

Ultragene Warlord

Chapter 16: You're Free

"Congratulations, Wang Xiaohua, you're free!" The moment they entered the settlement, Zhang Lie whispered into Wang Xiaohua's ear. Subsequently, she felt the presence by her side vanish: Zhang Lie had disappeared.

Wang Xiaohua was shocked. She couldn't believe that Zhang Lie would let her go so easily. Why? He hadn't hesitated to kill Qin Xiaotian and the others. Why would he let me go? Could he be interested in rekindling our relationship? Yes, yes, that had to be the case! Otherwise, why would he leave me alive without even extorting me for my points?

Zhang Lie's sudden departure left Wang Xiaohua, still stealthed, in deep thought. However, she was being so naive that Zhang Lie would have been in fits of laughter upon hearing her thoughts. Of course, while he didn't care about her thoughts, he had overheard what the crowds were saying outside the settlement.

At the betting stand set up by the three major corporations, a mysterious black-clad man came to the counter and said, "I'm betting thirty thousand points on Zhang Lie's safe return!"

His remarkable declaration sent ripples through the crowds.

"Thirty thousand points for Zhang Lie?! Is this guy crazy?"

"Some people clearly have too many points on their hands!"

"Isn't that so? It's already the third day of the hunt, and there's almost no chance for Zhang Lie by now. What a fool!"

The onlookers' taunts didn't affect the mysterious man at all. He slammed a card down on the counter and called out to the bookkeepers, "What's the matter? Aren't you going to accept my bet?"

The bookkeeper sitting in front of the counter immediately smiled. "Of course we'll take the bet! Why wouldn't we? The betting only closes at 5 PM, and it's only 3 PM right now!"

The paperwork was handled rapidly, and the mysterious man quickly left after receiving his receipt. Only after he had vanished did the onlookers begin to murmur among themselves again.

"What an idiot! The three corporations got thirty thousand points, just like that!"

"Isn't that so? Not only that, he's even trying to act like a mysterious fellow with that get-up!"

The crowd soon declared that black-clad man as the stupidest fool in the settlement.

Just as the commotion had settled down, a rather handsome hunter stepped forward, gaze still hovering in the direction in which the mysterious man had left. He sauntered up to the counter. "Ten thousand points to that Zhang Lie fellow."

These words sparked another discussion among the crowd. Someone even shouted out the hunter's name.

"Isn't that... isn't that Chu Feng?"

"Chu Feng? Who's Chu Feng?"

"The second-ranked hunter on the gene leaderboard, who else?!"

"What's going on? Why would someone like Chu Feng place a bet on Zhang Lie? Could he have received some news?"

Chu Feng's action immediately caused a few hunters to palm their point cards, thinking about whether or not to make the same bet he did.

"Friends, I haven't heard anything of the sort! I'm simply placing this bet on a whim. I don't care if you mimic me, but don't hold me responsible if you lose!" Chu Feng's explanation caused much of the crowd, eager to continue betting, to shrink back.

Chu Feng had the money and points to spare, after all, but they didn't. If other hunters were to mimic his bet, that was a decision they had to make for themselves.

The moment Chu Feng left, however, the bookkeepers from the three corporations, who had been smiling after the mysterious black-clad man's departure, suddenly grew stern and began packing up.

The gamblers lounging around the stand immediately noticed what was going on.

"What's the matter? Didn't you claim you were going to allow bets until 5 PM? Why are you all packing up now?"

"That's right, what's going on? This bet's recognized by the artificial intelligence presiding over the Blacksteel settlement, so you won't be able to run away so easily!"

The head bookkeeper strode out from behind the stand and explained politely, "Don't worry, we're from the three corporations. We certainly won't be running away. As for why we're halting bets so early on, it's simply what our superiors told us. We're just low-level workers, and we don't know what's going on either. I suspect it's simply a matter of risk. There are already tens of millions of points in the betting pool, after all."

His words and polite attitude barely persuaded the gamblers to let them pass.

But before they could leave, a particularly domineering voice came from within the crowd.

"Oh? Who's going to leave before I, Qin Xiao, have made my bet?" Qin Xiao strode forth in an imposing suit of jet-black armor.

With one hand, he pressed down on the table the bookkeepers were trying to pack up, retrieved his point card, and said, loud enough for all to hear, "I know exactly how capable my cousin is. I'll bet three hundred thousand points that the other dumb bastard who roused his ire won't make it back alive!"

"Young Master Qin, you—this isn't something I have the authority to handle, so..."

"Shut your damn mouth! I know exactly how much profit the three corporations have made in this settlement over the past few years. Give me a receipt for this bet, or I won't let you out of the settlement!"

What bookkeeper would refuse the bet now? Their lives were more important, after all, and they were only low-level workers.

"Qin Xiao, you're even bullying these white-collar workers now?" As Qin Xiao grabbed the receipt he was handed, a clear, flute-like voice rang out from the crowd.

"Yun Bing, the corporations themselves claimed that they'd halt the betting at 5 PM. It's not my fault that they're going back on their word! Why don't you come over and make a bet too? It's all thanks to our Xiaotian that we're getting such an easy way to make more points!"

Faced with Yun Bing, first on the gene leaderboard, Qin Xiao dropped his dominating attitude, but not his boastful tone.

His prideful posturing made Yun Bing want to laugh. As she stepped up to the counter, Yun Bing said, "If I can still make a bet, I'll bet ten thousand points that the fellow facing off against Qin Xiaotian will make it back alive!"

Her words caused the crowd to erupt in commotion. The top player on the gene leaderboard herself had made a bet, and it was even for the underdog! Of course,

everyone could tell that she had only done so to go against Qin Xiao, not because she had any hidden information of her own.

And given her status as the top hunter of the Blacksteel settlement, despite her polite attitude, the head bookkeeper certainly didn't dare to offend her and quickly handed her a receipt back.

"Haha! Yun Bing, I love stubborn women like you!" Qin Xiao's boisterous behavior clearly revealed his interest in Yun Bing, but she didn't get upset. Instead, throughout the entire process, she spared him not a single glance.

After claiming her receipt, she turned around and vanished like fog on a sunny day.

Keep pretending to be all distant, wench. I'll make you regret it sooner or later! Yun Bing's insouciance infuriated Qin Xiao, but what could he do about it? Her own strength, her clan's power, and even her team's capabilities all eclipsed his. He might shoot his mouth off from time to time, but he wouldn't offend her needlessly.

Similarly, while Yun Bing might ignore him, she wouldn't make a big fuss about the matter.

After Yun Bing left, Qin Xiao also quickly disappeared. But their departure didn't mark the end of the betting—many hunters near the top of the leaderboard trickled toward the betting stand, ready to make their bets after the top two hunters had done so.

Of course, most of them favored Qin Xiaotian, given what Qin Xiao himself had said. Nevertheless, there were a few gamblers who were willing to take the risk for the minuscule chance of a jackpot.

It took another dozen minutes before the bookkeepers were finally able to head out. The curtains to the entire fiasco were about to draw to a close. At that point, there should have been a lull before the final results of the bet were established.

However, the gamblers in the crowd were set abuzz not ten minutes later by a piece of momentous news: the female hunter who had spawned this entire conflict, Wang Xiaohua, had returned!

Of course, that wasn't the most salient point—more importantly, she had returned alone! Not Qin Xiaotian, not his team, not even Zhang Lie—just Wang Xiaohua!

The gamblers immediately swarmed her, wanting to discover the outcome of the bet.

However, before most people could reach her, guards sent by the Blacksteel settlement's artificial intelligence appeared to wall her off. By that point, the settlement gates were swarming with people.

Only with the appearance of the guards did the gathered hunters calm down. They could fight all they wanted outside the settlement grounds, but within the settlement, the guards could not be overcome.

As for Wang Xiaohua, under the protection of the settlement guards, she was given a room at the highest-class inn in the settlement, the Blacksteel inn, whose proprietor was the artificial intelligence itself.

Subsequently, the artificial intelligence transmitted a message to the gathered hunters on her behalf: she was beleaguered by the attention and her recent experiences, and she needed some time to herself to process what had happened. At 8 PM, the artificial intelligence would announce the outcome of the bet.

It was only then that Wang Xiaohua finally understood what Zhang Lie had in mind for her.

Chapter 17: The Show Begins

Oh, Wang Xiaohua understood it all now! The reason Zhang Lie had spared her wasn't because he pitied her, but because he was planning to shrug the blame for his murders onto her!

Qin Xiaotian and the others had died, but she was still alive, and she would be held responsible. There were only two survivors of the entire ordeal: one was her, and the other was Zhang Lie. Given their past relationship, it was conceivable that others would think that they were working together.

But this realization had come too late.

Everyone knew that she was still alive, so she had become the prime suspect. In fact, if she were to reveal the truth immediately, the matter might have resolved itself. Unfortunately, Wang Xiaohua was so scared that no one would believe her that she ended up doing nothing, and her inaction was damning.

Once things dragged out—once it seemed as though Wang Xiaohua were deliberately hiding her involvement in Qin Xiaotian's disappearance—the entire Wang clan would perish with her.

In a regular inn, Zhang Lie, dressed all in black, was happily writing an article: "What Really Happened at the Venombane Glade."

From the perspective of an onlooker, Zhang Lie carefully detailed and twisted the truth of the matter. According to him, Wang Xiaohua and Zhang Lie were acting in cahoots to steal all the soulshards from Qin Xiaotian's team—as well as their lives. Even more maliciously, Zhang Lie was waiting for Wang Xiaohua to speak up and take the first step toward her ruin before revealing his "truth".

Having prepared the article, Zhang Lie left the Blacksteel settlement again, returning to the venombane glade to set up the scene of the crime.

At 8 PM, a huge crowd had gathered outside the Blacksteel Inn. The gamblers who had taken part in the bet were all waiting to discover the outcome of the battle—or the juiciest, freshest gossip.

Shockingly, it was a robot who emerged out onto the inn's third-floor balcony, not Wang Xiaohua.

"Miss Wang Xiaohua has requested that I, the artificial intelligence serving the Blacksteel settlement, reveal the final outcome of the bet! The winner—Zhang Lie! Except for Miss Wang Xiaohua, Qin Xiaotian's entire team perished! The outcome of this bet is now official, and those winners can now redeem their receipts for points online."

For a brief moment, the deep, synthetic voice lulled the entire Blacksteel settlement into silence.

A mere fraction of a second later, however, the crowd erupted in shock.

How could Qin Xiaotian have lost?! His entire team, too?! How was this possible?

"No, I don't believe this! She has to be lying! How could Qin Xiaotian lose— and with his entire team, at that?! That's impossible!"

"That's right, it's impossible! Qin Xiaotian is Qin Xiao's cousin, after all—how could someone like him fail to beat a hunter at the bottom of the gene leaderboard?! Where's Wang Xiaohua? Why hasn't she revealed herself?"

"Preposterous, I say!"

"Wang Xiaohua, what really happened? You'd better tell us the truth!"

Clearly, this outcome was unacceptable to a majority of the crowd. After all, at least 90% of the crowd had staked a heavy bet on Qin Xiaotian. They would suffer heavy losses if Qin Xiaotian had actually lost.

As for the artificial intelligence, well, it didn't much care for the dismay of the crowd. If the crowd became violent, it would be dispersed, and any troublemakers would be arrested. The artificial intelligence would certainly reveal the impartial truth. And since it claimed that Zhang Lie had won, then Qin Xiaotian had to have been defeated—and killed.

Only after realizing that inconvenient truth did the dejected gamblers finally leave. However, just because they had dispersed didn't mean that they would take their loss lying down—no, they had to uncover the truth of the matter.

In every bet, there would be winners and losers. Even though Zhang Lie was a dark horse, there would still be some gamblers willing to bet on him. At that moment, they were overjoyed: the odds were 120:1 in their favor! They had earned their points back a hundredfold!

Even the strongest hunters like Yun Bing and Chu Feng were pleasantly surprised by their gains. After all, given such odds, a ten-thousand point bet would give them 1.2 million points back. No matter how much wealth they had, 1.2 million points was a considerable amount of points. As a result, both of them gained a deep interest in Zhang Lie, whom they hadn't ever seen in person.

Of course, at the same time, Qin Xiao was flying into a blind rage.

On the fifth-floor suite in the Blacksteel inn, with a huge boom, the table in front of Qin Xiao exploded into tiny shards.

"Find out exactly where that Wang Xiaohua is! I want to see her immediately!" Qin Xiao was howling at the door to his room like a ferocious beast.

"Yes, Captain!" Seeing how enraged their captain was, Qin Xiao's team immediately rushed off to find Wang Xiaohua.

The reason that Qin Xiao hadn't approached her initially was because he thought Qin Xiaotian was trying to drum up attention, not that he had lost! How could he have lost?!

Xiaotian was dead, and the only survivor was Wang Xiaohua... He'd bet three hundred thousand points, 90% of his total wealth, and it was all gone now...

His subordinates were rather capable hunters in their own right, and they quickly brought back the news that Qin Xiao wanted to hear.

Wang Xiaohua was in room 303 of this very inn, and was apparently meeting with the head of the three great corporations at the moment.

"The three corporations—!" Qin Xiao was so furious that he couldn't sit still.

In room 303 of the Blacksteel Inn, three middle-aged men were sitting in the rather small living room. Opposite them, Wang Xiaohua was seated by the corner of a couch, her face pale, surrounded on either side by two guards.

She was panicking because she now clearly understood the ramifications of her safe return. As a result, she had even spent her precious points to hire two guards for protection.

"Wang Xiaohua, I think you should understand your predicament quite well. To be frank, you're the only one who can save yourself now! Tell us everything that you saw and heard, starting from the moment you left the settlement gates! Otherwise, I can assure you that both you and your clan will be crushed by morning."

The head of one corporation was threatening and scaring Wang Xiaohua in order to learn about exactly what had happened. The other two heads were also in rare agreement.

No matter the outcome of the bet, the three corporations would still make a tidy profit. The reason they were here to see Wang Xiaohua was because the outcome was too shocking even for them. Furthermore, as merchants, they could sense an opportunity brewing.

Wang Xiaohua gulped down some saliva, not knowing where to begin.

Ding! Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Zhou Qian, Li Jin, Zhao Jia, open up! Otherwise, I'll kill any team from your corporations the moment I encounter them! I'm Xiaotian's cousin, and I demand to know the truth immediately! Open up!" Outside room 303, Qin Xiao's booming voice struck the hearts of the hunters inside like a bolt of lightning.

If this weren't the Blacksteel Inn, and if there weren't a horde of gamblers unable to accept their loss in the corridor with him, Qin Xiao would have broken down the door with a kick. The three heads eyed each other, and one of them finally turned to a subordinate.

As the door opened, the furious Qin Xiao stomped inside. His subordinates stayed outside to guard the door. Qin Xiao eyed the two guards by Wang Xiaohua's side, then dragged a stool over and went to sit by the three heads.

"Wang Xiaohua, you're with my cousin Xiaotian, so I won't make things difficult for you. But you have to explain to me exactly what happened on this trip! How did Qin Xiaotian and his team die—all except for you?! If you don't tell me what happened, I'll have you—and all the rest of the Wang clan—die alongside him!"

Such was Qin Xiao's rage that this outburst was the result of him trying to restrain himself.

Wang Xiaohua knew then that she wouldn't be able to keep her experience a secret; in truth, she was waiting for Qin Xiao to arrive. After all, as long as she were able to convince Qin Xiao of the truth, then she would be absolved of any suspicion.

After clearing her throat, Wang Xiaohua began, "We were all set up by Zhang Lie! That day, after leaving the settlement, we chased him all the way to the Moonlit Pond. There, he led us through a tunnel behind the waterfall into an idyllic glade.

"Everything in the glade was tinged purple, and the moment we entered, we found quite a number of rare herbs. However, our joy and happiness were short-lived: we had fallen right into his trap. We were attacked by these so-called venombane scorpions, most of which were regular-grade, but they swarmed us rapidly in huge droves. Worse, they seemed to have a stealth ability and a deadly poison.

"Zhang Lie had previously doused himself in soulbloom pollen, which would allow him to avoid the scorpions. Xiaotian led us into a battle with the scorpions, but after losing half our members, he transformed into a golden pangolin and burrowed a hole through which we could escape.

"However, by that time, we had all fallen prey to the scorpions' slow-acting poison. Our bodies were slowly becoming paralyzed, so Xiaotian brought us deeper into the glade instead, intending for us to recover before heading off.

"But even though Xiaotian used all sorts of antidotes, he wasn't able to cure the paralysis at all. We were discovered by Zhang Lie, who tricked us into handing over our soulshards before killing us all! The only survivor he left was me.

"Qin Xiao, Zhang Lie's a sly and malicious fellow, and he's been pretending to be weak all along. We've all been tricked by him, all of us hunters in the Blacksteel settlement!

"You have to avenge Xiaotian and his team!"

In the end, Wang Xiaohua's words were drowned out by a fit of desolate sobs.

Chapter 18: The Trap Tightens

Despite her cries, none of the four people before her showed any sign of pity—especially Qin Xiao, who immediately questioned, "Why would he keep you alive, then? Shouldn't this Zhang Lie fellow have killed you too? Why would he leave you alive? Tell me, why?"

Hearing Qin Xiao's accusation, and seeing the skeptical glances from the three corporation heads, Wang Xiaohua clearly sensed matters taking a turn for the worse.

"Qin Xiao, it's easy! He kept me alive so all of you would suspect me, to have me take the blame for his murder!"

"You, a scapegoat? No matter who this hunter is, everyone in the Blacksteel settlement would know my name. Wouldn't he know that, the moment Xiaotian died, he would be a dead man walking? What a foolish notion—is he a fool, or is he treating us like fools? And if this were the case, where's this Zhang Lie now?"

Qin Xiao was brash and arrogant, and his thoughts reflected that belief. He believed that anyone who had roused his ire within the Blacksteel settlement had no recourse but to wait for him to kill them. Furthermore, he believed that, if Zhang Lie truly were capable of killing Qin Xiaotian, then he wouldn't try to play such an obvious trick on him.

Wang Xiaohua was so agitated that she began to cry again. "Qin Xiao, Zhang Lie left on his own the moment he brought me back to the settlement. I'm sure he's still hiding somewhere!

Please, you have to believe me! I swear that I'm telling nothing but the truth. If you don't believe me, you can send your subordinates out to the venombane glade to have a look!"

"Oh, I will. At the very least, Xiaotian needs a proper burial!" Recalling how close she was to Qin Xiaotian, Qin Xiao suddenly felt less skeptical about her claims. After all, unless Wang Xiaohua was a fool, she would have no reason to collude with Zhang Lie. He would have to see the scene of the crime for himself.

He believed that, as long as he was there, he would easily figure out the truth.

"Qin Xiao, the venombane glade isn't very large, and it's a pretty easy place to find. Could I be allowed to remain here? After reaching the glade, go straight for about one kilometer. There, you'll be able to see the large hole out of which Xiaotian tunneled, and I buried his body inside!

"You'll need to start by finding a soulbloom flower. With its pollen, you can enter the glade. Zhang Lie mentioned that it isn't endemic to the venombane glade, so you shouldn't have a hard time finding one."

Wang Xiaohua could discern that Qin Xiao didn't completely believe her, so she didn't dare to leave the settlement with him. After all, he was notorious for his bad temper. If there were to be some unforeseen circumstance, she could well lose her life at his hands.

Wang Xiaohua looked timidly and pleadingly at Qin Xiao.

"Don't worry, Wang Xiaohua, I won't do anything to you until the truth is clear. Are you sure you don't want to go with me? This is your one chance at proving your innocence!" Qin Xiao narrowed his eyes, revealing a sudden killing intent.

Wang Xiaohua began to sob, "Please, Qin Xiao, don't force me to go! It's a very easy place to find, and once you find it, you'll surely understand that I'm innocent."

Qin Xiao leaned closer to Wang Xiaohua, until his eyes were directly facing hers. "You'd better not let me find out that you were part of this, or your entire clan will die with you."

He glanced toward her two guardians, glared at her, and then got up to leave. The three corporation heads did the same. In truth, they were now all very relieved that they had come to hear Wang Xiaohua's story.

Ignoring the details of Qin Xiaotian's death, they had learned about this mysterious venombane glade, apparently filled with a bounty of riches. The location hadn't yet been developed, which meant an unlimited set of possibilities for turning it into a goldmine!

The four men each rushed toward the inn's exit.

Right before stepping outside, however, Qin Xiao commanded, "Listen up, you three. This venombane glade's something that my Xiaotian gave his life for, so don't you think about trying to steal it away!"

The three corporation heads, Zhou Qian, Li Jin, and Zhao Jia, couldn't help letting out a faint mocking smile at his words.

Zhou Qian even murmured, "Qin Xiao, do you really think that you have the capability to do that? Even if all four of us were to work together, we wouldn't be able to monopolize the location. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He left before Qin Xiao could reply, and the other two corporation leaders shook their heads and followed suit, leaving Qin Xiao standing red-faced in the hotel lobby.

It took him a moment's thought to understand what they were saying: given the unusual circumstances, their every movement would be telegraphed and paid attention to. It would be impossible for them to secretly develop the location; the most they could do would be to develop it jointly.

He rushed out of the lobby, trailing behind the three corporation heads.

By the time Qin Xiao and his team arrived at the Moonlit Pond, those teams sponsored by the three corporations were already present. Not only that, Yun Bing's team and Chu Feng's team were also at the scene.

Everyone gathered underneath the waterfall at the Moonlit Pond. Qin Xiao glared at Zhou Qian, Li Jin, and Zhao Jia. However, the three of them each ignored his presence.

In truth, they had long since gotten used to Qin Xiao's brash behavior, and his threats meant nothing to them. The three corporations would, in order to avoid trouble, refrain

from antagonizing him as much as possible, but if there were sufficient profit to be gained, they really didn't have much to fear from the Qin clan.

"Qin Xiao, aren't you greedy? You want to have everything for yourself! It's not possible for you to develop the location alone, so let's have all six of us enter together!" Chu Feng was the first to speak up. He spoke in a relaxed fashion, but his eyes showed no intention of giving in if Qin Xiao were to decline.

Yun Bing, standing not far away, didn't speak up, but her expression made it apparent that she felt the same way.

Damn the three corporations! Qin Xiao cursed inwardly. To Chu Feng, he said, "You all make it sound so trivial, but Xiaotian died for this place! No matter what, my team has to be the first to enter, or none of us will!"

The other five teams all traded glances among themselves.

Then, Yun Bing stepped forward. "Since you clearly want to be cannon fodder, we'll let you head in first."

She was likely the only hunter in the entire settlement who dared to call Qin Xiao cannon fodder. Against Yun Bing, it was meaningless to talk back.

"Ready the soulbloom pollen! We're heading in!"

With Qin Xiao's loud roar, his subordinates immediately doused themselves with soulbloom pollen and rushed through the waterfall.

Just as the elites of the Blacksteel settlement were exploring the venombane glade, however,

another shock rumbled through the Blacksteel settlement.

A horde of hunters were heading straight for the venombane glade, prompted by an anonymous thread in the Blacksteel settlement's forum.

The author of the thread had detailed precisely where this venombane glade was, as well as what he had noticed playing out within the glade.

Apparently, while he was hunting near the Moonlit Pond, he noticed the chase between Zhang Lie and Qin Xiaotian's team, and he had trailed them stealthily.

According to him, he followed them into an idyllic glade, where he saw Qin Xiaotian fighting against a horde of scorpions. He had hidden up a tree and, later, fell prey to the scorpions' paralytic poison.

It was this paralysis that had caused him to witness the truth behind Qin Xiaotian's death—how Zhang Lie and Wang Xiaohua had plotted together to destroy Qin Xiaotian and the rest of his team.

By luring them within the glade, Zhang Lie induced the scorpions to attack Qin Xiaotian's team, sapping them of strength and energy. Then, with Wang Xiaohua's help, he tricked Qin Xiaotian's team into giving up their soulshards.

Finally, the two of them split their ill-gotten spoils and planned out how to dodge responsibility for the deaths of Qin Xiaotian and his team.

The thread vilified both Zhang Lie and Wang Xiaohua, and immediately caused the penniless gamblers, who had staked everything on Qin Xiaotian, and who hadn't believed that Zhang Lie had been able to kill them all with his own strength, to go berserk.

No wonder Qin Xiaotian had lost despite his overwhelming numerical and genetic advantage!

The Blacksteel Inn, in which Wang Xiaohua was residing, was quickly swarmed with all sorts of hunters, but even this wasn't the end of the story.

The other "culprit", Zhang Lie, had himself made a thread on the forum!

According to Zhang Lie, Wang Xiaohua had been an untrustworthy ally. Not only had she not given him his fair share of soulshards, she had even shrugged off all the blame for the entire affair!

He promised that he had no intention of killing Qin Xiaotian; he had only wanted to live, and Wang Xiaohua was the one who had plotted the murder.

The anonymous thread agreed with Zhang Lie's self-indictment, and Wang Xiaohua's traitorous behavior had been all but confirmed in a few short minutes.

Subsequently, someone noticed that Qin Xiaotian's golden-pangolin soulshard had been listed on the trading post by an anonymous seller.

Furthermore, even his subordinates' soulshards had appeared as well. All these soulshards were listed anonymously and slated to be auctioned off.

The entire settlement was in an uproar.

At this point, Wang Xiaohua realized that Zhang Lie was trying to shift the blame onto her, and she immediately made her own thread to clear her name.

But given her naivete, how could she beat Zhang Lie in a verbal battle? Her name became smeared in a matter of minutes, and descriptions of what she did grew darker and bleaker.

In the end, Wang Xiaohua could only focus on one key point: the location of Qin Xiaotian and his team's corpses in the venombane glade. Afterwards, she stayed cooped up in her room in the Blacksteel Inn, not daring to leave, or even to post on the forum.

But even so, Wang Xiaohua's name had become irrevocably tarnished.

After all, Zhang Lie was allegedly just trying to live. On the other hand, Wang Xiaohua had been the one clamoring for the death of Qin Xiaotian and his team.

Someone like her, even in the ruthless dimensional world, would be scorned and despised.

Worst of all, what Wang Xiaohua didn't know was that the key evidence she was counting on—the location of Qin Xiaotian's corpse—would be what eventually doomed her and her clan.

Chapter 19: Superior-Grade Lifeform

The moonlit night submerged the entire venombane glade in an aura of mystery.

However, this mysterious glade was now packed to the brim with hunters. The Yun, Chu, Qin, Zhou, Li, and Zhao clans had poured all their elites into this expedition, brightening the glade with hundreds of lanterns and conjured flames.

Their bodies were all covered in a generous quantity of soulbloom pollen, so despite all the commotion, they weren't attacked by the venombane scorpions.

As the elites of the Blacksteel settlement, they had noticed the stealthed venombane scorpions surrounding them almost instantaneously. On the rock walls, in the earth—these venombane scorpions seemed to be omnipresent within the glade.

The cave tunnel that they had passed through seemed to be their lair. However, because of the soulbloom pollen, the scorpions ignored them all. As a result, before the hunters attacked the scorpions, the scorpions wouldn't attack them of their own accord.

Although they had learned a little about the area from Wang Xiaohua, they forged on cautiously. Even Qin Xiao, brash and boisterous, had become extremely careful upon exploring the glade. Nighttime in the dimensional world was filled with danger; as an experienced hunter, Qin Xiao certainly wouldn't let his guard down.

After passing into the venombane glade, the hunters found that the glade really wasn't all that large, and there were only a very limited quantity of valuable herbs. Even after exploring the entire glade, no one discovered any other lifeforms. Although the glade was filled with spiritual herbs, they were all relatively common varieties, and most had clearly been harvested already.

The gathered hunters clearly didn't think much of the remaining herbs. In that case, the most valuable objects they could hope to find in the glade would be a mutated- or superior-grade venombane-scorpion soulshard.

The fight that had taken place had left a fair bit of evidence that the hunters were able to make out. Although there were only a few marks left on the ground by the tunnel exit, it was clear that a fight had taken place.

Qin Xiao stopped by a gigantic mound of earth, frowning. According to Wang Xiaohua, this was where Qin Xiaotian had been buried. Qin Xiaotian had revered his older cousin Qin Xiao, and Qin Xiao had regarded his cousin highly as well. How could he have died so suddenly?

"My condolences, Qin Xiao," Zhou Qian spoke up, his face a blank mask.

Li Jin and Zhao Jia echoed the sentiment, but their words seemed insincere, as though steeped in vicious schadenfreude.

Chu Feng clucked his tongue. How pitiful, for someone like Qin Xiaotian to be buried here!

"Qin Xiao, I told you your cousin was a weakling, didn't I? You didn't believe me, and according to Yun Bing, you bet three hundred thousand points on him? Surely even you can't afford to squander your wealth like that! I suppose you'll want to retrieve his corpse and bring it back to Earth? We'll leave you to it, then."

Chu Feng's words turned Qin Xiao's face an angry purple.

Qin Xiao was the most arrogant hunter of the top three hunters on the gene leaderboard, and that attitude was something he had embraced on a day-to-day basis. Even if Yun Bing and Chu Feng were slightly stronger than he was, he had never feared either of them.

When had the arrogant Qin Xiao suffered such humiliation? He didn't even know how to repudiate Chu Feng's words! After all, Chu Feng was right—no matter how much he didn't want to admit it.

As a scion of the Qin clan, Qin Xiaotian, whose mutated gene fragments were at capacity, and who had brought his entire team with him—how could he have lost to

someone like Zhang Lie, well known to be at the bottom of the gene leaderboard??How shameful! How abominably shameful!

It was a rare opportunity for Chu Feng to gibe at his old rival. Leaving Qin Xiao to grieve, he signalled his elites to head toward the cave entrance.

As Chu Feng left, Yun Bing followed suit. She wasn't on good terms with Qin Xiao, either. "Qin Xiao, what Chu Feng said was harsh, but not unreasonable. Take your cousin's corpse and give him a burial back on Earth."

She turned to leave with her team.

The three corporation heads, Zhou, Li, and Zhao, naturally couldn't stand still after seeing both Chu Feng and Yun Bing going into the distance. They glanced at each other, waved a hasty goodbye to Qin Xiao, and hurried to the cave.

After having explored the glade, they now knew what was most valuable inside. It was very late at night, and the gathered hunters intended to finish their work quickly before heading back to the settlement.

As he glanced at the mound by his feet, as well as the disappearing hunters from the other five clans, Qin Xiao began to smile. "Qin Feng, stay here with a few hunters and dig out Xiaotian's corpse. Everyone else, head to the entrance with me. Xiaotian's lost us a lot of money and face, and we'll have to hunt down whatever superior-grade lifeforms are around here to make up for the loss."

The procession of hunters headed to the entrance to the tunnel and began slaughtering the venombane scorpions in earnest.

Yes, a slaughter. After all, the hunters present were the elites of the Blacksteel settlement, and even the weakest among them had capped out his mutated gene capacity and possessed at least a dozen superior gene fragments.

The venombane scorpions had no effective means of attacking them with anything but their poison. Although they swarmed the hunters, just as they did with Qin Xiaotian's team, they weren't able to harm the hunters at all.

The hunters' genetic techniques slaughtered horde after horde of scorpions. Such endless slaughter would quickly generate soulshards, regardless of how rare they otherwise were.

As Yun Bing lightly waved her blade, wreathed in a curious white mist, a stealthed mutated-grade venombane scorpion was split in half. A thumb-sized purplish-black soulshard began to form over the scorpion's carcass.

A mutated-grade soulshard! Yun Bing's face lit up. After so much effort, she'd finally obtained one.

The next moment, as she quickly absorbed it into her soul space and activated it, her body turned translucent, then transparent. Chu Feng and the others immediately noticed the transformation.

Such a useful soulshard made the gathered hunters quite envious. They earnestly slaughtered the scorpions skittering toward them, hoping for that rare treasure.

"Argh!" As more and more soulshards began to drop and the hunters were becoming complacent given their accumulated spoils, a hunter suddenly cried out in pain.

The shout had emanated from a member of the Chu clan. Some attack had drilled a hole through the unlucky hunter's forehead, and he slumped to the ground amidst a flurry of commotion.

"Be careful, there's a superior-grade lifeform around, a superior-grade venombane scorpion!" a hunter to his side shouted, having seen something flash by.

Chu Feng's eyes brightened. "Quick, surround it!"

A superior-grade lifeform! To think that a superior-grade venombane scorpion was in their midst!

After all, Chu Feng and the others had long since maxed out their mutated gene capacity, and the only reason they were still here, without having advanced to the second realm of the dimensional world, was because they were waiting to fill their superior gene capacity as well.

And although superior-grade lifeforms were prevalent in the dimensional world, they were quite rare within hundreds of kilometers from the Blacksteel settlement.

Furthermore, killing just one superior-grade lifeform and consuming its flesh would usually only provide between one to ten superior gene fragments.

To reach the limit of a hundred superior gene fragments would require a dozen or more such lifeforms, each of a different type. Given how dangerous it was to go too far beyond the settlement, the difficulty of filling their superior gene capacity was obvious.

How could Chu Feng not be excited to encounter a superior-grade lifeform while surrounded by his elites? With a burst of wind, he immediately appeared before his fallen subordinate.

At the same time, his elites had begun blockading the area. Four walls of wind, like heavy curtains, separated the Chu team from the outside world.

Within the enclosed space, several hunters whose framework was geared toward detection began spreading out and searching for the superior-grade lifeform.

"It's there! Ah, it's moving so quickly!" By the southeastern corner of the enclosure, the orb of water that a youth was holding up suddenly began to ripple. The moment he spoke, several beams of genetic energy shot toward where he was pointing.

The revealed crystalline scorpion jumped up, evaded all the attacks, and vanished out of sight once more.

"[The Whispering Wind]!" Amidst the commotion, Chu Feng closed his eyes, stilled his body, and began emanating waves of genetic energy, rippling as they interacted with the solid objects around him.

"I've found you!" Moments later, his eyes shot open, and he struck toward the eastern wind wall.

His sword, glowing blue, traced out an electric arc as he struck at the skittering scorpion, only to have his attack blocked by its stinger with a resounding metallic clash. Immediately after countering the blow, the scorpion vanished from sight again.

Superior-grade lifeforms possessed a significant level of intelligence, and the venombane scorpion behaved much like a skilled assassin. If its blow were to miss, it would immediately hide in stealth. Under normal circumstances, it certainly wouldn't fight head-on with its target.

However, Chu Feng wasn't such an easy opponent to mislead. Wreaths of wind surrounded him, and it seemed as though he could sense the currents of movement all around.

Despite how quickly the superior-grade scorpion moved, Chu Feng seemed to be able to predict its location and strike with his blade. However, all his attacks were either blocked or knocked aside by the tip of the scorpion's stinger.

Although Chu Feng was unable to hurt the scorpion, he had managed to trap it.

At this point, the other hunters in the cave had all reacted to what was going on. Chu Feng's team immediately joined in the fight, trying to corral the scorpion so that Chu Feng could land the finishing blow.

However, just as Chu Feng's team was doing so, outside the walls of wind, the red-eyed Qin Xiao was stalking toward the scorpion as well.

Chapter 20: Violent Confrontation

"[Thunder God's Wrath]!"

With a yell, Qin Xiao's polearm blazed with lightning, frying countless scorpions ahead of him.

During the slaughter, because Qin Xiao had been the last to reach the cave entrance, all the best positions had been taken, and his luck was unusually bad. He had only killed a few mutated-grade venombane scorpions, let alone a superior-grade one, and had only managed to obtain a few regular-grade soulshards. As a result, when he saw this superior-grade scorpion, he hurried over with his team.

Of course, he didn't attack yet.

In the dimensional world, it was the hunter or team who scored the last hit on a lifeform that would be rewarded with its spoils—its flesh, with its associated gene fragments, and its soulshard, if one were to condense.

Superior-grade lifeforms, as the strongest grade of lifeforms in the first realm of the dimensional world, possessed significant vitality and constitution, and wouldn't be so easily killed.

Qin Xiao was waiting for this superior-grade scorpion to enter its death throes.

"Chu Lan, watch Qin Xiao carefully for me. If he gets within twenty meters, attack him!" Of course, as his old rival, Chu Feng knew what Qin Xiao was thinking. Almost as soon as Qin Xiao began moving closer, he murmured a few words to a female hunter by his side.

"Yes, Chu Feng!" She, along with two of her subordinates, stopped chasing after the superior-grade scorpion and went to waylay Qin Feng instead.

In truth, Chu Feng was hiding his true power as well. He displayed neither his best techniques nor his most useful soulshards.

The Void Cup, hosted once every five years, was right about to occur, and it made sense to hide as much of his strength as he could.

Furthermore, he knew quite well that Qin Xiao wasn't the only one eyeing this superior-grade lifeform. Yun Bing's team, as well as those of the three corporation heads, had all drawn closer.

He certainly didn't want to waste his efforts in vain. As he commanded his subordinates to increase the thickness of the wind walls, he activated an illusion-type soulshard to hide what was happening in the enclosed area from the outside. Then, he began whittling down the scorpion's health with only his [Hurricane Blade] and [The Whispering Wind].

The curious sight caused a certain hunter, watching from a fair distance away, to begin smirking. He was clad in black, hooded, and stealthed, and it was impossible to make out his features. As the fight continued within the rock cave, the black-clad man scattered an acid-green powder into the waterfall.

Clearly, he was hoping to cause a commotion.

Chu Feng was still patiently fighting the scorpion, but his opponent was getting much more fed up.

Clang! His blade again struck the superior-grade scorpion's stinger, and its fury was palpable. Indeed, the venombane scorpion was completely enraged—it had been trapped within this enclosed region and persistently attacked by an annoying foe.

Suddenly, it expelled a haze of poisonous mist and made its move.

A violet flash suddenly blazed by Chu Feng's nose, causing his back to erupt in cold sweat.

What was that? It was way too fast! So fast that he had caught only the barest hint of motion, so fast that he, despite all his gene fragments, couldn't respond in time!

Chu Feng hadn't even been able to see the mechanism behind the scorpion's attack by the time the violet flash reached his eyes. The only reason he was able to avoid it was because of his body's instinctive response. However, just because he could do so didn't mean his subordinates could.

One of them, struck by the violet flash, had his head suddenly rot and fall off his neck, his skull turning to powder as it struck the ground. The entire process had happened within three seconds, and no blood or brain matter was visible anywhere. His head had simply decayed away, and his skull had crumbled away to a fine powder.

What horrifying poison!

Even worse, the violet beam didn't lose any momentum. It shot forward into the hunters behind him, and all those who were struck by the beam immediately began to decay. The area enclosed by the wind walls was now furnished by a carpet of ash.

"That must be [Netherworld's Gaze]!" the black-clad man murmured to himself, stiffening as he saw the sight.

[Netherworld's Gaze] was a lethal skill that consumed much of the venombane scorpion's poison and vitality.

In exchange, the terrifying attack would cause instantaneous decay in everything it hit, and was particularly corrosive against living matter. Even a hunter who had a hundred superior gene fragments wouldn't be able to take the blow head-on.

"[Wings of Wind]!" Since he was in mortal danger, Chu Feng couldn't risk hiding his best skills any longer. As he dodged the violet light, genetic energy poured out of his body.

A pair of wind-green wings unfurled from his back. With another soul shard activation, a long, thin blade, almost like a rapier, appeared in his left palm. [Wings of Wind], Nature's Thorn, Chu Feng's signature move and sword, finally made their appearance.

"[Tempest Cut]!" Jade-green sword energy arced toward the scorpion with the fury of a tempest.

As it hit the scorpion's stinger, a small piece of exoskeleton, about the size of a fingernail, chipped off the scorpion.

With Nature's Thorn in his left hand, and a long blade in his right, Chu Feng seemed to have morphed into a howling tempest himself. While it defended against his attack, he rushed toward the scorpion, swinging his blades.

Amidst the whirlwind of attacks, the venombane scorpion let out a small cry, had a few more pieces of its exoskeleton chipped off, and again went back into stealth. Chu Feng chased after the scorpion, but the moment right before it vanished, the scorpion shot out another [Netherworld's Gaze].

"Be careful!" After seeing how horrifying the effects of the skill were, Chu Feng naturally had to swerve to dodge the attack. As he called out a warning, he flapped his wings, barely avoiding the ray.

With Chu Feng's advance warning, none of his subordinates fell prey to it this time around. However, one of the wind walls had vanished entirely after being struck by the attack. Seeing the enclosure break apart, Qin Xiao's body crackled with lightning. With a yell, he streaked toward the scorpion like a bolt of lightning.

"Halt them!" Chu Lan shouted, seeing Qin Xiao and his team approach.

Amidst the clash of genetic energy and steel, the Qin and Chu hunters began to face off with each other. The Zhou, Li, and Zhao teams also rushed into the enclosure, turning the battlefield into a mess.

As everyone was distracted by the fighting, a translucent cloud of mist wafted over the battlefield and through the wind walls.

Within the enclosure, the superior-grade venombane scorpion had gone berserk, shooting off [Netherworld's Gaze] indiscriminately with a wave of its stinger. Like a web,

the death rays criss-crossed the enclosure, killing yet another half-dozen elites from the Chu clan.

Then, the venombane scorpion went back into stealth.

Chu Feng began to frown. This superior-grade venombane scorpion was the smallest of all the superior-grade creatures he had fought. Coupled with its stealth ability, it was more than able to match Chu Feng's wind-attuned speed.

Even he was having a hard time dealing with the scorpion. It was difficult to catch, and lethal when it struck!

Suddenly, he noticed the mist drifting into the enclosure.

"Yun Bing, you came!" Chu Feng didn't even cast her a look as he continued chasing after the scorpion, as if he had long since guessed that Yun Bing would have been the first hunter in.

Yun Bing smiled as she morphed back into a human. "It looks like you need some help."

"Help? Shall we call it cooperation instead?" Chu Feng smiled, seeming to have come to the same conclusion.

"Cooperation? How do you want to split the spoils?" she asked.

"We won't try to hinder each other. Whoever defeats the scorpion takes it all."

"Deal!" Yun Bing nodded, returned to mist, and rushed toward the battlefield.

At the same time, Chu Lan, who had been eyeing Qin Xiao throughout the fight, successfully managed to stop him from approaching the scorpion. However, she was incapable of stopping the three corporations' teams from heading in while she blocked Qin Xiao.

"[Cloudmire]!" On the battlefield, Yun Bing waved her blade, expelling the mists around her. The fleeing superior-grade scorpion suddenly stiffened as the mists surrounded it instead.

The mists seemed to make the air denser, preventing the scorpion from skittering as quickly as before. Moreover, despite their evanescent appearance, the scorpion couldn't seem to cut its way out of the mists.

"[Tempest Slash]!" Chu Feng certainly wouldn't give up such an opportunity; almost immediately as the scorpion became entrapped, he crossed his two blades and swung both at the scorpion, sending a cross-shaped slash of wind toward it. At the same time, he swooped down on it with a flap of his wings.

Suddenly, two mutated-grade scorpions appeared out of nowhere and took the vicious blow, exploding into pieces as they did so.

The superior-grade venombane scorpion let out another desperate cry, and a dozen mutated-grade scorpions, like loyal soldiers, rushed out from the depths of the cave and began harassing Chu Feng.

"Scram!" In anger, Chu Feng swung his swords again, killing the mutated-grade scorpions before rushing toward the superior-grade one.

"[Thundercloud Strike]!" But before he could advance, a sword wreathed in mists had stabbed the superior-grade scorpion's body. With a distinct crack, a burst of dark violet blood shot out of the scorpion's body, and it vanished from sight.

This time, it had vanished for good, and even Chu Feng's [The Whispering Wind] couldn't sense its position.

Just then, the teams led by the three corporation heads had smashed the remaining wind walls apart. Together with Qin Xiao, they rushed toward the heart of the battlefield.

All six clans were together again, but their gathering was hardly as peaceable as before. The teams of hunters, their swords raised, billowing clouds of genetic energy swirling around them, were trapped in a stalemate.

By the waterfall, the black-clad man's smile deepened.