normal sword, but the light in her eyes was anything but ordinary. They were filled with

warmth, pain and hope. Her sword became an extension of her heart and soul, and all the conflicting emotions that roiled within her.

All three humans knew there was no room for leeway here. Holding back meant death – and not just for them, but possibly for all of humanity.

Right now, the Pharmacist's heart was filled with the thought of her lost husband, filled with all the beautiful things life had to offer. She poured all of it into her sword.

Behind slaughter was new beginnings. Life followed death. It was similar in some ways to the Birth and Destruction Domain of her enemies, but in contrast to those monsters the Pharmacist was a human with emotion. Her life was filled with pure love and sadness. All of these emotions coalesced in the intention of her weapon.

At first the weapon appeared entirely normal, like any old iron sword. However soon the golden runes appeared along its length much like Lan Jue's. They weren't quite so clear as his, but glimmered with mystical power. There was no murderous sense, but the fear it inspired was palpable. Suddenly, the Pharmacist understood the essence of the weapon she had carried for so long.

Only Zhou Qianlin did not raise her sword. She floated like a kite behind Lan Jue, bathing the three of them in the light of her Domain. The surge of strength Lan Jue and the Pharmacist felt was a result of Qianlin's abilities. Not only did it stabilize their Domains, but it amplified them – and further still, it deepened their comprehension.

Qianlin didn't pay the avatar any mind. Lan Jue was all that filled her vision, her sole focus. The memory of the first time they met rose from the depths of her memory. She was dressed in her beautiful wedding gown, and he descended like an angel from the sky. He was resplendent in gold from head to toe and stole her away. He took her into his arms then – firm, decisive, strong.

Qianlin's wedding had been a farce, organized by the Clairvoyant to spurn Lan Jue to action. But she had been uneasy. Of course she didn't really like Richard, she never had. Even back then there was some part of

her that knew she had feelings for Lan Jue.

Perhaps it had started with curiosity. What sort of man was he that her sister loved him so deeply? Loved him so much that he was her last thought at the moment of her death? Was this man worthy of her?

Her body was given before an answer was received, much to her dismay. Yet afterwards she found she did not regret.

She still remembered his eyes on that day. She saw the pain that was writ deep in his soul that made her want to do nothing more than sooth him. That was the only time they were intimate, since afterwards their affections were blocked by the arrow of compassion.

Bookmark

Chapter 852: Hearts Beat as One

But while the arrow closed the door on their physical relationship, from that time on she'd felt him engraved deep into her heart. She burned with an internal fire, her heart thawed by the love she held for him. She forgot her pain as it was replaced by affection.

But it was bittersweet. She knew the love he had for her in their first meeting wasn't hers, but Hera's. Still she couldn't help but be pulled in deeper. He seemed to have been imbued with some natural charm that just drew women to him.

This was proven when she saw so many beautiful women caught in his wake. But despite his wealth of choice Lan Jue was single-minded. It was part of what drew her to him.

Since then their tale had been written in the joy and pain they'd shared. However, looking back Qianlin's fondest memories were of their time in the National Eastern University; her seated below as he lectured from a podium.

He was refined, courteous, suave, and witty... he shared a special sort of knowledge with her and her classmates. They couldn't help but like him. Even Tang Mi was taken in by his charm.

But he is my man.

As the words crossed her mind Qianlin's heart filled with pride. Her mind turned again to other memories, painful memories not of when Lan Jue refused her but of the day they shared that special bottle of white wine. The day he professed his love.

That day it was she who turned him away. It wasn't him or anything he did that inspired her to turn him down. It was her, the fact she couldn't forgive herself for the deceptions she maintained. She did love him, but she couldn't abide a relationship built on a lie.

Her liberation came at the edge of the Astral Phantom's knife. In her willingness to give up her life for him, she allowed herself to accept their

circumstance as well. Their love was pure.

For a long time she was lost in a hazy world, on the edge of life and death. But when she came to everything was perfect – perfect but for one regret. She lamented over her stubborn determination, making such a big deal over something they could have put aside much earlier. If she had been forthcoming earlier perhaps they would have had more time. She felt like she missed out on any number of happy days with him – a beautiful if painful thought!

When the aliens appeared and began their aggressions Lan Jue became busy with the business of saving humanity, but they still ended up together. Now they faced a mission that may very well mean their death, but they faced it together. He didn't explain everything to her either, but she was happy to be by his side.

She was happy because she knew she was part of his life, that he understood her. If he died she would refuse to live on. Now that they were together any alternative was unthinkable. They would live or die as one. Their spirits would remain inexorably tied, forever.

As she pondered the breadth of their past, present and future, Qianlin's spirit entered an extraordinary state. Her soul and Lan Jue's joined into one. She did not raise Demortus but the connection she felt to her man was deeper than ever. They were a single entity – now, and always.

Two hearts beating as one!

Those five words rang Qianlin's mind like a mantra. She found she liked them, they reverberated deep within her.

Something changed in the avatar. Monarch realized there was something he couldn't simply grasp in the emotions of these three humans. None of them could match him in strength – not even close. What's more they were caught in his territory. Still, there was some mystifying sense that there was something he could not comprehend.

To call it uncomfortable did not speak to the depth of his disquiet. If there was one thing he could not abide, it was a lack of control.

A turquoise light sprang up as Ultus appeared in the avatar's hand. This creature was still just a doppelganger of Monarch's power, yet still was different from the others Lan Jue had encountered. This avatar was more than just a copy of Monarch. It was a piece of him – an important piece.

In order to prevent anything from interrupting their evolution, Monarch had left a portion of himself behind in the form of this doppelganger. It was the strongest of the avatars, unique, and in many ways it was much like the immortals from old human tales. However, in order to prevent universal protogenia from destroying it, the avatars powers were constrained to the Infinite. Here within the protective embrace of Monarch's true form the powers of the universe were halted.

In fact this avatar was stronger than Lan Jue or the others could know. Still, he summoned the Banishing Blade to help defend himself from the humans' attack.

Ultus became a flash of lightning and lashed out toward Lan Jue and Captus. But as the points of the two swords met, the avatar sensed that a part of his own weapon was swallowed up in Captus' charge.

Ultus was the keenest of the Banishing Blades, and in the old texts was called the all-conquering. But this clash between swords wasn't one force smashing into another. Captus wasn't a wall, it was a void.

Lan Jue came to a sudden stop, but his Boundless Starlight Domain reacted by exploding out in all directions. Light from his All-Heaven lightning painted Captus in electric blue. The weapon spat a coiling blast of energy at Monarch like a pair of lightning dragons.

The Harbinger Faerie and her legendary sword reacted in the same instant. Blue light was complimented by a streak of gold, and though the murderous aura of Occisus was not present an inscrutable power made Monarch shake.

He was forced to lash out with his other hand, punching toward the Pharmacist.

An outpouring of solidified energy smashed into Occisus, but much to his dismay it was easily cleaved in twain. The flood of deadly power split

apart and rushed passed the Pharmacist on either said, harmlessly passing her by. Where he thought he could finish this foe off with a single punch, now she was nearly right on top of him.

Squelch! Suddenly the whole world around Lan Jue was an ocean of purple, assailed by a torrent of the alien's Domain. The impossibly sharp intent of Ultus ripped through Captus and into his body. It was so intense it threw Lan Jue backward.

It was as Monarch said; at a certain point pure force could overcome anything. Lan Jue bore one of the strongest weapons in the universe and understood its secrets, but there was simply too large a gap between his strength and that of the avatar.

It was simply the Infinite he faced! Lan Jue was certain this monster's power went beyond such a simple explanation. The Violet Prince also commanded the power of the Infinite, but if it was that creature he faced instead of Monarch overcoming Captus would not have been so easy – even if this was their home turf.

Qianlin, who had been right behind him, also felt the attack land. She and Lan Jue collided as they were forced back. Her left arm flung out and wrapped around Lan Jue's neck, but both of them still held out their right hands in defiance, blades firm. A deluge of rainbow light was summoned that surrounded the two of them.

Qianlin and Lan Jue stared deeply at on another. They looked upon the swirling emotions hidden behind their eyes.

They smiled. Then, together, they thrust forward with their swords.

Two hearts beating as one!

Harmonious Swords gave way to a new name they settled on in this moment of pure connection. A spiritual connection, two hearts beating as one! The light became a rainbow heading straight for Monarch's chest.

It was more than their intent that was channeled through the swords. Lan Jue and Qianlin were one mentally, spiritually, even their Disciplines were completely integrated. The golden runes upon their blades burned as

their hearts beat together.

This was the first time they used the paired sword fighting style since breaking through to Nirvana. Now it went beyond a tacit understanding they shared, it was true fusion.

You within me. Me within you.

Just as Monarch was preparing to turn on the Pharmacist, he sensed a power unlike any he'd experienced before. The beast was forced to face it, and deflected the Pharmacist's attack with an absent-minded flick of his fingers. It was enough to cast the Harbinger Faerie away in a flailing heap. Monarch struck again with Ultus, this time holding nothing back.

Golden purple light replaced the turquoise glow of the sword. It was aimed at Lan Jue and Qianlin. The corrupted weapon rang with a sweet sound but never once did golden runes appear upon its blade. It was nothing but pure force.

Ting! The crisp, ringing sound peeled through the area. Lan Jue and Qianlin shook, but only for a passing moment. They remained steadfast.

The light of their combined swords swallowed up Ultus' power. Monarch's face betrayed shock as he was forced backward. The power he faced was at once solid and disperse and had within it a dynamism he'd never felt before. It wasn't just attacking his body, but his very soul.

The pain was excruciating, eliciting a long scream of pain. A flood of power swept across the area, nearly blowing apart Lan Jue's Domain.

But Skyfire Avenue's leader did not retreat. He was not pushed back. Together with Zhou Qianlin the two of them draw out a circle in the air with their swords.

Although the Taiji sword style didn't possess the same spectacular abilities of the Harmonious Swords, it easily neutralized the effusion of power released by Monarch.

Bookmark

Chapter 853: Execution

The technicolor light blazed again and once again the two Banishing Blades thrust for their mark. A streak of white joined in after but was the first to come near Monarch's avatar.

The doppelganger's eyes were dual pits of rage. He never would have imagined these insignificant creatures were capable of constraining his strength. He responded with a cold grunt, and the golden-purple light living in his eyes flared. Ultus was raked cross-wise through the air before him, so thick with power it made his deep purple Domain rumble. Every ounce of his power seemed focused into the Banishing Blade and the wave of energy it released.

But the white light of Occisus would not be denied, and it bore down on the avatar with a dense and murderous aura. It was unaffected by Ultus' strike, and the Pharmacist pressed forward even despite the very real possibility of destruction at Monarch's hand.

Scorn was writ plain on the doppelganger's face. In his view this insignificant woman would be swept away by the wave of energy. More threatening were the other two and their dual sword technique. They were the focus of his attention.

Drawing on his extensive combat experience with humans, Monarch estimated that Lan Jue and Qianlin, though strong, could not maintain such power for very long. This avatar's power was obtained from the home worlds themselves and was near limitless. He only had to keep up the pressure and eventually the Paragons' Domains would fail. Then, death.

But in truth Monarch's hubris blinded him to the fact that Lan Jue and Qianlin's combined might was indeed a match for his on. However his determination for the Pharmacist proved mostly true. Even before Occisus light could reach him, it was dispersed by the shimmering light from Ultus. She was like an infant trying to bring a sword to bear against an adult. An adult who wielded a legendary weapon, Ultus!

But the Pharmacist pressed on. The two swords were on the path to collision.

Then, in the moment before they struck Ultus' inherent turquoise light erupted from deep within the blade. Its impossibly sharp nature coalesced into a whirlpool of power that tore apart the purple-gold aura that hung over it.

Clang! The two swords met and the ring of steel on steel hung in the air. For the space of a breath the avatar felt muddled, his hand loosened, and in a flash of blue-green light Ultus stuck to Occisus. The Pharmacist pulled her arm back and disarmed her enemy.

The wave of power emitted from Ultus and cast by the avatar dispersed like leaves on the breeze. As his weapon was wrenched away a grotesque fissure split his body. His soul shook with the reverberating din of the swords' collision.

And then the rainbow of color came crashing down upon him.

The power of the Harmonious Swords poured into him like a clay ox disappearing into the sea. Once it struck home, the dazzling colors vanished.

Reality warped sickeningly all around them, like a beast writhing in the throes of its demise. Then the rainbow light erupted from the avatar's back and carved a path through the purple world behind it.

Reality fractured like a broken mirror.

Meanwhile Lan Jue and Qianlin had arrived before the avatar, in the wake of their mighty attack. Lan Jue released Qianlin and lashed out at his enemy. Parry and strike! [1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ga2YiOTZTs>] Lan Jue brought the power of his Domain to bear in the Taiji attack, aiming for the doppelganger's head.

Even up to this moment Monarch couldn't shake his disbelief. He couldn't comprehend how it was he was disarmed, or how it managed to shed his power so easily. He was nearly an immortal, but the sword denied him!

Conditions changed quickly in the heat of battle. However much the avatar refused to believe it, the truth would not be denied.

Shhhhck! Monarch's avatar dropped its head. A streak of electric blue light carved a path from his crown to his groin and then, in an explosion of light, the avatar was no more. Only a glittering golden-purple vital crystal remained. An invisible force started to draw it away.

Clang! It didn't get far. The Pharmacist appeared to block its path and batted the crystal back toward the others with the flat of Occisus' blade.

Power roiled behind Lan Jue's eyes, and his Domain concentrated around them. He reached out and from the palm of his hand shone a universe of stars. Its light hung over the crystal and drew it into his grip, smooth as water.

"Go!" An urgent voice cried out to them from within Ultus.

Lan Jue didn't dare hesitate. He took Qianlin's hand and together they reached out once again with their swords. The rainbow light of the Harmonious Swords cut open a path for them to escape.

Once the avatar was slain its Domain began to collapse. The world of purple bucked and shook, eventually changing back to the misshapen landscape that was Monarch's body.

But things had changed. Lan Jue could feel a vast and angry energy bearing down on them. Clearly Monarch knew something had gone wrong and aiming to intercept them.

Now was the time to flee, as fast as they could. Lan Jue believed the avatar was right, and Monarch's attention had been focused on joining with Europa until this moment. Attempting to destroy the planet now was unwise if not downright futile. They had to go. Recovering Ultus was already a great success. Seen another way, if they'd had a chance to destroy the planet Ultus would not have suggested they leave.

The ray of rainbow light tore a path through the purple world, severing the walls of the undulating vessels like paper. They could do nothing to impede the protogenia-imbued attack, though the torrent of power Lan

Jue felt coming their way certainly could.

However Lan Jue and Qianlin together commanded as much power as an Infinite-level Paragon. What's more they were the bearers of the Banishing Blades. Between Captus' reality-rending abilities and Demortus' ubiquitous presence their escape would not be denied.

The Pharmacist stuck closely behind. The three humans raced for the relatively safety of space as fast as they could.

ξ

The light of a thousand golden stars appeared in the sky, and the dense reality the Prince was caught in began to break apart. However, so long as that man knelt nearby the Violet Prince didn't dare make a move. He feared the opposition of a man on his proverbial deathbed.

He could not comprehend why this human would do what he did, knowing that the universe would exact a toll. Still it filled him with a peculiar sense of respect. This human was willing to battle against his own instincts of survival for the betterment of his species. Jue Di could have chosen to live forever as a part of their immortal pantheon, but instead he chose death. Human priorities confounded him.

As the beast looked on he grew calm. After all, the Prince was a product of Monarch himself, a true heir. He was familiar with their evolutionary process and precisely what it would take. Even locked within this human's Domain he could sense that the home worlds' process was nearly complete. The humans could delay him, but only temporarily. Once he was free they would not be able to break the aliens' line of defense, even despite their worthy fighters. Without this man, their strongest, the humans had no one who could stand against him.

All he had to do was wait.

Clang! There was a cacophonous rattle like the. The bronze light surrounding Jue Di faded away. And then, so did he.

A single beam of dark golden light rose toward the heavens. It flickered weakly, and then was gone. The Prince saw that it was the last remaining

light from the human's weapon.

He had wanted to take that golden staff as his own, but he was in no rush. For now he would be content with the destruction of the human race. Afterwards there would be time to discover what had become of this tool of destruction. He suspected it would be quite useful.

Once Jue Di's Domain was gone, the Prince and his cohorts reappeared in the battlefield. In a hundred seconds the situation had changed dramatically. He suspected that would be the case, but the Prince was still filled with anger and indignation once he saw how bad things had become.

The left flank was hardly worth mentioning. Under sustained assault from the armada it had been steadily pushed back. About forty percent of his forces were destroyed. Luckily these lesser creatures were possessed of only rudimentary intelligence, otherwise they would have been routed long ago.

The condition of the horde's right flank surprised the Prince.

Poseidon in its human form, with Middle Heaven at its side, were slaughtering his soldiers with wild abandon. Scores of alien fighters broke against the bastions like waves against a mountain side. A third of his people had been cut down, and that number was quickly rising.

Bookmark

Chapter 854: Breaking the Blockade

Poseidon continued to punish the alien horde in its mecha form. Its enormous mechanical body was a terrible weapon of war, compounded by the golden trident it bore. Wherever it pointed, the enemy was smashed. They had no means to fight back, and could only slow the monstrous bastion down with overwhelming numbers.

“Why won’t you die!” The Violet Prince howled. The Princess blade in his hand shook as he swiped it toward the distant bastion.

A sonic boom of purple-golden light issued forth. It began as a slash several meters long but quickly swelled as it raced through space. By the time the swipe reached Poseidon it had stretched to several thousand meters across. It was so imposing it seemed capable of cleaving the whole universe in two.

Poseidon was unconcerned by the rapidly approaching attack. It raised its trident in response and replied with a horizontal blow of its own.

Rrrriipp! A strange and uncomfortable sound arose as the two attacks met. Golden light ran up and down the length of the trident and became areoles of color. They neutralized the Prince’s assault.

The alien general stared in a moment of surprise. Was this not one of their technological weapons? The destruction he and the Princess could wreak was without question, even a bastion should be incapable of defending itself. The two of them together could potential destroy whole planets.

And yet Poseidon and its trident neutralized their awesome power in a manner the Prince couldn’t fathom. It could only mean that the bastion’s weapon somehow contained its own special energy, or that it was a mystical artifact of some sort. Only, an artifact that was somehow reproduced to a hundred times its original size.

The other creatures around the Prince also moved to re-engage the humans. Without Jue Di to stop them they could unleash their savagery. Three of their number had been lost while locked in Jue Di’s Domain, but

they still had the advantage of numbers.

A hurricane of energy swept across the battlefield, destroying scores of human ships. Even before the wrecked fleets cooled the horde's right flank began to react. They pushed forward to try and overwhelm the bastions and the remaining fleets were forced back while taking heavy casualties.

Until now the flow of battle had been firmly under Lan Qing's control, but there was a near insurmountable difference in strength between the two sides. Whereas before the fight had managed some measure of organization, now the war collapsed into outright chaos. Both sides relied on sheer destructive power to keep themselves alive.

No matter who emerged victorious, both sides would pay dearly for it.

The Prince made no attempts to save the left flank, it was all but fallen. Most of the human armada was focused there. His focus was the two bastions, especially Middle Heaven.

Were it not for that damn ship and its tricks, would he have lost so many soldiers? These humans were living on borrowed time, only capable of fighting back because the home worlds were busy with their evolution.

The Violet Prince charged into battle, ready to destroy Middle Heaven with extreme prejudice. But just as he was readying to strike his head whipped to the side, casting his eyes toward the three planets. They were full of shock, outrage and disbelief.

In the distance he saw Monarch heave and shake. An atypical purple haze surrounded his father in uneven patches, followed quickly by a spear of rainbow light tearing through the atmosphere and into space.

Massive tentacles heaved from the surface of Monarch and gathered round the beam of light to snuff it out. But nothing seemed capable of stopping it as it continued its trek, heading right for the battlefield.

Through the Prince's psychic connection with Monarch he could feel his father's bilious anger. Then came shock as he reared his head back and bellowed into the darkness of space. All of the alien avatars and himself

changed course, moving to intercept the rainbow light.

Lan Qing and his people – who had been ready to face their final moments – noticed something had changed. The admiral saw the change in Monarch's surface and the streak of kaleidoscopic light. Two pieces of information that spoke volumes.

He immediately began shouting orders. On the left end of the battlefield the myriad Paragons broke off and headed for where the Prince and the light were destined to clash. Poseidon spun its massive girth and thrust its golden trident at a passing high-level alien avatar.

They had come to a point where the battle rested on a knife's edge. Every moment counted. Although no one knew the implications of that light they knew it was key to victory.

An orb of dazzling light shot out from Middle Heaven and suddenly another figure appeared in space to join the battle. They burned a path toward the cluster of elite aliens like a shooting star.

The East's super soldier, Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven, the God of Wisdom. At last Admiral Lan Qing took to the field in this conclusive moment.

A similar flash of blue emerged from Poseidon headed in the same direction, following the line marked out by its massive trident. Hua Li, the true Poseidon, came to their aid.

From Tyrannosaurus there came an angry streak of red fire so fast it was hard to follow. But discerning eyes might catch a glimpse of a deathly grey sword encased in fire. Any beast caught in its path was impaled and burned to ash before they knew what was happening.

Chu Cheng, the terrifying Hades, was coming to lend his strength!

Until now the three men had been barred from joining in. They had been required to remain behind and command troops. But now their brother had returned to them, bearing the very thing that could win them victory over the alien menace. Nothing would stop them from coming to his aid.

Humanity's armies and starships were no longer the priority. The fight

had come down to an all-out brawl between the strongest each side could throw at one another. They had to fight passed the formidable evils barring Lan Jue's return.

ξ

Once he fought his way out of Monarch's sphere of control Lan Jue felt his whole body become lighter. Although the tentacles that barred his path had been mighty, they still fell before the light of the Harmonious Swords.

He knew the home worlds' evolution had to be nearing completely, otherwise their escape would not have gone so smoothly. Nearly all of the planets' energies were within Europa, leaving little to block Lan Jue's path.

In fact the aliens had made all the right choices, took all the right precautions. At any other time Monarch's avatar would have been more than sufficient to end Lan Jue and the other interlopers. Their single failing was in understanding the human spirit, and its connection to the legendary Banishing Blades. Monarch never realized the treasure he'd captured.

Lan Jue knew it when he faced the avatar. Monarch revealed his error when he said the sword had led them there – not that they had come to recover it. The Pharmacist's husband had saved them, even in death, by concealing the truth of Ultus and what it was capable of.

For all of Monarch's attentive plans and perfect defense, this was the one aspect he carelessly ignored.

The Pharmacist's husband had become the spirit of Ultus. He had bided his time, appearing to capitulate with the monsters until – at just the right moment – he dropped the façade. Ultus' true power was released, shattering the avatar's decisive blow and adhering itself to Occisus. Finally, it was able to break free.

The Pharmacist and her husband did not speak through the exchange, but they didn't need to. They had been together for years before Monarch took him from her, their understanding ran deep.

Her plan had been simple. First and foremost was to disarm the avatar if at all possible and return with Ultus. If she could not, she had been willing to give her life so that Lan Jue and Qianlin could have a chance. She had long ago prepared herself for the possibility of dying for her cause – ever since she left for the Shattered Starfields. What did her life mean in the face of humanity's destruction, if her sacrifice could recover Ultus and save their species?

In the end her decision had been the right one. It had been the moment her husband had been waiting for. Avatar's strength was suddenly and substantially reduced, and opened itself up to destruction.

The sound the swords had produced was a part of their secret power, an attack on the spirit of an enemy. This immortal-level assault had been discovered by the Pharmacist's husband after becoming one with Ultus, and the knowledge was passed on to Lan Jue and Qianlin. They used it at just the right moment to constrain the avatar and destroy it with their Harmonious Swords.

Bookmark

Chapter 855: The Four Swords Gathered

Without the avatar to deter them, breaking passed Monarch's blockade and back into space was easier than Lan Jue had anticipated. The opportunity had come largely because the planet was distracted with its evolution.

But it was more than that. Many factors went in to their success.

The Pharmacist eyes were red as she held Occisus and Ultus in her hands. One could only imagine the rush of emotions surging through her. Her husband had yet to speak with her but she could feel him – faint, but it was his essence! She had waited for so, so long to be near him again. The possibility of it was all that had kept her going.

At last the four Banishing Blades were reunited [1. And it feels so goooooood.]. They couldn't employ the banishing stance yet – they had yet to unlock its secrets. However, the fact that the swords were gathered meant that humanity could battle the alien home worlds, even if they succeed in becoming immortal.

The Prince bore down on Lan Jue with an aura of biting cold. Star Division's commander was not anxious, and in fact was happy to see him come. The monster attacked at Monarch's order, meaning the planets themselves could not.

Before Lan Jue would have been anxious, worried that he didn't have the strength to protect himself from the Prince and his cohorts. However, after breaking through to Nirvana, and once he and Qianlin uncovered the secrets of the Harmonious Swords, those fears were allayed. Together, with the power of the Infinite at their fingertips, even the Violet Prince could not stop them from rejoining their friends.

Shock and anger alternated in the Prince's heart. He knew what it meant the moment that human emerged from Monarch's grasp. At the time he did not find it unexpected that the humans might try something, but he also knew how strong Monarch's avatar was. It was his father's final line of defense – strong enough to face the whole human armada by itself if

necessary.

And yet, these three humans must have destroyed it.

Monarch spoke directly into his son's mind, telling him the ominous sense that filled him now that the sword was gone. There was something special – something unique about the weapon that made it a danger. It had to be recovered at all costs.

The Princes new mission was to destroy these invaders and return the sword to their control. He could sense from Monarch's urgency that this held precedence, even over destroying the human armada.

The two sides drew nearer. As the distance closed Lan Jue and Qianlin reached out with their swords and the rainbow light swelled. This time Lan Jue did not empower it with his Domain. It was too draining, so the harmonious swords alone would have to suffice.

Clang! The light of the harmonious swords and the Prince's sabre met with an ear-piercing ring. The Princess-sword darkened, and the rainbow light was dispersed. Both sides met.

Lan Jue took the initiative. He reeled back with Captus, and with the power of the harmonious swords carved out a circle with the Taiji style.

The Violet Prince felt his opponent's energies suddenly change, and suddenly there was too much to keep track of. Without foundation his body was immersed in the strange power, and he felt his own force diminished. The inscrutable pull of the circle Lan Jue carved out pulled him off balance.

Just then a cold and callous light rushed forth from behind the two humans. A murderous aura deep and indelible as the time crashed over him. His sword was caught in the traction of the harmonious swords, forcing him to punch with his free hand to try and get free.

Ka-cha!

The sound of the shutter was sharp in the vacuum of space. The Prince's movements froze and he was stuck with his fist raised.

Occisus glinting point struck his shoulder

The Prince screamed, fighting against Luo Xianni's power. He wrenched to the side just as Occisus strike arrived, causing it to glance off his shoulder. However the temporary delay was enough that Lan Jue, Qianlin and the Pharmacist could slip passed him. They shot into the distance as three streaks of light.

Luo Xianni appeared beside them, her face cold and drawn. Her pink camera was clutched in pale hands. When the Prince saw her appear she yelled in impotent rage.

Of course what followed was to be expected. There was a flash of pink, and the four of them were gone.

When they reappeared they were safely among the other Paragons.

There had been a reason for Jue Di's instance that he fight these aliens alone. He forbade Luo Xianni from spending her energy because he knew she would need to bring Lan Jue and the others back safely. Only her interdimensional powers were strong enough to escape the clutches of the Prince.

Luo Xianni was forced to watch helplessly while the love of her life arose to immortality in order to delay and kill these monsters through his own powers, sacrificing his life.

The pain that ate at her was unspeakable. His Compliance Rod was strapped to her back, and though the weight of what it meant threatened to crush her she soldiered on.

The Paragons gathered around them, including Lan Qing.

The admiral immediately saw the two swords held in the Pharmacist's hands, and though his features retained their cool detachment there was relief in his eyes. He reached forward and gently laid a hand upon his mother's arm. "Let's go back."

The hatred that consumed her for the Prince receded when she heard his soft voice. She wanted nothing more than to wring the life out of every last alien abomination, but she couldn't forget the final promise Jue Di made

her give.

ξ

“Xianni... I’m sorry. I have to do it.”

“Then let me go with you!”

“If it was just us I wouldn’t stop you. We would die facing them together, a fine way to go. But... but our children. If we both die, what will happen to them? A-Jue is on a mission that is more likely to see him killed than returned safely, you know this. You also saw how much this is destroying Lan Qing inside. Only A-Jue can do what needs to be done.”

“They’ve grown up, and now the fate of humanity rests on their shoulders. If something happens to me you have to remain strong, at least in order to protect our children. Promise me!”

ξ

Luo Xianni raised her camera. As the soft pink light fell over the gathered Paragons a single tear rolled down her cheek. Chi Bupang! You bastard. Are you really going to abandon me?

A flicker of pink, and they were gone.

The Prince could only watch as they Lan Jue and the others were squirrelled to safety. He didn’t race after them because he’d felt the power of their harmonious swords. As the power headed for him he was filled with the uncomfortable suspicion that he could not win. It was unthinkable, but true.

After a moment of hesitation he called for the horde to withdraw. Monarch wanted him to recover that weapon, but in order to do so it looked like he would need to destroy the whole human army first. Even that would not be an impossible request but for the fact that the horde had been nearly decimated in their last exchange. Few were the aliens’ advantages now, and fighting through the strongest of the humans to recover the sword looked to be more than troublesome.

For the time being it was more important to fall back and protect

Monarch during his evolution. At least, as far as he was concerned.

The aliens fell back like a receding tide, but the human ships did not give chase or harass them. Instead they fell back into formation to assess the damage.

Though it was not decisive victory, the humans retreated from this battle triumphant. No fewer than a third of the alien horde had been destroyed as well as four of their elite. The Violet Prince, Princess, and the other four Infinite-level aliens remains, but most of their lesser Nirvana brethren were slain. Still they did not give chase.

“Admiral Lan, why don’t we pursue them? We’ve bled for an opportunity like this!” Kang Hui’s stern face was the first thing Lan Qing saw on his screens when the aliens began their retreat.

But after his outburst he saw the Paragons gathered in the control room. He saw their despondent expressions.

“Obey my orders,” Lan Qing reminded him coolly. “Return to Angel.”

“Retreat? Admiral Lan, are you crazy? If we retreat now –“ In his incomprehension his voice continued to rise.

Lan Qing fixed him with a cold, hard stare. “Admiral Kang. We have achieved the mission we set out to do. We can take this opportunity to pursue but we ultimately do not have the power to overcome their defenses. However we have succeeded in our main objective, and soon we will have a super weapon ready that will allow us to destroy these creatures once and more fall. What’s more we need to recover from casualties. Including his Majesty Jue Di. My father. He’s dead.”

When he said it all the strength drained out of him. Lan Qing, forever the stoic and emotionless, couldn’t keep the red from his eyes.

Kang Hui’s body shook. He hadn’t known. Everyone was busy with their sector, and the battle was chaotic enough when only one aspect was on your mind. Now he learned the fate of Jue Di.

He knew how important that Paragons was to everyone, especially the army. He was as brilliant a tactician as his son and backed it up with

incomparable power.

No wonder they were insisting on a retreat. Where their losses not enough already? Jue Di had fallen, given his life.

But as for that super weapon, what did he mean?

Chapter 856: Jue Di's Essence

Kang Hui wanted to learn more about what happened, but he knew now wasn't the time.

"Aye aye! We comply with your orders, Admiral." He made no further fuss and cut the connection.

The control room was calm, and the only sound was Lan Qing giving his soldiers orders. The armada began to fall back while maintaining formation. They were heading back toward Angel.

The human forces considered this exchange a victory, but it didn't come without significant cost. Battle damage reports quickly started crossing Lan Qing's desk.

Drones from Middle Heaven and Poseidon suffered, with more than two thirds of their total number gone. Both bastions were running on minimum energy because their stores were almost entirely depleted. Poseidon wouldn't be able to deploy its mecha transformation for at least half a month. It had also run out of all Soft Water bombs.

The greatest loss was the death of Jue Di.

He was the strongest human alive, master of the Infinite. Through his own power and sacrifice he struck down scores of monsters, and kept the alien elite busy while Lan Qing decimated the enemy.

Even Lan Qing did not know Jue Di was planning to give his life in this way. Although, he had felt that Jue Di was on the verge of collapse from the weight of universal protogenia even before making the decision to break through into immortality.

Lan Jue stood in dumb silence. He knew something was amiss when he saw the Compliance Rod of Luo Xianni's back. Suddenly he realized what that dark and ominous feeling was he had on Monarch.

His father. His father was dead. It was more than he could get his head around.

All his life Lan Jue thought his father was unbeatable – a powerhouse

without equal, towering as a mountain. There was no power in the universe that could stop him. And yet it was the power of the universe that laid him low, slain by universal protogenia!

For the first time Lan Jue hated it. He hated the whole universe for what it took from him.

“No, that’s impossible. Dad can’t be dead! I don’t believe it – I can’t!” Lan Jue muttered his rejection but the tears on his face told a different story. His body shook as he confronted Luo Xianni with long strides.

“Mom... Dad, he...!” Luo Xianni immediately wrapped him in a tight hug. She shuddered with a painful cry.

With Jue Di gone, the Photographer was the last Infinite-level Paragon left to humanity. But right now she cried like a child, consumed by pain and sadness. This despondency hung over everyone like a fog.

The flows of protogenia around Luo Xianni were rough and intense. So much so, in fact, that Lan Jue worried for her. Universal protogenia was cruel and indiscriminating.

After achieving Nirvana, Lan Jue had become more sensitive to the dangers of that ubiquitous power, though he was not a focus of it yet. His eyes burned with rage and pain. Damn universal protogenia!

He was plotting ways to get back at the universe when a soothing energy descended upon him and Luo Xianni, isolating them. The threat of universal protogenia subsided as it seemed to lose its target. Under that gentle power Luo Xianni’s protogenia stabilized.

After achieving Nirvana, Zhou Qianlin’s ability to sooth and steady one’s powers had grown significantly.

“Ah!” Qianlin gasped, and quickly moved to join the other two. “Aunt, stop crying.”

Like a petulant child Luo Xianni’s head snapped up. She glared daggers at the girl. “What did you call me?!”

Her face reddened. “Mother!”

Luo Xianni's head returned to her son's shoulder and she continued to sob.

Qianlin looked at her, then at Lan Jue. She spoke to them softly. "Mother, please stop crying. Father, he... he may not be dead..."

The Photographer's body straightened, stiff as the rod on her back. Lan Qing also roused from his morose stupor. Suddenly the eyes of every Paragon were trained on Zhou Qianlin.

"Qianlin. What are you saying? He isn't dead?" Lan Jue placed a hand on her shoulder and tried to keep the excitement from his voice.

She glanced at her shoulder, caught in his slightly painful grip. She nodded. "Just now I could feel him, just barely. His body is gone but I can still sense his presence, like his essence has become part of my progenia."

The humans gathered in the control room were the peak of human ability. Wordlessly they turned their eyes to the Compliance Rod. If there was anything left of the man it would live in the astrum he'd created.

Luo Xianni deftly reached behind and with a flick of the wrist brought the staff forward.

"Qianlin, now isn't the time to delude your mother. My heart can't take it. Now you make sure your father didn't –" She couldn't go on, her body shook and sobs stopped her from completing the thought.

Lan Jue felt hope and anxiety rise within him. The greater the wish, the deeper the disappointment. If there was a chance that some part of his father remained, he would be elated. But if it were not true, the death of hope would be cruel and acute.

Qianlin solemnly placed her delicate hands on the staff. The white light of her Domain spread out and enveloped it. Lan Jue immediately stepped behind her and placed his hands on her back, lending his power to hers. Though their Disciplines were different, Lan Jue's help amplified both their abilities by several times.

Under the light of the Queen of Heaven the Paragons felt their

exhaustion melt away. The erratic pulses of protogenia that emerged from their battered bodies steadied. Those that were close to their bottleneck felt the pull of a breakthrough tugging at them.

Qianlin's abilities were already near legendary, and their usefulness widely lauded. If she could somehow bring Jue Di back it would be nothing short of a miracle. The faith in her as a goddess would come from more than just non-Adepts.

After ten minutes her white and gold aura slowly receded, then was gone. The look on her face was one of confusion.

"What is it?" Luo Xianni asked, though she feared the answer.

Qianlin looked at her mother in law. "It's fine. Father had reached the pinnacle of humanity long ago. In a way he's learned to evade universal protogenia, like the home worlds did by becoming planets. He had his own method, specifically this staff. It has a way to hide him from the universe. Father sacrificed himself, certainly, but he put his essence – his soul – into the Compliance Rod. I can feel him clearly, he's in there."

Luo Xianni's words were growing more desperate. "Is there a way to bring him back?"

She knew what it meant to speak of an Adept's soul. So long as her husband's will remained there remained a chance. Only, even she had been unable to sense him in the staff.

Qianlin explained. "Father sealed himself away deep within the weapon. He had to, otherwise universal protogenia would still be able to find him. I was only able to sense him because my Domain isolated us from the threat."

The Pharmacist was the next to speak up. "There is a precedent. In the ancient days immortals were somewhat of a misnomer. Their lives were limited, but lifespans stretched for thousands of years. Three thousand years was typical, I believe – of course, assuming they were protected in an immortal realm. Just as Qianlin said, like the aliens his Majesty Jue Di could have found a way to hide himself from universal protogenia. That should mean there's a chance to bring him back. Once one achieves

immortality reforming a physical body shouldn't be too difficult. However I imagine it would require a tremendous amount of vital energy. The only way to withstand the power of universal protogenia is to have enough power to match it."

Zhou Qianlin nodded in agreement. "I had the same thought, and gathering that vital energy shouldn't be a problem. In fact we just killed an Infinite-level alien and recovered its crystal. The real problem now is that we aren't strong enough to contend with universal protogenia. Perhaps, when I break through to the Infinite, we can try."

Hearing them discuss the possibility helped Luo Xianni shed her grief. She had experienced the mysteries of Qianlin's power herself, even going so far as to rely on it to rise to the Infinite. So far it had protected her reliably from the wrath of the universe.

"It would be a miracle if you could bring their father back. Qianlin, thank you. Without you we wouldn't have known his soul remained, much less have a hope of bringing him back."

Lan Jue and Lan Qing openly gaped, and how could they not? Their father was not wholly dead, and there existed a chance to bring him back. They'd found fortune in the midst of tragedy.

Lan Jue's eyes almost unconsciously turned toward the Pharmacist. "Sister, if we can do this with Father, could your husband...?"

The Pharmacist's face bore signs of sadness as she lifted her head, and sorrowfully stared at Ultus.

Chapter 857: Li Ke

The turquoise light of Ultus shimmered along its length. Pulsing, like a living thing. As its aura spread Captus, Demortus, and Occisus hummed from within their bearer's bodies.

Lan Qing had since recovered from the shock of the revelation. "Bringing your honored husband back should be considered a priority. He has knowledge pertaining to the Banishing Strategy."

Once he said the words, the Paragons and even a few of the Easterners instantly understood. They knew that Lan Jue, Qianlin and the Pharmacist had left for a secret mission, but now they knew what for. The Banishing Blades – legendary weapons that were capable of killing even the strongest immortals!

The Pharmacist's lower lip quivered. All the way back from Monarch and up to this moment she had tried to commune with the spirit of her husband. Yet all she could feel was a hazy, impermanent sense of her lost love. She could not seem to speak with him.

The possibility of bringing Jue Di back rested on the fact that his soul was that of an immortal. In many ways he remained as the will of a god. His essence was complete, and wholly contained within the Compliance Rod. Her husband, however, relied entirely on the power of Ultus to keep his spirit intact and his will alive. The chances of bringing him back into the physical world were small beyond measure.

She knew this, but she had also seen what Qianlin could do. The faintest light of hope sparkled in her heart.

Suddenly Ultus began to hum, and as the light around it expanded the faint image of a man appeared within.

When she saw who it was the Pharmacist's whole body shook uncontrollably, and tears streamed down her face. Jun'er, seated nearby, also seemed to feel something and turned toward them. She couldn't see, but reached out with her perception.

Lan Qing was also stunned when he saw who it was.

“You... You are Admiral Li Ke?” Clearly this man was important to Lan Qing.

Lan Jue fixed his eyes on them. This flickering spirit was not possessed of a solid body like Xuan Yuan Shishi or Jun Yongye. In fact he seemed only barely able to keep a recognizable form. Yet he could still make out the tall, lithe figure. He wasn't the most heroic looking, but he held himself with a sense of wisdom and refinement. Scholarly. His presence was gentle, and though there were no eyes its attentions seemed deep and profound.

“Hello, classmate.” Li Ke sighed emotively as he ‘looked’ at Lan Qing. The admiral's eyes were full of surprise, shocked to discover that the Pharmacist's husband was actually this man.

Li Ke? When he heard the name a curious expression flit across Lan Jue's face. He faintly remembered hearing the name from his brother before.

Being possessed of a fine memory, it took Lan Jue only a moment to recall. He cried out involuntarily. “You used to be called the East's most talented commander. They made an exception to enroll you in the military... upperclassman Major Li Ke.”

None of the others were familiar with the name, but at one point his name had caused a fervor in the East.

Li Ke was two grades older than Lan Qing, and exceptional as Lan Qing was his brilliance was overshadowed by Li Ke. He had a thorough knowledge of Eastern and foreign disciplines, especially when it came to ancient Chinese warfare. In his time Li Ke was the darling of the Eastern military establishment.

He had represented the East once in a mock battle meant to practice strategies. He went up against several illustrious commands from both the West and North, winning final victory against a Northern admiral. From that day forward he was considered the single greatest threat to Northern supremacy.

His performance was so impressive, in fact, the academy broke its own rules and graduated him early. He was enrolled in the military with the rank of Major, and after only a few years was awarded Colonel Commandant. Unfortunately it was as they say, and only the good die young. One day, during a routine patrol, he vanished. If he'd had come back he was on track to becoming the youngest Eastern commander in military history. Even younger than Lan Qing when he took that title.

Lan Jue had heard his brother mention the name before as a catalyst. Li Ke was his target in the academy, the opponent that made him work harder. He studiously examined every one of Li Ke's theses. Later, as Lan Qing rose in fame and prominence, he was referred to as one of the East's two rising stars.

Lan Qing's determination was that the Eastern army would be a full twenty percent more effective if Li Ke had lived to become a commander. He'd assumed his classmate's disappearance was at the hands of the North or West, for who could have known back then that the alien planets lurked in the darkness of space.

There was a conflicted look in Li Ke's eyes as well as he looked on Lan Qing. Especially when he saw the four golden stars on his shoulder bar. He'd achieved the goal Li Ke had set out to accomplish! Admiral in command of a bastion ship, the strongest power in all of human space.

But once he fell into the clutches of the aliens, his dreams were shattered. In the end he was forced to give up more than his dreams, but his body as well. Most of what the beasts knew of human military tactics they stole from his mind.

"Husband!" [1. While this may seem like a formal way to regard one's spouse, it is very typical for Chinese couples. It's how my wife gets my attention, sort of like the equivalent of 'sweetie' in the way we use it, but more acceptable in public.] The Pharmacist's quavering voice rose and the spirit's attention returned to her. The Pharmacist, choked with sobs, moved to hug him but grasped only air.

Pain and regret flashed in Li Ke's eyes. However, without a body there

was nothing he could do.

The other Paragons could guess what was happening. Lan Qing briefly explained the situation to them.

Li Ke took a few steady 'breaths' before speaking. "I'm sorry for the pain you've suffered. But right now it is more important that we deal with the alien planets. Soon they will complete their evolution, and when that happens they will no longer hold back. Beasts will appear in every corner of human space to destroy us. We must use what little time remains to establish the Banishing Strategy, and through it destroy them first."

Li Ke desperately wanted to speak with his wife, and to be with the little girl who was sixty percent the Pharmacist and forty percent him. Yet much as it pained him there were more pressing matters. Time was short, and the future of the species took precedence.

Zhou Qianlin supported the Pharmacist as she recovered her bearings.

Li Ke turned to Lan Qing. "The secrets of the strategy are hidden within Ultus. I discovered them when I was forced to become the sword's spirit. I am familiar with the process, all that is needed are people to put it into motion."

Lan Qing nodded. "Are you capable of handling Ultus and enacting it yourself, commander? Occisus is still under your wife's control. Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin possess Captus and Demortus respectively. Each of them are Paragons – is this enough to summon the power of the strategy?"

Li Ke repudiated the admiral's hope. "Impossible. The Banishing Strategy was one of the most taboo abilities, even in the ancient days. When the swords were first created, they were made with the intention of protecting the immortal realm. Before the strategy universal protogenia holds no power. But before its full strength can be drawn upon, it needs bearers who are immortals themselves. Immortals of the highest cast, Da Luo. Without an immortal realm such all-powerful beings cannot exist."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "However, that doesn't mean we're left without options to combat the aliens. We may not be able to summon the full power of the swords, but when the aliens complete their

evolution they will still be far from the likes of Da Luo. If we can use even a fraction of the strategy, that should be enough to slay these monsters. If we want to achieve this then the bearers must be the best of humanity – meaning, they must have achieved the Infinite. Four immortal-level Paragons would be even better, raising our chances to perhaps thirty percent. If they are only the Infinite that number drops to ten.”

The high demands of the Banishing Strategy caused everyone’s faces to darken. In all of humanity Luo Xianni was the only remaining Infinite-level Paragon. One out of four that were required. What’s more, three of the swords had already chosen new masters. Until Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and Qianlin died these weapons would not be wielded by others. And they were still far from the Infinite.

Lan Qing’s solemn voice replied. “What if we can’t produce four? What if their cultivation level was lower, would we still have a chance?”

Li Ke shook his spectral head. “No such chance exists. In the moment when the Banishing Stance is summoned, it will release a staggering level of energy. If the bearer is not strong enough to control it the power will break free and cause untold devastation. The Infinite is the minimum to see it done.”

Here the spirit turned its eyes to Lan Jue and Qianlin. “But there is another way, a special lineage that is similar to the Banishing Blades. It can increase the amount of power the bearers can support. Now, I must search the auras of those gathered and find the one who is most suitable to bear Ultus.”

Chapter 858: Violet Dominion

“What lineage could be similar to the Banishing Blades?” Lan Jue asked.

Li Ke replied. “Simply put, any inheritance passed down from the immortal realm are similar. Yours, the young female soldier, little Yue’s... they are all derived from the ancient immortals.”

When he looked at the Pharmacist, used her name, her tears began to flow anew. It had been so long since she’d been called by her real name, especially in such an affectionate voice.

Lan Jue nodded. The Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety was indeed a lineage of old. It was unlikely Li Ke knew precisely what Lan Jue’s powers were, but he could sense its profundity from his aura.

Lan Qing spoke up. “But their cultivation still isn’t sufficient. How much can this inheritance offset the deficiency?” The problem was less pronounced for Lan Jue and Qianlin – after all, they had recently achieved Nirvana. However, the Pharmacist was only a Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

Although being a Reflection was a terrific accomplishment among modern Adepts, Li Ke’s words proved it was not enough for the task at hand.

“Only one thing had quickly give you the power you need quickly,” Li Ke explained. “The alien planets have entered the final phase of their evolution, this I can confirm. The method involves fusing the three separate worlds into one, combining the powers of Monarch, Queen and Consort. Then, through the knowledge they stole from human DNA, they will create a single vessel to house this power. Thus will they achieve a qualitative leap, and finally can consume Europa to use it as the seed for their own immortal realm.”

“Creation of an immortal realm requires something real as a foundation, and a core of energy to support it. The aliens likely chose Europa because its core was more substantial than most. In catalyzing that core and fusing

themselves with the planet, it is the equivalent to a gestation period. When the process is complete a new entity will be born – what they’ve come to call the Violet Dominion. This entity will simultaneously be their immortal realm. From then on its power will be concealed from universal protogenia and they can grow in strength until they reach Da Luo.”

“Violet Dominion?” The name lay heavy on everyone’s heart like a curse.

Li Ke continued. “These monsters specialize in consumption. We can assume their Dominion will possess the same ability. Once Dominion is created there will be nothing to hold them back, and we should expect it will not hesitate to destroy us. Pure vital energy will not be enough once their evolution is complete. Dominion will need to consume stars and planets to continue its rise. Their plan is to begin with the cores of living planets, then graduate to stars when their power requires it. It will continued to devour what it can until it is strong enough to contend against the whole universe.”

Everyone was silent, stunned and frightened by the future painted by this spirit. They knew that these creatures were a threat to their species, but few had guessed their aim was to supplant the entire universe. They would do it by stealing the hearts of the stars and planets themselves – like Middle Heaven and its molinite. The energy contained in those cores is what kept a planet alive. Consuming it would destroy them outright.

After listening to Li Ke’s explanation, the gathered Paragons understood why the aliens chose his place. Europa was a large and vibrant planet, and there were seven more nearby. How strong Dominion would be after devouring this planets was frightening to speculate. From there its evil clutches would extend to other human-occupied worlds, becoming a planet-destroying nightmare.

A beast capable of consuming whole worlds. Nightmare didn’t begin to describe it.

The Terminator listened with an abiding sense of shame. He was from the North, and hi government stubbornly kept to the fantasy that they could protect themselves with the bastions that remained. They were not

aiming for success, only to protect themselves from blame. Indeed bastions were strong, but what could they do against a creature that ate whole planets?

“Dominion... that sounds more like hell.” The Wine Master muttered.

Li Ke offered a bitter smile. “Indeed. To us it would be hell. That’s why it’s essential we defeat them now before they get too powerful. Otherwise, the worlds of man will pass into oblivion.”

“Time is short,” the Wine Master confirmed. “You must choose who is most suitable to accept Ultus and its power, and complete the Banishing Strategy. Everyone here is willing to accept this responsibility.”

At any time in the past the Wine Master’s words would have been almost laughable. Who wouldn’t jump at the chance to bear a legendary weapon, and become one of the most powerful beings in the universe? However, with it came tremendous responsibility. Who could know what would happen once the Banishing Strategy was employed? If successful the amount of energy produced was nothing short of apocalyptic. What happened if it backfired, or spun out of control? IF they failed, they would be the first victims of the Violet Dominion.

Yet one after the other the Paragons nodded their heads. All of them were willing to give their lives, if necessary.

Li Ke swept his eyes over the crown and nodded. “Very well, then I will begin.” His human figure shimmered and vanished, returning to the sword. Turquoise light radiated from the blade as it headed for the Wine Master.

The elderly Paragon stood before the sword, still and dignified as the cutting energy of the Banishing Blade fell upon him. He made no effort to avoid it. Once the light of the weapon reached him it stopped and swept around to his side.

The Pharmacist watched through tear-misted eyes. If only he were alive, she lamented. Then Ultus would have the bearer they needed to enact the Banishing Stance.

It did not escape her notice that Li Ke never mentioned resurrection. Before his death they had been together for many years, and she knew her husband to be a wise and rational man. If there was any way to bring him back he would have taken it. In saying nothing it meant no such possibility existed. He was gone.

“Mama.” Suddenly a tiny voice called out to her.

She looked down and saw that Jun’er had snuck up on her. Her tiny hand slipped into hers and tugged to get her attention.

Her face wet with tears, the Pharmacist lifted Jun’er into her arms.

She wanted to tell her daughter that her father was here. Here real father. But she could not, because she couldn’t be sure how long that would remain true. She couldn’t decide whether telling her would be better than maintaining the lie they crafted.

She was no fool, she suspected Jun’er already knew Lan Jue was not her father. After inheriting the prognosticating abilities of the Clairvoyant, how could such a secret be kept? But so long as she didn’t ask, the Pharmacist was in no hurry to tell her.

The light of Ultus made a circuit around the Wine Master before heading toward the next Paragon. It continued in this way through the control room, a carefully constrained stream of cutting power.

The last Paragon it examined was Lan Qing. It flitted around the admiral the same as all of the others.

At first Lan Qing felt nothing, but after a moment the outside world was suddenly lost in a sea of turquoise light.

“Classmate.” Li Ke’s voice called into his ear.

“Upperclassman.” He replied.

Li Ke hesitated for a moment, then spoke. “I knew you were the one to bear Ultus when I was brought here. I can feel that you bear the lineage of a great and ancient power. Buddhist in nature, but you may still command this weapon. The reason I wished to undergo this process was to consider

a problem. I am still unwilling, but I must.”

Lan Qing furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

Li Ke explained. “When I lived I threw myself at my endeavors without sparing any effort. I was born into a normal family, typical in many regards. When I was ten my mother died, her dying wish was that I became a great man.”

“Everyone has the opportunity for greatness within them. It comes down to how much work you’re willing to do. I used this truth to spur myself on, to work the hardest I could without sadness or regret.”

“Despite my humble beginnings, my hard work paid off and I was recognized for my talent. I excelled and was rewarded with praise and scholarships. I worked hard through middle school and was accepted into a famous private school. There I realized there was a vast universe outside of my bubble, that there was an enormous gulf between my schools and others. I enjoyed vast returns for half the effort of what others required. The harder I strove the more I learned, I never stopped pushing myself. I can remember that I rarely slept more than four hours a night.”

“It was not in vain. Whether knowledge or cultivation, I was always at the top of the student achievement lists. I was a target for the most ambitious students. That’s when I met her. For the first time there was something outside of study that was worth appreciation. She was beautiful and arrogant, with a respectable lineage and a traditional flair. Our attraction to one another felt completely natural, it was almost like we were fated to be together. She even taught me the secrets of her lineage. During school recesses we would spend our time exploring ancient relics and ruined sites. Each discovery was a joyous celebration that made us strive even harder. It brought us closer.”

Chapter 859: I Understand

“Eventually our paths split. I chose the life of service and she wishes the peace of seclusion. If she did not studiously focus on her cultivation, she said, she would quickly fall behind me. It was the only way for her to keep up.”

“So, as you know, I became a highly sought after student in university. Many women were interested in me, but I never pursued any of them. It wasn't that I didn't like women, I had her. She had taken my heart and there would be no other. I liked it, this feeling. Although we only saw each other very rarely our feelings for one another never dulled. Our affection only grew stronger.”

“Later, when I graduated, I proposed to her. By then I was recognized as talented and nothing stood in the way of our union. In the end I regret... I regret focusing so hard on quick success. Destiny makes fool of people, maybe if there was fairness in the universe we would have lived long happy lives together. Instead I left on my mission and was captured by the monsters. My wife was left without a husband.”

“You see me now, know my condition – bodiless. In order to live on and preserve my consciousness I fused with Ultus. I became its sword spirit, though even now I cannot completely combine myself and the sword. I used to be its master, and no matter the circumstances the master can never become his own servant. A true sword spirit must be naturally occurring. Were it not for my obsession to see her again my soul would have passed into the nether long ago.”

“In helping them to defeat that avatar I used up the last of my energy. I can only remain a short time more, my final death will come at any moment. I felt her desire to die before, when she came and found me in the Shattered Starfields. If she learns that I am gone I fear she will lose all will to keep going. I needed time to think, and I believe I've come up with the only way for her to come around and enjoy life once more.”

Now there was pain clear in Li Ke's voice. There was so much hope he

would somehow live on – to live with the Pharmacist forever! Instead his deep-held desire would need to go unfulfilled, replaced with the pain of hopelessness.

He had been gone from the world of the living for too long. It was a small blessing that he did not know he had a daughter. His only concern was to find something his lost love could rely on.

Lan Qing nodded. “How would you like me to help?”

After a moment of silence Li Ke went on. “Marry her. I realize how this requests sounds, but I need to know she has someone solid to lean upon. I can’t stand to watch her in pain, nor can I watch her sadness convince her to follow me in death.”

Lan Qing was stunned to silence. He had never been an overly emotional man, and had no experience in these matters. The thought had never even occurred to him until Li Ke made the strange proposition. Now he understood, this had been Li Ke’s plan. It was inconceivable...

“Why? Classmate, why choose me?” Lan Qing queried.

“Because you are most suitable,” came the spirit’s answer. “I know you. I understand you. No one else was more like me when I drew breath. You are a commander, and command great potential. Most importantly your original yang is plentiful [1. A euphemism, I believe, saying he’s never lain with a woman. Original qi is derived from the Kidneys in Chinese medicine, and excessive sexual activity can drain your ‘pre-heaven essence’, damaging your original qi. The Chinese do not believe there is a way to replenish this pre-heaven essence.] and you’ve known no other women. Thus you are the best choice. Ultus has also chosen you. It is not lost on me that this is unfair to you, but all I can offer is what remains of me locked within this sword – including knowledge of the Banishing Strategy. With this legacy you can break through your bottleneck to the next level.”

“I’m not sure this will work...” Lan Qing sighed. “I’m not refusing, it’s just she’s unlikely to accept this. She’s already a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and even if you request it of her directly she likely won’t have any

amiable feelings. I'm not you. I will tell you I will try, because it's the right thing, but I do have hopes for my own future. The Pharmacist is a good woman, but we're unlikely to end up together."

Li Ke paused. "You have someone you love?"

Lan Qing wasn't sure how to respond. A face swam up from the depths of his memory. She was part of the allied forces and had fought with them in fight after fight. He hadn't seen her for a long while, but he still remembered that time they shared a cigarette on Skyfire Avenue.

Everyone saw him as a title; the God of Wisdom, or the An Lun super soldier. But beneath his shrewd, cold, calculating exterior there was a man struggling with his feelings. His heart was pure.

The purer the experience the deeper its impression. The Pharmacist was much stronger than the woman he was interested in – and more beautiful as well – however if Lan Qing had his way he would choose to look into those silver eyes every day.

Li Ke's stoic features gave way to a quiet sadness. "Then you would have her watch he die? I know her, she is unyielding in her moral integrity. When I die there is more than a passing chance she will try to follow. I only want her to live a long and happy life!"

Lan Qing hesitated. He wanted to help Li Ke, and more than that he understood what the man was going through. As commander of the allied forces he had to make sacrifice in order for humanity to succeed. But when he opened his mouth he couldn't summon the words.

Suddenly a thought sprang to mind. "Classmate, do you realize you have a child?"

Li Ke looked back at him, surprised. "A child?"

He turned his head toward the Pharmacist. Some part of him guessed when he saw Jun'er, but Lan Qing confirmed it. Jun'er was snuggled quietly in her mother's arms as she looked toward him, tears streaming down her face.

A searing ache burned deep in Li Ke's soul. A child... we had a child!

That is how she's persisted all these years!

Lan Qing continued. "She was pregnant with Jun'er when you disappeared. Unfortunately the pain she experienced from Occisus also affected her infant child. She was born blind. Jun'er grew, and eventually the Pharmacist approached my younger brother..." He explained the situation briefly to Li Ke.

Li Ke had no body, so no tears would grace his face. However, the look in his eyes spoke volumes. The intensity of it caused his spectral body to flicker. He knew that the Pharmacist's life must have been difficult after his disappearance, but he had no idea how bitter it had become for her.

His own daughter could not see. Somehow she became the apprentice to Skyfire Avenue's Clairvoyant, and will one day grow into that title herself. Though her eyes were useless, she was still the Eye of Tomorrow.

He never would have imagined it possible.

And he, her father, would be unable to fulfil his obligations. He no longer had a physical heart, but the pain within him was chaotic and overwhelming.

Lan Qing took a deep breath. "I think you should speak with her, just the two of you. She won't be convinced by anyone else. But do you think she'll ever pick someone else, after suffering so much waiting for you to return? It isn't what she wants, and trying will only cause her more pain. The two of you need to speak, if for nothing else than to let her say all the things she needs to say."

A storm of conflicting emotions ran through the spirit's eyes. A calm gradually came over him as he fixed Lan Qing with a steady gaze. "Thank you, underclassman. I think I understand."

There was a flash of light and Lan Qing was separated from Li Ke's small spiritual reality. The soul returned to its previous spot, steady in its human shape.

"I believe Ultus has made a decision. Underclassman, you are the most suitable bearer." As he spoke the other Paragons all nodded in agreement.

Lan Qing's abilities were evident to all, both in personal strength and his talent for command. Without him humanity wouldn't have come this far. Without him mankind would already be lost. It was his brilliance today, and Jue Di's sacrifice, that brought them to this critical moment.

Li Ke's attention turned to the Pharmacist. "Little Yue [1. Literally 'small moon', it's the same name given to Si Xiaosu by Lan Jue. However, where in Su Xiaosu's case I think it was a nickname alluding to her title as Moonfiend empress, for the Pharmacist I suspect the character 月 is part of her true name.], I was hoping we might have a chance to speak. Is that alright?"

The Pharmacist nodded.

Lan Jue stepped forward without having to be asked, and took Jun'er from her arms. The small girl didn't struggle and hung upon Lan Jue's neck. Against all expectations, her face was calm.

No one underestimated this small child, who had inherited the power of the Eye of Tomorrow. Although she said nothing many understood that she was likely to know what was happening.

Lan Qing personally led the way, bringing the Pharmacist and Li Ke to a quiet resting room near the bridge.

The Terminator watched Lan Qing go, some anxiety writ on his features. "Ultus. Is it really capable of destroying those aliens? If they succeed in creating Violet Dominion – a monster that can devour planets – it isn't just humanity in danger. The whole universe may be wiped out!"

Lan Jue gently nodded his head. "The Banishing Blades are god weapons passed down from antiquity. If we can lay out the Strategy killing those monsters would be no problem. Father was sure of it. Ultus used to belong to the Pharmacist's husband, this Li Ke. He was captured long ago by the aliens when he went on a scouting mission..."

He went on to fill in the rest of the Paragons about the spirit and the history of his blade. Finally they understood why Lan Jue, Qianlin and the Pharmacist had been absent all through the last battle.

Chapter 860: Husband and Wife, Face to Face

The Wine Master's face darkened. "It was dangerous for you to do this without alerting us first. If you--"

Lan Jue smirked at him. "Alright, it's done and it all worked out. I'm here, right? Don't be angry, right now we need to focus on defeating our enemy."

By now Lan Qing had returned. He bowed before the Wine Master. "I apologize, Wine Master – to all of you from Skyfire Avenue. Dangerous as the task was, there were no other alternatives. After making my plans I knew that our chances of winning the last battle were very slim. Even if we did, we wouldn't be strong enough to destroy the home worlds ourselves. We had to attack the problem from two sides. It was an opportunity we couldn't ignore."

The Wine Master and the other members of Skyfire Avenue didn't respond. The exhaustion in Lan Qing's face was apparent to everyone. All throughout this war their commander of the allied forces had had to shoulder tremendous pressure. The fate of humanity rested on his shoulders!

Lan Qing had to bear the knowledge that his decision to send Lan Jue into harm's way could have meant his death. The struggles he faced were no less dire than the soldiers out on the fields. He just had no choice.

In the end his gambit was successful. Not only did humanity win the day against the alien horde, but Lan Jue returned victorious from his desperate quest. Now humans had a way to fight back, and with Ultus their chances were even better.

The Keeper spoke. "Admiral Lan. In the last fight we held the advantage. Should we rally our troops and move in for another offensive? With the power we bear now we should at least be able to stand toe to toe with the monsters. The Banishing Stance is said to be powerful, but none of us

have witnessed it. None of the bearers are yet strong enough to succeed, either. If we put all of our hopes in one method and fail, all will be for naught. I think we should diversify our tactics.”

Lan Qing nodded in agreement. “That is also my thought. However, we suffered significant losses in the last exchange. Assuming we do not consider the fact that Poseidon cannot use its mecha transformation again, Middle Heaven will need a minimum of five days before it can return to battle. The core is already unstable and pushing it any farther could be disastrous.”

The Keeper nodded, apparently satisfied. The Bookworm spoke next. “So we hope that the alien home worlds don’t complete their evolution in the next five days.”

Then came the Wine Master. “I have a thought. Admiral, now that you have been chosen to bear one of the Banishing Blades it is integral that you return to Angel and cultivate with the Jewelry Master, Qianlin, and the Pharmacist. It is counterintuitive to have you commanding the troops. Leave command of the forces to us. Certainly we lack your tactical brilliance, but we should at least suffice to weaken the horde. Our goal would be to present you four with the best opportunity to complete the Banishing Strategy.”

The Wine Master offered the suggestion with calm dignity. However, Lan Qing could clearly hear the note of authority in his voice.

Lan Qing considered for a moment. “I understand your thought process, but give me some time to weigh the options. I will also need to assess whether Ultus can do what they claim, and then I can make plans. When I can I’ll ask Li Ke when, precisely, he suspects the aliens will complete their evolution.”

The Wine Master nodded. “Alright, we will go by your decision. No matter the circumstances you have our full support.”

As the others spoke, tears had begun to tumble down Jun’er’s smooth cheeks.

“Daddy, I saw him,” she whispered in his ear.

“Saw who?” He asked.

Her response was muttered. “I saw another daddy, but he wasn’t really here. He was very sad, and so was mommy. I think that daddy has to go soon. What should I do?”

Lan Jue fondly stroked her hair. “I don’t know either. But no matter what, Jun’er is daddy’s little girl.”

“Yeah. Jun’er loves daddy.” She hugged tightly to Lan Jue’s neck. Her tiny body shook against his.

Lan Jue was speechless. This little girl understood much.

ξ

Within the sitting room.

Li Ke and the Pharmacist stood, facing one another. Tears continued to stream down the Pharmacist’s face.

The Pharmacist looked at the faint image of her husband through hazy eyes. How many years? How long had it been since she’d seen him? She was ashamed to admit that she’d begun to forget what he looked like.

All this time she’d gone it alone, no one knew the pain she’d borne. Without help she raised a little girl who was blind, all the while bearing the memory of her lost husband.

When the pain of her loss was almost unbearable, when she discovered that it’d been these monsters that took her husband from her, the Pharmacist had been ready to give her life in vengeance. For love. She had decided that living was far more painful than dying. Now at last her wish was granted and the man she loved was returned to her, at least in spirit. But it was transitory, for he could vanish at any moment – gone, just like before.

For now, however, his body was more distinct. Still how could he keep the pain and sadness from his eyes? She knew how much it must have cost him to battle the aliens, to retain his will locked within the sword. All of that, to see her. After years of struggle they looked one another in the

face, but neither was sure what to say.

“Are... are you alright?” It was Li Ke who ventured the first question. But the moment the question left his lips he scowled. How could she be?

The Pharmacist looked back at him in silence. She wanted desperately to throw herself into his arms like she did in years past. But she couldn't. His stoic aura, his strong shoulders, his body... gone.

“I miss you so much!” She choked. “I think I've lost my will to live. I'm so lonely all by myself. I miss you, every day. I thought about the days we shared all the time, hoping for a miracle that would bring you home to me.”

“Day followed day and I hoped that feeling would ease, but it didn't. I told myself to be strong, to wait. For our daughter. Together we would wait for you to walk back through that door. When Jun'er was small she would always ask me why daddy wasn't back. Every time she asked my heart would ache, because just like her I was wishing so much for that day.”

“Jun'er is our daughter, born eight months after your disappearance. Because you were gone, the pain was too great and Occisus turned inward. My daughter lost her vision because I was weak. I'm sorry.”

“No. No!” Li Ke shut his eyes tight in pain. “It was me. All of it is my fault. I didn't need to go on that mission, I was ambitious and impatient. If I'd have just been content I could have stayed with both of you. Jun'er is blind because of my decision. I should be the one apologizing to both of you!” His voice was choked with emotion, but there were no ghostly tears.

The Pharmacist rigidly shook her head. “As time went on I couldn't stand her questions. I asked the Jewelry Master to pretend to be you. His aura was similar to yours, and he was of Chinese lineage like you. Jun'er was so happy believing her father was back. Thanks to him her heart was filled with the joy of having her dad returned. And I saw a glimmer of hope. I began to take Jun'er out of the house so she could experience the outside world. Her mood improved.”

“I found a way to solve her longing, but I could think of no way to ease my own. I couldn't make it go away, or even make it less acute. I couldn't

stop asking myself why you never came back. For a while I was so angry I was out of my mind, blaming you for taking that mission. In the end I just pleaded with whatever god would listen and begged them to bring you back to me. I just wanted you back, whatever the cost!" She fought against her crying to get the last few words out.

Li Ke hurried forward to hold her, but could not. There wasn't even any way for him to show her how deeply he felt her pain.

After a few moments the Pharmacist regained some composure. She lifted her head and peered through red, watery eyes at him. "When I heard from the Violet Prince that you had been killed by Monarch, the last hope within me died. The pain was gone, all feeling was gone. That was the moment I broke through to Paragon... when I achieved the dream you and I shared. But you weren't there anymore. Without you, it wouldn't matter if I became the strongest human alive."

"I thought about dying. No matter what I wanted to lay my eyes on Ultus one last time. I had no expectations, just the determination that I would die and be with you again. I was only thinking about myself, even our daughter didn't enter my mind. Was that selfish?"

"No. No it wasn't." Li Ke's voice shook when he answered. The spectral image of his long dead body quivered.

Chapter 861: Forget Me

Li Ke had thought the universe had treated him cruelly, but now he saw how much his wife had had to endure. At least he was given the mercy of sleep within Ultus, allowed to wait until his opportunity was presented. Though he missed her most of the time had been spent in darkness as he maintained his spirit within the Banishing Blade.

Time passed quickly as he slept, and moments where pain and regret gnawed at him were relatively brief. But her? Not only was the pain with her every single day, but she had to bear the hardships of raising a crippled child by herself.

“Little Yue, blame me. I’m so sorry about what was happened to the two of you. It’s all my fault.” Li Ke’s body shook.

“Don’t... you shouldn’t upset yourself. Your body is dimming. Li Ke!” [1. She’s referring to him as ‘elder brother Ke’ which I have not translated, because while it’s more literal it seems very strange to refer to one’s husband this way – especially during such an emotional scene.] She cried out as Li Ke’s body began to fade.

Suddenly Li Ke scowled, focused. His body solidified. “My greatest wish has been to see you again. But seeing you like this, seeing our daughter, it brings me no joy. I don’t want to have to leave you in such pain. I wish I would be with the both of you until the end.”

The Pharmacist’s face went white. “What... what do you mean?”

Li Ke dropped his face, biting back the pain of reality. He knew he couldn’t avoid it any longer. “When I was taken by the planets I tried to fight, but they were too strong. In order to gain the most from my DNA they didn’t kill me immediately. I was first imprisoned and slowly decomposed. Before they could take my soul I funneled it into Ultus.”

“I thought – hoped – that Ultus would recognize me as its master. As master the sword’s power would sustain me. It did know me, once, but with the loss of my body it became almost impossible to control the incredible power locked within the sword. When we merged my spirit

couldn't bear the strength of its influence. I was successful in transferring my spirit, but there was a problem. It was always only temporary, and I would never be able to exist without the help of Ultus. The power of my soul has been slowly draining away – eventually I will pass into nothing.”

“I tried to mitigate the loss as much as I could. Although I knew the chances of seeing you again were slim, I had to keep myself going no matter how remote the opportunity. Seeing you one more time was all I needed.”

“The heavens eventually worked in my favor and one day you came. As you attacked Monarch I was as happy as I was frightened for you. Thankfully you were rescued, and I was able to use the connection between our blades to deliver a message.”

“You came back, stronger than last time. Monarch never expected my will remained in the weapon, capable of fighting back. Together we eliminated his strongest avatar, but in galvanizing Ultus' power I had to spend what remained of my spirit's essence. I will not be able to remain for long.” His final words were heavy with grief.

“No, it can't be. How could heaven bring us back together under these circumstances? How could the universe have the heart to bring you back only to take you away again? No... No!” Her voice broke as she staggered backwards. It was like she was trying to distance herself from this place, this cruel circumstance.

“If there was even the smallest chance I would never leave you, but I can't hold off much longer. For all my pride and arrogance all I have remaining is this broken spirit. But death is not a bad thing for me now. If I am given another life after this one I will strive to be by your side. Whatever shape I take, I will be with you, protect you, forever. Until the last stars burn out.”

“I can only imagine the pain you've suffered through the years, little Yue. But can you see? Our daughter, she's so grown. So beautiful. She'll grow to be as stunning as her mother. She is the treasure of our union, and she bears within her parts of both of us. You've struggled, and now before I go

I need you to make me a promise. Promise that you will live fully, that you will live well. For our daughter, alright?" Li Ke's voice was soft and charming, but laden with woe.

"Take me with you." The Pharmacist shut her eyes tightly. "I don't want it to end like this. I want to sleep, long and deep, where there is no pain or memory. Li Ke, please take me with you. Please?"

"No!" Anger rang in his spectral voice. "Wake up, little Yue! I cannot take you with me. Who am I to end your life? Your life is your own, it doesn't belong to me. I am not even worthy of being your husband, I've failed to protect my wife. What right do I have to be with you? You've weathered all these years without me and have since become one of humanity's best. Why can't you snap out of this madness? My spirit was go but a part of me will remain locked within Ultus. Who is to say, if one day you become immortal, that I might be brought back? So, for the distant chance that I might be returned to the world you have to live and get stronger."

The Pharmacist was quiet for a moment, then muttered her reply. "There is still a chance? Really? Li Ke, is this true?"

He nodded. "Of course. If Jue Di can be returned, why can't I? I believe it. Only, to bring me back I think it will require more energy than to return Jue Di to life. You have to grow stronger. I will remain in Ultus and wait."

The Pharmacist stared deeply into his eyes and nodded. "I will get stronger. For you."

Li Ke smiled softly at her. "Good, that is the right choice. My destiny is in your hands, only you can bring me back."

"I'll call Jun'er in," the Pharmacist then said. "She hasn't met her father yet."

Li Ke hesitated a moment, but ultimately shook his head. "No, I don't want her to."

"Why?" She asked, looking at him.

He smirked a sad, bitter smirk. "How can I face my daughter in this

state? If she wanted a hug from her father I couldn't provide her one. I am not worthy of being her dad, not anymore. When you bring me back she can call me her father and I'll make up for all that lost time. For now the Jewelry Master is filling that roll, and she is happy. This is enough. I don't want that little girl to suffer any more than she already has. I can watch her from afar and be content."

She looked at him strangely for a moment, but after a moment nodded in reply. "Alright."

Gradually the pained expression fled from his face. He spoke again in low tones. "What do you think about this Lan Qing?"

She paused before answering. "He's an excellent man, an outstanding leader in this generation. He and his younger brother, the Jewelry Master, are good men. If you were alive you'd all be shoulder to shoulder."

Li Ke sighed. "I envy him, to be an admiral so young and a Paragon to boot. Now Ultus has chosen him, his dharma and Domain are most suitable. His foundation is solid and his dharma is well cultivated. He is a good choice to lead the Banishing Blades. He may be weaker than the others, but we can likely remedy that. Do you see a problem if I pass Ultus' lineage onto him?"

Her response was quick. "There shouldn't be a problem. Without commander Lan Qing we wouldn't be where we are now. He's the best choice."

"Very well." Li Ke nodded his head. "With your blessing I am satisfied. Ultus is the most potent of the blades and holds a close connection to Occisus. Besides me you are the best choice to bear it, but he will suffice. Once I impart the sword to him I will no longer be able to manifest, but the mark of my spirit will remain within Ultus. Help him to learn how to bear the sword and summon its power. He's a brilliant and talented man, he should have no problem."

"Alright." She nodded resolutely. However, for some reason she couldn't shake the sense of disquiet within her.

Li Ke sighed again. "Little Yue, the greatest fortune I had in life was

meeting you. I just wish I could have known the pain I would bring. If you don't become an immortal, or if a man comes who moves you... forget me."

Chapter 862: No Going Back

“What are you saying?” The Pharmacist’s eyes grew sharp and accusatory.

Pain flashed across Li Ke’s face. “There are some things I can no longer give you. I just want you to be happy. If a good man comes along I will happily give my blessing from the darkness. All I want is for you to be happy, like you were in the early years. You always had a smile on your face. Seeing you like that again would bring me joy.”

Seeing the look on his face, the anger quickly faded from the Pharmacist. Her eyes reddened again as she fought tears. “Don’t even say it, Li Ke. I know you’re trying to do right, but there are some things that can never be replaced. Never.”

Li Ke didn’t press the issue. He knew his wife’s heart, how stubborn she was. He could only nod.

“Let’s look out at space together. I remember how we used to like finding the highest places and stare at the sky.”

As he spoke Li Ke’s spirit floated to a nearby window and looked out. Although they could only see the landscape of An Lun, it was real.

The Pharmacist walked to his side, her pretty eyes wet with tears though they did not fall.

“Yes! We used to love to watch the stars together. You used to tell me you would become the commander of a fleet and lead your ships across the galaxies. Conquering planets and experiencing the beauty of the universe.”

He followed the line of her memory. “I also said I would take you across the stars, and when we both became Paragons we would harness the power of our blades to travel far and wide. Now you are a Paragon. Even if I cannot be brought back, will you promise me you’ll fulfil that dream? What you see, I will see.”

“Alright,” she softly replied. She tilted her head toward Li Ke’s shoulder.

There was no body for her to rest her head upon, but the motion gave her stability.

Li Ke lifted his hand and brought it to her waist. For a moment the two of them immersed themselves in this hard-won tranquility. What Li Ke could not see were the tears that had begun to stream down the Pharmacist's face anew, like pearls from a broken necklace.

ξ

The twinkling light from the stars outside bathed Lan Qing's face in an ethereal glow. His hands were pressed together before his chest. Li Ke's request had struck him deeply, not the sword but the pain the spirit felt.

In many ways he and Li Ke were the same. When he was younger, he had doggedly pursued Li Ke's every step, desperate to meet and surpass him.

Now, though, Li Ke was a shadow of who he'd been, even envying Lan Qing for what he'd achieved. He'd only known this Harbinger Faerie for a short while but he could already see her obstinate nature, going so far as to choose death for her love even after so many years. It went beyond persistence into the realm of obsession. He could look after her, but Lan Qing knew he would never supplant Li Ke in her heart.

The human armada rendezvoused, slowly retreating from the field. They gathered what dead they could and set about repairing damage to their ships. In truth there were few ships to repair – typically when the aliens reached a vessel it and everyone on board were lost. Few were those who survived an alien strike.

Fighter drones were the hardest hit. The East lost many stellar pilots in the last attack. But such was the cost of war. When would it be over? When would there be peace?

Lan Qing let his mind wander, recalling the fantasies nestled therein. When there were no more enemies to fight, he and his brother would find a small city few people knew about. They would open stores selling things that interested them and every day would be peaceful, boring, and quiet. At least that was the future he strove for.

“What are you thinking about?” Lan Jue wandered over to his side.

Lan Qing gave him a sidelong glance. “Nothing.”

A slight surprise crossed Lan Jue’s expression. “You mean there’s actually a time you aren’t furiously ruminating over something? It feels good to leave your mind blank for a while, doesn’t it?”

Lan Jue could see exhaustion writ clear on his brother’s face. Not just his body, but his heart as well. Though it was Lan Jue who was sent on a dangerous mission, the weight on Lan Qing’s heart was crushing and had been for a long while.

When Lan Jue returned from Monarch he knew his brother wanted to rush forward and embrace him. He didn’t, but it was the first time he’d had that sense from his brother. Blood, it turned out, was thicker than water.

“Now that we’re here, there’s no going back.” Lan Jue said with a sigh.

Lan Qing quietly nodded his head. He knew what his brother meant. They couldn’t turn back the clock on the aliens’ evolution, and the armada had suffered significant losses despite their victory. If they charged in again the fleets would be hard pressed to break the enemy’s lines, much less destroy the home worlds. Lan Jue, Qianlin, and the Pharmacist had seen how difficult it was. The planets were distracted but they weren’t defenseless.

Meanwhile their three bastions had depleted their energy stores. They would need time to recuperate before they could fight again. Time they didn’t have. This left them with only one choice; the Banishing Strategy. If they could enact the strategy – summon even a fraction of its power – their enemy would be destroyed and peace would come. It was the only way.

“There are benefits to having only one option. We know where to focus our resources.” Lan Qing turned toward his younger brother. The fatigue in his gaze was gone, leaving only determination.

“Alright, we give it our all – together.” Lan Jue lifted his hand.

The two brothers shook, and through their clasped hands they could feel

each other's puissant energies. Li Ke would direct their next steps.

Ten minutes later.

Li Ke and the Pharmacist returned. They seemed calmer and more collected than when they left. The Pharmacist's face was even graced by a small smile. The Paragons all turned their eyes toward them as they reappeared.

Li Ke looked over the crowd, nodded, then spoke. "I apologize for making you wait." As he spoke his eyes inadvertently moved to Qianlin. Jun'er was cradled in her arms, listening with a calm beyond her years.

A quick flash of emotion crossed over Li Ke's eyes but was quickly gone. He'd made the decision to keep his distance from the child, and though he was destined to vanish from the universe he didn't want to impact the sense of family that'd been so difficult for her to find. What purpose was there in telling her about her father? He had given her nothing, and telling her would only bring pain.

Steeling his heart, Li Ke floated toward Lan Qing. His low voice continued. "Lan Qing, Ultus has consented to taking you as its master. However, before you can use the Banishing Stance the four of you must find a way to improve your cultivation. Best would be to break through to the Infinite, then you might be able to manage its awesome power."

"Each of you have a lineage that resonates with the essence of the swords. Relatively speaking Lan Jue and Zhuo Qianlin are capable of summoning some measure of the Blades' powers because they have achieved Nirvana. You and little Yue, however, are not yet powerful enough. You must also reach Nirvana, then when the four of you are similar in cultivation you can begin to study the Strategy. It must be quick, for time will not wait."

Lan Qing frowned. He had exploded onto the Paragon scene as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, but he had since been kept busy with the war. He'd hardly had any time to cultivate. Even with all his talent and his mighty lineage, without special circumstance progress was still one step at a time. At present if he could achieve Nirvana in five years it would be

miraculous. Breaking through within the prescribed time seemed impossible.

The Pharmacist was in a similar situation. She'd broken through to Reflection of Heaven and Earth, and through her Slaughter Domain and Qianlin's Queen of Heaven abilities her breakthrough was stabilized. However, taking the next step to Nirvana seemed almost insurmountably difficult.

Lan Jue and Qianlin's circumstances were marginally better. Due to the faith Qianlin's Guanyin dharma commanded from the masses, both of them were enjoying a boost to their cultivation. What's more spreading that faith would not be hard, requiring only that the two Alliance lift their blockade of information.

Of course their path wasn't without problems. Their meteoric rise was quick and successive, from breaking through to Reflection immediately, then days later achieving Nirvana. This was dangerously fast, and once they entered into the Infinite they would have to suffer the ire of universal protogenia. For now, remaining at their current level was the best option.

For now, the main concern was figuring out how to get Lan Qing and the Pharmacist to Nirvana.

Chapter 863: Vital Crystal Transmutation

‘As fast as possible’ didn’t mean a year or two. They had to find a way to make these Paragons stronger within a matter of days. The Banishing Strategy, as one of the strongest powers in the ancient world of immortals, also needed time to understand and employ. All the while the threat of alien evolution loomed, for the moment their process was complete the humans knew those monsters would be coming for them.

Their days were quite urgently numbered.

When he saw Lan Qing’s concerned visage, Li Ke laughed. “Be at ease, I have a solution that can help you improve your cultivation. I’m not sure how effective it will ultimately be, but the chances are good it will help you ascend to Nirvana.”

“The years I was trapped with these monsters I studied them as they studied me. I watched how their energies were converted and used. After all, Ultus was kept within Monarch’s heart. I learned how they converted vital energy into power they used for themselves. If you have enough Paragon-level vital crystals we can attempt it ourselves.”

Suddenly everyone’s eyes were alight with the possibility Li Ke suggested.

It was true that vital crystals of that level were exceedingly rare, but they had come to possess a few. As this war waged many human lives were lost, but the same could be said for the alien horde as well – including their elite. At this point there were ten or so vital crystals Li Ke might find acceptable.

With serious countenance, Li Ke continued. “What worked for those creatures may not necessarily be suitable for us, and it isn’t without hurdles. First, this energy is far from pure – even at the highest levels it has been tainted by poisonous energies exclusive to these monsters. It is incompatible with our human bodies and thus may cause problems as it is absorbed. I cannot tell what those problems may be, but you must be ready with a solution.”

Lan Qing replied. "This shouldn't be a problem. We have Tears of Neptune that can be used to filter the vital energy before we use it. We didn't bring many, but it should be enough for what we need."

"We have enough." Hua Li, seated nearby, rose to his feet with a smile on his face. "Poseidon Group purchased them in bulk. The East is likely the only alliance who has more than we do. And we brought them all with us. I suspect that will be enough to do what you need to do."

Lan Qing looked at his fellow Monarch and shot him a thumbs-up. More than an S-ranked power gem, the Tears of Neptune were now an integral resource for filtering vital energy. Hua Li graciously offered them without precondition, something your typical rich man would not do.

Poseidon Group had spent a lot in defense of humanity, and have had to pay a high cost in lives and resources. They'd earned many vital crystals through the war but it did not offset the price they paid. Lan Qing said nothing, but Hua Li's generosity was offered before everyone's eyes. So long as they were successful the East would repay his kindness in spades.

The Terminator had to hold back a sigh of admiration. Although this generation's Poseidon was young and inexperienced, he didn't shy from his duties.

Hua Li left to retrieve the Tears of Neptune from Poseidon.

Li Ke went on. "If this solves our problem, then wonderful. The transmutation has a high chance of success. However, I do have one condition."

Li Ke's spectral face grew serious.

"What is it," Lan Qing inquired.

"This process must remain a secret," he said. "Only you and little Yue can know how it works. You must keep this information hidden, and take it with you to your graves."

Of course, the secrecy of it instantly piqued the other Paragons' interest. The Terminator scowled. "Why? Isn't this a good thing?"

Li Ke sighed. “A good thing. Be you man or monster, greed is a vice that impinges on the virtue of every soul. What you think is a good thing may not be, in many regards. This method is exactly the kind these aliens use to strengthen themselves. This means that if the knowledge becomes widespread we humans could be just as the aliens are. I ask you honestly, honored Paragons... if you knew this method, would you refrain from using it?”

“Yes, from the start we were capable of taking these crystals and using them to improve ourselves. But our supply of these crystals are limited. What happens once those crystals are used up? Where will the powerful turn their sights next? I am fairly certain, in the end, we would end up just like the monsters we seek to destroy. We would seek out the lives of lesser creatures to consume for our own benefit, and eventually even our own kind. I do not know if any more creatures like these aliens will appear, but our destructive thirst will encapsulate the whole universe.”

“We have suffered, but I do not wish to see our suffering turn us into monsters. Moreover, the universe is a place governed by rules. If the powers of the universe see what we’re doing we will be marked a threat. From that point on the enemy we face will be reality as a whole. Even the Banishing Blades wouldn’t be able to save us then. For these reasons it is my sincerest hope that the secrets of this method do not get out. It will stop with these two, and only employed because we face the direst of circumstances. Lan Qing, little Yue... this knowledge must never be shared.”

After listening to the spirit’s prognostications, the Paragons were silent.

Yes. None of them denied that they would use all the vital crystals in their power to create mighty human Adepts the likes of which had never been seen. Even that was not terrible in and of itself. But what about when the crystals were spent?

These wizened Paragons had seen the greed of humanity first hand. In more ways than they’d like to admit humans and aliens had their similarities. Life was about growth – expansion. Both species were always striving for better and greater things. Both wanted to be stronger, and their

efforts could influence all life throughout the universe.

With this dark knowledge humanity would be unable to resist. A portion would succumb to the poison allure of power and would not be able to control the hunger.

The Pontiff rose to his feet, his deep voice reverberating through the bridge. “What if it is kept to a small coterie? Methods can be used to protect this secret.”

Li Ke smiled. “Your Majesty the Pontiff, do you truly believe that would be successful? It isn’t that I am lacking in trust, but it is undeniably true that the only way to keep a secret is if the knowledge passes into history.”

Lan Qing spoke. “I agree with his assessment. Speaking for myself, I’m not even sure I can reliably keep this secret. Everyone has their moment of weakness. Sometimes disaster only needs the smallest opportunity. These vital crystals present our species with awesome opportunities, but that shouldn’t require the wanton consumption of life. Instead it should be used for our exuvium process, to extend our lives. I feel this is a suitable use of the treasures we’ve fought for. Constant evolution is simply hastening the path toward destruction.”

“That’s why, once the transmutation is complete, I will allow an Adept of suitable strength to enter into my mind and destroy any trace of that knowledge. I would like all of to bear witness. Li Ke is right – the only way to keep a secret is to erase it completely.”

Most of the Paragons nodded their head, only a few of them disapproved. However they were powerless against the majority.

Li Ke looked upon Lan Qing with an expression of satisfaction. “Then my mind is at ease. What we do, we do to save mankind – not lay the groundwork for its future destruction. As we perform the transmutation the others must not watch. Two protectors is all that is needed – I suggest Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin.”

Lan Jue nodded. “That’s no problem.”

Lan Qing swept his eyes over the rest of the Paragons. “Your Majesties

have fought valiantly. You've earned your rest and then some. The plan now is to return to Angel. There we will strive to complete the Banishing Strategy as quickly as possible and ultimately destroy our enemy."

The Pontiff was particularly displeased with the turn of events. When he heard Li Ke reveal the possibility of absorbing energy like the aliens, the deepest recesses of his heart was stirred. That knowledge could lead the Pontiff's Citadel into a new renaissance of prosperity. However, he was alone in this hope – the other Paragons were in agreement with Li Ke.

One by one the Paragons left. They remained on Middle Heaven but retired to their personal chambers to rest. They would need their strength, for the enemy could attack at any moment. Lan Qing and the others – bearers of the Banishing Blades – needed to be protected. They were humanity's last hope.

Li Ke told them what needed to be prepared. Lan Qing gave the order to see it done. The sooner they finished this business the better, time was of the essence.

Once the others were gone, Li Ke asked Lan Jue, Lan Qing, Zhou Qianlin and the Pharmacist to follow him into the nearby sitting room.

Chapter 864: The Four Banishing Blades

Jun'er left with the Wine Master. Li Ke's eyes never left her small frame as she disappeared.

Lan Jue wanted to ask him why he didn't want to meet his daughter, but a look from the Pharmacist kept him quiet. He wouldn't press the issue – this was, after all, a matter between a husband and wife.

“Before we begin, I will explain the principle behind the Banishing Strategy. These years I've been locked within Ultus I was able to learn its secrets.”

“The Banishing Stance is known as the single greatest destructive power in the universe. Back in the ancient days the Grand Master of Heaven battled against the four great sages. They were as strong as he, and you can imagine the power at their fingertips. Even so the Banishing Blades were called the most lethal of the Grand Master's weapons. Because of how powerful and dangerous it is, the Strategy has been hidden within Ultus ever since.”

“Not copper, nor iron, nor steel, the sword was hidden beneath the crushing weight of Mount Meru. What flame or fluid could quench its keen edge? Ultus – sharp, Occisus – death, Captus – universal red light, Demortus – the ever changing. The blood of the immortals stained their robes.” Li Ke's eyes burned as he recounted the old tale of the Banishing Blades.

Turquoise light sprang up from Li Ke's ghostly body and painted the room in its colors. A sharp and oppressive aura filled every corner of the room. Suddenly 'the most lethal of the Grand Master's weapons' seemed more than apt to describe the power of these blades.

Suddenly the Pharmacist's body reacted, releasing an aura of white light. A thirst of slaughter swelled and joined with Ultus' cutting eminence. The two together were murder given form.

Next to react was Lan Jue and Captus. Its red light reached out and where it touched reality was rife with tears. Reality collapsed where the

sword's power prevailed.

Last was Demortus, a blue light which radiated around Zhou Qianlin as a tapestry of ever-changing power.

As the light of the four Banishing Blades intermingled they all rang with an ethereal hum. The resonance of it spread far and wide. More than just the residents of Middle Heaven, the whole fleet could hear the near-deafening ring.

Lan Qing was not protected by the power of a sword. He felt the tides of power most acutely. As the sonorous ring of the swords crashed around him he felt his spirit leave his body. It was like his body would break apart at any moment, caught in the joyous reunion of the godblades. He was not the target of their song, but he felt it may destroy him anyway.

What incredible power!

Lan Qing pressed his palms together before his chest, and a radiant golden Buddha appeared seated in the center of his heart. It quietly meditated, humming the Diamond Sutra, encased in the light of Variochana. A golden light, starting from the crown of his head, quickly spread down his entire body fusing body and soul. Blessings of the Buddhas of past, present and future filled him, protecting him from the deadly aura of the Banishing Blades.

As the song of the blades rang out Li Ke's eyes were wide and fervent. This was the day he had hoped so desperately to see! As a bearer of Ultus – the unparalleled weapon of the Grand Master of Heaven – even universal protogenia couldn't stand against him once the Banishing Strategy was enacted.

Now the swords were reunited, but he was no longer Ultus' master. He had become a guide, despite the pain of regret that filled him. He steeled himself against the sadness, for now was the time for strength.

The turquoise light faded. As the deadly power of Ultus was restrained the other swords followed its lead.

The Pharmacist, Lan Jue, and Zhou Qianlin could faintly sense the

stirring power within. The gathered swords supplemented one another and awakened something inside them.

Lan Jue's understanding of his weapon ran deep, but in that moment he sensed something change completely. Its surge of power was so quick and intense it frightened him.

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BANG! A bone-jarring shock shuddered through the realm of violet light. The Violet Prince, Princess, and the twelve remaining avatars knelt in this hollow place. In addition were two more Infinite-level figures, the remaining doppelgangers of the home worlds.

All of them had been deep in meditation, but the sudden impact forced them all to awaken. One of Monarch's avatars, seated beside the Prince, shot to his feet. A surge of purple light gushed from it.

"I have felt something, a terrible danger that can impact our future. A rapid, destructive force."

This wasn't the avatar itself, but rather Monarch speaking through this echo of its power.

The Violet Prince looked upon the avatar in shock. "From those humans?"

Monarch's deep voice answered. "No. The sword they stole. So this is why they were so willing to put themselves in danger, so determined to abscond with that weapon. My first impression was incorrect, there is something more contained within it. The human who brought it to me was not dead, his spirit remained inside – otherwise we would not have suffered at the hands of the interlopers. All of you must recover that sword, no matter the cost."

The Violet Princess answered, unconvinced. "The humans have proven strong, but your merger with Queen and Consort is nearly complete. Soon you will create what the humans call an immortal realm and a Domain for us to survive in. Then we will be able to travel through the universe at a whim, destroying any vestige of humanity without effort. Even if that

weapon is dangerous, would it mean anything in the face of your future supremacy?”

Monarch’s avatar sniffed derisively. “You understand nothing. The mysteries of their species are revealed to me the more of their essence I consume. Many years ago humans had an immortal realm, stronger and more prosperous than what we will achieve. I suspect that sword is a relic of those times, conveyed to the humans from the gods they once served. The ones who came and took it from me also bore swords of similar caliber. I heard their song, and in the depths of my mind I sensed the danger they present. This danger is such that our power would mean nothing. Your task is to interrupt this power before it can be brought to bear against us. It must be thoroughly destroyed.”

The Violet Prince nodded. “As you wish!”

A cold light passed over the avatar’s face. “Remember – at any cost!”

“Of course,” the Prince replied.

Suddenly, the Princess felt a strange sensation trill through her. Such feelings had plagued her since they consumed human genetics for their own benefit. Monarch was unaffected by the Prince and Princess were more human-like as time went on. They even preferred to converse in human language.

She did not find these human weapons as dangerous as Monarch claimed. More dangerous was the assimilatory power of human genetics. They may have taken this genetic material from the humans, but it was changing them as much as they were using it to empower their abilities.

Once this immortal realm was established they would become more and more like the creatures they consumed. Maybe the human essence would completely replace what they used to be. What would happen then, she wondered?

The Violet Princess knew that much of this evolutionary process was derived from the latent memories of the humans, locked within their DNA. Monarch was trying to mimic what the humans had achieved thousands of years before.

“In ancient times but one bearer established the Banishing Stance, the Grand Master of Heaven Ling Bao. Before his overwhelming power even the likes of Heavenly Sovereign Taishang and Celestial Master Yuanshi, along with two others, were at a loss as to what to do. But as the four clashed against the Grand Master they managed to defeat him. Thus the swords earned their titles as the most lethal under heaven. The Strategy, with the four swords as its pivotal center, directed this unfathomable power. From what we can understand the Strategy focuses and guides a portion of universal protogenia.”

Li Ke shared all he knew of the Banishing Strategy with the four new bearers. As they listened intently it was as though gates hiding these secrets from them were opened before their eyes – especially for the three who were already familiar with their swords. Suddenly their knowledge and connection with these godblades was deeper than ever.

“Now we cannot rely on a single person’s power to establish the Strategy, of course. Nor can any of you fully command the power it contains. What you must do is approach the home worlds, establish the Strategy, then entice them forward. The enemy will react to you once the trap is in place.”

The sword contained profound knowledge, and even though Li Ke had been trapped within it for years he had only scratched the surface of its mysteries. Without the other three weapons parts of those mysteries had been locked away.

Knowledge of the Strategy had always been kept in Ultus, but many specifics of it were contained in the other swords. Only once all four of them were together was the entirety of the Strategy laid bare.

Lan Qing, Lan Jue, Zhou Qianlin, and the Pharmacist were all brilliant people. They could follow Li Ke’s information to its logical conclusion, comprehending the substance of his point and asking poignant questions.

Because they lacked the strength to control the swords’ power, they had only one chance to lay out the Strategy. Whether or not they could

eliminate the enemy was a question too difficult to answer now.

After all, the full strength of these swords – the most lethal weapons under heaven – was unknown. No one knew what would happen once the Strategy was enacted. All they knew came from old legends and whispered tales. They had to rely on faith that these stories were true.

Chapter 865: Daddy... Come!

Right now the only thing they could take faith from was the ringing son of the Banishing Blades. The sound of their long-awaited union rang with such ferocity that the strength within them was evident.

All preparations for the transmutation process were completed. Li Ke addressed them once again. “Now we will use the alien methods to increase your strength. Once you have achieved Nirvana I will pass on Ultus’ lineage to Lan Qing. From that point you can begin to practice the Strategy.”

Lan Qing nodded slightly. The Pharmacist looked on with sorrowful eyes. Li Ke said the words lightly, but she knew that once he passed the inheritance to Lan Qing her husband would be gone. Already it was clear to everyone that Li Ke’s spirit had begun to fade. It seemed he could vanish at any moment.

Lan Jue looked between the two. “We will watch over you. Qianlin’s Domain in particular will help keep you safe.”

Both Lan Qing and the Pharmacist nodded.

“Lan Jue. Thank you,” Li Ke said suddenly.

Lan Jue shrugged. “Just doing my duty,” he replied.

“I mean, about Jun’er.” A bitter pain crossed Li Ke’s ghostly face. “I was never able to fulfil by obligation as her father. You’ve helped remedy that. Thank you. I chose not to reveal myself to Jun’er because she already has a father – you. Don’t misunderstand, my meaning is that you are far more qualified to guide her as a father than I. I have already failed her too much, and I don’t wish to negatively influence her life any more than I have.”

Lan Jue’s surprise was palpable. Inwardly he lamented these star-crossed parents and the agony they’d suffered! Were it not for the misfortunes they’d suffered this man would have lived to be a modern luminary.

“However...” Li Ke hesitated, then dropped his head. “I have to trouble

you with a request. Bring Jun'er. I'll just watch from afar, I won't say anything. Is this alright?"

His voice shook. The fluctuations of his emotional state was reflected in his translucent body, which began to flicker.

Lan Jue nodded. "Alright, I'll bring her here." He left to do as he'd been asked.

However, after just a few steps he stopped and turned back to look at him.

"Brother Li," he began. "Or... perhaps brother in law [1. Since he refers to the Pharmacist as sister. This is actually more familiar than 'Brother Li'.]. I must ask, do you really believe Jun'er doesn't understand what's happening? She may be young, but that girl has more wisdom than most adults. That's even before you consider her inheritance from the Clairvoyant. She knows, she just hasn't said anything. She doesn't want to hurt you... or perhaps it's to protect herself."

Both Li Ke and the Pharmacist shook at his words. They looked at him, shocked.

Jun'er knew? She already knew?

Li Ke stared in surprise, the Pharmacist couldn't help but stare. She couldn't help but feel like she'd been neglectful of the girl lately. Lan Jue seemed to know her better.

Lan Jue looked from one to the other. "I feel sorry for Jun'er, but she's more mature than you give her credit for. You've been living in your own world, but I think you need to ask her what she thinks. Brother, you don't want to speak with her because you're afraid to cause her pain. But if she knows her father's back, and you say nothing, what sort of damage do you think that will cause? I hope you both speak with her. It may hurt, but at the very least she'll have the memory of her real dad. She'll remember that her father really did come back. At least for a moment your family was whole."

"Of course I'll always be a father to her, that won't ever change. I'll

protect her with my life and I promise that nothing will harm her so long as I draw breath.”

Li Ke felt like he'd been struck by lightning. His mind was muddled, he didn't know what to say.

“I think A-Jue is right. Some things have to be faced, no matter how unpleasant. Maybe for her, what you think is the right decision may not be the best one.” Lan Qing added his opinion.

Li Ke floated silently in the sitting room. He wasn't sure what to say, didn't know what to do. He was entirely at a loss.

Lan Jue didn't wait for him to answer. He simply turned and left to fetch Jun'er. Whatever Li Ke's decision he would bring her here so they could be face to face. They were, after all, family.

When Lan Jue returned, holding Jun'er in his arms, there were several more people in the sitting room. Lin Guoguo, Ke'er, and Xiuxiu were in attendance.

Lin Guoguo had come at Lan Jue's request. She would be the one to strip Lan Qing and the Pharmacist of their memories, so the secrets of the transmutation technique would be lost forever. There was no stronger Adept than Lin Guoguo in the realm of psychic power.

Xiuxiu and Ke'er had come with her. They had not had an opportunity to see their boss in some time so they aimed to advantage of this opportunity.

Mika was gone. Zeus' Amazons were now only three.

Jun'er was dressed in a white fluffy princess' skirt, with her hair combed and pulled into a pony tail. Her big eyes were dull and sightless, but beautiful nonetheless. They were like windows into an endless universe. In her hands she bore the Eye of Tomorrow, the crystal ball the Clairvoyant once used to influence the flows of human destiny.

When he saw her Li Ke's spirit floated forward, but stopped ten meters from where Lan Jue stood. The three amazons jumped when he did, unaware of what was happening. They looked at each other in surprise

and alarm.

Lan Jue looked at Li Ke, but spoke to Jun'er. "Mommy's here, little one. How about you play in here for a little while?" He knelt and put her on the floor before taking her hand and leading her to the Pharmacist.

Li Ke watched as Lan Jue and Jun'er passed him by. He remained silent as Lan Jue placed Jun'er's tiny hand in her mother's. Jun'er held tight to her mother, blinking her sightless eyes.

The Pharmacist looked down at her, then at Li Ke floating nearby. She fought to keep her emotions under control so that they wouldn't burst out. Her lips quivered from the effort of keeping tears from her eyes.

Jun'er's expression was calm and sweet, appearing blissfully unaware of what was happening. She lifted her hand, bearing the Eye of Tomorrow, and pointed it at Lan Jue. "Daddy, can you hold this for me, please?"

"Ok." He said. Lan Jue took it from her, and in his hands it looked like a perfectly normal glass bauble.

"Daddy... come!" Jun'er called out again, but when Lan Jue looked toward her, the young girl's hand wasn't stretched toward him. One hand held tightly to the Pharmacist's, while the other reached for Li Ke.

This touching moment struck everyone, filling their hearts.

Li Ke looked at his daughter, not daring to believe. He rubbed his spectral eyes then looked again to make sure she was pointing his way.

The Pharmacist, in her shock, looked at Lan Jue, but he shook his head. He didn't tell Jun'er anything. What he said had been true – Jun'er knew.

Of course! She was the Clairvoyant of the new generation, bearer of the Eye of Tomorrow. How could she not know her own blood was present?

"Jun-... Jun'er." At last Li Ke spoke, and he hurried to her side. He knew he was a spirit and could not touch his daughter, but he threw open his arms anyway and tried to hug her. Everyone's eyes were wet with tears. For a father to be unable to hold his daughter, the sorrow of it was unspeakable.

Jun'er's placid face bore a faint smile and she opened her own arms to accept him. She moved in perfect time with her ghostly father, though she could not see!

"I can feel you, daddy. Don't feel bad, it'll be ok when you come back." Jun'er comforted him through her tiny smile.

The Pharmacist couldn't contain herself any longer. She pressed herself into Qianlin's arms and cried against her shoulder.

Li Ke's body shook. He felt like his whole body was on fire, and nothing was important except this little life in front of him. The worry over aliens, the swords... all of it melted away when that little girl called him daddy. The pain and sadness that had consumed him for so long disappeared. She'd called him daddy.

Li Ke, choked with sobs, kept his arms around his daughter though the effort was fruitless. Jun'er stood happily within his supernatural embrace, smiling contently.

"Daddy, don't cry. Having the whole family together is a happy thing! Now you don't worry, I'm going to look after mommy. You have to be good, too."

Jun'er's sweet voice was like crystal bells in his ears. He hated himself. He hated that he'd decided to leave his wife for that cursed mission. If he'd refused he'd have been with her all along. Maybe she wouldn't have been blind.

But in all the universe there was no cure to take back regrets.

Jun'er lifted her arms and rested them around his phantom neck.

Chapter 866: Li Ke's Decision

"Alright... okay!" At last Li Ke was able to fight through his emotion to get the words out. Just seeing his daughter pushed all other thoughts out of his head. With a sharp sigh he appeared to come to a decision. Standing, he turned back toward Lan Qing.

"I'd like to ask for your help."

Lan Qing nodded. "Of course, upperclassman. I'll do whatever I can."

Li Ke spoke with quiet determination. "I want you to help me become the true sword spirit of Ultus."

Lan Qing paused, and the Pharmacist stopped her crying to turn back around and look at them. Neither quite understood what Li Ke wanted.

Li KE turned to the Pharmacist. "I'm sorry, little Yue. I can't hold it back anymore. I need to be selfish."

She looked back, her tear-soaked eyes confused.

Li Ke pulled his spectral face in to a tight, bitter smile. "I'm sorry, I lied to you. The mark of my spirit can't stay locked in Ultus. It is a legendary weapon, incomparably sharp, and it will carve away the last vestige of my soul once my will vanishes. Reincarnation teaches that when our life force passes it is born again in a new body, but I don't want that. Being born again is a fantasy, and even if it were real it would mean I'd forget all that has happened this life. I lied and told you there was a chance to bring me back because I wanted you to seek happiness for yourself. As I am now, an errant soul in a sword, I cannot perform the duties and responsibilities of a husband. I know you, more than you'd probably like to admit. You'll be by my side so long as my spirit remains. But if you tie yourself to the dead you can't leave a real life. So I chose the possibility of reincarnation, and chose to hope you might find a way to be happy."

"But now that I see my daughter I don't want to. I may not have the qualifications to be a real father, but at least I may be able to see her every day. I can watch my treasure flourish. Even just watching would fill my

heart with contentment. If I become a sword spirit I can remain here with her.”

“You fool.” The Pharmacist spat the word, her voice bitter. “Do you think I didn’t know you were lying to me? I just wanted you to have your lie because it comforted you. Your face becomes so serious every time you lie. You haven’t changed in all the time we’ve been together. If your spirit vanishes I refuse to live without you.”

“No!” Li Ke’s anger flared. “Jun’er is already missing a father. How could she go on without you?”

The Pharmacist shot back with cool conviction. “How can you be selfish, but I can’t?”

Li Ke stopped. He glanced at Jun’er nearby, still bearing the small smile on her face. “I’ve made my decision, to become the spirit of Ultus and remain. I’ll live so long as the current master of the sword draws breath. I’ll be able to watch my little girl. But little Yue you must promise me that you won’t throw away your life.”

The Pharmacist walked over to Jun’er’s side, knelt, and picked her up. She hugged the small girl tightly against her. Li Ke’s dedication to his choice was firm and fervent. He floated over to Lan Qing, then nodded that he was ready.

“Come with me.” He turned and left the room. Lan Jue, Qianlin, the Pharmacist, Jun’er, and the three amazons remained behind.

Ke’er, Xiuxiu and Lin Guoguo’s eyes were red. They were not immune to the emotional scene they’d witnessed.

“Mommy, you should go look after daddy. Daddy Lan Jue is here with me.” Jun’er cutely offered.

She nodded, ran her hand along her hair, and gave her small cheek a kiss. She put her down and left to join the two men.

After she was gone, Jun’er lifted her face toward Lan Jue. “Am I a good girl, daddy?”

Lan Jue knelt and wrapped her in a hug. "You little thing. It's okay to cry if you want to."

She wrapped her tiny arms around Lan Jue. Then, with tiny sobs, she cried into his shoulder.

No matter how much wisdom she possessed or how mature she was, Jun'er was still a child!

Lan Jue gently stroked her silk-like hair, eyes heavy with a sad and tender love. She really was a good girl. She'd told her mom to leave for a reason, so that she could let her pain out. To understand this at six years old was incredible.

Xiuxiu, Ke'er and Lin Guoguo quickly gathered round to comfort the little girl.

She didn't cry for long. After a minute or so her tears stopped falling and her sobs ceased. She slowly lifted her head.

As Lan Jue wiped away her tears, Jun'er muttered at him. "Daddy, I'm scared. I've seen some really scary things... that daddy, dead. Mommy, dead. They don't want me."

He gently patted her back. "Impossible, they both love you more than anything. How could they not want their little Jun'er? And you have me! Daddy Lan Jue will be with you forever."

"Ok." Jun'er's tiny voice replied. She hugged him tighter. He kissed her forehead.

Suddenly Jun'er's head shot up. She looked off in a seemingly random direction. "Daddy, be careful."

Lan Jue had quick reaction times and no reason to doubt the little girl. The moment she spoke the words. He took her and the three amazons and hurled themselves toward Zhou Qianlin.

A beam of purple light struck where they'd been kneeling half a breath before.

An aura of creation and destruction raged around them, fluctuating

chaotically. Even though Lan Jue had the perception of a Nirvana-level Paragon he had not felt any indication this power was coming.

Jun'er lifted her hand and a sparkling light filled the room. A dimness then overcame them as a twinkling backdrop enveloped everyone like a blanket of stars. The ship disappeared. Suddenly everyone found themselves in a boundless universe.

They could see four twinkling violet dots in the distance, but they closed in quickly to surround Lan Jue and the others.

The twinkling starlight gave their attackers pause before they were engulfed. Lan Jue responded quickly by holding tight to Jun'er and reaching out with his other hand. In a flash of red, Captus appeared in his grip.

The violet light subsided as a vortex of red light appeared and began to drink it up.

Chapter 867: Life for a Monarch

Recently Lan Jue's battles had been quick, fierce, and against foes much stronger than he. Under these stifling odds his cultivation and combat experience had grown by leaps and bounds. His comprehension of his sword and his own abilities was deeper than it'd ever been, and though he had only been a Paragon a short while he could still command with flows of protogenia with confidence.

The moment Lan Jue summoned Captus, Zhou Qianlin reacted in kind. Demortus appeared in her hand, ready to join Captus in battle. Flows of blue light surged from her blade and entered into Captus' vortex like bolts of silk. Suddenly it was a whirlpool of red and blue.

The light gathered into a flickering nimbus. Then, in a burst of energy, it shot forth in every direction and battered back the four alien monsters that'd come for them. In the same instant Lan Jue released the dazzling power of his Domain and allowed Boundless Starlight to spread.

Lan Jue's heart was heavy with fear, he knew how dangerous the situation they found themselves in was. These monsters were undoubtedly Infinite-level!

He berated himself for forgetting one very important thing; these aliens were adept at interdimensional travel. Their understanding of how to cross large distances undetected was unparalleled. However in all his battles with these aliens they had never used transference offensively. Humans had forgotten they could do it.

The Violet Prince and his coterie must have appeared through teleportation. It helped that Middle Heaven was relatively empty now, but nonetheless their extraordinary prowess was on full display. What's more, they could hide their aura so well that even the Photographer would be ashamed.

These thoughts flashed through Lan Jue's mind. But right now his top concern was finding out how to stay alive.

Turn!

As Lan Jue's Domain expanded the aliens began to swirl in a clockwise formation around him. The power of their birth and destruction Domain accelerated sharply, forcing it to change a hundred times a second. It overwhelmed the rules of reality and everything around them seemed to break apart.

A dizziness overcame Lan Jue, and before he knew it his Domain was overcome and destroyed. Even Qianlin's Queen of Heaven powers couldn't sustain it.

The Violet Prince grunted. His eyes flared purple-gold, and the monsters that accompanied him stopped their predatory circling. However the purple light did not stop, and became a tornado of deadly power that came crashing down on Lan Jue and the others.

"Our hearts beat as one!" Lan Jue yelled into the buffeting tides of power.

Captus flared red. Under the crushing weight of the aliens' Domain he would have been unable to summon his protogenia as a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Luckily he had risen to Nirvana, and with Li Ke's direction he had a new comprehension of Captus' true essence.

As he lashed out with the Banishing Blade golden runes burned bright, stamped in the metal. All of a sudden Lan Jue's body became illusory, like there were a hundred thousand copies of him overlaid one on top of the other.

Nirvana the omnipresent, gathered as one!

Faced with the oppressive and deadly power of the Violet Prince, Lan Jue reacted with one of the secret powers of Nirvana.

The sudden amplification of its powers made the golden runes along Captus burn with blinding light. Though Qianlin did not possess the same level of comprehension she shared his through their linked souls. Floating around them the blue light of Demortus coalesced into a haze and settled over Captus.

The power of the two swords mingled, and created a rainbow-hued halo

of light. It bloomed outward like the petals of a lotus, spreading out around them. These mysterious petals protected the humans from the rage and chaos of the purple cyclone.

Lan Jue channeled the Harmonious Swords to defend them from the storm. He couldn't retract the sword for fear of exposing him and his companions, even though the Violet Prince was closing in on him.

His other hand still held tightly to Jun'er, protecting her with his body. Lan Jue's Domain remained staunchly denied, and unable to fight off the encroaching power of the alien's creation and destruction abilities.

They were finished! Lan Jue's heart sank. Four Infinite-level monsters joined against him was as terrifying as it was insurmountable. He was effectively powerless, locked down by his enemies' overwhelming strength.

Adding insult to injury the Violet Prince did not attack Lan Jue directly. The monster's pale hand reached out, but toward Jun'er. The other was aimed at Lan Jue's chest.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin were focusing their powers on keeping the cyclone from tearing them apart. Qianlin could only watch, forced to cling to Demortus.

In the final moment, just before the Prince's hand could reach them, Lan Jue reacted. He spun around her blocking Jun'er from the Prince with his own body.

He had to protect her, even if it meant his death! This was the only thought going through his mind. He tried to position himself as best he could to block access to Zhou Qianlin as well. Maybe he could buy her some time.

"Agh!" There was a pained grunt and suddenly Lan Jue felt Captus grow lighter. A series of intense explosions followed, and then the combined power of he and Qianlin surged to dispel the tornado raging around them.

Reinforcements! Lan Jue turned around to see what had happened.

However, instead of the Violet Prince's grim and murderous expression

he was met with a familiar face.

Her face – as always traditionally beautiful and stunning to behold – was pale. She looked back at him with her big, soft, emotive eyes. All the feelings she'd held back for so long seemed to pour out of those eyes.

He was reflected in them, only him. For a moment her delicate, pretty face was filled serenity. Up until the moment she collapsed to the floor.

“Xiuxiu!”

Chapter 868: I'm Sorry, Boss

“Xiuxiu!”

Lan Jue cried out and lurched forward. The press of enemy protogenia had eased enough for some measure of his power to spread out. He dropped Jun'er's hand and reached out for Xiuxiu.

His heart sank the moment he touched her. There was hardly any trace of vitality left.

Reinforcements had arrived, only a moment too late. The pale pink light that surrounded them was from the Photographer, fighting against the pressure of the aliens' Domain.

She did not come alone. The Terminator had placed his enormous girth between them and their attackers while the Epochrion and the Wine Master manipulated the flows of space-time. All of humanity's Paragons were here in a unified defense.

Lan Jue could sense a hideous, murderous aura wash over them. The Pharmacist – they must have sensed something was amiss.

“Boss...” Xiuxiu's soft voice cut through the din. She sounded weak, different. Her eyes never left Lan Jue's face.

He held onto her limp body, kneeling beside her. “Xiuxiu, why would you do something so stupid...” He still wasn't sure what had happened.

The Violet Prince had been on him, inches from landing a blow. He couldn't have simply given up his chance to cut Lan Jue down. Xiuxiu was closest – she must have used her piercing Discipline to cut through the Prince's Domain and use her own body to block the attack.

She was a ninth level Adept, powerful and talented. However, in the face of an Infinite-level beast like the Prince she was no more dangerous than a normal human. Were it not for the timely intervention of the other Paragons, Xiuxiu would have been utterly destroyed.

“How could you be so stupid?!” Lan Jue's eyes were filling with tears. He knew how potent the Creation and Destruction Domain was. There was

no way to save Xiuxiu's rapidly fleeting life. Even the mighty immortals of old couldn't rescue her.

Tears carved two glittering rivulets down Xiuxiu's cheeks. Her eyes were cloudy and unfocused but were kept trained on Lan Jue.

"Why is it so dark? Boss? It's dark. I can't see you... I want to see you." She gripped his arm with what little strength was left to her.

Lan Jue took her hand and squeezed it tight. She squeezed back. "Boss, don't feel bad. I don't deserve it. Maybe this is for the best, it's worth it to die for you. I'm sorry boss, I have to ask your forgiveness. I'll repent in the next world, I'll pray for you. Boss... live happily..."

She gasped the last sentence, and suddenly Lan Jue felt her hand grow heavy. Her body went stiff as a faint violet light began to emerge from her skin. Gradually her form dissolved into motes of violet light, and then she was gone.

Lan Jue tried desperately to gather the motes as they floated away, to no avail. He wanted to force her body to stay. Instead her life force was devoured by these heartless monsters, and nothing remained of his childhood friend. Nothing but a faint sense of sentiment, sorrow, and regret.

Lan Jue's whole body shook.

Xiuxiu had been by his side since they were small. They'd grown up together. No one – not Hera, not Qianlin, not even Lan Qing – no one was with him longer. He'd turned her affections down more than once, but not because he didn't like her. She was like a sister to him!

As he struggled to figure out how to urge the Amazons to lead their own lives, he knew Xiuxiu would be the biggest worry. Her mannerisms were always soft, but inside Xiuxiu was more stubborn than any of the others. No one could change her mind if she firmly believed something.

He'd struggled to find a solution ever since Xiuxiu began to show signs of attachment. Never was an answer forthcoming. The other girls were fond of him, too, but none were around as long as Xiuxiu. She'd been

raised by Jue Di as Lan Jue's maidservant, to stay by his side always but not necessarily as his wife.

Xiuxiu was younger than Lan Jue by a few years. They grew up and trained together. Ever since then Lan Jue had developed a familial kinship with her. So, although he knew it was wrong to not flatly refuse her advances, he couldn't bear to hurt the girl – woman – who had dedicated her life to him

He never thought it would end this way, it was the only thing he could think about. Xiuxiu was dead. She died saving his life. He couldn't shake the image of her eyes as she looked at him. She'd loved him until the light faded away and the darkness took her.

An indescribable pain tore through every fiber of his being. It was his heart breaking, no less devastating than the day Hera died.

Xiuxiu was dead. Dead!

"A-Jue, snap out of it!" A pleading shout pulled him from the state of shock. His head shot up, and his red eyes narrowed into angry slits.

"Bastard!" He roared. Like a feral beast he hurled himself at the Violent Prince.

Chaos prevailed. Jun'er had had the forethought to use one of her most potent abilities to separate the fighters from Middle Heaven. The ferocity of their exchange could easily rip the bastion apart from the inside. But she was just a child, and even with the help of the Eye of Tomorrow she couldn't protect them for long.

Ten Paragons were desperately fighting for their lives. Nearby, the Pharmacist was guarding the door and blocking two more Nirvana-level aliens from entering.

Lan Qing had not appeared. He was likely busy absorbing Ultus' inheritance.

The aliens had chosen the perfect time to attack – besieging the stronghold to destroy the reinforcements [1. A military tactic wherein the attacker lays siege to an important positions defenders are unwilling to

give up. The defenders are forced to call for reinforcements, who thus fall into ambushes laid by the attackers. Now the defenders are without reinforcements against a powerfully positioned enemy force. Here the humans can't give up Middle Heaven so all the Paragons have to join in to defend it. The aliens can then pick off the Paragons and leave the humans weak.]. The humans were short Lan Qing's might and guidance, and were forced to protect him and the ship.

If Xiuxiu had not taken the blow meant for Lan Jue, he would have been seriously injured or even killed. Without the Harmonious Swords humanity's ability to fight back would be severely impaired.

Captus exploded with an intense red light as Lan Jue rushed forward, bringing Captus down on his enemy like a hammer. Qianlin remained by his side, but no matter how much she tried she found she couldn't combine her powers to his. In this moment there was no love in his heart, only hatred.

Pink light flickered around Luo Xianni throughout the fight. She was the sole Infinite-level Paragon defending the humans, and the only one with a clear mind. She knew how precarious their position was, and the moment the aliens' Domain broke past hers it would destroy Jun'er's protective shell. Exposed to the raging protogenia of so many Paragons, Middle Heaven would be torn apart from the inside. The results would be catastrophic.

They had to find another battlefield.

"Quickly!" Luo Xianni shouted toward the Wine Master.

The old Avenue leader knew what was needed without being told. He appeared in front of her in a flash of silver light. Holding his scepter high, archaic runes appeared floating in the air around them and the gem in its center flared. As waves of light poured from him Luo Xianni brandished her small pink camera.

Combined power from the two interspatial powerhouses caused reality to lurch uncomfortably. The aliens' Domain shook under the pressure.

All four of the Infinite-level aliens were locked in combat. The Violet

Prince was entangled by Lan Jue's rabid onslaught. With the addition of Zhou Qianlin and the Prince's fear of their Harmonious Swords he was on his back foot.

The Violet Princess was squared off against the two Gods of Wine, the Pontiff, and the Gourmet. All four of them were far inferior to the Princess in cultivation, but the Pontiff's light-based powers had a restrictive effect on her and he was nearly a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Likewise the Gods of Wine were adept at battlefield control and were keeping her tangled up. Indeed the Princess had the upper hand, but for now they weren't letting her employ her full powers.

The Terminator elected to face iron with iron. He faced off against one of the planet's avatars alone, relying on his overwhelming strength to keep his target locked down. The final alien was left to the Epochrion and the rest of the Avenue' Paragons.

For the time being the Epochrion's powers, paired with attacks by the Pauper and the Driver, were enough to keep the avatar distracted. What frightened their enemy the most was the Driver's Primordial Lightning, for even with its superior cultivation it didn't dare risk a direct blow.

Chapter 869: Sobering Kiss

The Keeper and Bookworm were helping the Pharmacist, working hard to keep enemy reinforcements at bay.

Chu Cheng had returned to Tyrannosaurus, because each bastion required a Paragon commander. Hua Li had left to gather the Tears of Neptune, as requested by Li Ke. Other than them, all the rest of mankind's Paragons were here, at war [1. Alright, but where is the damn Astral Phantom?!]. However, not all of the alien leadership had come.

Including the Prince and the other three Infinite-level attackers, only seven alien elite were here. Perhaps that was the limit they could teleport with their abilities. Still, it was more than enough to destroy Middle Heaven. Losing the East's last hope was unacceptable, so this fight had to quickly be moved elsewhere.

Ka-cha! For a moment everything froze, went silent, and was overlaid with a pink light. Then everything began to quake and ripple.

Lan Jue's pain and rage came crashing down on the Prince. Monster though he was, he was still a living thing and the fear that gripped him was real. His defense stuttered from the Photographer's intervention.

His hesitation lasted only a moment before everything returned to normal. In that moment Luo Xianni cast her hand toward Jun'er, emitting a beam of light that hung over the small girl. She disappeared, and with her the shell of protective power she'd created. The Photographer's Domain shattered as well.

But as the tides of protogenia burst out, obliterating everything in the room, the aliens were shocked to find what lay behind the metal walls. They weren't in Middle Heaven any longer. They were out in space, separate from the armada.

Teleported?

Luo Xianni's reaction had been a clever one. She didn't try to teleport everyone directly for she knew it was likely to be blocked by the aliens'

power. After all, their enemy had the power advantage.

Instead she called upon the Wine Master to conceal their plans, releasing his Domain as though he were there to support their defenses. While he did so she spread her power out and carved a pocket of reality around the whole room. She moved them, and in fact that whole cabin out into space.

Since the Violet Prince was distracted by Lan Jue's attack, he hadn't noticed nor had time to prevent it. Thus Luo Xianni was able to succeed with her ploy. In fact even Luo Xianni was surprised it worked.

A harsh roar bellowed from the Prince. He was calling for others.

"Grab A-Jue, get him to snap out of it." Luo Xianni grunted, and a pink light surrounded Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin. Both were pulled back from the Prince, and Luo Xianni took their place.

He had a healthy fear of the Photographer as well. Though she was not as powerful as that human with the staff, she was the only other creature who could stand toe to toe with him. Aside from her only Lan Jue and Qianlin's Harmonious Swords could defeat him.

Lan Jue swiped with Captus but struck empty space. His red, angry eyes were cast all around to search for something to kill but were met with only the twinkling stars.

It was him. He killed Xiuxiu – he killed her!

The only thought running through his addled mind was vengeance for Xiuxiu. His rage, his need for blood, had thrust him into a berserker frenzy.

"A-Jue, you have to calm down!" Zhou Qianlin hugged him tightly from behind to try and stop him from racing off. He was not himself, and the torrent of emotion he felt was preventing him from summoning his full power. The only way they might defeat these creatures is through the Harmonious Swords.

As she held onto him Qianlin released her Domain. The Light of Guanyin fell over the battlefield and the two of them. Its calming nature

soothed the erratic flows of protogenia radiating from Lan Jue.

One of the most dangerous situations for a Paragon was to lose control of their protogenia. These powers belonged to the universe, and were borrowed by the Paragon. They were conduits, and if they lost control of this flow the power of the universe could backfire. A rebound like that could destroy the Paragon.

The Queen of Heaven's powers were magnificent for just this situation. Almost instantly the dangerously regular pulses of protogenia were calmed. To Lan Jue it felt like a gust of warm wind blowing through him, soothing his heart and easing his pain.

He stopped, struck dumb in the moment of his anger. He began to shake as tears rolled down his face.

"Xiuxiu... Xiuxiu's dead. She's dead!" He lifted his left hand, and held tightly in his palm was a small storage device she'd given him just before she died. Somehow she'd managed to protect it from being destroyed by the Violet Prince's attack.

He didn't know what it was she gave him. He almost didn't want to know, but it was the only thing of hers he had left. He felt the sorrow and guilt growing in his heart.

Lan Jue slowly turned and faced Zhou Qianlin. She looked hazy through his tears. "Xiuxiu is dead. The Violet Prince killed her."

Qianlin didn't answer him. With pain in her own eyes she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply.

Her lips were warm. The essence of her – of her compassion and her love – was conveyed through that kiss into his body. It nourished him, nourished his soul. No words were needed now. Through that kiss Zhou Qianlin told him that he still had her. She was still here.

The blood-shot color drained from his eyes. Gradually the haze of rage and anguish drained away.

Qianlin put her hands on his shoulders and gently pushed him away. She looked deeply into his eyes. "We can't be sad now. We have to kill our

enemies, and make them sacrifices to the memory of Xiuxiu.”

He nodded firmly, causing the tears to be cast from his face. They floated in the nothingness around them. He took her hand in one of his gripped tightly to Captus with the other.

Zhou Qianlin’s kiss had calmed enough to where he didn’t rush back into the fight. He stood at a distance, surveying what was going on.

Seven enemies. Among them were the Violet Prince and three other Infinite-level aliens. On his side, other than his brothers all other Paragons were in combat.

Luo Xianni was trading blows with the Prince. Luckily she didn’t have to worry about universal protogenia while under the protection of Qianlin’s Domain. The Terminator also had one of the elite locked down, and for the time being he needn’t worry for his life.

But the situation was more precarious for the Gods of Wine. It was four on one, but the four humans were only part of the Realm of Protogenia. Luckily for them the Pontiff’s abilities were opposed to the monster’s, and the Gods of Wine were expertly keeping her on her back feet. If any of them slip up, however, it could mean their death.

Things also looked dire for the Pharmacist. She was strong enough to handle a Nirvana-level foe on her own, but she was currently facing three. The Keeper and Bookworm could only help from the sidelines, and their powerful attacks were barely able to penetrate the enemy’s Domain. None of the three aliens focused on them, because doing so might expose the other two to the Harbinger Faerie’s deadly abilities.

Clearly these beasts’ target was the Pharmacist herself. Under their fierce onslaught Occisus’ light was squeezed into the area just around her, the only thing standing between her and disaster. Things weren’t good anywhere Lan Jue looked.

His observation lasted only a moment, then he made his decision. He threw back his head and let loose a booming cry toward the heavens. His deep, booming shout shuddered through the battlefield, summoned from the depths of his soul, and everyone could feel it. He released his Domain

and let it flow from him at full force.

In the distance at least six more Nirvana-level aliens were quickly approaching. Once they arrived, even if Chu Cheng and Hua Li joined the fight, all hope was lost.

If they wanted to survive, they would have to punish the alien attackers dearly right this moment.

His crystal-clear eyes reflected the light of Captus as Lan Jue held the legendary sword aloft. His Boundless Starlight Domain surged forth.

However it did not spread out far. In fact it expanded only three meters around Lan Jue and Qianlin before stopping. Stars in the distance dimmed once his Domain emerged, as though his power drank their light into itself. He and Qianlin let their powers flow, and they amplified each other to a shocking degree.

The Violet Prince narrowed his eyes as he glared their way. Monarch had ordered them to spare nothing to bring that sword back, but the sword wasn't here. It was back on Middle Heaven.

Chapter 870: Disadvantages

Moments after the Photographer teleported them away from Middle Heaven the bastion powered on its shields. It was no longer possible for the aliens to simply transfer themselves aboard. Even at the level of Nirvana the creatures couldn't master the Creation and Destruction Domain enough to teleport themselves.

In fact even the three home worlds couldn't transfer. Only the Violet Prince and Princess had the innate energy and depth of knowledge of their Domain to do so. Even still the requirement in energy was immense. It was for that reason the Prince didn't immediately destroy Lan Jue upon appearing within Middle Heaven. If he hadn't already been drained by the transference, even Xiuxiu's interruption wouldn't have saved Lan Jue from him.

As the fight stretched on both the Prince and Princess were recovering their stored energy. He looked across the battlefield to get his bearings.

Monarch had told him that there were three other weapons like the one they'd lost. At least one needed to be brought back, though the more he could capture the better. Best was if the Prince could wrest all four from the hands of their enemy. Three were brought to bear against him now, but his first order of business was to kill one human in particular.

For the time being he was unreachable. Luo Xianni was strong, and had both Lan Jue and Qianlin protected. Until the rest of his elite warriors came, he would have to stall.

Of all the humans this woman was the only one who could stand toe to toe against him. The other human defenders could collapse at any moment, and the situation could quickly turn bad for his prey. Lan Jue and Qianlin could only help defend one group, possibly killing one of his own. But if the two could be separated the danger to his side would be mitigated. The rest of his elite fighters would arrive and this war would end.

Ten seconds at most, then six more Nirvana-level aliens would reach

them. Both sides were in a race against time. These ten seconds would determine who had the upper hand.

Lan Jue was on the move. He raced forward with the deadly point of Captus aimed in the Pharmacist's direction. Her situation was the most precarious as three Nirvana-level elite had surrounded her. It was the best decision, for Lan Jue and Qianlin's Harmonious Blades could kill one or two of them before the others arrived.

The tell-tale flash of rainbow color appeared. Lan Jue had cleared the haze of anger from his mind and thus the connection between him and Qianlin was renewed. The simple yet forceful beam of light pierced the darkness as it reached for a target.

In the same moment Lan Jue attacked the three aliens assailing the Pharmacist scattered like snow on the breeze.

Through his psionic connection the Violet Prince controlled his side throughout the battlefield. He had been watching and waiting for Lan Jue to make his decision, with the aim to stretch out the battle. Buying time was far easier when he only needed a few seconds.

From where he battled with the Photographer it looked like the Harmonious Sword strike missed. What's more, it was headed right for the Pharmacist.

Friendly fire? The Violet Prince paused, surprised at how poorly organized the humans' defenses were. He didn't believe it, something suddenly didn't feel right.

From the corner of his eye he saw the Pharmacist thrust forward with Occisus, aiming for the precise center of the multicolor beam. Suddenly she vanished and the spot she'd occupied was swallowed up by Lan Jue's attack.

No, that wasn't right. The sparkling light of Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain was the backdrop that surrounded them, and as the power of the Harmonious Swords cut through it the light suddenly changed direction. The Prince spied a faint figure that seemed to guide it – toward the three fleeing avatars and the Violet Princess.

Everything happened in the space of an instant.

The Violet Princess had her battle firmly in hand. The energy she'd spent in the transportation was gradually returning, and with each passing moment she was coming closer to overpowering the Paragons. Even the Pontiff's pure light of faith had begun to be contaminated by her violet powers.

In the face of her dominance, the light of the Harmonious Swords came crashing down from on high. It wasn't the fight time she'd faced Lan Jue and Qianlin, and the power they bore frightened her. It'd taken her and her 'brother' to defeat Lan Jue and the Pharmacist last time. Qianlin hadn't been part of that battle.

Although Lan Jue and Qianlin were but Paragons of Nirvana, she knew what they could accomplish when they fought together. Hand in hand, neither the Prince or Princess dared try to face down the Harmonious Swords straight on. It was an attack nearly as devastating as the ones they'd faced from the staff-bearing man.

She tried to dodge, but before she could two more blasts of power came from either side. Neither one of those were strong enough to threaten her life, but they were enough to cut off her escape. She was pinned by the Arcane Magnate and the Karmic Scholar.

Lan Jue's attack changed everyone's tactics. The Bookworm and Keeper were not considered powerhouses among the Paragons, but they were among the most experienced. Their wisdom manifested in perfectly timed cooperation, and they didn't hesitate in the slightest.

The Violet Princess was facing four Paragons. As her options for defense were stripped away all of them came at her, throwing caution to the wind in return for a chance to end her life. Lan Jue and Qianlin's deadly ray was blocking her only route. Suddenly she found herself in a fatal predicament with no option. She had to try and defend against a direct hit from the Harmonious Swords.

The Violet Prince's pupils had contracted to pinpricks. He recognized the danger to his sister's life.

Where before they could have relied on the home worlds to protect them, he knew such succor would not be coming. Monarch had made it clear they were to stop at nothing to get the godblades, everything else was secondary. Even their lives.

With a hideous, bestial roar the Prince released the full might of his Domain around him. Creation and Destruction reigned in the depths of his Domain, a hundred thousand beginnings and endings flashing by in an instant. He focused all of it into a punch and thrust his fist in the direction of the Violet Princess.

His attack came with a cost, for in the moment after shifting his focus Luo Xianni was on him. She took advantage of his distraction to land a blow on his back, and caused him to go reeling far from the Princess' location.

Still his attack was on its way and likely to be effective. An attack of such strength, once it arrived, would tear through the Paragons like paper. At the Princess' cultivation, she only needed a smallest opportunity to escape their trap.

Lan Jue scowled as he and Qianlin raced toward her. However, in order to deceive the enemy that had had to first fly in the direction of the Pharmacist. It would be a few moments before they could join their friends.

All the while the punch from the Prince was tearing through space. Pregnant with the full brunt of his Creation and Destruction discipline it coalesced and collapsed in on itself like a black hole in the midst of tearing itself apart.

The violet light around the Princess flared brightly, and scales appeared along the length of her back. She used them to protect against the Keeper and Bookworm's attack. Her body bowed forward slightly and she raised her arms high, disregarding all the other Paragons and focusing all of her strength on defending against Lan Jue and Qianlin's attack.

She had faith in her brother's strength. The humans she tangled with were capable but in the face of the Prince's full power they could only run

or be destroyed. For the Princess his power would serve to amplify her abilities and neutralize the Harmonious Swords attack.

The Prince's desperate attack was exactly the right call. By the time she warded off the Harmonious Swords the six other alien elite would arrive, and together they would kill all the humans who oppose them.

Her hands were raised and a wicked looking sword had appeared in her grip to help her deflect the blow. But the look on her face was one of fear and surprise.

They weren't running. All four Paragons were ignoring the Prince's attack and keeping her pinned.

Scores of thick vines poured from Aubert de Villain and wrapped her tight. They bristled with thorns that dug into her porcelain flesh and drank her blood. He burned with a ghastly red light, and all the while his vines tugged at her sword arm making it unstable.

Bess had moved in, and ten blood-red, dagger like fingernails were swiping at the Princess. Every strike plunged deep into sensitive pressure points on her body.

Chapter 871: The Pontiff's Epiphany!

Both the Violet Prince and Violet Princess had consumed vast amounts of human genetic material, even adopting the human form, so that they might grasp the potential of the species. So far it had worked very well for them. However, the familiar anatomy came with all the special characteristics of normal humans. Namely, acupuncture points.

The Prince and Princess could use their alien powers to cut off this internal system, but doing so would severely limit the potency of the human form. They would no longer really be human. As such they kept the meridians and acupuncture points intact.

There was an ocean of difference between the powers of the Gods of Wine and the Princess. However, they were still Paragons, old and wise. Both of them together, along with the pressure from the Bookworm and Keeper, made her organs feel like they were on fire. It was a sign the damage was running deep.

It was so intense that two streams of steaming qi seeped from her feet. At some point in the chaotic exchange two hands had appeared around her ankles, gripping tightly to her feet. Grey fires crept up her legs, simultaneously blocking her vessels and draining her vital essence.

The power of the Infernal Vanguard was born from the blood of Hades. Devouring the essence of life was the gift of the Gourmet's inheritance! But his power and those of the aliens was different in that he destroyed the essence of life for rebirth. It was completely opposed to the aliens' abilities of consumption for the purpose of personal amplification. This was the perfect moment for the Gourmet to exploit that difference against the Princess.

Were these humans crazy, she thought. They continued to fight in spite of immanent destruction. Did they hope to simply shrug off the Prince's attack? It would almost certainly mean their death.

She looked at them, three faces full of determination. But more than determination, there was sorrow and admiration.

Three? Where was the fourth?

She looked up, and for the first time there was utter disbelief in the Princess' eyes. She saw that the Violet Prince's attack would not come to save her, for in the midst of its all-consuming destruction was a single figure – a bright silhouette against the darkness.

No, not a figure. A mountain. A golden mountain whose peak was populated with a host of angels chanting in unison. It was the holy mountain, glimmering with the white light of faith. Pure white light spewed from its crest, and from the base rippled a pool of golden splendor.

Reflection of Heaven and Earth!

One figure stood at the highest point of this mountain. It was the Pontiff, clad in his resplendent robes with his scepter held aloft. His face was ablaze with the light of pure faith, and from his mouth poured prayers to the on high. In those deep eyes was profound understanding.

As his life had come near its end the Pontiff had achieved an awakening. At last he understood why he'd been stuck at the cusp of advancement for years. He knew why it was he could never progress.

It was his own heart. The faith within him was not pure. Without pure faith how could he receive God's love? Even with the worship of so many devour followers.

In the face of all his failings, all his shortcoming, the Pontiff placed himself between his allies at the Violet Prince's attack. Despite the knowledge that it would mean his end, he was willing to sacrifice himself. It was then he knew what he was missing.

Satan's mad smile as he died came to mind. If such a creature could face death unflinchingly, why not a man of faith?

It wasn't a decision that set him free, but instead instilled him with a sense of the sublime. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this way, it'd been so many long years since he'd felt such a connection. He felt proud!

For the first time in who knew how long he was proud of himself. Faith had burned away the final obstacle to his advancement, and at last he arose to become a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. The golden mountain burned defiantly as the Prince's black destruction bore down on it. They collided in a magnificent and terrible display of mutual destruction.

The Pontiff smiled contentedly. The truths he'd found crystallized in his mind, imprinted themselves on his soul, and were imparted into his holy scepter. A single beam of light, a gleaming spear of faith amidst the darkness, shot toward Middle Heaven and the Prince's power annihilated itself against the Pontiff. He would die, but in his final moments he imparted his legacy.

Constantine was the bearer of the Spear of Fate, but he was still young. Only Metatron was wise enough to accept the burden of this position. The Pontiff had faith that by virtue of the knowledge within the scepter Metatron would break the poisoned cycle they'd wrought and break through to become the next Paragon of the Citadel.

The Pontiff had spent his life in service to the Citadel. It was fitting that his last moments would be given to ensure its survival.

Just before the end the Pontiff closed his eyes. His heart was filled with a quiet joy. Death took him, and he went serenely.

If you are waiting for me in another world, Satan, then be ready to greet me.

The light of the Harmonious Swords collapsed upon the Princess just as the Pontiff drew his final breath. He's given his life for this moment.

Boom—The weapon separating the Princess from the light shattered instantly. Cracks turned her skin to broken glass. Golden-purple energy shot from the fissures, concentrated rays of ruin that fired out toward the Paragons that entrapped her.

A toxic cloud of purple bellowed from between her pretty lips. Her gorgeous features were broken and twisted, more hellspawn than human. Right away the Paragons could tell their coordinated effort had really hit the mark.

The creeping hand of death was crawling up her spine. She needed to flee, she was desperate to escape. Monarch's orders were forgotten as she fought for her life – a reaction all living creatures shared.

She struggled to get free but before she could another ray of light hit her. This one gleamed with a righteous, murderous white. The Harmonious Swords weren't the only danger, as the Pharmacist proved.

Lan Jue feint had scattered the three she was fighting against. Now she was free to lend a hand and focused her Reflection powers through Occisus. The blade hummed with additional power from Captus and Demortus.

The Pharmacist hated these beasts. These monsters stole her husband from her in his prime. They were responsible for her daughter's damaged eyes. That hate, and rage, and bloodlust crystallized within Occisus and she brought all of it to bear against the Princess.

The captured Princess could only lift her arms to protect herself.

Clang! A monster such as she would not so easily be brought down. The Princess was a reservoir of power far greater than any of theirs, and even Occisus couldn't break her defense. But it did cut halfway through her lifted arms.

If only Ultus was with them. The keenest of the Banishing Blades would easily cut through the Princess' empowered flesh. Without the fourth sword overcoming her defenses was a mighty undertaking.

And they did it anyway.

There was a flash of black and white before her eyes when suddenly the Princess discovered half her body had gone ashen grey. She watched in horror as pieces of her began to disintegrate.

Magnificent as she was she could not completely protect herself. Every last ounce of power she focused on keeping her core from ruin. Yet the skin on half her body was gone, revealing the sickness beneath.

Onlookers where shocked to see what lay below the Princess' beautiful façade. All of her was made of worms, writhing and working to keep the

meat sack moving [1. ED: Didn't they just say they kept the humans' internal structure?! Guess not...].

One by one the maggots were destroyed by the Pharmacist's sustained attack. The Princess' life force was draining at a swift pace. The alien royalty couldn't believe it, she had come to think there was almost nothing that could stand in her way. Nothing in the universe could harm her, especially not the humans.

Two figures appeared above her. Their two swords pointed with perfect synchronicity and another kaleidoscope of light burst forth. She raged and bucked, desperate to force her way out. Geysers of golden power burst from within her.

But Lan Jue would not allow it.

"Bonds of Devotion!"

This expression of their Harmonious Swords was not a single unbroken beam. Instead it was threads of power formed into the shape of a net. They swallowed up the golden-purple light beaming from her.

Each ray that was cast from the Princess was a single maggot in the throes of death. They were atomized the moment they touched the net. Little by little the Violet Princess was being consumed.

The Pharmacist recovered after being deflected. She came again blade first, reaching out with her barbarity. Her Slaughter Discipline encased the Princess and cut her off from any hope of escape. Spears of white light slipped through the holes of Lan Jue's net and proceeded to cut her enemy to pieces.

Chapter 872: Death and the Princess

By now the three Nirvana-level aliens scared away by Lan Jue's attack had realized they were not his target. The Princess' subordinates hurried back but were barred from helping her by the Bookworm, Keeper, the Gods of Wine, and the Gourmet.

Lan Jue had decided on his first target moments after coming back to his senses. With Qianlin's help, he knew that they could kill at least one Nirvana-level monster. But was that enough to alter the outcome of this battle? He didn't think so.

The combined power of the four Infinite-level aliens was beyond their abilities. What's more, they were wise, informed, and by some means were able to protect themselves from the dangers of universal protogenia. While Lan Jue's own side was not weak, they certainly didn't have enough peak-level powerhouses to contend with their foes. Once they ran out of stamina more of them would die, then the battle would be lost.

So, in order to change this grim fate he had to kill one of their strongest. If he could create a space for his allies to take advantage of, they could fight back.

He chose the Princess. What he had not anticipated was the Pontiff's noble sacrifice.

When the Violet Prince shed Luo Xianni's pressure and came to the Princess' aid, Lan Jue thought the best they'd manage was to injure her severely. Worse, there was the potential for harming his own people who might get caught in the path of the Harmonious Swords. Instead the man Lan Jue had come to deeply despise, whose dark heart had plagued Lan Jue for years, chose the righteous path. He gave his life, the thing Lan Jue knew was most precious to the covetous old man.

For the first time he had a sense of admiration toward the Pontiff. His final act helped to wash away the many sins he'd committed through his life. In doing so the late Citadel ruler ensured his organization could rise from the ashes left behind by the alien attack.

The Violet Princess' body gradually burned away. The Prince fought like a wild animal, trying to come to her aid. However, Luo Xianni fought back just as hard to keep him pinned down. He was forced to watch as his sister was slowly annihilated by the combined power of three Banishing Blades.

Lan Jue didn't dare let up, for he knew how tenacious the life of an Infinite was. These monsters grew to prominence through the consumption of outside life force. He knew that given even the slightest chance the Princess could claw her way back from death.

He had to keep it up. He had to continue to barrage the Princess with his full power until she was erased from reality.

As layers of the Princess were destroyed a translucent crystal appeared. It was perfectly formed and shimmered with a golden purple light. Little by little the octagonal crystal was revealed nestled in the muscle of her chest.

With no flesh to hide it, brilliant light radiated from the Princess' core. Even the light of the three swords couldn't cover it. But once the vital crystal was burned from the monster's body the rest of the Princess exploded into a mess of flesh. This detritus, that had been the nightmare of humanity for years, was incinerated by the light of the Harmonious Swords.

But the crystal seemed to have a mind of its own. The glittering gem propelled itself with appalling speed at the net closing in around it. It struck with such force that it broke through and started back toward the alien home worlds.

It was trying to flee! Lan Jue and the others did not slacken their assault but it still did not seem to be enough. What was left of the Violet Princess took the opportunity.

Everyone knew that these crystals were the essence of the monsters. Destroying the Princess' body had been a victory, but without her crystal there would remake her, and she would return to terrorize mankind.

But Lan Jue was prepared. The two of them had tangled many times, this was just the chance he'd been waiting for.

Thump! The crystal stopped dead in its desperate escape, like it'd been caught in a trap. Another net, this one blue. A figure appeared hovering nearby – none other than Hua Li.

He'd arrived on the scene a short time before. The moment combat broke out in Middle Heaven he'd started back, only to discover they were teleported outside of the armada. When he finally reached his friends he saw Lan Jue make his move and decided to wait and see where he would be needed.

In a flash Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin were by Hua Li's side. He said nothing, bringing his hand down upon Hua Li's net of power. Instantly the Princess' crystal was encased in a shell of Lan Jue's Domain. Captured in Boundless Starlight, the flash of the five thunders rumbled ominously.

Pure empyrean lightning, All-Heaven Lightning, and Primordial lightning blasted the crystal with alternating strikes. Eventually the crystal stopped, and struggled no more. There was a twinkle of light and the inert crystal appeared in Lan Jue's hand.

The Violet Princess had fallen!

At last the incredibly powerful monster had been defeated, though it was but one of their elite. However it was one of only two that possessed a true inheritance from the home worlds themselves. Monarch's remaining offspring, the Violet Prince, was shocked by what he saw. But it lasted only a moment, for now his reinforcements had arrived.

The Pharmacist did not pause to celebrate their victory over the Violet Princess. Once the threat was neutralized she turned around and returned to face the three alien elite that had entangled her before. Before the Keeper and Bookworm had struggled to keep the situation from spiraling out of control, but with the Pharmacist they managed to stabilize their section of the battlefield.

Under Lan Jue's direction Hua Li went to join the Driver. Lan Jue's lightning-bearing friend, together with the Epochrion and Pauper, were facing an uphill battle. However the Wine Master had also come to their aid after the teleportation was complete. Altogether they were managing

to keep the Infinite-level beast they faced from wreaking havoc. Now with Hua Li's help their situation was even better – maybe even equal to their foe.

The rest was left up to Lan Jue and Qianlin. Together they would have to face the encroaching six aliens and protect their allies. Lan Jue's eyes flashed with a clear and resolute light. Both sides had suffered, with the aliens losing the Princess and the Pontiff destroyed by the Prince. Humanity's losses were worse, however, with the death of Xiuxiu.

It was far past time to exact vengeance on these beasts.

Once again Lan Jue released his Boundless Starlight and in response the light of distance stars shone brightly upon them. In contrast to before, though, this time the light of the stars covered a much larger area.

The incoming alien reinforcements were immediately swallowed up. Lan Jue and Qianlin followed up by releasing a prismatic spray from their Harmonious Swords to black their path forward.

At the same time Qianlin was stretching to spread the warmth of her Queen of Light Discipline ever farther. Primarily it had to reach Luo Xianni, so that she could use her full strength without fear of universal protogenia.

Lan Jue's expression was as deep and inscrutable as the sea. He was cold, calculating, collected, and the calmer he was the most dangerous he became. The power summoned through him and Qianlin, channeled through their swords, stopped the aliens dead in their tracks. But it did not stop them from reacting.

Humanity wasn't alone in adapting to the situation!

The six avatars of Monarch, Queen and Consort linked hands and created a circle. Together they released their Creation and Destruction Discipline and allowed it to spread its chaos. Meanwhile their bodies also began to change.

Threads of purple light appeared between them and twined together. Quickly the light coalesced into a shape, a figure that swallowed up the

rich aura of strength seeping from all the avatars around it.

Was there no end to what these beasts could do? Lan Jue was almost at a loss, for as he watched these six beasts combined into one. The three-headed, six-armed horror's central head took the shape of Monarch's 'human' features. On either side were Queen and Consort.

A nightmarish amalgamation of the three – a sort of humanoid hydra!

Once they combined into a single form, the strength of the new creation's aura surged. All of a sudden it was stronger than the fallen Princess, even stronger than the Prince. It even seemed to surpass the mighty avatar Lan Jue had fought in the depths of Monarch.

"Humans, your species is destined for destruction. It is foolish to think you can resist your fate. Give in to the inevitable and we will grant you immortality." The middle head, Monarch's, spoke to them.

Lan Jue didn't bother to reply. In lieu of words he thrust forward with Captus and released a stream of focused flow in its direction. Qianlin imitated and released her thousand blades as one style to join with Lan Jue's, and together they melded into the versicolored ray of the Harmonious Swords. Together they wielded power as though they commanded the Infinite.

Lights flashed around all of the monster's six arms. Weapons appeared in each one; knife, gun, sword, halberd, axe and spear.

Monarch's arms bore the knife and sword. As Lan Jue and Qianlin's attack came bearing down on it the aura of power surged.

All at once all six weapons were employed, producing six beams of golden-purple light that combined into one. The two columns of energy crashed into one another.

Boom- - -! The Boundless Starlight shell they fought in shuddered from the impact. Qianlin and Lan Jue felt a wall of force strike them so hard it knocked them back.

Chapter 873: Fire With Fire

Such a powerful aura! Such powerful protogenia! Once the six avatars joined it wasn't so simple as adding up the sum of their parts. This new creature was several orders of magnitude stronger.

This was undoubtedly a stalwart and deadly foe.

Once more they were faced with a stalemate. Lan Jue blanched to think that if the Princess were still alive they would be doomed. He and Qianlin fought back against this new monster, empowered by the Harmonious Swords and the Boundless Starlight Domain that surrounded them.

Pandemonium prevailed. Neither side could find an advantage yet. On the face of it humanity had the numbers, but each alien attacker was more than their match on an individual level. Whether numbers or strength would prevail, was as yet impossible to determine.

Chu Cheng arrived on the scene a short time after Hua Li. He came to the Terminator's aid and helped equalize their footing.

ξ

Middle Heaven.

A strange sphere had been carved out of part of the bastion's bridge. It was what was left after the Photographer teleported the enemy into space, a prompt decision that saved the ship from destruction.

The Prince and his monsters were after the swords, but they would not have given up an opportunity to destroy Middle Heaven. This ship, more than any other, was responsible for the deaths of countless alien warriors. Destroying it would make their battle against the humans far easier.

Flows of energy wafted around a room at the edge of the damaged section. Lan Qing knelt therein, surrounded by a turquoise light.

Li Ke had begun the process of transferring control of Ultus the moment they left the others. It was a ceremony of acceptance – first, of Lan Qing as the sword's master, then for himself as the spirit of the weapon. In this way he would remain, his soul a part of the weapon so long as Lan Qing

wielded it.

In a way, he had to be the one to accept Lan Qing. But the process was not going smoothly.

Lan Qing's qualifications were solid. He was strong, and his inheritance was a vestige of the old world. However, the root of his powers rested in Buddhism. The Banishing Blades were the tools of Daoist masters, and the benevolence inherent in Vairochana's legacy did not meld well with Ultus' keen and cutting nature.

Lan Qing sat cross-legged on the floor with hands folded before him. Resting in the center of his core was the figure of a miniature Buddha, none other than Vairochana. Ultus hovered in the air across from the admiral.

Some part of the Buddha was rejecting Ultus, nor was the power of Ultus respectful of the legacy it was faced against. As one of the greatest weapons in the Daoist arsenal, one could imagine the arrogance a Banishing Blade might possess.

Even after years as the weapon's master, Li Ke never truly earned the weapon's acceptance. The reason was simple – he was never strong enough. Lan Qing did not face that problem, and instead it became a difference of ideals.

Buddhism also required the protection of its dharma! Lan Qing meditated on this as he looked past Ultus' bloodthirst, past its cutting aura. But the blade struggled for it would accept the light of Vairochana. Neither side gave ground.

If Lan Qing had not already been a Paragon perhaps the process would have been easier. After all, he had not accepted the lineage of Vairochana until after his breakthrough. Yet it was lucky that he was already so strong, for the dangers of the sword were minimal to a Paragon.

All he needed was time to resolve their differences. After all, he just inherited the Buddha's legacy, he wasn't Vairochana himself.

Back in the days when Celestial Master Tongtian was bearer of the

swords he was captured by Dipankara Buddha. Ever since the Banishing Blades – and especially Ultus – were suspicious of Buddhist faith.

Lan Qing and the will of the sword continued to clash, working through their differences.

Li Ke stood to the side. His body ebbed and flowed with the energies that Ultus output, and anxiety was writ on his ghostly face. If this failed and Lan Qing was not accepted by Ultus, then his soul would be expelled. He would die a final death, and the seal that sustained him would burn away.

He had thought, while searching among the Paragons, that Lan Qing would be suitable. He hadn't expected to encounter this problem. No matter how rushed or how desperate he was, though, he had to give them time. All that could be done was wait for Lan Qing to be accepted.

The minutes ticked by, and inch by inch the golden light from within him stretched out. Whatever conflict constricted his essence loosened its grip. Part of the test to become the master of Ultus was to suffer its essence. For what master could wield a weapon he could not control? Lan Qing began to understand the weapon the longer he struggled against it.

The Eastern admiral was aware of the sneak attack by the aliens even though he couldn't help. He felt the danger but continued to meditate because he knew rushing would solve nothing. Breaking off this process before it was complete could result in a backlash from Ultus that could threaten his life. It would at least injure him severely. Only once he had joined with Ultus and was accepted as its new master could he lend his strength to the fight.

So he focused all of his keen mind and willing spirit on becoming the next bearer of Ultus.

Lan Qing was not only wise but persistent, even stubborn. Tendrils of light reached out around him, crystalline cyan streamers of luminescence that seeped from his every pore. They were met with an equal number of threads from Ultus.

Once he saw this Li Ke finally heaved a sigh of relief. The Banishing Blade was beginning to compromise.

Eventually Ultus discovered it could not dissuade Lan Qing of his truth, and it's only option was to submit. It was a weapon of the gods and had the pride to prove it but even so the sword was possessed of only a rudimentary will. It may not agree with Lan Qing's lineage, but it needed a strong arm to wield it.

Li Ke wondered whether this mighty weapon and Lan Qing coming together wasn't the best of both worlds. Perhaps the peace of Buddhist faith could allay the dangers of Ultus' sharpness.

When Li Ke came to possess the sword he was already lauded as a once-in-a-generation Talent. He did not take precautions, accepted risks in order to gain quick success. How was Ultus any different? As he took and overcome these risks again and again, an abiding arrogance grew in his heart. His shortcuts were eventually his undoing.

He looked at Lan Qing, seated stoically like a bodhisattva. He knew, however, that the admiral's body was enduring a world of suffering just below the surface.

The elder Lan had been caught in the chaos of war since breaking through to Paragon. He'd wracked his brain every day and night, using everything at his disposal to combat destruction at the hands of the aliens. He'd been blessed with a string of shining successes. Using only three bastions and twelve fleets he'd continued to punish the vastly superior enemy force. At every step he'd been pitted against a foe just as smart as he who had a sordid history of outmaneuvering human leaders.

It was to be expected that the speed of his cultivation would be affected by his change in focus. Since breaking through he'd stayed more or less the same, a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. He hadn't even had time to deeply explore the truths of his protogenia.

Lan Qing felt the power of Ultus enter him like a hundred thousand daggers. It was a universe of agony that assailed him body and mind, testing his will. Lan Qing resisted by sitting quietly in the light of Vairochana.

But the mightiest weapon under heaven was not so easily repelled.

Ultus' deadly power was focused not on Lan Qing's body, but his very soul. He felt every excruciating incision carving him apart as Ultus continued to fill him with its power.

Lan Qing grit his teeth and bore it. At the same time he focused his beleaguered mind on the sword's secrets.

What he discovered was that the sword did not disagree with him. On the contrary, it was Lan Qing who could not accept the method Ultus chose to join their minds. Domination, not submission... Ultus was trying to control him.

If Lan Qing had not been a Paragon he would not have sensed it, the feeling was faint and ambiguous. He realized Li Ke must have experienced this, and was influenced by the creeping authority of the sword.

Lan Jue, Zhou Qianlin and the Pharmacist had not faced this trial when joining with their swords. This struggle was unique to Ultus. Submit? Lan Qing would not allow it!

Giving in was not part of the admiral's nature. How could he give in to a tool? He knew that once he conceded to the will of the sword his spirit would begin to come under its rule. He would not have the means or right to summon Ultus' true power.

So he endured, despite the pain. No matter how cruel or vicious Ultus' attack on his soul he had to persevere. With Vairochana firmly set in the center of his Core, armed with his knowledge of protogenia, guided by the Buddhas of the Three Times, he did not retreat. He experienced, he understood, and he adapted.

Chapter 874: Joining With the Sword

If Li Ke was still master of the sword Lan Qing would be unable to break his connection and fuse with Ultus. However, with only the sword's own will to contend against dominating it would be much easier. As resistance waned Lan Qing took in the tendrils of power from Ultus into himself where it began to join with the light around Vairochana.

The nimbus of orange light surrounding the Buddha took on a turquoise hue. Ultimately it was Lan Qing's wind-element Discipline that connected him with fully with the sword. It was impossible to force Ultus to accept Vairochana entirely, instead he found common ground through wind.

Lan Qing was surprised by the result.

When it was time to break through to Paragon, Lan Qing forsook his natural Talent and took on the inheritance of Vairochana with his father's guidance. His wind Discipline remained, but separate from the new powers of the Buddhist lineage. Upon rising to a Reflection he wanted to find a way to join the two and thus improve his protogenic potency. In doing so he would pave the way toward Nirvana. Only, he hadn't had the time.

Instead by happy circumstance his forced delay ultimately facilitated his success in combining with Ultus. As it was without bias Lan Qing's wind powers served as a bridge between his protogenia and the godblade.

A pale corona of light flickered around him, and a small smile touched Lan Qing's lips. His hands slowly curled into the dharma mudra seal and mystical sigils appeared in his palm. As the turquoise light gradually withdrew a halo of orange encircled Lan Qing's head. Vairochana's radiance shined all around him.

Was it over? Li Ke's eyes glimmered. As he watched Lan Qing opened his mouth and a beam of turquoise light burst forth. It was Ultus.

The sword's light was the same, but for the fact that it seemed somehow softer. This was because any trace of its keen nature had been removed.

Now was Li Ke's time. The spirit began to meditate and all of his experience, his will, dissolved into a beam of light that melded with that of Ultus.

The process was smoother than he'd thought it might be. While soothing chants hung in the air Li Ke allowed himself to become one with the godblade. The power of the sword stabilized his ebbing spirit.

He'd prepared himself to suffer the bite of Ultus through this process. It was certain, Li Ke thought, that he would suffer injuries from the sword's cutting essence that he might not recover from. Yet now that the time was upon him he was surprised to find his fears were for naught. None of the danger or pain he'd prepared for was present. He became the spirit of the sword without incident.

Lan Qing opened his eyes, and a faint flickering of turquoise light appeared and vanished within his orange halo. A wonderful sensation drew his attention to the sword, still before him.

He smiled. Ultus, first of the Banishing Blades – the greatest weapon of the gods!

Godblade was a worthy name. Even the faintest vestiges of its will was almost more than he could accept.

He opened his mouth and the sword, dissolving into a beam of light, vanished within. Immediately the light of his halo intensified. A moment later he was a streak of light flying into the distance.

ξ

On the outskirts of the armada, the battle between man and monster raged on.

The fight between the Violet Prince and the Photographer was evenly matched and they traded blows that shook the heavens. Had Luo Xianni been given more time to find the essence of her Infinite powers the fight would have been easier, for humanity's potency was always more than what these aliens could achieve. But she was still freshly arisen, and unfamiliar with the nuances the Infinite contained. Were Jue Di alive the

situation would have been very different. As it was the humans were beginning to lose steam.

Luo Xianni was managing to hold her own, but the others were flagging. Faced off against other Infinite-level monstrosities the Paragons were at an increasingly dangerous disadvantage. The Violet Princess was dead and the Prince was busy, but that left two peak-strength enemies still to deal with. They were the avatars of Monarch and Queen.

Terminator and Chu Cheng were a team, facing the might of Queen's avatar. Relying on his staggering strength, Terminator had so far been able to withstand Queen's devastating attacks. She lashed at the two of them with tendrils of purple light more cutting than any sword save Ultus. Mighty as the Terminator's defenses were his body was still soaked from the blood of several dozen wounds. None threatened his life, but they'd begun to take a toll on his abilities.

The Terminator had suffered some trauma before Chu Cheng arrived. Although he helped to take some of the focus off the Conclave's leader, Chu Cheng was only a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. Against an enemy as puissant as the Queen there was little he could do. The Terminator had to shield Chu Cheng from the avatar's attacks otherwise a single successful hit might end him.

With time Terminator was forced to expend more energy, and Chu Cheng's stamina was also quickly being spent. As the pressure mounted both men knew a single misstep could mean their lives.

Things were somewhat less bleak in the fight against Monarch's avatar. The Wine Master and Epochrion were bringing the full might of space-time to bear against the terrifying alien. The Pauper and Driver backed them up. The Driver's Primordial lightning was particularly effective in containing the avatar and was most lethal. So long as these Paragons continued to fight in unison they could defend themselves.

However the might of a creature of the Infinite was the stuff of legends. It crushed the waves of space-time protogenia as they came and shrugged off its debilitating effects. Each time the avatar fought back the four

Paragons had to struggle mightily to respond.

Most importantly, the Wine Master and Epochrion were battling against someone several classes above them. They were managing to contain some measure of the avatar's Infinite powers but it cost them greatly. Eventually they would tire.

Luckily the Driver's cultivation was also nearly Reflection-level. Even without a breakthrough his Primordial Lightning was a threat to the monster and gave them an edge. Still, it was clear the only way they could hope to survive was to finish the fight quickly. Each passing minute inched their chances closer to zero.

This engagement teetered on a razor's edge. If one side should fall all the rest would follow. This was especially true for the humans.

Things were no better for Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin. Hand in hand they wielded the power of the Harmonious Blades masterfully, but the monster they faced was the strongest of them all. Once the avatars combined into this three headed, six armed abomination its power surpassed even the Infinite. Jue Di in his prime would have struggled.

Lan Jue and Qianlin fought with all of their strength. So far they were able to distract the creature. And indeed distract was their purpose. Captured within Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight the hydra couldn't influence the other fights, but that was all they could hope to achieve. Any attempt to kill the beast was futile, especially after expending so much energy in killing the Princess.

Fear began to worm its way into Lan Jue's mind. If they were forced to continue the fight like this the only outcome would be defeat. If any flank collapsed everything would be lost.

The greatest hopes were placed on the Pharmacist, who faced the best odds. She was battling three Nirvana-level creatures and had the Gods of Wine, the Keeper, and the Bookworm to aid her. But Lan Jue quickly found they had nowhere to go, for the simple reason that they were too tired. Some of them had taken injuries, in particular the Gods of Wine and the Gourmet. They'd pushed themselves to their limit in fighting the Violet

Princess. She was now dead but their strength had quickly fallen off. Hua Li was fresh, but unfortunately was weaker in cultivation.

As a result most of the responsibility for the fight fell on the Pharmacist's shoulders. While the fight looks like seven on three, it was hardly as easy as the math might suggest.

What's more the Pharmacist had just experienced a deeply emotional event, one which was still affecting her. Her Slaughter Domain was deadly, but only empowered her if she took life. Thus far she'd only managed to kill one. Strong as the Princess was a single victory didn't catalyze the full might of the Pharmacist's Domain. So it was that her battle was the only one that could put pressure on the enemy, but killing them seemed unlikely.

What could they do? Unless something drastic changed they were on losing footing.

A voice rang in Lan Jue's ear. "Lan Jue, if things start to come apart you take Qianlin and the Pharmacist and return to the bastion. Its defenses should keep you safe. I know a way that will take me out and this bastard with me – or at least seriously wound it."

Lan Jue felt his heart skip a beat. The plan was delivered calmly, but he could hear the solemn sadness in it.

Terminator! The Northern leader couldn't hold out any more. He had one chance to go out together with his foe. If he waited any longer he couldn't have the energy remaining to do it.

Chapter 875: The Terminator's Undead Sorcery

The Terminator knew it'd come to the end, he'd prepared for it. If he hesitated any longer it would be too late. At least he wouldn't let his failure become the end for his allies. He could die proud of that fact.

"Your Majesty, wait a moment." Lan Jue pleaded.

From the outbreak of war they'd lost Satan, Xiuxiu, and most recently the Pontiff. There were so few of them left. If the Terminator... The realization was like a dagger to the heart, but he couldn't think of a good excuse to give the Paragon.

"Take care of Chu Cheng, he is the North's last hope. If you defeat the aliens, help him do what he must." The Terminator's voice was calm, with little emotion. It was Lan Jue who felt his heart sink with these final wishes.

He couldn't summon the words to ask him to stop. Now was the time for action, or the chance to make the Terminator's death mean something would pass.

The Conclave's leader took a deep breath. Suddenly his body surged, and a crackling light like electricity radiated from his dark gold skin. The strange and unexpected scene caused the Queen's avatar to shiver. She flicked her wrist and the threads of purple light she wielded gathered together to protect her. Chu Cheng's attacks could not get through, and she hoped it would be the same for whatever Terminator was planning.

Golden light shone from the convert's eyes. All of a sudden his aura burst out like a torrent and a burning shell of golden light sprang up. In horror they watched as his protogenia consumed him. The Terminator was his own Domain, and as it turned in on him his skin and muscles melted away. In the same moment the bones beneath grew, and in a few short breaths the Terminator had become an enormous golden skeleton.

"This is..." The Keeper, so wise and learned, gasped when he saw what

was happening. He vaguely remembered seeing something like this in an ancient text.

“Undead Sorcery!” The Bookworm blurted out, completing the Keeper’s thought.

Yes, undeath! The Keeper recalled learning about it. But to his knowledge it was an ancient Discipline from the West. They were called Necromancer, and their goal was to understand life through death. When a Necromancer reached the end of their natural lifespan they sought to become undead, and thus live forever to continue their dark studies.

A necromancer might also choose undeath if, in the course of their experiments, they suffered grave injuries. The process was irreversible, and the moment the Necromancer shed their body they were no longer human. They belonged to the ranks of the dead.

But in all his research the Keeper had never heard of someone becoming undead in the middle of a fight – much less seen it.

Relying on what he could sense the Keeper realized the Terminator was filtering all the energy of his body into his skeleton. It made the Terminator stronger, though beyond that the old researcher couldn’t tell how else it affected him. It went without saying this process made the Terminator a terrifying force on the battlefield. He now commanded the power of the Infinite.

Boom--! With one punch the shield Queen had created broke apart into a thousand pieces. The Terminator’s eyes were the only flesh of his to remain, and in their depths burned the indomitable force of his soul. He reached forth with his bony hands to try and snatch up the avatar, and where they passed great fissures appeared in the fabric of space-time.

The Terminator also kicked a foot, but this was aimed at Chu Cheng. He knocked the young Paragon away from him and toward where the Pharmacist was fighting.

Queen’s avatar whipped the threads of purple to create another barrier. She channeled her Creation and Destruction Domain around her in total defense.

But to her shock and horror, the Terminator's bony hands suffered nothing when they reached into her Domain. Neither the powers of creation nor destruction seemed to apply to this golden skeleton on any level.

Boom! Queen was flung away with the force of the punch leaving behind a caustic purple mist. He'd wounded her badly. However the Terminator also paused. He couldn't maintain this unnatural form for long.

"AGGHH!!" The North's ultimate Paragon, leader of the Great Conclave, heaved with a roar that threatened to deafen everyone nearby. Once more his skeletal form blazed with golden light and became a thousand ghostly copies. All at once they swarmed Queen, cutting off any means of escape.

No one could have guessed the Terminator possessed such a ghastly and potent ability, not the aliens nor the other humans. It was a skill that would cost the man his life, but might also turn the tide of battle. The Queen's avatar was currently lost beneath the myriad copies of Terminator assailing her.

Lan Jue was the only one who could sense that the Terminator's life force was gone. It was the power of his spirit that sustained him, but only for this final onslaught.

If it could be said that the Pontiff's sacrifice galvanized their fighting spirit, the Terminator's downfall set their blood to boiling. The Keeper and Bookworm exchanged a silent look, and each saw the determination in the other's eyes. The Avenue's old scientist extended his right hand, and the Bookworm took it with his left.

"You old queer, what are you grabbing my hand for?!" [2. Queer seemed the least offensive. In China the term for homosexual is 'glass people' – I'm not sure why.] His words were harsh, but he gripped his friend's hand tightly.

Their bodies began to shine brightly – a clear and brilliant light like the sun shining through crystal.

Humanity couldn't be allowed to lose this fight. If they did all of mankind would be lost. If the Terminator was willing to kill himself to

slaughter his enemies, the other Paragons were unfaltering in their will to do the same.

ξ

“We ourselves are an ultimate weapon. I must admit, it feels good.” The Bookworm mused.

The Keeper chortled. “What’s this ‘we’, eh? I. You can’t do the sort of damage I can if you turn yourself into a weapon.”

The Bookworm’s famous temper flared. “You old coot. What’s the point in being so competitive at your age. I’ve already made up my mind, either we succeed or I’m going down fighting. I’ve lived long enough, I’ve experienced all I want to. To be as old as us and not die in stealing from the young! What say you to that?”

The Keeper proudly answered. “I hope it does come to this, then we’ll see who dies in front of whom, eh?!”

Scornfully the Bookworm spat back. “How can you be such a coward? So afraid of death!”

He replied with a chilly laugh. “Fear of death, laughable. The youth of Skyfire Avenue have grown wise and strong. When the old hands like me die they’ll be around to support what we’ve built. Dying to give them an opportunity is a worthy cause. I just want to make sure I take at least a couple of those bastard aliens with me.”

The Bookworm waggled his hands together in front of the Keeper’s face, held together like a turtle. “Well the first one to chicken out is one of these!” [3. If you call someone a turtle it’s sort of like ‘bastard’, but used more specifically it can mean cuckold – ones wife is cheating on him. I guess ‘cuck’ is the modern Western equivalent, though I feel gross just writing it since it’s used largely by e-peen waving trolls and morons.]

ξ

“No!” Lan Jue screamed at them to stop but couldn’t free himself from his own fight.

The Keeper shot his young friend a look, paired with a haughty smirk. With a brazen wave of goodbye he took a step forward. Both he and the Bookworm were suddenly positioned above their section of the battlefield.

The three Nirvana-levels aliens they fought against had begun to win. However they stopped their attack in surprise once the two elder scientists appeared overhead. They had seen what was happening to the Queen's avatar. Evidently these humans were capable of mad feats of destruction when on the brink of death, and it frightened them.

But these avatars were different from the Prince and Princess. They were copies of Monarch, Queen and Consort who demanded those Banishing Blades captured. They would not flee, not when their mission went unfulfilled.

Their Creation and Destruction Domain flared and swallowed up a portion of the space around them. They launched forward full bore, attacking the Pharmacist and her allies with abandon.

The eyes of every Avenue Paragon were wet. The Keeper and Bookworm were old, but no one could replace what they meant to Skyfire and the East as a whole. They were the top minds of their Alliance, who had given selflessly and enormously to all mankind. Insights into Middle Heaven's molinite core were due to them. There was a long time they didn't work together, but that didn't mean either ever ceased working to uncover the secrets of the universe.

Now war had come to claim them, and no one could stop it.

The two mad scientists cackled as they embraced, despite a lifetime of bitter rivalry. The white light around them rose until it was too intense to look upon.

Two white dots appeared within two of the monsters below. The aliens felt themselves go numb, when suddenly a staggering sense of danger overwhelmed their senses. IT was so frightening they felt the urge to flee despite Monarch's directive.

But the Pharmacist and other would not allow it. Thousands of copies of Occisus appeared in the space around them, coming in on all sides and

preventing the aliens from going anywhere.

Chapter 876: Lan Qing Arrives!

“Unacceptable!” A rich and commanding voice boomed around them, and a golden light shone down from on high to encase the Keeper and Bookworm.

The two old men had primed all the remaining energy in their body. Through some means they’d targeted two of the enemy and were preparing a blast that’d erase their foes from existence. Yet when the golden light enveloped them they felt a sense of warmth and comfort and the raging tide of energy within them eased. The powers of both men returned harmlessly to their respective Cores.

“Leave them to me!” A figure raced passed the two stunned old researchers. A golden-turquoise light sparkled in their eyes as they watched a wondrous Buddha appear from nowhere seated in the midst of the fighting.

“Great Spiritual Mantra!” The guttural chant rang out like a bell, and everything seemed to calm. All of the pain, anger and disquiet in the hearts of the Paragons was assuaged, and stopped the alien monsters in their tracks.

An enormous blue, green and gold hand came crashing down from above to strike at the central avatar attacking the Pharmacist. It lifted its arms to try and ward it off.

Boom--! The figure that had come with the Buddha’s hand was knocked back. But the alien did not come away unscathed. A flicker of turquoise light burns in its palm before, suddenly, the beast’s whole arm cracked down the middle.

Excitement glinted in the Pharmacist’s eyes. She’d been waiting for this opportunity, and reacted by lashing out with Occisus. Guided by the turquoise light the copies of her sword wrapped together, became a single cohesive beam of energy and struck!

Thump! A pair of deep gashes appeared on the avatar’s shoulder, and a murderous aura ripped through it. Screaming in pain, the monster was

blasted away.

Suddenly three enemies became two, and the remaining Paragons redoubled their attacks. What's more, the Keeper and Bookworm had put a deep fear in them after nearly detonating themselves to achieve victory.

The figure that had so suddenly arrived returned to the two old men. Lan Qing regarded them both.

He looked at each and gave them a nod of respect. Without saying a word he was off, descending to help the Pharmacist. At some point a shimmering blade had appeared in his hand. Ultus, the greatest weapon of the gods!

Lan Qing's sudden arrival caused the humans' morality to soar. In the distance the Terminator's final strike was about to land.

The myriad golden skeletons eventually melded back into one and the Terminator's form reappeared in its entirety. Queen's avatar also reappeared, only not as she had been. Her upper half was securely caught in the Terminator's bony maw. Her lower half floated through space in several pieces.

The golden light in the skeleton's eyes had begun to dim. His mission accomplished, he raced off toward Chu Cheng.

"Your Majesty!" Chu Cheng cried out and rushed forward to meet the light. By the time they reached each other the Terminator had gone from the size of a starship to no larger than a hand. Chu Cheng caught him instinctively, now only a skull. The light in its eyes had gone out, but clenched tight in its bony jaws was a twinkling gemstone. The avatar's vital crystal.

The Terminator had put every ounce of his body and soul toward destroying that monster. He succeeded, but all that remained were his inert remains. Just as the Keeper and Bookworm had come to terms with dying, he'd prepared for this eventuality. Few knew that the Terminator was more than just the strongest Northern Adept, but also its foremost scientist. He'd done all his research under an assumed name to keep the secret. No one was more proficient in the art of conversion than he.

After achieving Nirvana the Terminator underwent a series of physical upgrades. He happily used the new powers available to him in order to improve upon his construction. Of course as his cultivation grew so did his abilities.

The Terminator's final secret was one even Lan Jue was surprised to discover. The energy that had come from that golden skeleton was nothing short of stupefying. In reality the Terminator hadn't even developed it for use against the aliens. The home worlds hadn't even appeared when he had it installed.

At the time Skyfire Avenue's Adept superiority had begun to be revealed. He needed an answer, especially since the North had a history of harassing the East. What would happen if war should break out, he thought? What if he were to face the strongest of Skyfire Avenue, or even Jue Di? This awful but effective result was what he came up with.

But the state of the universe had changed dramatically since then. In the end his secret weapon was turned against the enemies of mankind and not his fellows, though his mind was ever on the North and the Conclave he commanded. His skeletal form was a sort of god weapon, strange and unique, which was then bequeathed to Chu Cheng along with an Infinite-level vital crystal. The Terminator's final message was clear. Protect the Great Conclave!

Another of the might Infinite-level aliens had fallen. As a result, things began to change rapidly on the field. Lan Qing's arrival was the final straw to tip the balance in humanity's favor.

Had the Terminator not used his life to earn them an advantage the Queen's avatar would have been Lan Qing's first target. Even then, there was no guarantee that they would have been able to take the alien down. The other flanks would still have been in danger of succumbing. But with one of their top warriors dead, the balance of power shifted.

Xiuxiu. The Pontiff. The Terminator. Mankind had suffered terribly from this sneak attack. But the aliens had also lost two of their own, and two of their strongest along with the vital crystals that empowered them.

Lan Qing's face was grim as he and the Pharmacist fought shoulder to shoulder. His understanding of Ultus was minimal at best, but he could still feel the blade reacting to Occisus. Whether it was the keen power of Lan Qing's weapon or the bloodthirsty aura of Occisus, both godblades were stronger together than they were apart. Perhaps not as strong as the Harmonious Swords, but a mighty force nonetheless.

The Keeper and Bookworm still held one another above the fray. The Bookworm snorted. "That was quite the trick up the Terminator's sleeves. That meathead really pulled it off! Certainly worthy of respect."

The Keeper nodded in agreement. "Indeed! He died a hero. But we're still alive, beyond all expectations. What was this young punk doing, stopping us!"

"Eh? Why the hell are you so close to me! Have you been eating garlic? Agh!" The Bookworm said through a scowl.

"Bullshit, you were the one eating garlic! You wrinkly bastard, get away from me!"

Both men released one another at the same time and separated by a handful of meters. Yet as though still of one mind the two of them lifted their hands and fired off shots of their Positron Canon at the nearby avatars.

The Bookworm and Keeper attacked from above, while the Gods of Wine helped from below. Nearby Hua Li lent his powers. Lan Qing and the Pharmacist fought within their midst.

Lan Qing was only a Reflection of Heaven and Earth, but one could not discount the might of his lineage. The dharmic image of Vairochana frightened the aliens. As the light of the Buddha blazed, and the aura of their godly weapons swelled, the pressure lain upon these monsters continued to grow. This went double for the Monarch avatar that was already injured.

The Terminator's sacrifice also affected Lan Jue deeply.

He'd always been cautious of the Northern leader. There always existed

the possibility that he would turn against the East, and he'd proven that. However, at the same time he admired the master of the Great Conclave. He was willing to do whatever it took to protect his people, up to and including giving his own life. The blood he gave didn't only help his people, but all people. Was this not a gift to be cherished?

In addition, Lan Qing's arrival meant the four Banishing Blades were finally together, with masters to wield them. Though they could not yet employ the Banishing Strategy just being in close proximity amplified them all. Three golden runes blazed on Captus and Demortus now, and their glow further strengthened the ones who wielded them. All of a sudden the tables had turned.

The change was not decisive, but things were beginning to turn in their favor. The Violet Prince's face had grown dark and anxious. He knew that if things continued along this path they would fail, and likely face more losses.

Their aim was not to destroy the humans but to recover at least one of their weapons. He had to see it done, and quickly.

The Prince quickly cast his eyes around the battlefield, and they eventually fell upon Lan Qing. He knew it at a glance; the sword that human wielded was the one stolen from Monarch!

When he realized it the Prince belched a roar. Space around him quivered as the powers of creation and destruction swapped. His body vanished.

Even the Photographer, with her mastery of space-time, was caught off guard. The method he used to transfer was completely different from hers. Somehow the monster used the gap between creation and destruction to leap small distances.

Chapter 877: A Radical Reversal

A flash of purple light appeared behind Lan Qing. The Prince appeared, reaching out for the admiral's back. With all the power of Infinity behind it, if the strike landed Lan Qing would be done for.

Luo Xianni chased after the monster, right on his heels. Now the Violet Prince was in a difficult position, for if he chose to focus on Lan Qing and land his attack he left himself open to vengeance from Luo Xianni.

But he had no option. Getting the sword was paramount. No one was prepared for the sudden shift in battlefield dynamics.

Lan Qing felt something wasn't right, even before the flood of Creation and Destruction Domain stopped him from moving. The difference in strength between them was too great, he couldn't extricate himself from the trap.

It was during this life-threatening moment that Ultus reacted. The sword became a streak of light that arced backward behind Lan Qing to swipe at his enemy. Just a single reaction, but the keen power of the godblade forced the Violet Prince to react.

Lan Qing wasn't the only one who could wield Ultus. It possessed the spirit of Li Ke, and the former master could also exact a measure of control.

Li Ke was different from Jun Yongye or Xuanyuan Shishi. The latter spirits were created by the sword and shared the will of the weapon. They were a part of the godblades, and were controlled rather than controllers. The sword was their master.

Li Ke, on the other hand, was once master. His unfortunate death forced him to emblazon his spirit within the weapon. With the mark of his soul in the blade he could manifest his will through it.

This independent will was exercised when Lan Qing was frozen. At the key moment Li Ke – through Ultus – struck back. Linked with Lan Qing's will and the power he contained, he acted as an extension so that they

were not defenseless.

The Violet Prince made a quick determination and broke off his attack. This time he would be denied.

Although he would have gravely injured or killed Lan Qing, the riposte from Ultus would have likely wounded him in return. The sword would remain out of reach. Luo Xianni would have quickly followed, and with her strength she would have dealt a blow he might not be able to recover from. The tradeoff wasn't worth it.

Lan Qing's face was calm but a cold sweat had broken out along his back. He knew he'd been inches from death. But he was an admiral, and the shock of nearly losing his life was quickly pushed aside. His eyes flashed, and he began to give orders through targeted acoustics, delivered only to the target of his commands.

One could not forget that Lan Qing was more than an admiral. He was a preeminent warrior of the Eastern Alliance, and a Divine Monarch. He had led his brothers in the contest against Star Alliance guided by the Clairvoyant and nearly won, and he did it through control of the battlefield. His wisdom and talent of command could be applied wherever it was needed.

The flow of battle continued to change. The Driver and his eight companions broke off from trading blows with Monarch's Infinite-level avatar. Two identical particle beams swept by and kept the beast from moving and allowed the Paragons to regroup.

Lan Qing ordered everyone together. This served to protect him, but also to set them up to be more effectively organized.

"Prajna-paramita!" Lan Qing muttered the mantra which summoned his dharmic image. The admiral's body swelled while the power of the Buddha caused the Creation and Destruction Domain encasing him to grow translucent.

A clock appeared in Vairochana's hand that shimmered with a rainbow of colors. Time began to act erratically.

Everyone focused on four enemies; Monarch's strongest avatar and the three Nirvana-level doppelgangers. One of them was already wounded.

Luo Xianni continued to grapple with the Prince. Their clash had only become more intense.

The four avatars gathered together and eyed their opponents warily. Their instinct told them to flee, but that was not an option. The home worlds demanded success or death.

Monarch's strongest avatar lifted its arms toward the sky, and a golden-purple light sprang up around it. The other three pressed close. Together, the aura of their power swelled in defiance.

The Paragons didn't hesitate. First to react was not Lan Qing nor the Pharmacist. It was the Driver. He had chosen one of his previous names to adopt as his Paragon title – the Voltaic Wraith. He'd always liked it.

Flashes of purple Primordial Lightning lit up space, a marvelous and frightening display. Its power was palpable as it spread across the field. Pressure descended upon the four avatars, so intense it started to influence their own aura. Flashes of Primordial Lightning continued to ripple in the darkness but were not directed at the monsters yet. Their presence was intended to suppress.

Lan Qing and the Pharmacist shot forward to the head of the group of Paragons. They seemed determined to face the avatars two on four.

A beam of gentle blue light fell upon them. Their aura expanded as though full with water – Poseidon's amplification. Another pool of blue light appeared after the Primordial Lightning began to flash, but this amalgamation of power gathered around the feet of the avatars. It gripped them like a mire, preventing them from moving.

These monsters were powerful, and individually these attacks did not amount to much. However, as they came one upon the other their influence compounded. Uncertainty gripped them as they felt themselves slipping deeper into trouble. The strongest of them was forced to react.

Its attack was measured, a punch that released an orb of Creation and

Destruction power about the size of a rice bowl. The punch was directed at Lan Qing, for he held the sword stolen from Monarch. The home world's command was to direct their strength against the human admiral and recover the sword. Once it was in hand they were instructed to retreat.

Tactically they planned to weaken him with a series of attacks. Then once he couldn't defend himself any longer they would attack all at once and claim their prize.

There was a flash of silver and then, without warning, all of the humans were simply gone. No trace remained of the humans, their swords, or the powers they employed.

On shaky footing and with the battle turning against them, the avatar was cautious. Lan Qing was its target, but it did not use its full strength. When that silver light flashed it felt its psychic lock erased. With no target in sight its attack sped off into space.

Then the light flashed again, and suddenly the avatars were surrounded.

Countless thorny vines reached from the darkness of space attempting to wrap up the avatars. Purple light flashed from around their leader and burned the creepers to ash.

The last thing the aliens wanted was to be surrounded. With nowhere to turn Monarchs avatar gathered the others and together they tried to break the encirclement. It was confident in success, for although the enemy was strong and in greater numbers they couldn't contend against its overwhelming power.

Before they could reach an edge the interior of the encirclement became thickly populated with threads of red light. Suddenly their feet were caught, and when the avatars looked down they saw silver space-time fissures as the threads of red light tightly gripping their legs. Before they could react an orb of marbled light surrounded them that slowed the passage of time to a crawl.

In less time than it took for fear to grip them, the avatars were weakened, captured and under enemy control. Despite their lofty powers these monsters were stuck. Their only option was to rely on their Domain,

and hope they were strong enough to overpower the forces arrayed against them.

Their plan had been a good one, and likely effective if left unchecked. But their dramatic break had been brought to a standstill.

The Infinite-level Paragon's eyes had gone from a deep purple to a brilliant gold. In this fight its cultivation was second to none, no human could contend against it. The monster pressed ahead with indomitable force to burst through the impediments.

At last the hindrances were breached, it was through. The avatar seared across the darkness of space as a beam of purple light, only stopping when it was time miles from the trap. A second followed close on his heels, then a third.

"Hm?" The avatar felt something was amiss and looked back to where the humans waited.

None of them gave chase, and in fact remained right where they'd been. Finally the monster noticed its three companions were now only two.

Chapter 878: Synchronicity

Moments after Monarch's avatar realized something was amiss, a hailstorm of light descended on its absent companion. Before the beast could react, one of its allies was gone.

In the moments after the strongest of the avatars broke encirclement, its three companions also sought to follow. The first two succeeded, but the third was cut off by two searing lights that blocked its escape.

The first was turquoise – Ultus, the greatest of godblades. It was joined by the white and murderous blaze of Occisus. They were wielded by the Harbinger Faerie and the Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven. What chance did this single Nirvana-level creature have?

The two columns of light closed out a vast swath of area. Next the almost pitiful beast was put down by the collective ire of the Paragons. None of the humans in that crowd had achieved Nirvana, but they were Paragons nonetheless! What's more, the deadly power wielded by Lan Qing and the Pharmacist was no less than a Nirvana-level warrior.

Beneath the hail of protogenia, assailed by the cutting power of Ultus and Occisus murderous will, the monster could only watch death come. It took no longer than a single breath and one of the alien elite was torn to pieces. Its vital crystal was extricated and captured.

Ten seconds had passed since Lan Qing joined in their battle. Already one Nirvana-level monster was dead. Could the addition of a single Paragon really make such a dramatic difference? The answer, of course, was no. The difference was tactics.

Monarch's Infinite-level avatar watched the scene unfold. It wanted to flee, but the will of Monarch was steadfast. Desperate for the sword, the distant home world forced its representative on, charging at Lan Qing.

Radiant golden-purple light burned around it. The beast was ready to risk its life for the cause, for recovering Ultus was worth all they'd lost and more. Its task would be complete.

But once the Paragons destroyed the avatar they scattered like leaves on an autumn wind. They fled in all different directions. On a planet their choices were limited, but out here in space they were given free range. The remaining three were each mighty in their own right, but in the end were but three against many. They were limited in the area they could cover.

Lan Qing made his way toward Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin. The Pharmacist chose a path that brought her toward the Violet Prince and Luo Xianni. The remaining Paragons had no readily discernible target.

Monarch's avatar stuck to Lan Qing without thought. Its dogged pursuit for Ultus was an obsession.

Lan Qing arrived at La Jue's side quickly, his brother's Boundless Starlight Domain opened to let him in. In a blink of pink light the Pharmacist also appeared. She'd raced toward Luo Xianni and right into a portal of her making that conveyed the Harbinger Faerie here.

Turquoise, white, red and blue; incisive, savage, controlling and nimble. The four Banishing Blades were raised in unison. Each of them gleamed their tell-tale light and as they turned upon the three headed six armed abomination, the monster felt as though its soul was being torn asunder.

Lan Qing was only a Reflection of Heaven and Earth. However his appearance on the field was more than just the addition of another Paragon, he brought with him the final piece of the Banishing Blades.

Back on Middle Heaven the four weapons were gathered, but Ultus did not have a living master. Even then the power they released shocked the whole fleet. Now the swords and their bearers were together to create a cacophonous rhapsody, calling forth tremendous power and supplementing one another's strength.

This was not the Banishing Strategy, but a glimpse of what it could achieve. When these godblades were together the pillars of heaven shook and its denizens reduced to bones. This was not the Banishing Strategy, but they were frightening enough as it was.

For the first time the alien avatars could see what the blades were capable of. Time slowed to an ominous crawl as the hydra watched Lan

Qing, Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and Zhou Qianlin point at it with their swords. Pressure mounted as the lights collected at their tips.

Run! It was the only thought in the monster's brain. It had to protect its life if it wanted to get those swords. This logic seemed to agree with it and the alien lurched backward to flee – anything to get out of the blades' path.

Much to the monster's surprise it felt freed. The Boundless Starlight Domain and the ethereal lightning that had weakened it were gone. All the tension vanished and suddenly it was filled with a sense of comfort and confidence. Risking a moment to turn back and look, it saw that the swords' lights had turned away. Captus' red glare led them in an entirely different direction.

Captus' power was turned through the power of Taiji's Deflect and Punch technique. Its altered course brought the others in tow toward a new target – Monarch's strongest avatar.

At Infinite-level the avatar was superior to its fellows. It was faster as well as stronger, and had reacted before any of the others in its pursuit of Lan Qing. The two remaining Nirvana-level companions were yet to catch up. As such this single avatar was forced to stand alone against the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety, The Queen of Heaven Guanyin, the Harbinger Faerie and the Peerless Light Emperor of Middle Heaven.

They were the apex of humanity's next generation, wielding the power of the Banishing Blades. In addition Lan Jue and Qianlin had already achieved Nirvana. The Violet Prince would struggle against the two of them. This avatar was racing headlong toward four.

As the four beams of light carved a path, Lan Jue and Qianlin's attack combined. The brilliant light of the Harmonious Swords created a rainbow of light pointed at the chest of the avatar. The power of Ultus and Occisus passed on either side.

Lan Jue was shocked to find another secret revealed as they launched their attack. Working in unison something new appeared within each of

them, something bestowed by the swords. It felt like an invisible vein connecting him to Captus. It created a network spreading through his entire body, guiding his energy and protogenia through the channels.

The sparkling light of the Harmonious Swords vanished as Captus became red once more. But this time it was different, for the blades' red glow was strange and profound. It was as though the sword itself was the border of a thousand fissures in space-time. Layer upon layer of dimensional collapse was contained within, like a portal to the depths of reality.

His was not the only weapon to change. Qianlin sensed it too as their link broke and Demortus' blue light burst forth. Its diffused capacity coalesced into a single beam that stuck close to the light of Captus. Meanwhile the deep red trench it carved in space spat out errant gusts of power. These rings were like the event horizons of black holes, cast out in all directions.

Ultus and Occisus were slower, but only slightly. A murderous sense pervaded the air as Occisus' itself became a gust of sword qi. It slipped into the guiding ray of Captus and was quickly spat out. Manifestations of Occisus' power were different from those of Demortus. It made the whirling bands that were cast out all the more lethal. The Pharmacist's Slaughter Discipline empowered the combined attack even further. The power Lan Jue sensed surpassed almost anything he'd felt before. Only Monarch's avatar, encountered on the home world itself, was stronger.

The last to add its might was Ultus, delivered in several shafts of turquoise light. As it poured into the path cut by Captus it became a protective screen around Demortus' orbs, a shell of impossibly sharp power.

The four Banishing Blades... combined?

All four of them had the same thought. It felt as though the swords they bore were an inseparable part of themselves, an extension of their meridians. More than that, they were extensions of each other.

Chapter 879: Driving Off the Enemy

Monarch's avatar saw a red light charging its way, and then suddenly found itself in a strange and terrifying new reality. The only colors were red, blue, white and turquoise and the quadra-chromatic universe shifted from one hue to another seamlessly. First the avatar's Domain shattered under the mysterious force. Then its body followed.

The six-headed monster's first instinct upon learning it'd been tricked was to charge back into the fight. However its brazen return was halted when it saw how completely the avatar was destroyed. From its vantage the light of the swords looked like an enormous tornado. It effortlessly swallowed Monarch's representative and a moment later its companion's aura was snuffed out.

The Creation and Destruction Domain of the aliens was unique, and all of these creatures shared a psychic link. The absence of the avatar's aura was felt immediately and acutely. It was gone, like it never existed. There wasn't even a sense of its vital crystal to be felt.

What a terrifying attack! Even Monarch himself would fear its lethality.

The tornado of light roared into the distance to where the remaining two Nirvana-level aliens had been trying to return to the fight. They were also devoured by the power of the swords. Nothing of them was left behind either.

Everything stopped once the power of the four swords ripped across the battlefield. The Violet Prince's movements were sluggish, just enough for Luo Xianni to land a punch. Suddenly his body became a two-dimensional figure, transposed against the darkness of space. She followed up with a cruel barrage of blows. The Prince recovered but not without serious injury.

With a howl of rage and terror the hydra-beast turned to flee. Their mission was a failure. If it remained here any longer it would lose its life along with its companions. Two streaks of purple flashed across the area with shocking speed, and the creatures were gone. The roar of the four

Banishing Blades combined continued for a short while before gradually lapsing into silence and darkness. Lan Jue and his four companions reappeared.

The four sword-bearers looked at one another, speechless. Their weapons had darkened, though three twinkling gems were affixed to Captus' blade. Vital crystals.

How could this be?

The four of them shared the same thought. Lan Qing swayed but his brother was there to steady him. The Pharmacist was also visibly exhausted from their effort. Qianlin was by her side.

Lan Qing's brow was furrowed as he thought back to what he felt. The Pharmacist's eyes were brimming with awe. Yes, even she wasn't entirely sure what had just happened.

The final act of their fight had been composed by Lan Qing on the fly. His aim was to weaken the enemy. Undermine their strength bit by bit until final victory could be achieved. He hadn't anticipated that the fight would change so fast, so drastically. At best he thought they might destroy Monarch's avatar, but the Banishing Blades achieved much more. What awesome power!

Of course, it didn't come easy. Both Lan Qing and the Pharmacist were almost entirely drained of energy. Lan Jue and Qianlin had fared better, but not by much. Their victory was glorious, and forced introspection.

The Paragons regrouped.

If there was any doubt these four young masters could summon the Banishing Strategy, or that the swords could destroy the home worlds, that doubt was gone. What they just witnessed had overwhelmed their senses, and their sense of what was possible. And it wasn't even the Banishing Strategy! If they succeeded in laying it out against the home worlds, humanity's chances of survival were better than good.

It was like a weight lifted off of everyone's chest. They breathed a little easier, though it could not be said any were excited. They'd won, but at the

cost of Xiuxiu, the Terminator and the Pontiff.

Defeating the alien sneak attack had cost them dearly. One of their own Nirvana-level Paragons had given their life, but at least these beasts wouldn't try such a maneuver again.

Lan Qing scowled. His mind worked quickly, and as such was not as at ease as his compatriots. His first thought was if using the Banishing Blades was this intensive, how much energy would they need to employ the Banishing Strategy? Indeed they'd fought back today, but it was by no means certain they could successfully use the Strategy. At least not yet.

After becoming Ultus' master Lan Qing began to learn the secret of the sword, with Li Ke's help. In their synchronized attack each of the sword-bearers had become one with their weapons. If that was any indication it meant their own energies would be the catalyst for the Banishing Stance, and if so were they strong enough to sustain it?

"Let's head back!" Luo Xianni urged. Since Jue Di's sacrifice the joyful Photographer had become bitter.

Depression also lived in Lan Jue's eyes. In a flash the storage device Xiuxiu had given him before she died appeared in his palm. He didn't know what was on it, but something in him didn't want to know.

She died because of me! If she hadn't thrown herself between him and the Prince he would have been injured, maybe killed. Surely the result of this attack would have been worse than it already was. It would have been very unlikely they could hold out until Lan Qing arrived.

With heavy hearts the Paragons returned to Middle Heaven. Lan Qing set about explaining what had happened to the various commanders, easing their worries. He carefully gave them an account of the battle.

The rest of the Paragons rested to try and recover. Zhou Qianlin was busiest, for although she had spent a lot of energy in their fight she still went from one Paragon to another and helped heal them. Her Queen of Heaven Discipline was the only power that could do so. No one knew when the home worlds would complete their evolution, so although she was exhausted she had to make sure everyone was at their best.

Lan Jue sat by himself in a corner, looking despondently on the only thing he had left from Xiuxiu. She was gone – slain before his eyes. It'd happened so fast, he wasn't ready.

Her easy smile and sweet voice had been with him for years, had followed him from youth to adulthood. Visions of what they experienced together flashed through his mind in a painful procession.

"Boss!" A cry laden with sorry called to him.

Lan Jue turned his head. From the tear streaked faces of Mika, Lin Guoguo and Ke'er he could see they knew what had happened. Lin Guoguo had told Mika about Xiuxiu's sacrifice. They rushed to him as fast as they could.

Mika knelt in front of him but couldn't find any words. She'd fought on Xiuxiu's behalf more than once, hoping Lan Jue would accept her the way she wanted to be accepted. But Lan Jue always had an excuse. Now their friend and sister was gone, and she didn't know what to say.

"Boss, you can't let yourself get lost in the sadness. Our enemy is still out there. The one that killed Xiuxiu is still breathing!" Mika growled.

She was right. The Violet Prince still lived. Xiuxiu died by his hand.

Wordlessly Lan Jue nodded his head. He knew she was right but her words couldn't shake the anger and sadness that threatened to drown him.

Lin Guoguo and Ke'er also huddled around. Ke'er couldn't hold back her tears and sobbed upon Lin Guoguo's shoulder. Of all the Amazons they had been closest.

"She was sad for a long time, boss. She never said it but I could tell. All four of us like you, but her feelings ran deepest." Lin Guoguo muttered. "I lost count the number of times she cried over you. Late at night when it was quiet and she thought we were asleep she would cry. I'm a psychic, I could feel what she was feeling. Her mood would soar every time she saw you – real, powerful love. We all saw it."

"Enough, Guoguo!" Mika said harshly. She'd said enough, and every word was like a dagger to Lan Jue's heart.

But Lan Jue just shook his head. He spoke words full of bitter agony. “Let her speak. I knew. I always knew, but I refused to deal with it. I told myself it’d change with time. In my heart she was always my dearest sister, but I was never a worthy older brother. I never paid enough attention to her. Blame me... blame it all on me!”

Chapter 880: Some Silence

Lin Guoguo sighed. “Xiuxiu never blamed you. She used to tell us that love isn’t something you can manage. She always loved you. You would protect her if she were bullied, and help keep her head high – no matter the cost. She remembered that. And the times she would dress up as your bride when you played as children. She said she was yours all the way back then.”

“Xiuxiu was in so much pain when you were together with Hera. Her mood was always off. When Hera was gone and we came to you, to help you recover, we all thought the two of you would come together in time. Instead you fell apart. Xiuxiu saw what it did to you and cried every night. But she never cried in front of you.”

“When you snapped out of your stupor no one was happier than Xiuxiu. Then another girl that looked exactly like Hera showed up in your life. When she found out Xiuxiu went out to get drunk. We stayed with her. We all drank. Boss, she really loved you. She loved you more than her own life.”

As Lin Guoguo’s words washed over him tears streamed down Lan Jue’s face.

Xiuxiu was gone, not even a body left to bury. She was just...

Lan Jue hung his head and his eyes swung to her storage device. The last thing she wanted him to have... but what was it?

He rose to his feet, and addressed the three of them firmly. “I need some silence.”

He left quickly, like he couldn’t wait to flee.

Zhou Qianlin watched from some distance away, but did not follow. Not this time. He needed to be alone.

ξ

“You must have felt it.” Li Ke’s spirit manifested standing next to Lan Qing. After joining with Ultus his ghostly appearance was almost

indistinguishable from reality. He would never have a physical form of his own again, but this was a close facsimile.

He discovered that as Lan Qing's power grew he became more substantial. Maybe one day he could hold his daughter for the first time.

Lan Qing nodded. "Ultus asks for far more than I thought. We need to improve our cultivation. I worry if we'd succeed even if we all reach Nirvana."

Li Ke grinned. "Honestly, I don't know either. All I see what I find in Ultus' memories, and I've found nothing about what the Strategy will really do. After all, it's been an uncountable number of years since Ultus has appeared in human hands."

"If there a way for us to quickly improve our cultivation?" Lan Qing asked. "Surely the crystals we took today can help."

Li Ke nodded. "Helpful, yes. Enough in fact to empower you to the Infinite, I'd think. But that's not the way to do it. Your bodies wouldn't be able to withstand the massive amount of pressure placed on them. Little Yue told me Lan Jue and Qianlin have broken through a series of grades very quickly. Pressing that process any further would be dangerous. But once they do break through to the Infinite, I don't think they would be in any danger of a power backlash from the swords. Absorbing and assimilating protogenia takes time, and you're already moving quickly. Going too fast will have consequences, not least of which the universe itself. You won't know what it is to suffer the pressure of universal protogenia until you become one with the Infinite. Under those conditions the power you could command wouldn't be at the Infinite level. You'd be lucky to command the power of Nirvana. First, before we do anything, you all need to reach Nirvana. Once you do we can attempt the Strategy. Then we'll see if anything else needs to be done."

Lan Qing nodded. He agreed that it was the best path forward.

ξ

Lan Jue returned to his room and didn't leave for some time. No one knew what he was doing. Once he shut the door no one had gone in.

Humanity's armada and its three bastions slowly made their way back to Angel. They encountered no more aliens on the way. It wasn't very long before they were back on solid ground.

Lan Qing and the Pharmacist locked themselves away as well. They were trying to achieve Nirvana as soon as possible.

Middle Heaven's remaining Paragons were recovered. Chu Cheng took the remains of the Terminator and the vital crystal left behind to Tyrannosaurus.

They were returning after a series of victories, but they were hollow. The looming threat of destruction remained.

When they got back to Angel they were met with good news. Another bastion had appeared in Angel's orbit. It was Heron, the only bastion left that had experience fighting the alien horde.

The Northern Alliance had suffered a terrible defeat in the Shattered Starfields, and again shortly after. To try and offset this they threw all their resources into repairing their fastest ship. It packed a punch as well. As for other reinforcements it would be some time before they showed up. Luckily Angel's food stores were well stocked, and there were no fear of the citizens revolting. They'd started building neighborhoods.

Of course they made announcements of their victories during the campaign. This boosted moral and gladdened the hearts of the people. Video of the clashes were spread far and wide, filling the humans with hope. Especially when believers saw their Queen of Heaven appear on screen. Seeing her fighting nimbly by Lan Jue's side only boosted her reputation.

Of course the inevitable question afterward was, who was this man who dared fight shoulder to shoulder with her?

Lan Jue soon became the focus of scrutiny. He was known as the champion of the Conclave's Great Adept Tournament, and a hero who showed up to turn the tide on many tragedies. When they saw his pedigree they grudgingly accepted his relationship to Qianlin.

All over occupied space human eyes were trained on Angel, waiting for the verdict. Things had thankfully settled down, however, after word of the armada's deeds spread. Their string of victories and saving their fellow man had given them hope and pride.

But this relative silence had its drawbacks. Some were already voicing skepticism, saying that there were too few soldiers to prevail. Why weren't all of the North's eight bastions out there fighting for mankind?

Why weren't there reinforcements for these soldiers who've been battling on the front lines so long already? Were politicians more concerned with their own interests than those of their species? The North and East both suffered chastisement, though the North got it worse.

All along the North had been known as humanity's mightiest Alliance, with an invincible fighting force. Yet in this decisive time it wasn't the North was in charge. The Eastern Alliance and Poseidon Group were guiding the way.

Poseidon-class bastion's praise was especially high when the word got out, after scenes from its remarkable fight appeared on civilian screens. It was especially shocking for everyone to see it fighting in mecha form. Needless to say it made an impression and suddenly the Poseidon Group's reputation exploded.

Northern military news sources reported that in addition to Heron they were also sending two more bastions to the front line. They had to under pressure of public opinion. However the keen of eye knew that the war was coming to its end soon one way or another. Sending reinforcements now would make little difference in either case.

Heron's sudden arrival boosted the Northern's military capabilities significantly.

Since Lan Qing was working on his cultivation, Kang Hui had taken temporary control of the armada. He immediately recommended they prepare for another assault on the home worlds.

Kang Hui had no choice but to adhere to Lan Qing's plan for the Banishing Blades, but he was still the commander of the Northern forces.

There was still a lot of suspicion surrounding whether four swords could destroy three planets.

In fact they doubted that the alien home worlds were trying to create their own utopia. But they did know these monsters were changing, and whatever they changed into would be the stuff of nightmares.

Kang Hui proposed moving in now. The evolution had to be stopped, and both the monsters' soldiers and generals were bloodied. With the addition of Heron they were sufficiently reinforced, according to him. The nimble bastion was ready for action.

He didn't completely dismiss the possibility of the Banishing Blades being effective. What he proposed was a two-prong attack. If they could succeed with a purely military victory than that would be great, and the Banishing Swords could be kept as a backup. If they fail at least they'll have succeeded in weakening the enemy further. Perhaps that'd improve the Easterners' chances.

His proposal passed unanimously. Even the commander representing the Eastern army in Lan Qing's absence agreed. Poseidon Group didn't share an opinion. Its bastion, and Middle Heaven as well, would not fight as well in future battles as they had been.

When the plan was ratified Kang Hui announced three days of rest and repairs. After three day they would attack the aliens again.

Chapter 881: Cultivation and Strategy

The soldiers were once again busy with preparations. Repairs became the highest priority. Damage to the bastions both big and small were attended to while their energy stores were rebuilt. As a newly arrived asset Heron was in prime condition, and would likely hold an important role in the fight to come.

Kang Hui ordered Middle Heaven be given priority treatment. He was hoping to gain An Lun's favor. The Northern leader could see the East's rise to prominence, inevitable assuming they were able to defeat the aliens. Considering their high-powered fighters alone, the North could not catch up or hope to contend. They had an advantage technologically, but maintaining a force of notable Adepts was going to be difficult.

If Middle Heaven was any indication the East's technological mastery was not as backwater as they'd expected. In fact there were systems on that bastion that perplexed Northern scientists. It seems the only thing that'd been holding the East back was access to resources.

In this moment it was important for humans to be united against the universal threat of the alien horde. Kang Hui knew this, and it was for this reason that Lan Qing chose him to command the armada while he was cultivating. Kang Hui was more than an experienced and talented commander, he was also a good man deserving of respect.

ξ

Lan Jue was out of the public eye for more than a day before he emerged from his room. He seemed composed, at least on the surface Lan Jue appeared back to his former self.

Mika had returned to the area designated for the Dark Citadel's representatives. Lin Guoguo and Ke'er remained behind, and they had also regained their composure. When they saw Lan Jue again they didn't bring up Xiuxiu.

"Lan Qing and sister Pharmacist have locked themselves away to cultivate. They wanted me to bring you to them when you came back out.

“Zhou Qianlin said in her soft voice.

“Alright, I’m fine – let’s go now.” Lan Jue nodded for her to lead the way. She took his hand and smiled sweetly at him. She used her actions to soothe his injured spirit.

A loaded look crossed Lan Jue’s face, heavy with emotion. He lifted his other hand and gently pressed it against her face.

When they arrived at the room where Lan Qing and the Pharmacist were cultivating they found the Wine Master and Clockmaker seated by the door. They were there to look over them.

After the recent tragedy who knew when the Violet Prince might try to strike again? They knew it to be unlikely, though. If he did dare to come he would be marching to his own demise. Aliens no longer enjoyed an overwhelming advantage of super-powerful fighters.

“Wine Master. Clockmaker.” Lan Jue greeted both of them.

His old drinking companion answered with a smile. “What is past is past. Try to remain positive, and focus on exacting revenge for our fallen friends. For our people. The fight to come may require more sacrifices, but we are prepared to fight to the last man and woman.”

Lan Jue nodded firmly. He knew this was the Wine Master’s effort to soothe him, but the wound was still too fresh. What words could make him feel better?

“Let’s go in.” He said, nodding to the two Paragons.

The Wine Master moved aside from the door and entered a password. The metallic portal opened and Lan Jue stepped in. Qianlin was close behind.

Stepping inside, they were struck by the sensation in the air. It was thick with vital energy, almost stifling. Lan Qing and the Pharmacist were seated in the middle of the room with a strange device between them.

Nestled in the device was a single golden-purple vital crystal. Lan Jue could tell at a glance that this crystal was at least Nirvana-level. The rich

sense of vitality was coming from there. Situated around the apparatus were twelve Tears of Neptune, all comparable in size. Their presence galvanized the remains of the alien to release its vitality. Once that energy was filtered by the tears it could be used safely.

Lan Qing and the Pharmacist immersed themselves in the exuberant current, taking it in with slow and steady breaths. All the while their cultivation was slowly rising.

Lan Jue nodded in appreciation. This was certainly a spectacular specimen of a vital crystal! After only a day the two of them were already near the upper reaches of Reflection of Heaven and Earth.

There was another presence in the room with them. Li Ke observed the process, sustained through Ultus.

No one else was in the chamber. As agreed, these few were the only ones permitted in order to keep the vital crystal transmutation process a secret. Lan Qing and the Pharmacist already had their mind wiped by Lin Guoguo prior to beginning.

Lan Jue looked at Li Ke questioningly, but did not speak. The spirit understood and delivered his answer directly into Lan Jue's mind.

"We've used two Nirvana-level vital crystals up so far, the results have been encouraging. In around five hours this crystal will be spent and they should be strong enough to make a breakthrough. From my analyses I suspect that once they join you in Nirvana they'll need time to stabilize their cultivation. Qianlin's Queen of Heaven Discipline should help them significantly there. Afterwards all four of you should undergo this process. We won't push you into the Infinite, but we have to bolster your abilities as much as we can. The stronger you are, the more likely it will be that you can survive using the Banishing Strategy."

Lan Jue had experienced what it was like when one's foundation was unstable. There was no small measure of trepidation in his voice when he queried Li Ke. "Are you sure this won't cause any problems? The moment something goes wrong..."

Li Ke smiled reassuringly. "It's fine, I don't suspect any complications. At

your level and with the help of the Queen of Heaven, so long as we don't cross the line into the Infinite there is nothing to worry about. To be safe we won't reach the peak of Nirvana. Halfway should be sufficient to beginning attempting the Strategy."

"Alright!" Lan Jue affirmed. He and Qianlin made their way to a pair of seats nearby and waited.

They were careful to shut themselves off from their environment so that they did not absorb any of the vital energy. Qianlin let her Domain reach out and embrace them. Lan Qing and the Pharmacist had not yet broken through, but her presence helped strengthen and stabilize their protogenia in preparation for the moment they did. The two were almost immediately more relaxed, and were able to take in more of the vital energy.

Lan Jue and Zhou Qianlin passed the time in quiet meditation.

The moment of breakthrough was the most dangerous moment for Lan Qing and the Pharmacist. They were sure to experience some measure of what Lan Jue and Qianlin had had to suffer when they attained Nirvana. Unlike them, however, they had Qianlin's help. The power of Nirvana-level Queen of Heaven abilities meant risks were kept to a minimum. Without her help Lan Jue would never have agreed to this.

ξ

Time passed quickly. Before they knew it three days had come and gone.

The armada's three bastions were almost back in full service. Those ships that were still heavily damaged and soldiers too wounded to serve would remain behind on Angel. Troops were reorganized into ten fleets for the coming operation. Their three mighty bastions were joined by a fourth.

Tyrannosaurus, Middle Heaven, Poseidon and Heron led the way as the war party embarked. Ten fleets worth of support vessels spread out around them as they made their way toward Europa.

Tyrannosaurus was in the center of the formation, taking Middle Heaven's place. It wasn't a power move, but one of practicality.

Tyrannosaurus had the most resources left after their last campaign. What's more, without Lan Qing to stabilize Middle Heaven's molinite core the more advanced maneuvers were too dangerous to perform. With Tyrannosaurus in the middle it gave the other bastions more leeway.

No attempts to impede their progress troubled the armada. If they didn't know better they might suspect the horde had left. Kang Hui knew that the enemy force was still formidable, they just weren't wasting their strength on intercepting them.

He remembered that commander Lan Qing also suspected the alien home worlds were still a threat. Though they were busy with their evolution, they could still exert their influence on the battlefield. How much of an influence was as yet unknown.

They left Angel with Lan Qing and the others still locked away. Three days had passed without so much as a peep from the Paragons. Lan Qing had told him to expect a full week before they would emerge. Kang Hui used this estimate to craft his strategy. The four sword bearers should be completing their transmutation just as the armada was reaching Europa.

Kang Hui sat at his control desk looking over the information on his screens. But his mind was not on the data scrolling by.

Prior to this excursion he'd received tacit agreement to participate by the North. The day they set out he made peace with the idea that he might die. Chances were low that anyone would make it back. At that time humanity had yet to win a single victory over the aliens. Losses were already in the millions.

When they first arrived at Angel and saw the nearby planets occupied, his hope was all but gone. It felt like a pointless endeavor against an overwhelming enemy. Fighting was just increasing the number of casualties.

But fighting was their only choice. A desperate choice, certainly, but all that they had left.

He thought back to the outset of their war. Lan Qing was the youngest commander ever, an Easterner with command of three bastions and

twelve fleets against a vastly superior enemy force. And then he started winning.

Chapter 882: Striking Out Again

His ruminations reminded Kang Hui that Lan Qing's strategy had been right every step of the way. He'd taken advantage of the aliens' desperation to evolve, attacking them when they were at their weakest and diminishing their numbers. The creatures didn't respond, assured in their victory. All they had to do was repel the human forces long enough for the home worlds to ascend. Once they did, mankind would be served up on a platter.

Ignored and underestimated Lan Qing was able to command his forces masterfully. Bit by bit he gnawed away at the enemy. He began to accumulate victories but never became cocky.

When humanity's forces ultimately retook the seven planets Kang Hui saw a glimmer of hope. Under Lan Qing there was a chance, albeit remote. His spirit stirred at last and he studiously observed Lan Qing's plans. Kang Hui spared no effort to support this young genius leader.

In the end Lan Qing's tactics proved true. Through his wisdom and persistence humanity had achieved a miracle. Inch by inch they were fighting back against the forces of destruction. Today they were still fighting for their lives, but the soldiers of humankind were no longer passively reacting. They were taking the fight to the enemy. If there was still time before the home worlds completed their evolution, there was a chance this mission could thoroughly destroy the alien horde.

Miracle was the perfect word to describe what Lan Qing had done.

They should call you the Miracle Admiral, Kang Hui mused. Middle Heaven was strong indeed, but without Lan Qing's artful strategies it wouldn't have performed such glorious feats.

This time, I will be the one to see this mission to its end.

They had to finish their war on Europa. Whatever the cost they couldn't allow the aliens' reign of destruction to spread farther than it already had. His fellows had already suffered tremendously, and he knew they couldn't suffer much more.

Tyrannosaurus' energy stores were full after three days of replenishment. Heron flew on its left and Poseidon on its right. Middle Heaven was behind. It was not the primary force in the armada any longer but still was kept in the formation's leadership position, which was also the most defensible. Lan Qing and the other Paragons were there, and although it was depleted it was still one of the most powerful bastions in human history.

After everything that had happened since leaving the Northern Alliance, there was no doubt Middle Heaven had earned that title. Poseidon's spectacular metamorphic abilities were staggering, but the family's ship still didn't match up to the war planet. Middle Heaven's Terminal Ray was a truly terrifying weapon of mass destruction. According to Kang Hui's calculations there was nothing in all of known space that could survive a blast from Middle Heaven's main weapon.

The four bastions and ten fleets gradually closed in on Europa. Repairs continued as the armada made its way. Latest reports stated that Middle Heaven was at sixty percent combat effectiveness. Poseidon was at fifty percent, and couldn't transform to its mecha form. Tyrannosaurus boasted eighty percent of its capabilities, and Heron was fresh-faced and ready for battle. As for the ten support fleets that remained, they were operating at eighty percent efficiency.

Of course, aside from Heron all of the bastions had lost many of their fighter drones. Altogether only a third remained. Heron could only carry three thousand drones, the least capacity of all the bastions.

ξ

Pale light flickered around Lan Qing. He sat with a cool and stately expression on his face. The admiral's hands were pressed together before his chest, and light trembled erratically in his eyes.

He and the Pharmacist had already broken through to Nirvana. With the help of Qianlin's Domain, their protogenia was quickly stabilized. All four of them sat around the vital crystal and the strange apparatus now, silently absorbing the energies it released. The crystal they used now was

from one of the Infinite-level monsters they'd slain – the Violet Princess'.

Her crystal was purer than the others by comparison, but also more vibrant. The energies it released were difficult to control. Half their store of Tears was already spent.

Lan Jue sat across from his brother, the two women were on either side. Their swords floated nearby, for as they absorbed the vital energy they also needed to explore the secrets of the Banishing Blades.

The mysteries of the Banishing Strategy went far beyond their understanding of the systems of energy. In many ways the power of the Strategy was a sort of protogenia, but it was not a protogenia borne of the universe they resided in. It came from somewhere else entirely.

The Strategy produced its terrifying might through the repulsion of this protogenia and universal protogenia. The clash and subsequent rebuttal were focused into the Strategy to create its world-shattering result.

The fact it was able to borrow from universal protogenia was a staggering prospect!

As the four Paragons grew in strength and explored the knowledge of the swords, they could sense the ire of universal protogenia searching for them. They could feel, if only faintly, what the old immortal realm must have been like.

Immortals in those ancient days were powerful beyond comprehension. It took Celestial Master Yuanshi and Celestial Master Taishang – along with two others – to overcome the destruction of the Banishing Blades.

Lan Jue had never been too interested in the immortal realm, but his knowledge of it had improved since gleaning the secrets of Captus.

The immortal realm wasn't as simple as they'd originally thought. It was a reality created by the interwoven powers of protogenia. It not only protected them from universe protogenia but was also possessed of a protogenia all its own.

It was more than a pocket reality – it was its own universe that existed parallel to their own. Over time it grew and become stronger until it came

to the notice of the original universe. But the power of the realm could not be reversed. Since it relied on the essence of the universe this process could not be interrupted. If it did it could threaten the destruction of the immortal realm. As such the immortals of old did all they could do curtail the growth of their realm, lest it come into conflict with the universe it existed within.

The end result of that conflict from ages past was not recorded in the Banishing Blades. All they knew was the ancient realm of the immortals was gone. If it wasn't, these magnificent weapons would not have fallen into the hands of man.

Lan Jue knew what he meant with Jun Yongye had told him so long ago, that even as Paragon he would only command a tenth of what the swords could do. It seemed that may have been an exaggeration, but not in his favor. Even after achieving Nirvana, learnings Captus' secrets, and becoming one with the blade he could not say for certain he could summon ten percent of the sword's might.

The true power of the Banishing Blades could only be wielded by the highest caste of immortals! Knowing this, could they really hope to succeed in laying out the Banishing Strategy?

None of them presumed to know the answer. They continued to grow in power but the strength of the swords was inscrutable, deep, and seemingly without end. The stronger they became the more immeasurable these weapons seemed. All they could do was continue to learn, improve their cultivation, and hope they could survive the Strategy.

In the end, what measure of destruction they would cause was left in the hands of Heaven.

Li Ke's features were creviced with doubt. As a part of Ultus he, too, felt what they were feeling. The power of it ran deeper than he'd expected, lending ever more credence to their titles as the strongest weapons ever created. The pressure it put on the humans was immense.

If it ended up that they were not strong enough to control the Strategy there would be only one avenue left for them. But the cost...

A sadness flit across Li Ke's ghostly expression when he thought about the possibility.

ξ

Europa appeared on the horizon. The writhing membrane that surrounded it seemed thicker and more widespread than ever. The three home worlds were still attached to it, emitting a rich purple hue. However, all three of them were less than a third of their original size.

Meanwhile, Europa was twice the size it had been before, almost a whole new entity. It was hidden beneath layers of violet clouds that concealed its surface. Its hue was lighter than the home worlds, and as the rolling fogs changed it gave the appearance of being alive.

The savagery of the aliens was missing from their new creation. Europa was... strangely beautiful.

When he saw it Kang Hui's heart sank. It was clear the home worlds' evolution was nearing completion. It would happen any day.

"All ships, pay attention. I want all weapons systems charged and prepared for use. Do not be caught off guard. The time for rest is over, the war is back on." Kang Hui gave the order.

They couldn't wait, not a moment more. The home worlds could finish their evil ceremony at any moment so they had to strike first and strike hard. If they didn't, they wouldn't live to regret it.

Chapter 883: General Offensive

The ten fleets coasted forward, and spread out to either side of the bastions like wings. Their guns were primed, waiting for the order to fire. The four bastions also lit up as their weapon arrays were prepared.

Just then, the remains of the alien horde were revealed. They came swarming around either side of Europa and right for the armada. They lacked the vigor and numbers from before.

“Open fire!” At Kang Hui’s order the bastions and their support fleets let loose. Spears of light crashed into the encroaching enemy force.

The horde’s formation was diffuse, and they used their speed to evade the human long-ranged attacks as much as they could. However the hail of cannon fire was tightly packed and avoiding it completely was impossible. The aliens began suffering casualties right away. Compared to the last encounter the humans seemed much more confident.

Behind his control panel Kang Hui summoned his Discipline. Through his empowered eyes he read and analyzed the information that flooded his screens. Despite the punishment his enemy was facing in the opening moments of their conflict he did not relax. In fact his face grew darker as the moments stretched on.

The aliens came at them with no direction. He read that to mean the home worlds were almost finished with their evolution. If that were the case their elite would be sticking close to their masters. They didn’t need to command the troops, they were just cannon fodder.

Should they throw caution to the wind and attack Europa at full force?

His opponent still had a numbers advantage, although they were in disarray. Rushing ahead would expose his troops to a brutal counter offensive, and many would be lost. Besides, it could be a trap.

Kang Hui’s fighting style was always calm, and it’d served him well so far. Caution is what saved him from dying at the aliens’ hands long ago in the Shattered Starfields.

Instead of calling for the charge he ordered the ships to continue to pummel the aliens' front lines. However, he commanded the bastions to hold back on firing their main weapons. He wanted to save their strongest attacks for the planets themselves.

Eventually the aliens gathered into some semblance of formation. More defensive aliens took the fore and their speedier brethren stuck close behind. The plan was to push ahead, and once they got within range the faster aliens would burst out and wreak havoc among the human ships.

Mankind's armada was much weaker than it was when they first arrived in the system. After the last encounter the difference was especially marked, and especially now without Lan Qing's tactical genius. However, Kang Hui was also a lauded commander and he had no problem leading the human forces. His strategic plans were simple, but nonetheless took advantage of their ranged superiority to great effect.

Kang Hui orders artillery fire focused on the stronger aliens. He wanted them to be pummeled as hard as possible as they pressed forward. Once the enemy was close enough for their fast attackers to emerge they would be met by the Paragon-led Star Division, the Bloodiron Khan's, and Chu Cheng's convert army.

Against mankind's greatest Adept warriors and drones from their bastions, the aliens who dared attack were cut to ribbons. They were unable to cause any damage to the main fleet.

With their considerable advantage Kang Hui's leadership was flawless. The alien forces met the humans and were cut down like they were flung into a meat grinder. Monsters were cut down by the dozens and their vital crystals captured.

Kang Hui was keenly aware of the Violet Prince's absence, however. The three-headed, six-armed abomination was also nowhere to be found. They appeared to have disappeared after their failed sneak attack.

Already the armada was extending an advantage that seemed irrevocable. Already the horde was begin pushed back. The armada began moving toward Europa was slow but indomitable progress.

Soldiers who didn't know any better began to cheer, their cries reverberating off the hulls of their ships. After all these hardships and losses, they were beating the enemy! How could they not be overcome with joy? And as participants of this life or death struggle, they were heroes! In their mind's eye they could see the scene of their triumphant return, with ticker tape parades and flower petals descending from the sky. Humanity's allied forces, a ray of hope in a dark time.

Cannons continued to bombard the enemy, never letting up. The enemy was steadily losing ground. Nothing indicated the home worlds were getting involved, either. Europa was still hidden beneath the cloud of caustic purple fog that made it look like a fantastical land from the story books. By contrast the three planets looked like hideous tumors affixed to the planet's surface. Aside from the roiling tides of the clouds, nothing moved. They seemed completely devoid of life.

Kang Hui pressed a button on his control panel. In his deep voice he hailed the person on the other end. "Heron, prepare your main gun."

"Heron receiving. Main gun is charging." The response came swiftly.

Kang Hui refused to be lulled into a false sense of security by the scene before him. On the contrary, he was all the more vigilant. From the very beginning the aliens had enjoyed the advantage. Right up until this point humanity had been against the ropes, only to suddenly see a reverse in fortune. It was important to remember that it wasn't Lan Qing's brilliance alone that got them to this point, however. An important factor was the fact that the home worlds were not involved in the fighting.

If they had been even Lan Qing couldn't have spun gold out of straw. Against the home worlds and its horde the humans would never have stood a chance.

But not being present on the battlefield didn't mean their threat did not exist. Quite the opposite, the planets were laden with the life force of eight planets and all the vitality they stole from the Northern Alliance. They hadn't used any of that energy in battle against the humans and instead funneled it into their evolutionary process. Kang Hui shuddered to think

what sort of power this new creation would wield once its evolution was complete.

It went without saying that Kang Hui didn't find their chances appealing if the home worlds chose to fight. His loss at their hands was still acutely carved into his memory, an angry scar to remind him of his defeat. Their variable offense and impenetrable protection made them virtually impossible to shake off. They were as strong as they were cunning, and used whatever advantage available to win victory over their prey. As such humans had consistently been beaten back.

And so Kang Hui called off his focus to bear. Heron was their weakest bastion, but also charged its main weapons system fastest. As the fastest ship in the fleet it made for a natural choice to use as an opening gambit.

Lan Qing had told him that the home worlds had mostly fused with Europa by this point. The former Western capitol was the basis of their evolution and had been chosen as the site for these beasts' new immortal realm. With no hope of survivors left on Europa, it and the three home worlds attached to its surface were the main target.

"Heron reporting. Main guns are charged and ready!" The alert was fast in coming across Kang Hui's speakers. The armada was getting closer to Europa with each passing moment.

Kang Hui answered with a string of commands. The bombardment became even more intense as capital ships, up to now their cannons dark, joined the fight. The punishing offensive carved a path through the horde.

Heron's main engines flared to life and in a flash the bastion shot ahead. It punched through the flimsy alien line and was at top speed in moments. Its three main guns were extended and aimed at Europa.

The planet was a big target. Heron's gunners weren't afraid of missing.

While Heron made its attack run Kang Hui continued to call out orders. Tyrannosaurus, Poseidon and Middle Heaven all began to charge their primary weapons. Heron's attack was a feeler, to see how the planets would react. Once they got a read they could follow up with shots from the others bastions. He was confident that one round of attacks, if it didn't

destroy Europa outright, would at least severely affect the home worlds' evolution. That would be enough, and they could focus on a more comprehensive attack. The greatest result would be to damage the planet enough so that the evolution process was stopped entirely. Then, under concentrated fire, they could destroy the enemy outright.

At least for the moment his plan seemed to be working.

Heron shook as three beams of cyan light fired from its cannons. It erupted with such intensity that space rippled around the guns' barrels. While the weapon wasn't as strong as Tyrannosaurus', say, it was still a bastion's weapon. The damage it caused was more than considerable, and against any ordinary planet the results would be catastrophic.

Nothing was in the way of the three beams of light. In a blink they pierced the fog covering Europa and a mushroom cloud surged in its wake. All three shots disappeared in the haze.

Chapter 884: Aliens, Defeated?

With its payload delivered, Heron pulled to the side and arced away from Europa. With its speed and attack power it didn't worry about fighting its way back through the horde. After all, the armada was not far behind. The aliens were under so much pressure they didn't have an opportunity to give chase.

As Heron tore off to the flank its crew waited with baited breath. They stared at the screens and out of the windows, anxious to see the result of their flyby. If they could do Europa any harm it would open the gates for the other bastions to do the same.

Kang Hui was a good man, honest and sincere. Heron was chosen to attack the planet for more than just military reasons. Europa was the capitol of the former Western Alliance! Although the people knew it was no longer fit for human habitation, in their hearts – especially those of the Westerners – they still held the planet in high esteem. It would be better for the North to land the first strike, instead of an Eastern vessel, or Poseidon.

The order was Kang Hui's. He would bear the consequences.

“Eh?” He snapped out of his ruminations.

Heron wasn't the only one waiting for signs of reaction! He'd watched the blasts enter the cloud cover, but then... nothing.

The disturbance in the fog gradually disappeared and the surface looked like nothing had happened. There were no lights or indications of the shots passing behind the planet either. That should mean Heron's attack landed.

But, why was there no sign of impact? Where did the shots go? The uncertainty immediately set everyone on edge.

Those were three shots from a bastion's main cannons! Nothing came of them, not even the sounds of an explosion. It was like they just vanished into nothing, like Europa was a black hole.

“All forces focus your attacks on the enemy soldiers. Fire main cannons at will.” Kang Hui directed.

Europa’s situation was too inscrutable. Instead they would focus on weakening the horde, and once they got some breathing room they could find a more effective way to deal with the former human planet.

Almost before the orders left his lips Middle Heaven was in the thick of it. Where before it’d silently waited behind its defenders, it was now a piercing orb of light that fired rays of amber light in all directions. Together with Poseidon’s Soft Water bombs, swaths of alien fighters were destroyed.

The monsters were like a snake without its head, flailing every which way. They didn’t stand a chance against humanity’s disciplines forces.

Heron flew back around and rejoined the battle. After thirty minutes the enemy forces were under threat of collapse. Though the morale of these cruel beasts could not be broken, their lines could. More and more of them fell until the battle had become a one-sided extermination.

Mankind’s warriors could not let up, not when victory was so close at hand and so many vital crystals were up for grabs! These crystals were treasures that were priceless no matter how many of them were passed around. The exuvium process was complete and ready for use to extend human life. The foundation of that process was these vital crystals.

Humans had killed countless numbers of these monsters already, but there were also planets worth of humans. Everyone wanted a chance to live longer, and the only way to do that was if they got their hands on one of these crystals.

In addition Skyfire Avenue wasn’t the only one who encouraged their soldiers with the promise of a spot on the list to use the exuvium process. The North, and Poseidon Group also had similar plans.

Now more than ever was the time to gather these crystals. In the eyes of these soldiers it might be their last chance. Mechas, warship crews, drone pilots – everyone wanted to take advantage of this situation. Everyone was fighting their hardest.

This was, of course, within reason. The soldiers of the allied forces had struggled together for a long time, and none of them were willing to risk the lives of their brothers and sisters in greedy pursuits. There were enough vital crystals for everyone.

According to Northern and Eastern reports, one average vital crystal was enough to facilitate the exuvium process for ten people. The creatures they were killing now were more than your average fiend, and some were even of the enemy's upper echelons.

The better the crystal the more often it could be used for the process. The results were also better by orders of magnitude.

But while the soldiers were celebrating, the officers knew the war wasn't over yet. Heron's attack hadn't done much of anything, so how were they supposed to deal with the planet?

The horde's numbers thinned but never broke. Although they were cut down in droves there was no indication they would be routed or retreat. The beasts fought back as hard as ever.

Eventually the wriggling purple bodies disappeared from space. A glittering field of crystals was left behind, quickly gobbled up by the human ships.

At last the army of monsters that had harassed the human species had been exterminated. Cries of elation rang from the smallest patrol boat to the largest bastion. And it wasn't just the soldiers, either. All throughout the worlds of man people cheered their heroes. They'd watched with bated breath as the fight was broadcast into every home. Win or lose, the people had a right to know. The government could of course shut off the feed whenever they chose, but when it was clear humanity was winning they kept it going, clear as a bell.

Northern cries were especially loud. Two out of the four bastions were dispatched from their Alliance and the leader of the expedition was one of their own. They proudly congratulated themselves on these facts and through this the people were calmed. In fact the government enjoyed a sharp spike in public approval. Heron proved their leaders were

committed to reinforcing the heroes of the front lines. In this they were better than the East. Suddenly the calls for consequences were silenced and the citizens were at peace. Instead there were words of praise and support offered up from all corners of the Alliance.

Only a handful of people had the inside scoop, and knew that the fight wasn't over. The three home worlds still remained. It was the worst disaster in hundreds of years, but it wasn't over until those hellish planets were destroyed.

Kang Hui was inundated with commendations. He didn't try to silence the jubilation immediately. The soldiers had fought for so long, witnessed the death of their fellow shoulders and countrymen. They've needed this for a long, long time.

After a few moments he delivered more commands to the various ship captains. The fight wasn't over yet, he assured them, they had one final enemy to overcome. Now wasn't the time for celebration.

Soon the vital crystals left behind by their defeated enemies were gathered together. It went without saying that the North won the largest number of crystals, for their two bastions were integral in the fight. Especially Heron and its three thousand drones. They were fierce and flexible, resulting in an impressive haul.

"Form up, surround Europa." Soldiers were trained to follow orders like the word of god. Still beaming from their victory the soldiers rushed to follow instructions once they were given. The fleets spread out, and the bastions gathered in single file.

A fire burned behind Kang Hui's eyes. Do you still think yourselves so strong, monsters? With all our ships, bastions and soldiers do you think yourselves invincible?

All four bastions began recharging their main weapons. Among them was Middle Heaven, smoldering as it prepared the terrible power that was Terminal Ray. Poseidon, though still unable to change shape, still had Soft Water bombs to employ.

Kang Hui quickly puzzled out the best plan of attack. All bastions would

concentrate their fire on a single point, together with the fleet as a whole. If all of their firepower was directed at Europa's core they could destroy the planet outright.

From what he could tell from outside, none of the alien worlds plastered to Europa's surface were reacting to the horde's destruction. Their life force and consciousness must be completely funneled into the single planet. Thus if Europa was destroyed, the home worlds would die with it.

This was not the time for mercy and kindness. Kang Hui knew he'd have to face many difficult questions once the campaign was finished, but he didn't hesitate to give the order. Nothing was more important than the survival of the species.

The allied forces took advantage of the calm before the final storm. Energy stores were replenished and stabilized, guns were charged. Secondary weapons systems were turned down, for they were no longer helpful for what was to come. Only their strongest weapons could harm Europa, especially at a distance.

Battleship-class vessels and smaller were ordered not to engage. They were told to observe the situation and await further orders. Everyone else had their weapons primed and aimed, waiting for the order to fire from Tyrannosaurus.

The feeling of it all was thick in the air, everyone could feel it. Their battle was coming to a close, and though their final objective was in view they were not relaxed. They were tense, anxious, excited.

The four bastions shimmered with light as they pulled into firing range. Tempestuous flows of energy surrounded each of them.

Chapter 885: Success?

“Poseidon, prepare your main weapon.” Kang Hui ordered. He was taking personal command of how this final attack was executed.

“Soft Water bombs are ready to be deployed!” Hua Li’s voice returned. Poseidon’s patriarch was also taking full responsibility of his family’s bastion.

“Fire!” Kang Hui said.

“Fire!” Hua Li echoed.

Six glittering orbs were belched from Poseidon. Marvelous tails of blue light hung in the darkness of space where they passed on their way toward Europa.

The destructive capabilities of the Soft Water bombs were put on display more than once in earlier battles. Against living targets it was frighteningly effective, and the most difficult to evade.

The six bombs quickly reached their destination. They were ingeniously released in a line and slipped into the cloudy surface of Europa one after the other.

Nothing changed as the first bomb entered, then the second, then the third...

Once all six bombs disappeared into the fog a reaction became visible. The rolling tide of mist became tumultuous. Barely visible were flashes of blue light as the bombs detonated. They were arranged in a line to detonate at different depths, from the highest reaches of Europa’s atmosphere to where the ground presumably hid below.

Kang Hui had determined it was the best use of Poseidon’s weapons. His aim wasn’t to harm the planet so much as clear the fog so they could get a glimpse of what lay beneath.

The aliens had a reason for everything. When Heron’s attack disappeared into the fog Kang Hui knew the mists must have some defensive purpose. Perhaps they drained and devoured energy that passed

through. If that were true the first step to a successful blow would have to be clearing a path through the fog. Without its protection they could damage the planet.

His tactics were sound. The cloud cover melted away like snow before the summer sun. Europa's surface was revealed.

Spectators looked on in surprise. Europa's surface had been painted in a pale purple hue, in contrast to the rich purple of the home worlds that had taken it over. The remains of human structures could be faintly discerned by their long-ranged telescopes, partially obscured by wisps of the fog that remained.

Kang Hui did not appreciate the beautiful scenery, for he knew the cost of its creation. He continued to deliver his commands.

"Tyrannosaurus, fire the main gun!"

Tyrannosaurus' weapons were already aimed and fully charged. Once the order was given its primary cannon released a blazing beam of light right into the channel left by the Soft Water bombs. It sizzled through the darkness of space, a spear ready to skewer the planet like a kebab.

"Heron, all remaining ships, fire at will!" With Tyrannosaurus' blast on its way Kang Hui ordered the fury of the human armada released on their enemy.

Without hesitation thousands upon thousands of cannon blasts followed in the wake of Tyrannosaurus' shot. They were all carefully aimed to slip through the same channel, like threading a needle. Poseidon's secondary weapons systems, which packed as much punch as a fleet of capital ships, also spat out a salvo.

This was their chance to accomplish their goal in one final, decisive stroke. No one held back.

The resulting explosion was so intense it shook the distant ships. Burst after concussive burst rang in everyone's ears – a sound they would remember for all the rest of their days. Without the protection of the fog the ire of the human armada was heard, though it was difficult to tell how

much it was felt. Still, Kang Hui was confident in the capability of their unified assault.

“Middle Heaven, prepare Terminal Ray!” Kang Hui did not let up.

Against any normal planet the last hail of cannon fire would have been enough to split it in twain. However, Kang Hui did not want to underestimate their enemy, not in the slightest. Everything they had at their disposal, every weapon and tactic, he wanted thrown at their foes. They wouldn't stop until Europa was a cloud of space dust.

Flickers of angry amber light appeared around Middle Heaven as several beams were fired at once from different locations. They coalesced in front of the war planet into a single point of light so pregnant with energy space warped around it – Terminal Ray. The last time it was used in combat mankind walked away with several elite vital crystals. Now its aim was to obliterate Europa before it was converted into an alien paradise. To Kang Hui this was the *pièce de résistance*. The surface of the planet should already been a cratered hellscape, and once Terminal Ray made landfall Europa would be no more. It just needed to drill past the crust and into its core.

Kang Hui didn't put much stock in the stories of ancient immortal realms. To him the alien evolution was a process of energy consolidation. No matter how strong they got, once their planet was destroyed their evolution was finished.

At last, humanity's long, dark night was coming to an end!

The light of expectation glimmered in Kang Hui's eyes. One tortuous event after another had plagued them as they waited for this day! He and his species would survive. Kang Hui imagined seeing his family, heard the cheers of the people as they came back from this bloody campaign. Peace would reign again.

Suddenly a bone-deep fatigue washed over him. If he could go back he likely wouldn't join the army. He envied the life of the normal man, quiet and peaceful. At the very least he would want a nice, long vacation once this was all finished. Let the military function without him for a time, he

could avoid the interviews and galas and feasts.

The thoughts flitted through his mind, but did not impeded his command.

“Terminal Ray – fire!” Kang Hui coolly gave the order just as the blasts from Tyrannosaurus and the other ships were dying down.

Never let up! Let the attacks compound and make each other stronger. Kang Hui had considered everything that required consideration, and took all steps necessary to see this corrupted human planet destroyed.

Terminal Ray’s flash lasted only a moment. In what couldn’t have been longer than a fraction of a second, the piercing ray of light buried itself in Europa’s surface. The afterimage of its passage was burned in the eyes of spectators.

Would it be enough? Kang Hui’s fists had unconsciously clenched, and he wasn’t alone. Every commander of every ship watched in dread anticipation.

Kang Hui ordered everyone to fall back. Europa was among the largest planets to have been inhabited by humans. Once it exploded the scale of its detonation would cover a vast area. It would be very easy for their whole armada to be wiped out in the aftermath.

Gradually the lights all faded. The fog surrounding Europa continued to buck and writhe, except for the funnel created by the Soft Water bombs. Why was there no sound of explosion? Did the attack land?

Uncertainty wormed its way into Kang Hui’s mind. He could see clearly through the cavity in the clouds, peered through their telescopes and magnified on his screen. Europa’s surface was a world of golden purple, unscathed but for the crater where their attacks had landed. In the place where they’d aimed their barrage was a vortex of purple energy that fiercely swirled.

In the center of the vortex was a haze of golden orange light. That had to be the residual energy from Terminal Ray’s passage. The light began to grow, and as it did the whole of Europa started to shake ever so slightly.

Success?

Kang Hui's heart fluttered. He saw the shudders as a sign of impending collapse and ordered everyone to fall back as quickly as they could.

However it was then he noticed a change in the three planets affixed to Europa. They stretched and became oblate before eventually dissolving onto the surface of Europa. The purple orbs that were once Monarch, Queen and Consort shimmered gold and disappeared into the fog.

This...

Was Europa going to explode? When Kang Hui witnessed this scene he was painfully skeptical. If their target planet was going to die, why would the aliens merged with it?

A voice entered his mind, as cold as it was terrifying.

"Thank you for your bounty, humans!" The thought was clear and mocking.

Disquiet filled Kang Hui's heart. He wasn't the only one to hear the voice either – every single soul aboard every vessel heard the voice in their mind.

"Attack, attack with everything you've got!" Kang Hui shouted.

The home worlds weren't destroyed, and Europa wasn't going to explode. Kang Hui came to a dark and bitter understanding.

The effect of this intrusive thought had a dramatic effect on the soldiers. Their attacks were let loose on Europa, but wild and haphazard.

All four bastions had used their main weapons and needed time to recharge them, especially Middle Heaven. Terminal Ray was especially draining and it would be a while before the East's bastion could use it again.

The crater that they'd created with their attack was gone. The fog that surrounded Europa was dimmer now and threads of gold were spreading through it. At the same time it settled deeper into the atmosphere and thinned out, giving the beleaguered planet a misty, fantastical air.

Chapter 886: Revelations

As beautiful as Europa now was, it portend the end of the human race!

Blasts from the ships pummeled the planet but were swallowed up without so much as a whisper. Suddenly the planet was as deep as a black hole. No matter how much firepower was directed at it nothing left a mark.

“Hold your fire!” There was a flash of pin, and a figure appeared at Kang Hui’s shoulder. It was one of Skyfire Avenue’s founders, the Photographer.

Luo Xianni’s face was dark as she placed a hand on the admiral’s shoulder.

Kang Hui was understandably shaken. He snapped back at her. “Why?! We’re nearly there, we-“

Luo Xianni cut him off. “Shut up. Can’t you see that our attacks helped its evolution? The energy from them has boosted it, and now their immortal realm is almost complete. Keeping up your attack only hastens the process.”

Her reproach brought him back to his senses. Of course, ever since their attack on Europa began the planet had started to change. But what if she was wrong?

“Quickly! Do you want them to complete their process? They’ve reached the point of no return. Nothing your ships do now can harm it.” She tried again to convince him.

Kang Hui heaved a sigh. “Cease the attack,” he ordered. “All ships hold your fire.” He respected Luo Xianni and her status. She was, after all, the only Paragon alive who had stepped into the Infinite.

The flashes of cannon fire slowly tapered off. When the lights faded the scene that was revealed hung heavy on every heart. That place was no longer Europa. What had it become?

Luo Xianni scowled. “Lan Qing would have stopped you earlier.”

Kang Hui's face reddened but he did not share his misgivings. "Your Majesty," he said, "what should we do now?"

Her eyes flashed. "Wait. Wait for Lan Qing and the others. Those four are our only hope now. You've done all you can, the armada is of no use anymore. We were deceived by them from the very beginning.

Trap. The word gave Kang Hui pause but he quickly recovered. He broke out in a cold sweat and his face went pale.

"You mean, they meant to..."

Luo Xianni didn't respond except to nod.

Kang Hui's thoughts were in chaos but one thought rose to clarity above the others.

Yes! The aliens were strong and wise. Destroying humanity would only mean perfecting their strategy. In fact all they would have had to do was keep up the fight and total annihilation would have been inevitable for mankind. It was clear to everyone, especially once this final war had begun.

Once the home worlds were out of the equation, three bastions and twelve fleets from the human lands were repeatedly pummeled by the alien horde. Were it not for Lan Qing's superior tactics they wouldn't have come this far. Even then there were several times humanity was on the cusp of defeat.

For instance, the battle where most of their elite were on the field. If the armada had lost they would have been routed. Without the help of the Paragons they would have fallen before the Violet Prince for sure.

Strong as the horde was, how much more terrible would they be with the addition of the home worlds?

Those three planets were not comparable to a trio of bastion ships. Kang Hui had learned this the hard way in the Shattered Starfields. Against the planets and their horde, even the total might all of the Alliances – all their bastions, ships and soldiers – would likely fall.

Thinking about it, the aliens could have fought back with their full strength at any time. So then why didn't they? They were smart enough not to make such a glaring oversight! He was beginning to see that they were wiser than he gave them credit for. There was a method to their madness, as it were, and even the destruction of their army was part of the plan.

In constantly engaging the humans the horde had weakened them and kept the armada busy, but never lashed out with their full might. For instance, they never once attacked with all of their elite aliens at one time. At the outset Lan Jue and Qianlin weren't even Paragons much less having achieved Nirvana. If all of the alien generals had come for them then, humanity would have been utterly destroyed.

They chose not to. Instead they indulged the human fighters' clever tactics and bold strategies. Step by step they gave up ground and allowed their prey to retake the planets around Europa. All along they threw up hurdles and roadblocks that weakened them and attacked their morale.

It was all planned, even down to the moment they allowed the humans to destroy their army and focus their attack on Europa.

The change that had overcome the West's capitol only occurred after the concerted effort of the armada to destroy it. Was this merely coincidence? If one believed that the aliens completed their evolution at that very moment, who was in control? It certainly wasn't Kang Hui's side.

The possibilities stabbed at Kang Hui's heart. He was finally thinking clearly.

The greatest possibility was that the aliens had planned everything from the start. Losing was part of their strategy, allowing a series of defeats to lull the humans into a false sense of security. All of it leading up to today, where they'd laid in wait for the moment when the armada would turn their guns on Europa. The remaining alien soldiers were a ruse to draw them in.

The final steps of their evolution must require a tremendous amount of energy. Energy like that released by bastions, energy Europa could swallow

up and use to its own advantage. If this were true it meant the home worlds knew what was needed from the beginning. They'd masterfully guided the humans every step of the way to happily deliver the final piece.

What he and his soldiers had thought was the cusp of victory, was in fact the machinations of a vastly superior enemy. He'd given the order himself. His command gave the aliens precisely what they needed.

If all that were true than the entity they now faced was more terrifying than anything he could imagine. Everything had been perfectly calculated, exquisitely structured. It was too late now to take it all back.

Chapter 887: Insistence Leads to Ruin

Kang Hui was also struck by another thought, that of their hubris in thinking they understood their enemy. Namely, that the vital crystals were as important to the aliens as they were to humans. As the fighting grew more intense, humans took pains to capture vital crystals, thinking it was the crux of their effort to weaken the home worlds.

But in reality, was that so?

If the planets were willing to give up their elite representatives than these crystals couldn't be as important as they expected. Their evolution was clearly more of a concern, at least to where losing scores of high-grade crystals meant little.

If he took what the Skyfire Avenue luminaries said to be true then it made even more sense. Evolution created a new alien reality that would protect them from the dangers of universal protogenia. Once that threat was dealt with the aliens could continue to strengthen without fear of having their life force drained. With this being the case, what use would they have for the vital energy of lesser creatures?

Kang Hui's mind followed the string of considerations. Most of these crystals were created with energy stolen from humans and human worlds. Of course the beasts would be unperturbed by having them taken, since it was never theirs to begin with.

Kang Hui fell into his chair. These realizations came too late for them to make any changes to their tactics. All he could do was sit back and watch as their enemy achieved victory. Firing on the planet would only make it stronger.

The anger and disappointment churned his insides.

"I don't blame you!" Luo Xianni's voice had softened. "No one knew this was going to happen. I only saw it after the shot, when Europa began to change. A-Qing likely wouldn't have done any better, so don't be hard on yourself."

Kang Hui turned his red, tired eyes onto the Photographer. “Your Majesty, what should we do? Watch them evolve and wait for death?” The death he spoke of wasn’t just him or this army, he spoke for all of mankind! He didn’t believe for a second that the aliens would forget the humans and move on. Kang Hui and his people were doomed the moment this process was complete.

Luo Xianni answered in a low, solemn voice. “I can try. Perhaps vital energy will succeed where cosmic energy has failed.”

Cosmic energy was a concept discovered once humanity left for the stars. This was a catch-all phrase for energy created through transmutation or mechanics – for instance, the blast from a war ship’s cannon. In contrast vital energy was the energy created by living things, like the powers of Adepts and Paragons.

It had been proven over the long struggle against the aliens that they were more susceptible to vital energy. Cosmic energy, it was now revealed, actually helped them. In that case their only other option was to try and use the might of one’s life force to defeat the beasts.

Lan Qing and the others were still insulated while they improved their cultivation. Luo Xianni was the strongest Paragon left. She knew that while she was not strong enough to defeat the aliens on her own, perhaps she could improve the chances for her sons.

A flickering portal of pink light appeared, and Luo Xianni stepped through. When she emerged she was far above Europa.

The three alien home worlds had entirely disappeared, dissolving into one. Only Europa remained, wreathed in the golden-purple mist.

Kang Hui didn’t have the same sensitivity of perception as the Photographer. She could sense that the former human planet had undergone a large and dramatic change. It was saturated with energy, but to what degree she could not know. The truth was somehow shielded from her.

What she could tell was that the pressure of universal protogenia eased the closer she came to the planet.

This meant that the aliens' goal was a success. The greatest benefit of an immortal realm was protecting the denizens from the universe, and that's precisely what she felt now. The thieves of vitality were protected against the strongest force that could be turned on them, making them an almost insurmountable force. This was so whether the three worlds had merged into one or were somehow still separate.

As she pondered these things Luo Xianni lifted her right hand. Pink light began to shimmer within. She paid no heed to the stresses of universal protogenia, to the danger of its attentions. The light of her powers stretched until it began a thousand-meter long sword gripped in her palm.

She thrust it downward in an attempt to impale Europa.

As she expected the golden fog gathered when it came in contact with her powers. The effect was markedly improved over the cannon fire conveyed by the armada. The mists gave her a strange, sticky sensation like it was some kind of protective membrane. Strong as the Photographer was, she was somewhat surprised to find she could not break its defenses.

"Your efforts are futile, do not waste your energy. At your strength you must feel the persecution of universal protogenia, the same torture we had to endure. You should stand with us. The creation and maintenance of an immortal realm will need strong patrons, and you have the qualifications to join us. Make the right choice, and soon you shall arise to godhood."

The calm voice seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Luo Xianni ignored the voice and continued to pummel Europa. Though the golden haze shuddered under the weight of her onslaught it did not part. She knew it was a longshot, but to see her efforts fail caused Luo Xianni's heart to sink.

Europa and the three evil beings that possessed it were calm. Their evolution was nearly complete. Luo Xianni and Kang Hui's conjectures were right, through it all the human played right into the aliens' hands. Even Lan Qing's genius didn't see the invisible machinations that controlled them. Every seeming success was allowed by the beasts, another step toward sealing their own doom.

“Your insistence only seals your fate. You are the architect of your own ruin.” Monarch’s voice grew cold and harsh. “In many ways I will have shed the concept of race when my evolution is complete. I have chosen the shape of your species because your people are the only ones with experience contending against the tyranny of the universe. You nearly succeeded. Why do you struggle, when it is our aim to create the legacy your fallen gods left behind? Be at peace, I shall not proceed to destroy your species – it holds no further use for me. Rising to immortality means that consuming the vitality of others is no longer necessary. Our only goal is strength. With the protection of our immortal realm and the aid of cosmic energy, it is enough. Your species can still offer enough resources to aid in our improvement. With time we will be more powerful than any species before us – strong enough to consume the fractured pieces of the immortal realm left behind by your predecessors. Eventually we will replace this universe with one of our own creation, and we will be the true masters!”

The fervent tone in Monarch’s voice was clear. This was its real plan, its deepest desire.

All the while anguish flooded Luo Xianni’s heart. Her attacks were impudent at best, and she looked on as the purple haze was slowly being absorbed. Hardly a trace of it remained but she could not harm the planet anyway. She listened to his haughty revelations, to his assurance that he could steal the shape of her species and adopt the potency that was their birthright. Once the purple was gone entirely, the process would be complete.

My sons, can your swords truly triumph over this monster?

Luo Xianni never once lost track of Lan Qing and Lan Jue’s auras, even now. She sensed problems when they first tried to employ the Banishing Strategy, the greatest of which was their deficient cultivation. The Banishing Blades were too powerful to wield and utilizing the Banishing Stance required a nearly unfathomable amount of strength. What’s more the threat of universal protogenia was always present. If they reached the Infinite there was real risk that summoning the Strategy would mean their

undoing. Even the mightiest immortals feared the cosmos.

Her attacks subsided. Luo Xianni knew that nothing she did would work.

“Do you see? Take heart in your epiphany.” Monarch’s voice was almost warm, feminine.

“So now there’s only one of you?” Luo Xianni coolly asked.

Chapter 888: The Ignorance of Humanity

Monarch's response was tepid. "Some sacrifices are necessary in order for our evolution to succeed. Ah, yes – from the fragments of your species' DNA I acquired some knowledge. During the time of greatest influence your immortal realm had a caste of immortals called the Da Luo. I suspect that if things continue at their current rate I shall achieve this level in no more than a hundred years. From that point forward I can focus on strengthen this immortal realm. You must come, join me. You need only open your heart and allow me to place my mark on your soul. Then you shall be one of us."

Luo Xianni sniffed a laugh. "Become one of you? You mean be devoured? Do you think I believe even one word of what you've said? It doesn't matter what you turn into, you're still an abomination. You will never been human – you can never teach a dog to stop eating shit [1. Best phrase ever. Use it with your friends and family.]. It doesn't matter what you look like or what world you create, the facts will never change. You've done nothing more than profit off the hard work my species has done for millennia. So here is my response to your offer; I won't be your food. Everything you've said is idiotic nonsense."

For a moment Monarch was silent. When it spoke once again there was a tone of disappointment in its voice. "It appears you humans have grown wiser. Indeed, in my eyes your kind are nothing more than lesser life forms – so much wasted potential. You have lost any sense of how to utilize it, unlike your ancestors. The success of your forbearers to create an immortal realm was magnificent, but in all the time since you humans have squandered your birthright. You're right, I must continue to feed. Achieving my perfection means I must continue to devour powerful genetic material. I can only get it from your kind. But why do you refuse me? Why is it so unacceptable to be a part of me? Of something greater?"

"Do you think your defiance means something? If you refuse, do you think I will not simply take what I want? If you submit yourself you will save yourself from suffering. I may even chose to preserve your

consciousness. But for now... - hnggh!"

The remaining fog around Europa gathered together into an enormous hand. It groped for Luo Xianni.

She was ready. In a flash she was far away and out of Monarch's reach. She was unable to break its defenses, but at least until the monster's evolution was complete she could still flee. However she could tell from the faded purple light around Europa that the evolution was mere moments from completion.

"It is just a matter of time. All you can do is wait for me to viit destruction upon your people!" Monarch hissed.

Just then several glints of light flickered around Middle Heaven. A series of figured emerged and were heading toward Luo Xianni.

After Luo Xianni's revelations from before, the truth was quickly unraveled by others. Those that came toward here now were the rest of Skyfire Avenue's Paragons.

"Aunt, what should we do?" It was the Wine Master who asked her. His face was stern, for though there appeared to be little they could do he could not wait for death!

She answered somberly. "The only thing we can do is wait for Lan Qing and the others to employ the Banishing Stance. Only, they haven't - "

Before she could finish her thought four rays of light shined out from within Middle Heaven. Turquoise, white, red, blue. Like four heavenly spears they shot out toward where the Paragons had gathered. For a moment it was like all of space was painted in those magnificent colors. Suddenly four more figures joined them.

The lights weren't from the Banishing Blades. They came from the bodies of Lan Qing, Lan Jue, the Pharmacist, and Zhou Qianlin.

Lan Qing's entire body radiated the blue-green light, making him look fantastical. Lan Jue flashed with pulses of red light. Zhou Qianlin's blue aura was ever changing. Finally, the Pharmacist's light was the most pure, the snow-white purity of murderous intent.

The four of them appeared at precisely the right moment, pillars of strength in a sea of uncertainty. The Paragons were less anxious in their presence. There was a shimmer of light and Li Ke appeared from Lan Qing's body.

"You're successful?" The Wine Master asked Lan Jue. He sensed something inscrutable about the young man that wasn't there before. As a Reflection of Heaven and Earth the old Paragon still couldn't tell the depths of Lan Jue's newfound abilities.

Lan Jue responded calmly. "It isn't clear, we'll only know once we try. There's no time to lose."

Indeed it was true, they couldn't wait. Once the evolution was complete their chances of survival fell away to nothing. Everything rested on their ability to enact the Banishing Strategy before Monarch could succeed.

Lan Qing nodded his head. The four sword bearers floated out into space. They didn't spread too far before stopping and turned to face one another. The lights that radiated from them became all the more resplendent.

Lan Jue's eyes were sharp and glinted in the starlight. As bearer of Captus he was not leader of the four blades, but he was the strongest Paragon present. It fell to him to lead the attempt.

The reflection of the cosmos reflected in his deep eyes. Star twinkled back making his gaze bright and brilliant. It almost seemed to make all the universe brighter. His aura began to swell and expand. A purple crown appeared placed upon his head as his body became larger. It was his dharmic image, the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety.

Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain was contained within. Luo Xianni suddenly sensed her son's aura surge, surpassing Nirvana and peeking into the realm of the Infinite. In the same moment the pressure of universal protogenia was evident all around them. She could feel Lan Jue's life force draining.

In the midst of his transformation Zhou Qianlin was next. She swayed

and grew, clad in a magnificent fluttering white robe. Guanyin, the Queen of Heaven! Her body flickered a hundred shades of blue, but there was also a shell of white light that emerged from her. The warm light spread until it hung over all four of them. To Lan Jue his body instantly felt lighter as the pain of universal protogenia was forced away.

Very quickly Qianlin's powers also arose to the Infinite. It was a temporary increase from her dharma and Domain, but she nonetheless commanded supreme power.

Clearly the results of their quarantine were good, better than they might have anticipated. At least their cultivation had reached the upper levels of Nirvana. With Qianlin's help Lan Qing and the Pharmacist enjoyed good stability from their empowered abilities.

As the four young warriors began to prepare, the Photographer turned to address the other Paragons. "We have to serve as their custodians, this is our last chance. No matter what, we must help them succeed."

Her words were cryptic, but everyone knew precisely what she meant. This could very well be their final moments, victory or defeat were near at hand. Only the Banishing Strategy could save them. At Luo Xianni's instructions they spread out and made a defensive line.

Kang Hui, still seated in the control room, had come back to his senses. When he saw the two brothers appear on his screens, his heart was filled with resolve.

"Listen up. Tyrannosaurus reposition to the fore. Middle Heaven, take up position in the rear..." The armada's formation was restructured as per his commands.

Tyrannosaurus slowly moved to the front and blocked the Paragons from view of Europa. Poseidon was on their left, Heron on the right, and Middle Heaven behind. The ten fleets took up defensive positions.

If this was their last chance, Kang Hui wasn't going to allow the aliens to interrupt it.

"You foolish humans. How can you not see that your opposition is in

vain?” Monarch’s voice echoed again in everyone’s ear. It was harsh as ever, but if one listened closely they might hear something else in the monster’s voice.

The golden light that surrounded Europa, its shield, began to ripple. It started small, but soon became towering waves of energy that circumnavigated the planet.

It was afraid! Kang Hui’s eyes went wide. He could see the change coming over Europa from the bridge and knew that Monarch was urging more energy into its defenses. It could only mean the monster was afraid of what those swords might do.

The aliens had been ahead of them every step of the way, and their responses had always been spot on. This reaction had significance as well, namely that Monarch must have felt the danger headed its way. This returned a glint of hope to Kang Hui’s troubled heart. By now all the ships were in place, shields glimmered around every battleship and bastion. Lan Jue and the others were covered front, back, left, right, up and down. They were defended on all sides. All the strength of the human armada was turned toward defense, charged with making sure Lan Jue’s mission was a success.

Lan Jue floated calmly in space. “Not copper, not iron, not steel; Once hidden beneath the stones of Mount Meru.” Suddenly there was a flash of red around him and he was encased in a keen aura. All at once he was like Captus in human form. The power of the sword spilled out of his every pore.

Zhou Qianlin’s crystalline voice followed. “The perversion of yin-yang did not it make; What flame or fluid could dull its edge?” A hundred thousand copies of Demortus appeared, glittering blue like a crystal forest. They spread far and wide, so much that the Paragons defending them were forced to move farther back.

Chapter 889: Formation

The Pharmacist voice rang out. “Ultus – sharp, Occisus – death, Captus – universal red light, Demortus – the ever changing.” A surge of white light shot out and brought with it a stifling brutal aura. Slashes of Occisus’ energy criss-crossed the breadth of where its aura reached. The stronger her cultivation rose, the brighter Occisus burned.

Lan Qing was last to speak the words. “Immortals, eternal and marvelous, have their robes stained with blood.” The refreshing hue of Ultus arose as though summoned and coiled around him. Turquoise light shot into the sky and all at once the four Banishing Blades began to hum. Though the weapons themselves were yet to appear, all four of their bearers were illuminated by their power.

Halfway through their seclusion the four Paragons saw an increase to their cultivation, especially Lan Qing and the Pharmacist. Both of them broke through to Nirvana and in doing so understood how difficult enacting the Strategy would be. The more they learned of this unique power the more they saw what it would require. The sheer cost in energy was staggering to consider, only a true immortal could reliably stand it. The greatest weapon under heaven was aptly named, and just as dangerous to wield.

After some discussion – and with the help of Xuanyuan Shishi, Jun Yongye and Li Ke – they came to a bold decision. They would give their bodies fully to their swords, so that these great and terrible instruments of destruction would become a part of them.

The benefits of doing this were that they and the swords became inexorably linked. In many ways they became the Banishing Blades, and the blades became them. All the energy within them, including their protogenia and vital energy, could be used to galvanize the weapons. Thus their chances of successfully laying out the Banishing Strategy increased.

However this was not without dangers. After carefully studying the strategy they discovered that once the strategy was unleashed it could not

be stopped. The swords would ravenously devour all the energy it could. If it worked all of their problems would be solved. But if it failed the four of them would be the first ones to lose their lives.

Before becoming one with the swords there had existed the possibility they could break off the strategy and at least escape with their lives. Such possibilities no longer existed now that they were united. IF the Strategy became unstable, they would die.

However, despite the dangers all four agreed. The time had come to burn the boats and turn their eyes forward – this was their last resort. People fought hardest to live when they were faced with the certainty of death. If they were given no option of retreat the four sword bearers would be bound to give their all.

This was not to say they didn't examine contingencies. Triumph or defeat, they would have to submit to the will of heaven.

The four mighty emanations from the blades mingled among one another. Threads of ethereal light spread out from each person and made the scene indistinct. They wrapped around one another until they created a series of mystical runes – four in total, one of each sword bearer. The runes hovered over them causing reality to ripple from the injection of power.

They'd started close to each other, but as the runes appear there appeared a gulf. From outside it seemed large enough to swallow whole planets, and was growing larger.

ξ

Aboard Poseidon.

“Get out of the way!” Hua Li glared at Mo Xiao. His growling voice was anything but tender.

Mo Xiao threw open her arms in defiance. “I will not. I'm not letting you leave. There are already many Paragons looking over them, and besides you're only in the Realm of Protogenia. Do you think there's that big of a difference without you there? What does going out there achieve? Can't

you do more good staying here, commanding this bastion?”

Hua Li roared back at her. “Of course not! My friends and compatriots are out there putting it all on the line for humanity, and what am I doing sitting here? I need to be out there too, protecting them. I may not be the strongest of them but any help can make a difference.”

Mo Xiao’s eyes were full of pain. “He’s always been the most important thing to you, hasn’t she. This isn’t about your brothers, it’s about him.”

Hua Li paused for a moment. Glaring daggers, he hissed at her. “Get out of the way!”

“No! You’ll have to kill me first. Those aliens have almost completed their evolution, we should get far away from here. Every asset and every life of Poseidon Group is on this ship, our whole future. If we wait until their evolution is complete it will be too late. If you go out there now how can we retreat?”

“You’re still thinking about leaving, now of all times?” Hua Li screamed. “If you want to leave, then leave. I am not going anywhere, no matter what. I will live or die with my compatriots, fighting to the very last moment. You would see Poseidon Group running away when all of mankind was facing destruction?”

Hua Li took a threatening step forward, seeking to push Mo Xiao to the side and leave.

Mo Xiao, of course, was no match for him. She was pushed away but swung back and wrapped her arms around Hua Li’s waist.

“Don’t go, I’m begging you. Don’t go!” Tears ran freely down her face. In this moment she was nothing like the president of Poseidon Group. She was a normal woman, stricken and helpless.

“Release me.” Hua Li sighed, and the anger in his face eased. “I know we should leave – for the Group, for our family. I know. But I just can’t do it. When I leave take everyone and flee this place. The Group only needs you and... and our child. That’s all the family needs in case something happens to me. But you have to understand that I can’t go with you. For my

comrades, for the family, it doesn't matter. If the Banishing Strategy is successful and the aliens are slain, everything we've accomplished up to now would be wasted. We will have become the enemy of all humanity, deserters and scoundrels. It will be the end of us. Whatever way you look at it, I have to go out there."

Choked with sobs, Mo Xiao replied. "I don't care, I don't. I just want you to be safe. You don't have to love me, you don't have to be my husband, I just don't want anything to happen to you. I just want to be able to see you every day."

An ache crossed Hua Li's expression. "Enough, let me go. I have to do this. Just like you feel, I feel the same to the one in my heart. Don't you think I know everything you've done?"

When his words washed over her Mo Xiao shook. Her arms went slack but she did not let go.

Hua Li tightly shut his eyes against the pain. "I'm right, it was you. But what can I do? Although we can't truly be man and wife, how can I not know how you feel about me? And me, I am human and have my own selfish wishes. But I saw suffer terrible, silent all the while. Do you think I could stand that? What's done is done, but I will never forget what you did. All I want is to fight by his side, even if it means my death. One last escapade. I'm sorry Mo Xiao. Maybe in the next life..."

Suddenly his body was encased in light, and the Poseidon Group's patriarch shot off as a ray of light. Mo Xiao cried out with a heart-wrenching wail and fell to the floor. She lay there quivering with sobs, tears falling in torrents.

"A-Li... A Li..."

Messages from the various departments of the Poseidon family crackled through her communicator. They all made the same request; that they leave as quickly as possible.

The department heads were chosen for being intelligent, discerning individuals. Each of them knew what was happening to Europa. The aliens were evolving, and there was no way to stop them. Just as Mo Xiao had

pleaded, they begged her for permission to leave on behalf of the family's safety. But Hua Li had left, how could she give the order?

Mo Xiao clawed her way back to her command desk and fell into the chair. Gritting her teeth, she gave them her orders.

A few moments later a beam of blue light was blasting off from Poseidon into the distance. It was a vessel, perhaps the size of a Capital ship, with a hull that glittered crystalline blue from bow to stern. It seemed less metal and more gemstone.

The ship sped off into the recesses of space. In a blink, all trace of it was gone. The cries of a small infant rang through its largely empty halls.

ξ

Golden mist rotated rapidly around the planet, spreading out to create an effective shield. Gradually the mist became more transparent, and Europa's situation was revealed to everyone. To everyone's surprise there was no ferocity within the enveloping light. Instead the scene was stunningly beautiful.

Spectacular vistas appeared on the surface of Europa. Towering mountains and picturesque valleys spread as far as they could see. The planet was rife with all kinds of vegetation. Never had Europa looked so magnificent. However, any sign of the cities that once graced its surface was gone.

It had become a fairyland, like in the tales of old. Beneath the golden shell of light it was a paradise that took everyone's breath away.

Europa continued to slowly spin, each rotation causing the golden light to ripple. As the seconds ticked by the golden shell became more transparent. It remained settled above the world perhaps ten thousand meters above its atmosphere.

Chapter 890: A Planet's Transformation, Complete

Were it not for the fact that they knew this to be an enemy to their species, they would be stricken by its magnificence.

An Immortal Realm? Was this the paradise these monsters wished to build for themselves?

Kang Hui was similarly taken aback. He suddenly found himself questioning his doubt over the old tales. Before his eyes the aliens were establishing a new heaven, but an empty one. No gods roamed its vistas. All they felt was an impregnable quality.

No sooner had the throat crossed Kang Hui's mind than the atmosphere of Europa gathered together. A glorious scene of golden clouds appeared before him, and from its depths appeared a single figure.

From the depths of space the admiral saw him, clear as if he were standing a few feet away. The bastion blocked the view for the Paragons, but they watched a stream of the feed on their communicators.

Monarch. Unmistakably, Monarch.

This was one different from his avatars. He was clad in an opulent robe of silk with a crown upon his head. Monarch looked like the Jade Emperor himself from the old Chinese tales. His golden attire was as stately as it was magnificent, silhouetted against the shining clouds behind. He looked transcendental.

Monarch's 'voice' boomed far across space. "Witness this, the birth of an era; the era of new gods. Those who surrender will be lifted up as custodians of our new paradise. We will strive toward our goal of usurping the universe, together. Those who resist will be reduced to dust and lost to the darkness of time."

The more he spoke the more it seemed like a tale from the pages of ancient history. This newly crafted utopia and its robe-clad master were exactly as they were described thousands of years ago.

Was it done? Was his ascension complete?

The Paragons surrounded Lan Qing and the others felt their hearts drop into their stomachs. They were a moment too late. Now they looked on helplessly at the culmination of the aliens' plans. Three had become one, the Paragons shuddered to think how powerful this single being was.

Kang Hui sat silent on the bridge, staring at the scene unfold. He didn't dare give the order to attack, he knew the calamity it would cause. Long ago the ships had put all power to their shields, though little help it would serve them. For now they just waited.

From a strictly scientific standpoint there was nothing to suggest this planet was a threat aside from its anomalous creation. Only, just then Europa began to move. It began by spinning, and picked up speed until it was kicked off its orbit. It slowly began to bear down on their position.

Needless to say it was a big deal when a planet shifted orbit. It was not a common thing to witness.

Turning An Lun from a planet into a bastion had taken the East years of toil. It was only possible because of the world's molinite core. There had never been anything like it before.

In contrast to An Lun, Europa was several times larger. As it moved, it destabilized the whole galaxy.

"Do you still not understand?" Monarch's voice was cold and distant. The golden clouds beneath his feet began to swirl like a tempest around him. As they watched his body began to grow.

In mere moments Monarch was a colossus. He was a pillar that literally joined heaven and earth. So large in fact that Europa looked less like a planet and more like a vehicle for this humongous god. The aura that had protected it adapted to fit.

Monarch was already several times the size of Tyrannosaurus. Although the Paragons could also grow in size, even at their largest they were infinitesimal compared to this monster.

"Attack!" Kang Hui shouted.

Tyrannosaurus, having had its main guns charged and ready, fired a salvo. A beam of supercharged energy headed right for Monarch's mouth.

"Naïve." He scowled at the humans with thick disdain. Confident in his abilities Monarch stretched out his right hand to intercept the shot.

He was going to block a bastion's main weapon with his bare hand! Stunned, the humans looked on as he caught the attack in the palm of his hand. Instantaneously a white light appeared around Monarch and caused him to grow even further. Shots from other bastions and ships didn't even make the golden aura ripple. Each blow was sucked up like water.

"I have already told you, this is paradise. You mortals have no power here." Europa heaved Monarch forward as the beast thrust a palm toward Tyrannosaurus.

Dodging wasn't an option. Monarch's sheer size outclassed Tyrannosaurus by several times.

Boom- -! The force of the impact seemed to make the whole universe shake. The explosion that followed was almost deafening.

The first vessels to erupt were the support vessels in front of Tyrannosaurus. Their strongest shields meant nothing, they were wisps of smoke before Monarch reached them. Once his palm began to rip through the ones that were left behind showed them this was a real physical entity, not some illusion.

Whatever unfortunate crew was the palm when it passed were destroyed. Majestic ships became burning balls of slag in the blink of an eye. Nothing seemed to stop it, until Monarch's strike eventually came into contact with Tyrannosaurus.

Bo-o-omm--! The explosion tore across hundreds of thousands of kilometers. Monarch power was beyond humanity's worst expectations.

Tyrannosaurus shield only held for three seconds, then it was knocked away. An enormous palm print was embedded across one hemisphere.

Spectators all across space were silent. Tyrannosaurus was one of the most outstanding achievements accomplished by man. Never would they

have thought to see the day when it would be swatted away like a fly, yet that is precisely what happened.

What they did not know that their precious ship survived only by the grace of Monarch himself. If he'd willed it, put all of his power into that palm, he could have eliminated Tyrannosaurus entirely.

Without Tyrannosaurus, Lan Jue and the other Paragons were revealed to the newly ascended deity.

Heron was screaming in from the side with its guns aimed on Monarch. On the other flank, Poseidon was doing the same. Both of them engaged with cannon fire. No one expected their shots to do any damage, they only hoped to give the sword bearers more time.

Middle Heaven was moving in quick from the rear. It was already glowing orange, all of the core was being tapped. It looked like a giant comet. Their shots were meaningless, so the bastions aimed to put themselves physically between the Paragons and this monster.

A sneer slithered across Monarch's face. As the bastions were bearing down on him, suddenly he was gone.

No, not gone. Smaller. In a blink of golden light his massive form was gone and the bastions lost their target and were in danger of running into each other. Pilots raced to get the ships under control and avoided a collision.

Middle Heaven was still heading right for Europa. It was flung back by that thin but impossibly firm aura of golden light.

Monarch returned to the size of an average human and appeared before the Paragons. Light surrounded him, lent from Europa. He did not rush to attack, deigning instead to peer in curiosity at the streamers of luminescence that hung in the air. They'd already begun to weave themselves into the Banishing Strategy. He allowed the sensation to wash over him in silence.

Everyone was afraid. If this being could slap aside an entire bastion, what sort of damage could it do to them?

The Banishing Strategy also seemed to be nearing completion. Lan Jue and the others were lost within the blazing amalgamation of light. The only sign they remained was the odd flicker of their respective hues. However no one could be sure when – and if – the Strategy would be completed.

“Is this your means of defeating me? Indeed it does possess a peculiar quality. Even as a god I can sense the danger in it.” Monarch spoke as though he were musing out loud, or like a mouse teasing a rat it had caught. He was in no rush, he wanted to sate his curiosity.

“Let me take a closer look.” He lifted his hand and two figured appeared in a flash of light. One was the Violet Prince, and the other was the three-headed six armed abomination Lan Jue had fought against.

Both of them were surrounded by golden light as well.

“Try to harm them. Let’s see how they react.” Monarch cooed.

He looked down on the humans with eyes full of arrogance, even though he knew the sort of power Ultus contained.

Chapter 891: Golden Immortal Monarch

He'd waited for this this day – this moment – for many long years. He'd hidden like a rat from the fury of universal protogenia ever since his power became too great to hide. He'd wracked his brain day in and day out, trying to find a way to protect himself.

At last he had found his answer. In joining with Queen and Consort they'd created a realm of their own, and a singular entity to rule over it. He had arisen to the status of a Golden Immortal. [1. Immortals have their own levels, and the golden immortals are among the highest.]

To his knowledge there were no other beings like him in all of the universe.

So this is what the ancient human immortals felt, he told himself. It was glorious, and one more step toward the ultimate power of Da Luo Golden Immortality.

Upon becoming a golden immortal, Monarch enjoyed the protection of the immortal realm. He no longer had to fear retribution from universal protogenia. To be finally unfettered was comforting beyond expression. With the immortal realms protection he could employ his full power without hesitation.

After the brief display of his abilities he felt that nothing could stand in his way. These humans – even the Photographer for all her power – were no more than insects before him.

It was true that there was a faint sense of danger from the Banishing Blades. However, as the greatest living creature in all of space and time he need not hide any longer. The time for shrinking away had passed, and the danger he perceived only increased his fervor. It was an opportunity to flex his new muscles.

Changes had come over the Violet Prince and the three headed abomination as well. It was clear as they rushed forward to deal with the humans. Like Monarch they were protected from universal protogenia by the presence of their immortal realm, and thus were able to use their full

strength. The benefits were especially evident for the hydra, whose powers had risen beyond that of the Infinite and approached immortal-level.

For the humans, Luo Xianni led the defensive charge. She was joined by the Wine Master, Clockmaker, Driver, Keeper, Bookworm and the Gourmet. There was also the newly arrived Hua Li and Ch Cheng, as well as the Pauper, and the two Gods of Wine. Twelve all together, with the singular aim of protecting Lan Jue and his three companions.

Luo Xianni's face was a somber mask. She knew that the appearance of a golden immortal reduced their chance of success tremendously. She did not understand why Monarch didn't hurry to destroy the Strategy himself, but she wasn't going to give up an opportunity to fight back.

With this determined passion in her heart she led the way. The pink camera in her hand flashed again and again. She couldn't stop them, but she could at least slow her enemies down.

Without Lan Jue and the other sword bearers, these twelve Paragons were in dire straights. Indeed Luo Xianni was with them, but besides her only the Wine Master and Clockmaker were Reflections of Heaven and Earth. The Driver was next, at the upper borders of the Realm of Protogenia.

Against two creatures who no longer had to fear universal protogenia, it seemed like more than they could handle. Battle broke out in dramatic fashion, with the light of their clash blasted through the area as the Paragons fought for their lives.

Monarch turned and swung his attention toward the four bastions, which had since regrouped. He held himself with an almost playful air. Tyrannosaurus had been severely damaged but could continue fighting. Of course, at this point all their guns were useless.

None of their attacks had any affect against Monarch. On the contrary the energy from them seemed to make him stronger. They were forced to look on, silent and ineffectual.

Monarch narrowed his eyes, focusing on the shifting forces within him and the perfection of the immortal realm he'd created. After its creation

was complete, his internal environment was ever changing – affected by the presence and power of Europa. This was a special sort of protogenia, one he'd studied for years locked in human genetics.

In many ways he'd build this place based on the ancestral memory of the human immortal plane. That mythical land was the foundation he would build upon. His immortal realm would continue to grow just like him, evolving as more immortal creatures took residence within.

Monarch had only just stepped through the door. He searched the collected knowledge and experience of the human species, gathered through their DNA, looking for a way to quickly improve their strength.

The answer came to him quickly. The quickest route was the power of faith.

In the days of the immortal they continued to grow and expand their immortal realm through the faith of the common man. The stronger these past immortals became the more they lent to the realm itself, which in turn protected them more effectively.

That was then.

Monarch became to outline the makings of a plan. Suddenly it seemed destroying the human race was not the most effective use of his powers. Devouring them would help him minimally, if at all, even for someone like Luo Xianni. Consuming another's life force would only help him if he were feeding on other immortals.

In addition, his immortal realm required more denizens, not less. Killing those with the most potential was counter intuitive. It was better to subjugate these humans and become their master. Through their faith he would be made greater.

Suddenly he was less willing to turn his hand against his future subjects. He had enough power now to capture these Paragons. Once they were made more pliable – reeducated, as it were – they could become the first caste of immortals in the world he had built. Monarch was pleased with the idea.

Realizing these plans would not be difficult. As for the Banishing Blades, he figured they had to be relics from the human's ancient gods, passed down through the years. Admittedly part of the reason he did not move to stop them was because he was curious. What were these weapons capable of, these creations of the old pantheon? When they came under his control, how could he use them to his benefit?

As an immortal his perception was near omniscient. He saw that the four sword bearers were yet to unleash the true power of these weapons. And so, he chose to watch and commit their process to memory.

Indeed Lan Jue and his companions had come upon a problem. The demands of the swords were growing to be more than they could offer.

Thanks to Qianlin's Queen of Heaven powers they were recovering energy quickly, but they were still overwhelmed. What's more they were not blind to the chaos around them, speed would ensure the greatest effect against their foes. They also feared the backlash if Monarch interrupted their process.

The light from the four swords had almost completed arranging itself, but fear still broiled in the hearts of Lan Jue and his friends. Once the arrangement was complete the Banishing Strategy would unleash its true power. Monarch would surely sense the threat to his life and would have to respond with his full might. This was before they considered how much energy the strategy would drain from them in order to complete the ritual.

"We have to finish it, even if we must sacrifice ourselves." Lan Qing shouted.

Li Ke had not revealed it to them, but Lan Qing had discovered mysteries of his own while researching the strategy. He discovered a method by which they could complete the ritual even if they didn't have the needed power. Self-sacrifice. They could offer up their own life force to fuel the Strategy's completion.

Of course this was a tragic prospect, but one they had to consider. There were no other choices, and the cost of failure was too high. Thus the sword bearers joined with the weapons, and in so doing made themselves

into fuel for the terrible fires of the Banishing Strategy.

The hydra-beast came at the Paragons flailing its six weapons, pushing them back one by one. Were it not for the Driver's Primordial lightning and the danger it presented, the monster would have quickly cut them all down.

Meanwhile the Photographer was struggling to contain the Violet Prince. She was struggling against the threat of universal protogenia, and was still a novice to the powers of the Infinite. In contrast the Prince fought back without fear of consequence. In addition the immortal realm was constantly feeding him energy. It was only a matter of time before Luo Xianni was overcome.

Tens of thousands of soldiers were forced to watch. There was nothing they could do. The fight was also being live streamed all across human space. Official channels had been shut down across the North and East, however, as the situation unfolded. Politicians, who'd witnessed Tyrannosaurus being swatted away, had lost any hope of victory. Many were preparing to flee.

Perhaps, these people thought, if they got far enough away there was a chance they could survive. Staying would be waiting for death. This new creature and the world it had created was beyond their darkest nightmares.

Tendrils of light continued to gather, layer upon layer painted in the four hues of the Banishing Blades. The foundation of the Banishing Strategy was complete. However, pulses of energy revealed that it had become unstable.

"Truly pathetic!" Monarch felt something, some inexplicable sense that put him on edge. He waved his right hand and two waves of golden light washed over the Violet Prince and the hydra.

Both alien champions experienced a mighty surge in power. Luo Xianni took a head-on punch from the Prince that sent her sprawling. For the others the situation was worse. The Pauper got caught by a direct strike from the abomination and was cut down. His body exploded into dust and

was no more. Skyfire Avenue had lost another Paragon.

There was no time for sorrow. The three-headed, six-armed monster did not let up. The Keeper and Bookworm exchange a silent but telling glance as their bodies began to glow. Lan Qing had stopped them before. Now it seemed like it was finally their time.

Chapter 892: Suppression

Suddenly a thick and oppressive aura filled the air.

Four beams of light split the sky as they shot up. Turquoise, white, red and blue seemed to paint all the universe. A primitive, almost primordial sensation poured from the columns as they appeared.

Four figured previously hidden by the glare were again revealed.

Hovering above Lan Jue's head was Captus, whose length was covered in golden runes. Much like the first time his dharma manifested itself as the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety, all of the sword's powers were brought to bear.

Lan Qing, Zhou Qianlin and the Pharmacist appeared in similarly resplendent fair. Like Lan Jue, their swords appeared overhead and blazed with golden runes. The cocoon of light that had enveloped them was replaced by a bizarre and motley display. Pure chaos reigned all around them.

Monarch, who had just thrown aside caution for curiosity, watched in awe. His pupils contracted to tiny pits of black, for suddenly the nagging sense of danger had become a screaming alarm. The ethereal aura of Europa that he relied on for protection was in danger of scattering like a morning mist before the light of the Banishing Blades.

What was this power, that even immortal qi was rendered ineffectual? Did these humans actually possess a way to harm a god?

All throughout this conflict with the humans Monarch had carefully planned every step. Even Lan Qing's victories were part of the alien master's schemes. Everything had followed the path he laid out. The only thing outside of his control were the Banishing Blades.

Monarch even knew when Lan Jue and the Pharmacist had snuck into his planetary person. He'd been curious as to their purpose, what would cause them to undertake such a risk? Why was that sword so important? He hadn't taken them for granted either, and left his strongest avatar to

protect Ultus. However, much to his surprise the sword itself revolted and allowed itself to be pilfered from his very heart.

It was the only circumstance to fall outside of his control. The consequences of this oversight was coming back to haunt him.

The time for playing with his prey had passed. Monarch leaped forward to try and interrupt the Strategy. Still the size of an average human, he pressed out with his hands toward the chaotic flows amongst the four sword bearers.

The golden light emitted from his strike was not overly spectacular. However, the pulse of energy released from him was so intense that all of the Paragons – and the two aliens that aided him – were knocked backward. So intense was the shockwave that the human ships swayed dangerously and threatened to be crushed.

They were lost!

To Luo Xianni everything went dark. Clearly the Banishing Strategy was not yet completed and Monarch had had time to interrupt it. All was lost, the Strategy was defeated. Humanity's final hope was too late and the alien home worlds had won!

A terrible scream tore through her mind. She felt waves of shock wash over her, including from the Violet Prince and the three-headed avatar. Luo Xianni steeled herself and forced her attention toward the site of the Banishing Strategy where she was greeted with an incredible scene.

Monarch's arms were outstretched and the golden light from his palms hung over the area of the Banishing Strategy. Underneath the canopy of that light the chaos continued to swirl, gently at first until with a thunderous burst it broke free.

Even as powerful as Monarch had become, in the moment the power broke through his containment he found himself sluggish – frozen. Unable to move, the flood of pure chaos smashed into him.

In the moments following an even stranger spectacle emerged. The golden light that demonstrated Europa's protection vanished, like snow on

a spring morning. It was suppressed! The thought struck Luo Xianni as she watched, and once more hope sprang to life in her chest.

The Banishing Strategy was not yet completely set out, and yet even still it was effective. More than effective – it was able to contend against a golden immortal's direct attack! It meant humanity was not yet doomed.

The Violet Prince and his companion gaped at what they witnessed. Both of them had felt the terrifying might of that chaos. Before Monarch had been swallowed up by it they'd felt his intention telling them to attack the sword bearers.

Once Monarch had fallen into their clutches Lan Jue and the others began to blaze with light. That realm of unbridled chaos began to shrink once its prey was captured, as though Monarch had been captured in a universe that was rapidly decaying.

With a dangerous flash in his eye Lan Jue indicated with his right hand. Captus, which was ringing with the power of the Strategy, released a gust of red power into the stream.

Zhou Qianlin was next, and Demortus' blue light joined. As it mingled with Captus' intent both were made more powerful. The Banishing Strategy's already magnificent strength was magnified.

Lan Qing and the Pharmacist followed their example, channeling the essence of their swords into the stream. From the outside the Strategy was a riot of color, including the flickering golden light from Monarch. However, that golden light was quickly weakening.

Lan Jue and the others stared with intense focus, even as their bodies began to become transparent. With every change of their swords, every burst of light, the results were reflected in their bodies. As the Strategy grew stronger so did they, as though they were bound to it body and soul.

The Banishing Strategy became a tempest, fully established and with Monarch the center of its harrowing focus. Next was to let it loose.

The Banishing Strategy was stratified into several levels. Lan Jue and his companions were aiming to accomplish only its simplest manifestation.

While to the Paragons outside everything was clear and bright, to Lan Jue and the other sword bearers their weapons were insatiable pits that drank everything in.

As they continued their struggle to summon the power of the Strategy, the pressure suffered by the Paragons outside only grew. With Monarch caught, the Prince and the avatar fought like wild animals.

With the Pauper dead the defenders were reduced to eleven. Luo Xianni was a mighty power on their side, but she could feel universal protogenia imposing its limits on her abilities. It was increasingly more difficult to keep the Violet Prince at bay. And if it was difficult for her, the situation was far more dire for the ten paragons tasked with containing the three-headed avatar.

The Driver had emerged as the leader of their defense. He continued to pummel the hydra monster with Primordial lightning, and his Domain spread across the field. It was only thanks to the empyreal quality of his abilities that the avatar was prevented from killing all of them.

However, every time that beast attacked it took all ten avatars to beat it back and keep the Domain stable. They were quickly growing tired.

Whether it was the Wine Master's dimensional abilities or the Clockmaker's control of time, all were limited in their effect on this beast. It was only getting more difficult with time to keep themselves from being destroyed. The slightest mistake could lead to disaster.

Suddenly figured emerged on the outskirts of their battlefield. Starlight glinted off the metal hulls of countless mecha suits.

Su Xiaosu's voice rang through every cockpit. "This is it people, life or death. For our families, for our species – with me!"

A six-winged mecha streaked passed the encirclement and into the fight. Hundreds of glittering metal warriors followed.

They were soldiers from Star Division, from the Bloodiron Khans, and the convert army of the North. They'd already proven themselves in the battle against the alien horde, and now they were on the front lines again.

Every one of them knew it was a suicide mission. They were too weak to do anything against an enemy like this. However, if their deaths bought the Paragons even just one extra minute they were glad to die for the cause. Su Xiaosu had made no attempt to hide from them the truth of this mission. If they chose to join the fight, it was likely they wouldn't make it back.

Nonetheless one fifth of recruits answered the call. For Star Division that number was closer to one in three, and among those were every single one of Lan Jue's former students. An Lun's Bloodiron Khans also showed up in full force.

Indeed none of Lan Qing's warriors shirked what they felt to be their duty. Though they did not have the individual power of Star Division's soldiers or the Northern converts, they charged into the fray with a fervor that outshone them all. For their country and their people, they were more than willing to give up their precious lives.

At Xiaosu's call it was the Bloodiron Khans who rushed in first. They arranged themselves into a human wall and cut off the aliens from the Banishing Strategy. They diverted all power to shields and flooded their suits with Discipline.

Star Division and the converts were a step behind. They formed up, ready to give their all.

Chapter 893: Faith and Fervor!

Soldiers throughout the armada looked on with eyes red from emotion. But the surprises were not over.

Scores more mecha suites were dispatched from the twelve fleets. All four bastions released their remaining drones to join the fight as well. Every fleet and bastion had a contingent of ground troops and mechas to equip them with. Together with the drones they were a flexible and dynamic fighting force. Yet, their mission was clear in the minds of every pilot; they were cannon fodder.

In a matter of moments these brave soldiers created a ring on the outer edge of the Banishing Strategy. They arranged themselves so that the representatives of each adept army were protected as well.

Every man and woman, whether in the cockpit of a mecha suit or drone, stared grim faced and red eyed at their foes. They did not attack, for they knew that they could not positively affect this battle beyond using themselves as human shields. Every ounce of energy was poured into shields in preparation for the attacks to come.

In this moment they did not fear death.

A stifling silence hung over the worlds of man as they watched on their screens. In high-definition they saw these brave warriors preparing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. And a sacrifice it would be, for even though there were only two the soldiers knew they had no hope of defeating enemies that powerful.

Despair settled in the hearts of the ruling class, especially the politicians, and many had already fled. However there were some who remained, to wait and see what would happen. These public servants were determined to meet their fate with their constituents.

The East's Chairman Zhou Xueguan was together with the parliament. His hands were curled into tight fists. By his side was the speaker of the parliament, and both men glared ferociously at the images of the screen before them.

The parliamentary hall was full, with every representative in attendance. They'd been invited to watch the operation together. They'd cheered Zhou Xueguan as their armies won victory after victory against the alien horde. Now however, with the ascent of Monarch and the display of his might, the hall was silent.

When the battle started to turn there were some in the room who sought to slip away. But before they could, the doors to the hall were flung open and soldiers flooded in. They were fully armed, and trained their guns on the politicians.

The speaker addressed his comrades with frigid promise, stating that they would die with their people if it came to it. No one would be permitted to leave. They would not be allowed to abandon the East.

All of this had been prepared in advance, arranged by Zhou Xueguan and the speaker. They had to assure the people, and they couldn't do that if the political class was in turmoil. If the leadership could show steadfastness and solidarity, the people's faith would remain strong.

The scene from the parliamentary hall was streamed along with the battle, in a small box on the bottom right corner. In a joint announcement Chairman Zhou and the speaker reassured everyone that their leaders were not going to leave them to their fate.

It had the desired affect and the people calmed. They earned no praise, but it did allay fears that they would be abandoned. In their minds if the politicians were in the same situation they were, there was still a chance things could be turned around.

Video of Eastern mechas putting themselves in harm's way were streamed into every household. Pride and tears filled the eyes of citizens as they saw the signature yellow of the Bloodiron Khans arrayed against overwhelming odds. They weren't afraid, and so neither were the people. Like the soldiers who fought for them they were filled with passion.

Eastern soldiers were doing right by their duty to all of humanity. They put themselves in the line of danger, putting down their lives so that their species might have a chance to fight back.

Heroes. Every single one of those brave warriors were heroes to all of mankind. Tears flowed down a countless number of faces and many citizens were out in the streets to watch the fight together on enormous screens on the sides of buildings [1. This is typical for many cities in China. Skyscrapers may often come equipped with enormous televisions. They're used for many purposes; in the summer they have movies on some and street vendors lay out tables where people can watch a movie and have food. They're also for propaganda and public service announcements. The world cup and Olympics are the time when these outside screens are most popular. However, I think they're beginning to fall out of style. Here's an example, though I don't know why they have it censored.]

A silver-haired woman in her twilight years pointed to the enormous screen and cried out. "My son's out there! He's one of the Bloodiron Khans!" Her face was wet with tears but she stood tall. Her words, quavering with emotion, betrayed her pride.

Similar scenes played out all across the East. Panic was gone, replaced by the undaunted fervor reflected in the eyes of those soldiers. They were a people of singular purpose and unity!

People on what remained of the Western Alliance planets were also emotional as they watched. Their government was gone, but after Guanyin the Queen of Heaven saved their fellows – channeled through Zhou Qianlin – they'd felt more inclined toward the East.

The stream they were receiving came from the East. When they saw that the Eastern parliament was not fleeing they hung their head in shame.

Many of their leaders and politicians had fled Europa even before the aliens attacked. Most of those left behind as victims were common folk without the ability to run. They were forced to wait for the end to claim them.

No one wished for the end of this conflict more than the Western people. They had suffered awfully and were tired of conflict. They prayed for the success of the four sword bearers from the East, prayed that they

would be victorious over this hated foe. Their hearts were just as impassioned as the narration from the Eastern streaming video.

“Look, what are our young comrades doing? They are giving all of themselves so that all of us might be safe. These are our Bloodiron Khans, our An Lun soldiers, our Eastern countrymen. Majesties from Skyfire Avenue fight on the front lines while Star Division and Bloodiron Khan soldiers stand at their backs. Nor do they stand alone, for soldiers from our Eastern army have come to bolster their numbers. I am not a believer, but I pray for these brave souls – pray for our people and our future. Join me in cheering them on and our combined faith will help them win the day. Our enemies will be destroyed.”

The rousing speech reverberated all throughout the East and inflamed passions. Through their actions the government and military inspired the people and gave them faith. Even in defeat they would stand in solidarity.

This was not the case in the North. They were the mightiest of nations, and as such were rife with powerful political, military and business families. When the situation began to deteriorate these influential people prepared for their exodus. The government did not inspire the same confidence in its people as the East. Though many took faith in the images from the live stream, they were not unified in the way the other Alliances were.

As the conflict increased the differences between these alliances became more stark. However no one paid much attention as all eyes were trained on the front lines and the battle that would determine the fate of humanity.

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Boom! Layers of pink shattered like glass, a dimension fractured. The Photographer was flung away and spat out a mouthful of blood. Her powers changed constantly to match the ever-increasing Domain of Creation and Destruction, barely managing to keep it at bay.

The Violet Prince paid her no further mind. He switched directions and launched himself toward the location of the Banishing Strategy. He was

loathe to obey Monarch's command but the newly ascended immortal was master. If Monarch perished the immortal realm they build would disappear. He was also acutely aware that he could not contend against his father's tremendous power.

He witnessed what everyone saw on their screens once he turned toward the Banishing Strategy; it was hidden behind a sphere of metal. Countless mechas and drones were tightly organized so that there was no way to get at the sword bearers except through them. Only the stream of chaotic power was left unguarded, the same stream that had swallowed up Monarch. The Prince had no illusions that he would fare better if he chose that route.

The Violet Prince narrowed his eyes as he surveyed the landscape. He grunted and chastised humanity for its naiveté. Did they believe they could stand against him?

He rushed forward, fist outstretched. A burst of purple light emerged.

A hundred defenders exploded immediately, reduced to burning slag. However the Prince was slowed ever so slightly as he was struck with a surprising thought. These humans were not disheartened. Even in the face of death they persevered!

The aliens were adept at psychic communication. He could feel their courage and conviction as clearly as though it had come from him.

Chapter 894: Sacrifice

A hundred thousand thoughts flooded the Violet Prince's mind, all the same: Humanity forever! For the North! For the East! Cry after cry of devotion, each one small but together a cacophony. It was so intense it gave him pause.

He only managed one attack before Luo Xianni caught up with him.

In the same instant two incandescent beams of light exploded forth. The dazzling beams were birthed from what appeared to be binary stars burning one beside the other. The focused fury of their dual supernovae were focused on the three-headed avatar.

The mad laughter of the Keeper and the Bookworm hung in the air, audible to all. Their dharmas appeared beside them, for in the final moments of their lives as they channeled their vital essence into the attack they broke through to a new level. Like the Pontiff their sacrifice empowered them to be Reflections of Heaven and Earth.

Tears wet the eyes of every member of Skyfire Avenue, Paragon and Division soldier alike. These men were pillars of the Avenue, of the East as a whole. Echoes of their contributions would persist far into humanity's future – if they had a future.

It was the two of them who first puzzled out the secrets of the exuvium process, using vital crystals to extend life. It was them who pushed the East forward technologically so they would not fall too far behind the North. Now, they used the last light of their lives in a final service to their people.

The splendor of their sacrifice shone all across the universe.

The hydra abomination was shocked by the turn of events. By itself the beast could defend against the blasts, but the will and spirit of these old men surged tenfold. Faced with such conviction, the avatar paused.

Half a moment later the beast was swallowed up by the beams of light. Under the blaze its body was torn apart and put back together half a

dozen times.

The Wine Master watched, holding tightly to the Clockmaker's hand, his face pale. He'd known the Keeper for so long, the old scientist was more senior among the Avenue's leadership. When the Clairvoyant passed, it should have been the Keeper to take over the duties of chairman. However the Keeper refused, stating only that he didn't have the time. Thus the responsibility passed onto the Wine Master.

He was selfless. He put the prosperity of Skyfire Avenue and the East as a whole before himself, to the very end!

The Wine Master cast a glance to the Clockmaker at his side. "I'm sorry."

She smiled back at him, her free hand fiddling with the small clock she carried with her. She gripped his hand tighter. "What are you saying? You think I'm less dedicated than you?"

He smiled back. "I've loved you my whole life. It took me an eternity to earn your heart, but it is my greatest achievement. If another life awaits us I will meet it gladly, and I'll be more brazen the second go-round."

As they spoke, looking deeply into one another's eyes, light began to flicker around them. Flashes of silver radiated from the Wine Master and his scepter. A smear of multicolor light hung over the Clockmaker. She flung her small clock into space where it dissolved into a golden beam, and was caught in the flows of space-time that surrounded them.

The avatar was too strong. Though the scientists' sacrifice had managed to contain it temporarily they could not destroy it. More power was needed.

When the Wine Master said sorry to his love he'd made up his mind. He was the chairman of Skyfire Avenue's council, he had a responsibility.

Sacrificing one's life for humanity was a fine period on the final sentence of his life. His only regret was leaving the wonderful woman by his side. Her calm in the face of the end, her small comforting smile, eased the sorrow in his heart. They were together at the finale of their lives, two

hearts beating as one. Together they would deliver a crushing blow on behalf of mankind.

“This sort of thing is the responsibility of us old folk.” The words were almost lackadaisical, delivered from another figure standing on the Wine Master’s other side. A crystalline vine, pulsing with protogenia.

“You’re a lover of wine, and our legacy has to be passed on. It’s a treasure that belongs to everyone.” Two streaks of light flit passed the Wine Master, one purple and one red. They raced toward the dual columns of white.

The Gods of Wine, Bize and Aubert.

“I finally feel like I’m worthy of meeting Henri in the afterlife. I’m a hero, now – he can’t steal you away from me. Hahahaha!” Aubert’s laughter was coarse, making Bize’s cheeks red.

A deep purple light spread forth from Aubert, turning the branches sprouting from him into crystal extensions. A rich scent of wine filled the air. In all his life the Wine Master had never smelled anything so wonderful.

Purple and ring intermingled, and as they drilled into the light they became a magnificent spear.

POP! A sound like a balloon exploding rang out. The whole area seemed to shake as red, white and purple sparkled so brightly it painted the whole galaxy.

Boom--! A ripping explosion followed.

The lights dimmed and a body hung in space. It was the three-headed avatar. The Keeper, Bookworm, and the two Gods of Wine were gone without a trace.

But did their target still live?

Four Paragons gave their lives to destroy a single creature, but it still didn’t seem enough. It spoke to how terrible its power really was.

However their sacrifice wasn’t entirely in vain. The three-headed

monster had but one head remaining, two thirds of what had created it were destroyed. Its power was still roughly equivalent to the Infinite, but compared to the near immortal level might it'd commanded before this was a sharp decline. The remains of its battered body continuously leaked a thick purple fluid and branches could be seen embedded in its back. The wounds and branches leached out the lifeblood of the monster, making it weaker.

"Kill it!" The Wine Master shouted. He charged in to put the beast down.

The Pauper was gone, as was the Keeper, the Bookworm, Bize and Aubert. Only six Paragons were left, standing between the enemy and the Banishing Strategy.

The Gourmet, Driver, Wine Master, Clockmaker, Hua Li, and Chu Cheng were all that were left.

They dashed forward, a flood of rage, sadness and determination. Chu Cheng swiped at the avatar with Hade's Falchion, which glinted with a bitter and forlorn glow. With no time to recover before the Paragons were on it, the beast was cut deep by the weapon.

Orbs of blue and gold erupted from Hua Li's trident. They surrounded the creature and slowed it down. Primordial lightning, dimensional daggers and weaponized time-element struck all at once.

Blood shot out like a geyser, but the avatar still stood. Even heavily damaged it contrived to summon what remained of its Domain to block the brunt of the attacks. It knocked the Wine Master away.

Things were looking bad for Luo Xianni. Her powers were suffering after the wound she'd sustained from the Prince. It was only getting easier for her foe to cast off her attacks and turn his focus on his real target.

Every time the Prince repelled her he lashed out at the Banishing Strategy. Each attack destroyed hundreds more mechas and drones. Were it not for Luo Xianni's persistence he would make quick work of these piddling defenders.

Yet as their comrades died more mechas and drones surged into the

breach to take their place. They were ready for a glorious death, to give themselves for victory. The Banishing Strategy was in the midst of establishing mankind's last chance. The least they could do – the only thing they could do – was whatever they could to see it succeed.

“Die!” The Violet Prince roared. He sent Luo Xianni flying once again. Her chest was visibly collapsed, her protogenia could no longer protect her. Her camera was damaged beyond repair.

Her expression crestfallen, a bronze light flickered as Jue Di's former weapon appeared in her grip. She clutched the Compliant Rod desperately.

“Chi Bupang, I'm coming to join you. Don't forget me.” She whispered through lungs rapidly filling with blood.

Luo Xianni threw the rod into the air. Then, aiming her camera, she focused on the Prince as he raced toward the Banishing Strategy. As he began to tear through the mechas and drones, she muttered through gritted teeth.

“Take... advice... from Luo Xianni. A camera... is all you need.”

She fought to speak the words, each syllable causing her small pink camera to grow more dim and intangible. A fading violet light arose from her concave chest and merged with the fading astrum.

Chapter 895: One Final Photograph

Blood trickled from the corners of Luo Xianni's mouth and dripped onto her camera. Suddenly it flashed with an intense pink light that made her stand out against the darkness of space.

The Violet Prince, in the midst of his charge, sensed something and spun around. When his eyes fell on Luo Xianni, his pupils contracted.

Ka-cha! The unmistakable sound of a camera shutter clicked. Everything froze.

The Violet Prince was stuck with a hand raised, ready to launch another attack at her. He fluttered through invisible gravitational waves as a two-dimensional image.

Luo Xianni's body was pink from head to toe and somewhat opaque. It made her all the more beautiful and ethereal, like an angel. Strangely she also looked much younger, perhaps only fifteen or so.

"Chi Bupang... Chi Bupang you bastard, you dare jilt me. You just wait, I'll fight for you all the rest of my life!" She smiled as she muttered the words, a recollection from years ago.

The Prince's picturesque image floated over to her and with great difficulty she lifted her arms. Pinching the top of the photo she began to tear.

A flood of energy so intense it was frightening poured from the photograph, a sign of the Prince's struggle. Luo Xianni's pink-hued body shone brighter.

Crack! The dainty camera she carried with her shattered into dust.

Ssshhrrrip! She tore off one edge of the picture, containing the Prince's arm. She cast the torn section away and it dissolved into ash.

She pinched again and began to pull. Her aim was his head.

"Aaaarrrrrgggghh!!!" A bloodcurdling roar burst forth, followed by a surge of violet light that tried to smother Luo Xianni's pink glow. Her body

warped in response and flickered with a rose tint. The violet aura solidified and was blocked from expanding, she refused to let him escape.

“My children, this is as much as your mother can offer. Don’t give up!” Her voice was not pained, or sad. Instead she sounded almost jovial. She sounded relaxed. Indeed, she was off to find her love, she hadn’t been happy since Jue Di’s passing. At last she could put down her burden and look for the partner she’d lost.

ξ

Within the Banishing Strategy.

Tears flowed freely from Lan Jue, Lan Qing and Zhou Qianlin’s faces. They put their all toward establishing the Strategy, but they saw everything that was happening outside. They were forced to watch silently as soldiers from Star Division, the Bloodiron Khans and the convert army gave their lives. They were acutely affected by the deaths of the Keeper, Bookworm, and the Gods of Wine.

Every one of them gave their lives to buy them time. They sacrificed themselves for final victory!

The Banishing Strategy fought perpetually against the might of Monarch. But this Strategy was designed to contend against the strongest immortals in history, one of the greatest forces of the universe. Even the simplest manifestation of it was a threat to Monarch’s life.

Unless the Strategy failed, Monarch wasn’t getting away.

The Banishing Strategy had only been attempted once before, by four of the greatest warriors to have ever lived. Among them were legendary Celestial Masters Yuanshi and Taishang!

Lan Jue could feel himself weakening. His protogenia, energy, and life force were being drained by the sword. But he was ready – they were determined to give their lives for the Strategy to succeed.

However it was difficult beyond words to watch his friends, his family, his soldiers fall one after the other. The burden it put on him was crushing, and reached its peak when he heard Luo Xianni’s parting words.

Even Lan Qing, always a rock in the most unstable times, had tears running down his face. But they couldn't help, all they could do was continue to focus all of their strength on the Strategy.

Light from the four swords continued to oscillate around them. They carved out channels of energy as they build the foundation. Erratic tempests of deadly sword energy whipped all around. When they brought it under control, the Strategy would be complete.

Upon being captured by the power of the Strategy, Monarch was filled with fear. Immediately he sensed the aura of immortality protecting him get stripped away. He was left exposed, and if the universe discovered him he would be subject to the terrible power of universal protogenia.

However as time stretched on he found that universal protogenia was no threat to him under the cover of the Strategy. On the contrary, he sensed something altogether different here. The energy that assailed him was completely different from anything he'd experienced before. Its burden was incredible, outstripping even his own Domain. The revelation opened his eyes.

What in the world was this mysterious power? Its turbid, agitated influence was capable of locking out everything outside and yet offered no physical threat.

Monarch and his species were adept at consumption and adaptation. He'd grown to these lofty heights thanks to this skill. Naturally his first instinct was to try and absorb this power for himself and see if it could be used to his benefit.

Starting small, he drew in a portion and tried to assimilate it but hastily cast it back. Although the small dose was weak he could sense the grade of this energy was towering beyond limit. Taking in even the slightest amount was met with a violent and immediate rejection that threatening to destroy him from inside.

What frightening power! If only he could somehow command it, he wondered, to what heights would he climb?

Monarch mulled over the problem, searching for some way to consume

this inexplicable force. As he did, the tinge of fear that had assailed him before was gone. After exploring his surroundings with his senses he did not fear for himself, not against these four insignificant humans. He was a god amongst men, and with Luo Xianni's demise none among them commanded the power of the Infinite. Even this strange power that had him temporarily suspended was causing no damage. Who remained to stand against him?

Monarch was a creature of supreme ambition. His target was to supplant the universe itself. He was both curious and fascinated by this new type of energy and thus did not hurry to free himself from it. Instead he followed its ebb and flow, confident that he could discover its secrets. Secrets that would guide him on the path to domination.

As a result Lan Jue and the others did not sense Monarch struggling. Little by little, they were free to establish their Strategy. However it was more than just the death of Luo Xianni that filled their hearts with sadness. Despair was beginning to set in.

They could not complete the Strategy! This unspoken fear grew within each of the four sword bearers. They were nearing their limit and yet not even a third of the Strategy's foundation was complete. Even if they spent every drop of vitality remaining within them they could not see a way to give what the Strategy demanded. In the end they would be consumed by the power they sought to command, Monarch would escape unscathed.

Half of humanity's mightiest had already fallen and they were failing. After all of this, was it truly the fate of mankind to be destroyed by these monsters?

Lan Qing's voice called to the other three. "Do not give up, even to the last moment. Give up everything and we will see what can be accomplished. His aura of protection is gone, and even if we only succeed in injuring him perhaps universe protogenia can do the rest."

"Alright!" Lan Jue answered. His eyes, burning with resolve, never left Zhou Qianlin.

While Monarch couldn't see through the chaotic flows of energy, to the

sword bearers it was clear as water. It was carried by the swords, but was present at the creation of the universe. Lan Jue's Five Lightnings were a derivative of this primordial power. This pure chaos was a profound and eternal aspect of reality. Of course Monarch would know nothing of it.

Lan Jue took a deep breath and from his Core a bright light emerged. An image of the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety appeared behind. Hundreds of twinkling star-like lights appeared upon Lan Jue and set his body ablaze.

He offered himself as a sacrifice to the Banishing Blade, urging it to give them more power. Lan Qing, Zhou Qianlin and the Pharmacist did the same.

In response all four swords flared and burned like four suns. The Strategy began to arrange itself faster. Monarch, who had been carefully examining the power, felt it suddenly press heavily upon him. The load it placed on him took his breath away.

"Impossible!" It was the first thought to cross his mind. How could this insignificant creatures summon something so exceptional?

Golden light radiated from him as he fought to stave off the pressure. The chaos around him rippled but was otherwise unchanged.

Something like fear flashed in Monarch's eyes. No, he couldn't hold back any longer. If they were allowed to use even a fraction of this power against him it would threaten his life.

Chapter 896: The Definitive Moment

In the space of an instant everything changed, and Monarch discovered that this chaos was far more profound than he'd thought. Even if he were ten times stronger this power would remain incomprehensible to him. The only explanation was that this was part of the fabric of the universe, but how could it appear here?

Curiosity no longer superseded the fear that was creeping up within him. With his eyes dual points of golden light Monarch thrust his arms overhead to protect himself. He raced off to find an exit.

He aimed to rely on his immortal-level powers to break out of this encirclement. Once he broke free it would be far easier to clear away these pesky humans. Once they were dealt with he could carefully begin to examine the intricacies of this chaos. Perhaps he could use it as a weapon in his quest to overcome the universe.

He fixated on the idea as he charged, looking for a way to escape.

Much to his surprise, however, there was no border in site. He could travel thousands of kilometers in a blink, but no matter how far or how fast he moved there seem to be no exit. He didn't know where to go, or which way to focus his power. Despite his god-like strength his attacks struck nothing but empty space wherever he directed them. Through his perception this reality he found himself was as stable as it was infinite, and there appeared to be no breaks for him to exploit. He found himself trapped in a never-ending expanse, a hostile territory with no border he could assault.

What to do?

The gravity of his situation began to dawn on him. He continued to fly in a direction chosen at random, all the while lashing out with his power.

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After two whole minutes the Violet Prince managed to extricate himself from Luo Xianni's dimensional prison. He looked haggard and monstrous,

and was missing his left arm.

It was the result of Luo Xianni's final photograph. Though she did not kill him, she'd managed to injure him greatly.

Elsewhere the avatar and the six remaining Paragons were near to the end of their conflict.

The four who gave their lives had succeeded in wounding the beast terrible, especially the final push from the Gods of Wine. Their addition continued to drain the monster of its vitality while the living Paragons pressed the attack. By now its power was reduced to Nirvana levels, and it continued to sustain injuries.

The six remaining Paragons were not having it easy, however. From the very beginning they had attacked this monster with their strongest abilities, never letting up. Exhausted, they were battling against a beast with its back against a proverbial wall, fighting for its life. No one was without considerable injury, but the humans were gaining ground.

With the Violet Prince free from Luo Xianni's constraints, things turned bad. He chose not to assault the remaining Paragons and instead charged right at the site of the Banishing Strategy. Without Luo Xianni's help none of the intrepid soldiers could survive against this monster, the Prince would have already broken through their man-made barrier.

Now, although the Prince was gravely injured, Luo Xianni was no longer there to dissuade him. He crashed into the defenders, killing dozens of soldiers with every wave of his hand as he searched for a way through.

Humans watching from home felt their hearts leap into their throats. They knew the definitive moment was near, when it would be determined if humanity would continue or be snuffed out. Prayers were said for the North, the East and the West. They were spoken for the soldiers and the battle, for the Banishing Strategy. They didn't even know what the Banishing Strategy was, only that if it succeeded their species would be saved.

Boom! A huge number of mechas and drones went flying in all directions. When the Prince crashed into the front line he sent them

soaring with a vicious punch.

The soldiers managed to ward him off for only a few moments. However, with the area of the Banishing Strategy nearby the Prince stopped cold.

The Strategy was in its middle stages. Already the aura it produced sent a chill down his spine. He hesitated, but the consequences of inaction won out and he continued his charge.

The stakes could not be higher[1. Interestingly, in Chinese this is ‘without lips the teeth suffer cold.’]. If Monarch perished the humans could use this terrible power to destroy everything they labored to build. Their immortal realm could be wiped from existence and all their dreams destroyed. More importantly the Violet Prince was not himself a full immortal. He still needed Monarch’s help.

He made the prompt decision that, no matter the cost, he had to help Monarch escape.

This Banishing Strategy was the creation of just four humans. The one the monster Prince chose to deal with first was not Ultus’ bearer, but Lan Jue. Of all these humans Lan Jue was the one he was most familiar with. There was no sense of kinship among the aliens, but the Prince and Princess had worked closely for years. She had been slain by his hand. It was also Lan Jue’s deception that helped them abscond with Ultus, right from under their nose. He was the reason they were in such a precarious position.

For these reasons the Prince hated Lan Jue, loathed this arrogant human meat sack. He had to die.

In a flash he appeared before Captus’ bearer. His face was savage and feral like a wild animal and he swiped at Lan Jue with his remaining limb.

Recognition of the danger flashed in the Jewelry Master’s eyes, but he did nothing. The mechas raced toward them to help but they were too slow. They had the heart but not the ability. Although Lan Jue was in many ways Captus after their joining, in the midst of the Banishing Strategy he could not defend himself. All he could do was pour all of himself into his task and hope it was enough.

The light of his vitality blazed around him like an inferno. I was so intense it affected the Prince. But just as the beast's attack was about to find its target it was not the fires that stopped him. A figure flashed into view, appearing from nowhere and standing between them.

A shield of rippling waves shattered beneath the Prince's attack. His fist buried itself in the newcomer's chest.

BOOM! The blue silhouette was flung away like detritus, smashing into Lan Jue's body but blocked by Captus' power.

"A-Li!" Lan Jue screamed.

His friend had leapt in to take the blow for him. Crippled and bleeding, he regarded Lan Jue with a forced grin.

"How about that, eh? Just in time." He smirked at his brother in arms, even as the sound of shattered glass echoed from his chest. It was the sound of his Core breaking.

No one survived a deadly blow to their Core – not a human, not an immortal. A broken Core was a death sentence.

Lan Jue's tears came again, bitter and profuse. Yet Hua Li regarded him calmly. Five more figures were quickly converging on their location. They'd finally managed to defeat the avatar and had come to fend off the Prince. Injured from his conflict with Luo Xianni he was once again caught in a struggle he couldn't free himself from.

Hua Li struggled to turn himself around, facing Lan Jue. "You've already sacrificed so much for us. Now you're giving up your life!"

Anguish was clear in his voice. "Aren't you doing the same? We would give it all so our people can continue. To the last drop of blood."

"No," Hua Li retorted. "I'm not like you. I cherish my life. I'm not giving myself up for all people, or my family. Poseidon Group can find some quiet corner to survive, and I could have gone with them. We would have made it work. But I didn't... I stayed. My sacrifice isn't for humanity. It's for you."

Hua Li's smile spread wide across his face, as though he were finally free from some unspoken burden.

"There's a lot I never dared to tell you, A-Jue."

Hua Li's expression surprised him. Lan Jue's voice was hoarse as he answered. "Don't say it A-Li. I don't want to hear it."

But Hua Li shook his head. "No, I need to say it. This is the only opportunity I'll get."

"Hera... I killed her."

Hua Li spoke the words softly. But to Lan Qing, to Lan Jue, to Zhou Qianlin it was like a blast of thunder. Qianlin swayed and threatened to topple over. It was inconceivable that her sister would have been slain by one of Lan Jue's closest friends. Lan Qing and Lan Jue may have been family but his relationship with Hua Li was just as close.

They were lifelong friends. Brothers!

Chapter 897: Hua Li and Mo Xiao

For a moment the smile on Hua Li's face appeared more forced than genuine. He saw Lan Jue's shock and it filled him with an indescribable regret.

"I'm the one who killed Hera. I didn't know it would hurt you so badly. But, I had to." His smile warped into a pained scowl and he clutched his chest. Were it not for the inherent vitality of his bloodline, the Prince's attack would have destroyed him outright.

"Do you remember when you asked me why I don't like Mo Xiao? You said she was a good woman. You're right, she is. She's always been good to me, but I don't like her in that way. I told you I have someone that I love, someone I've always loved. Just Like Xiuxiu who always loved you but was never loved in return. We're very similar this way. We just have... different tastes."

Hua Li's eyes were red from the emotion. "The one I love has almost superhuman talent, an open mind, and a good heart. They're strong, and always willing to give help where and when it's needed. From the moment we met I knew this was the person I was meant to love."

"But life had other plans. They loved someone else and I knew I would never have a chance. I could only remain silent, give my blessings, and hope they were happy. But the pain never got better. I saw that wonderful face in my mind every day. I longed to be near whenever I could, as often as possible. But he was always with a woman. He never knew how I felt."

"One day I couldn't take it anymore. I convinced myself I had to kill her, that it was the only way I'd have a chance. Jealousy poisoned my heart and caused me to make a terrible mistake."

Lan Jue couldn't believe what he was hearing. He gaped at Hua Li, stunned beyond words. He'd never suspected... never expected to hear anything like this from his closest friend.

Hua Li looked deeply into his eyes, his expression oft and sorrowful. "I'm so sorry, A-Jue. I want to give my life to pay for the awful thing I did. I

hope it can mean I don't owe Hera. I knew our different orientation would mean we'd never be together but it never stopped my love. I didn't want to leave without you knowing the truth. If there is a next life I hope I can come back as a woman, as beautiful as Hera or Qianlin, and I hope I meet you first."

Lan Jue shut his eyes tightly and muttered through grit teeth. "A-Li, I –"

'No! That's not true!' The cry came a navy blue mecha that came their way. A petite figure emerged and tightly wrapped her arms around Hua Li.

"It wasn't him! He didn't do it!" Mo Xiao, president of the Poseidon Group, sobbed as she held onto her husband.

Hua Li's face changed, growing pale and fatigued. "What are you doing here? Go, quickly. You need to command Poseidon."

Mo Xiao looked at him sadly. "I knew this would happen. I knew you were going to make this choice, that's why I didn't want you to go. You've always felt like his life is more important than yours. But you don't realize I feel the same about you!"

She snapped her head around and looked at Lan Jue. Her lips trembled.

"It wasn't him. Hua Li didn't kill Hera. He loved you so much, how could he hurt you in any way? It didn't matter how sad he was he never wanted anything bad to happen to you. I knew how he felt about you but I liked him ever since I was young. That like grew into love, and nothing was going to change it. I... I'm the one who killed Hera!"

As she went on her voice became more and more hysterical. "Hua Li was never going to give me his heart, but I couldn't stand to see him so sad all the time. I had to help him, and so long as Hera was alive Hua Li would never have his chance. So I killed her, for him. I came up with the plan, arranged everything, and in the end I succeeded. In doing so I destroyed you, too."

"Hua Li never dared to tell you everything and you continued to sink into depression. I killed Hera, not A-Li. A-Li never once did anything to hurt you. Once he found out what I did he alienated me but, A-Li, everything I

did was for you. I just wanted you to be happy and I was willing to do anything to make it happen. I never expected you to love me, but to be the mother of your child would be enough. Yet you wouldn't even give me the opportunity to be with you, to see you every day. Why?! Why would you chose to give your life for this man who never knew your heart? You idiot!"

Hua Li stroked her long dark hair. "Aren't you just as foolish? To say I wasn't involved in Hera's death simply isn't true. If it weren't for who I am and who I loved, Hera would still be alive. I never told A-Jue, even after I figured out it was you. I didn't do anything to try and make it right. In the deepest parts of my heart I know I'm just as responsible for what you did to Hera. I had to try and pay her back. Mo Xiao, go back. All of this will be solved when I am gone. We have a child, and you have to take care of him. Flee now, while Monarch is still captured."

Mo Xiao smiled. "You're finally concerned for my well-being. That makes me happy. But do you really think that if you die I will continue living?"

"No!" Hua Li struggled, knowing what was to come, but with his Core shattered there was nothing he could do.

Mo Xiao deftly slipped a dagger into her own heart. With a soft grunt she looked up at him, a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. She hugged him tight.

"In the end, I'm happy to die in your arms... A-Li..."

Hua Li's lips moved but no sound came out. He lifted his head and looked at Lan Jue, his face forlorn and unaccepting. Motes of blue light began to rise from Hua Li and Mo Xiao's body. Eventually they both disappeared into an enormous bubble and floated away into space.

Lan Jue was stupefied by all that had happened. His mother and father were gone, now Hua Li had perished. But not before revealing that terrible secret.

However, even before the battle Lan Jue knew who had a hand in Hera's death. He'd been struggling with it since he found out, but told no one.

The storage device Xiuxiu had left him had contained a lot of information. The worst of it detailed Xiuxiu's collaboration with Mo Xiao. They'd conspired to earn Hera's faith, and orchestrated her murder. It was why Xiuxiu's last words were an apology. Lan Jue never suspected the people closest to him were responsible for one of the most terrible periods in his life.

Xiuxiu's reasons were simple; love. When her suffering and Mo Xiao's met, the two women came up with their plan. However Xiuxiu's revelations did not reveal Hua Li's special affections. Now it all made sense, why Mo Xiao would do what she did.

After Hera's death Lan Jue was consumed by anger. He swore to hunt down the monster that killed her and tear them apart. But now, how could he let that anger go? There was no target for this deep-seated loathing.

Xiuxiu was dead. Hua Li, Mo Xiao – dead. Xiuxiu and Hua Li gave their lives to protect him. What was he to do with this resentment? When he looked at Qianlin he found no enmity or anger in her face. Instead he saw concern.

It was done. The past was the past, and it had to remain there. The only way left was forward and nothing else was important.

Lan Jue focused anew on the task at hand. Determination hardened his face and the light around him burned brighter than ever. He became a pillar of crimson light, the same as Captus. In choosing to give his life for humanity all past grudges were given up. Right now there was one thing which demanded all of him, and that was completing the Strategy so that Monarch might be destroyed and peace could return to the worlds of man.

Within the flood of energy the Strategy required, all distractions melted from Lan Jue's mind. However a bone-deep weariness sunk into his soul, like he was being consumed from within. He could feel that his body might give in at any moment and be destroyed, but this was to be his fate. When he died all of him – body and soul – would be sacrifice on the altar of the Strategy so that it would succeed. It had to, so that Monarch could be defeated.

Mankind's Paragons had lost another, and without Hua Li the fight was that much more perilous. Luckily Luo Xianni had injured the Prince gravely and in doing so made managing his attacks easier. Even so the remaining Paragons were being beaten back. It would only be a matter of time before more lives were taken.

Chapter 898: Too Little Too Late?

The Violet Prince watched all that transpired while he fought at the edge of the Strategy. Unbeknownst to the humans he was weakening. Luo Xianni's powers had not only deprived him of his arm, but had also created fissures within him that were blocking his channels and tearing up his body.

This was certainly to the humans' benefit, for if he'd not been so gravely injured how could they contend against an Infinite-level creature such as he? How could someone like Hua Li have completely blocked his attack?

He waited for Monarch to break free of containment, just as fervently as the humans were waiting for the Banishing Strategy to be complete. He wanted to see his master retake control of this situation and bring these lesser creatures to their knees.

This had been a battle of tragedies. More than ten Paragons were reduced now to single digits. This was before considering the very real possibility that Lan Jue and the other three sword bearers would be required to give their lives. If they did, only five Paragons would make it home.

Had they reached their limit? Lan Jue could feel that his body was near to bursting. It felt like his spirit was cracking, like crystal under too much pressure. Similar and equally uncomfortable sensations consumed Lan Qing, Qianlin and the Pharmacist as well. Worse, in fact, as they had reached their limit long before!

Li Ke appeared behind the Pharmacist. He did nothing – he could do nothing. He watched his wife with a tender gaze as she struggled mightily, and she looked back. She continued to fight, to struggle against the demands of the sword. Even without speaking she could see what was in her husband's heart.

Keep fighting – for Jun'er!

Yes, for their child, their beautiful daughter, for all the mothers and daughters on every human world. They had to hold on until the last

possible moment and keep this monster from destroying everything.

But Occisus demanded more. Its hunger for energy was fearsome and insatiable. Every moment sucked what little energy remained, pushing them to the edge of ruin. Powerful as the will of humanity was, it did not translate into energy. She wanted victory desperately, more than anything, but if she did not have what was required she would be destroyed all the same.

None of them expected to survive. They just wanted to hold on, long enough that their sacrifice could galvanize the Banishing Strategy.

All the pilots in mechas and drones, all the soldiers in distant warships bore witness to the battle. Prayers and desperate hope filled every heart.

Qianlin struggled as well, in some ways worse. Though her cultivation was not inferior to Lan Jue's her Domain was not intended to be used in combat. Her inheritance wasn't some almighty ancient god. In that way she was the weakest of the four, her spirit never having been tempered. She was the first one in danger of giving in.

A-Jue, I can't hold on. She whispered the sad and desperate thought in her heart.

Lan Jue sensed it: Go, Qianlin. Wait for me on the other side. I'll be there soon. It doesn't matter where, we will always be together.

A small smile played on Qianlin's face. Yes! So long as he was with her, not even death was something to be frightened of.

Tendrils of white light arose around her like threads of silk. They were cracks, coalescing together around her dharmic image as it began to break apart. She was one with her image, and once it was destroyed she would die as well, forever gone from this world.

Qian was ready, she'd prepared for this. She quieted her mind, and even Xuanyuan Shishi was silent. They put all their focus into the sword and Strategy. They were committed to dedicating all of themselves, no matter the result.

Suddenly, Qianlin felt a warmth flow from her limbs toward her center.

It started gently at first, but became more intense as she neared her final moments. For some reason it reversed the pain she felt, going so far as to ease the pain in her soul.

She opened her eyes and looked toward Lan Jue. It was then that she saw all around her were dots of brilliant white light. They sank into her body. Demortus' demands were lofty beyond what she could offer and though these motes of light were weak individually, there were too many to count. They were filled with the unique power of faith, and it served to slow her consumption.

This... this was...

The power of prayer. Qianlin understood immediately. The prayers of humans everywhere were sustaining her. And yet she was not filled with joy. Instead her eyes betrayed panic.

Perhaps this power would save her, maybe even survive. But what of Lan Jue? The people did not have the same faith in him. If he were to perish what would she do?

Her eyes desperately searched for Lan Jue's form. When she did, to her surprise Lan Jue was also surrounded by small specks of light. They were pale blue, and through her perception she could sense that they were empowering him as she was being empowered.

This...

She was at a loss? What was it? Could it be...

Yes. It, too, was faith. The faith of all the people!

When they saw Lan Jue and the others fighting, saw the Bloodiron Khans defending them, and heard the impassioned pleas of that Eastern announcer they were moved. People all throughout the galaxies began to pray. They prayed for the sword bearers and for all of mankind.

All of that faith united around them.

Lan Jue, Lan Qing, the Pharmacist, Zhou Qianlin. All the soldiers, the Paragons, the mechas and drones. They weren't alone – they fought

together on behalf of their species. They represented the determination of their people in seeing tomorrow. They were the instrument of every human's desire to fight!

They had the strength and faith of everyone at their back.

The first wave of faith had come from Angel. Those hundreds of thousands saw their conviction manifest first. They wanted to see their representatives succeed from the bottom of their heart. They prayed loudly and earnestly for the Banishing Strategy to emerge.

This was the first time since the Banishing Blades appeared in the world of man that everyone wished to see its Strategy conquer the enemy. It seemed almost natural that it began to absorb the power of this faith, and not just around Qianlin but with all four of them.

Heavenly weapons were possessed of their own intelligence, and the Banishing Blades were the greatest heavenly weapons ever created. Of course it yearned to absorb the pure power of faith. More than any other energy, the faith of the masses could help to establish the Banishing Strategy – and maybe beyond.

Seeing their bearers earn the respect of all mankind, the swords were pleased. The esteem of these arrogant weapons soared. With these blessings the Strategy stabilized and began to grow again. It was nearing completion.

When he saw the light appear around them, the Violet Prince sensed things were spinning out of their control. At first it was insignificant but with time grew exponentially, feeding the swords and the chaos that they wielded. The first indicating Lan Jue and the others were consuming their own life force had been extinguished.

More frightening was the revelation that these four humans were getting stronger. All of a sudden their level of cultivation had surged to several times their original power. In a matter of seconds they were nearly ready to push through to the Infinite.

Each of them were surrounded by a halo of polychromatic light. It wasn't coming from them, but from the Strategy itself. The flows of chaos

also saw this mottled hue emerge within it, giving it a strangely beautiful appearance. Monarch, who was captured within it, was speechless and did not even attempt to escape.

How could this not cause the Violet Prince to be afraid? If Monarch perished he would be the last of his people. Caught amidst all of these humans he certainly would be unable to escape.

The Violet Prince made a prompt decision and acted on it without delay. A fiery purple light blazed from his chest and all of a sudden he was as strong as he ever had been. He knocked the Driver before him away with a single punch.

Even with the protection of Primordial Lightning the Driver's bones cracked from the blow. He spat a mouthful of blood from the severe injury.

The Prince didn't slow. In a flash he appeared once more before Lan Jue and threw a punch at the hateful human's head.

No one expected the Prince to regain his power so suddenly. Among the five remaining Paragons the strongest were only Reflections of Heaven and Earth, hardly a match to a creature who commanded the powers of the Infinite. No one could match him for speed either, and by the time they reacted the alien's attack was already reaching its target.

Finished!

The Wine Master despaired – all their effort, too little too late!

However, just as the Prince's fist reached Lan Jue the halo around him flared. He didn't move and his body became instantly translucent. Thrown off balance by his zealous assault the Violet Prince toppled through Lan Jue and into the chaotic flows of the Banishing Strategy.

It all happened so suddenly everyone stopped.

The Clockmaker was first to snap out of it. Loudly she cried. "Everyone, pray for them! Pray the Banishing Strategy will work. Our unity is our strength, that is how we win the day."

Chapter 899: Turning the Tables

She saw that what was coalescing around Lan Jue and the others was the power of faith. Pure and strong, it was easy to absorb and best to strengthen their efforts.

Of course it was only a temporary boost. Once that faith was gone the power would vanish. Their cultivation would return to the levels they were previously.

The Pontiff's Citadel relied on this faith to boost their abilities. Part of the Pontiff's failure to grow stronger had laid in the limits of the faithful who followed him. His influence extended only throughout the West, while the faith of Northerners and Easterners was separate and unique.

Lan Jue and his fellow sword bearers, however, were bestowed the faith of all of humanity!

It went without saying that this was a tremendous boon. Through the live stream, and the heroism of the Bloodiron Khans and Star Division, people worlds away were inspired by their acts. How could they not have faith in their champions?

Only the purest, most sincere faith could manifest in this way. It was not constrained by either time or space and appeared instantly where it was needed.

The Queen of Heaven Guanyin, Qianlin, was the main focus of that faith. Westerners especially placed their belief in her after what she did for their people. But beyond her they said their prayers for the Banishing Strategy itself and the courageous Paragons who were willing to sacrifice everything.

With their own eyes spectators watched as Paragons were felled one after the other, mostly in giving their own lives so that others can continue the fight or to weaken the enemy.

There was a universe of difference between a normal person and a Paragon. To the common man Paragons were living legends, hardly

believable except for the fact that they were often in the public eye.

All of that power still was not enough for many of them, who were slain or gave their lives against an enemy that still threatened their species. This fact put a stark point on the fact that this enemy was powerful beyond belief.

They had to be united. Unity is strength!

This was the key the Clockmaker pointed out. All the soldiers of the armada bowed their heads in prayer, hoping against hope for the Banishing Strategy to overcome their foes. Those in other worlds who had yet to lend their faith did so at the Clockmaker's demand.

Influenced by this universal favor, Lan Jue and the others continued to grow stronger. They no longer worried about failing to sustain the Strategy, even as its bottomless hunger continued to feed unabated.

Within the Strategy itself the multicolored light became more intense. An archaic and mysterious diagram was beginning to appear between the sword bearers.

Li Ke, who stood beside the Pharmacist, was shocked to discover that some of the people's faith was directed toward him. His first instinct was to flee, but the gravitational power of the Pharmacist's halo held him fast. He could feel the energy of prayer seep into him, nourishing his soul. It was comfortable beyond words, a sensation he hadn't felt since being captured by the monsters.

The Pharmacist's face went from strained to peaceful. She could see her late husband's spectral body becoming more corporeal before her very eyes. He looked almost whole.

The people were not stingy with their prayers. Seeing this spirit beside the Harbinger Faerie, helping her, they assumed he was as important to the Strategy as she was. They had prayers enough for him as well, and thus did he benefit from this disaster.

The first to break through was, of course, Lan Jue. There were no dramatic signs to mark it, all of a sudden he just felt like a veil had been

lifted from his eyes. Suddenly there was more to everything.

The universe became a rich and complicated tapestry. Everything he saw and felt was completely different than it had been before. His consciousness felt boundless and untethered.

The Infinite! Was this what it felt like to truly be one with everything?

In contrast to the dangerous instability of his breakthrough to Nirvana, now he felt only comfort. With this breakthrough all the damage he'd done in burning away his vitality was reversed. His spirit was restored, and even his Core underwent a qualitative shift. Instead of a solid, crystal-like center it became gas-like, suspended as a cloud of energy in his chest. Its power flickered to life amidst the many-hued halo that enveloped him.

Stranger still, Lan Jue could sense something in the depths of space calling out to him. Whatever it was, it felt as though it were gathering around him.

They were fragments of memories. Somehow he knew that they were pieces of the old masters left behind. Shards of what had been the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety.

A stream of purple light extricated itself from him – the image of the Great Emperor. However the depth and wisdom in his eyes was more profound than it ever had been. He was towering, stately, and radiated an aura of godliness.

This was the true Emperor of the North Star! A piece only, yet still possessed of the great power the immortal once commanded. Lan Jue could see that as the mighty spirit gazed upon the Strategy there remained a lingering fear of the destruction it manufactured.

In the time of his reign the Emperor was slightly more than half again as powerful as Celestial Masters Yuan Shi and Taishang. If the Emperor in his fully glory was present, the Strategy may not have been enough to destroy him outright but would certainly have been a threat.

The next one to break through was Zhou Qianlin.

In the moment of her breakthrough a heavenly chorus rang out through

space. As the soothing tones reverberated, ripples of white light radiated out around her. It continued to spread until it enfolded Lan Jue, Lan Qing and the Pharmacist as well. Thus connected the four bearers felt more intimately joined. Each of them absorbed faith different up to this point, Qianlin enjoying the most benefit. However, with her breakthrough it was now evenly distributed among all of them.

A tiara of water drops glittered like crystal against her forehead. Her dharma also appeared, but like Lan Jue's was different than before. Her head was covered by a white gossamer veil, and a lotus flower bloomed beneath her feet. In her right hand she held a willow branch, and in the other a jar of pure water. Though just a shadow of the beloved Goddess of Mercy, her appearance was stunning.

Guanyin, one of the most beloved of the Buddha. It was nothing short of amazing that Qianlin's dharma would be revealed as this ancient goddess upon breaking through to the Infinite. Her Paragon title was more apt than ever.

Lan Qing and the Pharmacist broke through at nearly the same moment.

Vairochana's image appeared from Lan Qing in all its glory and split, replete with an aura of benevolence. Three mighty Buddhas of the past, present and future shone with divine light. Lan Qing opened his eyes, and from them emerged an ethereal golden mist to match the aura that encased him. He was surrounded by the soothing hum of chanting.

The Pharmacist's change was more sensational. Her dharma had always been herself, but that appeared to have changed. In breaking through her abilities assimilated some inexplicable power, and instead of a dharma she was surrounded a burning garnet hue. The contrast was striking when set beside Lan Qing's luminous aura.

Within the borders of that red light was a terrifying scene. Mountains of corpses and seas of blood stretched far and wide. Ghouls and spirits wandered the hellscape howling in rage. Other figured, visible only barely, wandered aimlessly throughout.

"So long as hell hath sinners, I will not ascend!" Ten words boomed into

existence like a voice from the depths. The frightening vision of hell subsided and was replaced by the stern visage of the Pharmacist's dharma. Its hands were pressed together before its chest, and the being was clad in the simple garb of a monk. Her dharma was revealed as Yama, King of the Underworld!

One after the other their breakthroughs were complete. It took only a matter of moments.

The four sword bearers revealed their legendary lineages, manifest by the power of faith; Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Star of Purple Subtlety; Vairochana; Guanyin; King Yama. Each one a figure from the highest echelons of the ancient pantheon.

Among them Vairochana held the highest status, though the others were considered lesser by small degrees only. As the fragments of these all-powerful beings stood in attendance, the vast powers of the universe gathered to their side. The Banishing Strategy grew ever more powerful.

Lan Jue and the others had arisen to the vaulted heights of the Infinite, and yet they were not assailed by the threat of universal protogenia. However this was not due to the protective aura from Zhou Qianlin. It simply wasn't present, as though it ignored them entirely.

The polychromatic light of the Banishing Strategy was an energy that was born at the creation of the universe. Even the immortal qi surrounding Monarch dissolved under its all-pervading dominance. This was similarly true of universal protogenia, a derivative of this energy. So long as they remained within the embrace of the Strategy, the Lan Jue and the others did not need to fear destruction at the universe' hands.

A real blessing in disguise! None of them expected this Strategy that they were ready to give their life for would protect them in this way. Slowly the Strategy was nearing completion, their plans finally coming to fruition.

They'd expected to only accomplish the minimum of what the Banishing Strategy could do, and use that to kill Monarch. Now, with the power of faith, it was growing stronger than they thought they could manage. Whether or not they would succeed was no longer the question, it was to

what extent. This was, after all, the greatest weapon under heaven!

Upno sensing this critical change, Lan Jue delivered a message to the Wine Master. "Tell everyone to fall back to Angel. We're fine from here on out. The Banishing Strategy will be complete any moment, and Monarch will be slain."

When he heard this the Wine Master breathed a sigh of relief. It was finally going to end. However, in his eyes there was also sorrow. They had lost so many.

Satan, the Pontiff, the Terminator, the Keeper, the Bookworm, the Pauper. Jue Di, the Photographer, Poseidon, the Gods of Wine. They had all perished to see this war won.

Chapter 900: The Complete Banishing Strategy!

Only nine Paragons remained. They were all that was left of humanity's greatest Adepts.

The Wine Master quickly relayed Lan Jue's command. He also told Kang Hui aboard Tyrannosaurus, which thankfully could still fly. As commander of the armada it was his responsibility to give the order to fall back.

"Pass on my directive. Everyone is to fall back to Angel. Bastions take up the rear. Leave a couple reconnaissance vehicles behind."

No more need be said. Everyone could see the dancing lights within the Strategy. Compared to when they first started the energy surging from it was inconceivable. Even laymen could tell that they were on the cusp of completion. Victory was eminent.

The five remaining Paragons stayed behind to bear witness while Kang Hui and his soldiers began to retreat.

Even though the soldiers were falling back, there was no decrease in the faith afforded to the four sword bearers and their Strategy. Though, it wasn't just their Strategy anymore. Everyone, all throughout the galaxies, had a hand in its completion.

Monarch would never have believed that he would be caught by the wiles of man, but such was the case. He struggled and railed against his prison, sure that he could escape if only he found the right place to attack. Before his attacks felt blocked, like they were caught in a mire of that chaotic energy. Now that sense was gone. All of it was gone.

The confusion was gone and reality came back into focus, free from the flows of chaos. This lauded Strategy had its limits, he was glad to discover. Monarch was pleased that his golden immortal abilities were able to defeat their ploy. He grinned arrogantly to himself.

He glared at his surroundings as they once more became clear, and reached out with his perception. To his North was Ultus; to his South,

Occisus; on his West arose Captus; at his East was Demortus. Before him arose a gate, and from it issued a murderous aura and an evil wind.

This is...

Something flashed behind his eyes. He wasted no time, moving quickly toward Ultus. It was the sword he was most familiar with, the one he'd left his mark upon. It would likely be the easiest one to conquer.

However as he moved forward to take the sword a portal appear. He slipped through, and was transported back to where he started. He hadn't gained any ground toward Ultus.

The Banishing Strategy's suffocating pressure had dissipated once his surroundings became clear again. It led him to believe the danger was passed. But he was wise, and understanding was clear in his face. Instead of moving forward to seize the weapons himself, instead he lashed out with a punch in each direction.

Faced with Monarch's all-mighty powers the swords simply flickered. Monarch's explosions of energies vanished without foundation. He was the most powerful being in a millennia, so he sensed the flows as they reacted to one another. He felt it as the manifestation of his power was shattered and swallowed up like it was nothing.

His manufactured human heart sank. Without question, he no longer possessed the power to threaten the trap he'd been caught in. It was in this moment a flash of purple caught his eye. It caught him off guard and he nearly fainted away, but turned fast enough to catch who it was. The Violet Prince was at his side.

The Prince was ablaze in violet light. Monarch recognized that he was consuming the essence of his Core to empower his abilities.

"Monarch!" The Prince greeted weakly.

The immortal regarded his progeny with an ominous glare. "Why are you here? Did I not order you to destroy the Strategy?"

"The humans staunchly resisted," the Prince explained. "Moments before I could break free and attack the sword bearers, the Strategy

changed. I was caught.”

Gazing upon the lesser alien’s beaten and crippled body, he knew it to be true. It meant that the humans had obtained some unknown power to aid them. Whatever it was, it had been enough to help them complete the Strategy.

Even now Monarch found it difficult to believe that his strength was incapable of breaking them free. The humans were no greater than Nirvana-level, how could they possibly contend against him?

It was well known that the gulf between an Adept of Nirvana and a denizen of the Infinite was vast. The difference between the Infinite and Immortality was larger still. The potential of an Immortal was vast as the heavens themselves.

At his level of cultivation it would require another ten thousand years before he arose to the next degree of domination. If crossing the threshold from one Paragon rank to another was a herculean task, rising in status as an immortal took eons.

Monarch’s face darkened. Finally he realized that perhaps he’d overestimated himself. At the final moment, when he thought victory was his, human beings proved their strength.

There was nothing in the genetic material he stole from mankind that told him what this trap was. How could it? There were so few humans who knew of the existence of the Banishing Strategy.

“Monarch, what should we do?” The Prince asked.

Monarch fixed him with a serious gaze. “The only thing we can do is try to break free. Perhaps we can overwhelm their ability to hold us here. I don’t believe these humans can maintain this trap for long. The amount of energy required to hold me here must be immense, and the moment they begin to falter that will be our chance. It’s a test of endurance, how can they challenge me in such a trial? This trap they’ve lain has only kept me stationary – it does not cause any harm.”

The moment these words left his lips, the four Banishing Blades glowed

brighter. As more portals appeared all around them reality became less distinct. The areas around them started to change.

All of a sudden the swords seemed leagues away.

A deep and booming voice thundered through the interior of the Strategy. "In all of history you are the first to assume this trap lacks bite. Monarch, you must know what it is you face. Regardless, I shall tell you: it is called the Banishing Strategy. In the days of immortals it was called the greatest weapon under heaven. Is it not your goal to attain the highest state of immortality? I may as well tell you, even if you succeeded this very moment the Strategy would reduce you to dust. Were this not so, would its title be so audacious? What you face terrified the gods of old. You – will – die."

The voice was Lan Jue's. It was cold and callous, full of dark promise.

Monarch responded with a dismissive sniff. "Very well! I'm eager to see what your so-called super weapon is capable of!"

"Monarch. Are... are you sure we'll be fine?" The Prince at his side sounded less than convinced.

Scorn dripped from Monarch's voice. "This is nothing more than a trick to shake our confidence. Greatest weapon under heaven... they have no means to kill me–"

His haughty affirmation were cut short when suddenly reality began to tremble. In the distance eight glimmering portals revealed themselves. Shimmering around them the rainbow of color started to fluctuate. Monarch shook and the Prince quailed. The lights went out.

When the Prince looked at his master he was surprised to see shock on Monarch's face. Before his eyes miniscule cracks appeared upon the immortal's body, spurting golden light. They started on his head, but quickly spread until they criss-crossed every inch of him.

With a loud clap, Monarch's body broke apart.

A beam of golden light escaped from where its head had been. It tried wildly to flee in any direction it could. However the flows of sword-energy

that had vanished suddenly reemerged from the darkness. The moment the golden light crashed into these lights it froze, and revealed its true nature.

It was Monarch, though a miniature copy. The tiny golden homunculus was nimble, but was now frozen with an expression of disbelief writ plain on his face.

“No! Don’t kill me. I’ll surrender the immortal realm. I can teach you how to make one of your own. I can –” Before he could finish Lan Jue’s voice rumbled from within the tempest.

“Your pleas are useless. Did you think we would allow you to live, after what you did to our people? With every murder you only thought about consuming more – you never spared a thought for those not of your ilk. Goodbye, Monarch. You should be proud to die by the might of the Banishing Strategy.”

As the last syllable hung in the air, an unending torrent of cutting light descended upon him. Monarch’s immortal spirit was cut to ribbons and drifted away to nothing in the emptiness of space.

The Violet Prince witnessed the whole scene. His face had gone ghastly pale.

Monarch – the ascendant, he who consumed the power of both Queen and Consort, the master of their immortal realm – was dead!

How was this possible? How could they have killed a god?

He stood still, frozen in place, shaking ever so slightly. No thought of confrontation entered his mind, for in the face of that terrifying storm he felt insignificant.

When it swept through the Violet Prince was rent asunder until nothing remained. He was beneath even a final word from Lan Jue.

Chapter 901: Shards of Primordial Spirits

Monarch and the Violet Prince had been destroyed, forever erased from the universe by the power of the Banishing Strategy.

Red light drained out from Lan Jue's eyes. He had been the one to guide their concentrated power. Now that Monarch was destroyed, at last the threat of alien aggression had passed.

He revealed no pleasure from their victory, no excitement. There were still problems to address – chief among them, how to restrain the Strategy safely. They hadn't been sure they could even succeed in establishing the attack, and thus had given stopping it not even a passing thought.

Through the power of faith they were ultimately able to overcome the enemy. The Banishing Strategy had been enacted and was stable, endowing them with a caliber of strength that far outstripped their wildest imaginings.

As the prayers of billions were continuously laid upon them, the swords thirstily drank of their gifts. The Banishing blades used it to complete what the sword bearers couldn't do on their own.

In a series of flashes Lan Jue and the others appeared, standing at the four corners of the Strategy. However, none of them were holding their weapon.

Lan Qing looked from one to the other, his expression uncertain. "What now?"

Lan Jue smirked at his brother. "How do I know? Wine Master, could I trouble you to report Monarch's death to Kang Hui? All remaining enemies have been destroyed. That should curtail the faith flowing into it. I'm afraid if we don't do something to weaken it the Strategy will continue to solidify."

The Wine Master interjected, curious. "What's the problem with that?"

"Well, to start if it keeps getting stronger I'm not sure we'll have the means to stop it," he answered. "It would remain here forever, and this

whole area would be too dangerous to ever go near again.”

His old friend nodded. “What do you think is needed to get it to stop?”

Lan Jue pondered out loud. “According to our estimates we would need to be Da Luo-level immortals if we wanted to exert that level of control. If one of us were that could be enough.” He sounded unconvinced even as he said it.

Lan Qing wryly added his voice. “And it has to be you. You were the one who led the Strategy.”

The Wine Master sucked in a surprised breath. “So you’re saying that anyone who enters this field will be instantly killed?” If the Strategy would bring down a god, he shuddered to think of what it might do to a normal person.

“Not necessarily,” Lan Jue answered. “If one of us – the sword bearers – guided someone through then they would be fine. After all, we’re part of the Strategy ourselves. But if someone were to enter without us it would probably end as you’d expect. I... don’t recommend you try it.”

The Wine Master’s brows furrowed in thought. “If it’s simply a matter of closing of a section of space that shouldn’t be too great of an issue. It’s impossible to expect you to reach the highest level of immortality any time within the conceivable future! Are there any other dangers we need to consider?”

Lan Jue explained further. “Right now the Strategy is still under our control, and there is no immediate problem. However, I think it’s fair to expect that the zone will expand once we leave and are no longer maintaining its borders. None of us can know how large it’ll spread, but if I had to guess I’d say it would at least swallow up Europa and everything around it. But before we consider that, it isn’t completely unthinkable for us to reach Da Luo.”

As he spoke, he swung his eyes toward Europa floating placidly in the distance.

Monarch and the Violet Prince had been vanquished, but the fruits of

their evil labors remained. Basking in a pale golden glow the newly crafted immortal realm flooded the area with its aura. Lan Jue and the others, now risen to the Infinite, could feel it clearly from where they stood.

Indeed this was their next problem. What were they to do with the alien's immortal realm?

"We can deal with that later. Right now there are more pressing matters." Li Ke interrupted them. His voice bore a somewhat urgent tone.

Lan Jue turned his attention toward the spirit. "What is it, brother-in-law?"

After absorbing so much faith, Li Ke was almost indistinguishable from any of them. The Pharmacist was even holding his hand, and the smile on her face betrayed her happiness.

Li Ke, however, was not smiling. "You have to gather the spirit shards. Fragments of what remains of the Paragons' souls. In a way what we call Paragons can be likened to 'half immortals', Taoist magicians of the ancient times. After spending so long cultivating, their souls become like primordial spirits. Primordial spirits don't disappear so easily, just like the ancient gods whose essence remains even though they lost to universal protogenia. Even now, thousands of years later, we can still feel their echoes. If we hurry and gather these shards now, there's a chance we could bring them back to life!"

Lan Jue froze when he heard it. If this were true and they could return their friends and loved ones to life, today's victory would be absolute.

"How do we do that?" He asked urgently.

Li Ke explained. "The four of you have reached the Infinite. If you search your feelings you can sense them."

"Excellent!" With such good news, how could Lan Jue ignore it? Even Lan Qing's steadfast demeanor hid a buzz of excitement. If Li Ke was right they could bring Luo Xianni and the others back from the dead!

Lan Jue shut his eyes and reached out with his perception. He began to search the area for any sign of these spirits.

He was calm now, and no longer burdened by the dangers he'd faced before. His sense of his surroundings was different. Suddenly there was something more, hidden behind a veil.

In theory space was largely empty. Aside from relatively miniscule pockets of matter, space was defined by how much nothing there was. However when someone's consciousness reached a certain level of understanding, they found this to be untrue. Their perception was more sensitive than even the most advanced instruments, telling them that there was something else.

Even up to now Lan Jue and the others radiated polychromatic light, a residue from the Banishing Strategy. So almighty was the Strategy's influence that universal protogenia still couldn't apply its pressures on them.

Safe for the time being, Lan Jue searched his consciousness until he came upon a strange and arresting impression. However it was not human. Far from it, in fact – it was what remained of the three-headed avatar.

The pulses of primordial energy were odd and uncomfortable. They seemed desperate to gather together, as though hoping it could reconstitute itself. It made Lan Jue shiver, for he knew that somewhere within the six souls that had made up that beast was a whisper of Monarch's consciousness.

Monarch was gone, completely destroyed by the Strategy, leaving these spirits on their own. It was almost pitiful to feel these fragments trying to piece themselves back together, like they had a chance to somehow come back.

Now that he saw them, how could Lan Jue give them even a shadow of hope?

Lan Jue lifted his right hand and summoned an electric blue light from the ether. When the light fell upon the cluster of spiritual energy it released a haze of pale purple which blanketed the area, sparkling with points of illumination. It was Lan Jue's Boundless Starlight Domain.

As Lan Jue became stronger, both his control over the Domain and its menace had increased exponentially. Heavenly Lightning began to crackle the moment his Domain manifested itself.

The blasts of lightning that tore into the cluster of souls was nothing short of harrowing. But before these evil fragments could feel fear, they were burned from existence. Nothing remained. They would never threaten the worlds of man again.

Lan Jue had called his Domain to prevent these fragments from scattering, but also – more importantly – so that his lightning would not hard the spirit shards he sought to save.

With the last vestiges of his enemy destroyed, Lan Jue breathed easier. When he began to search anew his perception settled on something nearby.

A copper-gold halo surrounded appeared. Near it, a fragment nearly as strong as the ones Lan Jue had wiped out lingered. Though weaker, it was more persistent and slowly drew itself closer to the golden light.

Lan Jue raced over to where the light shimmered and reached out for it.

“Qianlin,” he called. She hurriedly came to his side. Lan Jue’s Boundless Starlight Domain could destroy nearly any enemy that crossed his path, but it was not built to heal or rescue. What was better for this purpose than the Light of the Goddess of Mercy?

The golden light was radiating from Jue Di’s astrum, the Compliance Rod. The spirit that was so desperately trying to stay with it was what remained of Luo Xianni.

Only the simplest desires were left to these broken spirits. It was clear what mattered most to Luo Xianni was finding the Compliance Rod, for within it she could be together with Jue Di.

Luo Xianni pointed with her right hand. She was also now of the Infinite and could sense what Lan Jue saw. With the utmost care she guided Luo Xianni to the rod and the spirit of her lost love.

When a primordial spirit left one’s body it was assailed by the cruel

power of universal protogenia. It was torn apart, and ultimately dissipated into the vastness of space to be lost forever.

Chapter 902: Preserving Immortal Essence

Protected by an astrum, the fragment of a soul could persist for much longer than normal.

Once Luo Xianni's spirit was recovered Lan Jue continued his search. He quickly found the Pauper, Keeper, Bookworm, and the gods of wine. They were also conveyed into the Compliance Rod.

However, when he looked for Hua Li he was surprised and saddened to discover there was no trace that remained of him.

"A-Li!" When he returned to the corpses of Hua Li and Mo Xiao his heart was a tempest of emotion.

Zhou Qianlin gripped his hand. She said nothing and only hung her head before the scene. To claim there was no animosity within her would have been a lie, but be it Xiuxiu or Hua Li, they gave their lives to try and make it right. They died protecting Lan Jue. Could hate survive in the face of such sacrifice?

A thought came to Lan Jue. He extricated his hand from Qianlin's and reached forth to search the bodies for any residual parts of Hua Li's soul. But then a blue light from the distance captured his attention. As it approached, he watched in shock.

The one who came looked a lot like Hua Li, if more mature. He regarded Lan Jue with a calm expression, and was wreathed in pale blue light.

He nodded once he was close. "We'll take him. The Poseidon family has its own ways." Hua Xu answered Lan Jue's unspoken question. There was no indication any of this had affected him emotionally.

Lan Jue regarded him with a pained and conflicted expression. "Uncle, I..."

Hua Xu cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Destiny makes fools of us all. I can only hope that you see some way to forgive them. When the light of one's life goes out, it should extinguish their follies."

Lan Jue nodded his head. Hua Li and Mo Xiao were dead, harboring

hatred and resentment would serve no one. He didn't bear any ill-will toward his fallen brother.

Hua Xu extended it right hand, and from it floated a deep blue crystal. It slowly floated through space glittering in the dim light until it came to the bodies of his children. It flickered with a blue light that hung over the bodies, and moments later when it vanished so too did Hua Li and Mo Xiao.

Hua Xu nodded a final time toward Lan Jue, then turned and left.

However, he did not go far before stopping. He turned back and fixed Lan Jue with his eyes. "After this fight, it will take a long time for the Group to recover. Hua Li hoped that you could help look after he and Mo Xiao's child. It was his desire that their little one could live on Skyfire Avenue. Is there anything that might make this impossible?"

Lan Jue did not immediately reply, so Hua Xu continued. "You might not expect it from looking at our family, but our heirs are not immediately granted the full rights and powers of the bloodline. They employ the benefits of the family to choose their own path, and ultimately undergo the process of accepting the lineage. So it is destined. Of course none of us wish for this burden, neither I nor A-Li wanted to carry this mantle. I failed. Under cover of this conflict, as Hua Li was leaving to join the fight, Mo Xiao sent a ship back toward Skyfire Avenue bearing their child. I ask that you seek his aura, and bring our heir to Skyfire Avenue so that he might grow and prosper. When he comes of age, if he so chooses he can return and take up his rightful place as leader of Poseidon Group. If he does not..." Hua Xu stopped, a smile on his face. He didn't finish the thought before a flash of blue light conveyed him far away.

Lan Jue heaved a sigh. A piece of A-Li still existed somewhere! A-Li, he thought to himself, I'll do whatever I can to grant your final wish. I'll look after your son.

The battle was finally over, and the Wine Master left to spread the good news across all the human worlds. However when Lan Jue returned to his fellows his face was no less serious and burdened. They looked into the

distance where the gold-blanketed legacy of the aliens remained. They silently regarded Europa, immortal realm of their enemy.

“Brother, what are we going to do about this?” Lan Jue asked.

Lan Qing’s deep voice replied. “Under the power of faith the Banishing Strategy is strong. As its guides we can direct its power to smother and destroy Europa. We can erase every last trace of these aliens, once and for all.”

“No.” Li Ke answered quickly and firmly. Everyone turned their attention to him.

He explained. “Creating an immortal realm is phenomenally difficult. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn it’d taken ten thousand years of preparation for the aliens to succeed here. It was based off of what Monarch could piece together from the ancient immortal realm of our history, so its existence isn’t actually a threat. Now that the aliens are dead, we can take this realm for ourselves. Think about it, all four of you have reached the Infinite and the moment you leave the protection of the Strategy universal protogenia will leech your vitality. The only way you can continue to grow as Paragons is if you do so under the protection of an immortal realm.”

Lan Jue bitterly shook his head. “I have absolutely no interest in continuing this journey. It was never my dream to become an immortal, all I ever wanted was a normal life. Besides, so long as he we don’t deliberately seek cultivation Qianlin’s Domain can protect us from universal protogenia.”

Li Ke paused, then wryly chuckled. “You still can’t destroy this place, even despite your personal desires. The immortal realm is the only way in which you can bring the others back. You have your selfish motives and so do I. I want my body back, to live a normal life where I can be with my family. Small as that chance might be, I have to pursue it no matter how remote.”

Lan Qing blinked in surprise. “You’re saying we can use their primordial spirits in the immortal realm to bring our friends back?”

Li Ke answered. “Theoretically yes. An immortal realm is replete with

immortal qi that circulates through it as ubiquitous as the wind. Its basis is in faith, and I could sense that Monarch's intention was not to kill the humans once he'd succeeded in his desire to bring about the immortal realm. What he really wanted was for humans to submit and accept him as their god. Then he could feed off of our faith. Right now Europa is sustained by the faith of all those Monarch consumed. However, this had made the realm unstable. Immortal qi will continue to be consumed but not replenished. For you four, it would be different. You're heroes, and if you claim the immortal realm as your own you can inject it with the faith of the masses. You are the only ones that can stabilize this place and replenish its power."

"Not only will immortal qi protect you from universal protogenia, it will also nourish and restore the fragments of primordial spirit you've gathered. I dare say that with the help of immortal qi you could bring Jua Di back to life quickly. The others may take more time but are likely to walk the worlds of man once more."

Nearby, Chu Cheng extended the golden skeleton he carried, the remnants of the Terminator. "Is there a chance his Majesty the Terminator..."

Li Ke sighed and shook his head. "Too much time has passed, his primordial spirit has already dissolved. A Paragon's spirit can only survive about an hour before it returns to the universe."

Chu Cheng's disappointment was visible. He could say that the Terminator had given him new life. Without the Northern leader's help Chu Cheng's rise would never have been so quick. With the Terminator gone, the responsibilities of being the North's sole Paragon fell to him.

Lan Qing pressed the spirit. "So what do you suggest we do now, comrade?"

Li Ke's response came without hesitation. "First we should go to Europa and see if anything remains of the three home worlds. If it does that poison must be removed. Using the Banishing Strategy to surround Europa was not wrong, for if we find that there is no saving this immortal

realm it can quickly be destroyed. That responsibility will be left up to the four of you. In addition, if in the future anyone wants to enter the immortal realm they could only do so with your blessing and guidance. Until one or more of you achieve Da Luo status as immortals the Banishing Strategy will persist. In the meanwhile, you simply need to control it.”

Lan Qing looked at Lan Jue, who nodded back. “It sounds like the best course of action. Let’s go to Europa, and see if we can’t solve any problems we come across.”

With Monarch dead, in principle there should be nothing remaining of the three alien planets. However, they couldn’t be sure until they went to Europa and searched it themselves. With the backing of the Banishing Strategy they would make sure everything was in order.

Were it not for the possibility of saving his friends and family from permanent death, Lan Jue would much have preferred destroying this immortal realm. He’d have liked to see it pass into history and erase any possibility of future trouble.

The four sword bearers didn’t rush into the immortal realm. First they guided the Banishing Strategy’s power so that it settled over Europa, and only then began their trek to the gold-wreathed planet.

“Let’s go.” Lan Qing ordered.

The four of them entered into the newly remoulded planet’s atmosphere together. Immediately they were embraced by the multifaceted aura of the Strategy and the effects it provided. The golden light of Europa caused them no trouble, and they entered without issue.

All they felt was their bodies becoming lighter, and suddenly they were in what seemed to be a whole new reality.

Space was a vacuum, and while it didn’t threaten a Paragon’s life it could not be called comfortable. They left the distressing sensation behind as they slipped into Europa’s atmosphere.

They took their first breaths of Europaen air, filling them with delight. It

seemed like just being here was increasing their cultivation by the moment.

Li Ke and the other Paragons didn't come with them. It was dangerous until Lan Jue and the others discovered otherwise, so they were told to remain behind. Only Lan Jue, Lan Qing, Zhou Qianlin and the Pharmacist stepped foot in this immortal plane.

They looked at each other, nearly speechless.

"So this is the immortal realm?" Qianlin managed to say.

Epilogue: The Immortal Realm

Lan Qing's voice betrayed his awe. "No wonder they were so dead-set on creating it. There's something... incredible, about this place."

The immortal realm was replete with immortal qi that flowed like the clouds. In some areas it was rich, in others thin. Each of them could feel the power nourishing their bodies, and without question they knew that cultivating here would be more fruitful than anywhere else in the universe.

Any hint of universal obstruction was absent the moment they entered into this world. Here they no longer needed Qianlin's Domain to protect them. They took to this place like a fish to water.

Lan Jue bit the tip of his tongue, fighting the bone-deep comfort. "We have to see if there's anything left of the planets. This place has to be controlled from somewhere, let's see if we can find its center."

"Alright."

They didn't split up, choosing instead to remain together and sweep the area with their combined perception. They search for dangers while simultaneously taking in the view.

They were surprised to find that while the immortal qi was immensely helpful, their perception was limited here. They could only extend their consciousness a short distance, which make their task more difficult.

However it was not anything more than a nuisance. They had time, and so they cautiously combed the picturesque vistas around Europa.

The planet was nothing like it had been before the aliens took control. Everywhere they turned were exotic flora, and flows of immortal qi whispered through valleys and over mountains. It was the definition of a fairyland, Heaven stretching out before their eyes.

After about ten hours they came to the peak of a mountain where they discovered a palatial building. Before its grand gates was a board upon which was inscribed two words; Heavenly Court.

“You can’t say Monarch didn’t do his homework. It seems he had a real appreciation for our ancient culture.” Lan Jue said wryly.

They’d search nearly everywhere around Europa and had found nothing until now. Even here there was no trace of any primordial spirit or malicious vitality. Clearly Monarch’s death had left this place without a ruler.

Immortal qi was thickest here in the Heavenly Court. This had to be the center of this immortal realm though it was less opulent than one might expect. All they found was a single gemstone that looked markedly like a vital crystal. The energy it produced was released in waves and quickly became immortal qi.

This had to be what was powering this immortal realm, the collected vitality reaped by the planets in their rampage across the cosmos. Somehow this crystal was supporting the entire planet, stolen vitality circulating through it like blood.

With no aliens left to fear Lan Jue didn’t give a second thought to delving deeper into the secrets of this place. He pulled forth the Compliance Rod and released the spirits contained within out into the air.

As they’d suspected, upon reaching the earliest levels of immortality Jue Di had maintained his consciousness even as a spirit within the astrum. Once his spirit was freed it immediately set about absorbing the immortal qi around it. The other souls did so as well, though more slowly.

The Pharmacist heaved a sigh. “Now that our victory is complete, I’ll collect my husband and bring him here.” Li Ke was a part of Ultus, but as a spirit was not bound to its precise location. With Ultus part of the Strategy protecting Europa, this was the best place for him to be. He could be here, and their family could be whole.

Lan Jue nodded. “Spirits should have no problem here. I’m not sure about the other Paragons, though.”

His fears were warranted, for although they could guide their friends here the moment they were left on their own the dangers of the Banishing Strategy would turn on them. The Heavenly Court could only control the

flows of immortal qi, and not how accessible this world was. For these reasons it was difficult to say whether the Paragons could even get close.

When they returned to space the four sword bearers underwent a series of small experiments. As anticipated, although Li Ke's spirit was not strong it was sustained by Ultus and thus could enter into the immortal realm without issue. However this was not so for the Paragons. They were barred from stepping foot on Europa.

They also found that they could enter even after shedding the chaotic qi of the Strategy. This meant that only a Paragon who had achieved the Infinite could enter. The immortal realm was so named for a reason, there were standards for those who could witness its beauty. Lan Jue did not worry about what would become for this place for his mind was on returning to Skyfire Avenue. That was his home, it was where he planned to live out his days.

When his father returned he would certainly be interested in taking over management of the immortal realm. He would take on the mantle of being the modern Jade Emperor.

Lan Qing was supportive of his brother's plan. After discussing it with Li Ke, the Pharmacist decided to remain behind with him here. For the time being Jun'er would be left under Lan Jue's care. The Pharmacist would, of course, visit often until such time as her daughter reached the Infinite and was able to join them in the heavens.

"Well Qianlin, it's starting to look like I've taken the job of a kindergarten principal. I'm now responsible for Jun'er and Hua Li's son."

Qianlin laughed prettily. "You have experience after working at the NEU, don't you? Teaching children should be relaxing by comparison." [!. This is absolutely not the case.]

Lan Jue wrapped an arm around her slender waist. "Teaching them won't be a problem. But how is that going to influence having one of our own, hm?"

Her face reddened. "How many were you thinking?"

“The more the better!”

Epilogue

The Immortal Realm

Jue Di sat upon the throne within the Heavenly Court, lost in quiet contemplation.

“Chi Bupang, what are you thinking about?” Luo Xianni sat by his side, plucking grapes from a bunch in her hand and lazily popping them into her mouth.

Jue Di cast her an irritated glance. “I am Jade Emperor, master of the immortal realm. Can we not use my real name?”

She answered his onerous request with a snort. “Well hello there Master No-one. There’s only a handful of us in this place. The Keeper and Bookworm have returned to Skyfire Avenue to continue their research since they weren’t at all interested in staying here. Li Ke and the Pharmacist, that sweet couple, never come our way. Bize and Aubert are growing grapes, and if they’re successful will create a wine without equal in all the universe. Sadly it loses its taste without the addition of immortal qi. If that wasn’t the case they’d be millionaires in the East. So to put it bluntly, about the only person you can boss around is me so I don’t know who you’re trying to impress, Your Majesty!”

Jue Di scowled. “Those sons of... they pile everything on my shoulders and just run off. I’m tired of this crap.”

Luo Xianni chortled back at him. “Everyone has their own aims, just like us no? With the Pharmacist here at least there’s enough faith flowing through that the realm is stable. What do you need to fret over? Now you behave yourself, you’re almost a Golden immortal already and you’re thinking of leaving? If you think you can go on then! I won’t stop you.”

“You! You’ll be the death of me, woman!”

Luo Xianni just shrugged. “I think it’d be pretty absurd if I could irritate a god to death, I’d like to see it happen. Should we give it a try?”

He denied her the pleasure with a dramatic ‘harumph’ and proudly shot to his feet. “I was thinking that with how slow time passes here those boys should have visited at least once already. Ahh, idle hands are the devil’s workshop. Perhaps we should have a child of our own to keep us busy, at least you won’t be lonely. What do you think?”

Luo Xianni was suddenly bashful. “This is no good... not at our age.”

“Time doesn’t pass in the heavens,” Jue Di said with serious countenance. “Besides, you said yourself that you’re the only one here I can boss around. There’s no escape, heh heh!”



Planet Skyfire, Skyfire City, Skyfire Avenue.

This famous lane didn’t permit any vehicles or any robots to cross it, much less mecha. Even the patrolling police must patrol on foot, the most ancient of methods. That’s because this is a street for pedestrians, a lane for nobles, hidden away within this high technology world.

Fresh yet uniform stones covered this 2048 meter long lane. The buildings on each side of the lane were of completely different types, but every single building had its own unique aspects and history. There was ancient French gothic-style pointed buildings, the sprawling and majestic jade-carved buildings of ancient China, and were even Roman-style buildings.

This street, which seemingly had no high technology present, was set within the most central, most developed area within Skyfire City. Supposedly, here, every single square meter of earth was worth as much as one of the newest, top-tier Michaely P12-class high atmosphere hovercar.

Three years had passed since the disaster. Things were back to normal and humanity had prospered, free from alien threat. The dark days were behind them.

After the battle was done Lan Qing – The East’s super soldier, the youngest admiral in history, backbone of the Eastern army, Peerless Light emperor of Middle Heaven and commander of An Lun – announced his

retirement. However, he was sure to let everyone know that he would not be leaving the Eastern Alliance. If he was ever needed he would appear. He also mentioned he would be looking for a spouse.

I didn't take long for the news to spread, and soon women all throughout the human worlds – as young as eight and as old as eighty – were expressing their desire to be Mrs. Lan Qing. The lucky girl was never publicly revealed.

The ones known as the Middle Heaven Great Emperor of the North Pole Star of Purple Subtlety, Guanyin the Queen of Mercy, and the Pharmacist later known as Queen Yama, vanished from the public eye. Legends claimed they still used their powers to protect humanity.

As many anticipated, Skyfire Avenue became the strongest Adept organization in all the Alliances. The Wine Master continued to serve as chairman of the council, though it was only the other councilors who knew that he cursed the post every day. He was constantly heard to mutter his displeasure about how a certain someone was shirking their responsibilities.

In the North, master of the Hades bloodline Chu Chng took up the position vacated by the late Terminator as leader of the Great Conclave. The North remained as the largest Alliance, though two thirds of those planets that had once belonged to the West chose to join the Eastern Alliance. The ones that chose the North were those that were nearest to its borders. Angel and its sister planets, of course, decided to join with the East.

Over the three years these seven planets had recovered well. Only one system of faith prevailed through the whole system, loyal to the Goddess of Mercy Guanyin. As far as they were concerned she was the only one responsible for pulling them back from the brink of extinction.

The East's total power and influence grew significantly after the conflict. Poseidon Group officially announced that they would be basing their operation out of the Eastern Alliance. Their family would continue operate out of their home planet. The East was more than happy to accept.

Poseidon Group retained its title as the richest organization in all of human space, although they kept a low profile after the human-alien war. More surprising, after the fighting was done the group agreed to hand over control of their sole bastion to the Eastern army.

The Eastern armed forces still controlled far fewer than the North, and likely would never be able to compete on that front. However, the two bastions universally accepted as the strongest in human space were under their command.

The North had spent the last three years restoring order to the people. Because the East had enjoyed unity through the crisis it was able to prosper more quickly, ultimately catching up to the North.

Right now it was spring. Cool winds blew down the Avenue and rattled shuttered shop windows.

A young girl, perhaps ten, wandered down the lane clad in a pretty white dress. Her hair was pulled into a simple pony tail and though young she was as pretty as the mythical faeries of old. She was destined to be a beautiful woman when she grew up.

She wasn't alone. Two young boys walked with her on either side.

The child on her left looked just barely old enough to walk on his own. The one on her right was a little older. They were perhaps three and four, respectively.

"Sister Jun'er, I'm hungry!" The boy on the right complained. He looked up at her and pouted.

"I know! We're on our way to the Gourmet's house to have a meal. Uncle said he was going to cook us something nice today." Jun'er said, placating the child.

He swallowed a mouthful of saliva in anticipation. "Great! I want some chocolate!"

Jun'er crinkled her cute little nose and shook her head. "If you eat too much chocolate you'll rot your teeth. Daddy spoils you, he lets you do whatever you want. When you're with me you have to do what I say."

The young boy was strangely compliant. “Okay – I’ll listen to sister Jun’er. But see how good I am? You have to promise to marry me!”

“Absolutely not,” Jun’er replied. “I already have a fiancé. I can’t agree to marry you. Any you’re only four years old. Do you even know what it means to get married?”

The young boy refused to give in. “Of course I know, it means two people stay together forever. Daddy told me once, he said if I like a girl I have to bravely go after her. He said going after what you want is half the battle. The girl I like the most is sister Jun’er, and I want to make you my wife. Say you’ll marry me, Jun’er.”

She snipped back at him. “No, of course not. We have the same daddy, how can we get married? That’s wrong.”

The child petulantly pursed his lips. “An adopted daddy and a real daddy are different. What do think I’m still a baby? Your fiancé is daddy’s real son.”

As the young boy spoke he flashed a jealous glance at the boy on her left, who was also carefully picking his way along the road by their side.

The other boy gave a fierce look back. He pressed himself against Jun’er and flung his arms around leg. “Sister, give me a hug!”

She did as he asked and wrapped him in an embrace. “Don’t be scared, Lan Zhou. I’ll protect you. I won’t let anyone bully you.”

The boy on the right kicked up an even louder fuss. “That’s not fair, sister, you like him better!”

Jun’er stared at him with her dim eyes. “What’s unfair? He’s my fiancé, I’m going to marry him when we get older. Of course I’m going to treat my husband differently. Isn’t daddy nicer to you? Let me tell you, Hua Yun, if you keep teasing Lan Zhou I’m not going to play with you anymore.”

“Me!” He whined. “He’s so small, how can he be your fiancé? Even mommy and daddy say you’re too old for him.”

Jun’er paid him no mind. “Age isn’t a problem. You’re still a kid, you

don't understand. Anyway you should be glad, when I was your age I wasn't even allowed to leave my house. I spent every day lonely by myself. You get to stay on Skyfire Avenue and everyone treats you so well. What do you have to complain about?"

There was a flash recall behind her eyes when she said it. She remembered those days clearly, when she was lonely, all by herself. Then that warm voice had appeared.

Daddy, for me to be your real daughter I just have to marry your son. Right?

Lan Zhou happily snuggled against her, perfectly content. He puckered his lips and planted tiny kisses on her cheek. As she held him he began to get drowsy.

Hua Yun looked at Jun'er and then at Lan Zhou. He huffed in irritation. "I'm gunna get strong, you'll see. One day I'll steal you away and make you my wife!"

"Ow! Why'd you hit me in the head?!"

"Stop daydreaming! Do you want to go eat at Uncle Gourmet's or do you want to marry me?"

"I... I wanna eat! I'm so hungry, let' hurry."



Planet Lyr.

On a humble street there sat a set of storefronts.

On this early morning the doors were pushed open and a men issued forth. He pulled up the metal grating to protect against theft and set up his display.

The showcase was stocked with decorations for advertisement. Most of them were carvings made out of olive pits, simple artistic pieces.

They weren't exquisite works of art and the store itself was nothing special. On this small and narrow street it hardly inspired a second glance.

The tall man settled on a stool by the front door with a smile on his face. His eyes settled on the store across the street.

A gentle fragrance wafted over from the shop. Over its door was a board upon which was written 'Brimstone Bao Zi Shop.' It was evident by the state of the shop that business wasn't booming.

The door opened and a silver-haired woman exited with a table she set up outside. She flicked her wrist and cast a cigarette across the street.

The large man caught it out of the air and placed it in his mouth. He lit it with a lighter in his right hand.

The silver haired woman produced another cigarette which she kept for herself. But in a blink the stick disappeared.

"What are you doing?" The silver-haired woman complained to the man. He smirked at her. "Smoking too much is bad for a woman."

She snorted derisively at him, spun on her heels, and disappeared into her shop. She came back out a few minutes later bearing a tray.

Six bao zi [1. These are delicious steamed buns with fillings. You can get them with all kinds of stuff inside, from corn to red beans. I used to eat them so much my bao zi guy would have a pack ready when I swung by after classes.] were arrayed on the plate. They didn't look too appetizing with their yellowed skin. There was also a bowl of congee, two eggs and a small dish of pickles. [2. Xian Cai – salted pickled veggies. I hate it but my wife goes wild for the stuff. All of this is a very traditional Chinese breakfast.]

With a pleased look in his eye the man placed himself on a stool by the table she set out and dug into the meal. He ate like it was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted.

The silver haired woman stood by his side with a napkin in her hand. She quietly watched him eat.

"I hear you have a nickname, 'Everyone's Favorite Husband.' I told everyone you were mine, but no one believed me. What should I do?"

“Pugh!” Congee spewed all over the table.



Northern Alliance. The Great Conclave.

His coal-black suit set off the young man’s fiery red hair. Chu Cheng frowned as he mulled over several pieces of business held in his hands. The Conclave was a large and influential organization, and there was much that required his direct input. Often he was busy from morning to night.

Knock knock! Someone rapped their knuckles against the door.

“Didn’t I say I wasn’t holding audiences today?” Chu Cheng answered impatiently.

“Mr. Big Shot! I can’t come say hello?” The door swung open and someone entered.

When he saw her, Chu Cheng’s sharp glare turned to shock.

She wore leather thigh-high boots that covered most of her legs, leaving only a few inches of lily-white flesh visible between their tops and the bottom of her leather short-shorts. Her torso was hugged by a tight fitting vest that left her arms bare and dipped low in the front.

“Lina Lee. What are you doing here?” It was none other than the Vampire Princess who had disturbed his work.

Lina shrugged. “No reason. I thought I’d come and find something fun to do. Take me out to a nightclub or something.”

Chu Cheng’s face fell. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Does the Dark Citadel’s Succubus know you’re here?”

Lina responded flippantly. “Her Majesty the Queen and I get along wonderfully. What does she care? I’m not here to stir up trouble. Besides, she’s busy with her immanent breakthrough and doesn’t have time to worry about what I’m up to. Ugh, ever since we established the Citadel on Skyfire it’s been a total bore. There’s no chaos you know? But the Queen insists on it, and she likes to dress up and play shopkeeper with those two

friends of hers. I need to get out and have some fun from time to time!”

Chu Cheng sniffed. “I’m busy, I don’t have time for you either. Feel free to go stag.”

In a few swings of her long legs Lina was in front of him. She fixed him with her smoldering eyes, full of dark promise. “You really don’t have time for me? I was gunna let you do whatever you wanted.”

Chu Cheng squared his shoulder and adopted a righteous air. “What kind of man do you take me for?” He shot to his feet and declared: “Of course I have time!”



Planet Poseidon.

Waves of crystalline blue rippled through the area. Down in these depths, the Poseidon bloodline was the uncontested master of the world.

Two men stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the lights play through the ripples. They looked remarkably similar in appearance, most of the differences due to age.

The older man sighed. “Are you sure you don’t want to gout and have a look? Even if we don’t tell anyone you’re still alive?”

The younger man shook his head. “That’s all done, now. I’ve done all I needed to do. The rest of my days belong to her. The Heart of Poseidon brought me back but it can’t bring back what I’ve decided to let go.”

He turned and looked at the beautiful woman, frozen in time within an icy coffin.



Eastern Alliance. National Eastern University.

An antique bicycle trundled along the road toward the university gates. It stopped a dozen or feet back and a man in a meticulously tailored suit hopped off. He pushed the bike the rest of the way.

He looked exceedingly normal except for his fine clothes. He was around

thirty, with black frame glasses perched on the bridge of his nose [3. This is Tang Jia San Shao. Writers tend to put themselves in their works.]. As he entered the school and pushed his bike down the lanes, he was occasionally greeted by passing students.

“Hello, Professor.”

“Good morning.”

After a little while he hopped back up on his bike and made his way toward the university’s electives building. When he arrived he dismounted and placed the bike thoughtlessly to one side. He didn’t enter the offices and instead made his way to one of the lecture halls. He was a little late today, and if he didn’t hurry he feared he might be tardy for the start of class.

He pushed open the doors to a pitched lecture theatre and was met by a full house. Everyone’s eyes swung his way.

“Stand up!”

“Good morning, Professor!” [4. Traditional start to every class, depending on how strict the teacher is. Everyone rises and greets the teacher then are told to sit. In university we did this at the start of every semester, but were usually told by the teacher that it wasn’t necessary.]

“Hello everyone, please sit.” The young instructor took up his position behind the podium and smiled at everyone.

“We have an interesting class planned for today. If I recall, last time I told you that I would be handling lunch today. I see we have quite a few students who brought their appetite! I’m not sure to make of your unusually eager participation.”

A student quipped. “What’s on the menu, Professor Lei Feng?”

Lei Feng smirked. “Ma La Tang, spicy soup. I don’t know if anyone here is familiar with the dish. For today’s Etiquette class we’re going to learn what real Ma La Tang tastes like. That will be our lunch.”

A fiery woman – clearly not a student – sat in a far corner. She was

dressed in smart black business attire and also wore black-rimmed glasses. A strange expression flitted across her face and she muttered: “Lei Feng!” She said it with a wry grin as she thought back to a time not long ago...

The End

*

Author’s Note:

At last we’ve come to the end of Skyfire Avenue. Frankly speaking there was a lot in this novel I wanted to write for myself. My favorite part was the beginning, but many of my dear readers expressed a lack of understanding. Later I changed direction and focused more on conflict and combat. This book was an experiment, with the beginning following more of a novella-type arrangement. I truly enjoyed the world of Skyfire Avenue and the people in it. I’m curious who you liked best.

Readers who are familiar with me will know that my works are seamlessly connected. In some ways I’m disappointed with where this novel ended – there was a lot I didn’t exactly agree with. However, it is time to put the novel to rest. Perhaps when I have matured I will revisit it and make some modifications, and add some things I feel it needs.

It was my hope, when I started writing Skyfire Avenue, that I might be able to teach my readers about some of the finer points of etiquette and high culture. I fear I wasn’t very successful. As you continue to make your way through like you will encounter more of the things we discussed in the novel and then you will understand. I was very meticulous in my research, and much of what I described you can find today.

I find myself conflicted. Skyfire Avenue has been completed, so what will the next project be? I suspect many of my readers already know. It’s a project that’s been brewing in my mind, that I’ve been preparing for, for a long time. I think you will be pleasantly surprised when I tell you it is part three of the Dou Luo Da Lu series.

Readers of the previous novels and its peripheral works will be able to guess some of its content. The Dou Luo Da Lu series is undoubtedly my

favorite to work on, and now it's time for it to continue its progress. What marvels await us in the third installment? We'll have to wait and see. All I can say is I'll be returning to my roots as a more experienced and mature author. I promise to provide you all a feast for your imagination. I'm sure you all will enjoy!

*

Translator's Note:

Before RXW approached me with the offer to translate *Skyfire Avenue*, I had never even read a Chinese novel. My translation experience did not extend past paragraphs of medical texts. I've forgotten precisely when I began working on *Skyfire Avenue*, but it had been a project that has spanned years. Over that time there have been challenges and triumphs, and I have grown professionally during the course of this novel.

As Tang Jia San Shao expressed above, many of you shared similar concerns about the beginning of this story with readers throughout China. The author was bold in his decision to try something new, which ultimately didn't have the effect he wanted. While there were ups and downs with the path he chose, I think we can agree that it created an engaging world, with multifaceted characters that were fascinating to follow. Tang Jia San Shao's experimentation produced a unique work that I think stands alone in a difficult genre, completely unlike any other translated work. As a whole, while it may have felt tedious from time to time, I feel that the final product would not have been as satisfying if the setting had not been established as the author had chosen.

Where I was as a translator and reader changed throughout the course of the novel. In the beginning I was a novice, translating part-time between classes. I had passion for the prospects ahead and excitement in pursuing a new skill set. I think in some ways that might shine through in the product. Over time, when readers dwindled and I felt more like a burden to my employer, that passion waned. I always strove to make sure that my work was as engaging as I could make it, however, and I think that my ability to understand the intent and 'voice' of the author improved.

Now as we close the proverbial book on Skyfire Avenue I hope that all of you enjoyed the journey. Though I did not create the world Lan Jue lived in I did have an opportunity to put my mark on it, and in so doing I've become invested in its reception. If it brought you any measure of joy, if it made a tough day better, if you laughed or scoffed or got teary-eyes than I'm proud I could help bring that to you. I'll see you wherever the journey brings us next.

Xiao Lai

Credits

Translator: [Wuxiaworld](#)

Epub: [Estevam](#) / [dotNOVEL](#)